

Sustainable development goals and the way ahead

The twenty-first century started with a set of development goals, known as Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). These goals were set up by the United Nations (UN). They aimed at improving the life of people, living in developing countries. MDGs were meant to be achieved in 15 years – that is, by 2015. The major focus of MDGs was to promote environmental sustainability, reduce poverty and ensure increased access to sources of water, improve upon child mortality and school enrolment, etc. It is difficult to say to what extent these goals have been met. There are indications that the level of poverty has gone down, especially as a result of faster economic development in some developing countries, the prime example of which being China.

Gaining from the experience of MDGs, the UN decided to expand the goals to make them much wider, encompassing both developed and developing countries. As a consequence, new goals, known as Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), have been announced in the last part of 2015. The SDGs are meant for the next 15 years, covering the period of 2016-2030. Being 17 in number, SDGs aim to focus on three aspects: that is, social, economic and environmental. These goals are: (1) to end poverty in all its forms everywhere; (2) to end hunger, achieve food security, improve nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture; (3) to ensure healthy lives for all; (4) to ensure inclusive and quality education for all; (5) to achieve gender equality and empower all women; (6) to ensure access to water and sanitation for all; (7) to ensure access to affordable, reliable and sustainable energy for all; (8) to promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment and decent work for all; (9) to build resilient infrastructure, promote sustainable industrialization and faster innovation; (10) to reduce inequality within and among countries; (11) to make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable; (12) to ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns; (13) to combat climate change; (14) to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources; (15) to sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, halt land degradation, and halt biodiversity loss; (16) to promote inclusive societies; and (17) to revitalize global partnership for sustainable development.

As can be seen from the above, the SDGs are very ambitious and, if achieved, will indeed make lives wholesome for each and every person on this planet. Needless to say, the challenges are huge in meeting these goals. Financial needs to meet these goals will be in trillions of dollars. It is possible that developed countries may give some development assistance to developing countries. This assistance will enable the developing countries to meet a part of their needs. Yet, a good part will have to be met from national budgets or internal resources of each country.

Reading through the list of goals clearly shows that while governments will have a major role in pushing the implementation process, businesses and corporate sector will have no less important contribution to make. For example, Goal Numbers 8, 9, 12 and 13 will require major initiative from industry. Similarly, educational institutions have a pre-eminent role with regard to Goal Number 4.

Since the goals are wide and sweeping, each country may decide to prioritize so as to take up some goals immediately and others a little later, not forgetting that all of them have to be pursued, and possibly achieved within a time frame of 15 years.

Academic researchers can think of devising models to suggest to governments and policy makers on how to implement the goals and ways to measure the progress as the process moves forward.

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