Why localising SDGs is crucial to meet targets

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By: FE Bureau | New Delhi | Published: June 15, 2018 2:32 AM

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The NITI Aayog is likely to soon release its first annual ranking of districts currently struggling in terms of their performance in specific development parameters, but aspiring to transform rapidly. These districts have been termed "aspirational," as Prime Minister Narendra Modi feels describing them as "backward" gives a negative connotation. At this point, the idea is to dynamically evaluate only the identified 115 "aspirational" districts with respect to a limited, but critical, criteria that includes health and nutrition, education, agriculture and water resources, financial inclusion and skill formation, and basic infrastructure. The stated philosophy here is "what is measured, improves rapidly," which, in the given context, means "competing districts bring out the best in each other."

Significantly, the ranking parameters have retained the essential spirit of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—adopted by 193 countries including India in September 2015 at the UN and had come into force in January 2016. These

include 17 goals, 169 targets and 230 indicators that are to be achieved by 2030. The distinct feature of SDGs—unlike its predecessor, the Millennium Development Goals—is that countries can set their own priorities and need not get bogged down by global prescriptions. Taking a cue from that approach, in the district-wise ranking mechanism, SDGs have been pragmatically indigenised for effective implementation. This is because the mammoth exercise of pushing through all SDGs, including their accompanying targets and indicators, at one go would not have been practical in India, given the complexities and administrative challenges, particularly at the state and district levels.

Therefore, simplifying these mega goals to just 48 indicators in the exercise to rank the aspirational districts on a real-time basis is useful as it would enable the district administration, even with their limited resources, to plan better and deliver with greater enthusiasm. It could even result in the young and eager-to-prove collectors leading their districts to surpass the given benchmarks. With the District Development Coordination and Monitoring Committee (called DISHA) in operation, it could also lead to strengthening of district-level data benchmarking and bringing about visible changes in a shorter time span.

Taking the SDG challenge down to the district level is crucial for India to achieve the targets by 2030. In a move that would assist in increasing financial resources of the SDG implementing agencies including at the district level, the Centre had accepted the Fourteenth Finance Commission recommendation of increasing the share of states from the net tax revenue to 42% during the five-year period starting 2015-16, from the earlier 32%.

India's first Voluntary National Review (VNR) Report on Implementation of SDGs also states that special purpose grants to secure universal primary education, health, employment, affordable housing and urbanisation provide a solid collaborative fiduciary basis for securing SDGs. The VNR Report of July 2017 added that "the Centre also supplements local body finances by providing them with appropriate fiscal space." Now, while these factors will boost SDG localisation efforts, the planners need to take care that it leads to institutionalisation of a bottom-up approach and creation of more stakeholders including local communities, civil society organisations, think tanks and other development agencies.

Only then the novel SDG localisation measures that emerge from India can be put up on global platforms for replication in other developing and poor countries. This is cardinal because as per the VNR Report, the government hopes that "other countries will find India's experience helpful in advancing SDGs." The report not only points out that "much of India's development agenda is mirrored in SDGs," but also states that "local bodies will be at the frontline of operationalising the SDG strategy in India."

Being the world's largest democracy in terms of population and home to the maximum number of people living below the international poverty line, India is uniquely placed to assume the mantle of global leadership for evolving innovative ways to localise SDGs for their successful implementation.

India has already shown its global leadership capabilities, be it in playing a crucial role in conceptualising and founding the International Solar Alliance (to exploit solar energy efficiently and cut the fossil fuel dependence, in line with SDG-7 of affordable and clean energy), or in convening a mini-ministerial of WTO to renew the commitment to the rules-based multilateral trading system at a time when increasing protectionism is threatening to undermine the global trade body.

SDG diplomacy for peaceful borders

India's SDG localisation efforts can be taken to an even higher orbit if there is a focus on the implementation of SDGs in the country's border districts. In addition to the positive spillover such a strategy will have in the districts across the Indian territory in the bordering nation, the localisation plan at the border could showcase India's abilities using SDGs as a diplomatic tool for peaceful boundaries. In this regard, it would be effective for policy-makers to integrate India's SDG localisation efforts with the Border Area Development Programme (BADP), whose scope is quite substantial as it is being implemented in 367 border blocks of 104 border districts in 17 states constituting international land border, and also since the list of schemes permissible under BADP has been expanded to include those relating to cleanliness, skill development, sports, tourism, heritage sites, infrastructure, organic farming, foodgrain warehouses and e-chaupals, most of which relate to SDGs as well. Another initiative that can be melded is the Border Haats (local markets) initiative currently with Bangladesh. While there is a scope for improving this confidence-building measure, it is nevertheless a fine example of economic and commercial diplomacy to boost infrastructure, communication links and lives of people at the border. If such strategies are implemented, there is no reason why a host of successful "think-global act-local" examples would not emerge out of districts in India and its bordering nations to help achieve SDGs.

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