



A Study on the Progress of Sustainable Development Goals in Assam

Sonali Debnath

Ph.D. Scholar, Department of Education, Assam University, Silchar

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ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to discuss the progress of Assam concerning the sustainable development goals adopted by the United Nations and India in 2015. This paper taking into consideration the 17 Sustainable Development Goals adopted by India in 2015 and Assam by 2016 tried to high spot the approach undertaken by the Government of Assam to outreach the goals by 2030. This paper also tried to highlight the formal adoption of Sustainable Development Goals by the Assam government in 2016 and the conduction of training of officials and action plan on Sustainable Development Goals in Assam. The vision of the Assam government and strategies adopted for achieving Sustainable Development Goals also discussed in this paper. The profile of Assam is also underscored adequately. Awareness and literacy level among the population of the state is also a reason for the delay in the implementation or non-implementation of schemes and policies on an apparent time. The barricade the state face in implementing the programme suitably is also underlined. This paper also focused on the numerous challenges encountered by the state Assam in achieving Sustainable development goals. To sum up, the paper also focused attention on how the state is progressing with the Sustainable Development Goals of United Nation and recommendations to get the better of the barriers with appropriate measures.

Introduction

UNESCO has adopted the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015 at the 70th session of the UN General Assembly. The sustainable development goals were designed to achieve a sustainable future for all. India also signed the agenda of achieving 17 sustainable development goals by 2030 in 2015. India is among the 193 signatories to accept the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These 17 SDGs are monitored at the Global, Regional and National levels also. However, every country has modified the global indicators according to its setting. In the case of India, NITI Aayog coordinates the SDGs. Several other civil societies are also engaged in monitoring the work for India's progress towards achieving these SDGs. The government of India and the Civil Society Organisation put their efforts into popularising all the SDGs at the state level. Several states of India have also set up their SDG cells. Being a diverse country like India, the processes to fulfill these targets will vary depending on the geographical, economic, cultural, and social conditions.

Among the seven northeastern states, Assam is the largest in terms of area and population. The national development council (NDC) has given special status to Assam based on a few criteria- Low resource base, Hilly terrain, tribal population, hostile location, and low population density. Based on these criteria Assam receives preferential treatment in availing assistance and funds from the Central and concessions on excise duty which can attract industries to set up in Assam. Assam is unique from the point of view of SDGs as it counts as the first Indian state to adopt a Vision document of its own-"Vision Assam 2030". The goal was also adopted by Assam in 2016 by releasing "Vision Assam 2030" and "Assam 2030: Our dreams Our Commitment". Assam has also set up a state SDG cell. To achieve the targets of SDGs, the state has adopted a seven-year strategy plan and three-year action plan. It also made a budget based on SDG-oriented outcomes for 2017-18. To monitor the SDGs, the state made a semi-formal body Strategy support group (SSSG) and identified 59 core indicators.

The Assam government has conducted district-level workshops on sustainable development goals to make people aware of achieving SDGs. The government of Assam also collaborated with the private sector to make SDGs a social responsibility. The government of Assam adopted certain approaches and principles in the implementation of SDGs- Single synergized initiatives, technology, innovation, knowledge management and management of change, mobilization, and utilization of resources. The government of Assam also made institutional changes for achieving SDGs. The budget was classified

according to the requirement of the 17 goals. An integrated village development program was also initiated for the holistic development of the village. To monitor the SDGs a new IT-based system was also developed. The government of Assam is committed to meeting SDGs by setting objectives of poverty-free Assam, promoting economic development, ensuring sustainable development, developing human resources, security improvement, and corruption-free. The objectives were prepared in consultation with several other governmental and non-governmental stakeholders.

Profile of Assam

Health Index of NITI Aayog keeps Assam at 16th position out of 21 large states in overall performance. Assam stands at 11th position in annual incremental performance with 0.6 incremental change between the base year (2014-15) and reference year (2015-16). Based on this performance Assam falls under the least improved state as per NITI Aayog, 2018.

To improve the situation and address the issues faced by Assam, civil society joined hands. Few forums have also stepped forward to make learning collective and sustained. It includes- The people's rights forum, the Inter-agency forum, and the All Assam forum for child rights.

In 2005, the government of India implemented the National rural employment guaranteed Act (NREGA) to provide a minimum of 100 days of work but the rural inhabitants of Assam were way behind in receiving these benefits. This pushed the civil society groups of Assam to form a body "People's Rights Forum". For a larger systematic change at the state level, the forum organized conventions and involved higher officials from government and academicians. This helped in creating a platform where the poorest can be heard.

Assam is prone to annual floods where 20% of the plain districts suffer and it increases to 67% if the flood is high. The rural economy suffers the most from the high-level flood. Millions of people get displaced affected by the flood and lost property and crops. To receive a response to such an emergency situation Inter-Agency Group (IAG) was brought into function in Assam in 2004. The IAG's mainly focuses on emergency response and information sharing. It conducts meetings to review the information and situation assessment which has been prepared by NGOs and other agencies who participated. It reviews the requirement of reliefs supplies and coordinates the distribution of supplies. It keeps a close eye to avoid duplication of efforts and mismanagement of resources.

Assam is placed at the top in the list in the field of corporal punishment in school as per a National study on child abuse done by the Ministry of women and child development in 2007. These results pushed the government of Assam to take action for reducing child abuse in Assam. A two-day all Assam consultation on child rights was organized in 2008, the participants of this organization united and formed the All Assam Forum for Child Rights.

In the field of education, the literacy rate of Assam is 72.2 percent. According to the Census of India, 2011, the literacy rate of females in urban areas is higher than in rural areas. Girls of secondary and higher secondary level showed higher participation in comparison to the national average but the dropout rate of girls at the secondary level is quite high compared to the national average. The dropout rates increase between 14-15 (secondary level) years and 16-17 years (higher secondary level). To increase the rate of literacy of girls, the Government of Assam came up with a few schemes. It includes- Providing Free bicycles to BPL girl students up to class ten to reduce the dropping rate from school. Providing two-wheeler to top 1000 girls students after completing higher secondary education. Providing annual scholarships to girl students from class Ten to post-graduation belonging to minority communities so that they continue to receive higher education. Setting up of women ITI and Women's university to enhance skills of girls and promote higher education. With all these schemes for women, the outcome is discouraging.

In the field of gender equality, the condition of women is not satisfactory. 30.8 % of women get married before the age of 18. The rate is even higher in rural areas. 33% of married women at the age of 15-19 years began childbearing and with the increase in education the rate reduced by 4%. The percentage of married women bearing a child is double in the case of Muslim women (NFHS-4, 2015- 2016). The implementation of The prohibition of the child marriage act, of 2006 couldn't give a proper outcome because of community groups who follow their own cultural norms of marriage. In Assam, some tribes and communities accept child marriage as a tradition. Witch-hunting is another harmful practice in Assam. In the records of NGOs and mission birubala, above 400 persons got killed between the period of 2007 to 2014 in case of witch-hunting. The government of Assam passed the Assam witch-hunting (Prohibition, prevention, and protection) Bill in the year 2015 to address the issue but still, death and killings related to witch-hunting continue (Das, personal communication, March 21, 2018). The above issues can be resolved with the more stringent implementation of The prohibition of the child marriage act, 2006.

Assam is placed highest in maternal mortality rate (MMR). The rate differs among the different populations residing in Assam. Assam is termed the largest region to produce tea across the world. It is the home of eight hundred large tea estates and one lakh small tea gardens. It produces 50 percent of the tea production in the country. These tea industries in the state contribute to the economy of the state at the same time the workers engaged in these estates are heavily exploited and deprived. Ironically the majority of the workers are women who belong to different tribes. These tribes were brought from different states of the country as migrant workers. The tribes popularly known as Adivasis are the most exploited community in Assam. Most of the population of these tribes are undernourished, illiterate, and underpaid. Even after independence, their condition remains unchanged. The lack of education plays a barrier to their awareness of their rights. The reason for a higher rate of MMR among the tea tribes is poor nutrition and health which is further prompted by the consumption of tobacco and alcohol. Another factor behind poor health status is inadequate health care facilities in and around the tea garden of Assam. The government of Assam in 2008 made a public-private partnership with the tea estates to improve the health care facilities inside the tea garden. The two decided to facilitate fifteen lakh per tea garden for delivering the health care facilities to the workers and their families engaged in the tea garden. The initiative failed to perform better because of corruption, a shortage of doctors, and an adequate supply of medicines.

Another issue is violence against differently able women. These women often face sexual abuse, exploitation, and violence. These issues go unreported and unheard. The judiciary and police stations have no well-equipped system to facilitate the interpretation of statements given by victims in case the victim is deaf. From the part of the state, no emphasis has been laid to come out with remedial measures.

Progress of Assam in achieving sustainable development goals

Assam 2030: Our dream and our commitment were adopted by the government of Assam in 2017. The government has revisited the initiatives undertaken and made all the SDGs interconnected to realize the synergies. An IT-based platform made to monitor the programs and initiatives. People-partnership-projects approach was adopted as a part of the strategy. Partnerships with different stakeholders have been made for the formulation and implementation of the SDGs. Exploration of New technologies and innovation applied in the implementation of the vision. A proper knowledge management system and strategies for the management of change were also adopted. The government tried to make proper utilization of the resources-land, human, capital, IT, Institutional resources, and biological resources.

The strategy of “7 for 17” (7 types of resources for 17 goals). Each government department under the government of Assam participated actively in the process. The process includes- identifying the sources of the new resources, mapping the available resources, improving the efficiency of the resources, value for money principle, reorientation of budget towards the sustainable development goals, mobilization of resources from the community and state-owned enterprises including central government.

The government of Assam has also set up an SDG Strategy Support Group (SSSG) to support the integrated implementation and strategic thinking. The SSSG looks after SDG-related activities of data collection and analysis. Eight interdepartmental working groups were set up by the government of Assam to prepare strategy papers and action plans to achieve the SDGs. This strategy paper and action plan provide thematic roadmaps to proceed further by setting targets and identifying supporting agencies and actions & solutions holistically.

The government of Assam has also taken action in ensuring fiscal resource allocation to the SDGs. The budget of SDGs was redesigned. Maximum resources are allocated to SDGs 1, 3, 4, and 10 (poverty, health, education, and inequality).

Chief Minister’s samagra gramya unnayan yojana (MSGUY) was launched by the government of Assam in 2017 for the holistic development of the village. This program helped to achieve several SDGs which include- increasing employment, reducing inequality, reducing poverty and hunger, promoting peaceful and inclusive societies, and sustainable use of water and terrestrial ecosystem.

There are certain challenges on the way to achieving the SDGs. There is a need to prepare an integrated panchayat level development plan and to integrate the same with the state plan and budget. Creation of an effective platform where knowledge can be shared easily between government officials and institutions, industries, schools & colleges regarding the application of SDGs. Capacity building and devolution of power among government officials at the district level. A good database should be prepared for monitoring the progress of strategies adopted and strategies further needed to adopt to achieve the goals.

Recommendations

To do progress toward achieving SDGs goals in Assam the government will have to take certain measures. To improve the provision of health services, “leaving no one behind”, the state needs to develop the infrastructure and availability of staff in the health facilities. The state needs to concentrate

more on women belonging to vulnerable groups regarding the maternal mortality rate. A separate budget has to be prepared to reduce the female mortality rate and the outcome has to be published every two years. Participation at a local level- communities and panchayat raj institutions members can play a major role in monitoring and auditing the health system. The laws like the child marriage Act need to be strictly implemented to improve the condition of women in the state. Shifting grievances redressal cells from district level to block-level can provide better accessibility to the people. One needs to understand that equality breeds inequity and the state need to develop a proper strategy to empower those who are left behind. A long-term mechanism should be set up to monitor the progress of SDGs. Sustainable development cells and institutions like CAG can be made part of the periodic audit of the government system and civil society in the state.

Conclusion

The state Assam presided over to improve with satisfactory accomplishment and managed a position in the most improved big state category scoring 1,185.3 out of a score of 2000 points for the year 2022. The government of Assam has fully dedicated to the Sustainable Development Goals of United Nation and decided to achieve all the goals in Assam by 2030 through a considerable wide ranging resourcefulness. To conclude, Sustainable Development Schemes being implemented in Assam are manifold and strive to address an extent of challenges related to economic progress, social advancement and renewable environment.

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