The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), otherwise known as the Global Goals, came into effect in January 2016. They are a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace, prosperity and equality of rights. The timeline to accomplish them: 2030.

These 17 goals build on the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which were set by the United Nations in 2000 and expired in 2015. The MDGs were concrete, specific and measurable, and therefore succeeded in establishing some priority areas of focus in international development. But that was also one of their biggest drawbacks: by being so targeted, they left out other, equally important, areas. SDGs include new areas such as climate change, economic inequality, innovation, sustainable consumption, peace and justice, among other priorities. The goals are interconnected – often the success of one involves tackling issues more commonly associated with another.

In June 2018, Russell Reynolds Associates convened a roundtable of private, public and social sector leaders to discuss the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the particular challenges and opportunities faced by India in meeting these ambitious targets by 2030. Participants included:

- Anand Singh
- Anuja Bansal
- Anoop Ratnakar Rao
- Bitra George
- Himanshu Patel
- Mathew Joseph
- Sachin Rajan
- Sanjay Kapur
- Sanjay Khazanchi
- Sanjeev Dham
- Shankar Narayanan
- Simon Kingston
- Soumya Rajan
- Sourav Banerjee
- Swatantra Gupta
- Tarun Vij
- Thomas A.
- Umakant Panwar
- Vinita Katara
- Vinoj Manning

**What are the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?**

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*Source: United Nations Foundation*
What evidence can make a case for aid across all of these variables?

While the understanding of SDGs and their benefits is clear, in India there seems to be a gap between policy and action. Whose targets are these? And whose responsibility is it to achieve these goals? The lack of clarity is a reflection of the top down approach that is prevalent today. However, any strategy that has interconnecting pieces cannot work in isolation. The question is – how do governments and private organizations come together and develop a joint approach to achieving these global goals?

The scenario today

- SDGs are a good framework and depict a shared language of aspiration and measurement of progress. However, the approach has been top-down and in many cases implementation has not reached practitioners.
- One of the greatest drawbacks of the MDGs was lack of commitment by governments and the absence of the private sector in the framing of the goals. Both these issues have been addressed in the case of SDGs, however, commitment has not been able to percolate down the ranks. In the cases where efforts have trickled down, practitioners across multiple sectors often work within their ‘silos’ and do not share data and results.
- Adding to this is the fact that the SDG matrix is complex. Understanding of the first six categories – health & wellbeing, education, clean water & sanitation, gender equality, poverty & hunger – is widespread. Here, there is a higher level of interaction between the civil society, the public sector and the private sector. But this has been offset by the deficit of funds, driven by a real time decline in budgetary allocations. This fact needs attention, with perhaps the private sector taking up a larger role.
- The second six categories is where the challenge lies – affordable & clean energy, work & economic growth, innovation & infrastructure, reduced inequalities, sustainable cities, responsible consumption & production. These have traditionally been considered the government’s responsibility. If we are to realize these goals, and sustain them, a partnership between industry, government and private sector is necessary. One of the most critical questions for this is: Who will implement and who will pay?
- Corporate sector partnership in SDG implementation has been lack luster, but this is not without reason. While corporates understand SDGs and their implications, a discussion about how their businesses can benefit from their involvement, how their involvement can be integrated into their businesses or how it can impact shareholder value is yet to take place.
- On the recipient side, communities also have a role to play. However, more often than not, acceptance to change is not immediately forthcoming. If sustainability is the objective, then strategists at all levels must first understand the mindset and needs of communities. Identifying their unique demands is essential if their support is to be garnered. Once this step is taken, change will not be enforced but embraced.
The challenges facing India

**Disconnect between intent, action and outcome**
The biggest challenge faced in achieving SDGs is the disconnect between intent, action and outcome. No doubt, the government needs to take the first step. But government is not one senior officer or secretary; it is a workforce. Furthermore, it is the middle and the lower levels of government workers that actually work towards implementing SDGs. Unfortunately, they are exactly the ones who do not understand or comprehend the role of SDGs today.

**Lack of mechanisms for refining approach**
There are also too many strategies and approaches during enforcement and action. To an extent this is good, but there needs to be effective feedback processes that refine execution in order to maximize benefits.

**Need for government coordination with stakeholders**
The disconnect is also partly due to a failure of government to take onboard the external stakeholders - the corporates, civil society and NGOs at the ground level. The intent and ownership of SDGs needs to move beyond signatures on a document, with the government showing a commitment towards achieving the goals and prioritizing them. This clarity needs to be there in order to attract private funding.

**Broadening the lens**
Today, participants in this process are ‘blinded’ and narrowly focused on individual organization strategies. Unless the vision is broadened and filtered down towards practical implementation of the strategies and feedback, sustainability will not be possible.

**Data quality**
Accuracy and authenticity of data is another concern. Large amounts of data on SDG implementation have been collected by multiple agencies. On further scrutiny, however, they do not corroborate each other.
Recognizing the opportunities

Prioritizing education

- While recognizing that SDGs are inter-connected, it is important for India to prioritize them – taking into consideration the importance and urgency of the goals.
- Education should be a foremost priority because it is the enabler for the rest of the goals, making investment in this area fundamental to India’s overall progress. There has been tremendous improvement in access to education; the focus now needs to shift to quality and learning outcomes. It is crucial to enhance community participation and increase private sector involvement – corporates and societal organizations - to sustain the momentum achieved.

Youth and skills development

- Skills development is equally important. India will account for the largest, youngest workforce by 2030. There is an urgent need to address this from the point of view of education and vocational studies.
- The youth in India are often seen as a resource – for today and the future. However, this needs to change. If we are to progress towards and sustain achievement of SDGs, we need to think of the youth as participants, not recipients. Their active involvement is necessary since they are the ultimate beneficiaries of the future that we are building today.
- This thought is supported by business leaders, who speak about how millennials are driving change in the way they do business. Furthermore, they are more than a resource; they are the future consumers, with new expectations that balance social and financial impact.

Balancing urban and rural needs

- Gender equality, especially with regards to women’s entrepreneurship – rural and urban - as well as women’s empowerment is critical. This will have cascading effects on children and nutrition, in addition to other SDG goals such as poverty elimination, economic development and sanitation.
- Though the majority of the Indian population resides in rural areas, SDG communication there has been limited. If this is to change, good leadership in our villages is essential. Educated, young sarpanches can make all the difference. This can be supplemented with a grading system for villages that help NGOs and corporates identify and prioritize projects. This will definitely be more effective than randomly identifying and working on need gaps.

Learning from past experience

- SDG implementation should take into account learnings from the HIV success story in India. By involving civil society organizations right from the beginning, the government ensured that its message reached marginalized populations that would have otherwise been left behind. A similar strategy would work for SDG strategies as well, especially in areas like nutrition and sanitation. This is an area that has yet to be explored.
- Failures in new initiatives are inevitable. However, are we learning from our failures? A business space for seriously and mindfully analyzing failures during SDG implementation is required if we are to prevent unnecessary loss of time and funds.
What's next?

- The letter ‘S’ in SDGs refers to sustainability. The SDGs were created to be achieved, not to be showcased. If we have to meet the targets that have been set, we need to build and strengthen the basic system whether it is health, education or sanitation.

- The first responsibility of interpreting the SDGs into a national context comes at the country level, by the government. This needs to be supported by the national and international development practitioners (corporates, NGOs, civil organizations) who work towards developing and aligning their global strategies - how to broaden their coverage, how to touch the maximum number of goals and have an integrated comprehensive strategy around that. Once this is achieved, every office within the organization commences with the implementation that reaches the individual citizen.

- For the above framework to succeed, the government needs to create an enabling environment. Today, can we confidently say that India is creating the right atmosphere so that business and consumers make the right decisions, adopt the right behaviors?

- The perspective of the SDGs being universal and portraying human aspirations for a better world needs to evolve. What is required is sensitivity and a sense of responsibility – starting with the political class and percolating down the chain to the individual. Only then do the SDGs become relevant.

- Inclusion is the keyword, bridging the gap that exists with the implementation of SDGs. The various stakeholders need to come together from the point of strategizing – not only at the macro level, but at the grass root level as well.

- Only if we are able to create this space of dialogue - this space of synchronizing strategies between government, civil society and corporate world - will we be able to bring about sustained impact of the SDG framework.

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