

## Higher Education and Sustainable Development Goals: Contribution and challenges in Assam

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### Abstract

Assam has made energetic efforts since 2015 towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Cognizant of the state's weak improvement in development, its recent governments irrespective of political affiliation adopted the SDGs and **Assam became the first state in India to do so**. The paper discusses in detail the steps taken so far which include overall vision of SDG-fulfilled Assam in 2030; and contribution and challenges in higher education and sustainable development in Assam. The Assam experience has many important lessons. These include the criticality of inspiring staff at all levels to instill the SDGs in every aspect of their work and the role of leadership in this respect; proactively forging partnerships with all stakeholders including the administration and the judiciary and creating an environment for such partnerships to flourish; the general need for adopting a result and outcome-based development process that the SDGs represent abandoning narrow departmental and output-based activity and perform. These would require initiating institutional and organizational changes counting to ensure that major improvements take place in project implementation processes. Also essential is inculcating a culture of modernism –including technological innovation–in every sphere of public service; and developing effective coordinating mechanisms to ensure that all concerned stakeholders work synergistically to achieve the SDG outcomes. Also, very critical is the role of national and global partners in supporting Assam's earnest efforts as the resource, information and capacity gaps that Assam faces are too large for it to fill through its own means –even with its best efforts.

Keywords:-- Sustainable development, community, agreement, Higher education, Technologies, opportunities.

### Introduction

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2015, the international community adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) also in higher education which are more grand and comprehensive in reach. International agreements on development priorities that affect the wellbeing of the entire world's population are hard to achieve owing to wide differences of thoughts among development economists, social scientists and environmentalists. But the momentous agreement on the SDGs –prepared after nearly two years of effort and thousands of consultations among experts and all stakeholders across the world–was formally sealed by the United Nations General Assembly in September 2015 when the Heads of Governments including the Prime Minister of India adopted them commonly. The SDGs renovate and build on the success of the MDGs adopted in September 2000 by the same United Nations General Assembly and were aimed at reducing poverty and hunger across the world by half within 2015 and significantly reducing other deprivations and gaps such as lack of education; gender

inequality; lack of access to health services, clean water and sanitation; and adverse environmental conditions. The MDGs influenced international development significantly through billions of dollars of aid since 2000 and refocused national priorities worldwide towards achieving them.

### Objective of the study

1. To study the awareness of Sustainable development and find out challenges and contribution.
2. To find out the level of awareness of Sustainable development on Higher educational students.
3. To find out the statistically difference among male & female or General and Mishing students towards Sustainable development.

### Sustainable Development Goals Meaning

The SDGs represent another major opportunity for developing countries such as India or any state like Assam to accomplish the crucial task of ensuring decent living standards including better environmental quality, and equality of opportunities, higher education for all the world's population by 2030. They include a wider set of goals compared to the MDGs incorporating the whole gamut of the most pressing development issues covering economic, social and environmental imperatives. The SDGs call for ending the worst forms of social deprivations such as great poverty and hunger and not just in reducing them as the MDGs had proposed. The SDGs aim at achieving universal education, going beyond the MDG focus on just primary education, but rather including both the crucial pre-primary stage and universal secondary education. They offer minimum social safety guarantees to all citizens including health care for all. Unlike the MDGs which failed to prioritize economic growth and physical transportation development, the SDGs particularly lay stress on these as social and human development is not possible without them.

Higher education plays a key role in achieving the 2030 plan for Sustainable Development. It underpins all the SDGs and trains the future leaders. With this publication, the International Association of Universities calls for more acknowledgment of the significant role higher education plays in powerful the processes towards a more sustainable present and future. The Association also commits to keep on to raise awareness on inspiring sustainability initiatives taken by universities around the world in order to help more institutions get concerned, and to help its Members develop entire institution approaches to sustainable development.

### • SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

The first definition of sustainable development comes from the Brundt land Report(1987) where it was described as "development which meets the needs of current generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".

The UN General Assembly in September 2015 adopted a global development vision called. The 2030 Agenda is "a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity". As part of this agenda, 17 new Sustainable Development Goals(SDGs) and 171 targets to stimulate global action over the next 14 years on issues critical to humanity and the planet have been identified by the global community.

In the September 2015 UN Summit, the Prime Minister of India pledged its commitment to the SDGs. The SDGs officially came into force from 1 st January, 2016. NITI Aayog has been assigned the role of developing national indicators, overseeing the completion by ministries and coordinate with States for the achievement of development targets as enshrined in the SDGs. Government of Assam has demonstrated leadership as the front runner in the country by preparing the Vision 2030 document in light of the SDGs. Government of Assam has taken concrete steps to move towards this vision and has followed the much recommended whole of the government approach in preparing for the implementation of the SDGs.

The inter linkages and integrated nature of the Sustainable Development Goals are of crucial importance in ensuring that the purpose of the new Agenda is realized. The Goals and targets will stimulate action over the next fifteen years in areas of critical importance for humanity and the planet. **Sustainable Development Goals Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.**

#### **2030 Agenda of sustainable development goals**

The 2030 agenda now proposes a holistic approach to growth strategies and calls for pursuing all dimensions of sustainable development in a balanced and integrated way. The new agenda goes beyond the traditional three dimensions of sustainable development and is grounded in 5 "Ps":

1. **People:** to end poverty and hunger
2. **Planet:** to protect the planet from deprivation
3. **Prosperity:** ensure that all human beings can enjoy prosperous
4. **Peace:** promote peaceful, just and inclusive societies which are free from fear and violence
5. **Partnership:** Mobilize the means required to implement this Agenda through a revitalized Global Partnership..

By 2030, substantially increase the supply of capable teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least developed countries and small island developing States. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were universally adopted in January 2016 as a call to action to end poverty, defend the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and affluence. The 17 Goals which are to be achieved by 2030, were designed based on the learnings from Millennium Development Goals, through a global consultative process, to include many more new areas of focus such as Climate Change, Sustainable Consumption, Peace and Justice, and Innovation among many other key areas. The

SDGs are based on the principle of forging partnerships and setting clear guidelines to achieving these targets as per the needs of each region.

The Hon'ble Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendra Modi, in his speech addressing the United Nations on 25th September 2015 at the UN Sustainable Development Summit stated, 'Today, much of India's development agenda is mirrored in the Sustainable Development Goals'. Government of Assam, mirroring this commitment, strived to take forward the SDGs in Assam. On **28th December, 2015**, by issuing a Government Order, Government of Assam launched "**Assam 2030 Initiative**" on **1st January 2016** towards achieving the SDGs. Under the guidelines structured in the vision document called, 'Assam 2030: Our Dream, Our Commitment', a strategy was created to start the process of inducting SDGs into the policy planning processes of the Government of Assam. It is one of the first states in India and globally to start bringing SDGs into the policy discourse of the state. Then, all departments of the Government have been asked to implement SDGs to realise our vision through a Government Order of 4th March, 2017.

### **The Sustainable development goals in higher education: Challenges**

To achieve the goals and to drive organizations on the path of sustainability, there is a need for an improved understanding of the intricacy and inclusiveness of sustainable development. Sustainability is based on the three 'pillars' of sustainability: economic, social, and environmental. It is also known as the triple bottom line principle and over the years, there have been a number of definitions developed by different academic scholars and business leaders.

The sustainability challenges we are witnessing today can be viewed as a funnel depicting the increased demand for resources, as the global populace increases, within the context of limited resources.

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are key stakeholders in implementing the 17 SDGs. The SDGs stay put high on the higher education agenda through teaching and learning, research, community service, modernism, and quality. Universities have increased their collaboration and partnering with internal and external stakeholders and through inter and intra-disciplinary teaching, research, and service, in order to produce new knowledge on how best to implement the SDGs. However, argued that an increasing number of declarations and agreements had been signed, but the impact of the changes and outcomes have been minimal. As we get closer to 2030, there will be increased pressure on HEIs to be more accountable for the impact of their activities on society.

HEIs must therefore expand their role in imparting the necessary sustainability knowledge, skills and expertise to their students at all educational levels (undergraduate and post-graduate) in order to produce graduates who can lead the world in creating a sustainable planet. Innovation and technology play a massive role in sustainable solutions. Appropriate tools must also be in place to measure and evaluate the outcomes over time.

## The Move Toward to Achieve SDGs

The authors attended the 3rd World Higher Education Conference organized by the UNESCO on May 18-20, 2022 to promote the contribution of HEIs to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Conference enclosed several themes ranging from the impact of Covid-19 on higher education, equity, inclusion, quality and relevance of programmes, academic mobility in higher education, governance in HE, financing HE, data and knowledge production, and international cooperation to enhance synergies and the futures of HE.

- Academic faculties have thoroughly integrated sustainability throughout their academic and research activities to make sure that graduates are ready to apply the skills and knowledge foundation sustainable development. With the advent of the pandemic, where all lectures were obliged to be delivered online, faculties and centres have made a huge leap in the use of technology in their teaching, learning as well as research.
- HEIs are escalation efforts to work together and share knowledge to find solutions to the complex social, economic and environmental challenges of the planet, for which a clear language and shared definition of success are crucial. More effective tools and methods are needed when transforming towards a sustainable society. It can only be achieved by engaging and collaborating with all key actors, with a common objective and an effective process.
- Though national governments were not legally bound to implement SDGs, however, it was expected from them to take ownership and integrate SDGs with their national policy framework in order to achieve the desired results by 2030.
- *To achieve the goals under the SDGs, each participant country is supposed to raise its own resources through domestic sources, funding from private sector, and crackdown on illicit financial flows and corruption. SDGs have provided a new opportunity for India on the development front to align its policies, programmes, enhancing budgets and improving the preparedness of the national and sub-national governments to implement them.*

### **Contribution of Sustainable development goals in Higher education**

- In this direction, Union Government of India tried to align SDGs with its National Development Agenda and has to bring out key policy documents such as Vision, Strategy and Action Agenda. Similar exercises have to be carried out at the state and district level as well. The Vision document was supposed to focus on the social, economic and environmental goals proposed for SDGs up to 2030, with an aim to transform India into a prosperous, highly educated, healthy, secured, corruption free, energy abundant, environmentally clean and globally influential nation.
- Further, mapping of schemes and programmes have been carried out by Ministries and Departments in Union and the select State governments as per SDG goals but no

framework has been equipped at the levels of districts/ local governments. To monitor SDGs and its related targets, a National Indicator Framework (NIF) comprising 306 national indicators has been developed by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) in consultation with Central Ministries/ Departments, States and other stakeholders, such as, UN Agencies and CSOs. NITI Aayog, in enterprise with UN India, developed a SDG India Index Baseline Report (composite index comprising of 62 indicators across 14 SDGs) and a Dashboard, in Dashboard measures the achievements made by States and UTs towards various SDG targets, by ranking them on a select set of development indicators. Similar efforts have to be made by States and local governments to implement SDGs through their own local level priorities integrating with national priorities.

- Although NITI Aayog and some States have taken policy initiatives, but there are several challenges in addressing the possible bottlenecks in the institutions, processes relating to planning, implementation and monitoring of SDGs and entrée to benefits. Firstly, in terms of localization of SDGs, the process of policy and budget making, planning, realization and monitoring of strategy is not clearly reflecting SDGs at the level of State and local governments. Further, devolution of funds, functions and functionaries (3Fs) to local governments as per condition of 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Act is still a distant dream in most of the States. Hence, local governments (rural and urban) are not able to prepare people's plan and local budgets for their respective areas through people's participation. NITI Aayog being a nodal agency for monitoring the implementation of SDGs at the national level has not made any serious effort for pursuing States for devolving 3Fs to local governments.
- Secondly, like NITI Aayog, the State Planning Departments/Boards in the States have been made nodal agency to oversee the process of implementation of SDGs at the State level. So far many States are not prepared for completion of SDGs given their capacity in terms of adequacy of financial and human resources and decentralized planning processes followed by them. Further, little efforts have been made to redesign the policies and enhance the budgetary provisions as per the local felt needs.
- Thirdly, there has been a poor effort to address the issues and challenges for increasing the domestic resources mobilisation. Union Government's poor capacity to mobilise the financial resources will reduce the quantum of public spending on social and economic services at the level of State and local governments because they are largely dependent on the transfers from the above. Further, the expansion policies and budget heads of Union and State Governments have not been fully integrated with SDGs.
- Fourthly, it was observed that there has been insufficiency in unit cost of services such as old pension scheme, disability pension, widow pension, housing scheme, Supplementary Nutrition Programme, Mid-Day Meal Schemes, Pre Matric and Post Matric Scholarships for Minorities, honorarium for frontline service provider, school teachers, health workers, Workers and Helpers of Anganwadi Centre and cooks.

- It is also important to enhance the financial resources to have better unit cost of services and adequate payment to staffs, who are engaged with social and economic sectors. The adequacy of staff and their trainings have to be given top priority for better implementation of SDGs. There is a need for developing monitoring indicators and database on SDGs at the level of State and local governments. It would be useful if NITI Aayog may engage regularly with CSOs, think tanks, research organisations and academic institutions along with Planning Departments and District Planning Committees to have better local level feedback on implementation, monitoring and evaluation of SDGs.
- Among the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) set up by UN to be achieved by 2030, quality education stands at the number four positions from the top. That means ensuring wide-ranging and equitable quality education and promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all is a top priority of SDGs worldwide. UN states that education is a right. It empowers individuals to increase their well-being and contributes to broader social and economic gains. However, gender-based discrimination has been a deterrent to this right in many developing countries like India. Improved education accounts for about 50% of economic expansion in Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries over the past five decades.
- Assam has the distinction of being the first government anywhere to adopt and implement SDGs. Formally adopting the SDGs on 1 January 2016, the Government of Assam, launched “Assam Vision-2030 Initiative” in August that year towards achieving the goals. Significantly it has selected Char areas of the state as one of the models in particularly identified deprived and vulnerable areas for preparing model SDG plans and implementation. The Char areas of the Brahmaputra valley has a unique feature of development exclusion coupled with geographical isolation, hostile terrain, naturally disaster prone with a society afflicted by poverty, poor health, population explosion and heavily gender biased. Widespread illiteracy and lack of educational facilities and the distances the Char dwellers have to cover to access them is a major challenge that the state has to face to achieve the SDG of ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. The issue of women related to literacy and education in Chars is of prime importance as it transcends SDG 3 to SDG 5 (Gender Equality).
- The status of women in a society is highly resolute by the education and literacy they have. Gender issues are always related to education. The UN-Women estimate that women account 60% of world illiterate population and terms quality education as core pre-requisite for gender equality and women’s rights. In the Chars of the Brahmaputra in Assam, the literacy and educational circumstances in general and that of women in particular is very dismal. No latest data is available on the state of education in Chars of Assam. However a survey conducted by the Directorate of Char Areas Development

(DCAD), Govt. of Assam in 2002-03 shows that about 81% of the males and 92% of females in Chars of the state are illiterate.

### **The responsibility of higher education:**

The role of higher education is to authority students' perspectives on sustainability and alter how future generations will view the value of sustainability. Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) has been viewed as a common solution to foster sustainability knowledge, values, behaviours and ultimately promote social transformation .

Through their educational systems, curriculums, syllabi, practices, and "green" university ideas, the younger generations are educating themselves on sustainability, such as environmental sustainability (Hamid et al., 2017). The Higher Education Partnerships for Sustainability e-

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of forum for the future, a renowned nonprofit organization dedicated to sustainable development, this initiative aims to assist higher education institutions in delivering and sharing strategic sustainable development objectives.

The relationship between higher education and sustainable development:

In terms of operationalizing the various ways that sustainable development concepts, principles, and practices can be incorporated into teaching and learning, the relationship between ESD and the more general concept of sustainable development is complex and challenging to describe. The development of novel theories and technologies that form the foundation of sustainability is confident by higher education. Despite this, higher education institutions'

### **Conclusion**

Sustainable development includes all of the fundamental requirements for a good life in the society, plus good health, education, a clean environment, prosperity, and table political institutions. Students who are knowledgeable about sustainable development should be motivated to others, to build a harmonious educational community and be prepared to face the challenges of the twenty-first century by adopting sustainable lifestyles for a better future. This programme can be start from all educational campus, where university plays a crucial role in transforming the society.

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