

REALISING THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGs) – WHAT DOES IT TAKE?

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The SDGs address the most pressing global challenges of our time, calling upon collaborative partnerships across and between countries to balance the three dimensions of sustainable development – Economic growth, Environmental sustainability, and Social inclusion. SDGs provide a framework for shared action “for people, planet, prosperity, peace, and partnerships,” to be implemented by “all countries and all stakeholders, acting in collaborative partnership.”

So, what would it take for India to achieve the Sustainability Development Goals?

What got us here won't get us there

We have spent the last few hundred years trying to make a dent on poverty, hunger and access to education and health services for the poor. The Sustainability Development Goals not only shift the bar from access to quality (for education and health) but also give us a date for us to solve the problem. Hence, the approach and mindset that we have taken so far to address social issues will neither be relevant, nor sufficient for us to achieve the goals.

A true commitment to SDGs starts with denominator thinking – starting with the divisive line, or denominator, for these problems and finding scalable ways of solving these issues. We will need a whole set of such solutions that can be implemented in parallel. For instance, the issue of quality education would require solutions that address the teaching methodology at schools, process effectiveness of the stage, the engagement of the parents and community and a larger focus beyond pedagogy on aspects such as sports, arts and holistic development.

The ball falls in the middle

For the longest time, the issue of social development and equity has been the onus of the government. Over the past years, there has been emergence of philanthropy that goes beyond charity and a robust civil society ecosystem. There has also been a greater focus on corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainability as being a central pillar of corporate governance. Achieving the SDGs requires us to accelerate the commitment of all these stakeholders towards social and environmental sustainability since the goals are beyond the reach of any single stakeholder.



Achieving the SDGs will require us to collaborate a lot closer to realise solutions that leverage the strengths and capabilities of all the stakeholders. For instance, livelihood solutions that can scale will require capabilities of unlocking market potential (that corporations have), engaging and aligning the community (that non-profits have), establishing support systems for financing (that governments and financial institutions can do) and orchestrating these individual elements to enable local entrepreneurs to sustain and thrive. A solution that does not provide any of these does not have any potential to achieve impact at scale.

It is beyond 2%

While governments and civil society have always considered poverty alleviation as an integral part of the *raison-de-etre*, corporations have always been ambivalent about the relevance of social impact as an integral part of their core focus. While there has been increasing focus on corporate social responsibility, today the CSR Strategy of organisations are focused on brokering industrial peace, ensuring compliance and engaging employees.

However, achieving SDGs requires all companies to take a long-term view of their business. And this is not only out of a moral obligation but also to leverage the growth than sustainable development can usher. A 2017 report by The Business and Sustainable Development Commission found that sustainable business models could create economic opportunities worth up to US\$12 trillion and increase employment by up to 380 million jobs by 2030.

While it is easy to talk about corporations having to do more, the truth also is that the current quarterly reporting models provide subversive incentives for companies to think short-term and maximise immediate returns. And it takes visionary leadership to help companies see beyond their immediate term. However, realising SDGs cannot happen just through visionary leadership. It requires the right government incentives and civil society engagement. Internally, it requires Companies to be able to take a strategic view of their CSR and sustainability investments since they allow companies to run strategic pilots, demonstrate value to internal and external stakeholders and build a robust business for long-term investment in these issues. CSR and sustainability budgets should be seen as patient capital to demonstrate business models that are equitable and provide long-term value.

Maximising Social Return on Investment (SROI)

It is estimated that the financial gap for SDGs in India is INR 533 lakh crores (USD 8.5 trillion). That is a staggering number even if one does not consider the amount of waste and pilferage that happens for every rupee spent on social impact. So even if one optimistically assumes that 50% of the investment made in social result in commensurate value, we are looking at an investment of 106,60,00,00,00,00,000 rupees for achieving SDGs. Only for India.

The fact is that we don't have this much money to make the SDGs happen. Hence, it is extremely critical to focus on both the effectiveness and efficiency of all social solutions that are implemented. The truth is that today, philanthropists do not use the same level of rigour to decide on their social investments as they would for their for-profit investments. Hence, there is a proliferation of stunted solutions that are neither innovative, scalable nor sustainable which continue to exist in the landscape. While mainstream markets clear out inefficient models, the same does not happen in the social impact space. Hence, there must be a stronger engagement with the donors in helping them **maximise their Social Return on Investment (SROI)** – this will include identifying the right organisations and models and more importantly, working with those organisations and models to help them succeed.

In summary, the mark is set, the intentions are right and there is a greater alignment on the need and urgency than ever before. However, there is enough precedent in history to demonstrate that the best laid agreements, policies and plans go unimplemented or are implemented ineffectively. The gap has almost always been in Implementation . And that is what needs fixing now.