India's progress on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Why in news?

The Prime Minister expressed concern that progress on Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) seems to be slowing down.

What are Sustainable Development Goals?

- The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted by the United Nations in 2015 with a vision to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all.
- The SDGs, officially known as 'Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' is a set of 17 Global Goals with 169 targets between them.
- India is one of the signatory countries that has committed to achieving these goals by 2030.
- The UN member states use the SDGs to frame their agendas and political policies over the next 15 years.
- The SDGs framework sets targets for 231 unique indicators related to economic development, social welfare and environmental sustainability.

Where does India currently stand in the progress on SDG indicators?

- India is roughly halfway to the deadline to achieve SDGs.
- A recent study assesses India's progress on 33 welfare indicators, covering 9 SDGs and the results are mixed.
- **Positive trends -** India is 'On-Target' to meeting 14 of the 33 SDGs, including indicators for neonatal and under-five mortality, full vaccination, improved sanitation, and electricity access.
- But, the national 'On-Target' designation does not apply equally across all districts.
- **Concerning trends -** For 19 of the 33 SDG indicators, the current pace of improvement is not enough to meet SDG targets.
- Despite a national policy push for clean fuel for cooking, more than two-thirds (479) of districts remain 'Off-Target'.
- **Heightened concern -** No district in India has yet succeeded in eliminating the practice of girl child marriage before the legal age of 18 years.
- Despite the overall expansion of mobile phone access in India (93% of households), only 56% women report owning a mobile phone.

Why India's SDG progress is important?

- India is expected to surpass China as the world's most populous country in 2023, as per UN projections.
- India will become the third largest economy in the world over the next decade.
- Regardless of the global progress that has been made to date, realising Sustainable

Development Goals (SDGs) at a global scale is intrinsically tied to the success of India for the above 2 reasons.

What could be adapted from India's recent mobilisation for COVID-19?

- India adopted an 'optimisation' approach to the COVID-19 pandemic giving the focus and resources necessary to succeed.
- The following lessons from COVID-19 could be adopted in realising SDGs.

'Optimisation problem' is the designing and implementing a policy response to a pressing issue relying on political will, responsive administration, adequate resources, and sound data.

- **Political-administrative synergy -** Strong and sustained political leadership supported by a responsive administrative structure at all levels, from national to the district level.
- This synergy which was willing to learn and undertake course corrections in real-time was critical to the success of vaccination programme and rollout of a comprehensive relief package.
- **Public data platform -** The existing digital infrastructure, as well as new, indigenous initiatives such as the Co-WIN data platform made India's success with COVID-19 possible.
- India must put in place a coordinated, public data platform for population health management, by
- India must consolidate its many platforms into an integrated digital resource for district administrators, as well as State and national policy makers.
- **Proactive Programmes -** A targeted SDG strategy delivered at scale must be executed with the same timeliness of India's COVID-19 relief package.
- For example, the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (March 2020) later augmented Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (2023) covering 800 million people.
- The relief programme was a mix of spending to provide direct in-kind and economic support, as well as measures aimed at revitalising the economy, small businesses, and agriculture.
- This was critical in blunting the adverse effects of COVID-19, especially for vulnerable and the socio-economically disadvantaged groups.
- It also measurably demonstrated the value of a proactive, government-supported programme specifically aimed at improving people's well-being.

What does India need to do?

- There is no historical precedence on how to deliver development to a billion-plus people in a healthy and sustainable manner.
- India needs to innovate a new policy path in order to meet the aspirations of its people in the decade ahead.
- India has proved that it is possible to deliver at scale in such an ambitious and comprehensive manner, in successfully delivering a real-time response to the

COVID-19 pandemic.
- To succeed in meeting its SDG targets, a similar concerted, pioneering, nation-wide effort would be the need of the hour.

References

1. The Hindu - India, its SDG pledge goal, and the strategy to apply

