



India and the MDGs: Towards a Sustainable Future for All

Policy Briefs



Enhancing the sustainability of development

Highlights

India's performance on Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 7 targets for environment has varied. India is home to two of the world's 25 internationally recognized global biodiversity hotspots and is one of only 17 mega-diverse countries. The overall area under biodiversity protection and forest cover has increased but its forest-growing stocks are declining.

Although India has still relatively low levels of pollution per capita or per dollar of GDP given its population, it is likely to soon become one of the planet's largest polluters, with the rapid urbanization that is expected over the next few decades.

In the post-2015 period, India will not only need to accelerate achievement on its MDG targets, but also focus on the environment and the negative impact of climate change that threatens to wipe off developmental gains. It needs to pursue an environment friendly growth process to serve its own domestic compulsions and strengthen global climate change mitigation measures.

Key actions towards sustainable development:

- Prioritize afforestation measures by the Central and state governments.
- Reduce the carbon footprint in production and consumption, through greater emphasis on renewable energy, waste recycling and reuse and enhanced energy efficiency.
- Review strategies on conservation of the maritime and coastal ecosystems, improvement of air quality in cities.
- Involve private sector to support sustainability efforts through investments in clean energy.
- Pursue the '100 Smart Cities' proposal through sustainable finance models.

This policy brief has been prepared by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) on behalf of the United Nations Country Team in India.



Synergies between economic, social and environmental development

The MDGs mainly focused on social development and a limited set of core environment related concerns: protection of forests and biodiversity, and mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions. In the current global discourse on the post-2015 development agenda there is now near consensus that the future well-being of humanity requires greater attention to environment and climate related concerns to set countries on more sustainable development paths. There is also recognition that pursuing economic, social and environmental objectives separately — as was being done earlier — fails to take account of the interactions and synergies between them. There is a need therefore to integrate all these major development objectives within a single set of development goals to be achieved together — Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Different economic and social development objectives, under the MDGs and the future SDGs, are being discussed. This brief discusses India's performance on the MDG-related environment targets, followed by India's position on the leading environment and climate change related concerns (emphasized in the post-2015 development agenda).

India's performance on the MDG environment objectives has varied

On the positive side, India's area under biodiversity protection and overall forest cover has increased although its forest-growing stocks are dwindling. On the other hand, although India still has relatively low levels of pollution per capita or per dollar of GDP, given its population size, yet with the rapid urbanization in the country expected over the next few decades, it is likely to soon become one of the planet's largest polluters.

Biodiversity: India is home to two of the world's 25 internationally recognized global biodiversity hotspots — the Western Ghats and the North-Eastern Himalayas — and is one of only 17 mega-diverse countries. India has been taking active measures to protect its biodiversity. India's total protected area under biodiversity conservation has been growing and it now has a protected area network of national parks, wild life sanctuaries and conservation reserves that covers about 4.8% of its total geographical area.¹

Important steps taken by India include the ratification on the Convention on Biological Diversity in 1992; the enactment of the Biological Biodiversity Act in 2002 and the setting up of the National Biodiversity Authority in 2003. India has been Chair of the Group of Like Minded Mega-diverse Countries (LMMC) from 2004 to 2006. The country hosted the United Nations Biodiversity Conference at Hyderabad, in 2012, in which developed countries

committed to double the funding for biodiversity protection and developing countries agreed to expand funding for biodiversity protection to beyond their usual contributions. India pledged over \$50 million to the programme to support the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity. Since October 2012, India has the presidency of the Conference of the Parties (CoP), which is the governing body of the Convention, and expects to use it to strengthen biodiversity protection world-wide.

Forests: Forest cover as a percentage of the total geographical area in the country increased from 19.32% in 1997 to 21.23% in 2013² (Figure 1). Most states have shown small increases in forest cover but states like Tripura, Goa, Kerala, West Bengal and Delhi have recorded large increases. Forest cover has decreased in the north-eastern border states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, and Manipur, as also in Chhattisgarh. However, the positive national trend in forest cover masks the depletion of the growing stock of India's forests.³ More efforts need to be taken to increase the forest cover and expand the growing stock.

India needs to devise sustainable growth strategies that can help expand its economic growth along with promoting its environment protection efforts. The establishment of the National Green Tribunal (NGT) in 2010, for expeditious disposal of cases relating to environmental protection and conservation of forests, is an important step in this direction. Vigorous implementation of the recently approved Green India Mission is equally necessary to protect India's environment and its forests.

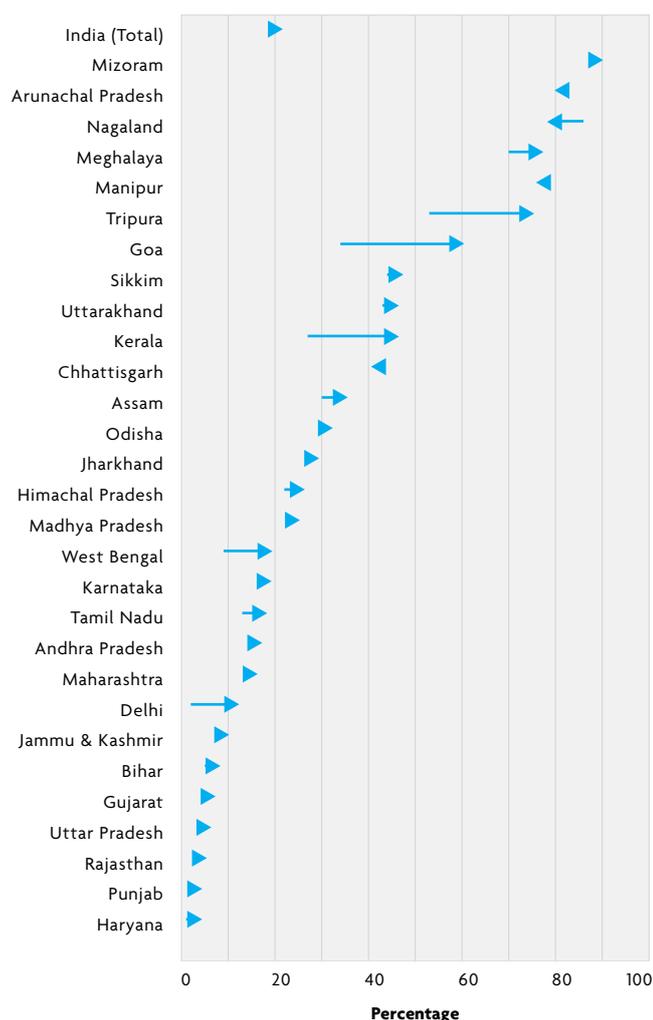
The Green India Mission, one of eight under the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC),⁴ aims to increase the forest cover in the country by five million hectares by 2017, and improve the quality of forests on another five million hectares of land. The plan aims to enhance the forest cover at a cost of Rs. 46,000 crores, over a ten-year period, until 2022. This enhancement represents an equivalent, annual increase of 55% over the ongoing outlay of Rs 8,500 crores per year for forestry.⁵ Funds will be sought from private parties, and bilateral and multilateral agencies. As the goals and strategies of this mission are ambitious, the objectives and approaches need to be more clearly defined, for a quick and effective start. It should be provided with adequate resources, so that it can improve the quality of India's forest cover and effectively protect its biodiversity.

Greenhouse gas emissions: India's performance in controlling greenhouse gas emissions, as part of the international effort to reduce global warming, can be considered satisfactory, if the carbon intensity of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is used as an indicator; but not if carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions per head is considered. India has actively supported global efforts on climate change, welcomed the Rio+20 outcomes on sustainable development but taken the stand that developing countries striving for higher growth cannot afford aggressive global warming mitigation measures without assistance from developed



Figure 1

Forest cover as a percentage of total geographical area, 1997-2013, India and states



Source: Based on India State of the Forest Report, various issues and Forest Survey of India, 2014.

countries. India believes controlling greenhouse gas emissions is a global responsibility to be pursued under the principle of “common but differentiated responsibility.” Nevertheless, as India is likely to be one of the countries most affected by climate change, owing to its vulnerabilities (a large number of poor people, the frequency of natural disasters – cyclones, floods, and droughts; the drying up of its glaciers and rivers; the adverse impact of these occurrences on food security), it needs to pursue environment friendly growth policies, to serve its own domestic compulsions and strengthen global climate change mitigation measures.

India’s CO₂ intensity fell from 0.59 kg of CO₂ per \$PPP, in 1995 to 0.33 kg by 2012.⁶ By contrast, India’s per capita CO₂ emissions increased from 0.8 tonnes in 1990 to 1.7 tonnes in 2010.⁷ In absolute terms, India is among the five largest CO₂ emitters internationally, although its level of per-capita emissions is the lowest among the five. For example, per capita emissions in the

USA stood at 17.6 tonnes in 2010, compared to 1.7 tonnes in India. India’s total CO₂ emissions have almost tripled between 1990 and 2010, and by 2020 India is expected to account for around 6% of total global emissions. The Government has recognized climate change as a major challenge and is committed to reducing the carbon intensity of its GDP by 20% to 25% by 2020, compared to 2005 levels (as per the Copenhagen Accord signed in December 2009, at the Climate Change Summit in Copenhagen).⁸ India can meet this commitment if it can reduce energy use through energy efficiency measures; by moving to low carbon and renewable energy sources; and by adopting sustainable consumption and production patterns (SCP) in general. These are areas where priority international action is being focused for the post-2015 period and India has taken up a number of programmes to address them under the National Action Plan for Climate Change, as discussed below.

India and emerging sustainable development priorities

The United Nations General Assembly’s Open Working Group (OWG) proposals on the SDGs have highlighted several post-2015 development priorities for achieving sustainable development. These are also all generally consistent with India’s own commitments towards inclusive and sustainable development. India’s status and concerns with regard to some of the more important of these emerging environment and climate related issues are discussed briefly here.

Terrestrial and marine ecosystems conservation: The post-2015 development agenda that is being discussed has widened the areas of concern, from just forests and biodiversity protection to other areas of natural resources protection. It now covers both land and sea, and includes conservation of inland freshwater ecosystems and mountain ecosystems; reversing desertification and land degradation; conservation of coastal and marine resources, including promoting sustainable fishing; and the protection of flora and fauna.

Being a geographically vast and diverse country, India confronts problems in each of these areas that are being proposed as focus areas. Its inland rivers and waters suffer from high levels of pollution and require urgent attention. The Government has prioritized measures such as cleaning the river Ganga with an Integrated Ganga Conservation Mission called ‘**Namami Gange**’. A similar approach needs to be extended to all other major river systems in the country. Most of India’s river systems are snow fed by the Himalayan glaciers and it has been estimated that the reduction in river flows due to their rapid melting is likely to affect around 500 million people in India.⁹ Depleting groundwater is another major problem affecting water supply. Another problem area is land degradation, caused by intensive farming, soil erosion (particularly in the hills and arid and semi-



arid areas) and human activity such as mining and quarrying. Estimates of the proportion of degraded land vary depending on the intensity of degradation but the Planning Commission had estimated the proportion of wasteland which forms the core of degraded land, as being close to 20% of the total land area.¹⁰

Very little attention has been paid by countries including India, to coastal and marine ecosystems. India has a vast coastline with varied and abundant coastal ecosystems. For instance, together with Bangladesh, it has the Sundarbans, the world's largest mangrove forests. Coastal fishing and post-harvest fisheries employ more than two million people. However, international agencies such as the World Bank feel that insufficient protection has been provided to coastal ecosystems. For example, 34% of India's mangroves have been destroyed between 1950 and 2000; coral areas are now threatened; marine fish stocks are declining; and several species of marine creatures are disappearing.¹¹ Unless remedied, such destruction of coastal ecosystems would put at risk the sustainable management and use of such ecosystems and the livelihoods of the people that depend on them.

Climate change mitigation measures: The MDGs focused on reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, a major factor in climate change. As the need to control such emissions becomes more urgent, increased focus is being placed on the various measures to achieve it. The SDG proposals identify (i) expanding renewable energy and energy efficiency; and (ii) encouraging sustainable consumption and production patterns (SCP) in general. India has made a commitment to reduce the carbon intensity of its GDP and will therefore need to vigorously pursue such measures.¹²

Energy efficiency measures are needed by India in all areas of economic activity, particularly in the power, transport and industry sectors. India's power sector is inefficient, uses outdated technology and has high transmission and distribution losses. The broader energy sector is overburdened by fossil fuel subsidies and consumer tariffs that often bear little relation to the cost of energy, causing excessive energy use and forcing the Centre and state Governments to subsidize loss-making state-owned utilities rather than using such resources to provide basic services to citizens. Similarly, the transport sector, which along with power generation contributes to almost two thirds of all emissions, requires a major overhaul. Cleaner and more energy efficient technologies in industry need to be promoted as well. An important energy efficiency initiative of the Government is establishing the Bureau of Energy Efficiency under the National Mission on Energy Efficiency to benchmark electrical appliances to guide consumers. The Government is also providing incentives for the use of LED lights that can significantly enhance energy efficiency.

India's energy basket has a mix of renewable and non-renewable resources, with the dominance of coal in the energy mix projected to continue through 2030, with an estimated 50% of

total commercial energy consumption sourced from coal and 70% of coal-based energy being used by the power sector.¹³ This represents a major challenge to a low-carbon future. Renewable energy sources such as wind, geothermal, solar and small hydro power plants account for a minuscule 2% share of the Indian fuel mix. Nuclear energy has a 1% share. It is necessary that India substantially increases investments in renewable energy and reverse the fall in investments in such sources (from \$13.0 billion in 2011 to \$7.4 billion in 2014) that has occurred.¹⁴ Other measures that are needed are to gradually introduce alternative fuels such as biodiesel, compressed natural gas and ethanol; and support businesses that promote the use of renewable energy.

The new Government is targeting up to 100,000 MW of solar generation by 2022, representing 10% of total energy consumption, quintupling the existing 20,000 MW target by 2022, under the National Solar Mission. While an ambitious renewable energy programme is timely, coal would continue to be a dominant source of energy in India for many years. Hence, there is also need to switch over to use of clean coal technology including carbon capture and storage (CCS) to enhance efficiency of coal-based thermal power generation. India would need access to advanced technologies to effect such a transition.

Indian industry needs to move towards sustainable production through enhanced energy efficiency, waste recycling, and cogeneration. Smart incentives can encourage sustainable development practices such as those creating 'wealth out of waste.' For instance, by incentivizing production of recycled paper, India has created livelihood for millions of people in the informal sector, who collect waste paper from households and get paid by paper producers. Such recycling of waste paper leads to saving of raw material (which is often wood pulp imported from other countries), energy and water used in paper production. Such good practices that create incomes and livelihoods, help save energy, reduce the carbon footprint and dependence on imports, need to be scaled up and replicated in other sectors.¹⁵

Resilience to natural hazards: The MDGs did not focus on natural disasters that can destroy development gains of years in minutes. People living in poverty bear an increasing brunt of natural disasters and other climatic events, the frequency of which is likely to increase in the future. Reflecting this concern, the SDG proposals, for example, emphasize the need to strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity to natural disasters and climate related hazards.

India has had commendable successes in reducing human losses from natural disasters. While in 1999, a category 5 cyclone that hit Odisha killed 10,000 people and caused damage of \$4.5 billion, 14 years later, when Phailin, another cyclonic storm of the same category hit the state—less than 40 people were killed and economic losses were about \$700 million.¹⁶ This was made possible because of India's ability to generate



accurate early warnings through cumulative investments in scientific and technological establishments that enabled timely evacuation of nearly a million people to safer places. A similar success was achieved with cyclone, Hud Hud, later (October 2014) when 400,000 people were evacuated. However, floods in Uttarakhand, in 2013, and in Jammu and Kashmir, in 2014, resulted in huge damages and loss of lives. Besides developing capability in remote sensing and early warning systems, India has raised the National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) and has established the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) to strengthen disaster preparedness. The Government is revamping the NDMA by bringing in domain experts. In future, such disaster management practices have to be scaled up and adaptation measures including climate proofing of infrastructure such as riverine and shoreline embankments, roads, bridges and railways near coastal and flood prone areas, have to be undertaken.

Inclusive and sustainable cities: The problem of rapid urbanization is beginning to pose a major problem for many developing countries, including India, and municipal authorities are finding it difficult to expand basic housing and urban services at the pace needed to provide a decent living environment to all citizens. India is currently among the least urbanized countries, with only about 31% of its total population living in urban areas. But this proportion is expected to rise to 40% by 2030 and to 52% by 2050.¹⁷ By 2050, 400 million more people would be living in urban settlements.

Air pollution in India's cities is widespread, with vehicular and industrial emissions being the main culprits. The World Health Organization (WHO) reported recently that Delhi was the most polluted major city in the world, on the basis of particulate matter concentrations with PM10 and PM2.5 concentrations of 286mcg and 153mcg, respectively, in 2014.¹⁸ The situation in recent years between 2008 and 2012, in the five major metropolises in the country, is shown in Table 1. All cities show

particulate matter (PM10) dangerously above WHO norms (and four of five even above national norms). The reasons for high PM10 are increased emissions from diesel electricity generators, small-scale industries, biomass incineration, dust due to traffic and construction, natural dust, commercial and domestic use of fuel and vehicular emissions. Two cities exceed norms for Nitrogen dioxide (NO₂), which has increased in three of the five metropolises studied. On the positive side, Sulphur dioxide (SO₂) concentrations remain below norms and have been stable or decreased in all metropolises, except in Kolkata.¹⁹ This is due to recent initiatives such as reduction in sulphur in diesel, use of cleaner fuel such as Compressed Natural Gas (CNG) in public transport in metro cities, change in domestic fuel from coal to Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG), etc. Although several measures are being taken, these do not seem to be sufficient to arrest the general decline in air quality in cities and much more clearly needs to be done.

Apart from poor air quality, cities also face other environment related problems such as excessive congestion, unhygienic living conditions, poor waste disposal, and the lack of green spaces for recreation. More attention to creating better livable cities must be made. Recent initiatives to develop "smart cities" can help these immensely by providing digital solutions to urban problems and need to be integrated with environment improvement interventions and scaled up throughout the country in the post-2015 period.

The projected rapid rise in urban population over the coming decades provides to India an opportunity to leapfrog into more sustainable patterns of urbanization. In this context, the Government has announced the development of **100 'Smart Cities'**, which will be more sustainable and follow low carbon paths. Cities are known to be engines of growth and of social transformation. New sustainable cities could drive India's growth on a more inclusive, resilient and sustainable path by harnessing technologies that allow future cities to become more efficient in the use of

Table 1

Air quality in five metropolitan cities-annual average concentrations in micrograms per cubic metre (µ/m³), 2008-2012

Year	2008			2009			2010			2011			2012		
Pollutant	SO ₂	NO ₂	PM10												
WHO Norm*	20	40	20	20	40	20	20	40	20	20	40	20	20	40	20
Mumbai	9	42	132	6	42	109	4	21	94	5	35	119	5	20	117
Delhi	5	45	198	6	49	243	5	55	259	5	57	222	5	59	237
Banglore	15	40	90	16	40	122	15	31	94	16	29	94	14	28	121
Chennai	16	9	48	9	17	70	9	15	59	12	19	65	12	21	57
Kolkata	9	58	148	16	56	187	11	62	98	13	66	115	12	70	135

Source: Based on National Ambient Air Quality Status and trends, Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB), India, various issues.

Note: (i) Data in excess of WHO norms shown in red. *WHO norm for SO₂ is for 24 hours mean. (ii) Revised National Ambient Air Quality Standards (as per NAAQS Notification, 2009) for Industrial, Residential, Rural & Other Areas are: SO₂ = 50 µ/m³, NO₂ = 40 µ/m³ and PM10 = 60 µ/m³.



energy and natural resources, including through waste recycling while enhancing resilience through improved building codes.

Government's initiatives under the National Action Plan on Climate Change: The Action Plan announced in 2008 focuses on environmental sustainability together with the promotion of inclusive growth and both adaptation and mitigation measures relating to climate change. The eight national missions under it cover almost all aspects on environment and climate change that are highlighted in the SDG proposals. The national missions are for: (i) solar energy; (ii) energy efficiency; (iii) sustainable habitats; (iv) water; (v) Himalayan ecosystems; (vi) creating a "Green India"; (vii) sustainable agriculture; and (viii) strategic knowledge for climate change. The Action Plan is coordinated by the high-level Prime Minister's Council on Climate Change that also advises the Government on proactive measures that can be taken by India to deal with the challenge of climate change. The Council has been reconstituted by the new Government, to facilitate inter-ministerial coordination and guide policy in relevant areas and monitor key policy decisions.

To accelerate sustainable development, India needs to review these initiatives and consider whether other initiatives for priority areas, indicated in the SDG proposals, such as for marine and coastal ecosystems and improvement of urban environments, including air quality need to be introduced. The country also needs to carry forward the implementation of such initiatives speedily and closely monitor action at both the Centre and in the states. Apart from public action, encouragement of the private sector to support sustainability efforts, particularly by undertaking investments for clean energy deployment is critical. Access to affordable and clean energy technology and skills is equally crucial, together with the development of local expertise and capacity for encouraging and incentivizing innovative approaches.

Towards sustainable development

Apart from speedily achieving the MDG targets, India needs to now focus on environment and climate change concerns, which are emerging and will become major issues for the country and the world in the post-2015 period. Simultaneous action is required on a number of fronts, if these problems are to be addressed. These include:

- Accord higher priority and support to **afforestation** measures by the Centre and the states, focusing particularly on reversing the loss of multi-purpose trees from the large forested states and increasing growing stock of forests and Non Timber Forest Products (NTFP).
- Make more vigorous efforts to **reduce the carbon footprint in production and consumption**, through greater emphasis on renewable energy, enhancing energy efficiency, waste recycling and reuse, which will contribute to reducing import dependence, given the high dependence of the country on energy imports. India will need to be supported with access to advanced technologies in this respect.
- Review strategies to better **combat climate change**, including examining areas in the OWG proposals that are crucial for India such as conservation of marine and coastal ecosystems; air quality in cities, etc. Implement such strategies effectively, with close monitoring of action at the Centre and in the states. Apart from public action, encouragement of the private sector to support sustainability efforts, particularly by undertaking investments for clean energy deployment, must be a priority.
- Vigorously pursue the **100 'smart cities'** proposal. Evolve sustainable and win-win financial models for leveraging public-private partnerships for these smart cities.



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About the India and the MDGs Policy Briefs

This policy brief is part of a series developed by the Research and Knowledge Team of the United Nations in India. The policy brief series provides additional information and analysis on India's progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), as they end in 2015, and medium-term policy recommendations. The series accompanies the report of the United Nations Country Team in India entitled *India and the MDGs: Towards a Sustainable Future for All*, released in February 2015*. The report makes an assessment of achievement of MDGs by India over the past 14 years and draws policy lessons for accelerating progress for closing the gaps and carrying forward the momentum post-2015 to end poverty and other deprivations and provide sustainable prosperity for all. (* <http://www.unescap.org/resources/india-and-mdgs-towards-sustainable-future-all>)

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