

MISSING THE GENDER-INFRASTRUCTURE LINK

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The NITI Aayog should be complimented for releasing the “SDG India Index Baseline Report 2018”. The document tracks India’s progress at the sub-national level on 13 of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The launch of an index that maps India’s endeavours at sustainable development is significant in several ways. The performance of the world’s second-most populous country would have a great influence on the success or failure of the SDGs. A rigorous evaluation of India’s performance is thus critical to ensure that the UN’s Agenda 2030 does not remain on paper.

The report classifies states as “achievers” (index score = 100), “front-runners” (score: 65-99), performers (score: 50-64), and “aspirants” (score < 49) based on their performance on 13 indices, each representative of an SDG. The country’s performance has been exemplary with respect to “life on land” (Goal 15), “reduced inequality” (Goal 10) and “peace, justice and strong institutions” (Goal 16) with scores of 90, 71 and 71 respectively. However, the performance has been abysmal on goals pertaining to industry, innovation and infrastructure (Goal 9, henceforth Infra-9), sustainable cities and communities (Goal 11) and gender equality (Goal 5), with scores of 44, 39 and 36 respectively.

The performance of gender equality is particularly lamentable, given the intrinsic and instrumental importance of this SDG. The sub-indicators adopted by the NITI Aayog to formulate the gender equality index are based on sex ratio at birth, wage-gap, domestic violence, women in leadership, labour-force participation and adoption of modern family planning methods by women. At the state-level, Kerala (50), Sikkim (50) and Chhattisgarh (49) have emerged as the top performers, while Uttar Pradesh (27), Manipur (25) and Bihar (24) trail far behind. Kerala’s lead can possibly be attributed to its legacy advantages, including high literacy rates and low gender literacy gap.

To assume that “expenditure” creates a distinction between front-runners and under-performers is not necessarily true since the gender budget allocation of Kerala is a fraction of that of Bihar. In such respects, governance matters as well.

Gender inequality is determined by an interplay of complex economic, demographic and socio-cultural factors such as income, health, education and religion. Several studies, including the World Bank’s Engendering Development (2001) and World Development Report on Gender Equality and Development (2012) and the Asian Development Bank’s Sectoral Perspectives on Gender and Social Inclusion (2011) point out that infrastructure development has a significant bearing on gender equality.

The Niti Aayog’s report too underlines that Infra-9 is closely intertwined with gender equality. Our findings, however, do not indicate a strong positive relationship between gender equality and Infra-9 scores in the agency’s report (a correlation of -0.3). This raises two queries. How representative is the Infra-9 index as compiled by NITI Aayog vis-a-vis the UN’s comparable description of “industry, innovation and infrastructure”? Second, how representative is the term “infrastructure” in Infra-9 a-vis. the generally acceptable definition of infrastructure?

The Niti Aayog considered only two sub-targets (9.1 and 9.2) under Infra-9 pertaining to physical and wireless connectivity. This negates the importance of sub-targets related to financial inclusion, sustainability of industrial activities and research and developments (sub-targets 9.3 to 9.5). The scope of the Niti Aayog's targeting exercise would be enhanced by the addition of the relevant sub-indicators for the missing targets.

With respect to targets pertaining to physical connectivity, the Niti Aayog's exercise uses only the data pertaining to all-weather roads under schemes such as the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana. And with regards to targets under wireless connectivity, the exercise covers only mobile tele-density, internet connectivity and e-governance through BharatNet. In both respects, therefore, Niti Aayog's exercise covers "infrastructure" under Infra-9 partially. This limitation can be overcome if the exercise evaluates the country's performance on Goal 6 (clean water and sanitation), Goal 7 (affordable and clean energy) and Goal 11 (sustainable cities and communities). Exercises like the Asian Development Bank's report, Meeting Asia's Infrastructure Needs (2017) and the World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Report 2017-18 underscore the salience of incorporating these SDGs in any evaluation of infrastructure.

Our analysis, which links a single unweighted composite-index of Goals 6, 7, and 11 with gender equality, establishes a significant and positive relation (correlation of 0.6). Schemes like Swachh Bharat, Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana, AMRUT and Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana are progressive steps in strengthening such plurality of relations. So SDGs pertaining to energy, water-sanitation and sustainable cities must be aligned with Infra-9 in order to establish the linkage between gender and infrastructure comprehensively.

Despite paucity of disaggregated data, the NITI Aayog has done a commendable job in compiling the "SDG India Index Baseline Report 2018". Constant review and monitoring of the progress in achieving SDGs is important not only for honouring the country's commitments in this respect but for effective policy-making as well. We hope that Indian statistical organisations take cues and work towards capturing and collating comprehensive micro-level data sets that cover the SDGs in all their facets.

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