

ACROSS SECTORS, OVER TIME

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Conservation, Sustainable Development, and EIA

The re-elected government has a unique chance to change India's policy direction from a drive for short-term GDP growth at any cost to confronting the vast social and environmental gaps. A way forward is to make the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) the policy guide rather than short-term GDP growth. SDGs target human, social and governance improvements, and their linkages. Studies in Asia document the impact of corruption in aggravating illegal logging and deforestation. And environmental destruction and climate change hurt the poor the most. Other crises resulting from a short-term focus at the expense of the long term also harm the poor the most. The 1997 Asian financial crisis and the 2007-08 global financial crisis are examples. Even when policy assessments show the merit of looking at lasting welfare, there is political pressure to only show immediate growth. To overcome this conundrum, we need to bring together three approaches in evaluation: impact evaluation, cost-benefit analysis, and objectives-based evaluation.

Impact evaluation can serve as a valuable way to gauge the causal effects of a programme — for example, providing vaccination to the population. An example is an impact evaluation of 24x7 rural electrification in Gujarat, showing that benefits of reliable electricity go beyond having lighting and have positive spillovers on maternal and child health.

Cost-benefit analysis too has a growing role to play in enlarging the focus of evaluation. For example, growth analysis could give special attention to the time frame when impacts are assessed to ensure that sustainability is rewarded. Cost-benefit analysis could also apply distributional weights to address income disparities.

Extensions of objectives-based evaluation can show the importance of considering growth plus equity and the impacts of natural disasters. Odisha is an example in 2019 of ensuring early warning and evacuation. But budget allocations for preventing calamities remain woefully inadequate.

India is ranked 130th out of 189 countries in the UN's human development index, and 114th among 142 countries in gender gap. Of the world's 30 cities that are ranked worst in air pollution, 22 are in India. India needs to vastly increase spending on education, health and the environment, and build smart components into projects. An example of incorporating social inclusion is that of the JICA-funded Delhi Metro, which included gender elements.

The new administration can direct policy towards longer-term SDGs rather than short-term growth. To support this effort, policy assessments that only have a myopic focus on one sector and election cycles need to give way to ones that span across sectors and over time.

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It opens the window for India to take advantage of economic opportunities in the geopolitical space

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