BRIDGING THE GAP: INDIA'S PROGRESS AND CHALLENGES IN ACHIEVING SDG 4: QUALITY EDUCATION FOR ALL

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ABSTRACT

Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) aspires to ensure inclusive & equitable quality education for all. This study delves into India's progress towards this crucial objective. While advancements have been made in primary education enrolment and female literacy, significant hurdles remain. Millions of children lack fundamental literacy and numeracy skills, and overall learning outcomes fall short. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these inequalities, disproportionately impacting disadvantaged groups. India, a signatory to the SDGs, has implemented initiatives like the Right to Education Act (RTE) and digital learning platforms (DIKSHA, SWAYAM) to foster access and bridge geographical divides. However, substantial challenges persist. Socioeconomic disparities continue to hinder access for marginalized communities. Teacher shortages, inadequate training, and a lack of basic infrastructure in schools create further roadblocks in ensuring quality education. Achieving SDG 4 necessitates a multi-pronged approach in India. The curriculum and pedagogical approaches must be revamped to improve learning outcomes. Strategies to bridge the equity gap and address disparities based on gender, socioeconomic background, and location are vital. Investing in teacher training, addressing shortages, and providing essential school facilities are essential steps. Finally, promoting lifelong learning opportunities empowers individuals throughout their lives. Addressing these challenges with urgency is critical. By focusing on these priority areas, India can en route for achieving SDG 4 and ensure a future where quality education empowers all citizens.

***KEYWORDS**: Sustainable Development Goal – 4, Digital Learning, Quality Education, Teacher Training.*

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Introduction

Sustainability refers to the desirable state through a process, which is the means towards this desirable state and the means – the process of development and all that it entails – are sustainable, in order to justify the end (KALLIO, 2007). The phenomenon of sustainable development can never be exhaustively defined; it would constantly change with time, interpreters, and their needs. Thus possess an elusive and temporary end goal pursued through a flexible and evolving set of methods and strategies (Quental, 2010,).

Sustainable development therefore, necessitates the understanding that the state of the family is intricately linked to the fate of the planet. As far as the geospatial aspect is concerned, we are all connected, through one way or the other. As reported in an issue of The Economist in 2019, Sgroi and Proto have shown that increasing national income is important to happiness, but not as important as ensuring that the population is healthy and avoiding conflict (www.economist.com, 2019).

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The Sustainable Development Goals are a worldwide call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and improve the lives and forecast of everyone, everywhere. The 17 Goals were adopted by all United Nation Member States in 2015, as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which set out a Fifteen-year plan to achieve the Goals (Asaithambi, 2023).

SDG 4 focuses on inclusive & equitable education, aiming to provide quality education for all individuals while reducing inequalities within and among countries (Mariyam, 2022). This goal emphasizes the importance of ensuring that children with communication disabilities in underserved communities have equitable access to tailored services that cater to their specific needs, ultimately contributing to the overall development and well-being of society (Mariyam, 2022). Additionally, the role of tertiary education, particularly universities, is highlighted in the broader scope of the Sustainable Development Goals, emphasizing equal access to higher education as a means to promote lifelong learning opportunities and drive innovation and knowledge production for societal development (Maia, 2021). Furthermore, the use of digital education technologies is seen as a key strategy to advance SDG4, promoting equal opportunities for boys and girls, enhancing fundamental skills, and reducing inequalities through accessible and high-quality educational content (Agung, 2023). Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4) aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" by 2030 (www.unstats.un.org). The introduction of SDG-4, which focuses on quality education, has been a key component of the global development agenda. (Nazar, 2018) and (Wulff, 2020) both highlight the importance of this goal, with Nazar emphasizing the need for equitable and high-quality education, and Wulff discussing challenges and opportunities in its implementation. (Boeren, 2019) further explores potential strategies to achieve SDG-4, emphasizing the shared responsibility of individuals, educational institutions, and governments. These studies collectively underscore the significance of SDG-4 in promoting sustainable development through education. In India NITI Aayog has been entrusted with the role to co-ordinate with respect to SDGs. NITI Aayog has mapped the goals and targets to various nodal ministries as well as flagship programmes. To accelerate this agenda, the Government of India has recently unveiled a draft Three-Year Action Agenda spanning from 2017-18 to 2019-20. Concurrently, significant progress is being made on a 15-Year Vision that will encompass a 7-year Strategy as well (www.niti.gov.in).

Review of Literature

(Maia, 2021) , stated that the centre of attention of SDG - 4 is inclusive & equitable quality education, which emphasizes the importance of higher education in achieving this goal. Also Through collaborations between UN Agencies, governments, and the telecommunications industry, higher education institutions are working towards providing affordable and context-sensitive digital education to promote equal opportunities for all. (Krystal, 2022), exploring the role of higher education institutions in advancing Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through digital education and equitable services. It highlights the importance of local knowledge and perspectives from the Global South in shaping more effective and inclusive strategies for sustainable development, emphasizing the need for diverse perspectives in global sustainability initiatives.

(Suriamurthee, 2022), consider the inquiry into the viability of schools in extremely impoverished settings and the ethical and intricate considerations of imparting sustainable development knowledge to children on the brink of survival.

(Sugata, 2022), explores a valid analytical framework to measure the level of incorporation of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and Global Citizenship Education (GCED) in educational documents, in relation to Indicator 4.7.1 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

(Stepanek, 2016) focuses on achieving and monitoring SDG4.7, which includes education for sustainable development, human rights, gender equality, promoting a culture of peace and non-violence, and appreciation of cultural diversity.

(Clinton, 2022), discusses how an exhibition, featuring artifacts related to each of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), contributes to SDG 4. It explores the transformative approaches in education and governance for sustainable development.

(Suriamurthee M. M., 2022), ensure that every learner gains the knowledge and skills necessary to advance sustainable development. The paper examines the difficulties of imparting this curriculum in schools facing severe poverty and deprivation.

According to (Gemma, 2016) the effectiveness and nature of indicators generated through a values-based approach known as ESDinds are contrasted with those produced through a UN process. The analysis reveals that the UN process generated limited indicators related to broader dimensions of knowledge. In contrast, the values-based approach provided additional coverage of Target 4.7, encompassing well-defined competencies and less tangible aspects. The paper suggests that the UN procedure could benefit from incorporating design elements from the ESDinds approach.

Objective of the Study

The following Objectives have been included in the research paper presented:

- To examine the perspectives of the Sustainable Development Goals related to providing quality education.
- To measure the development of SDG-4 around the world.
- To analyze the current state of initiatives implemented and challenges faced by the Indian government to achieve the objectives of quality education (SDG 4).

UN Progress and reports from 2016 to 2023 on SDG – 4: According to the report submitted by UN since the inception of SDGs the progress in education throughout the world is as follows:

- **2016**

Despite some advancement, the global community did not achieve the Millennium Development Goal of universal primary education by 2015. In 2013, there were still 59 million children of primary school age not attending school; of these, 20% had dropped out, and 40% had never been to school at all. That year, worldwide, 10% of girls and 8% of boys were not in school, with children from the poorest 20% of households being nearly four times more likely to be out of school compared to those from the wealthiest households (www.sdgs.un.org). By 2030, there is a pressing need for almost 26 million new primary school teachers, with Africa facing the most significant challenges. In 2013, only 71% of teachers in sub-Saharan Africa and 84% in Northern Africa met the national training standards (www.sdgs.un.org).

- **2017**

Around 263 million children and young people were not attending school, including 61 million of primary school age. Sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia made up over 70% of the world's out-of-school population. In every country with available data, children from the wealthiest 20% of households had higher reading proficiency at the end of primary and lower secondary education compared to those from the poorest 20%. In many developing countries, over 60% of primary and secondary schools have access to computers and the Internet for teaching purposes. However, in more than half of the sub-Saharan countries with data, this figure is below 40% (www.sdgs.un.org).

- **2018**

Globally, the participation rate in early childhood and primary education rose to 70% in 2016, up from 63% in 2010. Approximately 617 million children and adolescents of primary and lower secondary school age—58% of that age group—are not meeting minimum proficiency standards in reading and mathematics. In 2016, around 85% of primary school teachers worldwide were trained, but this percentage was lower in Southern Asia at 71% and even lower in sub-Saharan Africa at 61%. Additionally, only 34% of primary schools in least developed countries (LDCs) had electricity, and less than 40% had basic hand washing facilities (www.sdgs.un.org).

- **2019**

Despite significant progress in education access, 262 million children and youth aged 6 to 17 were still out of school in 2017, and over half of children and adolescents were not reaching minimum proficiency levels in reading and mathematics. In 2015, an estimated 617 million children and adolescents of primary and lower secondary school age worldwide—more than 50%—were not achieving basic proficiency in reading and mathematics. About two-thirds of these children were either attending school but not learning effectively or had dropped out. In 2016, 750 million adults remained illiterate, with two-thirds of them being women (www.sdgs.un.org).

- **2020**

The school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic have significantly impacted student learning outcomes. Globally, 17% of children and adolescents remain out of school. Illiteracy continues to be a major issue, with approximately 773 million adults lacking basic reading and writing skills. This

disparity disproportionately affects women and individuals in low- and middle-income countries. Teacher training has stagnated, with only 85% of primary school teachers receiving the minimum pedagogical training required by national standards since 2015. The lowest training rates are in sub-Saharan Africa (64%) and Southern Asia (72%) (www.sdgs.un.org).

- **2021**

    The COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted global education, potentially undoing decades of progress. In 2020, approximately 101 million additional children in grades 1-8 fell below the minimum reading proficiency level due to the pandemic, erasing gains made over the past 20 years. Gender disparity remains an issue, with only 92 literate young women for every 100 young men in 2019. The pandemic is expected to widen this gap as girls face more challenges in accessing remote learning. Additionally, over 20% of primary schools worldwide lack basic drinking water, and more than 33% lack basic hand washing facilities (www.sdgs.un.org).

- **2022**

    In the past two years, 147 million children missed more than half of their in-class instruction, potentially reducing their lifetime earnings by $17 trillion. Despite some progress, 70% of children aged 3-4 still lack access to quality early childhood education programs, and school closures have further restricted this access, possibly affecting their development. Globally, only 10% of people have basic digital skills, such as sending emails with attachments. Additionally, 25% of primary schools worldwide lack essential amenities like electricity, water, and sanitation. Access to technology and facilities adapted for disabilities is even lower, especially in developing regions. While 83% of primary and secondary teachers are trained, the remaining 17% require additional support (www.sdgs.un.org).

- **2023**

    Only one in six countries is on track to achieve universal access to quality education by 2030 (SDG4). An estimated 84 million children will still be out of school, and 300 million students will lack basic literacy and numeracy skills. Furthermore, only one in six youths and adults have participated in recent education or training, with adult participation significantly lower at 5% compared to 40-50% for youth. Additionally, 25% of primary schools lack essential amenities such as electricity, water, and sanitation, with access to technology and disability-adapted facilities even lower at around 50%. Over 14% of teachers worldwide are not qualified according to national standards (www.sdgs.un.org).

- **2024**

    Globally, only 58% of students achieve minimum reading proficiency by the end of primary school. Learning outcomes in lower secondary school are deteriorating, partly due to the impact of COVID-19. Key concerns include teacher shortages and insufficient training, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, as well as inadequate basic infrastructure in many schools, including facilities for students with disabilities (www.sdgs.un.org).

India's progress in SDG – 4

India has made considerable progress in increasing literacy levels and enhancing enrolment rates in primary and elementary education (Pandey, 2019); (Draboo, 2020). The country's education policies and programs, including the Draft National Education Policy, 2019, are aligned with SDG 4 (Draboo, 2020). The quality of education is being assessed based on variables such as enrolment ratio, learning outcomes, and pupil-teacher ratio (Jana, 2020). While there has been notable progress in achieving universal primary education by enhancing enrolment rates, retention rates, and expanding physical infrastructure, considerable work remains to be done in terms of quality. (Pandey, 2019).

Progress and Achievements

- **Increased Enrolment Rates:** India has made significant strides in improving enrolment rates at primary and secondary levels. The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for elementary education has consistently improved, reflecting the country's efforts to make education accessible to all children (www.pib.gov.in).

- **Literacy Rates:** According to the National Statistical Office (NSO) report on literacy, India's literacy rate was 77.7% in 2017-18, with significant progress in female literacy, though a gender gap persists (www.mospi.gov.in).

- **Digital Education Initiatives:** Initiatives like DIKSHA (Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing) and SWAYAM (Study Webs of Active-Learning for Young Aspiring Minds) offer a range of digital resources to students and teachers, promoting remote and flexible learning (www.diksha.gov.in) (www.swayam.gov.in).
- **Skill Development Programs:** To align education with employment opportunities, India has launched numerous skill development programs under the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY). These programs aim to equip the youth with vocational skills, thereby enhancing their employability and contributing to the economy (www.msde.gov.in) .

Challenges

- **Quality of Education:** The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2020 highlighted that a considerable percentage of students in rural areas lack basic reading and arithmetic skills. Bridging this quality gap is crucial for achieving SDG-4 (https://img.asercentre.org) .
- **Infrastructure Deficiencies:** Many schools, especially in rural areas, face infrastructure challenges such as inadequate classrooms, lack of sanitation facilities, and insufficient teaching aids. These deficiencies impact the learning environment and student retention rates (www.niti.gov.in).
- **Teacher Shortages and Training:** The shortage of qualified teachers and the call for for continuous professional development pose major obstacles. Enhancing teacher training programs and ensuring better working conditions for educators are essential for improving educational outcomes (www.education.gov.in).
- **Educational Equity:** Disparities in educational access and outcomes persist among different socio-economic groups, genders, and regions, including Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and rural populations, often face barriers to quality education (www.unicef.org).

Government Initiatives

- **Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan:** This integrated plan for school education extends from pre-school to class XII, aiming to improve the quality of education at all levels (www.education.gov.in).
- **Mid-Day Meal Scheme:** This program provides free meals to all the students of government & government-aided schools, addressing both nutritional and educational needs which helps in improving enrolment, attendance, and retention rates (www.mhrd.gov.in).
- **NEP 2020:** The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 envisions transformative changes in the education system. Key provisions include early childhood care and education, a new curricular structure, emphasis on vocational education, and the promotion of multilingualism (www.education.gov.in) (www.pib.gov.in).

Conclusion

India's commitment to SDG-4 is evident through its various policies and programs aimed at improving educational access, quality, and equity. Enhancing public-private partnerships, leveraging technology, and fostering community participation are essential for overcoming existing challenges. Investing in education, particularly in early childhood and teacher training, and addressing infrastructure gaps can significantly boost educational outcomes. Through SDG -4 India can pave the way for a more inclusive, equitable, and prosperous future. Promoting high quality education for everyone not only fulfils a fundamental human right but also lays the foundation for sustainable development & economic growth.

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