

# Two cheers

India better score in the latest SDG Index, but methodological tinkering is cause for concern

India's push in the right direction in achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) related to clean energy, urban development and health has helped it improve its overall SDG score from 60 in 2019 to 66 in 2021, according to NITI Aayog's SDG India Index 2020-21. Besides SDGs on eradication of poverty and hunger, measures related to the availability of affordable, clean energy in particular, showed improvements across several States and Union Territories. The campaign to improve the access of households to electricity and clean cooking fuel has been shown to be an important factor. While this is cause for cheer, the Index reveals that there has been a major decline in the areas of industry, innovation and infrastructure besides decent work and economic growth, again made worse by the lockdowns imposed by the governments seeking to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic. But the stark differences between the southern and western States on the one hand and the north-central and eastern States on the other in their performance on the SDGs, point to persisting socio-economic and governance disparities. These, if left unaddressed, will exacerbate federal challenges and outcomes, as seen in the public health challenges during the second wave across some of the worse-off States.

Notwithstanding the improvement in key indicators, the Index has curiously made some methodological changes that render comparisons on some SDGs over previous years moot. The SDG on inequality shows an improvement over 2019, but the indicators used to measure the score have changed. The 2020-21 Index drops several economic indicators and gives greater weightage to social equality indicators such as representation of women and people from marginalised communities in legislatures and local governance institutions, and crimes against SC/ST communities. By dropping the well-recognised Gini coefficient measure and the growth rate for household expenditure per capita among 40% of rural and urban populations (instead, only the percentage of population in the lowest two wealth quintiles is used), the SDG score on inequality seems to have missed out on capturing the impact of the pandemic on wealth inequality. This could be a significant miss as a UN assessment of the impact of COVID-19 had said that the South Asian region may see rising inequality. Methodological issues on measuring other SDGs have been flagged before, but the lack of adequate measurement of economic inequality seems to be a glaring miss. Like in the first wave, the second wave, with more fatalities, has had similar outcomes on livelihoods and jobs. While the better score for India in its endeavour to achieve SDGs will bring some cheer, governments must work on addressing pressing issues such as increased inequality and economic despair.