

International Norms and Domestic Change: Implementing the SDGs in India

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The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a set of 17 goals and 169 targets around which international and national development efforts are expected to coalesce. They can also be thought of as a cluster of inter-related ‘norms’ that prescribe pathways for global poverty alleviation and sustainable development. The widespread nod from member states to the final SDG document can be seen as a point of global normative convergence around the post-2015 development agenda. However, such convergence at the inter-governmental level does not guarantee the successful achievement of the SDGs; the success and failure of the SDGs will ultimately be decided at the national level by whether and how member states follow through on their international commitments.

Implementation of the SDGs in India is likely to be shaped by a number of factors and processes. It is necessary to systematise our understanding of these processes to be able to isolate specific levers that facilitate or impede implementation. This chapter takes the SDGs to be a collection of norms—a normative vision—and constructs a framework that can be used to analyse norm implementation in the Indian context: What factors enable or constrain the domestic implementation of international norms, what explains variance in norm implementation, and

what might this suggest for the achievement of the SDGs in India? In identifying and isolating key factors, the framework can be used as a map, or set of signposts, to build recommendations for progress on SDGs in India. The main focus of this chapter is to identify these factors and suggest ways in which they could apply to SDG implementation, not to provide an in-depth analysis of the SDGs themselves. Subsequent chapters in this volume examine specific SDG goals and their convergence with Indian priorities, and identify means through which India can come closer to achieving targets in line with domestic priorities.

Norm implementation at the domestic level, it will be argued, depends on two keys factors: The degree of *fit* between international norms and domestic rules, priorities and culture, and the *capacity* of the state to implement the norm as determined by available resources, institutional structures and the external environment. The domestic level, however, is not homogenous and variations in fit and capacity across the national, state and local levels are likely to further shape norm implementation. These differences across various levels of the state have been bracketed off in this volume, as the main focus is on how the SDGs align with Indian national priorities; they are nonetheless a critical part of the story of norm

implementation that could be explored in further study.

NORM INFLUENCE

Norms are typically defined as standards of appropriate behaviour for actors with a given identity. Norms contribute to behavioural change by shaping the identity and interests of actors, by defining the terms of legitimate action, or by altering the costs and benefits associated with norm-following or norm-breaking behaviour. With the ratification of the SDGs at the United Nations General Assembly this year, the SDGs are likely to become the dominant frame of reference for the post-2015 development agenda and be incorporated into the organisational mandates and policies of international development agencies. The SDGs are also seen as substantively and procedurally more legitimate than the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), as they are universal in scope and have been negotiated through an inter-governmental process. There is thus considerable buy-in for the SDGs among member states.

NORM IMPLEMENTATION OPENS UP A NEW PHASE OF POLITICAL AND NORMATIVE CONTESTATION AS NORMS ENCOUNTER DOMESTIC BELIEFS, PRIORITIES AND CAPACITIES

This would suggest that the SDGs, as a collection of norms, have reached what Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink refer to as the final stage of the ‘norm cycle,’ in which they are institutionalised at the international level.¹ The MDGs went through a similar institutionalisation process, involving annual reporting on progress towards MDG achievement to the UN General Assembly by each member state and Global Monitoring Reports.

However, as Alexander Betts and Phil Orchard argue, the institutionalisation of norms at the international level is an inadequate indicator of domestic-level change. It does not tell us how international norms enter domestic discourses and

practices. They argue that we need to consider ‘norm implementation’ as a fourth stage of the norm cycle, given that implementation opens up a new phase of political and normative contestation as the norm encounters domestic beliefs, priorities and capacities, processes that can alter the meaning of the norm and/or constrain its application.² SDG implementation processes will thus determine the extent to which India achieves its international commitment to the SDGs, and understanding this requires looking toward domestic-level variables. India’s negotiations around the post-2015 development agenda in fact corroborate this analytical distinction between international and domestic norm institutionalisation processes. While India has ratified the SDGs, it has also been clear that the SDGs cannot be ‘to constrict policy space’ or facilitate ‘international priority setting or monitoring.’³

NORM IMPLEMENTATION

Betts and Orchard define implementation as the steps necessary to introduce a new norm into formal legal and policy mechanisms within the state or organisation in order to routinise compliance.⁴ At the norm implementation stage, states need to ‘walk the talk’ by allocating budgets and undertaking concrete political actions. Betts and Orchard disaggregate domestic-level influences on norm implementation in terms of whether these are ideational, material or institutional, and how these factors change the norm and/or constrain its application. In practice, however, ideational, material and institutional influences are likely to work alongside one another, combining to shape norm implementation; as theory building is not the main focus of this volume, these analytical distinctions have been collapsed. Instead, the framework proposed in this chapter disaggregates the domestic level into three levels—national, state and local, to indicate that policies, institutions, priorities and values may differ within a country itself. Norm implementation is thus not only a domestic-level process distinct from international norm institutionalisation, but also a differentiated process within specific domestic contexts. Disaggregating the domestic level as such is particularly suited to a discussion of SDG

implementation in India with its federal structure and vast cultural diversity, though as mentioned earlier, these set of variables have been bracketed off in this volume.

FIT AND CAPACITY

Norm implementation at the domestic level will depend on two sets of factors: One, the degree of fit between international norms and domestic beliefs, priorities and systems; and two, the capacity of the state and other relevant actors in implementing the norm. These are not strictly mutually exclusive categories, but rather a way of finding critical implementation mechanisms that can be examined or operationalised as variables for further empirical investigation—some of which have been raised in the subsequent empirical chapters of this volume. The concept of a fit can explain the extent to which international norms cohere with domestic values, priorities and structures, where the greater the fit, the greater the possibility of the international norm being accepted in a domestic context and contributing to a change in discourse, policy or behaviour. However, the fit between international norms and domestic beliefs and priorities

Fit could be cultural, political or legal. ‘Cultural fit’ refers to the extent to which international norms match domestic cultural norms and values. When such a cultural match exists, domestic actors are likely to treat the international norm as a given, and recognise the obligations associated with the norm.⁵ Conversely, where the norm clashes with existing belief systems, the ensuing contestation is likely to obstruct implementation. The SDGs for ending poverty, health and hunger are likely to have broad-based acceptance in India, partly because they are easily relatable to a cross-section of Indian society, and partly because as goals, they are fairly broad and can thereby sustain multiple interpretations. Other goals, however, particularly around achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls, are likely to meet cultural resistance, and would require a change in deeply embedded mindsets and attitudes. The chapter on gender in this volume shows, for instance, how legislative amendments that could promote gender equality in India have had little impact because of deep-rooted cultural biases and traditions. The chapter on energy similarly notes the importance of belief systems and cultural understandings when it argues that

	FIT			CAPACITY		
	CULTURAL	POLITICAL	LEGAL	RESOURCE	INSTITUTIONAL	EXTERNAL
NATIONAL						
STATE						
LOCAL						

is not enough; there must also be adequate capacity to implement the norms. A strong fit can, nonetheless, propel domestic leaders to seek ways to increase capacity with the re-allocation of resources or the creation of new institutions and governing arrangements. Equally, capacity can also be used to improve fit through, for example, education, training or awareness programmes. But the degree of fit and/or capacity could vary across domestic levels—interest groups at the state level could resist the introduction of a norm into national policy, or national capacity to implement a norm may not translate to the required local capacity.

energy transitions are fundamentally ‘social affairs’ that require social transitions.

SDG implementation in India will also depend on ‘political fit,’ or the extent to which the SDGs align with domestic-level priorities and interests. Acceptance or rejection of a norm is thus seen as a function of its utility to the state. Indian negotiators in New York have frequently reiterated that the SDGs align with India’s core priorities. “The core Indian position...[is that] the eradication of poverty must remain at the core of the Post-2015 Development Agenda... there can be no sustainable development

with the perpetuation of poverty and hunger.”⁶ This in turn necessitates a strong focus on economic growth, creation of infrastructure, employment generation and industrialisation. The government’s recent initiatives of Make in India, Digital India, and Clean India are all geared towards these objectives.⁷ It would thus seem that there is a good deal of political fit to help accelerate implementation.

At the same time, as mentioned earlier, New Delhi has been clear that the SDGs cannot become a means to influence domestic priority setting. Thus, while there is alignment between India’s national priorities and the SDGs, the main utility arguably to India in negotiating the SDGs has been to create an external policy environment conducive to domestic growth. Key to this external policy environment are the four interrelated issues of: 1) A universal but differentiated responsibility for achieving SDG targets; 2) the need for a global partnership to facilitate the implementation of the SDGs; 3) sustainable consumption patterns in the developed world; and 4) a clear separation between development and peace and security issues.⁸ Moreover, signing on to the SDGs is a way for India to signal to the international community that it is a responsible stakeholder; at the same time, India reserves the right to not pursue particular goals when they do not fit domestic priorities. This indicates that India’s commitment to the SDGs is transactional rather than ideological.⁹ However, there is an ideological convergence around the primacy of economic growth for achieving development targets in mainstream development thinking and policy circles, in India and internationally, which creates the conditions under which this transactional interaction is complementary to domestic priorities.

When discussing political fit, it is also important to keep in mind that the ‘state’ is not a monolithic entity, and what is identified as the ‘national interest’ is in fact an ongoing negotiation between the priorities of domestic leadership and relevant interest groups.¹⁰ The parochially defined preferences of domestic interest groups can contribute to a disruption in political fit; the chapter on health shows, for example, how insurance benefits do not

reach intended beneficiaries in rural India due to corruption and pilferage in the health sector. Similarly, implementing goals for the management of natural resources and the environment will have to negotiate industry priorities, incentivising a shift in long-established practices.

Finally, the extent to which international norms cohere or combine with domestic legal structures—their ‘legal fit’—is likely to influence their implementation. Local legal culture can shape how international legal standards are interpreted and applied in the domestic context.¹¹ Equally, the nature of the regulatory environment is likely to influence the extent to which political and normative goals lead to effective policy and behavioural change. The chapter on economic growth, for example, shows how archaic, rigid and lopsided labour laws result in people seeking informal sector employment and hamper employment generation in the formal sector. Similarly, legal structures and regulatory processes influence India’s growth trajectory. The World Bank’s Ease of Doing Business study, for instance, ranked India 142 out of 189 countries in 2014, two places below its 2013 ranking.

Capacity refers to the strength and robustness of various domestic-level tools, mechanisms, structures and knowledge systems required for norm implementation. ‘Resource capacity’ refers to the extent to which the state has the financial, technical and human resource capacity to implement particular normative commitments. In looking at why norm compliance occurs, Stacy VanDeveer and Geoffrey Dableko argue that ‘it’s about capacity stupid,’ reflected in, for example, GDP per capita, levels of corruption, or education and scientific epistemic and policy communities.¹² India’s 13th Finance Commission has estimated that the collection efficiency for property taxes, a key revenue source, stands at a low 37%. This phenomenon has precluded cities from providing even the most basic public services to their citizens.¹³ The chapter on health highlights how a 17% reduction in healthcare budgets for 2015-16 will complicate meeting health targets; similarly, the chapter on energy argues that the biggest challenge to scaling up renewable energy in India is the cost of investment.

BECAUSE INTERNATIONAL-LEVEL PROCESSES, LIKE GLOBAL TRADE AGREEMENTS, CAN INFLUENCE DOMESTIC CAPACITIES FOR NORM IMPLEMENTATION, INDIA HAS EMPHASISED A BROADER GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP AROUND THE MEANS OF IMPLEMENTATION FOR THE ACHIEVEMENT OF SDG TARGETS.

Resource capacity could also include the availability of qualified technical personnel as well as the strength of epistemic and policy communities that can use specialised knowledge and domestic legitimacy to interpret international norms for local application.¹⁴ India has a vibrant civil society that could be a key resource for mobilising action around the SDGs. Campaigns to end corruption and halt violence against women, for example, continue to mobilise millions across India. These campaigns articulate expectations of the state and can help propel state action, though recent restrictions on the space available for non-governmental

organisations are a cause for concern. Resource capacity could differ between national, state and local levels with, for example, the local-level implementation of a norm constrained by the lack of qualified technical staff or poor budgetary allocations.¹⁵

‘Institutional capacity’ refers to the strength and robustness of domestic institutional structures and processes. This could include the departments of government and their related bureaucracies, civil society structures, implementing agencies, and financial and legal institutions. Norm implementation could thus be constrained, for example, by

slow bureaucratic cultures or weak and corrupt implementing agencies. Studies note that one of the main reasons for several of India’s social welfare programmes not achieving desired results are widespread leakages in the system. As a case in point, the major bottleneck that stifles agriculture growth is the complicated and an unnecessarily long supply chain structure, which has led to the wastage of produce and thereby low profits for farmers and higher prices for consumers. Other discrepancies, such as the inefficiencies of the Food Corporation of India and the lack of a proper system of inspection of entitlements, further complicate achieving SDG targets on hunger in India. States with better, more accountable and responsive service delivery also performed better on the MDGs, highlighting the importance of institutional structures in achieving broad-based development outcomes.¹⁶ Reports

also indicate that while a federal system is well placed to implement a sustainable development agenda, its various tiers and actors lack the necessary human and financial capacity to enable improved service delivery and governance.¹⁷ The institutional capacity of domestic-level structures will also be reflected in how well domestic institutions are learning organisations, the extent to which their organisational culture promotes effective implementation, and their ability to adapt and respond to a changing environment.

The final category of ‘external capacity’ may seem like an odd choice when discussing norm implementation as a domestic-level process. The integration of markets, the movement of people and goods across borders, and the nature of global governance issues such as climate change and migration has meant that broader external processes, such as global trade agreements or technology transfers to the developing world, also influence the capacity of the state. International-level processes can influence domestic capacities for norm implementation, even while implementation is primarily a domestic-level process. India has thus emphasised that the achievement of SDG targets requires a broader global partnership around the means of implementation. This would include better trade agreements, more accessible banks, technology transfer mechanisms, innovative financial institutions, and the closing of global tax loops and illicit financial flows. This would ensure that the SDGs do not become “a mere template to spur domestic action through domestic funding,”¹⁸ but are a global commitment requiring political action from both the developing and developed worlds.

The SDGs align closely with India’s national priorities with the focus on poverty eradication, economic growth, social welfare provision and energy access for all. At the same time, India’s negotiating position in New York has been that the SDGs cannot be used to constrict domestic policy space or determine domestic priorities, particularly without the allocation of additional international resources to facilitate the means of implementation.



There is likely to be a lack of complete 'cultural fit' when implementing SDG 5

A HEAVY BURDEN/M - BOT/FLECKR/CREATIVE COMMONS

India's ratification of the SDGs can thus be argued to be transactional—to signal to the international community that it is a responsible stakeholder, and to create an external policy environment conducive to its domestic growth priorities. Moreover, as a poor and heterogeneous country, practically speaking, India needs to retain flexibility in implementation. However, as noted above, it is worth keeping in mind that economic growth as a means to development is re-emerging as the dominant development ideology, and India's national priorities are thus not a departure from dominant thinking in international development policy circles.¹⁹

India's nod to the SDGs, while maintaining its autonomy in domestic policy setting, thus suggests that we need to look at domestic-level levers for implementation. These can help identify pathways through which India can move towards SDG targets that fit with Indian national priorities. This chapter has attempted to construct a framework to systematise these levers, arguing that SDG implementation will depend on the degree and nature of 'fit' and 'capacity,' which often combine and overlap in practice. The goal-specific chapters in this volume

highlight the varying role of these factors in shaping India's performance on the SDGs; taken together, they particularly illustrate the importance of resource and institutional capacity in achieving development outcomes, but also note that development itself a social process that requires buy-in from various levels of society.

In order for India to move forward on the SDGs it will need to strengthen critical development drivers, such as economic growth, industrialisation, employment creation, basic infrastructure provision, access to comprehensive social services and women's empowerment. It will also need to strengthen the sustainable dimension of its high economic growth to address challenges of natural resources, environment and climate change. It would also need to be able to access the necessary means of implementation, including the transfer of advanced sustainable technologies.¹⁹ Accelerated progress on these fronts will rest on strengthening the identified levers for implementation, combined with political will at both the national and international level, to create a policy environment conducive to sustainable development.