

UNITED NATIONS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION FRAMEWORK – A PARTNERSHIP FOR A MORE SUSTAINABLE, INCLUSIVE, AND RESILIENT INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The Government of India and United Nations are in the process of formulating the GOI-UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (GoI-UNSDCF) 2023-2027, which lays the framework of cooperation, results and strategies that contributes to the achievement of the national development priorities and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Cooperation Framework is the means for the Government of India and the United Nations system to come together, representing the true spirit of ‘whole of Government’ and ‘whole of UN’ to achieve the end of more sustainable, inclusive and resilient India. This article provides a narrative of the systematic cooperation framework between the Government of India and the UN – its background, nature, and structure. It gives a glimpse of the current framework –GOI-UNSDCF 2018-22 and the process of formulation of the next cycle of Cooperation Framework from 2023-27.

1. Introduction

“More than ever before in human history, we share a common destiny. We can master it only if we face it together” -Kofi Annan, Former Secretary General of United Nations

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India is one of the fastest-growing major economies in the world; according to the estimates by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), a “fairly robust” growth of 8.2 per cent is projected for India in 2022. India is also the second-most populous as well as youngest country in the world, standing at the brink of unleashing its demographic advantage. The foremost priority at this juncture is alleviation of all forms of poverty and deprivations and ensuring well-being of and dignity for all, resonating the motto ‘SabkaSaath- Sabka Vikas’ (collective effort, inclusive Development) with the underlying maxim of ‘leaving no one behind’.

The Government of India is implementing a range of large-scale innovative flagship programmes to achieve India’s development goals—Rural electrification, Sanitation, Housing for All, Clean and Renewable Energy expansion, universal elementary school education, skill development, infrastructure development, POSHAN Abhiyaan (national nutritional mission), Ayushman Bharat (PMJAY and health and wellness centres) for a Sampanna Bharat-Samridh Bharat (Prosperous and Vibrant India).

The next five years will not only be crucial for India but also for the world, as India plays an outsized role in the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, adopted by the United Nations and its Member States in 2015, by contributing to more than 50 percent of the global targets. The Hon’ble Prime Minister of India rightly voiced at the 76th United Nations General Assembly held in September 2021, “When India grows, the world grows, when India reforms, the world transforms”. This is an opportune moment for the Government of India and the United Nations system to come together, and represent the true spirit of ‘whole of Government’ and ‘whole of UN’ to build a more sustainable, inclusive and resilient India.

2. On the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework

The United Nations is the largest inter-governmental organization with a current membership of 193 member states. To accelerate the delivery of results to its member countries for achieving the SDGs, the UN system has undertaken reforms to reposition the UN development system. Under the renewed system, the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF or Cooperation Framework in short) forms the core of the reforms. It represents the UN development system’s collective offer to support the country in addressing the SDGs, and seeks to tailor-fit the purpose of UN plans and programmes at the national level for more unified, cohesive, and efficient support.

The UN General Assembly resolution 72/279 elevates the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) as “the most

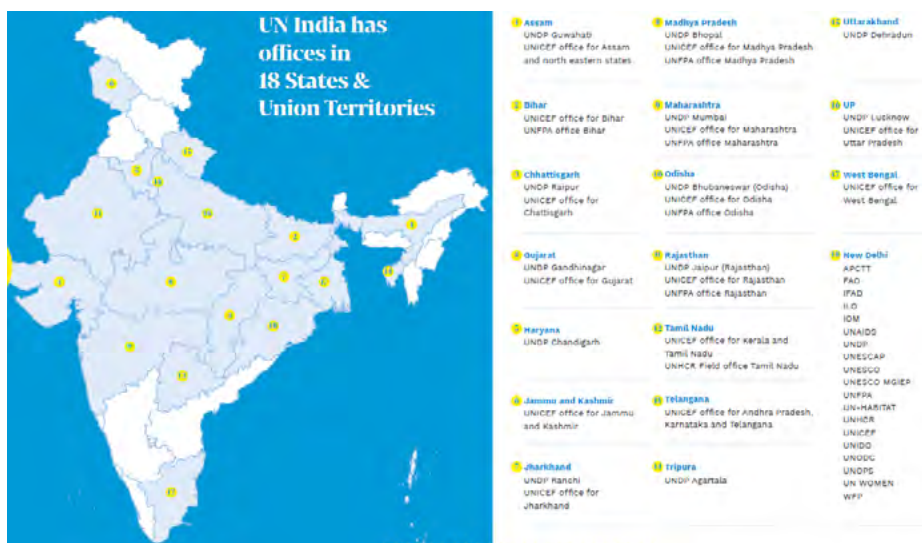
important instrument for planning and implementation of the UN development activities at country level to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda". The aim is to ensure that the countries have access to complete breadth of knowledge and expertise at the United Nations, within the country and globally, enabling the governments to see the complete contribution of the UN system to their nations.

The Cooperation Framework thus serves as a core accountability tool between the UN Country Team (UNCT) and the Government, as well as among UNCT members to collectively achieve the development results. It is a five-year framework that sets out a complete programme cycle that links planning, implementation, monitoring, learning, reporting and evaluation. It is beyond a mere document; it is an instrument to implement a multi-year engagement that evolves based on national development priorities.

3. UN in India

India has been one of the founding members of the UN, working closely and consistently since 1945, hailing strongly the relevance and importance of the UN. India's robust engagement with the United Nations is based on its commitment to multilateralism and dialogue as the key to address the common challenges faced by the world including those related to peace, sustainable development, poverty alleviation, eradication of all forms of discrimination, climate change, terrorism, disarmament, human rights, health and pandemics, migration, cyber security, space and frontier technologies like Artificial Intelligence among others.

The United Nations system in India consists of 26 entities, with its plans and programmes in all 36 States and Union Territories in India. It has offices in 18 states and Union Territories as shown in Figure 1. Much of India's development agenda is mirrored in the Vision 2030 of the UN. Likewise, are the mandates of the UN country team in India aligning their work to achieve the national development priorities of the country.

Figure 1: Presence of UN in India in the States and Union Territories

Source: UN in India 2020 Annual Report

4. Cooperation Framework of Government of India and United Nations

The strength of the Government of India's and UN system's partnership is reflected in the robustness of the planning and implementation of its several five-year Cooperation Frameworks. The current Government of India-United Nations Sustainable Development Framework (UNSDF) 2018-22¹ captures the entire UN system's footprint in India – both national and sub-national plans and contribution to the national agenda. Under the ongoing framework, the UN in India prioritises seven low-income states that are home to 67.6 percent of India's poor – Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. Additionally, supporting the national look east policy, the UN in India supports the north-eastern states in several ecosystem and livelihoods initiatives.

The contribution of the GoI-UNSDF is captured under the seven priority areas viz. poverty and urbanization; health, water, and sanitation; education; nutrition and food security; climate change, clean energy, and disaster resilience; skilling, entrepreneurship, and job creation; and gender equality and youth development.

NITI Aayog on behalf of the Government of India plays a pivotal role in planning and execution of the Cooperation Framework. It provides the required leadership and strong ownership of the GoI-UNSDF 2018-2022. The

1 For more details on the Government of India-United Nations Sustainable Development Framework (UNSDF) 2018-22, refer to https://in.one.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/UNSDF_Print_Oct12_web.pdf.

implementation of the framework is guided by a Joint Steering Committee (JSC) co-chaired by the Vice-Chairperson, NITI Aayog and United Nations Resident Coordinator in India with members from the Department of Economic Affairs, and the Ministry of External Affairs.

Of the several notable contributions of the UN in India², its support to meet the ever changing exigencies of COVID-19 has been unfathomable. As the entire world grappled with COVID-19, UN agencies in India immediately partnered with the Government of India providing their support in all possible aspects – be it training the frontline workers, delivering essential drugs and medical supplies, facilitating world’s largest vaccination campaign, policy support bringing in best international practices, and the like. The UN Country Team and Government of India worked collectively to contain the pandemic, to respond to its socio-economic repercussions, and to build back better.

5. Onset of the next generation Cooperation Framework 2023-27

While the GoI-UNSDCF (2018-2022) has entered its final year of implementation, the GoI and the UN Country Team in India is committed to renew the GoI-UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) for the next five-year period (2023-27). More typically, the new generation Cooperation Framework would contain both familiar priorities and the unfinished business of the current cooperation framework, as well as identify new areas of opportunities and challenges. While some plans and programmes from the previous Cooperation Framework will inevitably continue until their completion, the new framework will also reflect fresh thinking on new plans and programmes that would enable India build back better in the aftermath of COVID-19, with less than a decade left for achieving the SDGs.

The Cooperation Framework formulation is an extensive process, which is developed over a period six to nine months and is informed through three sub-processes.

- The first process requires an independent system-wide evaluation of the current/ ongoing UN sustainable development framework. The fundamental objective of the evaluation is to ensure accountability, support learning, provide clear recommendations to inform decisions regarding the mechanics of planning, implementation and monitoring of the next Cooperation Framework.
- The second process is conducting a common country analysis (CCA) – the UN system’s independent, impartial and collective assessment of the country’s situation and analysis of the underlying causes and its implication

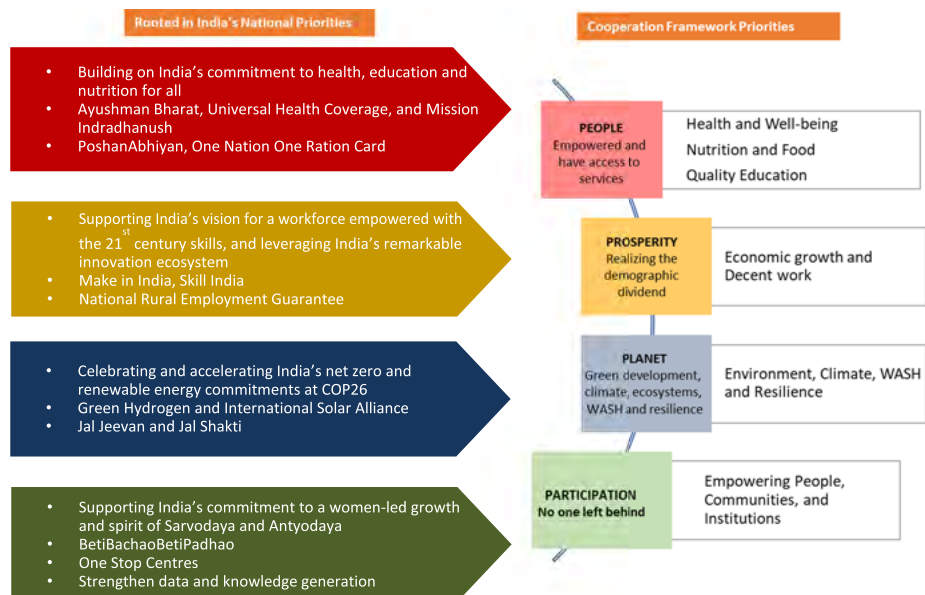
2 For more details on the collective efforts of the Government and United Nations in India refer to UN in India- Annual Report 2020 accessible at https://digitallibrary.in.one.un.org/PdfViewer.aspx?FileName=6330_1.pdf.

on the achievement of the Agenda 2030. The CCA feeds into identification of the key priorities of the next Cooperation Framework.

- Subsequent to these two processes, a consultative process is followed for drafting the priorities and results framework of the Cooperation Framework.

The common priorities of the Government of India and UN Country Team under the new Cooperation Framework are encapsulated in a result framework of outcome and outputs – identified through a highly participatory and consultative process with stakeholders viz. national and sub-national Government, CSOs, Think Tanks and Economic Enterprises. These priorities are structured around the four-pillar approach of the Agenda 2030: People, Planet, Prosperity, and Participation, that guide the six outcomes under the framework viz. (a) Health and Well-being, (b) Nutrition and Food, (c) Quality Education, (d) Economic Growth and Decent Work, (e) Environment, Climate, WASH (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene), and Resilience (f) Empowering People, Communities, and Institutions. To ensure a ‘Whole of Government’ and ‘Whole of UN’ support to the new cooperation framework, these priorities along with outcomes and outputs were deliberated at length at the National Validation Workshop on the Government of India-UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) 2023-27 held on 12th April, 2022. This was the first such hybrid congregation that saw in-person participation of officials from 30 Union ministries, heads of 26 UN agencies, Senior officials of NITI Aayog and over 250 Senior Government Officials joining virtually from all states and Union Territories.

Figure 2: Priorities of the New Cooperation Framework (2023-27)



The new Cooperation Framework will also be underpinned by a focused set of policy research questions whereby the UN can support India in identifying development accelerators, and enablers like evidence generation, technology and innovation. In line with the spirit of India's support to various regional and global partnerships, and the country's commitment to Agenda 2030, the Cooperation Framework gives particular emphasis on south-south cooperation, sharing of India's success stories globally, and localizing the international best practices in the country.

6. Conclusion

The next generation Cooperation Framework to be signed at the threshold of 75th year of India's independence will reinvigorate India's golden period of transformation. It is an opportunity to make the collaboration between the UN and Government of India more meaningful and adaptive to meet the national development priorities and the national commitment to the Agenda 2030. The new Cooperation Framework while harnessing the strength of the UN system in India would also focus on collective action and convergence within the Government and the UN system. As the famous saying by Aristotle goes, "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts", the essence of these words is central to the GoI-UNSDCF 2023-27.

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