



# International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews

Journal Homepage: [www.ijrpr.com](http://www.ijrpr.com) ISSN 2582-7421

## Sustainable Development Goal 4 and Inclusive Education: The Indian Experience

Amrutha P<sup>a</sup>, Dr. K. Sathyamurthi<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Full Time Ph.D. scholar, Department of Social Work, Madras School of Social Work, Chennai, [amruthaicon@gmail.com](mailto:amruthaicon@gmail.com)

<sup>b</sup> Associate Professor, Department of Social Work, Madras School of Social Work, Chennai

### ABSTRACT

Education is widely acknowledged as a cornerstone of sustainable development, contributing as a catalyst for economic growth, social progress, and environmental stewardship. At the heart of this global commitment to education lies Sustainable Development Goal 4: to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030 (UNESCO, 2014). The COVID-19 pandemic has led many nations to cut public spending on education, causing disruptions to learning and worsening educational inequalities. These disruptions have highlighted significant gaps not only between countries but also among different learner groups within nations. As a result, the crisis in educational sector is severely affecting the future prospects of children and youth worldwide. In the context of India, a country marked by its cultural diversity, socio-economic disparities, and vast geographical expanse, the pursuit of SDG 4 presents a multifaceted challenge. Inclusive education emerges as a fundamental component of this effort, embodying the principles of equity, diversity, and accessibility. This review examines inclusive education and its significance embodied within the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with a focus on its implementation and challenges in India.

Keywords: Inclusive education, SDG, Disability, Inclusion, Education

### 1. Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), officially known as the "2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development," were adopted by the United Nations in 2015 as a plan of action to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030 (UNDP, n.d.). The SDGs build upon the successes and limitations of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) proposed in 2000 and encompass a broader and more integrated set of goals and targets (WHO, 2018). Comprising 17 goals and 169 targets, the SDGs put forward interconnected issues across economic, social, and environmental dimensions, recognizing the intrinsic linkages between poverty eradication, sustainable development, and global peace and security. The goals and targets of the SDGs are interlinked and mutually reinforcing, recognizing the complex and interconnected nature of global challenges (Arora & Mishra, 2019). Therefore, it can be viewed as a network of targets (Blanc, 2015).

### 2. Methods

This review intends to examine the importance of inclusive education within the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with a focus on its implementation and challenges in India. A comprehensive literature search was conducted analysing various databases including PubMed, Google Scholar, Science Direct, Web of Science, and Scopus, using keywords such as inclusive education, quality education, SDG 4, and sustainable development goals. The review begins by outlining the concepts of Sustainable Development Goal 4, then traces the origins of inclusivity in education in India, details various government initiatives, and finally examines the challenges associated with achieving inclusion in the country.

### 3. Sustainable Development Goal- 4

Sustainable development goal 4 commits to 'ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all,' serving as a crucial catalyst for positive change by highlighting education's transformative potential in building a sustainable and equitable world (UNESCO, 2024). The 10 targets of SDG4 are:

1. All boys and girls, by 2030, must receive free, fair, as well as good quality primary and secondary education which in turn will lead to effective outcomes in learning. This includes assessing proficiency levels in reading and mathematics among children and youth at different educational stages and ensuring completion rates for primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary education.

2. Target 4.2 focuses on the aim that by 2030, all the children will get quality early childhood development, care, and pre-primary education to make them prepare for primary level education.
3. Target 4.3 intends to provide equal access to affordable and quality technical, vocational, and tertiary education, including university education, for both women and men by 2030.
4. Target 4.4 aims to significantly boost the number of equipped youth and adults with relevant skills, particularly technical and also vocational skills, by 2030, to enhance their employability, secure decent jobs, and foster entrepreneurship.
5. Target 4.5 aims to eradicate gender discrimination in the sector of education by 2030. In short, without any disparities or criteria such as female or male, urban or rural, wealth ranking, disability status, indigenous peoples, and conflict-affected individuals, all should have inclusive quality educational opportunities.
6. Target 4.6 aims to ensure that by 2030, all youth and majority of adults, irrespective of gender, attain proficiency in literacy and numeracy.
7. Target 4.7 aims to ensure that by 2030, all learners acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to advance sustainable development including education on sustainable development, sustainable lifestyles, gender equality, human rights, peace promotion, global citizenship, non-violence, and cultural diversity appreciation.
8. Target 4.a focuses on constructing and enhancing education facilities that cater to children, individuals with disabilities, and gender sensitivity, ensuring safe, non-violent, inclusive, and effective learning atmosphere for everyone.
9. Target 4.b aims to significantly increase the global availability of scholarships by 2030, specifically targeting developing countries, particularly the least developed ones, small island developing states, and African countries. These scholarships are intended for higher education, including vocational training and programmes in ICT, technical, engineering, and scientific fields, both in developed countries and other developing nations.
10. The last target is to increase the number of qualified teachers globally, primarily through international collaboration for teacher training in developing countries, with a strict focus on countries that are least developed and small island developing states. Recognizing that teachers are pivotal in achieving all targets of SDG4, efforts should prioritize empowering, recruiting, adequately compensating, motivating, and supporting teachers and educators (Ossai, 2022).

Executing SDG4 targets at the country level involves aligning and adapting national education policies and planning to the global targets and policy priorities outlined in the 2030 agenda. The extent to which national policies and plans align with SDG4 depends on various factors including countries' policy priorities, planning cycles, institutional arrangements, political commitment, as well as their human, technical, and financial capacity (UNESCO, 2017). Inclusive education, integral to SDG4, advocates for every child's equal right to high-quality education, regardless of their unique characteristics or circumstances. Achieving this goal requires a flexible education system that acknowledges and accommodates the diverse needs of learners. Such a system must be adaptable, capable of adjusting to various learning styles, abilities, and backgrounds of the learners to ensure that every student can thrive and succeed. This flexibility allows educators to tailor teaching methods, resources, and support services to meet the specific needs of individual learners, fostering an inclusive environment where every student feels valued and supported in their educational journey (Sanjeev & Kumar, 2007).

#### 4. Inclusive education in India

As per the 2011 Census data, 1.2 billion people, approximately 2.21 percent of India's population, live with some form of disability. Of all the disabled population in India, 45% are literate. 13% has metric or secondary education but are not graduates and only 5% of them are graduates and above (National Statistical Office, 2021). The population of women with disabilities is less educated than that of their male counterparts as per the statistics. This suggests that obtaining education continues to be a challenge for India's disabled population, particularly for women with disabilities. Thus, achieving target 4.6 of SDG4 requires considerable effort. Among total disabled population, there are 6.6 million children aged between 5 and 19 years. However, only 61% of children with disabilities in this age group were enrolled in educational institutions, while 27% had never attended any educational institution, compared to the national average of 17% (Government of India, 2011). It's sadly true that despite efforts to improve educational accessibility, children with disabilities are frequently overlooked.

Inclusive education, emerging as a viable alternative model to traditional special education, has the power to transform the lives of these children by combating the discriminatory attitudes of the society through the creation of more inclusive environments (Messiou, 2017). When tracing the historical milestones of inclusive education at the global level, 'Salamanca Statement on Principles, Policy and Practice in Special Needs Education and a Framework for Action' can be identified as a turning point among the initial efforts for promoting educational inclusivity across nations and cultures (UNESCO, 1994). Adopted at the 1994 World Conference on Special Needs Education, the Salamanca Statement urged a collective commitment to providing education for children with special needs within the regular school framework. The idea was further supported by United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2007 and various other international and national laws. In line with this, Government of India amended the Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995 and later this act was replaced by the Rights of PWD Act in 2016 to comply with the obligations of UNCRPD (Math, et al., 2019).

According to RPWD (Rights of Persons with Disabilities) act, 2016 inclusive education is defined as *“a system of education wherein students with and without disability learn together and the system of teaching and learning is suitably adapted to meet the learning needs of different types of students with disabilities”* (Rao, Shrivastava, & Sarkar, 2020).

The act emphasizes that every child aged between six and 18 years, with a benchmark disability, is entitled to receive free education. This education can be availed either in a neighbourhood school or in a special school of the child's preference (DEPWD, 2016). Additionally, the Right to Education Act (2009) grants children with severe and multiple disabilities the option of receiving education either in a school setting or through home-based education (DSEL, 2021). There are concerns that the absence of truly inclusive settings in public schools, results in the use of home-based education (HBE) as a way to exclude children with disabilities. Moreover, in practice, HBE typically focuses on basic numeracy and life skills and does not strive to achieve educational equivalence with school-based learning (Global education monitoring report team, 2020).

The National Education Policy (NEP), 2020 of India seeks to address the increasing inequality and injustice within the country's education system. By 2030, it aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all, fostering opportunities for learning lifelong. To accommodate this objective, assistive devices, relevant technology tools, and language-appropriate teaching materials will be provided. Additionally, the NEP will facilitate access to high quality modules for teaching Indian sign language and rest major subjects in Indian sign language through the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS). As per the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2016, children with benchmark disabilities have the right to attend regular or special schools. Thus, resource centres, along with special teachers and trainers, will be made available to meet the diverse rehabilitation and educational requirements of students with severe or multiple disabilities (Kumar & Singh, 2022).

To meet the educational requirements of Children with Special Needs (CWSN) during secondary and senior secondary schooling, the Inclusive Education for Disabled at Secondary Stage (IEDSS) programme was initiated by *Samagra Shiksha* Scheme under the Ministry of Education, Government of India. This initiative which is alignment with the SDG 4.1, aimed to provide all students with disabilities who have completed eight years of elementary education the chance to pursue four years of secondary education within an inclusive and supportive setting within the regular education system from classes IX to XII (Ministry of Education, 2020).

---

## 5. Challenges to Inclusive Education

Limited awareness, infrastructural facilities and community support contribute to the low enrolment of individuals with disabilities in higher education institutions which create barriers in achieving target 4.3 of SDG. According to the 2011 census, only 5% of this population have attained a graduate degree or higher (National Statistical Office, 2021). The majority of laws and policies designed to improve conditions for individuals with disabilities have little impact on higher education, as they primarily concentrate on school-level education (Chauhan, 2022). According to a study conducted by National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People (NCPEDP) in four states- Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Assam, Maharashtra and one Union Territory (Delhi) on the status of higher education of students with disabilities in India, it was found that the prevalence of students with visual impairment and locomotor disabilities was higher when compared to students with disabilities at the higher education level. The percentage of students who identify as having intellectual disability was merely 3.9% (NCPEDP, 2024) which shows in general that there exists a disparity in inclusion depending on the kind of disability as well.

Students who attend mainstream schools also face challenges in continuing their education because these institutions lack the necessary facilities to meet the needs of their disabled students, which act as an obstacle in realizing the target 4.a of SDG. Examples of these facilities include ramps, elevators, appropriate signage, and disabled-specific restrooms. Very few teachers with specialised training, disability-friendly books and learning materials, and alternate teaching methods are among the other inadequate infrastructure features (NIUA, n.d.). There is a necessity to bridge the gap between the current proficiency levels of teachers and those required to execute successful inclusion programmes (Das, Kuyini, & Desai, 2013). Given that teachers play a crucial role in putting inclusive education into practice, it is important to study and mould their attitudes, knowledge and skills in a way that will advance inclusion (Amrutha & Sathyamurthi, 2024). The attitudes of teachers about inclusive education vary greatly across their locality. This could be because, in compared to rural teachers, urban teachers are more exposed and have more options to attend workshops, seminars and other resource systems about inclusive education (Singh, Kumar, & Singh, 2020). It is therefore to be noted that teachers from rural areas may need more awareness regarding inclusivity in education.

The development of inclusive education in India is thus an ongoing process marked by gradual evolution, as numerous barriers impede its smooth and successful implementation. Even in schools where inclusive education is implemented, there is a lack of adequate infrastructure to support inclusive teaching-learning practices. Additionally, the competence of teachers to effectively educate both children with special needs and typically developing children seems to be deficient, indicating inadequate training in inclusive education. The only positive aspect in this scenario is the acknowledgment and increasing focus from the government on providing universal education to children with special needs through inclusive education initiatives (Ahmad, 2015).

---

## 6. Discussion

Education is widely recognized as a fundamental element for the holistic growth of individuals, enabling them to reach their full potential and contribute meaningfully to society. In this context, inclusive education emerges as an inevitable factor towards realizing the ultimate goal of education. By embracing inclusive education, societies strive to create learning environments that cater to the diverse needs of all learners, regardless of their backgrounds, abilities,

or circumstances. The concept of inclusive education has gained significant attention in the global discourse on sustainable development, particularly with the addition of Goal 4 in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Johnstone, Schuelka, & Swadek, 2020). In nearly every country, including India, inclusive education remains a pressing issue within the education sector. However, the implementation of inclusive education in the country has faced various challenges, with research indicating that the adoption of inclusive practices is often superficial, lacking clear understanding and commitment from school management and teachers. In addition, there is a mismatch between the vision of inclusion and the ground realities faced by schools. Moreover, limited resources and deeply rooted social attitudes further complicate efforts to promote inclusive education. Addressing these obstacles requires a concerted effort to identify and overcome barriers at multiple levels. It involves not only allocating adequate resources and infrastructure but also challenging societal norms and attitudes that perpetuate exclusion and discrimination. Additionally, building inclusive education systems entails enhancing teacher training, developing accessible learning materials, and fostering supportive school environments that accommodate the diverse needs of children with disabilities. The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of providing quality education to all by 2030 remains uncertain in India due to the significant challenges posed by existing structural and systemic barriers. Achieving this goal will require a concerted and extensive effort from various sectors of society, including the government, the general public, individuals with disabilities, their families, Disabled People's Organizations (DPOs), and other private entities. Overcoming these obstacles is a hectic task, but it is not impossible. Progress can be made gradually if there is a genuine commitment and collaborative effort from all stakeholders involved. Inclusion is important, not because it is added as one of the targets of SDGs, but to ensure the basic right of every human being born on this planet.

## 7. Conclusion

As the world grapples with the profound obstacles posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the necessary to prioritize inclusive education has never been clearer. This review has underscored the significance of inclusive education in the context of SDGs, particularly within the diverse landscape of India. Despite the formidable barriers and persistent challenges, inclusive education remains an essential instrument for fostering social cohesion, promoting diversity, and unlocking the full potential of every individual. The journey towards inclusive education is not without its hurdles, as evidenced by the gap between policy aspirations and on-the-ground realities. However, it is a journey worth undertaking—a journey that demands unwavering commitment, collaborative efforts, and innovative solutions. Future research need to focus more on inclusive practices and models adopted in different developing nations and its effects on the marginalized groups including children with special needs.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

## References

1. Ahmad, F. K. (2015, January). Challenging exclusion: Issues and challenges in inclusive education in India. *Researchpaedia*, 2(1), 15-32. Retrieved June 5, 2024, from <http://www.researchpaedia.in/issuepdf/14473216103fouziakhursheed.pdf>
2. Amrutha, P., & Sathyamurthi, K. (2024, August). Attitudes towards inclusive education: Understanding parental perspectives. *Science, Technology and Development*, 13(8), 1-10.
3. Arora, N. K., & Mishra, I. (2019, November 11). United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 2030 and environmental sustainability: race against time. *Environmental Sustainability*, 339–342. Retrieved May 29, 2024, from <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s42398-019-00092-y.pdf>
4. Blanc, D. L. (2015, April 10). Towards Integration at Last? The Sustainable Development Goals as a Network of Targets. *Sustainable Development*, 23(3), 176-187. Retrieved May 29, 2024, from <https://doi.org/10.1002/sd.1582>
5. Chauhan, P. S. (2022). Higher Education Policies in India for Persons with Disabilities: Building an Inclusive Ecosystem in Higher Education Institutions. *Samajik Nyay Sandhesh*, 23-31. Retrieved June 5, 2024, from [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/365787785\\_Higher\\_Education\\_Policies\\_in\\_India\\_for\\_Persons\\_with\\_Disabilities\\_Building\\_an\\_Inclusive\\_Ecosystem\\_in\\_Higher\\_Education\\_Institutions](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/365787785_Higher_Education_Policies_in_India_for_Persons_with_Disabilities_Building_an_Inclusive_Ecosystem_in_Higher_Education_Institutions)
6. Das, A. K., Kuyini, A. B., & Desai, I. P. (2013). Inclusive education in India: Are the teachers prepared? *International journal of special education*, 28(1), 27-36. Retrieved June 10, 2024, from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1013694>
7. DEPWD. (2016). Acts. Retrieved May 30, 2024, from Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities: <https://depwd.gov.in/acts/>
8. DSEL. (2021, July 14). Home: Right to education. Retrieved May 30, 2024, from Department of School Education and Literacy: <https://dsel.education.gov.in/rte>
9. Global education monitoring report team. (2020). Inclusive education in India. UNESCO. Retrieved May 30, 2024, from UNESCO: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373670>
11. Government of India. (2011). Census tables. Retrieved May 30, 2024, from Census India: <https://censusindia.gov.in/census.website/data/census-tables>

12. Johnstone, C. J., Schuelka, M. J., & Swadek, G. (2020). Quality Education for All?: The Promises and Limitations of the SDG Framework for Inclusive Education and Students with Disabilities. In C. J. Johnstone, M. J. Schuelka, & G. Swadek. Retrieved June 5, 2024, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctv2gjwnt3.10>
13. Kumar, D., & Singh, M. (2022, February). India's New Education Policy (NEP) 2020: Catering for Children with Disabilities. *International Journal of Advanced Research in Science, Communication and Technology*, 2(1), 70-74. doi:10.48175/IJARSCT-2505
14. Math, S. B., S. Gowda, G., Basavaraju, V., Manjunatha, N., Kumar, C. N., Philip, S., & Gowda, M. (2019, April). The Rights of Persons with Disability Act, 2016: Challenges and opportunities. *Indian J Psychiatry*. doi:10.4103/psychiatry.IndianJPsychiatry\_105\_19
15. Messiou, K. (2017). Research in the field of inclusive education: Time for a rethink? *International journal of inclusive education*, 21(2), 146-159. Retrieved June 4, 2024, from [https://eprints.soton.ac.uk/400070/1/FinalMessiou\\_IJIE\\_July2016.pdf](https://eprints.soton.ac.uk/400070/1/FinalMessiou_IJIE_July2016.pdf)
16. Ministry of Education. (2020). Samagra Shiksha. Retrieved June 5, 2024, from Ministry of Education: <https://samagra.education.gov.in/inclusive.html#:~:text=The%20Scheme%20aimed%20at%20enabling%20all%20students%20with,at%20the%20secondary%20level%20%28classes%20IX%20to%20XII%29.>
17. National Statistical Office. (2021). Persons with Disabilities (Divyangjan) in India - A Statistical Profile: 2021. Government of India, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation. National Statistical Office. Retrieved June 5, 2024, from <https://ruralindiaonline.org/en/library/resource/persons-with-disabilities-divyangjan-in-india---a-statistical-profile-2021/>
18. NCPEDP. (2024). Reports. New Delhi: National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People. Retrieved June 10, 2024, from [ncpedp.org](https://ncpedp.org): <https://ncpedp.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/NCPEDP-Study-Digi.pdf>
19. NIUA. (n.d.). Forums. Retrieved June 10, 2024, from National Institute of urban Affairs: <https://niua.in/forums/academic-spaces-and-student-disabilities-structural-and-functional-challenges>
20. Ossai, A. G. (2022). Sustainable Development Goal Four (SDG4): Challenges and the Way Forward. *Academia Letters*, 1-10. Retrieved May 30, 2024, from <https://doi.org/10.20935/AL4839>
21. Rao, P., Shrivastava, S., & Sarkar, T. (2020). Towards an Inclusive Education framework for India. Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy. Retrieved May 30, 2024, from [https://vidhilegalpolicy.in/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/InclusiveEducationReport\\_final\\_28April\\_0527PM-1.pdf#:~:text=The%20RPWD%20Act%20defines%20inclusive%20education%20as%20%E2%80%9Ca,needs%20of%20different%20types%20of%20students%20with%20disabilities.%E](https://vidhilegalpolicy.in/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/InclusiveEducationReport_final_28April_0527PM-1.pdf#:~:text=The%20RPWD%20Act%20defines%20inclusive%20education%20as%20%E2%80%9Ca,needs%20of%20different%20types%20of%20students%20with%20disabilities.%E)
22. Sanjeev, K., & Kumar, K. (2007). Inclusive education in India. *Electronic Journal for Inclusive Education*, 2(2). Retrieved May 30, 2024, from <https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1086&context=ejie>
23. Singh, S., Kumar, S., & Singh, R. K. (2020). A Study of Attitude of Teachers towards Inclusive Education . *International Journal of Education*, 9(1). Retrieved June 10, 2024, from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1277802.pdf>
24. UNDP. (n.d.). Sustainable development goals. Retrieved May 29, 2024, from UNDP: <https://www.undp.org/sustainable-development-goals>
25. UNESCO. (1994). The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education. (pp. 1-50). Spain: UNESCO. Retrieved June 1, 2024, from <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000098427>
26. UNESCO. (2014). Sustainable development begins with education: how education can contribute to the proposed post-2015 goals. France. Retrieved May 29, 2024, from <https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/publications/2275sdbeginswitheeducation.pdf>
27. UNESCO. (2017, October). UNESDOC: Digital library. Retrieved May 30, 2024, from UNESCO: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000246300>
28. UNESCO. (2024). Home: UNESCO. Retrieved May 30, 2024, from UNESCO: <https://www.unesco.org/sdg4education2030/en/sdg4>
29. WHO. (2018, February 19). Millenium development goals. Retrieved May 29, 2024, from WHO: [https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/millennium-development-goals-\(mdgs\)](https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/millennium-development-goals-(mdgs))