SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS, EDUCATION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING: CHALLENGES AND WAY FORWARD

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ABSTRACT

In a momentous move, mental health was included in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals in September 2015 as part of its 2030 Agenda. Emphasising the excessively high global burden of disease due to mental illness, the UN positioned mental health as a priority for global development. Consequently, promotion of mental health and wellbeing became a vital part of SDG 3 – Good Health and Well-being. Further, it is crucial in ensuring the achievement of several other SDGs such as No Poverty (SDG 1), Gender Equality (SDG 5), Reduced Inequality (SDG 10) amongst others. On World Mental Health Day 2023, the World Health Organization reiterated that "mental health is a universal human right" asserting that everyone everywhere has the right to the "highest attainable standard" of mental health. WHO further noted that it was impossible to accomplish sustainable development without attending to mental health. The National Education Policy, which was adopted by India in 2020, closely reflected these sentiments and took a holistic approach to learning. It highlighted the critical role played by educational institutes in ensuring emotional well-being and psychological health of students and impressed upon these institutes to create an inclusive and supportive environment conducive to psychological growth. This paper examines the rising trend towards appreciating the critical role of mental health in holistic education, sustainable development and growth. It assesses the provisions of the Sustainable Development Goals and National Education Policy that cater to this goal of facilitating mental health and inform policies of educational institutes. Actionable insights and policy recommendations are offered.

Keywords: Mental Health, Sustainable Development Goals, National Education Policy, Psychological Well-being, Holistic Learning Approach

Sustainable Development Goals and Mental Health

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted by the United Nations in September 2015. Titled "Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development", 17 Global Goals were adopted with the mission to develop "a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future." In an unprecedented move, the United Nations for the first time recognized mental health explicitly as part of the Sustainable Development Goals, specifically as part of Goal 3 on Good Health and Well Being to "ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all, at all ages". As part of Goal 3.4, the SDGs aim to treat, prevent and reduce premature mortality resulting from non-communicable diseases by one-third and to "promote mental health and well-being". Further Goal 3.5 is targeted at strengthening "the prevention and treatment of substance abuse". The United Nations emphasised that the global burden of disease due to mental illness is excessively high and thus positioned mental health as a priority for global development.

Further, while mental health is explicitly recognized in one goal, it is implicit in all the 17 goals. As noted by Lund et al. (2018) and further recognized by the University of Washington, all sustainable development goals are intricately related to mental health. Most other goals are both causally and consequentially linked to Goal 3. They form the basis of achieving good mental health and are simultaneously determined by psychological wellbeing resulting in a bidirectional relationship. Poverty, for instance, has fundamental linkages to mental health. It is a key determinant of psychological well-being, a causal factor in the context of several mental illnesses and building mental resilience is a key factor in poverty eradication. Similarly, establishing a more equitable society, specifically ensuring gender equality (SDG 5) and reducing inequality (SDG 10), is also fundamentally grounded in having a more mentally balanced population and further builds mental health. Economic growth (goal 8) and building safe and resilient cities (goal 11) is also contingent upon an overall mentally healthy society. On the World Mental Health Day 2023, the World Health Organization reiterated that "mental health is a universal human right" asserting that everyone everywhere has the right to the "highest attainable standard" of mental health. World Health Organization further noted that mental health was a crucial factor across all SDGs and it was impossible to accomplish sustainable development without attending to mental health. Not only is mental health a precondition for physical health, it is also crucially associated with indicators of societal development including employment and economic development, diversity and inclusion, respect for human rights, ensuring the prevalence of justice, peace and overall sustainable development (Votruba & Thornicroft, 2016). It is a common factor that cuts across areas and has relevance across the entire range of development (Chatterjee *et al.*, 2014)

Halfway Progress: Where have we reached?

Back in 2015, the UN had envisioned the accomplishment of the SDGs by 2030. Towards the fag end of 2023, we are already over halfway to the deadline and unfortunately, we are yet far from the ideal trajectory that would lead us to achieving this Agenda 2030. Despite taking the very crucial first step of creating mental health related targets, the UN appears to be failing in what it had set out to accomplish. Several factors have been noted for this sluggish movement towards ensuring a mentally healthy globe. For instance, the United Nations has failed to use multiple measures of mental health and has only been using one indicator of suicide mortality rate as an estimate of mental health. First, statistics are not very encouraging. A reduction of only 3% has been documented in suicide rates globally between 2015 and 2019. This decline is extremely slow if one has to achieve a reduction of one-third as envisaged by the SDGs (Heymann & Sprague, 2023). Second, the use of suicide mortality rate as the singular indicator is a cause of concern on several counts. For instance, one wonders why the documented cases of depression are not being factored as indicators of mental health considering that depression is the "single largest contributor to disability" globally and accounts for 13% of disability adjusted life years (DALYs) (Vigo et al., 2016). Additionally, why has budget allocations towards mental health and mental health related expenditure by governments of member states not been the centre of concern especially where there is recognition that nationals across the globe spend way more on physical health than on mental health and there is a massive shortage of mental health professional and support workers. Thus, there is an urgent need to scale up measurements as well as ensure rapid growth rates to achieve mental health goals.

Educational Institutes - A Ripe Ground to Speed-Up Progress

Child and adolescent mental health is one area that can be utilized to ensure rapid progress in achieving mental health related targets as well as all other targets. Children and adolescents are young human resources that would shape the future of our world. Global mental wellbeing can be significantly improved by focusing on the protective and risk factors across the first couple of decades of life – more specifically, building psychological resilience by strengthening the protective factors and lowering vulnerability to mental illness by monitoring, measuring and systematically alleviating the risk factors. Some protective or resilience factors include early support in childcare and development, creating safe, equitable and inclusive learning spaces in schools, focusing on healthy competition and positive achievement, and facilitating positive peer experiences. Risk factors, on the other hand, include malnutrition, exploitation of children and early exposure to drug and substance abuse (Clark et al., 2020).

Educational institutes, therefore, offer a ripe ground that can be utilized to enhance psychological resilience. The starting point of which can be cultivating a psychologically informed

environment in schools and institutes of higher education. Positively shaping young minds when they are most mouldable can ascertain psychologically healthy and resilient future generations. One example of an initiative guided by this ideology is the National Education Policy (NEP) which was adopted by India in 2020. The policy aims to imbibe and actualise these sentiments of enhancing psychological wellbeing through the educational system by taking a holistic approach to learning. This goal of the NEP is in tune with the mental health related targets of SDGs. It stresses on mental and emotional wellbeing of children and highlights the determining role of educational institutes in shaping the psyche of students. It emphasizes that educational institutes must go beyond just teaching and create an accepting, supportive, open and inclusive environment and a safe space for students to blossom and develop.

The NEP provides for training and sensitization of teachers, students and guardians towards psychological issues with the aim of creating more awareness and acceptance of mental health issues leading to destigmatization of mental issues, and early recognition and identification of psychological issues leading to timely intervention and treatment. Further, the goal is not limited to dealing with and managing mental health issues but also fostering positive psychological development. One of the chief arenas include enhancing accessibility to counsellors creating effective student counsellor linkages. Further, strengthening peer support groups can also be extremely effective since it offers greater identification and a natural safe space for students. The Manodarpan program launched by the Ministry of Education is one initiative in this direction. It was launched during the Covid-19 pandemic with the objective to provide psychosocial support for the mental well-being of students, teachers & families during the pandemic. It has now been extended further.

Need Gaps and Way Forward

However, utilizing educational institutes to ensure positive psychological development and offer timely intervention in case of mental illnesses is drenched with massive shortcomings. Right at the outset, adequate infrastructure and manpower required for effect implementation of mental health programs in education institutions is missing. Even though policies in most countries provide for a psychological counsellor in educational institutes, it is far from being actualized in a good number of countries including India. Although in India, there has been a rising trend of psychologists being hired in educational institutes, especially post-pandemic, we are substantially lagging behind in what is desirable. In 2018, the University Grants Commission recommended the establishment of "student counselling systems". It suggested that teachers must be trained in basic psychology and act as counsellors to students. It is important to highlight that, although, psychological training of teachers is highly desirable to ensure best practices in student engagement, training in basic psychology is highly inadequate to ensure effective counselling of students with mental health issues. Highly trained and specialized mental health

practitioners are required to deliver effective psychological interventions. There is an urgent need to ensure functional counselling or psychological establishments in all educational institutes equipped with essential tools and manpower to cater to the rising psychological needs of students. According to the New Indian Express Report (2023), there are currently only 3372 clinical psychologists registered with the Rehabilitation Council of India. This humungous shortage in professionals working in mental healthcare needs to be immediately addressed and rectified for a mentally healthy India.

Curriculum modifications to include not just sensitization courses in psychology but also courses in core psychology are also the need of the hour. This would enable the children to go beyond just a superficial understanding of psychology, to delve deep and develop and scientifically sound understanding of oneself and others. Apart from sensitizing students, psychological training of teachers is also essential. This would ensure that teachers engage in best practices from a psychological standpoint. Further, strategically including sports, yoga, "rest periods" etc into the curriculum can help by not just providing calming windows but also building resilience.

The government's role in funding mental-health-related initiatives also needs a reality check. The budget for mental healthcare in India in 2023 was 0.01 per cent of the total healthcare budget (Keshav Desiraju Indian Mental Health Observatory, 2023). This is way less than that of developed nations, where the average proportion of the total healthcare budget devoted to mental health is at least 5%. Despite the active recognition that mental health is as important, and perhaps even more important, than physical health, the budget allocation to mental health massively lags behind. This is highly unfortunate. Issues of infrastructure, trained manpower, training of teachers or even designing of effective curriculum would be impossible without adequate financial resources. This disparity between mental and physical health is also reflected in the fact that mental health is not covered by several insurance programs of almost half the member states of the United Nations. This also needs to be immediately rectified and insurance coverage for mental health must be made mandatory.

Conclusion

The recognition given to mental health in the sustainable development goals was a path breaking move and envisaged a rather ambitious, yet much required, goal of ensuring mental health for all. Despite a grand start, the essence of this recognition appears to be fading away half way through the journey and the member states seem to be losing sight of the mental health related goals and the timelines. Educational institutes as grounds for building psychological resilience and ensuring mental health offer immense potential for pacing up the timely achievement of this goal. Mental health infrastructure, workshops and training sessions for parents, teachers and students must be implemented to increase awareness regarding mental health. Although the

Sustainable Development Goals and the National Education Policy in India are a good initial step and provide a framework for not only improving prevention and treatment of mental health conditions, but also for improving the quality of life of students and in turn the future of humanity, there's a long way to go to ensure their implementation in letter and spirit.

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