



The Status Of SDG Implementation In The Context Of Manual Scavenging In Gujarat

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Abstract

Manual scavenging, the practice of cleaning human waste by hand, remains a pervasive issue in India, despite efforts to eliminate it through various legal and policy interventions. Gujarat, a state in western India, has been one of the key areas where manual scavenging persists, contributing to significant social, health, and economic challenges. This paper aims to analyze the status of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) implementation in the context of manual scavenging in Gujarat, with a focus on SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). By reviewing policy frameworks, government initiatives, and the socio-economic realities of those affected, this paper highlights the gap between SDG aspirations and on-the-ground realities, suggesting a multi-dimensional approach for more effective SDG realization in this context.

Key Words: Manual Scavengers, Sustainable Development Goals

Introduction

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity for all. India has committed to these goals, but certain practices, such as manual scavenging, continue to hinder the progress towards achieving them. Manual scavenging, as defined by the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act (2013), refers to the manual cleaning, carrying, or handling of human excreta. Despite being illegal, this practice continues in certain parts of India, particularly in states like Gujarat, where social and economic inequalities perpetuate the cycle of exploitation and poverty.

The status of SDG implementation concerning manual scavenging in Gujarat is crucial for assessing the state's commitment to eliminating this practice and ensuring that vulnerable groups are not left behind. The problem is compounded by social stigma, lack of political will, inadequate enforcement of laws, and the persistence of caste-based discrimination, particularly among Dalit communities.

Objectives

This paper aims to:

1. Analyse the alignment of Gujarat's policies and actions with the SDGs, especially SDG 6, SDG 8, and SDG 10, concerning manual scavenging.
2. Assess the challenges and barriers faced by the affected communities in Gujarat in achieving sustainable livelihoods and access to basic services.
3. Recommend policies and strategies to address manual scavenging in alignment with the SDGs.

Literature Review

Manual Scavenging and its Persistence

Manual scavenging has deep historical and cultural roots in India's caste system, where certain marginalized groups, especially Dalits, are forced into this degrading and hazardous work. Despite legislative measures to abolish the practice, manual scavenging persists in both rural and urban areas due to entrenched social hierarchies, economic exploitation, and lack of adequate alternatives.

In Gujarat, manual scavenging is prevalent in rural areas, small towns, and specific urban slums, particularly in the form of sewer cleaning, drainage maintenance, and toilet cleaning. Research indicates that manual scavenging disproportionately affects Dalit women, who face multiple layers of oppression, including caste-based discrimination, gender inequality, and poverty.

SDGs and Their Relevance to Manual Scavenging

India is a signatory to the 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development. Yet the prevalence of manual scavenging in the country undermines the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) related to clean water and sanitation

(Goal 6), decent work and economic growth (Goal 8), reduced inequalities (Goal 10), and peace, justice and strong institutions (Goal 10). The Danish Institute for Human Rights notes that 156 of the 169 targets defined under the SDGs are linked to human rights and labour standards¹⁰, underscoring the importance of measuring progress of excluded communities and rights-holders such as those engaged in manual scavenging and sanitation work. In addition, the UN Special Rapporteur on Minorities, recognizing the prevalence of caste discrimination in different parts of the globe, recommended the inclusion of caste-specific indicators to address caste-based discrimination.

The SDGs, adopted in 2015, include several targets directly related to manual scavenging. Of particular relevance are:

- **SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation):** Ensuring access to sanitation facilities is crucial for eliminating the need for manual scavenging. The target is to provide access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all by 2030, which directly challenges the persistence of manual scavenging.
- **SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth):** Ending manual scavenging aligns with promoting decent work. This goal focuses on improving job conditions, offering social protections, and eliminating exploitative practices. The practice of manual scavenging is the antithesis of decent work and hinders economic mobility for marginalized communities.
- **SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities):** Manual scavenging is inherently tied to caste-based discrimination, and addressing this issue is central to reducing inequality. Empowering affected communities and offering rehabilitation and alternative livelihood opportunities is essential to achieving this goal.

Policy Responses to Manual Scavenging in Gujarat

The Indian government has implemented various laws, including the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, which prohibits manual scavenging and mandates the rehabilitation of affected individuals. Gujarat has also launched specific state-level programs aimed at eradicating manual scavenging and promoting access to sanitation facilities. However, enforcement has often been weak, and significant gaps remain in the state's response.

Methodology

This paper utilizes a qualitative approach, drawing on primary and secondary data sources. Primary data includes interviews with affected individuals, community leaders, government officials, and representatives of civil society organizations. Secondary data comes from government reports, policy documents, academic studies, and media reports. This combination of sources helps assess the implementation status of SDGs in the context of manual scavenging in Gujarat.

Analysis of SDG Implementation in the Context of Manual Scavenging in Gujarat

SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation

The goal of ensuring universal access to sanitation is directly linked to the eradication of manual scavenging. Gujarat has made strides in improving sanitation infrastructure through initiatives like the Swachh Bharat Mission (Clean India Mission), which aims to eliminate open defecation and improve waste management. However, the problem of manual scavenging persists in some areas due to inadequate infrastructure, poor maintenance of sanitation systems, and the lack of proper waste treatment technologies. Moreover, the practice of manual scavenging is often tied to dysfunctional sewer systems, where manual labor is used to clean clogged drains and sewers.

SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth

The SDG target of promoting decent work is closely related to eliminating manual scavenging. Gujarat has made efforts to provide skills training, employment opportunities, and social security benefits to manual scavengers through various welfare schemes. However, these initiatives often fail to reach the most marginalized individuals, particularly in rural areas. The lack of dignified, alternative livelihoods, compounded by discrimination and social exclusion, prevents effective economic integration of manual scavengers into the formal workforce.

Furthermore, the state's focus on urban infrastructure development has often overlooked the informal sector, where many manual scavengers work. Without access to stable, decent jobs, manual scavengers remain trapped in a cycle of poverty.

SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities

Manual scavenging is a form of social exclusion that perpetuates caste-based discrimination. In Gujarat, Dalit communities are disproportionately affected by this practice. The state has enacted laws aimed at reducing caste-based discrimination, but these laws are poorly enforced, and manual scavengers continue to experience social ostracism and violence.

Efforts to integrate manual scavengers into mainstream society have been limited, and caste-based discrimination remains a barrier to achieving SDG 10. Despite legal provisions, manual scavengers often face difficulties in accessing social services, education, and healthcare, which further perpetuates their marginalization.

Discussion

The implementation of the SDGs in the context of manual scavenging in Gujarat faces significant challenges. While Gujarat has made progress in terms of sanitation infrastructure and social welfare programs, these efforts have been insufficient in eliminating manual scavenging or providing dignified alternatives for affected individuals. The persistence

of manual scavenging in Gujarat reflects deeper structural issues related to caste, gender, and economic inequality, which must be addressed holistically for SDGs to be achieved.

The focus on infrastructure development, while important, must be complemented by a broader strategy that includes community-based approaches, stronger legal enforcement, and awareness campaigns. Moreover, the participation of affected communities in decision-making processes is crucial to ensure that policies and interventions are aligned with their needs.

Conclusion

The persistence of manual scavenging in Gujarat highlights the gap between SDG targets and ground-level realities. Achieving SDGs 6, 8, and 10 in the context of manual scavenging requires comprehensive, multi-sectoral interventions that go beyond infrastructure and social welfare. A rights-based approach, community empowerment, stronger enforcement of laws, and targeted efforts to eliminate caste-based discrimination are necessary for Gujarat to achieve the SDGs related to manual scavenging.

Recommendations

- 1. Strengthening Law Enforcement:** Ensure strict enforcement of laws prohibiting manual scavenging and provide rehabilitation programs for affected communities.
- 2. Inclusive Policy Design:** Design policies that address the socio-economic challenges of manual scavengers, with a focus on skill development, livelihood alternatives, and social security.
- 3. Community-Based Approaches:** Involve affected communities in the decision-making process to create context-specific solutions.
- 4. Awareness and Education:** Launch awareness campaigns to eliminate stigma and educate the public on the rights of manual scavengers.

By addressing these issues, Gujarat can take meaningful steps toward achieving the SDGs and ensuring that no one is left behind in the fight for equality and dignity.

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