Time: 10 min   **Date: 07-10-2023**

Aligning higher education with the United Nations SDGs

Syllabus: GS2/ Education

In Context

- Educational institutions have to rethink their approach so that it is in tune with the NEP which will be crucial in realising the 2030 deadline for SDGs.

Sustainable Development Goals

- The United Nations Document "**Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**".
  - This agenda contains 17 goals and 169 targets.
- The agenda is built on the **Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)**, which were adopted in 2000 and were to be achieved by 2015.
- SDGs provide a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future.
- They recognize that ending poverty and other deprivations must go hand-in-hand with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality, and spur economic growth – all while tackling climate change and working to preserve our oceans and forests.

Challenges in achieving Sustainable Development Goals
- Though it has been eight years since the inception of these goals, the SDGs Report 2023 flagged **slow progress** and painted a **grim picture.**
  - The reasons are cited as the prolonged effects of **COVID-19**, impacts of the **climate crisis**, the **Russia-Ukraine conflict**, and a **weak global economy**.
- The lack of progress towards the goals is a **universal experience**, but it has been more pronounced in the **Least Developed Countries (LDCs)**.
- **India,** despite having managed the crises of the global economy and relatively succeeded in overcoming the challenges posed by the pandemic, has **suffered a setback in achieving these goals**.

About the National Education Policy 2020
- The NEP 2020 is founded on the **five guiding pillars** of Access, Equity, Quality, Affordability and Accountability.
- In school education, the National Education Policy 2020 stresses on the core values and principle that education must develop:
  - **not only the cognitive skills**, that is, – both 'foundational skills' of literacy and numeracy and 'higher-order' skills such as critical thinking and problem solving –
  - **but also, social and emotional skills** - also referred to as 'soft skills' -including cultural awareness and empathy, perseverance and grit, teamwork, leadership, communication, among others.
- It recommends a plethora of **reforms at all levels of school education** which seek to ensure quality of schools, transformation of the curriculum for the age group of 3 to 18 years.
  - For that, the **"10 + 2" structure** will be **replaced with the "5+3+3+4"** model.
- It seeks to:
  - Increase public investment in education,
  - Strengthen the use of technology and
  - Increase focus on vocational and adult education, among others.

NEP 2020 and SDGs
- **SDG4:**
  - It pertains to access to quality education. It is a prerequisite for the achievement of other goals.
- **India's role towards achieving SDG4:**
  - India, with a long-standing history of equitable and inclusive education, has accelerated efforts to ensure the achievement of SDGs through various reforms.
  - Among them, the **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 should be given credit** to a great extent.
- **NED 2020 & SDGs:**
  - NEP 2020 has been prepared in tune with most of the SDGs.
  - Though NEP 2020 calls for changes at all levels of education, **priority should be accorded to higher education** as it accelerates social mobility,

empowers people through creativity and critical thinking, and grants them employment skills.

Role of Higher Education in Sustainable development

- **OECD's data:**
  - According to data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), people with a higher education degree are more **employable** and **earn an average of 54% more** than those who only have completed senior secondary education.
- **Role in achieving SDGs:** A university-inclusive education, thus,
  - Better protects people against poverty (SDG1),
  - Prevents them from hunger (SDG2), s
  - Supports them for good health and well-being (SDG3),
  - Promotes gender equality (SDG5),
  - Provides them decent work, which in turn drives economic growth (SDG 8), and
  - Reduces inequalities (SDG10).
- **Role of Multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approach:**
  - Multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary systems of education produce multitalented people who can pursue research, and find innovative solutions to global challenges such as
    - Affordable and clean energy (SDG7),
    - Sustainable cities and communities (SDG11),
    - Climate change and global warming (SDG13), as well as studying their impact on an economy and the earth.

Suggestions

- **Integrated approach:**
  - To accelerate the progress towards achieving the 2030 agenda, the 56,205 higher educational institutions and universities in India should work together.
- **Multidisciplinary outlook:**
  - Universities should come out reinvigorated and play a part in the **education, innovation, culture, and civic life** of their local communities.
  - Community health, energy-saving measures, efficient resource allocation, waste reduction, development of local skills, as well as the sharing of services, infrastructure, and facilities with other universities or external partners should become a culture in universities.
- **Strengthening the research-teaching nexus:**
  - Universities should strengthen the research-teaching nexus in university education.
  - That way, students will become direct benefactors of the knowledge generated from research.
- **Adopting sustainability as a mantra:**

- It is high time that universities adopted sustainability as a mantra and incorporated SDGs into their institutional strategies, both in daily administration and in teaching and research.
- **Role in socio-economic development:**
  - It has been realised that higher education cannot work in isolation; rather it must be directly integrated with socio-economic development where each activity and transaction has meaningful and multiple impacts on SDGs.
  - Every citizen must feel that the universities contribute directly to their well-being and nation-building.

Way ahead

- **Need of achieving SDGs:**
  - SDGs are a matter of urgency, and actions by all countries, both developed and developing, to end poverty and other socio-economic and environmental problems should align with strategies that improve the standard of life and education, reduce inequality, and harness economic growth.
- **Attaining Goals for "Life on Land":**
  - Innovative solutions and start-ups (SDG 9) must be developed in collaboration with private companies.
  - Introducing Value-Based Education (VBE) will help citizens become responsible towards self, society, and the planet and help our nation achieve "Life on Land" (SDG15).

Daily Mains Question

[Q] Examine the role of the National Education Policy 2020 in achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for India.