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Inclusive Education and Sustainable Development: A Critical Analysis of NEP-2020 Provisions

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Abstract: Inclusive education has gained prominence as a pathway toward sustainable development and advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) articulated by the United Nations. By ensuring equitable access, participation, and meaningful access to quality learning for learners from diverse socio-economic, cultural, linguistic, and ability backgrounds, inclusive education contributes not only to Quality Education (SDG-4) but also to broader goals such as Reduced Inequalities (SDG-10) and Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions (SDG-16). In Indian, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a significant shift towards equity-oriented and inclusive educational reform. The policy emphasizes universal access, gender equity, support for socio-economically disadvantaged groups, inclusion of children with disabilities, multilingual education, and the strategic use of technology, thereby aligning national priorities with the global sustainable development agenda.

The present study critically examines the provisions of NEP-2020 related to inclusive education and analyses their relevance in promoting sustainable development. Adopting a qualitative, descriptive-analytical research design, the study is derived from the document and content analysis of NEP-2020, supported by government reports, policy documents, and international frameworks related to inclusive education and the SDGs. The analysis focuses on key policy dimensions such as equity and access, teacher preparation, gender inclusion, linguistic diversity, and technology-enabled inclusive learning. The findings indicate that NEP-2020 presents a progressive and holistic vision of inclusive education with strong potential to support sustainable development. However, the study further reveals challenges concerning implementation mechanisms, resource allocation, teacher preparedness, and monitoring systems. The study determines that NEP-2020 provides a comprehensive and forward-looking policy framework for inclusive and sustainable education, its effective realization depends on sustained institutional capacity building, continuous evaluation, and coordinated implementation throughout all stages of education system.

Keywords: Inclusive Education; Sustainable Development; National Education Policy 2020; SDGs; Educational Equity; Educational Reform

1 Introduction

Inclusive education and sustainable development have increasingly been recognized as closely connected and essential concepts within contemporary educational and social thought. Both are grounded with the conceptual framework of equity, social justice, and long-term well-being, with the shared goal of building societies in which participation is accessible to everyone meaningfully while safeguarding resources for future generations. Considering persistent global challenges such as inequality, social exclusion, and environmental degradation, education emerges as a vital link that connects inclusive practices with sustainable development outcomes.

Inclusive education is widely regarded as a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of equitable development. It emphasizes providing fair and meaningful & quality learning opportunities for all learners, regardless of their socio-economic status, gender, language, culture, or physical and cognitive abilities. Rather than simply accommodating marginalized learners within existing systems, inclusive education calls for a transformation of educational environments so that diversity is acknowledged, differences are respected, and all learners are supported to learn and succeed together. By nurturing empathy, mutual understanding, and social cohesion, inclusive education plays a crucial role in strengthening democratic values and fostering more just and inclusive societies.

Sustainable development, as defined by the United Nations, represents a systematic process of development that fulfills present needs without undermining the opportunities available to future generations to meet their own needs. It is derived from the integration of social equity, economic growth, and environmental protection, seeking to ensure balanced progress through responsible governance and resource use. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) offer a comprehensive global framework to address critical challenges such as poverty, inequality, climate change, and access to quality education. Within this framework, **SDG 4** places particular emphasis on ensuring high-quality education that is accessible and responsive to diverse learners and fostering learning throughout the life span for everyone.

The connection between inclusive education and sustainable development is both strong and reciprocal. Inclusive education contributes significantly to sustainable development by equipping individuals with the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes required for active citizenship, productive economic participation, and responsible environmental behavior. By addressing exclusion and disadvantage, inclusive education helps reduce inequalities and strengthen social cohesion, which are essential foundations for sustainable societies. Conversely, sustainable development creates the broader social, economic, and policy environment in which inclusive education can thrive,

recognizing education as a critical driver of long-term human and societal advancement.

In the Indian context, these global commitments are reflected in the **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020**, which places equity, inclusion, and quality at the core of educational reform. The policy acknowledges the differing learning capacities and needs of India's population and emphasizes improved access, participation, and learning outcomes for socio-economically disadvantaged groups, children with disabilities, gender minorities, and linguistically diverse learners. By aligning national educational priorities with the SDGs, NEP-2020 positions inclusive education as a central strategy for achieving sustainable development.

As societies confront the interconnected challenges shaping the twenty-first century, understanding the synergy between inclusive education and sustainable development becomes increasingly vital. Examining these concepts together enables a deeper appreciation of how educational policies and practices can contribute to building a more inclusive and fairer, resilient, and sustainable future. Accordingly, this study explores the interrelationship between inclusive education and sustainable development, highlighting their mutual reinforcement and considerations for educational policy development and practice.

Need and Significance of the Study

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a major shift in India's educational framework, moving beyond a primarily access-oriented approach toward one that foregrounds equity, inclusion, and meaningful learning outcomes. By acknowledging the multiple and diverse learning requirements of students and emphasizing fairness in educational opportunities, the policy seeks to address long-standing structural inequalities and align the education system with the broader goals of sustainable development.

However, despite its progressive vision and comprehensive scope, the effective implementation of NEP-2020 remains a significant challenge at both institutional and grassroots levels. Disparities in infrastructure, variations in teacher preparedness, unequal access to digital resources, and differences in administrative capacity often hinder the translation of policy intentions into inclusive educational practices. These realities emphasize the necessity of a critical and systematic examination of how inclusive education provisions are being interpreted and operationalized across varied contexts.

The present study is therefore significant in contributing to informed policy discourse and providing actionable understanding for educational practitioners, teacher educators, administrators, and educational planners. By critically analyzing the inclusive education provisions of NEP-2020, the study aims to support evidence-based decision-making, strengthen teacher education and professional development, and guide educational planning toward the effective realization of inclusive and sustainable development goals.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine inclusive education and sustainable development as envisaged in NEP-2020.

2. To analyse inclusive education provisions under NEP-2020 in relation to SDG-4.
3. To identify challenges in implementing inclusive education for sustainable development.
4. To assess strengths and gaps in NEP-2020 related to inclusion and equity.
5. To suggest strategies for successful implementation of inclusive and sustainable education.

Research Questions

1. How does NEP-2020 conceptualize inclusive education and sustainable development?
2. What inclusive education provisions are outlined in NEP-2020?
3. How far do NEP-2020 provisions align with SDG-4?
4. What challenges and gaps exist in implementing inclusive education under NEP-2020?
5. What measures can enhance inclusive education for sustainable development?

Research Methodology

The present study employs a **qualitative, descriptive-analytical research design** to critically examine the provisions of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in respect to the framework of inclusive education and sustainable development. The research is **theoretical and analytical** in nature and is based exclusively on **secondary data**, collected through systematic document and content analysis. Primary sources include the NEP-2020 document, reports of the Ministry of Education, Government of India, and policy frameworks issued by the United Nations and UNESCO, particularly those related to inclusive education and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG-4), along with relevant research articles, books, and policy reviews. The data were assessed through thematic analysis utilizing a content analysis framework focusing on inclusion, equity, access, correspondence with the principles of sustainable development, implementation strategies, and policy gaps. The study followed a structured process involving the identification of relevant documents, coding and analysis of policy provisions, comparative assessment with global frameworks, and interpretation of findings. The scope of the research is primarily concerned with policy-level analysis and relies solely on secondary sources, without primary data collection or empirical evaluation of implementation. As the study relies solely on publicly available sources, ethical concerns are minimal, and appropriate acknowledgment of all sources has been ensured to uphold academic integrity.

2 Conceptual Framework

2.1 Inclusive Education

Inclusive education denotes to an educational approach that aims to provide equitable access, active participation, and significant educational opportunities accessible to all learners by recognizing and catering to the diverse educational requirements and removing obstacles to inclusion. As articulated by UNESCO, inclusive education focuses on adapting and transforming education systems to accommodate learner

diversity through inclusive policies, flexible curricula, appropriate pedagogical practices, and supportive learning environments. At its foundation, inclusive education is shaped by the principles of equity, respect for diversity, and social justice.

Inclusive education goes well beyond the physical placement of learners from marginalized groups into mainstream classrooms. It reflects a broader philosophical commitment to viewing diversity considered an advantage rather than a limitation. This approach seeks to cultivate educational environments that enable students with varied abilities, socio-economic backgrounds, languages, cultures, and learning needs can engage, learn, and succeed together. By addressing systemic inequalities and fostering empathy, mutual respect, and cooperation, inclusive education serves an essential function in strengthening democratic values and social cohesion.

In the Indian context, the philosophy of inclusive education initially developed through the framework of integrated education, which largely concentrated on the inclusion of children with disabilities. As time progressed, this perspective has expanded to acknowledge multiple and intersecting forms of disadvantage related to poverty, gender, language, geographical location, and social identity. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a significant advancement in this evolution by adopting a comprehensive, rights-based, and holistic vision of inclusion, thereby reinforcing the significance of education in promoting equity and sustainable development.

NEP-2020 advocates widespread and equitable access to education, equity in participation and learning outcomes, quality & holistic learning experiences and sustained learning across the lifespan opportunities. It aligns India's educational priorities with global commitments, particularly the agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4), which advocates inclusive educational practices that guarantee equitable and quality education for everyone. The policy explicitly identifies Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs), children with disabilities, gender and linguistic minorities, migrant children, and first-generation learners as groups that require targeted support and systemic interventions to ensure meaningful inclusion.

Within this framework, inclusive education under NEP-2020 is positioned as a central strategy for achieving sustainable development. By enabling marginalized learners to access effective and meaningful education and acquire relevant knowledge and skills, inclusive education fosters the development of social justice, reduction of inequalities, and enhanced economic participation. It also reinforces democratic values and the strengthening of social cohesion, which is vital for sustainable national progress. Given the policy's broad scope and transformative intent, a critical examination of its inclusive education provisions is both timely and essential to assess their effectiveness and support for the achievement of sustainable development goals.

Principles of Inclusive Education

Inclusive education is shaped by a series of core principles that aim to ensure accessible and meaningful educational

opportunities for all learners by recognizing and responding to their diverse needs.

- **Diversity and Equity-** Inclusive education recognizes diversity as a natural and valuable feature of any learning environment. Learners differ in their abilities, socio-economic backgrounds, cultures, languages, and learning styles. An inclusive approach seeks to promote equity by making certain that each learner is provided with fair access to educational opportunities, resources, and support systems. Rather than treating all learners within the same framework, inclusive education responds to individual needs for the purpose of achieving equitable learning outcomes.
- **Access and Participation-** Ensuring meaningful access and ensuring that all learners participate meaningfully in learning, is a central principle of inclusive education. This involves removing physical, curricular, and attitudinal barriers that restrict participation. Educational institutions are encouraged to adopt flexible teaching methods, adaptable curricula, and accessible learning environments facilitating learners with diverse requirements to engage fully and benefit from educational experiences.
- **Collaboration and Support-** Inclusive education is grounded in joint efforts among important stakeholders such as teachers, school leaders, families, communities, and specialized professionals. This shared approach designed to support learners with diverse abilities requires collective responsibility and coordinated support. Strong partnerships and support networks enhance learners' intellectual, social, and emotional development alongside fostering an inclusive school culture.
- **Learner-Centered and Flexible Pedagogy-** A learner-centered approach lies fundamental to inclusive education, acknowledging differences in abilities, interests, and learning pace. Flexible pedagogical practices such as differentiated instruction, formative assessment, and the use of varied teaching-learning strategies empower educators to respond effectively to diverse learner needs. These flexible strategies guarantees that all learners could achieve meaningful and relevant learning outcomes.
- **Respect, Dignity, and Empowerment-** Respect for the dignity and rights of every learner forms the foundation of inclusive education. Inclusive learning environments promote self-esteem, autonomy, and confidence, particularly among learners from marginalized or disadvantaged groups. By empowering students to express their views, participate in decision-making, and take ownership of their learning, inclusive education fosters a secure sense of acceptance and inclusion and prepares individuals to contribute positively to society.

2.2 Sustainable Development and Education

Sustainable development represents a comprehensive approach to growth that harmonizes social, economic, and environmental

dimensions. It seeks for addressing the requirements of the present while safeguarding the potential of future generations to address their own needs. This framework emphasizes balanced growth, social inclusion, responsible efficient use of resources, along with environmental protection as essential components of long-term development.

Education serves an essential function in advancing sustainable development by nurturing critical thinking, responsible citizenship, environmental awareness, and social cohesion. Through education, individuals acquire the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes necessary to guide effective decision-making and contribute positively to society. In this context, education represents not only personal advancement but also a strategic investment in sustainable national and global development.

The **United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** provide a global roadmap for addressing interconnected challenges such as poverty, inequality, health, education, gender equality, climate change, and clean water. These goals highlight the interdependence of social, environmental, and economic concerns and call for integrated and holistic solutions. Among the seventeen SDGs, **SDG-4** specifically focuses on education that ensures inclusivity, equity, and quality, and promoting lifelong educational opportunities accessible to all learners.

Inclusive education is therefore central to the sustainable development agenda. By ensuring access, equity, and meaningful participation for everyone, inclusive education contributes to reducing inequalities, strengthening social cohesion, and fostering inclusive growth. As such, it functions not only as a social responsibility but also as a critical driver of sustainable development at national and global levels.

Intersection of Inclusive Education and Sustainable Development

The intersection of inclusive education and sustainable development is particularly significant, as education serves as a foundational instrument for achieving sustainable development objectives. Inclusive education seeks to enable every learner, without consideration of their socio-economic background, gender, language, or abilities, have access to quality learning opportunities. In doing so, it addresses systemic inequalities and supports the broader goals of sustainable development.

Inclusive education promotes social inclusion by reducing disparities and enabling equal participation in educational processes. By ensuring equitable learning opportunities, it helps break cycles of exclusion and marginalization, thereby strengthening social cohesion and advancing social justice. Such an approach reinforces democratic values and fosters mutual respect within diverse and pluralistic societies. Another significant contribution of inclusive education lies in the development of human capital. By recognizing and nurturing the abilities and potential of all learners, inclusive education supports the creation of a skilled, innovative, and adaptable workforce. This enriched human capital is essential for economic growth, technological progress, and long-term national development.

Inclusive education further contributes significantly to promoting environmental awareness and responsible citizenship. Through the integration of environmental education and sustainability principles into inclusive curricula, learners develop an understanding of ecological responsibility and sustainable practices. This prepares future generations to respond effectively to environmental challenges and adopt lifestyles that support environmental sustainability. In addition, inclusive education contributes to gender equality by challenging entrenched stereotypes and facilitating inclusive educational opportunities for all genders. Safe and supportive learning environments empower girls and gender-diverse learners, thereby advancing broader goals of gender equity and social development. Finally, inclusive education strengthens communities by encouraging collaboration among schools, families, and local communities. This shared responsibility enhances community engagement in education, builds local capacity, and ensures that educational practices are responsive to social and cultural contexts.

In conclusion, the combined effect of inclusive education and sustainable development is both powerful and essential. By making education inclusive, equitable, and accessible, societies can nurture the human capital, values, and awareness required to achieve sustainable development, thus promoting a more equitable, and environmentally balanced world for present and future generations.

3. National Education Policy 2020: An Overview

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 offers a transformative vision for reforming India's education system in catering to the expectations of the twenty-first century. Anchored in principles such as flexibility, learner-centeredness, equity, quality, and effective use of technology, the policy seeks to create an inclusive, holistic, and future-ready education system.

A major reform under NEP-2020 is the introduction of the 5+3+3+4 curricular framework, which replaces the traditional 10+2 structure and aligns educational stages with learners' developmental needs. The policy places strong emphasis on the universalization of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) and promotes competency-based learning, continuous assessment, and reduced reliance on rote memorization. In higher education, NEP-2020 encourages multidisciplinary learning, academic flexibility, vocational integration, and the incorporation of technological tools to enhance access, quality, and employability.

Inclusion and sustainability are central themes of the policy. NEP-2020 acknowledges persistent inequalities in access, participation, and learning outcomes and proposes targeted measures for **socio-economically disadvantaged groups, children with disabilities, gender minorities, and learners from marginalized communities**. By aligning national educational reforms with global commitments such as the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDG-4)**, the policy positions education as a catalyst for inclusive growth, social transformation, and sustainable development, extending its role

beyond economic advancement to encompass democratic participation and environmental awareness.

4. Inclusive Education Provisions in NEP-2020

NEP-2020 places **inclusive education** at the core of India's educational reform agenda, emphasizing equity, access, and quality for all learners. The policy addresses the diverse needs of marginalized and disadvantaged groups through targeted interventions across multiple domains.

4.1 Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs)

NEP-2020 introduces the category of **Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs)**, encompassing students from Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes, Other Backward Classes, minority communities, migrants, urban poor, and rural populations. To enhance access, retention, and learning outcomes, the policy proposes measures such as targeted scholarships, conditional cash transfers, hostel facilities, mentorship programs, and academic support initiatives. These provisions aim to bridge systemic inequalities and create equitable academic opportunities available to learners belonging to marginalized backgrounds.

4.2 Education of Children with Disabilities (CwDs)

The policy aligns with the **Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016** and emphasizes barrier-free, inclusive education for persons with disabilities. Key initiatives include the provision of assistive technologies, flexible curricular adaptations, and specialized teacher training in inclusive pedagogy. NEP-2020 recognizes that facilitating inclusive education for CwDs is critical not only for their academic success but also for their social integration and economic empowerment.

4.3 Gender Inclusion

Acknowledging persistent gender-based inequities in education, NEP-2020 proposes a **Gender Inclusion Fund** to support female and transgender learners. The policy outlines strategies to ensure safe and supportive learning environments, including secure school infrastructure, transport facilities, community engagement, and awareness programs. By promoting gender equity, NEP-2020 contributes to broader social development and sustainable growth.

4.4 Multilingualism and Linguistic Inclusion

Language is acknowledged as a crucial element in inclusive education. NEP-2020 recommends instruction in the mother tongue or home language at least up to Grade 5, viewing linguistic diversity as an educational and cultural asset. This approach enhances comprehension, retention, and learning outcomes while supporting cultural sustainability and identity.

4.5 Technology and Digital Inclusion

NEP-2020 emphasizes the integration of technology to broaden access to quality education, through platforms such as DIKSHA, SWAYAM, and the National Digital Education Architecture (NDEAR). While digital initiatives have the potential to democratize learning, the policy also highlights the existing digital divide and calls for equitable access to digital infrastructure, devices, and training to ensure that technology benefits all learners.

5. Inclusive Education and Sustainable Development under NEP-2020

Inclusive education is central to advancing sustainable development as it strengthens human capital, reduces economic and social inequalities, and promotes social cohesion. NEP-2020 integrates sustainability as a fundamental principle across all levels of education, with a strong focus on lifelong learning, vocational education, skill development, and values-based learning. By prioritizing the inclusion and support of learners from marginalized and disadvantaged groups, the policy reflects the SDG commitment to "leaving no one behind."

Education for sustainable development under NEP-2020 extends beyond economic and vocational objectives to include environmental awareness, ethical understanding, and citizenship education. The curriculum and pedagogical approaches aim to cultivate the competencies, understanding, and attitude needed for learners to participate in an equitable, and environmentally responsible society. Inclusive classrooms that respect diversity and accommodate varied learning needs prepare students for active participation in democratic life and sustainable community development.

Through the alignment connecting inclusive education with the objectives of sustainable development, NEP-2020 positions education as both a social equalizer and a driver of long-term sustainable growth. The policy highlights that inclusive education is not merely a matter of contributing to social justice while also serving as a strategic investment in developing human capital equipped to respond to complex social, economic, and environmental issues of the twenty-first century.

6. Challenges and Gaps in NEP-2020's Inclusive Education

While NEP-2020 provides a **progressive and systematic framework** for inclusive education, its effective implementation faces several challenges and gaps that may limit the policy's potential impact. A critical examination of these aspects is crucial for guaranteeing that the policy's vision translates into meaningful outcomes for all learners.

6.1 Strengths

NEP-2020 demonstrates several key strengths in promoting inclusive education:

- **Holistic and rights-based approach:** The policy recognizes inclusion as a fundamental right and adopts a learner-centric, equity-oriented framework.
- **Alignment with global education goals:** NEP-2020 is closely aligned with **SDG-4** and international education frameworks, emphasizing access, quality, and lifelong learning.
- **Recognition of diverse learner needs:** The policy goes beyond disability inclusion to address socio-economic disadvantage, gender disparities, linguistic diversity, and marginalization.
- **Focus on teacher education and professional development:** NEP-2020 emphasizes training educators in inclusive pedagogy, promoting competence and awareness.
- **Integration of technology:** Digital platforms and technology-enabled learning are highlighted as tools to expand access and enhance educational equity.

6.2 Gaps and Challenges

Despite its progressive vision, NEP-2020 faces several challenges in practice:

- **Lack of a clear implementation roadmap:** The policy provides limited guidance on operational strategies, timelines, and responsibilities at institutional and state levels.
- **Inadequate emphasis on funding mechanisms:** While the policy suggests financial support measures, it does not provide detailed strategies for sustained resource allocation.
- **Limited monitoring and evaluation framework:** Clear mechanisms for assessing progress, tracking outcomes, and ensuring accountability are not fully elaborated.
- **Challenges in teacher preparedness:** Implementing inclusive classrooms requires continuous capacity building, which may be constrained by existing teacher shortages and insufficient training.
- **Risk of exclusion caused by the digital divide:** Technology-based initiatives may inadvertently disadvantage learners in rural, remote, or economically marginalized communities lacking access to digital infrastructure.

7. Educational Implications

The critical analysis of NEP-2020's provisions for inclusive education highlights several important implications for educational policy, practice, and research:

- **Teacher Education and Professional Development:** Teacher preparation programs must incorporate inclusive pedagogy, differentiated instruction, and concepts of sustainable development. Educators should be equipped to address diverse learner needs, foster equity, and integrate values-based and environmental education into classrooms.
- **Curriculum Reforms:** Curricula at all levels should reflect local contexts, cultural diversity, and learner heterogeneity. Content should promote critical thinking, environmental awareness, ethical reasoning, and civic responsibility, harmonizing education with the objectives of sustainable development.
- **Technology and Digital Inclusion:** While technology offers opportunities for expanding access and enhancing learning, initiatives should go hand in hand with adequate digital infrastructure, access to devices, and competence in digital technologies programs. Special attention is required to prevent the restricted access for learners to marginalized and remote communities.
- **Policy Evaluation and Monitoring:** Continuous assessment, monitoring, and feedback mechanisms are essential to ensure that policy provisions are responsive, effective, and aligned with intended

outcomes. This will enable timely course corrections and support evidence-based decision-making.

8. Conclusion

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 presents a progressive and visionary framework that places inclusive education at the core of sustainable development by emphasizing equity, access, quality, and lifelong learning. Its holistic approach accommodates a wide range of needs among learners, including socio-economically disadvantaged groups, children with disabilities, gender minorities, and linguistic communities, thereby aligning national education priorities with the Sustainable Development Goals, especially SDG-4. However, the realization of this vision depends on effective implementation, adequate funding, teacher preparedness, and robust monitoring mechanisms, as challenges such as resource constraints, training gaps, digital divides, and weak evaluation systems may hinder desired outcomes. This study highlights the pivotal role of inclusive education in advancing sustainable development through social integration, human capital development, and ethical and environmental awareness, underscoring that inclusion is not only a moral responsibility but also a strategic investment in national progress. Ultimately, the successful implementation of NEP-2020 has the potential to transform India's educational landscape by guaranteeing that every learner is included and that education serves as a driver for sustainable social, economic, and environmental development.

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