Productive and Decent Work Employment Opportunities: Reflections of Sustainable Development Goal 8

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Abstract

This study measures the impact of seven indicators of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on Goal 8, which is about productive and decent work and employment opportunities in India. The study employs pooled ordinary least squares (POLS) methods to capture the impact of seven indicators— annual growth rate of real GDP per capita, ease of doing business, unemployment rate, labour force participation rate, participation of informal workers, fatal and non-fatal occupation injuries, and banking outlets, on SDG 8, for 2018-2021. The findings reveal that the annual growth rate of real GDP per capita, labour force participation rate, and ease of doing business influence SDG 8's score positively and significantly. On the contrary, the unemployment rate impacts sustainable score value negatively and significantly. The inferences of the study did not unwrap a significant effect of the percentage of workers in the informal sector, fatal and non-fatal occupation injuries and the number of banking outlets on SDG8. The study recommends reducing unemployment and increasing labour force participation rates in the economy for sustainability. At the same time, policymakers must focus on enhancing the ease of doing business and the annual growth rate of real GDP per capita to realise decent work and employment opportunities. To advance sustainable development goals, especially SDG 8, fostering sustainable and inclusive economic growth is the need of the hour.

Keywords: Productive and Decent Work; Employment Opportunities; Sustainable Development Goals; Sustainable Development Goals 8 (SDG 8); Pooled Ordinary Least Squares

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Introduction

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development provides a holistic and all-encompassing structure for tackling complex problems by incorporating sustainable development's economic, social, and environmental aspects (Kuhn, 2019). The Sustainable Development Agenda, endorsed by government delegates representing 193 states during the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), offers a comprehensive global framework to guide humanity towards a sustainable trajectory. The framework comprises a comprehensive set of 17 goals, 169 targets, and 232 indicators, and these components collectively provide a strategic path for promoting social well-being, achieving economic prosperity, and fostering world peace (Serafini et al., 2022). Within the adopted framework, various social-ecological indicators are identified and linked to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) targets. The term 'social' encompasses both the social and economic aspects of sustainability, while the term 'ecological' pertains to its environmental dimension (United Nations, 2020). Collectively, these elements are commonly known as the three pillars of sustainability, namely people (social), profit (economic), and planet (environmental) (Elkington, 1994).

The eighth sustainable development aims to foster inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment, and decent work opportunities for all individuals (Braganza et al., 2021). The attainment of SDG 8 holds great importance due to its inherent interconnection with the achievement of other goals, particularly the reduction of inequality, the promotion of peace, justice, and strong institutions, the eradication of hunger and poverty, the advancement of good health and well-being and gender equality, and the provision of high-quality education. The objective of the goal is to ensure that workers can afford access to safe and secure working conditions while simultaneously reducing the prevalence of precarious employment (Bhattacharyya et al., 2023). It advocates for the advancement of comprehensive and efficient employment, the preservation of worker rights, the establishment of universal social protection, and the facilitation of collective bargaining (Bhattacharyya et al., 2023).

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 8 aims to foster sustainable economic growth, enhance productivity levels, and encourage technical advancements in the long run. It is imperative to foster entrepreneurial activity and promote the generation of employment opportunities while concurrently implementing substantial measures to combat the practices of forced labour, labour exploitation, and human trafficking. The global community will only face challenges in achieving several of the remaining 16 Goals if it embarks on a new trajectory of economic development that prioritises the promotion of quality jobs and sustainable productivity growth. The recent G-20 meeting calls for collective efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda (Mor & Das, 2023), where developed nations should help developing nations with innovative technological solutions for making a carbon-neutral sustainable planet (Mor et al., 2023a).

International Labour Organization (ILO) advanced the Decent Work Agenda in 1999 to promote social and economic progress worldwide, and decent work is a vital component of this agenda. The Decent Work agenda encompasses four 'core standards'— the elimination of forced labour, the eradication of child labour, the prevention of workplace discrimination, and the promotion of the right to form and join a labour union, as well as the right to engage in collective bargaining (Vosko, 2002; Standing, 2008; Albin & Mantouvalou, 2012). The agenda encompasses productive and remunerative employment opportunities, social protection, rights at work, and social dialogue characterising decent work. It relies on the idea that work should provide income, dignity, security, and personal and professional development opportunities. Decent work refers to favourable conditions for satisfactory and productive employment, usually indicated by

freedom, fairness, security, and human dignity (ILO, 2000). Table 1 highlights the various indicators of decent work and sustainability.

Research indicates that the unemployment rate, embodied in decent work opportunities, negatively affects sustainability (Lerche, 2012; Dhakal & Burgess, 2020). Business via ease of doing business impacts sustainability (Haidar, 2012; Ghosh et al., 2019). Financial Inclusion promotes sustainable growth in essential financial services (Sain et al., 2016; Ade' Soyemi et al., 2020; Ozili, 2022; Tejasmayee et al., 2023). Economic Growth GDP has not been regarded as a deceptive gauge of progress (Easterlin et al., 2010; Fanning & O'Neill, 2019) because of disparities among nations (Sugiawan & Managi, 2016), failed to promote sustainability (Arrow et al., 2004) and exacerbate existing inequalities (Coscieme et al., 2020). In India, NITI Aayog (2018) predicted that individuals of both genders will have access to relevant and financially rewarding employment opportunities, enabling them to engage in labour esteemed by society.

Table 1: Indicators of Decent Work and Sustainability
Decent Work and Economic Growth.
Sustain per capita economic growth in accordance with national circumstances and, in particular, at least 7 per cent gross domestic product growth per annum in the least developed countries.
Achieve higher levels of economic productivity through diversification, technological upgrading, and innovation, including through a focus on high-value-added and labour-intensive sectors.
Promote development-oriented policies that support productive activities, decent job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity, and innovation, and encourage the formalisation and growth of micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises, through access to financial services.
Improve progressively, through 2030, global resource efficiency in consumption and production and endeavour to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation, in accordance with the 10-Year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production, with developed countries taking the lead.
By 2030, achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value.
By 2020, substantially reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education, or training.
Take immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking and secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including recruitment and use of child soldiers, and by 2025, end child labour in all its forms.
Protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrant workers, in particular women migrants and those in precarious employment.
By 2030, devise and implement policies to promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products.
Strengthen the capacity of domestic financial institutions to encourage and expand access to banking, insurance, and financial services for all.
Source: Compiled from Sustainable Development Report, 2020 (United Nations, 2020).

Within this context, the study measures the impact of decent work opportunities on SDG 8 in India. The main research question is to measure the impact of various indicators of SDG 8, such as annual growth rate of real GDP per capita, ease of doing business, unemployment rate, labour force participation rate, participation of informal workers, fatal and non-fatal occupation injuries, and banking outlets, on SDG 8. To accomplish the objectives, the study employs pooled ordinary least squares (POLS) methods to capture the impact of seven indicators of SDG 8 for 2018-2021.

Literature Review and Hypotheses Building

Unemployment Rate and Sustainability

Decent work is the provision of favourable conditions for both men and women to acquire satisfactory and productive employment, characterised by freedom, fairness, security, and human dignity (Tapiola, 2000). Decent work has expanded its scope to include informal labour, which refers to unregulated and subcontracted work that has become increasingly important in the era of globalisation. This includes paid domestic work, which women predominantly perform. The decent work agenda encompasses four fundamental principles— the elimination of forced labour, the eradication of child labour, the prevention of workplace discrimination, and the promotion of the right to form and join a labour union, as well as the right to engage in collective bargaining (Vosko, 2002; Standing, 2008; Albin & Mantouvalou, 2012). Improving the conditions of the working poor, including those in vulnerable employment or who are unemployed, has made decent work a top priority in social policy. In a nation where the majority of the labour force is found in the informal sector, the decent work strategy had minimal influence on the informal sector (Fajana, 2008; Lerche, 2012; Dhakal & Burgess, 2020). We examine the following hypotheses linked to unemployment rate and sustainability:

H_{01}: There is no statistical relation between the state unemployment rate and productive and decent work employment.

H_{01a}: Productive and decent work employment does not depend on the percentage of workers in the informal sector, and,

H_{01b}: The labour force participation rate does not impact the value of productive and decent work employment.

Business and Sustainability

The United Nations (UN) utilised the ease of doing business indicator to assess the progress of SDG Goals 8.2 and 8.3, which pertain to the business climate and encompass factors such as technical advancement, diversity, innovation, the development of micro, small, and medium enterprises, and entrepreneurial capabilities (UN, 2015). The existing body of literature presents a range of perspectives regarding the ease of doing business to attain the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Studies have identified a favourable correlation between regulations that control corporate activity and economic growth (Haidar, 2012). Ghosh et al. (2019) have created the SDG Index and found that it is statistically significant in explaining the "Ease of Doing Business Index" and FDI flows to the states. Udayanga and Jayaweera (2019) conducted a study on middle-income countries and found that the impact of the entrepreneurial ecosystem and ease of doing business on gross domestic product is significant. The study concluded that establishing effective entrepreneurial ecosystems is a sustainable solution to increase the contribution of Small and Medium Enterprises to GDP in middle-income countries. Innovation-focused education and research help promote responsible innovation, which is crucial for sustainability (Kopala et al., 2023). The following hypothesis examines the extent of the ease of doing business.

H_{02}: The state's productive and decent work employment is independent of the ease of doing business score.

Financial Inclusion and Sustainability

Sustainable development's objective encompasses establishing enduring stability in both the economy and the environment. This can only be accomplished by incorporating and

recognising economic, environmental, and social considerations, which can be achieved through the financial system (Emas, 2015). Improving the availability of credit, savings mobilisation, insurance, and risk management can promote sustainable growth in basic financial services (Sain et al., 2016). Research (Ade' Soyemi et al., 2020; Ozili, 2022; Tejasmayee et al., 2023) reveals that the presence of bank branches in rural areas, demand deposits from rural areas, and loans provided to entrepreneurs all contribute positively and significantly to sustainable development. The following hypothesis is employed to examine financial inclusion and sustainability.

H_{03}: *There is no relationship between the number of banking outlets and productive and decent work employment.*

Economic Growth and Sustainability

The United Nations establishes a quantifiable objective for SDG 8, which entails achieving a minimum annual GDP growth rate of 7%; however, the UN does not outline the specific type of growth that countries should strive for. Arrow et al. (2004) examined the sustainability of economic development in several countries and areas, and these countries failed to meet the requirements for sustainable development due to a decline in their overall wealth. The emphasis on uninterrupted economic growth and the reliance on GDP as a metric for SDGs 8 in EU countries disregard the widely recognised criticisms of GDP as a deceptive gauge of progress (Easterlin et al., 2010; Fanning & O'Neill, 2019). Sugiawan and Managi (2016) discovered a significant disparity between the present economic advancement and the projected threshold for achieving a sustainable growth trajectory, while Kurniawan and Managi (2018) assess economic growth exploitation of abundant natural resources, disregarding the fundamental principles of sustainability. The GDP metric fails to consider inclusivity or provide insights into the sustainability of economic growth. The provision of agribusiness facilities enhances growth (Panghal & Mor, 2020) and has proved crucial in the dangerous anthropogenic impacts of climate change in India (Mor, 2017a, b). This study probes the following hypothesis.

$H_{04:}$ *Decent and productive employment and economic growth are independent of each other.*

Research Methodology

Tools and Technique

As discussed above, this study aims to measure the impact of various social and economic indicators under SDG 8 on the SDG score of Goal 8. Panel analysis is employed in the study to analyse the impact of various indicators of SDG8, on the Sustainable Development Score for India. Panel data analysis is a statistical method widely used to analyse data collected for multiple periods and over the same individuals or entities. Pooled Ordinary Least Squares (POLS) is a statistical technique used in regression analysis to examine the relationships between variables. It is highly relevant when dealing with panel data, which involves observations of multiple individuals or entities over several periods. POLS combines data from various periods and entities to estimate a single regression equation, thus increasing the sample size and potentially providing more precise parameter estimates. Pooled panel analysis assumes homogeneity of all sections in a panel data study and does not treat each section differently. There are no unique characteristics of individuals within the measurement set and no universal effects over time in POLS regression. So, the intercept is assumed to be the same for different entities in pooled OLS regression (Adeomi et al., 2017).

Model Specification

The model is specified as follows:

$$SDGs_{it} = \beta_{0t} + \beta_1 SGR_{it} + \beta_2 EODB_{it} + \beta_3 UR_{it} + \beta_4 LFPR_{it} + \beta_5 PWIS_{it} + \beta_6 FOIL_{it} + \beta_7 NBO_{it} + u_{it} \qquad (1)$$

Where,

$SDGs_{it}$ = Score Value of Goal 8 (SDG8);

SGR_{it} = Annual Growth Rate of Real GDP per Capita;

$EODB_{it}$ = Ease of Doing Business Score;

UR_{it} = Unemployment Rate;

$LFPR_{it}$ = Labour Force Participation Rate;

$PWIS_{it}$ = Percentage of Workers in Informal Sector;

$FOIL_{it}$ = Fatal and Non-Fatal Occupation Injuries Per one lakh; and

NBO_{it} = Number of Banking Outlets.

Database

The present study measures the impact of various indicators covered under the eighth goal of sustainable development for 2018-2021. The data for three years (2018-19, 2019-20 and 2020-2021) for all 29 states of India was gathered, leading to 87 observations. The statehood of Jammu and Kashmir was repealed on 5th August 2019 with the abrogation of Article 370, thereby reducing the total number of States in India to 28 (Rather et al., 2020). The erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir is divided into two union territories -Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh.

It is pertinent to mention that all variables in the study are measured on a ratio scale. Table 2 briefly details the variables selected for the study, their expected relationship with SDG 8 and their respective sources.

Table 2: Description and Source of Variable Used in the Study		
Variables	**Methodology**	**Data Source**
Score value of Goal 8 (SDG8)	**Higher value means higher performance (+)**	**(National Institution for Transforming India [NITI Aayog], 2019, 2020, 2021)**
Annual Growth Rate of Real GDP per Capita	**Higher value means higher performance (+)**	**Rajiv et al. (2019); Prasad et al. (2020); Joshi et al. (2021)**
Ease of Doing Business Score	**Higher value means higher performance (+)**	**NITI Aayog (2019, 2020, 2021)**
Unemployment Rate & Labour Force Participation Rate	**Higher value means lower performance (-)**	**Government of India (2019, 2020, 2021)**
Percentage of Workers in Informal Sector (PWIS)	**Higher value means lower performance (-)**	**Government of India (2019, 2020, 2021)**
Fatal and Non-Fatal Occupation Injuries Per one lakh	**Higher value means lower performance (-)**	**Government of India (2019, 2020, 2021)**
Number of Banking Outlets	**Higher value means higher performance (+)**	**Rajiv et al. (2019); Prasad et al. (2020); Joshi et al. (2021)**

In this section, we present the parameter estimate of the POLS regression along with the interpretation and hypothesis testing.

Table 3 displays the model's descriptive statistics, which includes 87 variables examined in the study. The R Square values indicate the variation in the dependent variable that the independent variable can explain. It is observed that there is a total of 63% variations in the sustainable score value due to different independent variables demonstrating the adequacy of the model in the study (Table 3). The f value in the table is smaller than the 0.05 probability value, indicating that the model is suitable for the investigation.

Table 3: Goodness of Fit of Model				
Source	SS	Df	MS	F Test
Regression	7928.179	13	609.860	Prob>f .000b
Residual	4608.096	73	63.125	
Total	12536.276	86	145.77065	
Number of observations = 87				
R2 = 0.632				
Adjust R2 = 0.567				
Source: The Author				

Table 4: Parameter Estimation of Pooled OLS Regression Analysis		
Variables	β's	t- value
Annual growth rate of real GDP per capita	0.557**(0.254)	2.197
Ease of Doing Business (EODB) Score	0.090***(0.029)	3.050
Unemployment rate (%) (15-59 years)	-0.739**(0.332)	-2.226
Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) (%) (15-59 years)	0.342***(0.142)	2.407
Percentage of workers in the informal sector	-0.052(0.086)	-0.607
Fatal and non-fatal occupation injuries per 100000	-0.060 (0.054)	-0.54
Number of banking outlet	0.011 (0.022)	0.485
Constant	38.673***(14.648)	2.197
Note: 1. *** and **significant at 1% and 5% level of significance.		
2. Figures in the parenthesis represent the standard error.		
Source: The Author		

Table 4 depicts the estimated regression coefficient of various indicators like the annual growth rate of real state growth per capita, ease of doing business score, unemployment rate, labour force participation rate, percentage of workers in informal sector, fatal and non-fatal occupation injuries per 100000, number of banking outlet. The analysis demonstrates that the unemployment rate and ease of doing business score are statistically significant at 1% significance and further indicates that the unemployment rate is negatively related to the sustainable development score, and a 1% increase in the unemployment rate declines 0.73% score value. In contrast, the ease of doing business score positively correlates with sustainable score value, and a 1 unit increase in ease of doing business score advances 0.9 unit of sustainable score value of states. In conclusion, our alternate hypotheses regarding unemployment and ease of doing business are selected and reveal that these regressors have a negative and positive association with employment, respectively.

The analysis further indicates that the state average annual growth rate per capita and labour force participation rate are statistically significant at a 5% significance level. Table 4 further indicates that both variables positively correlate with SDG 8. In contrast, a 1% change in

the State average growth rate brings a 0.55% change, and a 1% change in labour force participation rate leads to a 0.34 change in score value, respectively.

Decent work emphasises the importance of fair wages, safe working conditions, and access to skills development, which increase worker productivity and lead to higher overall economic productivity, contributing to economic growth (Bhattacharyya et al., 2023). Decent work promotes investments in human capital, such as education and training, and fosters economic growth through technological advancements and higher-quality outputs (Ferraro et al., 2017). Decent work fosters social cohesion by promoting labour rights, social dialogue, and a sense of societal fairness. A more harmonious and inclusive labour market can lead to greater stability and reduced social unrest, which are conducive to economic growth. Decent work can help lift people from poverty by providing them stable incomes and access to essential services (Bhattacharyya et al., 2023). Reducing poverty improves individuals' well-being and contributes to economic growth by expanding the potential consumer base (ILO, 1999, 2001, 2008).

The study's findings show a relationship between decent and productive employment, supported by many other studies (Standing, 2008; Lerche, 2012). Therefore, we reject our first maintained hypothesis that unemployment and productive employment do not relate to each other and can draw the inferences that unemployment is a significant indicator of productive and decent employment (SGD8). The enhancement of the ease of doing business score contributes to the generation of productive and decent employment opportunities, as evidenced by the studies conducted by (Haidar, 2012; Ghosh et al., 2019; Udayanga & Jayaweera, 2019). Thus, we reject our second-defended hypothesis that the ease of doing business is independent of decent and productive employment.

The findings of the study reveal that the numbers of workers in the informal sector, as well as with regards to fatal and non-fatal occupation injuries, both variables are negatively related to decent and productive employment. These inferences bear resonance with the findings of some previous research by (Dhakal and Burgess, 2020; Fajana, 2008; Lerche, 2012). Hence, this study rejects our third hypothesis on the independence of the number of commercial bank outlets (Ade'Soyemi et al., 2020; Tejasmayee et al., 2023), and we can conclude that there is an insignificant relationship between the number of commercial bank outlets and decent and productive employment opportunities across all state. Similarly, the findings from our last hypothesis decent and productive employment and economic growth are independent of each other have been supported by numerous researchers (Arrow et al., 2004; Coscieme et al., 2020; Fanning & O'Neil, 2019; Kurniawan & Managi, 2018) and show a positive relationship between state average annual growth rate and decent and productive employment.

Conclusion and Policy Implication

Sustainable Development Goal 8 (SDG 8) promotes sustained, inclusive, sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work. SDG 8 addresses fundamental societal needs and provides a comprehensive framework for measuring the progress of nations toward economic well-being and social justice. To effectively achieve Sustainable Development Goal Eight (SDG 8) in India, it is fundamental for policymakers to concentrate on a holistic and diversified strategy. Government investment in education and skills development programs is necessary to support full and productive employment (SDG 8.5), focusing on improving education quality, particularly in rural areas, and providing vocational training to equip the workforce with the skills required for modern industries. Implementing labour reforms fosters a balanced and equitable relationship between employers and employees, safeguarding workers' rights (SDG 8.8). It also enables companies to increase their workforce and expand, while promoting a flexible work environment by ensuring workers' social security.

Policymakers need to assist the growth of small and medium enterprises (SDGs target 8.3) by providing improved access to finance, less regulatory burden, and business development support. Small and medium-sized enterprises are frequently the backbone of an economy and can create jobs enormously. Governments should upgrade energy, transportation, and digital connectivity infrastructure to support economic growth and job creation. Large-scale infrastructure projects can be financed and carried out with the help of public-private partnerships. It remains paramount to ensure that more individuals have access to banking services, insurance, and credit (SDG 8.10) by implementing programs like Jan Dhan Yojana, a scheme adopted by the Government of India that places special emphasis on financial inclusion of citizens to provide access to various financial services including Remittance, Credit, Insurance, Pension, Banking Savings & Deposit Accounts affordably. By enacting workplace regulations, the government will end discrimination, give women equal opportunity, and advance gender equality (SDG 8.5) in the workplace.

To encourage economic growth and decent work, working with international organisations (SDG8.9), surrounding nations, and the global community is vital to sharing best practices, gaining access to finance, and streamlining technology transfer. Fostering technological development (via Higher Educational Institutions) promotes climate mitigation, a zero-carbon society (Mor et al., 2023b), and visualising the concept of a green university. Hence, one must ensure that all societal segments benefit from economic growth, particularly marginalised groups and underserved communities (SDG 8.1). The successful attainment of Sustainable Development Goal Eight (SDG 8) in India necessitates a collaborative effort among the government, industry, civil society, and international stakeholders. Adapting these policy implications to India's distinctive context and assessing their effectiveness in consistently implementing necessary adjustments is essential.

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