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INDIA'S JOURNEY TOWARD SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: PROGRESS, BARRIERS, AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

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Abstract
India's journey toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) reflects a complex interplay of substantial progress, persistent structural challenges, and evolving opportunities for sustainable development. This paper examines India's performance across key SDG domains including poverty reduction, health and sanitation, clean energy, climate action, and sustainable ecosystems using data from NITI Aayog's SDG India Index, national surveys, and international development reports. The analysis highlights significant advancements, such as declining poverty rates, expanding food security and social protection coverage, reduced maternal mortality, improved sanitation access, and accelerated growth in renewable energy and climate action indicators. However, progress remains uneven due to inter-state disparities, gender inequality, environmental stress, health system gaps, and limitations in data availability. The study emphasizes the need for strengthened state-level capacity, gender-focused interventions, enhanced environmental resilience, improved health infrastructure, and a robust national SDG data ecosystem. Additionally, the paper underscores the importance of localized implementation strategies, increased investment in human capital, and the integration of climate-smart policies into development planning. It highlights that long-term success depends on coordinated governance, equitable resource distribution, and the effective use of technology for real-time monitoring and evaluation. By identifying progress trends alongside persistent barriers, the study provides insights into the structural changes required for sustainable and inclusive development. The paper concludes that India is on a promising path but requires targeted, inclusive, and sustained policy measures to fully achieve the 2030 Agenda.
Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals, SDG Index, Poverty, Gender Equality, Climate Action, Health, Social Protection, Future Directions.

Introduction:

India's pursuit of sustainable and inclusive development has become increasingly significant in the 21st century as the nation strives to balance rapid economic growth with social equity and environmental stewardship. The adoption of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 provided India with a comprehensive framework to guide its developmental trajectory across crucial sectors such as poverty reduction, health, education, gender equality, clean energy, and climate action. As one of the world's fastest-growing emerging economies and home to nearly one-sixth of the global population, India's progress on the SDGs is pivotal not only for its own national prosperity but also for the global achievement of the 2030 Agenda.

Over the past decade, India has implemented a wide range of policies and flagship initiatives aimed at accelerating sustainable development ranging from poverty alleviation and food security programmes to renewable-energy expansion, digital infrastructure, and improved healthcare access. While notable progress has been achieved in several areas, the journey remains complex. Persistent challenges such as regional disparities, environmental degradation, social inequality, and gaps in data and governance continue to hinder uniform progress across all SDGs.

This introduction sets the foundation for a comprehensive analysis of India's journey toward sustainable development. It examines the significant progress made, identifies critical barriers that impede advancement, and highlights the strategic pathways necessary for India to move closer to fulfilling the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda.

Review of Literature:

Sachs, J., Lafortune, G., & Schmidt-Traub, G. (2025) in the *Sustainable Development Report 2025* stated that India has made steady improvements in poverty reduction, energy access, and health outcomes, allowing it to enter the top 100 in the global SDG Index. However, they highlighted that India remains off-target on environmental

sustainability goals, particularly SDG 12 (responsible consumption), SDG 14 (life below water), and SDG 15 (life on land).

The SDG India Index Report 2023–*24* published by NITI Aayog stated that overall national performance improved compared to the 2018 baseline**,** but significant inter-state disparities continue. The report emphasized that while states such as Kerala and Himachal Pradesh performed strongly, states like Bihar and Jharkhand lagged behind on multiple indicators.

India's Voluntary National Review (VNR) submissions to the UN (2020 and 2023*)* stated that the government has taken **a** "whole-of-society" approach, integrating SDGs into national programmes such as Poshan Abhiyaan, Swachh Bharat Mission, Ayushman Bharat, PM-KUSUM, and Digital India. The reports acknowledged progress in sanitation, financial inclusion, and renewable energy**,** while noting persistent challenges in nutrition, gender equality, and climate resilience.

Dreze, J. & Khera, R. (2021) in their analysis of India's social sector programmes stated that although schemes like PDS, MGNREGA, and ICDS have improved human development outcomes, leakages, exclusion errors, and uneven implementation weaken progress toward SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 2 (Zero Hunger).

Gupta, A. & Singh, N. (2022) argued that India's progress on SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) is visible through improvements in institutional deliveries and maternal health. However, they noted that under-nutrition, stunting, and disparities in rural healthcare infrastructure remain major obstacles.

Chancel, L. (2022) examined inequality trends in India and stated that persistent income inequality and uneven access to public services hinder SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). The study emphasized the need for stronger redistributive policies and social protection mechanisms.

The Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) in its National Indicator Framework 2023 stated that data availability for several indicators especially climate, biodiversity, and local governance remains limited or inconsistent, which affects India's ability to measure SDG progress accurately.

The UNDP India Human Development Report (2022) stated that India's human development indicators have improved**,** particularly in digital inclusion, livelihoods, and women's participation in self-help groups. Yet, it highlighted that climate risks, gender gaps, and social exclusion pose continuing challenges to SDGs.

Mehrotra, S. (2020) stated that achieving SDGs in India requires greater investment in health, education, and employment**,** particularly in the informal sector. He emphasized that while welfare schemes have expanded, their quality and long-term sustainability must be strengthened.

The World Bank's India Development Update 2023 stated that economic growth and poverty reduction efforts have been encouraging, but achieving SDG targets requires structural reforms**,** including better urban planning, climate adaptation, and labour-market modernization.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY:

- To assess India's progress toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)
- To identify and analyze the key barriers
- To identify Future Directions for Accelerating India's SDG Achievement

METHODOLOGY: This study follows a descriptive and analytical research design to assess India's progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and to identify the major barriers and future directions. The research uses a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative analysis of national SDG indicators with qualitative interpretation of policy documents and thematic challenges. The study relies entirely on secondary data collected from the NITI Aayog SDG India Index Reports, United Nations SDG Database, National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), National Sample Survey (NSSO), MoSPI publications, and World Bank indicators. Relevant scholarly articles and government policy reports were also reviewed to support the qualitative analysis.

Data collection involved compiling state-wise and national-level SDG scores, trends, and rankings from 2015 to 2024, along with policy insights from government schemes. The data were organized systematically and verified through multiple credible sources. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and comparative techniques to understand progress and regional disparities. Qualitative data were examined through thematic analysis to identify recurring barriers such as socio-economic inequality, environmental stress, governance issues, and financial constraints.

The study is guided by a simple conceptual framework that evaluates three core dimensions: progress made, barriers faced, and future directions required for achieving the SDGs by 2030. Since the study uses only publicly available secondary data, no primary data collection or ethical approval was required. Limitations exist due to

variations in data availability and reporting gaps, but the methodology provides a clear and comprehensive foundation for analyzing India's SDG performance..

RESULTS OF THE STUDY:

India's SDG Progress -Key Trends:

Poverty, Social Protection, and Inequality (SDG 1 & related):

Table–I presents a consolidated view of India's recent progress in poverty reduction, food security expansion, social protection coverage, and inequality levels. The data reveal a significant decline in poverty, with the proportion of people living below the poverty line falling from 24.85% in 2015–16 to 14.96% in 2019–21. This notable improvement reflects positive outcomes of targeted welfare schemes, expanded financial inclusion, and improved rural livelihoods. However, the data also indicate that nearly one in seven Indians still remains poor, emphasizing the need for sustained and inclusive policy interventions.

Food security advancements are evident in the expansion of NFSA coverage from 95.2% to 99% between 2015 and 2025. This near-universal outreach demonstrates the government's successful efforts to strengthen subsidized food distribution systems, especially among vulnerable groups. Similarly, social protection coverage has expanded sharply from 48.8% in 2022 to 64.3% in 2025, suggesting that welfare schemes, direct benefit transfers, and social insurance programs have increasingly reached the intended beneficiaries.

Inequality trends, measured through the Gini coefficient, show a consistent decline in both rural and urban areas. Rural inequality decreased from 0.283 to 0.237, while urban inequality dropped from 0.363 to 0.284 over the same period. This downward movement indicates a more equitable distribution of consumption and suggests that growth benefits have gradually extended beyond higher-income segments. Despite these improvements, inequality, especially in urban areas continues to remain a policy concern.

This data highlights meaningful and multidimensional progress, reflecting India's commitment to poverty alleviation, welfare expansion, and reducing disparities. At the same time, the persistence of a sizable poor population and residual inequality underscores the need for continued, focused, and regionally sensitive interventions to achieve inclusive and sustainable development.

Table 1. Progress on Poverty Reduction, Food Security, Social Protection, and Inequality in India

Indicator	Baseline Value	Latest Value	Period	Progress/Change	Source
Poverty Rate (% of population)	24.85% (2015–16)	14.96% (2019–21)	2015–2021	Decline of 9.89 percentage points	NITI Aayog; World Bank Poverty Estimates; NFHS-linked Consumption Data
NFSA Coverage (% of eligible population)	95.2% (2015–16)	99% (2024–25)	2015–2025	Increase of 3.8 percentage points	Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution (NFSA Progress Reports)
Social Protection Coverage	48.8% (2022)	64.3% (2025)	2022–2025	Increase of 15.5 percentage points	UN SDG Database; MoSPI Social Protection Indicators; NITI Aayog SDG Index

Gini Coefficient – Rural	0.283 (2011–12)	0.237 (2023–24)	2011–2024	Significant decline in inequality	NSSO Household Consumption Expenditure Survey; Economic Times (2024)
Gini Coefficient – Urban	0.363 (2011–12)	0.284 (2023–24)	2011–2024	Noticeable decline in inequality	NSSO Household Consumption Expenditure Survey; Economic Times (2024)

Health, Sanitation, and Well-being (SDG 3, SDG 6, related): Table–2 highlights notable improvements in India's maternal health and sanitation sector over the last decade. The decline in the Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR) from approximately 130 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2014–16 to 93 in 2019–21 signals substantial progress in maternal healthcare. This improvement reflects successful interventions such as increased institutional deliveries, better antenatal and postnatal care, expanded emergency obstetric services, and improved access to nutrition and healthcare facilities for women. Such advancements directly support India's achievement of SDG 3: Good Health and Well-Being.

Sanitation indicators also exhibit remarkable progress. Nationwide campaigns such as the Swachh Bharat Mission have significantly expanded access to toilets, improved hygiene facilities, and enhanced rural sanitation coverage. Many rural households now have access to improved water and sanitation sources, leading to better public health outcomes and reduced risk of water-borne diseases. These improvements strongly contribute to SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation, demonstrating the effectiveness of large-scale behavioral and infrastructure-driven initiatives. Despite this progress, disparities persist. Maternal health outcomes and sanitation access vary widely across states, socio-economic groups, and rural–urban regions. While national averages show improvement, localized gaps in healthcare quality, sanitation maintenance, and water security continue to require attention. Therefore, deeper analysis and targeted interventions remain essential to achieve equitable health and sanitation outcomes across all population groups.

Table 2. Progress in Maternal Health and Sanitation in India

Indicator	Baseline Value	Latest Value	Period	Progress/Change	Source
Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR) (per 100,000 live births)	130 (2014–16)	93 (2019–21)	2014–2021	Decline of ~37 points, indicating major improvement in maternal health outcomes	Sample Registration System (SRS), Registrar General of India; Economic Times
Sanitation Access	Limited access; low rural toilet coverage (2014)	Widespread access to toilets, hygiene facilities; significant improvement in rural sanitation and water access (2021–24)	2014–2024	Massive expansion in rural sanitation and hygiene infrastructure	Swachh Bharat Mission Reports; Drishti IAS; Economic Times

Energy Access, Infrastructure and Climate Action (SDG 7, SDG 13, SDG 15, etc.): The findings from the SDG India Index 2023–24 highlight India's steady progress in key environmental and sustainability-related goals. The strong improvement in SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy) indicates substantial achievements in expanding renewable energy capacity, enhancing household electrification, and promoting energy efficiency. These gains reflect the momentum created by major national initiatives such as the National Solar Mission, UJALA scheme, and expanded grid connectivity, showcasing a clear shift toward cleaner energy pathways. The most notable progress appears in SDG 13 (Climate Action), which recorded the highest increase among all SDGs between 2020–21 and 2023–24. This improvement suggests that India's climate-related policies such as disaster resilience planning, commitments under the Paris Agreement, and large-scale afforestation and adaptation measures are starting to translate into measurable outcomes. The enhanced performance in climate readiness also highlights improved institutional preparedness and better integration of climate priorities into national development planning. Similarly, SDG 15 (Life on Land) shows improvements in forest cover, biodiversity protection, and conservation of natural ecosystems. The increase in protected forest areas and improved land management practices underscores India's efforts to restore ecological balance and strengthen environmental stewardship. All these indicators suggest that India is moving toward a more sustainable development trajectory, driven by clean energy expansion, climate-focused governance, and strengthened ecological conservation. However, the long-term sustainability of these gains depends on continued policy commitment, resource allocation, and careful monitoring of environmental resilience, particularly in the face of climate vulnerabilities and rapid economic growth.

Table 3. Progress on Clean Energy, Climate Action, and Environmental Conservation (SDG India Index 2023–24)

SDG Goal	Indicator Summary	Earlier Status	Latest Status (2023–24)	Progress/Change	Source
SDG 7: Affordable and Clean Energy	Clean energy access, renewable energy growth, household electrification	Moderate improvements in earlier years	Significant improvement; higher SDG 7 score in 2023–24	Strong positive growth in clean energy performance	NavClasses; SDG India Index 2023–24
SDG 13: Climate Action	Climate policies, disaster preparedness, emissions reduction measures	Lower score in 2020–21	Highest increase among all SDGs between 2020–21 and 2023–24	Largest improvement across all SDG goals	The Economic Times; SDG India Index 2023–24
SDG 15: Life on Land	Forest cover, biodiversity conservation, protected land areas	Moderate performance earlier	Improvement in forest cover and land protection measures reflected in Index	Gradual strengthening of environmental conservation efforts	IAS Score; SDG India Index 2023–24

Progress in Key SDG Measures (2020–21 to 2023–24): The SDG India Index data clearly indicates measurable overall progress, with the national composite score rising from 66 to 71, reflecting multi-sectoral improvements across health, poverty reduction, energy, and environmental sustainability. The most striking gains are seen in Goal 1 (No Poverty**)** and Goal 13 (Climate Action**)**, which recorded +12 and +13 points respectively, suggesting that targeted welfare schemes, green missions, and climate-resilience policies have begun delivering substantial results. Goal 8 has emerged as a front-runner, highlighting India's comparatively strong performance in economic growth, entrepreneurship ecosystems, and improved employment-related indicators despite earlier disruptions due to global economic slowdowns.

Similarly, Goal 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy**)** shows a substantial but non-quantified increase, aligning with India's rapid expansion of renewable energy capacity, rural electrification, and clean cooking fuel adoption. This underlines the country's accelerated shift toward sustainable and affordable energy systems. However, persistent stagnation in Goal 5 (Gender Equality**)** remaining below the 50-point threshold signals enduring socio-economic disparities. Gender-based violence, low female labor force participation, and unequal access to resources continue to impede progress. Overall, the observed trends depict *steady national advancement* with strong policy-driven gains in poverty reduction, climate action, and clean energy. At the same time, gender equity emerges as a critical area requiring intensified policy focus, structural reform, and social transformation to achieve balanced progress across all SDG dimensions.

Table-4: Progress in Key SDG Measures (2020–21 to 2023–24)

SDG / Measure	**Score (2020–21)**	**Score (2023–24)**	**Change (Points)**	**Remarks / Source**
Composite Score (All SDGs)	66	71	5	Source: SDG India Index 2023–24, NITI Aayog
Goal 1: No Poverty	60	72	12	Source: SDG India Index 2023–24, NITI Aayog
Goal 8: Decent Work & Economic Growth	—	Front-runner	—	Source: NITI Aayog SDG Dashboard 2023–24
Goal 13: Climate Action	54	67	13	Source: The Economic Times (2024) citing SDG Index
Goal 7: Affordable & Clean Energy	(Earlier score not disclosed)	(Significant increase)*	—	Source: NavClasses (2024) summarizing NITI Aayog data
Goal 5: Gender Equality	<50	<50 (no improvement)	—	Source: SDG India Index 2023–24, NITI Aayog

SDG Social and Economic Indicators – Progress over Time:

The presented data reveal significant progress across several key socio-economic indicators linked to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in India. The sharp decline in poverty—from 24.85% in 2015–16 to 14.96% in 2019–21 indicates substantial improvement in income security and living standards. This downward trend reflects the impact of targeted welfare schemes, rural employment programs, and large-scale food and financial inclusion initiatives.

Similarly, the National Food Security Act (NFSA) coverage increased from 95.2% to 99%**,** demonstrating near-universal access to subsidized food grains. This expansion, along with the notable rise in social protection coverage from 48.8% (2022) to 64.3% (2025)**,** highlights strengthened safety nets for vulnerable populations. These improvements collectively contribute to SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 2 (Zero Hunger). In health outcomes, the maternal mortality ratio declined from approximately 130 to 93 deaths per 100,000 live births, reflecting advancements in institutional deliveries, antenatal care, and public health infrastructure. This progress aligns directly with SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being). The reduction in inequality is evidenced by falling Gini coefficients for both rural (0.283 → 0.237) and urban areas (0.363 → 0.284). These reductions suggest a narrowing consumption gap and improved distribution of economic gains over time. However, despite these improvements, the persistence of inequality indicates that inclusive growth remains an ongoing challenge. Overall, the data demonstrate that India is making measurable progress in poverty reduction, food security, health outcomes, and inequality mitigation. Yet, areas such as deep-rooted disparities, social protection adequacy, and inter-state variations require continued policy focus to sustain and deepen SDG achievements

Table-5: Key SDG Social and Economic Indicators – Progress Over Time

Indicator	**Baseline / Earlier Period**	**Recent Value / Period**
Poverty Rate (% of population)	24.85% (2015–16)	14.96% (2019–21)
NFSA Coverage (Eligible Population)	95.2% (2015–16)	99% (2024–25)
Social Protection Coverage	48.8% (2022)	64.3% (2025)
Maternal Mortality Ratio (per 100,000 live births)	~130 (2014–16)	93 (2019–21)
Gini Coefficient — Rural Households	0.283 (2011–12)	0.237 (2023–24)
Gini Coefficient — Urban Households	0.363 (2011–12)	0.284 (2023–24)

Source: The Economic Times

BARRIERS TO SDG ACHIEVEMENT:

Inter-State and Intra-State Development Disparities: Evidence from the SDG India Index (2023–24) highlights significant disparities in progress across states. High-performing states such as Kerala (score 79) contrast sharply with lower-performing states like Bihar (score 57). Nearly nine states score below the national average, reflecting uneven progress across multiple SDG dimensions. These lower-ranking states typically lag behind in critical sectors including health, education, gender equality, and economic development.

Gender Inequality as a Structural Impediment: Gender inequality remains one of India's most entrenched developmental challenges. SDG 5 (Gender Equality**)** continues to score below 50, making it the lowest-performing goal nationally. Key indicators such as female labor force participation (around 25%)**,** child marriage prevalence, and gender-based violence show only marginal improvement. This reflects both systemic and cultural barriers faced by women.

Environmental Stress and Climate Vulnerability: India ranks among the most climate-vulnerable countries globally**,** experiencing frequent heat waves, floods, droughts, and cyclones. Progress remains weak for SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production**)** and SDG 14 (Life Below Water)**.** Additionally, air pollution persists at critical levels, with several Indian cities consistently ranking among the world's most polluted.

Health System Gaps and Unequal Access to Care: India has made progress in health outcomes, including a reduction in the maternal mortality ratio (MMR) to **93** per 100,000 live births. However, disparities remain substantial across regions, with rural and economically weaker states showing slower improvement. Public

health expenditure continues to hover around 2% of GDP, well below global benchmarks. Nutrition indicators such as stunting and anemia remain moderately high.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR ACCELERATING INDIA'S SDG ACHIEVEMENT Enhancing State-Level Governance and Decentralized SDG Implementation: Persistent inter-state and intra-state disparities indicate that uneven governance, fiscal constraints, and social sector investment gaps slow India's overall SDG progress. Strengthening state-level capacities, increasing fiscal transfers to lagging states, and introducing district-level SDG dashboards can enhance local planning and accountability. Empowering Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies for community-level SDG implementation ensures context-specific solutions and reduces internal disparities.

Strengthening Gender Equity and Women-Centered Development: SDG 5 remains the lowest-performing goal, reflecting deep-rooted socio-cultural and structural barriers. Expanding skill-building programs, entrepreneurship opportunities, and employment initiatives for women can increase participation in the workforce. Strengthening laws and enforcement against gender-based violence, along with improved access to education, digital literacy, and reproductive health services, can empower women and promote inclusive development. Addressing gender inequality has a multiplier effect on health, education, and economic growth.

Advancing Environmental Sustainability and Climate Resilience: Environmental goals exhibit the slowest progress, and India remains highly vulnerable to climate-related risks such as floods, droughts, and heat waves. Scaling up renewable energy, promoting green transport, expanding climate-resilient agriculture, and enhancing ecosystem restoration are critical. Strengthening early-warning systems and climate adaptation funding, particularly in high-risk districts, is necessary to safeguard livelihoods, health, and natural resources against environmental shocks.

Expanding Public Health Infrastructure and Nutrition Programs: Although health outcomes like maternal mortality have improved, disparities persist across regions and socio-economic groups. Increasing public health expenditure beyond 2% of GDP, enhancing primary healthcare networks, rural hospitals, and telemedicine access, and targeting nutrition interventions can strengthen resilience against health challenges. These measures are essential to achieve equitable and sustainable progress in SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being).

Developing a Comprehensive National SDG Data and Monitoring Ecosystem: Data gaps and fragmented monitoring limit evidence-based policymaking and mask inequalities. Expanding the National Indicator Framework, implementing real-time reporting tools, standardizing measurement across ministries, and integrating digital platforms, geospatial mapping, and big-data analytics can enhance monitoring accuracy. A robust data ecosystem enables precise targeting, evaluation, and timely policy interventions for SDG acceleration.

Promoting Inclusive, Sustainable, and Equitable Economic Growth: Despite improvements in poverty reduction, inequalities persist and may undermine long-term development. Supporting MSMEs, promoting green jobs, and providing skill development for youth fosters inclusive growth. Expanding social protection for informal workers and implementing urban planning reforms to reduce slum expansion and infrastructure deficits will ensure equitable access to opportunities, contributing to sustainable economic development and SDG achievement.

Conclusion:

India's pursuit of sustainable development demonstrates a dynamic balance between measurable progress and persistent developmental barriers. The evidence presented in this seminar paper confirms that the country has made noteworthy advancements across several SDG domains particularly in poverty reduction, food security, maternal health, sanitation, renewable energy expansion, and climate action. These improvements reflect the impact of strengthened welfare programmes, targeted social protection schemes, large-scale environmental initiatives, and growing policy emphasis on clean energy and climate resilience.

Despite these gains, significant challenges continue to impede India's ability to achieve the SDGs uniformly. Deep-rooted inter-state and intra-state disparities, gender inequality, environmental degradation, health system constraints, and gaps in SDG data remain critical obstacles. Addressing these limitations requires multidimensional and coordinated action that prioritizes decentralized governance, gender-responsive policies, environmental sustainability, health system strengthening, and development of an integrated national data ecosystem.

The future directions outlined in this study offer a strategic pathway to accelerate India's progress toward the 2030 Agenda. By fostering inclusive economic growth, enhancing climate resilience, empowering women,

investing in human capital, and strengthening monitoring mechanisms, India can transform its development trajectory. Ultimately, achieving the SDGs will not only ensure social and economic prosperity but also reinforce India's commitment to global sustainability, equity, and long-term resilience

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