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UN Sustainable Development Goals and Human Rights: Evaluating Progress Toward Inclusive Development

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Abstract-- This article examines the evolving relationship between the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and international human rights, highlighting their convergence into a unified framework for promoting human dignity, equality, social justice, and environmental sustainability. It traces the historical development of both concepts from the emergence of the international human rights regime following the Second World War to the evolution of sustainable development through major global conferences and agreements, culminating in the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The article demonstrates that the SDGs are firmly grounded in human rights principles, including universality, participation, accountability, equality, non-discrimination, and the commitment to leave no one behind. It further explains how specific SDGs operationalize internationally recognized rights relating to health, education, food, water, decent work, gender equality, justice, and an adequate standard of living. The article also provides a retrospective assessment of developments since 2025, identifying achievements in expanding social protection, strengthening universal health coverage, promoting digital inclusion, advancing women's rights, recognizing environmental rights, improving democratic governance, and encouraging youth participation in sustainable development. At the same time, it critically examines persistent challenges such as weak legal accountability, climate change, armed conflict, governance deficiencies, inadequate data systems, tensions between economic growth and environmental sustainability, and emerging digital rights concerns. The study concludes that although the SDGs have significantly strengthened the integration of human rights into global development policy, their successful implementation requires stronger accountability, effective institutions, sustained international cooperation, and a comprehensive human rights-based approach. Sustainable development and human rights are therefore presented as mutually reinforcing foundations for achieving inclusive, equitable, and sustainable global development.

Keywords -- environmental sustainability, digital inclusion, sustainable development, digital infrastructure, climate change, artificial intelligence

I. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between human rights and sustainable development has become one of the defining features of contemporary international governance.

Although these two concepts originated as separate international agendas, they have gradually evolved into complementary and mutually reinforcing frameworks aimed at promoting human dignity, social justice, equality, and environmental sustainability¹. Human rights emerged after the Second World War as a universal legal and moral framework designed to protect the inherent dignity and freedoms of all individuals through instruments such as the United Nations Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), and the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Sustainable development, on the other hand, evolved through growing international concern over environmental degradation, economic inequality, and the limitations of conventional growth-oriented development models. The concept gained global recognition through the Stockholm Conference (1972), the Brundtland Report Our Common Future (1987), and the Rio Earth Summit (1992), all of which emphasized balancing economic development, social inclusion, and environmental protection.

The adoption of the United Nations 2030 Agenda² for Sustainable Development in 2015 marked a significant milestone in integrating these two agendas. Unlike the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) explicitly recognize that sustainable development cannot be achieved without respecting, protecting, and fulfilling human rights. The 17 SDGs are grounded in fundamental human rights principles such as universality, equality, participation, accountability, non-discrimination, and the commitment to "leave no one behind." Consequently, the SDGs serve not only as development objectives but also as practical mechanisms for advancing internationally recognized human rights through measurable targets and indicators. Goals addressing poverty, education, health, gender equality, clean water, decent work, reduced inequalities, climate action, and peaceful institutions directly correspond to internationally recognized rights and demonstrate the indivisibility and interdependence of human rights and sustainable development.

This article, critically examines the historical evolution and convergence of human rights and sustainable development, analyses the human rights foundations of the SDGs, evaluates major achievements since 2025, and explores the continuing challenges confronting their implementation. Particular attention is given to progress in social protection, healthcare, digital inclusion, gender equality, environmental rights, democratic governance, and youth participation, alongside persistent concerns relating to climate change, armed conflict, weak accountability, governance deficits, economic inequality, and emerging digital rights issues.

By providing a retrospective assessment of the relationship between the SDGs and human rights, the article highlights both the achievements and limitations of the current global development framework. It argues that sustainable development and human rights should not be viewed as separate policy objectives but as mutually reinforcing pillars of inclusive and equitable development. The study ultimately emphasizes that strengthening human rights-based approaches, democratic governance, institutional accountability, and international cooperation remain essential for achieving the vision of the 2030 Agenda and ensuring that development benefits all people without discrimination.

II. CONVERGENCE OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The modern human rights framework emerged in response to the atrocities committed during the Second World War. The widespread violations of human dignity prompted the international community to establish universal norms aimed at preventing future abuses. The adoption of the United Nations Charter in 1945 marked the first global commitment to promoting human rights, affirming the determination of member states to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights and the dignity and worth of every human person (United Nations, 1945). The most significant milestone in the evolution of international human rights was the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) by the United Nations General Assembly on 10 December 1948. Although not legally binding, the UDHR established a comprehensive catalogue of civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights that belong to all individuals irrespective of nationality, race, religion, or gender (United Nations General Assembly [UNGA], 1948). The Declaration introduced the principle of universality, emphasizing that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.

Following the UDHR, the international human rights regime expanded through legally binding treaties, particularly the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), both adopted in 1966 and entering into force in 1976. Together with the UDHR, these instruments constitute the International Bill of Human Rights (OHCHR, 2023).

The concept of sustainable development has evolved alongside growing awareness of environmental degradation and the limitations of traditional development models. Following the Second World War, development policies largely emphasized rapid industrialization and economic growth as indicators of national progress. However, by the 1960s and 1970s, environmental degradation, resource depletion, and widening social inequalities highlighted the shortcomings of purely growth-oriented development strategies (Sachs, 2015). A major turning point occurred with the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, held in Stockholm in 1972. The Stockholm Declaration³ recognized that environmental protection and human well-being are interconnected and emphasized the responsibility of governments to safeguard natural resources for present and future generations (United Nations, 1972). This conference laid the foundation for integrating environmental concerns into development policies. The term "sustainable development" gained international prominence through the World Commission on Environment and Development, chaired by Gro Harlem Brundtland. The Commission's landmark report, *Our Common Future* (1987), defined sustainable development as: "Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development [WCED], 1987, p. 43).

This definition emphasized intergenerational equity and the need to balance economic development with environmental protection and social justice. The Brundtland Report⁴ transformed sustainable development from an environmental concern into a comprehensive development paradigm. The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), commonly known as the Earth Summit, held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, further institutionalized sustainable development. The conference produced several landmark documents, including the Rio Declaration⁵, Agenda 21, the Convention on Biological Diversity, and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) (United Nations, 1992).

These instruments promoted integrated approaches to environmental management, poverty reduction, and sustainable economic growth. Subsequent international conferences - including the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg, 2002) and the Rio+20 Conference (2012)—expanded the scope of sustainable development by emphasizing inclusive economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability (United Nations, 2012). These conferences also recognized that development strategies should be grounded in human rights principles, particularly equality, participation, accountability, and non-discrimination.

Although human rights and sustainable development initially developed as separate international agendas, they gradually converged through shared commitments to human dignity, equality, and social justice. The 1986 United Nations Declaration on the Right to Development marked a critical milestone in linking development with human rights. It recognized development as an inalienable human right and affirmed that every individual is entitled to participate in, contribute to, and benefit from economic, social, cultural, and political development (UNGA, 1986). The Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action (1993) further strengthened this relationship by reaffirming that democracy, development, and respect for human rights are mutually reinforcing and interdependent (United Nations, 1993). This marked a significant shift from viewing development merely as economic growth to recognizing it as a process centered on the realization of human rights.

The adoption of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000 represented another important stage in integrating development with human welfare. Although the MDGs significantly contributed to reducing poverty, improving education, and enhancing healthcare, they were criticized for lacking an explicit human rights framework. The goals focused primarily on measurable development outcomes rather than legal obligations, participation, accountability, and equality (Alston, 2005). Recognizing these limitations, the international community adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in September 2015. The Agenda explicitly affirms that the SDGs are grounded in international human rights law and are guided by the principles of universality, equality, participation, accountability, and the commitment to "leave no one behind" (UN, 2015). Unlike the MDGs, the SDGs apply universally to all countries and integrate economic, social, environmental, and governance dimensions of development. Several SDGs directly correspond with internationally recognized human rights. For example, SDG 1 (No Poverty) reflects the right to an adequate standard of living; SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) supports the right to health;

SDG 4 (Quality Education) advances the right to education; SDG 5 (Gender Equality) reinforces women's human rights; SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation) promotes the right to safe drinking water; SDG 8 (Decent Work) supports labour rights; SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) advances equality and non-discrimination; and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) strengthens access to justice, accountability, and the rule of law (OHCHR, 2023).

Today, sustainable development is widely understood as a rights-based process that seeks not only economic prosperity but also social justice, environmental sustainability, democratic governance, and the protection of human dignity. International organizations increasingly adopt Human Rights-Based Approaches (HRBA) to development, ensuring that development policies empower rights holders while strengthening the accountability of governments as duty bearers (UNDP, 2006).

III. HUMAN RIGHTS FOUNDATIONS OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGS)

The adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development by the United Nations General Assembly in September 2015 marked a transformative moment in global development policy. Unlike its predecessor, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are firmly anchored in the principles and norms of international human rights law. The 2030 Agenda explicitly recognizes that sustainable development cannot be achieved without ensuring respect for human dignity, equality, justice, participation, accountability, and the rule of law (United Nations [UN], 2015). Consequently, the SDGs are not merely development targets but also represent a comprehensive framework for realizing internationally recognized human rights.

Universality and Equality

One of the most significant human rights principles embedded within the SDGs is universality. Human rights apply equally to every individual irrespective of nationality, race, religion, gender, disability, or socioeconomic status. Similarly, the SDGs are universal, applying to all countries - developed and developing alike - thereby moving beyond the traditional donor-recipient framework that characterized earlier development agendas (Sachs, 2015). Closely linked to universality is the principle of equality and non-discrimination, which constitutes one of the fundamental pillars of international human rights law. The 2030 Agenda emphasizes the commitment to "leave no one behind", ensuring that development benefits all members of society, especially marginalized and vulnerable groups (UN, 2015).

This principle reflects Articles 1 and 2 of the UDHR, which prohibit discrimination and affirm equal rights for all persons. Several SDGs directly address equality:

SDG 5 (Gender Equality) promotes women's rights and gender justice.

SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) addresses inequalities within and among countries.

SDG 4 (Quality Education) ensures inclusive and equitable education.

SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) promotes equal employment opportunities and labour rights.

These goals reinforce international human rights treaties such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which require states to eliminate discrimination in law and practice (OHCHR, 2023).

Participation and Accountability

Human rights emphasize that individuals are not merely beneficiaries of development but active participants in decisions affecting their lives. Participation is recognized in numerous international instruments, including Article 21 of the UDHR, which guarantees the right to participate in public affairs (UNGA, 1948). The SDGs incorporate participation by encouraging inclusive decision-making, stakeholder engagement, and partnerships among governments, civil society, indigenous communities, the private sector, and international organizations. SDG 16, which promotes peaceful, just, and inclusive societies, explicitly calls for responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making at all levels (UN, 2015).

Equally important is the principle of accountability. Human rights law imposes legal obligations on states to respect, protect, and fulfil human rights. Governments are therefore accountable for implementing policies that advance sustainable development while respecting internationally recognized rights. Accountability mechanisms include independent courts, national human rights institutions, treaty-monitoring bodies, parliamentary oversight, and civil society participation (OHCHR, 2023). Unlike the MDGs, which primarily measured development outcomes, the SDGs emphasize transparent governance, access to information, monitoring, and regular reporting. These mechanisms strengthen public accountability and ensure that governments remain responsible for achieving sustainable development objectives.

Indivisibility and Interdependence of Rights

International human rights law recognizes that all human rights are universal, indivisible, interdependent, and interrelated (United Nations, 1993). Civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights are mutually reinforcing and cannot be fully realized in isolation. The SDGs reflect this principle through their integrated and interconnected structure. Progress in one goal often depends upon achievements in others. For example:

Eliminating poverty (SDG 1) contributes to improved health (SDG 3) and educational outcomes (SDG 4).

Gender equality (SDG 5) enhances economic growth (SDG 8) and reduces inequalities (SDG 10).

Clean water and sanitation (SDG 6) improve public health and reduce poverty.

Climate action (SDG 13) protects livelihoods, food security, housing, and health.

This interconnectedness mirrors the human rights approach, which recognizes that denying one right frequently undermines the enjoyment of others. For instance, inadequate education limits employment opportunities, while poverty restricts access to healthcare and justice (Sen, 1999).

Specific SDGs and Their Human Rights Foundations

Almost every SDG reflects one or more internationally recognized human rights.

SDG 1 (No Poverty) corresponds to the right to an adequate standard of living and social security recognized under Article 25 of the UDHR and Article 11 of the ICESCR.

SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) advances the right to adequate food and freedom from hunger.

SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) reflects the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health established under Article 12 of the ICESCR.

SDG 4 (Quality Education) supports the right to education recognized in Article 26 of the UDHR and Articles 13–14 of the ICESCR.

SDG 5 (Gender Equality) reinforces international commitments under CEDAW and promotes equal rights for women and girls.

SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation) reflects the internationally recognized human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation.



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SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) supports labour rights recognized by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the ICESCR.

SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) strengthens equality and non-discrimination principles central to international human rights law.

SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) promotes access to justice, the rule of law, accountable institutions, and protection of fundamental freedoms.

Consequently, the SDGs operationalize internationally recognized human rights through measurable development targets and indicators (OHCHR, 2023). The Sustainable Development Goals are deeply rooted in international human rights law and collectively provide a practical framework for realizing universal human rights. Each SDG corresponds with one or more internationally recognized rights, transforming legal obligations into measurable development targets. From poverty eradication and education to climate action, gender equality, decent work, and access to justice, the SDGs operationalize the principles of dignity, equality, participation, accountability, and non-discrimination. Their interdependent nature demonstrates that sustainable development and human rights are mutually reinforcing rather than separate agendas. A human rights-based approach to implementing the SDGs therefore strengthens inclusive governance, social justice, environmental sustainability, and equitable development while ensuring that no individual or community is left behind.

IV. SDGs AND HUMAN RIGHTS: ACHIEVEMENTS SINCE 2025

The year 2025 marked a significant milestone in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, leaving only five years to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It also prompted renewed global reflection on whether the SDGs were fulfilling their dual purpose of promoting sustainable development and advancing human rights. Since 2025, governments, United Nations (UN) agencies, regional organizations, civil society organizations, and the private sector have intensified efforts to accelerate SDG implementation through rights-based policies emphasizing equality, participation, accountability, and social inclusion. At the same time, international assessments have acknowledged that although notable progress has been achieved in several areas, global advancement remains uneven due to persistent challenges such as armed conflicts, climate change, economic instability, and declining development assistance.

Expansion of Social Protection and Poverty Reduction

Since 2025, many countries have continued strengthening social protection programmes to protect vulnerable populations against economic shocks, inflation, climate-related disasters, and food insecurity. Governments have expanded conditional cash transfers, universal pension schemes, unemployment assistance, disability benefits, and child welfare programmes. These initiatives directly contribute to realizing the right to an adequate standard of living recognized in Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) (United Nations General Assembly [UNGA], 1948; United Nations, 1966). International organizations have also emphasized inclusive economic recovery by promoting decent employment, financial inclusion, and equitable access to public services. Although global poverty reduction has slowed because of multiple crises, strengthened social protection systems represent a significant achievement in integrating human rights into sustainable development policies.

Advances in Health and Universal Health Coverage

Health has remained one of the strongest areas linking human rights and sustainable development after 2025. Countries have continued investing in Universal Health Coverage (UHC), digital healthcare services, disease surveillance systems, pandemic preparedness, maternal healthcare, and mental health programmes. Lessons learned from the COVID-19⁶ pandemic encouraged governments to improve health system resilience and strengthen international cooperation in vaccine production, emergency response, and public health research. Greater attention has also been given to equitable healthcare access for women, children, older persons, refugees, and persons with disabilities. These initiatives reinforce the right to the highest attainable standard of health under Article 12 of the ICESCR, demonstrating that healthcare remains central to both human rights protection and sustainable development.

Digital Inclusion and Human Rights

One of the most notable developments since 2025 has been the increasing emphasis on digital rights within sustainable development. Governments and international organizations have expanded investments in digital infrastructure, broadband connectivity, digital education, electronic governance, and digital financial services. Digital technologies have improved access to education, healthcare, employment opportunities, judicial services, and public information, thereby strengthening several SDGs simultaneously.



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At the same time, policymakers have increasingly recognized challenges relating to data privacy, artificial intelligence (AI), algorithmic discrimination, and cybersecurity. Emerging international initiatives on responsible AI increasingly frame digital governance within a human rights perspective, emphasizing transparency, accountability, and protection from discrimination. Digital inclusion has therefore become an important dimension of both SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions).

Progress in Gender Equality and Women's Human Rights

Following 2025, governments have continued strengthening legislative and institutional measures promoting women's rights. Increased attention has been given to eliminating gender-based violence, promoting equal pay, expanding women's political participation, improving maternal healthcare, and increasing women's participation in science, technology, and leadership positions. Several countries have adopted gender-responsive budgeting and strengthened institutional mechanisms for monitoring gender equality under SDG 5. International organizations have also increased efforts to bridge the digital gender divide and improve women's economic empowerment. Despite these achievements, recent UN assessments caution that progress remains uneven because conflict, discrimination, and reduced development financing continue to undermine women's rights in many regions.

Recognition of Environmental Rights and Climate Justice

Since 2025, environmental protection has become increasingly recognized as an essential component of human rights. Building upon the 2022 United Nations General Assembly resolution recognizing the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment, countries have expanded investments in renewable energy, biodiversity conservation, climate adaptation, sustainable agriculture, and disaster resilience. Climate policies increasingly incorporate concepts of climate justice, recognizing that vulnerable populations - including indigenous peoples, coastal communities, women, and children - experience disproportionate impacts from climate change. Consequently, climate adaptation policies increasingly integrate human rights principles such as participation, equality, intergenerational justice, and accountability. Renewable energy investments, green infrastructure, and sustainable urban development also contribute simultaneously to SDGs relating to health, clean energy, sustainable cities, and environmental protection.

Strengthening Democratic Governance and Accountability

Progress since 2025 has also been evident in strengthening democratic institutions and accountability mechanisms. Many governments have expanded access to public information, digital governance platforms, anti-corruption initiatives, judicial reforms, and citizen participation in policymaking. National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) increasingly participate in monitoring SDG implementation, ensuring that development policies comply with international human rights obligations. Greater integration between SDG reporting and human rights reporting mechanisms has enhanced institutional accountability and transparency. International cooperation has likewise encouraged improvements in public administration, access to justice, and evidence-based policymaking, reinforcing the implementation of SDG 16.

Youth Participation and Inclusive Development

Another significant achievement since 2025 has been the increasing recognition of youth as essential partners in sustainable development. Governments and international organizations have expanded opportunities for youth participation in climate governance, entrepreneurship, innovation, education, and digital transformation. The emphasis on future generations within recent UN initiatives has reinforced intergenerational equity as a central component of sustainable development. Policies promoting youth employment, digital skills, leadership training, and civic participation contribute simultaneously to human rights realization and SDG implementation.

V. CHALLENGES TO SDGS AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Despite their transformative vision, the SDGs have been subject to significant scholarly, legal, and policy critiques. While the SDGs have strengthened global cooperation and provided a comprehensive framework for development, implementation has revealed substantial challenges related to accountability, financing, inequality, governance, climate change, conflict, and the protection of vulnerable populations. Human rights scholars also argue that although the SDGs incorporate human rights principles, they remain largely political commitments rather than legally enforceable obligations (Alston, 2020). Understanding these challenges is essential for evaluating the effectiveness of the SDGs in advancing universal human rights.

Weak Legal Accountability

One of the most frequently cited criticisms of the SDGs is the absence of legally binding obligations.

Unlike international human rights treaties such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the SDGs do not create enforceable legal duties for states. Instead, they rely primarily on voluntary national commitments, international cooperation, and periodic reporting through the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) presented at the United Nations High-level Political Forum (United Nations, 2015). This voluntary approach has encouraged broad international participation but has also resulted in uneven implementation. Governments may prioritize politically attractive goals while neglecting more challenging commitments, particularly those affecting marginalized communities. Moreover, there are limited international mechanisms to hold states accountable for failing to achieve SDG targets or for adopting policies inconsistent with human rights standards (Alston, 2005). Human rights law, by contrast, establishes legally binding obligations and provides mechanisms for judicial review, treaty monitoring, and international accountability. Consequently, scholars argue that integrating stronger human rights accountability mechanisms into SDG implementation would improve transparency and policy effectiveness.

Climate Change and Environmental Challenges

Climate change has emerged as one of the most serious threats to achieving sustainable development and protecting human rights. Rising global temperatures, biodiversity loss, extreme weather events, sea-level rise, and environmental degradation threaten rights relating to life, health, food, water, housing, and development (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2023)). The impacts of climate change disproportionately affect vulnerable populations, including small island states, indigenous communities, rural populations, women, and children. Food insecurity, water scarcity, forced displacement, and natural disasters increasingly undermine progress across multiple SDGs. Although SDG 13 (Climate Action) promotes climate mitigation and adaptation, critics argue that global climate commitments remain insufficient to meet international targets established under the Paris Agreement⁷. Continued dependence on fossil fuels and inadequate climate financing have slowed progress toward environmental sustainability while increasing human rights vulnerabilities (IPCC, 2023).

Conflict, Political Instability, and Humanitarian Crises

Armed conflicts and political instability remain major obstacles to sustainable development. Ongoing conflicts in several regions have caused widespread displacement, destruction of infrastructure, food insecurity, and violations of international human rights and humanitarian law.

Conflict disrupts education systems, healthcare services, employment opportunities, democratic governance, and access to justice, thereby affecting progress across numerous SDGs simultaneously. Refugees and internally displaced persons often experience severe human rights violations, including restricted access to healthcare, education, housing, and legal protection. The United Nations has repeatedly emphasized that achieving SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) is essential for realizing all other SDGs because sustainable development cannot occur in the absence of peace, security, and effective governance (United Nations, 2023).

Governance and Institutional Weaknesses

Effective implementation of the SDGs depends upon transparent, accountable, and efficient public institutions. However, weak governance remains a persistent challenge in many countries. Corruption, political instability, bureaucratic inefficiency, limited institutional capacity, and inadequate policy coordination reduce the effectiveness of development programmes. Weak governance also affects the protection of human rights by limiting access to justice, reducing public participation, and weakening oversight institutions. In some contexts, restrictions on civil society organizations, independent media, and human rights defenders further undermine accountability. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) emphasizes that strengthening democratic institutions, judicial independence, and public participation is essential for ensuring rights-based implementation of the SDGs (OHCHR, 2023).

Data Gaps and Monitoring Challenges

Monitoring progress toward the SDGs requires reliable, timely, and disaggregated data. However, many countries continue to experience significant limitations in statistical capacity, digital infrastructure, and data collection systems. Lack of high-quality data makes it difficult to assess whether marginalized groups are benefiting equally from development programmes. Without disaggregated information based on gender, disability, ethnicity, age, migration status, or geographic location, governments cannot effectively identify inequalities or design targeted interventions. From a human rights perspective, inadequate data also weakens accountability because violations affecting vulnerable populations may remain invisible within national development statistics.

Balancing Economic Growth and Human Rights

Another important critique concerns the tension between economic growth and human rights.



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While SDG 8 promotes sustained economic growth, employment, and industrialization, some scholars argue that excessive emphasis on growth may conflict with environmental sustainability and social justice (Hickel, 2019). Large-scale infrastructure projects, mining activities, urban expansion, and industrial development have occasionally resulted in forced displacement, environmental degradation, and violations of indigenous peoples' land rights. These developments illustrate the need to balance economic objectives with environmental protection, community participation, and respect for internationally recognized human rights. A rights-based approach therefore requires that development projects undergo environmental and human rights impact assessments before implementation.

Digital Inequality and Emerging Human Rights Concerns

Digital transformation has accelerated SDG implementation by improving access to education, healthcare, financial services, and government information. Nevertheless, digital technologies have also created new human rights challenges. Unequal internet access, digital illiteracy, algorithmic discrimination, artificial intelligence (AI), surveillance technologies, misinformation, and data privacy concerns increasingly affect equality and participation. Many low-income countries continue to face significant digital divides, limiting their ability to benefit from technological innovation. These emerging challenges demonstrate that sustainable development must increasingly incorporate digital rights, cybersecurity, and ethical governance of artificial intelligence.

VI. CONCLUSION

The evolution of international human rights and sustainable development reflects one of the most significant transformations in global governance since the establishment of the United Nations. Initially conceived as distinct international agendas, human rights and sustainable development have progressively converged into a comprehensive framework centred on human dignity, equality, justice, participation, and environmental sustainability. This convergence recognizes that development cannot be measured solely through economic growth or material prosperity but must also be evaluated by its capacity to enhance the freedoms, rights, and well-being of individuals and communities. The adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development marked the culmination of decades of normative development by explicitly embedding internationally recognized human rights principles within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

In doing so, the United Nations reaffirmed that sustainable development is fundamentally a people-centred and rights-based process aimed at ensuring that no one is left behind.

The analysis presented in this article demonstrates that the SDGs operationalize human rights by translating universal legal and ethical principles into measurable development objectives. Goals relating to poverty eradication, health, education, gender equality, clean water, decent work, reduced inequalities, climate action, and peaceful institutions collectively advance internationally recognized human rights while acknowledging the interconnected nature of economic, social, environmental, civil, and political rights. This integrated framework moves beyond fragmented approaches to development and recognizes that progress in one dimension reinforces progress across many others. By incorporating principles of universality, accountability, participation, non-discrimination, and equality, the SDGs provide governments with a practical framework for implementing their existing human rights obligations through coherent public policies and inclusive governance.

The retrospective assessment since 2025 indicates that meaningful progress has been achieved in several areas despite increasingly complex global challenges. Many governments have expanded social protection systems, strengthened universal health coverage, promoted digital inclusion, improved women's participation and gender-responsive governance, advanced environmental protection, and enhanced institutional accountability. These developments demonstrate growing recognition that sustainable development policies are most effective when grounded in human rights principles. The increased participation of civil society, youth, national human rights institutions, and international organizations has further strengthened democratic governance and public accountability, illustrating the practical value of rights-based approaches to development. Although progress remains uneven across regions, these achievements confirm that integrating human rights into sustainable development contributes to more inclusive, equitable, and resilient societies.

Nevertheless, the article also reveals that the international community remains far from fully realizing the ambitions of the 2030 Agenda. Climate change, biodiversity loss, armed conflict, political instability, widening inequalities, weak governance, inadequate financing, and persistent poverty continue to undermine both sustainable development and human rights. Furthermore, the voluntary nature of the SDGs limits their effectiveness when compared with legally binding international human rights treaties.



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While governments regularly report progress through Voluntary National Reviews, the absence of enforceable accountability mechanisms allows inconsistent implementation and insufficient protection of vulnerable populations. Emerging issues such as artificial intelligence, digital surveillance, cybersecurity, and digital exclusion further demonstrate that sustainable development must continually evolve to address new human rights challenges arising from technological transformation. These realities reinforce the need to strengthen institutional capacity, judicial independence, transparent governance, reliable data systems, and meaningful public participation at every level of policymaking.

Looking beyond 2030, the future of sustainable development will depend not only upon achieving specific development indicators but also upon preserving the normative foundations of international human rights. Governments must ensure that economic growth does not come at the expense of environmental sustainability, indigenous peoples' rights, labour protections, gender equality, or democratic freedoms. International cooperation remains indispensable for addressing transnational challenges such as climate change, migration, pandemics, food insecurity, and digital governance, all of which require coordinated action grounded in shared human rights values. The continued integration of human rights institutions into SDG implementation, monitoring, and evaluation can significantly enhance transparency, accountability, and public trust while ensuring that development benefits reach marginalized and disadvantaged populations.

The article ultimately reinforces the understanding that sustainable development and human rights are not competing objectives but mutually reinforcing pillars of global progress. Human rights provide the normative and legal foundation for sustainable development, while sustainable development creates the social, economic, environmental, and institutional conditions necessary for the realization of those rights. Their relationship is therefore reciprocal and inseparable. The principle of "leaving no one behind" embodies this integrated vision by emphasizing inclusion, equality, and justice as the defining characteristics of development.

In conclusion, the Sustainable Development Goals represent one of the most ambitious global efforts to align development policy with universal human rights principles. Their success, however, depends not merely upon achieving numerical targets but upon ensuring that development processes remain inclusive, participatory, transparent, and accountable.

As the international community approaches the final years of the 2030 Agenda, renewed political commitment, stronger international cooperation, enhanced legal and institutional accountability, and sustained investment in human rights-based governance will be essential for translating the aspirations of the SDGs into lasting improvements in human dignity, social justice, environmental sustainability, and peace. The enduring legacy of the SDGs will ultimately be measured not only by development outcomes but by their contribution to building a more equitable, inclusive, and rights-respecting world for present and future generations.

Notes

1. Environmental sustainability is the practice of interacting with the planet responsibly to avoid depleting natural resources and compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. It requires balancing human economic and social progress with the preservation of vital ecosystems, clean air, and fresh water. By adopting renewable energy sources, reducing waste, and protecting biodiversity, individuals and societies can help reverse climate change and ensure a healthy, living planet for the future.
2. The UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is a comprehensive, global blueprint adopted by all 193 United Nations Member States in 2015 to promote peace, prosperity, and planetary health. At its core are the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which serve as an urgent call to action for both developed and developing nations to work in a global partnership. The agenda addresses interconnected challenges - such as eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, expanding access to clean water and quality education, and combating climate change - under the guiding principle to "leave no one behind". However, tracking reports from the UN DESA Statistics Division show that while progress has been made in areas like digital connectivity and renewable energy, geopolitical conflicts and climate disruptions mean the majority of targets require urgent acceleration to be met.
3. The Stockholm Declaration is a landmark document adopted at the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, widely recognized as the birth of modern global environmental governance. Consisting of 26 distinct principles, it marks the first time world leaders officially linked economic growth with environmental protection, human dignity, and the universal right to a healthy lifestyle.

The declaration famously established the foundational concept of intergenerational equity - the responsibility of the present generation to safeguard natural ecosystems for the future - and mandated that sovereign nations must ensure their activities do not cause environmental damage across borders. Beyond shaping international environmental law, the conference's most concrete institutional outcome was the creation of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to coordinate global ecological action.

4. The Brundtland Report, officially titled *Our Common Future*, is a seminal document published in 1987 by the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development, chaired by former Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland. The report is globally historic for officially defining and popularizing the concept of sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." It broke new ground by shifting the global conversation away from seeing environmental protection and economic growth as opposing forces, arguing instead that they are deeply interconnected and that long-term economic stability relies on protecting natural ecosystems. Ultimately, the report's warnings about global warming, deforestation, and resource depletion laid the direct political and conceptual foundation for the 1992 Rio Earth Summit and all modern international climate agreements.
5. The Rio Declaration on Environment and Development is a pivotal document produced at the 1992 United Nations "Earth Summit" in Rio de Janeiro, consisting of 27 principles designed to guide international sustainable development. It fundamentally advanced global environmental law by introducing and popularizing core concepts like the precautionary approach, which states that a lack of full scientific certainty should not delay measures to prevent environmental degradation, and the polluter pays principle, which dictates that those who cause environmental damage should bear the costs of cleanup. Furthermore, it established the concept of Common but Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR), recognizing that while all nations must protect the planet, developed countries carry a greater historical and financial burden to address climate issues due to their higher industrial output.

6. Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is a highly contagious respiratory illness caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, which triggered a historic global pandemic after its initial outbreak in late 2019. The virus primarily transmits through airborne respiratory particles in shared indoor spaces, causing symptoms that range from mild fever, cough, and fatigue to severe respiratory failure. While the World Health Organization (WHO) officially declared an end to the global health emergency phase in May 2023, the virus has transitioned into an endemic phase and continues to circulate globally. Public health networks like the WHO Coronavirus Network (CoViNet) actively monitor its evolution, tracking emerging sub-lineages within the Omicron family - such as the JN.1 variant and the heavily mutated BA.3.2 (Cicada) variant. Today, long-term management relies on updated booster vaccinations, antiviral treatments like Paxlovid, and ongoing research into the persistent debilitating condition known as Long COVID.
7. The Paris Agreement is a legally binding international treaty on climate change adopted by 195 parties at the UN Climate Change Conference (COP21) in 2015. Its overarching goal is to limit global warming to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels, while actively pursuing efforts to restrict the increase to 1.5°C to avoid severe climate disruptions. Unlike previous climate pacts, the Paris Agreement operates on a bottom-up framework where every participating nation must formulate and update its own climate action plan, known as Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), every five years. It also outlines provisions for climate finance, requiring wealthier nations to provide financial and technical assistance to developing economies to build green infrastructure.

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