



Strengthening the Sustainable Development Goals through integration with human rights

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Abstract

This paper discusses the relationship between the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the long-standing human rights system of the United Nations. Thematically, these two modes of global governance strongly overlap. Several SDGs are in line with human rights obligations. At the same time, the SDGs and human rights are based on divergent logics and constructed very differently. After capturing the key characteristics of the two governance modes, this paper highlights the differences between the SDGs and human rights and introduces a novel conceptualisation to enhance our understanding of the relationship between rights-based and goal-based approaches. Against this backdrop, we assess this relationship and argue that human rights have the potential to strengthen and reinforce the SDGs. In particular, we sketch some future pathways to better integrate the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with existing human rights instruments to enhance accountability, review, and participation in decision-making in relation to the SDGs.

Keywords 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development · Global governance · Human rights · Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Abbreviations

2030 Agenda	2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development
HLPF	High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development
OHCHR	United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals

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1 Introduction

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs) were adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015 with the aim to “transform the world for the better by 2030” (United Nations, 2015, 35). The SDGs have acquired a strong normative status within the United Nations system and in numerous countries. They have been celebrated as high aspirations to attain sustainable development in its economic, social and environmental dimensions. More long-standing and going back to the adoption of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* in 1948, international human rights have been institutionalised as core norms in the United Nations system. They have continuously been under severe pressure with economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights being violated in many countries.

In this perspective paper, we argue in favour of a deeper integration of existing human rights instruments into the current efforts to implement the SDGs as a way to strengthen actors and institutions working towards attaining sustainable development. While both the SDGs and human rights constitute core visions and norms of the United Nations, they seem to operate in separate spheres and, arguably, do not make sufficient references to each other. This paper tries to make sense of the complex relationship between the SDGs and human rights. In our view, a deeper integration between the two governance modes could help overcome shortcomings of both approaches. In a nutshell, the SDGs could give visibility to essential human rights inherent in many goals and human rights could reinforce the SDGs, among others, through monitoring mechanisms.

We proceed as follows. Next, we highlight the diverging logics of human rights and the SDGs, representing two different modes of global governance. After that, we introduce a conceptualisation to enhance our understanding of the relationship between human rights and the SDGs. Using this conceptualisation, we offer some preliminary observations at different levels before we sketch some future pathways to better integrate the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda) with existing human rights instruments.

2 The SDGs and human rights as different governance modes

The preamble of the 2030 Agenda stresses the importance of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 2030 Agenda’s goals and targets comprise a few references to human rights. However, the SDGs lack systematic references to the core human rights treaties with their related instruments. While the SDGs and human rights address similar issues, such as education, health, welfare, and many others, they build on divergent logics and are constructed differently.

The international human rights system has evolved considerably after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted in 1948. The core international human rights treaties establish individuals as rights-holding legal subjects linked to duty-bearers (states) with specified responsibilities and associated accountability channels. Non-compliance with these international human rights treaties can generate complaints before their respective monitoring bodies. Moreover, the United Nations charter-based bodies (the Special Procedure mandates, the Universal Periodic Review of the Human Rights Council and its Independent Investigations) provide continuous reporting of countries’ human rights violations, supported by civil society organisations. The *United Nations Office of the High*

Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) is the key UN entity on human rights policy and has been mandated to insert a human rights perspective in all United Nations operations.

In contrast, the SDGs constitute a set of politically negotiated ambitions without any legal force to be fulfilled by national governments in partnership with societal stakeholders as well as sub-national authorities and subject to domestic adaptation and implementation. The SDGs are part of the 2030 Agenda which was negotiated by numerous national delegations representing different groups of countries for two years with input from civil society (Kamau et al., 2018). The 2030 Agenda and the SDGs do not entail any direct means of implementation or a comprehensive international monitoring system. Unlike human rights, the SDGs give much leeway to governments and other actors on how to interpret and address the different goals in domestic contexts (Kanie & Biermann, 2017).

Despite their thematic overlap, the precise connection between these two modes of global governance has not yet been subject to systematic research. In the next section, we introduce a conceptualisation to enhance our understanding of the relationship between the SDGs and human rights.

3 Conceptualising the relationship between the SDGs and human rights

We argue that the relationship between the SDGs and human rights is ambivalent at three different levels. First and most abstract, at a *normative level*, the SDGs and human rights have different regulatory underpinnings. Goals are different from rights and have other political implications. While the SDGs grant equal moral and political status to a range of addressees, human rights highlight human dignity and individuals as rights-holding subjects. Second, at an *institutional level*, the SDGs and human rights build upon different organisational bases, including factors that shape their realisation, such as legal rules, enforcement powers, mandates and resources. This applies both to the international level and the national level where we see much variance between countries. Third, at the *substantive level*, the SDGs and human rights interact in contradictory ways in concrete policy practices at global, national, and local governance levels. Sometimes, they reinforce each other and sometimes they are played against each other by powerful actors that aim to further their own interests.

Research exploring the intersection between the SDGs and human rights is piecemeal and points into different directions. Some studies suggest that the relationship between human rights and the SDGs is potentially marked by *synergies*. Several SDGs and their targets are in line with human rights obligations. Examples are SDG 2 (“No hunger”), SDG 3 (“Good health and well-being”), or SDG 4 (“Quality education”), which are in accordance with the right to food, the right to health, and the right to education (Kaltenborn et al., 2020). Authors also stress that human rights approaches could strengthen the *National Voluntary Reviews* under the auspices of the United Nations (e.g. Freiring & König-Reis, 2020). More generally, a potentially synergetic outcome of anchoring the SDGs in human rights means a greater emphasis on substantive equality, justice and accountability (Saiz, 2019).

Other studies convey the idea that the relationship between human rights and the SDGs is primarily coined by *tensions*. From this point of view, the SDGs do not challenge the dominant paradigm of growth-oriented market liberalism and economic development

(Eisenmenger et al., 2020). The SDGs and their targets, following this argumentation, fall short of protecting and realising human rights on the basis of substantive equality and the principle to leave no-one behind (e.g. Elson, 2019; Fukuda-Parr & Hegstad, 2018; Gupta & Vegelin, 2016). These scholars call for a more radical set of political goals and ambitions to promote the full range of human rights and see rights-based approaches as crucial safeguards for attaining sustainable development based on just transitions.

Still other studies provide examples illustrating in which ways the relationship between human rights and the SDGs is characterised by *conflicts*. These studies point out that the SDGs are at times instrumentalised by powerful actors that seek to maximise their profits and further their own interests (e.g. Schapper et al., 2020). These actors use the SDGs, for instance, to justify investments into large renewable energy projects, such as mega hydroelectric dams and huge solar power plants. Such projects require the relocation of Indigenous Peoples and local communities which violates their individual rights (Schapper, 2021; Schapper et al., 2022). There is, hence, a risk that fundamental human rights are neglected or even abused under the cover of sustainable development.

In brief, the existing literature on the relationship between human rights and the SDGs is scarce and we lack theory-informed empirical work on the relationship between individual rights and global goal-setting as contemporary modes of governance. We, therefore, propose an analytical framework that allows us to identify *synergies*, *tensions* and *conflicts* at *normative*, *institutional* and *substantive* levels as described above. This framework enables researchers to comprehensively explore the interface between the SDGs and human rights and ensures that justice is done to the multifaceted relationship in focus.

4 Assessing the relationship between the SDGs and human rights

We next offer some preliminary observations on the relationship between the SDGs and human rights for each of the three levels of the analytical framework—against the background of international power struggles marked by growing inequalities, democratic decline, and an ecological crisis of planetary scale.

First, for the *normative level*, we observe a gap between the SDGs and human rights. At the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 2023, the United Nations celebrated it as “the world’s most ground-breaking commitments” and called for its “rejuvenation” (OHCHR, 2023). At the same time, the international community highlights the 2030 Agenda as a “shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future” (United Nations, 2023). Yet, we find only very few statements on their integration, which mirrors previous political reluctance to human rights-based approaches to development. Some governments opposed references to human rights when the goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda were negotiated (Kamau et al., 2018), undermining promises made on rights-based approaches to development in previous international instruments (Carmona & Donald, 2020).

Second, at the *institutional level*, we recognise initial efforts to integrate the SDGs and human rights, most notably by the OHCHR. In fact, the OHCHR has become increasingly active in strengthening human rights in the area of SDG reporting and seeks to support countries in integrating human rights and SDGs in national policies and programmes (e.g. OHCHR no date; OHCHR, 2023). In the *High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development* (HLPF) and in *Voluntary National Reviews*, human rights seem to remain a marginal topic although human rights have lately been mentioned a bit more frequently and are

now included in the *Handbook for the Preparation of Voluntary National Reviews* (HLPF, 2022). Still, silo-based organisational mandates as well as lacking political will impedes integration in national public-administrative systems (Bexell & Jönsson, 2021).

Third, at the substantive level, the SDGs have so far generated only limited transformational impact (Biermann et al., 2022). At present, we often observe that powerful actors selectively invoke individual SDGs to legitimise policy interventions in concrete cases while neglecting a human rights-based approach. The latter would require states to address structural determinants of, for example, inequality, poverty, and pollution (cf. Michéle et al., 2019 for the case of malnutrition). Large-scale development projects, implemented within the framework of the SDGs, can exacerbate already existing inequalities and lead to adverse human rights and justice impacts (Siciliano et al., 2018). Therefore, demands for just sustainability transitions have been raised (Schapper, 2021; Swilling, 2020). There are large obstacles to realising the SDGs at global level as well as in domestic political systems in the global North and global South (Bexell & Jönsson, 2021, 2022).

Many more observations need to feed into a comprehensive assessment of the relationship between human rights and the SDGs. Nevertheless, we argue that conflicts and tensions between the SDGs and human rights are evident while they do not appear to be the all-dominant picture. Likewise, synergies between the SDGs and human rights do not come about naturally but require political initiative.

5 Future pathways

The SDGs seem to be almost everywhere in the United Nations and they appear much less politically contested than the international human rights system. Generally, it is, of course, a positive development that there is growing awareness in at least some parts of the world of the urgency to attain sustainable development due to the focus on the SDGs. However, human rights seem to fall behind in practice and in the current debate about the much-needed societal sustainability transformation. A deeper integration of the SDGs and human rights is promising in our view. There are several concrete pathways in this regard.

A better integration of human rights elements in United Nations and country reporting on the SDGs could increase recognition of the connection between rights and goals. Accountability for the SDGs can be enhanced through the establishment of monitoring mechanisms using the example of the established periodic review procedures of the United Nations Human Rights Council. SDG reporting can also be integrated under existing United Nations treaty bodies, human rights committees and Special Procedures and with the mandates of national human rights institutions. The central leave no-one behind principle of the 2030 Agenda can be specified through obligations of international human rights treaties. Increased integration of human rights can moreover strengthen weak spots of the SDG indicators, which have taken centre stage in SDG follow-up and review. Individual projects funded by the United Nations within the framework of the SDGs could be subject to human rights impact assessments, in addition to social and environmental impact assessments prior to project planning and implementation. Furthermore, including procedural rights, such as the right to information, transparency, participation in decision-making, and access to remedies in SDG projects, can prevent abuses and adverse human rights effects on the ground. This could enable and foster just transition processes and increase the acceptance of SDG implementation among affected local communities.

What makes the relationship even more difficult is that we presently witness an increase in the number of autocratic states and a narrowing space for civil society across the world. Populist challenges to human rights and democracy are manifold. This trend is an important reminder of the continuing necessity of protecting the full range of human rights, including civil and political rights that are still largely lacking in the SDG indicators.

In conclusion, the SDGs can direct political attention to fundamental human rights while human rights have the potential to overcome shortcomings of the SDGs (and their indicators) by enhancing accountability of governments and empowering the individual as holder of social, economic and cultural rights as well as of civil and political rights.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors acknowledge that the corresponding author is an editorial board member and declare that they have no other competing or conflicting interests. They have no financial or material interests that relate to the content of the paper. No funding was received to assist with the preparation of this manuscript.

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