

# Sustaining Human Rights through Sustainable Development Goals

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## Abstract

The United Nations, in 2015, announced the Sustainable Development Goals as an ambitious programme. On the verge of Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, the Sustainable Development Goals also aims to bring a difference in the approach to achieve justice and sustainability on a worldwide level. Both the United Nations instruments claims to realize global imagination but what they actually do in practice is the big question today. Recently it has been claimed that Human Rights are not enough to bring justice and sustainability in human life, but this has not been considered whether the Sustainable Development Goals are going to be sufficient for what human rights are lacking. Current research brings into consideration the governance aspect of the Sustainable Development Goals and the scope and directions with their implementation by national governments. Here we are going to explore the Sustainable Development Goals as a vision of a moral order in society along with finding in what manner the Sustainable Development Goals can be the key to realize Human Rights.

**Keywords:** Sustainable Development Goals; Human Rights; Global Imagination; Sustainability.

## Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) presented a need of action from all the humans in the world in the direction of achieving major goals including end of poverty worldwide, along with protecting the planet while promoting the principles of shared prosperity and constructing peace. There are 17 Goals in the Agenda and all are multidimensional, transformational, comprehensive and universal in nature, and needs attention of all irrespective of their region and economic status. SDGs were adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015 and have set the development agenda of the world till 2030.

Inspired by the successes and constructed on the basis of the experience gained from the execution and achievements and failures of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), SDGs with over 169 targets known as 'global goals', focus extensively on new areas involving climate change, economic inequality, innovation, sustainable consumption of resources, social justice and peace, while dealing with the linkages between development, healthcare, peace and security. The attainment of Sustainable Development Goals seems becoming an untold testament to universal human rights.<sup>1</sup>

The successes and limitations of the Millennium Development Goals have been reported and sustained as a matter of debate in the last few years, without giving sufficient attention, inclusion and examination in the perspective of principles of universal human rights. The new agenda adopted under the SDGs seems to be giving adequate attention to human rights and considering them too while making efforts to achieve the targets set as global goals. The MDGs were lacking connection to critical issue of human rights, although they still reflected some indirect concern for certain rights in economic, social and cultural contexts. However, the new framework of development called as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development reflects major principles and standards of human rights in a robust manner by circumscribing issues around political and civil rights of the people along with the right to development.<sup>2</sup>

The Sustainable Development Goals have been well placed in the global human rights law framework and setting out an agenda with the commitment of guaranteeing human rights for every human being, without any discrimination on the basis of race, religion, gender and region. The Sustainable Development Goals are universal, inclusive, comprehensive and transformational principles to guide the development of humanity in the world.

As the global achievement of the Millennium Development Goals had been average, it has left so several aspects to be achieved through the SDG Agenda to ensure the humanity an adequate access to the essentials to live a life full of dignity, with assurance of the fulfillment of their basic survival needs and guarantee of human rights. The adoption of Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 followed by the enactment of several other subsequent treaties and ratified declarations endured the popularity of the discourse on human rights.

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The discourse on human rights, however, is not simply a monolithic and progressive agenda which accelerates the process of transformation; it is actually a process that earlier targeted legitimizing the colonization.<sup>3</sup> But, the present SDG agenda have presented before us laudable yet precarious and ambitious aims along with the criteria where the progress is to be implemented, assessed and measured. The vision attached with the SDGs is the achievement of sustainable long-term societal, individual and environmental benefits for all the people in the world by unleashing whole new avenues for bringing together the human rights, and global and national strategies by 2030. This vision has been set not just for developing nations but it applies on the developed nations too. Within its principle framework and prime objective 'leaving no one behind', the Sustainable Development Goals implementation strategy would require continuing and more wholly embrace a data revolution through an approach of data collection, analysis, production and dissemination based on human rights in order to transparently revealing the current state of disadvantage and sheer vulnerability of several affected groups most commonly left behind.<sup>4</sup> The strategies for evaluation and monitoring in the SDG framework should be focusing on the reduction of inequalities and developing equity at all levels, including the personal, family, and group or community, regional, local, national, and global.

### **2030 Agenda of Sustainable Development Goals and Human Rights**

The drafting of UDHR (UNGA Resolution, 1948) was performed by a small group of nations and the major countries suffering from the severe issues of human rights violation were excluded. For example African countries could not participate as they were still under the colonial rule of western developed countries. The declaration was subsequently refined by a small group of 50 nations expected to be the roadmap to guarantee universal rights to all humans on the globe and to ensure the realization of the whole new vision of United Nations to never let the destruction and atrocities of the Second World War and the holocaust repeated. Although, there found limitations and pitfalls, but the UDHR 1948 has inspired a robust movement in motion, reaching out the regions where the maximum violation of human rights was found. The declaration also worked as the backbone of several other international human rights conventions and treaties. Other than International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1966; and International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is the only international document till now that aims fundamental rights entitlement for every human being and inspires global contribution in the promotion and protection of human rights.

After a span of more than five decades, the MDGs were introduced to forward the same objectives which involve bringing about a considerable decline in extreme poverty, improved status of nutrition for children, better gender parity, and improved access to primary level education and clean water.<sup>5</sup> The MDG agenda was criticized by the human rights advocates and other civil society

organizations on the ground that the process of deciding the goals was lacking public consultation and the voice of youth was ignored. Taking these into the consideration, the SDGs are determined and adopted with an extensively participative and human rights oriented approach. While deciding on the goals of this agenda for 2030 major groups including NHRIs, United Nations Treaty Bodies, and National and International civil society organizations along with groups ensuring youth representation had been involved. The participation in the drafting is fine but the realization and achievement of these goals by the deadline set for them in 2030, it is necessary to ensure the active participation across all the major areas with complete accountability. There is a need of eliminating the prevailing discriminatory practices that have been challenging the exercise of basic human rights of the persons across the globe. After all these, there are still some individuals and groups feeling dissatisfied as they have expressed that SDGs are still lacking the adequate input from global leaders outside political sphere. They have stated that SDGs have been determined under political guidance and required social and public consultation is still ignored while setting up the agenda. There have been other arguments raised by the human rights activists and youth organizations that the SDGs were developed without involving the central human rights framework and agenda, and also the grandiosity (SDGs includes 17 goals and 169 targets) is being the reason of the failure.<sup>6</sup>

Despite all, there is an optimistic view linked with the SDGs that it would not only proved an appropriate successor to the Millennium Development Goals, but also be functional being a unifying force for human race in the world as it applies both on developing and developed countries similarly. There is a hope developed with the implementation of SDGs that if the appropriate consideration and implementation would be ensured with placing in the necessary accountability, this will be the key to reduce inequalities, end the global poverty, and gain the shared prosperity for all in the world.

Adopting the Agenda and all its Goals, though, is no doubt the easiest part; proving commitment for the goals will be the most difficult one. The intense enthusiasm shown in 2015 can presently be perceived in some quarters as to some extent dissipating; perhaps it's still too soon for them to get traction. Being an example, United States of America has denied officially to the realities of climate change even after overwhelming scientific evidences, and as a corollary, decided to cut funding, and already did so, to major United Nations agencies and other international development and humanitarian actors working in this direction.<sup>7</sup> It has been the same story played with the issues like family planning and other sexual and reproductive health agendas (SDG3), that are seen as human rights in themselves. With the USA donating disproportionately large share of the contribution (due to the size of territory and wealth), this seems causing wide-ranging negative consequences.<sup>8</sup>

Though it has been only 6 years into the Agenda 2030, wealthy nations have started showing a sense of lethargy and stagnancy

because of the diversion in their attention due to migration and conflicts and their own socio-economic freedom to entertain aggressive proactive and innovative policy framework. In other words, this has posed an immense challenge for the global community and the SDG's values of 'leaving no one behind' that aims to improve the situation of the marginalized and extremely vulnerable populations in the world. The existing and most prevalent model of development actually lacks a directing framework of human rights and ensures highly divisive forces in the world and of the countries struggling due to structural poverty, corruption, economic dependency and slow aid approach to issues at the best.

The universal applicability and importance in shaping development priorities, the Sustainable Development Goals or Agenda 2030 is expected to be opening up completely new portals to integrate human rights into global and state level policies in both developed and developing countries for upcoming 15 years. However, a robust sense of responsibility at the individual level and robust accountability architecture is required to be established at regional, national, international and global levels. The indicators of the success are required to be placed in the arena of human rights and the data needs to be aggregated according to the basis of discrimination prescribed prohibited under human rights law as far as possible. People should be equipped with the rights and backed by the instruments ensuring capacity of people to hold their government accountable for meeting the targets set by the agenda.

SDGs are more balanced approach than MDGs as the launch of Agenda 2030 took a long time of intergovernmental negotiations among United Nations member states and the process of developing the agenda had been extremely consultative procedure in the journey of United Nations. Involving into it 17 Goals and 169 targets, the aim of the Agenda 2030 has been the people, planet, peace, prosperity and partnership. It has been vital as it has to cause greater influence on the construction of global and national policies addressing the issues of sustainable development for the next 15 years.

#### **Human Rights Norms inspired the SDGs' to Focus on Inclusive Development**

The Agenda 2030 aims at the inclusive development with the view to ensure with the vision of what the UDHR and other subsequent charters of the human rights were adopted implemented. It has been ensured by the composers of the SDGs that the goals and target of Agenda 2030 are well placed in the scenario of human rights and that is the reason why the 2030 Agenda is unambiguously anchored in the arena of human rights. The new Goals are explicitly placed in accordance with the United Nations Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and other conventions and treaties involving the concern for universal human rights, including the declaration on the Right to Development. Preamble of the Agenda 2030 states that the SDGs aim to "realize the human rights of all" and Para 19 of the same reads as "the responsibilities of all States to respect, protect and promote human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, without any distinction of any kind as to race,

colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, disability or other status".<sup>9</sup> It is crucial to note here that the new agenda is expected to be applied in such a way that ensures the compliance of the obligations of States under international law (Para 18). This shows that any discrepancy or gaps should be filled by in accordance with the arrangements asked by the international human rights law.<sup>10</sup>

#### **How the Value of Human Rights Growth Culminates in the SDGs?**

The Sustainable Development Goals offers an increasingly balanced paradigm for an increasingly sustainable and equitable growth than the MDGs. MDGs were addressing only economic and social issue, whereas SDGs have included total of 17 goals and 169 targets which are closely linked with or we can say well grounded into the universal human rights framework. Many of the SDGs are directly relating economic, cultural and social rights enshrined in the various human rights charters. SDG16 which is related to the societies which are peaceful and inclusive also addresses many other dimensions of civil and political rights, that include personal security, access to inclusive justice, and basic or fundamental freedoms. Goal 17 along with many other international targets under different goals in the Agenda deals with the issues which are related to the obligations such as international cooperation and the right to development. Also, the SDGs are associated directly and closely with human rights standards. Although the SDGs are not drafted and reflect the language of human rights in a completely explicit manner, but, most of the targets reflect the content incurred in the related standards of human rights. For example- the Sustainable Development Goals deals with the availability, accessibility, affordability and quality of education, healthcare facilities, water and sanitation and other services related to such rights. There have been targets related to access to safe, nutritious and adequate food for all, universal health coverage, free quality and equitable primary and secondary education, access of safe water, sanitation, hygiene and housing, and access to effective, safe and affordable essential medicines and facilities of vaccination for all.<sup>11</sup> However, there exist gaps or inconsistencies; it is difficult to ensure that implementation of the targets is well coordinated with international human rights law. Examples may include sexual and reproductive health and rights (Target 5.6), targets restricted to the needs of national law (Target 5.a and 16.10), ending violence and torture (Target 16.2) and fundamental freedoms (Target 16.10). There may be implicit inconsistencies with human rights standards in several other cases. The examples for that may include Target 6.2 which deals with the elimination of open defecation but, in the absence of specific implementation means, there exist a risk of criminalizing the poor people. Such unintended consequences need to be anticipated and prevented.<sup>12</sup>

The Agenda 2030 reaffirms in Para 19 that it is the obligation on the States, to ensure respect, protection and promotion of human rights, irrespective of distinction on the basis of race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other

opinions, national or social origin, property, disability, or other status. Two Goals in SDGs Goal 5 and Goal 10, on achieving gender equality and reducing inequalities within and between states aim at reducing inequality and discrimination. The Agenda 2030 directs by its Para 74 and Target 17.18, that the follow-up and review to be based upon evidence and data in context of specific measures including income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts.

There is strong focus in the new agenda on the women and girls and gender issues. The new agenda aims at the inclusion of children youth, disabled people, people living with HIV/AIDS, older persons, indigenous people, refugees and internally displaced people and migrants. Para 23, of the Agenda 2030, calls for the inclusion of these sections of the society. Para 35 of the Agenda reads that “full respect for human rights and the human treatment of migrants regardless of migration status, of refugees and of displaced persons”. However, here also exist major gaps due to absence of explicit reference to minorities and LGBTI. The Sustainable Development Goals are universal and indivisible and are meant to be guaranteed for all similarly as the human rights do.<sup>13</sup> The Agenda 2030 ask for a strong accountability framework to be established at regional, national and international levels, and also calls to ensure the civil society and non-state actors to be accountable. The Agenda guides governments to ensure a strong, voluntary, participatory, effective, transparent and integrated mechanism to follow-up and review processes.

### Aim of the Study

To explore the Sustainable Development Goals as a vision of a moral order in society along with finding that in what manner the Sustainable Development Goals can be the key to realize Human Rights.

### Conclusion

It has been reflected in the discussion that how Human Rights principles have been a supportive factor in regards of pushing the developmental agenda of United Nations focussing explicitly on inclusive development. Agenda 2030 seems to be a major initiative taken in this regard. The SDGs are explicitly placed in accordance with the United Nations Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and other conventions and treaties involving the concern for universal human rights, including the declaration on the Right to Development. The momentum around sustainable development goals and their placement in the arena of Human Rights definitely offer hope of influencing the practice of Human Rights. The universal applicability and importance in shaping development priorities, the Sustainable Development Goals or Agenda 2030 is expected to be opening up completely new portals to integrate human rights into global and state level policies in both developed and developing countries for upcoming 15 years.

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