The Right to a Healthy Environment and Its Role in Achieving Sustainable Development Goals

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ABSTRACT

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by the United Nations in 2015, present an integrated framework for addressing the world's most pressing challenges, including poverty, inequality, climate change, and peace. Central to the SDGs is the recognition of human rights as a foundation for sustainable development. This chapter explores the intrinsic linkages between the SDGs and human rights, emphasizing how the realization of one reinforces the other.

Many SDGs align with core human rights principles enshrined in international frameworks such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and subsequent treaties. For example, Goal 1 (No Poverty) relates to the right to an adequate standard of living, while Goal 4 (Quality Education) aligns with the right to education. Similarly, Goal 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) supports rights to justice and freedom from oppression. The interdependence of human rights and SDGs ensures that marginalized groups are included in development processes, fostering equity and social justice.

The chapter also examines the challenges in implementing rights-based approaches to the SDGs. Conflicts, governance deficits, and resource constraints hinder progress in certain regions. Nevertheless, integrating human rights into SDG strategies offers a pathway to addressing these barriers effectively.

Finally, the chapter provides case studies highlighting successful rights-based approaches in achieving SDGs, including initiatives addressing gender equality, environmental sustainability, and the protection of vulnerable populations. By embedding human rights into development frameworks, the SDGs not only aim to eradicate deprivation but also empower individuals and communities to participate meaningfully in shaping their futures. As the global community advances toward the 2030 Agenda, a rights-based approach will remain pivotal to ensuring that no one is left behind.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goal, Human Rights, Environmental degradation.

INTRODUCTION

The right to a healthy environment is increasingly recognized as a fundamental human right, critical to both individual well-being and the collective health of ecosystems. It reflects the understanding that access to clean air, safe water, nutritious food, and diverse ecosystems are not only necessary for human survival but also form the foundation for sustainable societies. Defined as the right to live in an environment that allows for a life of dignity, health, and well-being, this concept has gained widespread international recognition over recent decades. It acknowledges the essential links between environmental integrity, human rights, and development, stressing that sustainable growth cannot be achieved if environmental degradation continues unabated. With the adoption of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, the right to a healthy environment has gained additional prominence, as the SDGs emphasize the interdependence of economic, social, and environmental progress. These goals advocate for holistic development strategies that protect ecosystems while advancing social and economic justice for all, reinforcing the idea that environmental protection is integral to human rights.

Historically, the right to a healthy environment was not formally included in early human rights frameworks. Human rights charters, such as the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, prioritized political and civil rights, with limited consideration of environmental factors. However, the rapid industrialization of the mid-20th century, accompanied by widespread pollution and environmental degradation, brought the environmental dimension into global discussions. Public awareness of environmental issues grew alongside scientific evidence of ecological harm, health risks, and resource depletion. Landmark moments such as the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm marked a turning point, recognizing the environment as an essential element of human rights and declaring that "both

aspects of man's environment, the natural and the man-made, are essential to his well-being and to the enjoyment of basic human rights—even the right to life itself."

Since then, international agreements, national constitutions, and regional frameworks have increasingly enshrined the right to a healthy environment as a legal obligation. In 1981, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights became one of the first regional human rights treaties to include a provision for environmental protection, and the Aarhus Convention (1998) in Europe established rights to access information, public participation, and access to justice in environmental matters. The Escazú Agreement, which came into effect in 2021, focuses on environmental rights and justice in Latin America and the Caribbean, making it the first international treaty to include specific protections for environmental defenders. These agreements illustrate the growing global consensus that environmental rights are indispensable to human rights, critical to both individual and community well-being, and fundamental for sustainable development.

The right to a healthy environment is a guiding principle across the SDGs, reflecting the growing recognition that human rights and environmental protection are mutually reinforcing. The SDGs set a transformative agenda that emphasizes the need for development that benefits both people and the planet. This perspective marks a shift from previous models of economic development that often-prioritized growth at the expense of natural ecosystems, resulting in pollution, biodiversity loss, and climate change. Each of the 17 SDGs incorporates, either directly or indirectly, elements of environmental sustainability that align with the right to a healthy environment[1]. By linking social, economic, and environmental aspects of development, the SDGs provide a blueprint for a future where people's basic needs are met without compromising the planet's ecological balance.

Several specific SDGs directly underscore the importance of the right to a healthy environment. SDG 3, which promotes good health and well-being, highlights how environmental factors—such as air quality, water sanitation, and food safety—are critical for public health. Air pollution alone, primarily from industry, transportation, and energy production, causes millions of premature deaths each year, affecting respiratory health, cardiovascular systems, and child development. The right to a healthy environment, as outlined in SDG 3, seeks to address these health risks by mandating protections against pollution and ensuring that people can live in environments that support their health and dignity.

Similarly, SDG 6, which focuses on clean water and sanitation, reinforces the environmental right to access safe water. Water is essential not only for drinking but also for agriculture, hygiene, and ecosystem health. The right to a healthy environment enshrines access to unpolluted and sufficient water resources, supporting the preservation of water bodies and preventing contamination. With water scarcity affecting more than 40% of the world's population, this goal highlights the critical need to conserve and equitably distribute water resources, ensuring that all people have safe, accessible water supplies[2].

Climate change, addressed by SDG 13, is perhaps the most pressing environmental issue threatening the right to a healthy environment. Rising temperatures, extreme weather events, and shifting ecosystems are already affecting millions, with marginalized communities, particularly in developing countries, facing the brunt of climate impacts. The right to a healthy environment intersects with SDG 13 by advocating for climate action policies that prioritize the rights of vulnerable populations, promote renewable energy, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Climate resilience and adaptation strategies are essential for securing environmental rights in the face of climate change, ensuring that all communities can withstand and recover from climate-related challenges.

Moreover, SDGs 14 and 15, which focus on life below water and life on land, respectively, emphasize the need to protect ecosystems that sustain biodiversity and provide vital resources. Healthy ecosystems support livelihoods, regulate climate, and provide ecosystem services essential for human survival, such as pollination, water purification, and soil fertility. The right to a healthy environment includes a commitment to protecting biodiversity, ensuring that human activities do not

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[1] United Nations. (1948). *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. UN General Assembly. Retrieved from https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights

[2] Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). (2021). *Sixth Assessment Report: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability*. IPCC. Retrieved from https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/

irreparably harm marine and terrestrial ecosystems. This goal is fundamental not only to environmental sustainability but also to food security, medicinal resources, and climate stability.

Despite global support for environmental rights and the SDGs, significant challenges remain in implementing the right to a healthy environment. Economic growth continues to drive resource extraction and pollution, with industries such as mining, manufacturing, and agriculture contributing to habitat destruction, air and water pollution, and greenhouse gas emissions. Urbanization and population growth place further pressure on natural resources, exacerbating deforestation, land degradation, and biodiversity loss. Furthermore, the impacts of environmental harm are often borne disproportionately by marginalized communities, including Indigenous peoples, low-income communities, and future generations, highlighting the need for an inclusive approach to environmental rights that addresses systemic inequalities and promotes justice.

Securing the right to a healthy environment requires a concerted effort at multiple levels. Governments must establish and enforce environmental regulations that protect public health and preserve ecosystems. International agreements and regional collaborations are essential for addressing cross-border environmental issues, such as pollution and climate change, which require coordinated global responses. Corporations, particularly in high-impact industries, bear responsibility for minimizing environmental harm and adopting sustainable practices, while communities must be empowered to participate in environmental decision-making. Public awareness campaigns and educational initiatives are also essential, as informed citizens are more likely to advocate for and protect their environmental rights.

In 2023, the United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC) underscored critical state obligations to uphold and promote human rights in its sessions and resolutions. The Council's work emphasized obligations related to emerging global challenges, including environmental rights, social and economic inequalities, digital transformations, and crises such as climate change and armed conflicts. This chapter delves into key obligations highlighted during HRC's 53rd and 54th sessions and their implications for global human rights efforts.

1. General State Responsibilities for Human Rights

The Human Rights Council reaffirmed the foundational responsibility of states to respect, protect, and fulfill human rights. This involves obligations to implement and enforce international treaties, cooperate with UN mechanisms, and report on progress through periodic reviews. The 53rd session emphasized improved state accountability by addressing gaps in treaty compliance and systematic underreporting in areas such as racial discrimination. States were urged to enhance reporting mechanisms and address barriers to treaty implementation, ensuring inclusivity and effectiveness in human rights governance.

2. Environmental Rights and Climate Change

One of the Council's major thematic focuses was the link between human rights and the environment. States were reminded of their obligation to ensure the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment. In its resolution on human rights and climate change, the HRC called for urgent action, encouraging ratification of the Paris Agreement and emphasizing the need for resilience-building measures to mitigate climate-induced risks. States were urged to incorporate human rights principles into their climate policies, addressing the disproportionate impact of environmental degradation on vulnerable populations such as indigenous communities and small island states.

3. Economic and Social Inequalities

The Council highlighted the role of states in addressing structural inequalities through policies that respect economic, social, and cultural rights. In 2023, resolutions on inequality underscored the interconnection between development and human rights, urging states to scale up resources for addressing poverty, housing, and education. States were also encouraged to enhance international cooperation to close gaps in global inequalities.

4. Digital Technology and Human Rights

As digital transformations reshape societies, the HRC emphasized the need for states to regulate technology within a human rights framework. This includes protecting individuals from digital surveillance, misinformation, and violations of privacy. States were encouraged to develop robust policies to safeguard digital freedoms while ensuring access to technology for marginalized communities.

5. Addressing Armed Conflicts and Humanitarian Crises

The HRC identified state obligations to protect human rights during armed conflicts and humanitarian crises. The plight of Rohingya Muslims and other minorities in Myanmar was a focal point, with states called upon to facilitate humanitarian access, ensure accountability for violations, and address root causes such as systemic discrimination. States hosting refugees, like Bangladesh, were urged to bolster protections for displaced populations and secure adequate funding for humanitarian efforts.

6. Strengthening Accountability Mechanisms

A recurring theme in 2023 was the importance of holding states accountable for human rights violations. The Council advocated for states to cooperate with Special Rapporteurs and other international mechanisms. Specific cases, such as Eritrea and Myanmar, demonstrated the need for states to allow access to UN bodies and implement recommendations from international reports.

7. Gender and Intersectional Rights

The Council's work in 2023 included a focus on gender equality and the rights of women and girls, particularly addressing gender-based violence and systemic barriers to their participation in public life. States were encouraged to adopt comprehensive frameworks to combat violence and ensure gender-responsive policies, even amid opposition from socially conservative states.

Indian scenario :

India's journey toward achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is closely linked to its constitutional commitment to fundamental rights and freedoms. The convergence of SDGs and human rights in India underlines the indivisibility of development and dignity. By focusing on principles such as equality, non-discrimination, and environmental protection, India has sought to bridge developmental gaps while safeguarding human rights.

India's Progress on Key SDGs

India's SDG achievements in 2024 have been highlighted by consistent efforts in critical sectors:

- **No Poverty (SDG 1)**: Over 40 million homes have been built under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, improving living standards for vulnerable communities. Programs like PM-KISAN and MGNREGA have enhanced rural incomes and reduced inequality.[3]

- **Clean Water and Sanitation (SDG 6)**: The Jal Jeevan Mission has brought tap water connections to over 149 million households, marking a transformative change in public health and women's empowerment.[4]

- **Affordable and Clean Energy (SDG 7)**: Renewable energy investments surged in 2024, with significant progress in solar and wind capacity, reinforcing India's leadership in green technology and addressing climate action goals .[5]

Human Rights-Based Development Approach

India's developmental policies reflect a rights-based approach, aiming to ensure inclusivity:

1. **Right to Food and Nutrition Security**: With its legal framework enshrining the right to food, India has transitioned from focusing solely on food self-sufficiency to ensuring nutritional security. Programs under the National Food Security Act now reach 800 million beneficiaries, tackling hunger and malnutrition effectively

2. **Gender Equality and Women's Rights (SDG 5)**: Initiatives like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao and PM Ujjwala Yojana have not only addressed gender disparities but also empowered women economically and socially

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[3] United Nations India. (2024). *Celebrating India's progress on SDGs at UN Day event*. United Nations India. Retrieved from https://india.un.org

[4] Government of India. (2024). *Jal Jeevan Mission: Progress update*. Retrieved from https://jalshakti.gov.in

[5] Ministry of New and Renewable Energy. (2024). *India's renewable energy growth: Solar and hydrogen*. Retrieved from https://mnre.gov.in

3. **Climate Justice and Environmental Rights**: India's National Green Hydrogen Mission and investments in climate-resilient agriculture illustrate its commitment to addressing environmental challenges and safeguarding the rights of future generations

Regional Disparities and Challenges

Despite progress, disparities persist among India's states and union territories. While many regions achieved "Front Runner" status in the SDG India Index 2023-24, others still grapple with poverty, poor health indicators, and gender inequality. For instance, states like Assam and Manipur made notable improvements, but others require intensified efforts to close developmental gaps

Emerging Opportunities and Global Role

India's leadership in South-South cooperation and its active participation in global forums like COP 29 emphasize its pivotal role in driving sustainable development worldwide. India's emphasis on innovation, from climate tech startups to green energy solutions, presents a model for achieving sustainability through inclusive economic growth.

1. **Strengthen Regional Collaboration**:
   India should enhance its collaboration with states and union territories to address disparities in achieving the SDGs. Tailored strategies for lagging regions, particularly in health, education, and poverty alleviation, are necessary to ensure uniform progress.
2. **Adopt a Holistic Rights-Based Approach**:
   Integrating human rights principles more deeply into policy frameworks will ensure inclusive and sustainable outcomes. For instance, incorporating intersectional gender approaches can address gaps in SDG 5 (Gender Equality) while boosting access to healthcare and education.
3. **Increase Investments in Climate-Resilient Infrastructure**:
   Climate change poses a significant threat to India's sustainable development trajectory. Expanding initiatives like the National Green Hydrogen Mission and climate-resilient agriculture will bolster SDG 13 (Climate Action) and related targets.
4. **Promote Public Awareness and Participation**:
   Engaging civil society and local communities in SDG implementation can amplify progress. Grassroots programs should focus on raising awareness about human rights and sustainability, empowering citizens to participate in decision-making processes.
5. **Leverage Technology and Data**:
   Advancing technological solutions, including artificial intelligence, clean energy innovations, and data analytics, can optimize resource allocation and monitor progress on SDG implementation. Such measures will improve accountability and transparency.
6. **Foster International Cooperation**:
   India's leadership in South-South cooperation should be further strengthened by sharing best practices, technologies, and expertise with other developing nations, ensuring a collective push toward global SDG achievements.

Conclusion

India's journey toward fulfilling the Sustainable Development Goals is intrinsically linked to its commitment to human rights. In 2024, the nation has demonstrated significant progress in areas like poverty reduction, gender equality, and renewable energy. However, challenges such as regional disparities, climate vulnerabilities, and gaps in education and healthcare demand continued focus and innovation.

By embracing a rights-based approach, India can ensure that its development trajectory is inclusive, equitable, and sustainable. As a global leader, India's efforts to align SDG targets with human rights obligations offer a blueprint for other nations to follow. With strengthened policies, targeted investments, and robust international cooperation, India can set an example of sustainable development that prioritizes human dignity, environmental stewardship, and economic growth. Such a balanced approach will be pivotal in achieving the 2030 Agenda's vision of leaving no one behind.