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# Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Interplay between Human Rights and Sustainability

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## Preface

The following collection of manuscripts emerged from an interdisciplinary virtual exchange held during the Winter semester of 2023/2024 at the Environmental Campus Birkenfeld, organized by Prof. Dr. Milena Valeva and Prof. Dr. Kathrin Nitschmann. Additionally, Prof. Dr. Héctor Bombiella Medina, a lecturer of anthropology in the Department of World Languages and Cultures at Iowa State University, contributed to the virtual exchange and supervised case studies 3 and 4, bringing his extensive experience in this field and facilitating the international exchange. Within the elective module on Human Rights, students from the Bachelor's programs "Nonprofit and NGO Management" and "Environmental and Business Law," as well as the Master's program "Energy and Corporate Law," explored the interconnections between human rights and sustainability.

In an era marked by unprecedented environmental challenges and profound social transformations, the intersection of human rights and the rights of nature has emerged as a critical area of inquiry and debate. Today, as we face the dual crises of climate change and biodiversity loss, the traditional boundaries between human and environmental rights are increasingly blurred. This confluence demands a fresh, interdisciplinary approach to understanding and addressing the complex and interrelated issues at hand.

Human rights, fundamental to the dignity and freedom of individuals, are deeply impacted by environmental degradation. Communities worldwide are experiencing firsthand the devastating effects of polluted air, contaminated water, and deforested landscapes, all of which undermine basic human rights to health, livelihood, and well-being. Conversely, recognizing the rights of nature – the intrinsic value of ecosystems and species – challenges us to reconsider our legal, ethical, and philosophical frameworks. It calls for a paradigm shift from an anthropocentric world-

view to one that embraces the interconnectedness of all life forms.

Engaging in robust discussions and research on these topics is essential in today's context. By exploring interdisciplinary perspectives, we can forge innovative solutions that honor both the rights of individuals and the integrity of nature. This special issue aims to contribute to this vital discourse, providing insights and fostering dialogue on how we can collectively navigate the complex landscape of human rights and environmental sustainability.

The first chapter „Human rights and SDGs in the context of democracy“ examines the significance of international human rights in today's context and links them to new value systems like sustainability.

The second chapter, the case study „Rights of Nature“ explores the concept of granting legal rights to nature itself by comparing laws from various countries to show how it combats environmental exploitation.

The third chapter, the case study „Traditional coca leaf consumption and drug trafficking in Colombia“ delves into the complex issues surrounding coca cultivation in Colombia, highlighting its economic, social, and political impacts.

The fourth chapter, the case study „The artisanal fishing community of Chorrillos, Peru“ aims to provide theoretical insights and recommendations for improving the livelihoods of artisanal fishing communities in Peru, considering legal, ethical, and environmental perspectives as well as how economic liberalization, privatization, and deregulation affect the community's socio-economic conditions.

# Comparison of Human Rights and Sustainable Development Goals

Author: Christine Wetter

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## 1 Abstract

This article aims to provide a concise yet comprehensive overview of the evolution of human rights and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), tracing their historical development to the ongoing monitoring initiatives today. As we delve into the core of the discussion, a critical examination will be conducted to assess the alignment between the SDGs and human rights. The focal point will be a nuanced exploration of whether these two frameworks are in sync or if there are discernible deviations and potential conflicts of goals between them.

To facilitate a more in-depth analysis, the SDGs will be systematically categorized into distinct clusters, enabling a clearer illustration of their compatibility or divergence from human rights principles. By breaking down the SDGs into specific thematic areas, we aim to shed light on both the areas where alignment is evident and

those where disparities with human rights may exist. This comparative approach seeks to enhance our understanding of the interconnectedness and potential tensions between the SDGs and human rights.

Moreover, the exploration will not only highlight the points of convergence but also delve into the complexities of ensuring a harmonious coexistence between these two vital frameworks. By examining the interplay of human rights principles with the diverse goals encapsulated within the SDGs, this article endeavors to contribute to a nuanced understanding of the broader implications for global development and social justice.

In summary, this expanded article aspires to offer readers a more detailed exploration of the interrelationships between human rights and the Sustainable Development Goals, navigating through the clusters of SDGs to unveil areas of agreement and potential divergence. Through this

analysis, we seek to foster a deeper appreciation for the complexities of aligning diverse global goals with fundamental principles of human dignity and equality.

## 2 Human Rights

### 2.1 History of Human Rights

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, signed in 1948, was influenced by the history of various member states of the UN, which was founded in 1945. In the course of history, the idea that people must be protected from the arbitrary power of the ruler has developed again and again. Here are some examples.

In the Middle Ages, the law was also known as "Magna Charta Libertatum" (1215 England) for the protection of the nobles and clergy, but also in the approach of the peasants against exorbitant taxes of the royal family. This was later enshrined in the English Constitution.

In the United States of America, on July 4, 1776, Congress adopted the Declaration of Independence drafted by Thomas Jefferson. "*We hold the following truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that this includes life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,*" reads the 15-article declaration that became the basis of the U.S. Constitution.

In France, during the Revolution of 1789, the National Assembly promulgated the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. There it was stated in Article 1: "*Man is born free and equal in rights and remains so.*" Article 2 reads: "*The aim of all plodding societies is the preservation of the natural and inalienable rights of man. These rights are liberty, property, security, and the right to resist arbitrary oppression.*" the fundamental rights set out in 17 articles were incorporated into the new constitution of 1791. The French "Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen" had an impact on the whole of Europe and brought about a new beginning of platitude in thinking.

There was a revolution in Germany in 1848. It was in this context that the National Assembly gathered in Frankfurt's Paulskirche and proclaimed the fundamental rights of the German people on 17 December 1848. It included the following

points: "*equality before the law, protection against arbitrariness by the authorities, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, freedom of assembly, the right to form associations, independence of the courts, public trials, freedom of property*". Unfortunately, these were not supported by all states and King Frederick William IV of Prussia also refused to be elected emperor. (Lohmann, 2004)

After World War II the United Nations (UN) was founded in New York in 1945 with the aim of "saving the world from the scourge of war", it took 2 years until the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" was promulgated on December 10, 1948. The declaration, comprised of 30 articles, articulates a comprehensive framework of rights and freedoms inherent to all individuals, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, or any other distinction. These rights include civil and political rights, economic, social, and cultural rights, as well as the right to equality and non-discrimination. The UN had at this time 56 member states, of which 48 voted yes and eight abstained from voting.

The Declaration has become a touchstone for advocates of human rights, providing a universal reference point for holding nations accountable for their treatment of individuals. As the world continues to grapple with evolving challenges, the Declaration of Human Rights remains a foundational document, reminding humanity of its shared commitment to the dignity and worth of every person.

### 2.2 Monitoring compliance with Human Rights

Human rights are not merely abstract ideals but rather concrete principles, legally binding through international treaties and conventions. States that ratify these agreements commit to upholding and protecting the rights outlined within them. In the course of time, these rights become ingrained in the collective consciousness of societies, as they are continually talked about discussed and debated, again and again.

As a body attached to the UN General Assembly, the Human Rights Council has assumed the supervisory function. Members serve for staggered three-year terms and can be re-elected. The geographical distribution ensures a degree of diversity in the council's membership, allowing for broader perspectives.



**What the Human Rights Council does:**

- Serves as an international forum for dialogue on human rights issues with UN officials and mandated experts, states, civil society, and other participants;
- Adopts resolutions or decisions during regular sessions that express the will of the international community on given human rights issues or situations. Adopting a resolution sends a strong political signal which can prompt governments to take action to remedy those situations;
- Holds crisis meetings known as special sessions to respond to urgent human rights situations, 36 of which have been held to date;
- Reviews the human rights records of all United Nations Member States via the Universal Periodic Review;
- Appoints the Special Procedures, independent human rights experts who serve as the eyes and ears of the Council by monitoring situations in specific countries or by looking at specific themes; and
- Authorizes commissions of inquiry and fact-finding missions, which produce hard-hitting evidence on war crimes and crimes against humanity.

(United Nations Human Rights Council, 2024)

**3 Sustainable Development Goals**

**3.1 History of the Sustainable Development Goals**

The genesis of the Sustainability Development Goals can be traced to a series of international conferences and summits held in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

The concept of sustainable development gained prominence at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, also known as the Earth Summit, held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. The "Agenda 21" has been a comprehensive action plan in which 178 governments have set themselves the task of taking sustainable action in all areas where humans have an impact on the environment.

At the New York Millennium Summit in September 2000, 189 countries came together and adopted the Millennium Declaration at the Summit Conference. This gave rise to the 8 Millennium Development Goals, which had the following objectives by 2015:

- of halving hunger and poverty among the world's population,
  - providing primary education for all,
  - strengthening gender equality and women's rights,
  - improving communicable diseases and maternal health,
  - protecting the environment,
  - building global development partnerships.
- (UN, 1992)

Since not all goals were achieved, the international community adopted the "2030 Agenda" in 2015, as well in New York. All 193 states of the United Nations have agreed on the plan, more precisely on the document "Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development". These are 17 goals, also known as the Sustainable Development Goals, with 169 targets, covering a broad spectrum of issues including poverty, hunger, health, education, gender equality, clean water, climate action, and more. The adoption marked a historic moment as countries committed to a universal and transformative agenda that applies to all nations, recognizing the interconnectedness of global challenges. The ecological, social and economic goals are interconnected, recognizing that



Figure 2: Overview SDGs

addressing one goal often involves addressing multiple others. (UN, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Sustainable Development, 2015)

The interconnection of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is a fundamental aspect of the 2030 Agenda, recognizing that progress in one goal often influences and is influenced by progress in others. Let's consider an example:

Clean Water and Sanitation (SDG 6) and Good Health and Well-being (SDG 3) Improving access to clean water and sanitation (SDG 6) contributes directly to promoting good health (SDG 3). Access to safe drinking water and proper sanitation reduces the risk of waterborne diseases, which, in turn, enhances overall public health.

**3.2 Monitoring compliance with Sustainable Development Goals**

There is no single monitoring body or system. The "2030 Agenda" stipulates that each member

state should conduct regular and review of progress at national and subnational level. To this end, a set of indicators has been developed by the "Interagency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goals Indicators" at UN level. This is constantly being developed and adapted to the given circumstances. In addition to the set of Sustainable Development Goals monitoring indicators developed by the Interagency and Expert Group, each country can create its own indicators for national monitoring and measure themselves against them. The fact that each country sets its own indicators results in a variety of monitoring approaches, which are not comparable with each other. The member states meet annually to inform and exchange information on their progress. The problem, however, is that all member states act independently and prepare their own reports. Also, the Sustainability Development Goals are not binding and have no legal basis, so that there are

no direct consequences or any sanctions for the failing state. Due to this lack of commitment, the goals are repeatedly neglected, in order to gain other advantages for one's own country. Often, it is economic or political benefits, whether they are industrial countries or developing nations.

#### 4 Comparison Sustainable Development Goals and the Human Rights

In figure 3, three distinct clusters are divided. The circle itself presents the human rights. As seen, some goals are transferred out of the human rights, some goals are based on the human rights and the last part is not in context with the human rights. In this part I will compare the Sustainable Development Goals with the single articles of the Declaration of Human Rights.

##### 4.1 Transfer of the Human Rights into the Sustainable Development Goals

The first cluster would be the exact correspondence between the SDGs and parts of human rights. Often one SDG includes several different Articles of the Declaration of Human Rights.

Goal 1 "No Poverty: End poverty in all its forms everywhere." This can be found, for example, in Article 23 (2) "Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work", or as well in Article 25 (1) "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control."

Even if it is not taken literally, it can be assumed that equal pay as well as a standard of living that ensures the family's health and well-being is a measure against poverty.

Goal 2 "Zero Hunger: End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture." is also found in Article 25 (1) of the Declaration of Human Rights, which states that health and well-being include food.

Goal 3 "Good Health and Well-Being: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages." is reflected in some articles of the Decla-

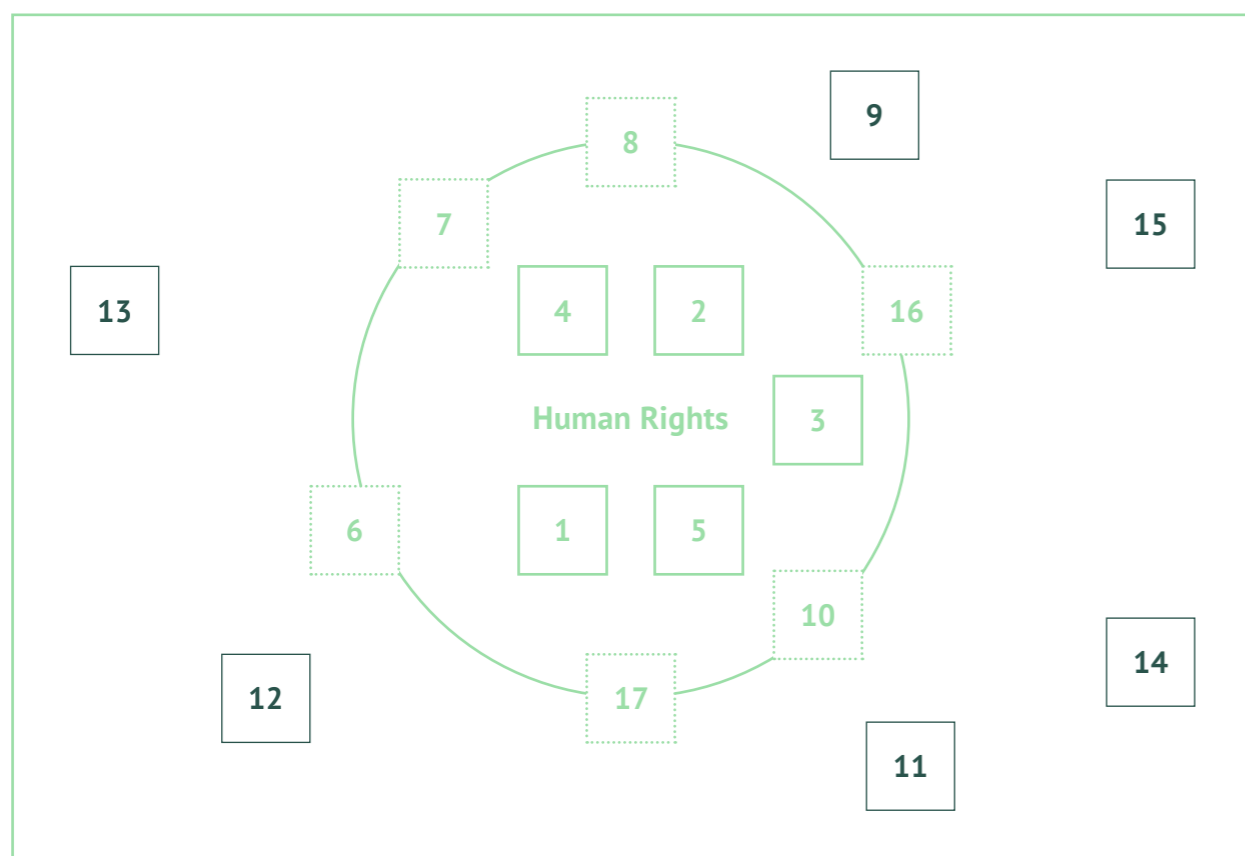


Figure 3: Overview Comparison SDGs a Human Rights

ration of Human Rights. Article 5 "No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment". Although it refers more to torture and slavery, it can also be interpreted to mean that if there is no torture and slavery, people are well off, and their well-being is taken care of Article 24 states that "everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay, from which well-being and health can also be derived." This is because overwork and no free time has a negative effect on them. Article 25 also refers to health. This is even mentioned verbatim in the article.

Goal 4 "Equal Education: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" is explicitly stated in Article 26. Here it says:

"1. Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.

2. Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

3. Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children." Education is also derived from Articles 23 and 24, since without them there is no possibility of qualified work.

Goal 5 is "Gender Equity: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls". Equality is an important topic in human rights and all articles are accompanied by the reference that human rights apply to everyone. Articles 1 and 2 deserve special mention here. Article 1: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." And Article 2 is more actual, then thought, when it was formulated 1949: "Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Decla-

ration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty". The Sustainable Development Goal also points to equality. For the 1949 version of human rights, equality between men and women, but also of different origins, was already a step forward, which from today's perspective does not go far enough, as people still feel disadvantaged in this regard.

##### 4.2 Partly match

The next aspect to consider is the set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are founded on human rights but cannot be directly derived from them. To identify specific Sustainable Development Goals within the realm of human rights, certain assumptions need to be made.

Goal 8 "Decent work and economic growth: Promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all" can be derived from all human rights articles that relate to work. For example, article in Article 23 (3) which states, "Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection." Article 4 and 24 also deal with the work of the individual, but not with companies. This can therefore only be freely deduced by saying that if everyone has a decent job, is fairly paid and the social system behind it is also right, there is the possibility of economic growth, because through the appropriate remuneration people have the opportunity to use the goods and services they produce because they can afford it. Through sales, development and research can continue and the economy has an opportunity to grow and create new opportunities, jobs and fair conditions.

What is easier to interpret is the Goal 10 "Reduce inequalities: Reduce inequality within and among countries". It is about inequalities between individual countries but also within one's own so-

ciety. On the one hand, the fact that rights apply to everyone already makes it clear that there must be no inequalities between people. Human rights also mention globality and freedom to travel beyond the borders of one's own country, which also points to a certain extent to equality. Article 13 (2) of Human Rights states: *"Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country."* On the other hand, human rights also specify that everyone must be and be treated equally before the law. This is set out in Article 6. *"Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law."*

Goal 16 "Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels" could be interpreted into any article of human rights or seen as the quintessence of all human rights. This is also summed up well in Article 30 of the Human Rights Act: *"Nothing in this Declaration may be interpreted as implying for any State, group or person any right to engage in any activity or to perform any act aimed at the destruction of any of the rights and freedoms set forth herein"*. Because without peace, justice and strong institutions that implement the rights and control their monitoring and advocate for their enforcement, it makes no sense. As far as the Sustainable Development Goals are concerned, the same principle applies here as well. Everyone needs to work together and pursue the goals together so that the line can be reached.

This is followed by Goal 17 "Partnerships for the goals: Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development", because human rights and the Sustainable Development Goals can only be implemented in the community.

Goals 6 "Clean water and sanitation: Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all." and 7 "Affordable and clean energy: Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all" are more difficult. This could be seen as a basic requirement for Article 25, because without water and energy, health cannot be guaranteed. This is one of the basic needs that should be self-evident and that does not need to be pointed out first.

#### 4.3 No match

The third group refers to the Sustainable Development Goals that deal with nature and the climate, these are Goal 9 "Industry, Innovation and infrastructure: Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation", Goal 11 "Sustainable cities and communities: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable", Goal 12 "Responsible consumption and production patterns", Goal 13 "Climate Action: Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts", Goal 14 "Life Below Water: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development" and Goal 15 "Life on land: Protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss". In 1949, the subject and research were not yet so advanced, and so was the background problem from which human rights were born in 1949, clearly focused on people and not on nature. But there is no doubt that nature also needs a voice in order for life on earth to continue and will be discussed in more detail in a later chapter of this book.

#### 5 Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be asserted that the 17 Sustainable Development Goals represent, to some extent, a refinement of human rights principles. However, the absence of legally binding obligations diminishes their efficacy, especially considering that violations have existential implications for all life on the planet. Surprisingly, no country or government seems willing to acknowledge full responsibility for these transgressions. Instances like wars exert a severe toll on both the environment and the well-being of the population.

Various injustices persist, undermining the spirit of the Declaration of Human Rights and contravening the ideals of the Sustainable Development Goals. Examples include corporations depleting groundwater in impoverished regions, leaving the local population without access to essential water resources. Additionally, the exploitation of children in mines for the extraction of rare earths, depriving them of education, merely to secure a

meager income for their families, constitutes a clear violation of human rights and the objectives set by the SDGs.

These injustices underscore the urgent need for a shift in societal attitudes and behaviors. The prevalent lack of awareness or delayed recognition of the imperative nature of these issues by governments necessitates a comprehensive reassessment by the entire population. Initiating a boycott against companies engaged in harmful practices becomes crucial to stimulate corporate reconsideration.

Moreover, political leaders should play a more assertive role, enforcing stringent measures that compel major industries to align their practices with the principles outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals. By taking a proactive stance, politicians can not only raise awareness but also hold corporations accountable for their impact on human rights and sustainable development. It is imperative that a collective effort has to be undertaken to prompt a reevaluation of priorities, fostering a global commitment to the ideals encapsulated in both the Declaration of Human Rights and the Sustainable Development Goals.



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