



Original Article

The Role of International Law in Advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

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Abstract

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), established in 2015, constitute a comprehensive and ambitious framework designed to eradicate poverty, safeguard the environment, and promote equitable growth by 2030. While the primary responsibility for implementing these goals lies with national governments, international law plays an indispensable yet frequently underappreciated role in their support and advancement. This paper investigates the intersection of international legal frameworks with sustainable development, analyzing how sources such as multilateral treaties, customary norms, and activities of international institutions contribute to the global SDG agenda. Through the examination of legal instruments related to human rights, environmental protection, trade, and development cooperation, the study demonstrates how international law serves as a normative guide, a platform for international coordination, and a mechanism for accountability. Although challenges such as limited enforceability and fragmented legal systems persist, the paper affirms that international law remains integral in shaping global efforts toward the SDGs, offering structured pathways for cooperation and policy coherence in sustainable development.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals, International Law, Human Rights, United Nations.

Introduction

Sustainable development has become a core principle of modern international law and global governance. Its importance has grown considerably since the United Nations General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in September 2015, a historic agreement that detailed 17 interconnected Sustainable Development Goals and 169 related targets (What Are the UN Sustainable Development Goals? | Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). These goals present a multidimensional view of human progress, highlighting social inclusion, economic growth, and environmental protection as integral and interdependent components of sustainable development. The Sustainable Development Goals include ending poverty and hunger, promoting quality education and gender equality, tackling climate change, ensuring sustainable consumption and production, and strengthening institutions and partnerships (Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), List, 17 Goals, n.d.). Although these Goals are non-binding and mainly aspirational, their realization largely depends on the supportive framework provided by international law (C. A, n.d.). The legal aspects of sustainable development are complex and continually changing, involving a broad range of instruments and mechanisms at international, regional, and national levels. International law relevant to the Sustainable Development Goals encompasses a range of instruments, from binding agreements, treaties, and Security Council resolutions to softer instruments such as political declarations, guidelines, codes of conduct, and customary international norms (R. A et al., n.d.). Collectively, these tools influence state actions, shape domestic laws and policies, and promote international cooperation and accountability (C et al., n.d.).

Furthermore, international law does not operate in isolation; it interacts with various legal systems, including international human rights law, environmental law, trade law, and development cooperation law (J, n.d.). These systems provide both substance and procedures for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. For example, international human rights treaties support Goals related to education, gender equality, and reducing inequalities, while multilateral environmental agreements back goals concerning climate action, biodiversity, and sustainable resource use (GJ et al., n.d.).

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International organizations also play a crucial role in implementing the legal aspects of sustainable development. Organizations such as the United Nations, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, and various treaty-monitoring bodies help coordinate efforts, monitor adherence, and provide technical and financial support to countries (W. K, n.d.). These organizations not only create and spread norms but also serve as platforms for multilateral discussions, dispute resolution, and reporting.

Despite these strengths, the legal framework surrounding the SDGs encounters several challenges. The non-binding nature of the 2030 Agenda, the fragmentation of international legal regimes, and the diverse capacities of countries to implement legal obligations create significant obstacles (M et al., n.d.). Additionally, questions remain about how to ensure accountability, especially when legal obligations are unclear or enforcement mechanisms are weak (J. T & P, n.d.). This paper critically analyzes the role of international law in promoting the Sustainable Development Goals. It aims to explore how international legal norms and institutions support the implementation of the SDGs, the degree to which they foster accountability and coherence, and the limitations that hinder their effectiveness. By examining both the opportunities and constraints within international legal frameworks, the paper enhances our understanding of how law can serve as both a tool and a framework for achieving sustainable development.

Objectives:

1. To examine the legal foundations of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
2. To identify the role of key international legal regimes in supporting specific SDGs.
3. To assess the effectiveness of international legal mechanisms in promoting accountability and compliance.
4. To evaluate the limitations and challenges of using international law to achieve sustainable development.

Conceptual Framework: International Law and the SDGs

Understanding Sustainable Development

Sustainable development, as a conceptual framework in legal and policy fields, gained widespread recognition following the 1987 report by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), also known as the Brundtland Report. This report famously described sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." While this definition is broad, it marked a shift towards development strategies that balance immediate goals with long-term commitments to environmental care, intergenerational fairness, and social justice. It underscored the fundamental connection between economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability, thereby establishing a foundational principle that has become central to international ecological and developmental law (Morton et al., 2017). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) concretize the abstract principles articulated in the Brundtland Report. For instance, Goal 13 (Climate Action) and Goal 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) specifically address the requisites of environmental sustainability and judicious resource utilization, reflecting concerns for future generations. Concurrently, objectives such as Goal 1 (No Poverty) and Goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities) correspond with the report's call to fulfill the essential needs of all individuals, notably the impoverished populations worldwide (Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and Their Implementation | British Medical Bulletin | Oxford Academic, n.d.). In this context, the SDGs serve as both a political commitment and a normative framework, translating the principle of sustainable development into quantifiable targets and indicators that are supported through international cooperation and legal mechanisms. Furthermore, the interconnected nature of the SDGs embodies the principle of indivisibility, signifying that progress in a particular area should not hinder advancement in others (E. S, n.d.). This concept mirrors the emphasis of the Brundtland Report on policy coherence and cross-sectoral integration (L. T & G, n.d.).

Nature and Role of International Law

International law comprises rules established by treaties or customs that govern the relationships between countries and other global entities. Its sources include:

- Treaties serve as the most formal and explicit source of international legal obligations. These are binding agreements between states or international entities, governed by international law, and codified through instruments such as the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties (1969). In the context of sustainable development, numerous multilateral treaties provide legal frameworks for specific issues related to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For example, the Paris Agreement on Climate Change (2015) is a significant treaty under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) that directly supports SDG 13 (Climate Action) by establishing legally binding commitments for states to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and report on their national efforts. Likewise, treaties such as the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) promote various environmental and human rights-related objectives (R et al., n.d.).
- **Customary international law:** Customary international law develops from consistent state practice coupled with *opinio juris*, which is the belief that such practice is legally binding. Unlike treaties, customary norms are obligatory for all states irrespective of formal consent, unless a state persistently objects during the formation of the norm. In the context of sustainable development, specific environmental and human rights principles, such as the precautionary principle, the duty to prevent transboundary environmental harm, and the principle of intergenerational equity, are progressively regarded as elements of customary international law. These norms bolster the SDGs by integrating sustainability principles into the general conduct of states (Programme, n.d.).
- **General principles of law:** General principles pertain to fundamental legal norms that are universally recognized across major legal systems worldwide and serve to address gaps in treaty or customary law. In the context of sustainable development, principles such as good faith, due diligence, equity, and proportionality frequently inform the interpretation and

application of international obligations. For example, the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR), while explicitly incorporated in certain treaties, also embodies broader notions of fairness and equity acknowledged across various legal systems, thereby influencing how responsibilities are apportioned among nations in the pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals (B. K & S, n.d.).

- **Subsidiary sources like judicial decisions and scholarly writings:** While not primary sources of law, decisions from international courts and tribunals, along with the writings of highly qualified publicists, serve as key interpretive tools. Rulings by bodies such as the International Court of Justice, the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS), and various human rights treaty bodies help clarify and develop international legal norms related to sustainable development. Academic scholarship also plays a crucial role in organizing legal principles and shaping the development of legal norms, particularly in emerging areas such as environmental justice, climate litigation, and the rights of future generations (D. S et al., n.d.).

Together, these sources form the legal framework underpinning the international community's endeavours to realize the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). While not all SDG targets are directly enforceable through international legal instruments, the cumulative influence of binding and non-binding norms significantly affects state conduct, guides policy development, and fosters accountability in the pursuit of sustainable development (Desai et al., 2025).

Key Areas Where International Law Supports the SDGs

Environmental Protection

International environmental law supports SDGs related to climate action, life below water, and land. Key instruments include:

The Paris Agreement (2015) is a binding treaty concerning climate change mitigation, adaptation, and finance. The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) supports Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 15 by promoting the conservation of ecosystems. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) facilitates the sustainable utilization of marine resources (SDG 14). These legal instruments establish standards, encourage commitments by states, and provide mechanisms for monitoring and enforcement (Spiezia et al., 2025).

Human Rights and Social Development

Many Sustainable Development Goals are rooted in human rights law. For example:

The International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) affirms the fundamental rights to education (SDG 4), health (SDG 3), and adequate living standards (SDG 1). The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) advocates for gender equality (SDG 5). Furthermore, the conventions established by the International Labour Organization (ILO) promote the principle of decent work (SDG 8). These frameworks serve to enhance accountability and delineate the obligations of states towards the marginalized population (Kakavas et al., 2025).

Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions (SDG 16)

International criminal law and rule-of-law promotion are crucial for peace and justice:

The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) seeks to eradicate impunity for genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. The UN Charter and peacekeeping missions play a role in conflict resolution and governance reform. Strong institutions serve as both a vehicle and a goal of sustainable development, and international law advances judicial independence, anti-corruption measures, and public participation (Padulo, 2025).

Global Partnerships (SDG 17)

International cooperation through legally binding trade, finance, and development assistance agreements improves implementation capacity. Examples include:

- WTO agreements for fair trade (SDG 17.10).
- International development financing agreements, such as those managed by the Bretton Woods institutions.
- Technology transfer agreements under the frameworks of WIPO and UNFCCC (Walsh et al., 2022).

Challenges in Using International Law to Achieve the SDGs

- **Fragmentation and Lack of Coherence:** The variety of legal systems causes overlap, contradictions, and inefficiencies. For example, trade and environmental agreements can conflict, such as when WTO rules limit ecological labeling schemes (Nyland et al., 2025).
- **Weak Enforcement Mechanisms:** Numerous international legal instruments depend on voluntary adherence or lack robust enforcement mechanisms. For example, the Paris Agreement utilizes a "name-and-shame" approach rather than imposing obligatory sanctions (Morton et al., 2017).
- **Inequality in Access and Capacity:** developing countries frequently lack the legal, financial, or institutional capacity to effectively implement international obligations, despite being disproportionately impacted by global challenges (Sustainable Development Goals | United Nations Development Programme, n.d.).

Emerging Trends and Opportunities

- **Soft Law and Normative Development:** Soft law, including resolutions, declarations, and guidelines from the United Nations General Assembly, promotes consensus and directs national implementation without requiring ratification (Sustainable Development Goals: 17 Goals to Transform Our World | United Nations, n.d.).

Examples include:

- **The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights**
- **Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure (VGGT)**

- **Judicial Interpretation of Sustainable Development Principles:**

The principle of sustainable development has progressively become a focal point of judicial interpretation at both international and national levels. Courts and tribunals have assumed a pivotal role in ascribing legal significance to the inherently broad and aspirational nature of sustainable development, particularly through its interpretation in conjunction with established legal norms such as the right to life, environmental protection, and intergenerational equity. International and regional judicial bodies are increasingly applying sustainable development principles in their interpretation of ecological and human rights obligations (Nations, n.d.). Landmark cases include:

- **In Urgenda v. the Netherlands, the Urgenda Foundation**, along with 900 Dutch citizens, filed a lawsuit against the Dutch government, arguing that its insufficient action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions violated its legal duty to protect citizens from the dangers of climate change. In a landmark ruling, the Dutch Supreme Court upheld lower court decisions and ordered the government to reduce emissions by at least 25% by the end of 2020 (Urgenda Foundation v. State of the Netherlands - Climate Change Litigation, n.d.).
- **Advisory Opinion on Human Rights and Environment** by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights explicitly acknowledged, for the first time, the existence of an autonomous human right to a healthy environment under Article 26 of the American Convention on Human Rights (ACHR). This right is inherently both individual and collective, safeguarding not only the rights of individuals but also the environment in its entirety, including ecosystems and species, even in the absence of direct harm to a specific individual (Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court | OHCHR, n.d.).
- In the **Gabcikovo-Nagymaros Project** (Hungary/Slovakia), the International Court of Justice (ICJ) explicitly acknowledged sustainable development as a principle of international law. The Court emphasized the necessity of balancing economic growth with environmental conservation. It highlighted that development should not impair the rights of future generations, thus recognizing the intergenerational dimension of sustainability (June Climate Meetings (SB 62) | UNFCCC, n.d.).
- In the **Pulp Mills Case** (Argentina v. Uruguay), the International Court of Justice (ICJ) reaffirmed the principle of the sustainable utilization of transboundary resources. Additionally, the Court emphasized procedural obligations, including environmental impact assessments (EIA), as crucial elements of sustainable development (Sharma, 1995).
- **Advisory Opinion of the ITLOS Seabed Disputes Chamber** (2011) The International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) emphasized the due diligence obligations and environmental protection responsibilities of states in deep seabed mining, aligning them with the principles of sustainable development. (Pietrangeli, 2011).
- In **Vellore Citizens' Welfare Forum v. Union of India** (1996), the Supreme Court of India explicitly acknowledged sustainable development as a component of Indian environmental law, referencing international instruments such as the Stockholm Declaration (1972) and the Rio Declaration (1992). The Court affirmed the implementation of the precautionary principle and the polluter pays principle, asserting that these are fundamental components of the sustainable development framework (Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development | Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.).
- In **Narmada Bachao Andolan v. Union of India** (2000), the Court recognized the necessity of balancing ecological conservation with economic progress. While permitting the construction of the dam, it reaffirmed the importance of environmental impact assessments and rehabilitation policies, underscoring the complexities involved in implementing sustainable development within public infrastructure projects (Singh et al., 2024).
- In the case of **T.N. Godavarman Thirumulpad v. Union of India** (Forest Case series), the Supreme Court, through a series of landmark rulings, broadened the scope of sustainable forest management and biodiversity conservation. The Court frequently invoked the public trust doctrine and reaffirmed the state's obligation to safeguard natural resources for the benefit of future generations (Alston, 2016).

Cross-Sectoral Legal Innovations

New legal instruments are being developed to address cross-cutting issues such as:

- **Plastic pollution and UN Plastics Treaty:** Plastic pollution represents a significant threat to ecosystems, public health, and sustainable development. In response, the United Nations is currently engaged in negotiations for a comprehensive, legally binding treaty aimed at managing the entire lifecycle of plastics, from production to disposal. This treaty aligns with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) and 14 (Life Below Water) by aiming to reduce plastic waste, promote circular economy practices, and enhance international collaboration (Walsh et al., 2022).
- **Digital equity and data governance:** Digital equity guarantees equitable access to digital tools, connectivity, and skills for everyone, thereby supporting Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 9 through the promotion of inclusive innovation and infrastructure. Data governance pertains to the responsible collection, utilization, and sharing of data. It reinforces SDG 17 by facilitating global partnerships, informed policymaking, and accountability. Collectively, these elements are crucial for bridging the digital divide and achieving sustainable development through the effective use of technology.

Conclusion

International law serves as an essential instrument in promoting the Sustainable Development Goals. Although it encounters challenges in enforcement and consistency, it provides vital frameworks for collaboration, accountability, and the safeguarding of rights. To harness the full transformative potential of the SDGs, the international legal system must continue to evolve toward greater inclusivity, integration, and responsiveness to emerging global challenges.

Suggestions

1. Strengthen the binding nature of sustainability commitments.
2. Promote greater coherence among environmental, human rights, trade, and development laws.
3. Develop precise monitoring and accountability mechanisms.
4. Support capacity-building and legal reform in developing states.
5. Promote judicial engagement with SDG principles.
6. Foster inclusive and participatory global governance.
7. Advance the recognition of environmental and digital rights.
8. Foster inclusive and participatory global governance.
9. Expedite the finalization and implementation of thematic treaties.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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