

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS AND THEIR ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the implications for environmental aspect of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which were adopted at the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit in 2015. It briefly introduces us to the United Nations Agenda on Sustainable Development and traces back to the concept of environmental justice and its aspects or three pillars in light of distribution of environmental goods and bad. It goes on to highlight the opinion of other authors in different articles and pointed out the systematic analysis and result. Finally, it explores the legal challenges of the functioning of the environmental aspect of the SDGs in the wider context of the agenda.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals, United Nations, Environmental justice, International Environmental Law, UNEP

I. INTRODUCTION

The ongoing process of what we call development has led humans to realize that development without checks and balances can be destructive in nature and harmful for humanity. This has escalated, over the past years, the importance of development that is sustainable and suitable not only for human beings but for other living organisms and the environment as a whole. Since the circumstances and the urgency have called for it, the highest international body – the United Nations in 2015 has established the program called Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development that contains 17 goals and 169 targets focusing on three aspects: economic growth, social inclusion and environmental protection. Countries of the world are striving to achieve these goals and are moving forward with the aim of integrating all efforts towards an inclusive, sustainable and resilient future.^[1]

The UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), developed as an heir to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), was introduced in 2015 and came to effect on 2016. Its signatories commit to facilitate any development undertaken by the nation state governments to be in line with sustainability, thereby not hampering resources for future generations. The 17 goals cover disciplines, sectors and institutional mandates, acknowledging the integrated nature of the many challenges that humanity faces – from gender inequality to inadequate infrastructure and youth unemployment to environmental degradation.^[2]

The SDGs have been widely accepted and a number of initiative and programs have been undertaken to spread awareness. However, this acceptance is not quite universal as there are skeptics and critics seeing these goals as useless and vague. Although it remains a contested concept, it is still important to have a deeper understanding and study of these goals and their implications since many countries have established their goals and visions along the line.

II. UN ENVIRONMENT ACTION IS FOSTERING THE ENVIRONMENTAL ASPECT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

In the 2030 Agenda of the United Nations (UN), the development and enhancement of integrated approaches to sustainable development becomes an environmental challenge. These approaches will demonstrate how improving the health of the environment will bring social and economic benefits. UN Environment action fosters the environmental aspect of sustainable development that will lead to socio-economic development. It aimed at reducing environmental risks and increasing the resilience of societies and the environment as a whole. UN

Environment is taking a lead on thirty (30) SDG indicators. UN environment is also working with other agencies on areas that are not directly related to the environment. We must remember that this is an ongoing process and is subject to change.

UNEP (n.d.) in their '*Sustainable Development Goals: Monitoring Progress*' stated that "as the leading global environmental authority, UN Environment Program (UNEP) is the Custodian for 25 SDG indicators – across SDG Goal 6, 8, 12, 14, 15 and 17. These indicators cover topics related to resource management including protection of water, marine and terrestrial ecosystems, circular economy, including the sustainable management and efficient use of natural resources; and environmentally sound management of chemicals and waste. For these, UNEP has the duty to work with UN member states to develop SDG methodologies; work with national statistical authorities to collect and review SDG data; and promote the use of data for analysis, which are included the Global SDG progress report." (<https://www.unep.org/explore-topics/sustainable-development-goals/what-we-do/monitoring-progress>)

III. ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN THE SDGs

Gellers and Cheatham (2019) in their article '*Sustainable Development Goals and Environmental Justice*' pointed out that "the myriad definition of sustainable development share an acknowledgement that humanity faces an environmental crisis that requires a paradigm shift in the way we live in." (p. 277-278)

They traced back to the concept of Environmental Justice (EJ) that arose in the 1990s in the US to encompass distributive and collective justice and not only relating to toxic wastes with the poor or marginalized. It has been developed to include both good and bad impacts of the environment. The poor or marginalized have been considered to enjoy environmental benefits as well in the form of participation and recognition. It means that the affected groups should have the ability to actively engage in environmental decision making processes that determine how environmental bad and goods are distributed. Here, three pillars of environmental justice were developed – distribution, participation and recognition. Later, capabilities also came into the scene. Hence, a pluralistic understanding of justice is required. Any one aspect of these can prohibit or promote the achievement of the others. Along with Environmental Justice (EJ), Climate Justice also came into the picture since 2000 onwards followed by Energy Justice and Food Justice.

Since there is no explicit mention of environmental justice in either the SDGs themselves or any of the foundational documents that inspired the global goals, the link between EJ and SDGs becomes unclear. However, the basic elements and products of EJ find expression in the SDGs. The SDGs feature seventeen goals that approach development more holistically as compared to the MDGs. They focus on issues at the individual and global levels, emphasize quantifiable objectives and enhancing data collection capacity to facilitate measurement of progress explicitly encourage adapting goals to national contexts. The SDGs apply to both developing and developed states.^[4]

Gellers and Cheatham (2019) also mention that this "latest policy platform for global development' is anthropocentric in nature in a sense that they prioritize human needs above ecological limits. This implies that the SDGs fail to observe the importance of placing constraints on human activity that might further intensify or worsen environmental change and degradation. He directs us to a potential solution of this pitfall that is the reaffirmation of the 1982 World Charter for Nature or pursuing a new eco-centric binding agreement through the United Nations." (p. 288-289)

According to Gupta and Vagelin (2016), as cited in Gellers and Cheatham (2019), in their article '*Sustainable Development Goals and Inclusive Development*', the Global Goals interests more on social inclusiveness than ecological inclusiveness. Reid et al. (2017) in his writing '*Post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals Still Neglecting Their Environmental Roots in the Anthropocene*' also conclude that "the SDGs give short shrift to environmental concerns to the detriment of social and economic goals that depend on the safeguarding of environmental conditions. Both of these efforts suggest that despite the stated intention of balancing the economic, environmental and social spheres of sustainable development, the SDGs fall demonstrably short." (p. 290)

A more systematic analysis is necessary so that there can be a better understanding if and how EJ relates to the SDGs. For this purpose, Gellers (2019) and his colleagues reviewed all 169 targets to determine whether they could be sorted into one or more of the environment related seven aspects of EJ. The results show that just over 50% of the targets directly relate to one or more of the seven EJ components. Thus, this empirical evaluation of the extent of EJ among the SDGs demonstrates that the Global Goals are heavy on capabilities. This exercise was conducted in order to understand whether and to what extent national efforts to realize the SDGs emphasize environmental justice (EJ) in the way the concept was operated at the global level.^[5]

An analysis of Voluntary National Review was also done and this offers three insights. First, Components of EJ can be found within the VNRs that countries have submitted to indicate their progress towards achieving the SDGs. Second, the extent to which elements and cognates of EJ appear in VNRs varies greatly among states. Third, a strong plurality of those targets linked to EJ center on capabilities. Despite the characterization of the SDGs as universal, some of the targets simply do not apply to some countries, possibly limiting the ability of some states to address EJ-relevant goals.

Although the SDGs do not include any specific mention of environmental justice that does not mean that environmental justice is altogether absent from the post 2015 development agenda. From the finding of Gellers and Cheatham, it can be suggested that states are primarily placing their emphasis on enhancing the capabilities of individuals and also make steps to improve how the positive and negative impact of environmental effects are distributed within societies. It is important to note that the present level of emphasis that states place on certain aspects of EJ within the SDGs could change in the near future.^[6]

It is likely that more targets related to EJ will be engaged in the course of implementing the SDGs with the completion and submission of VNRs. The world will be interested in answering the question whether successful achievement of the SDGs and their accompanying targets produces environmentally just outcomes at the conclusion of this era in the global pursuit of sustainable development.^[7]

IV. INTEGRATION OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL ASPECTS OF THE SDGs INTO THE GENERAL FRAMEWORK OF THE UN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AGENDA

The SDGs are ambitious goals in the field of environment, with caution on one side and optimism on the other. Two important points need to be addressed here – first is the normative value of the environmental obligations of states enshrined in the SDGs. Second is the problem of implementation of the results of the UN Summit on sustainable development. An attempt was also made to identify the main legal challenges for the operation of the environmental component of the SDGs in the wider context of the agenda.

As a principle of integration among environmental, social and economic consideration, sustainable development was developed and it focuses particularly on the evolution and progress since the publication in 1987 of the report *Our Common Future* of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). The scenery of international environmental law has been shaped hence including other key areas of international law, such as human rights, trade investment law and others, over the past few decades.^[8]

However, Pavoni & Piselli (2016) in their article *'The Sustainable Development Goals and International Environmental Law: Normative Value and Challenges for Implementation'* stated that “neither the WCED report nor its following international apparatuses, including the 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development have become successful in providing genuine answers as to what sustainable development as a principle of integration exactly implies for multi-level environmental governance. It is still uncertain, in other words, whether the conceptual synergies existing between environmental protection and development are bound to remain a slippery aspiration of the international community or if they can instead come up with effective guidance for international, national and sub-national law and decision making on environmental issues.”^[9]

The normative foundations for most of the SDGs are constituted in the international environmental law and therefore identifying and addressing its shortcomings becomes a crucial step in the implementation of the environmental component of the 2030 Agenda. It is also a key necessity to guarantee that human development stays within the Earth's sustainable boundaries in the next 15 years and beyond.^[10]

The goals and targets of SDGs are observable with respect to environmental matters. A higher number of environmental goals would create a fragmented framework, similar to that of the MDGs, if cross-cutting environmental issues were not taken into account under the other 'economic' and 'social' goals and vice versa. The concept of integration of the environmental aspect manifests itself in the comprehensiveness of the challenges addressed, ranging from climate change (SDG13) to loss of genetic diversity in agriculture (SDG2), and including (but not limited to) topics as heterogeneous as terrestrial ecosystem destruction and bio-diversity depletion (SDG15), waste management and unsustainable production patterns (SDG12), marine pollution (SDG14), wildlife crime (SDG15), protection of water related ecosystems (SDG6) and energy efficiency (SDG7). At first glance, at least four of the sixteen 'substantive' goals are directly and primarily concerned with environmental sustainability in their formulation.^[11]

The evident improvement of the environmental dimension of the SDGs over that of the MDGs needs to be evaluated against the long-standing shortcomings of international environmental law i.e. emphasis on the sovereignty of states, lack of mechanisms to ensure compliance and/or ineffectiveness of regulatory regimes, insufficient resources, fragmentation and so forth.^[12]

V. CONCLUSION

It is quite evident that a strong emphasis on the environmental aspect of the SDGs is required, maybe even more than the economic and social aspect since neither of the latter two aspects would become better if the environment deteriorates. However the intensity and variety of process and procedures of implementing these goals would differ across countries and within states as well. Here, it is important to localize these goals especially among the people who have closer connections with the flora and fauna. We must, while making judgments and assessments, also never forget that the SDGs is an ongoing process, to be carefully analyzed and directed to have the best outcome from it.

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