

INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN NO POVERTY AND ZERO HUNGER SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS WITH HUMAN RIGHTS NORMS*

Abstract

This paper examined the intersections between Sustainable Development Goals 1 (no poverty) and 2 (zero hunger) with human rights norms. Courtesy of the doctrinal research method, detailed analysis of textual provisions of international, regional, and national domestic instruments were undertaken. The paper established that on one hand, the SDGs 1 and 2 are interwoven with human rights as these Goals, like human rights standards, provide the platform for collective promotion of human interest, elimination of want and poverty, and satisfaction of human survival needs. The paper also found out that on the other hand, a significant difference is that while the Sustainable Development Goals 1 and 2 have an expiry date of 2030, human rights have no expiry date. It was therefore suggested that while States are encouraged to continue to work assiduously towards attaining the Sustainable Development Goals 1 and 2 which will expire in the next five years, they must invest heavily and constantly in the enforcement and protection of the more durable human rights as the ultimate panacea for eradication of poverty and hunger.

Keywords- development, goals, hunger, poverty, rights, sustainable

1. Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals¹ represent a set of grand universal goals, targets and indicators that the United Nations member States agreed and are expected to use to frame their agendas and political policies over the period 2015 to 2030. The SDGs flowed from, followed and expanded on the Millennium Development Goals which expired in 2015. The Global Goals, officially known as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development or SDGs seek to end poverty and hunger, realise the human rights of all, achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, and ensure the lasting protection of the planet and its natural resources. There are seventeen SDGs but this paper has singled out SDG 1 and SDG 2 which centre around No poverty and Zero hunger for close examination to see how they intersect or link with human rights.

Against this background, this paper will examine the nexus or linkages between SDGs 1 and 2 and human rights. It will also highlight some of the marked differences between these SDGs and human

2. The Seventeen SDGs- What are they?

In a nutshell, the seventeen United Nations SDGs expected to transform the world by 2030 are as follows: GOAL 1: No Poverty; GOAL 2: Zero Hunger; GOAL 3: Good Health and Well-being; GOAL 4: Quality Education; GOAL 5: Gender Equality; GOAL 6: Clean Water and Sanitation; GOAL 7: Affordable and Clean Energy; GOAL 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth; GOAL 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure; GOAL 10: Reduced Inequality; GOAL 12: Responsible Consumption and Production; GOAL 13: Climate Action; GOAL 14: Life Below Water; GOAL 15: Life on Land; GOAL 16: Peace and Justice Strong Institutions; and GOAL 17: Partnerships to achieve the Goal. These seventeen SDGs enumerated above are a proposed set of targets and indicators relating to future international development. Their primary purpose is to envisage a world free of poverty, hunger, disease and want and where all can thrive. According to the UNDP,

The 17 SDGs are integrated, meaning that they recognize that action in one area will affect outcomes in others, and that development must balance social, economic and environmental sustainability. Countries have committed to prioritize progress for those who are furthest behind. The SDGs are designed to end poverty, hunger, AIDS, and discrimination against women and girls. The creativity, knowhow, technology and financial resources from all of society is necessary to achieve the SDGs in every context.²

The SDGs intersect, interconnect and link with human rights in many unique and assorted ways although it remains unarguable that human rights influenced the SDGs. Under article 1(1) of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action,³ which predates the MDGs and its later replacement the SDGs, it is recognised that human rights and fundamental freedoms are the birth rights of all human beings, their protection and promotion is the first responsibility of Governments. No doubt, the goals of the SDGs are downloaded and extracted from the provisions of the numerous human rights standards found in declarations, treaties conventions and instruments. Thus, SDGs, like human rights standards, provide the platform for collective promotion of human interest, elimination of want and poverty, and satisfaction of human survival needs.

3. Linkages between SD1 and SDG 2 with human rights instruments

As already stated, SDG 1 is No Poverty while SDG two is targeted at Zero hunger. These two SDGs interconnect or overlap with human rights in many significant ways. The aim of SDG Goal 1 is to 'End poverty in all its forms everywhere' while SDG Goal 2 on 'Zero Hunger' is to 'End Hunger achieve food security and improved Nutrition, promote sustainable

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¹ Hereinafter abbreviated and referred to as 'SDGs'.

² UNDP, 'The SDGs in Action', <<https://www.undp.org/africa/waca/sdgs-action>> last accessed 25/6/25.

³ Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, Adopted by the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna on 25 June 1993.

agriculture'. SDGs 1 and 2 are analogous to the old MDG 1 ((Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger). Poverty, hunger, want, lack and deprivations are core human rights issues and calls for their eradication exist before both the MDGs and SDGs. Remarkably, in his 1944 State of the Union address, Roosevelt had advocated the adoption of an 'Economic Bill of Rights' when he among other things said that:

We have come to the clear realization of the fact that true individual freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence. 'Necessitous men are not free men'. People who are hungry and out of jobs are the stuff of which dictatorships are made.⁴

Wherever and whenever hunger is identified, there is presence of poverty. Hence, the link between SDG 1 and SDG 2 and human rights are very manifest. Apart from the copious provisions contained in the Declaration to the Right to Development, 1986, article 25 of the UDHR, 1948 provides that

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and wellbeing 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.

With respect to eradication of poverty and hunger, article 22 of the UDHR, 1948 also provides that 'everyone as a member of society has the right to social security and is entitled to realization through national effort and international co-operation in accordance of each state of the economic social and cultural right'. Furthermore, article 11 of the ICESCR, 1966 and article 16 of the ACHPR, 1981 respectively recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions. Specifically, at the African continental level, article 22 of the ACHPR guarantees the right to development which is a comprehensive right that is antithetical to poverty and hunger. Article XV(b) of the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa,⁵ mandate States Parties to ensure that women have the right to nutritious and adequate food. In the same light, article 14(2)(c) of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, 1999⁶ recognises the right of the child to health and health services and makes it a punishable offence if a State does not provide adequate nutrition and safe drinking water to a child.

As a human rights issue, the right to adequate food goes beyond the principal obligation for States to feed their citizens but rather extends to States respecting and protecting the rights related to food as well as emphasizing the obligations of individuals and civil society in this regard. A human rights approach to food and nutrition problems is fundamentally different from the basic needs-oriented approaches to development. It introduces a normative basis, which is obligatory at the state level. It also implies that the 'beneficiaries' of development are active subjects and 'claim holders' and stipulates the duties or obligations of those against whom such claims can be held. Finally, such an approach introduces an accountability dimension not present in basic needs strategies.⁷

The right to adequate food, to be free from hunger or the right to feed oneself is a fundamental human right that is also firmly recognised in article 55 of the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration on the Eradication of Hunger and Malnutrition of 1974⁸ which recalled that 'Even man, woman and child has the inalienable right to be free from hunger and malnutrition in order to develop fully and maintain their physical and mental faculties'. The right to adequate food was also reaffirmed in the Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons of 1975, the provisions of articles 3 and 14 of the CEDAW, 1979, article 4 of the Declaration on the Right to Development of 1986. Furthermore, article 4 of the Declaration of the Right of the Child, 1959 and article 27 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989, all recognized the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development. This is also true of the ILO Convention No. 169 Concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries which also affirms the right to adequate food.⁹ Other international instruments that impact on the right to adequate food and other variants of it include the World Food Conference which first held in 1974,¹⁰ the Declaration of Principles and Programme of Action of the World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development of 1979, the World Summit on Children of 1990, the International Conference on Nutrition of 1992, the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action of the World Conference on Human Rights of 1993, the Copenhagen Declaration and Programme of Action of the World

⁴ Ushistory.org, 'The Economic Bill of Rights', https://www.ushistory.org/documents/economic_bill_of_rights.htm last accessed 20/6/25. See also Alston, P., 'U.S Ratification of the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: The Need for an Entirely New Strategy', 84 *AJIL* (1990) 387.

⁵ Adopted by the 2nd Ordinary Session of the Assembly of the Union Maputo, Mozambique 11th July 2003 Entry into Force 25th November 2005.

⁶ Adopted by the 26th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the OAU Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in July 1990, entered into force on 29 November, 1999.

⁷ FAO, *The Right to Food in Theory and in Practice*, (Rome, Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations, 1998) vi-viii.

⁸ Endorsed by General Assembly resolution 3348 (XXIX) of 17 December 1974- Main part, paragraph 1.

⁹ Article 7(2) and 19(a) and (b).

¹⁰ Others include the International Conference on Nutrition Rome, 1-3 December 1992; World Food Summit, Rome, 13-17 November 1996; World Food Summit +5, Rome, 10-13 June 2002.

Summit for Social Development of 1995, the Beijing Conference on Women of 1995¹¹ and the Rome Declaration on World Food Security and the World Food Summit Plan of Action of 1996.¹²

The inter-relatedness of the right to adequate food and other human rights cannot be overemphasised. Human rights and fundamental freedoms are holistic, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated and the full realization of one set of rights is impossible in situations where another set is not protected. Thus, the right to adequate food is no exception to this assertion as the right to life cannot be sustained without adequate food since starvation and hunger can result to death. By extension, denial of inheritance rights and gender discrimination in access to land sometimes render women without access to land vulnerable to hunger and starvation because land which is necessary for food production will be far beyond their reaches. In the same light, violations of the rights of communities to a safe and livable environment, for instance in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, often result to the loss of arable land and aquatic resources and these also reduce available food and livelihood support for the communities that are dependent on that environment for their sustenance. The United Nations Commission on Human Rights had stated that hunger constitutes an outrage and a violation of human dignity, and therefore requires the adoption of urgent measures at national, regional and international levels for its elimination. The United Nations Commission on Human Rights also reaffirmed the right of everyone to have access to safe and nutritious food, consistent with the right to adequate food and the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger so as to be able to develop fully and maintain their physical and mental capacities.¹³ There can be no greater physical or mental torture or indignity than being hungry and not knowing where to get the next meal.¹⁴

It has also been judicially determined that when the right to housing¹⁵ is violated through forced eviction and relocation, access to a means of livelihood or the right to work is in most instances cut off resulting to a violation of the right to food. In the *Indian case of Olga Tellis v Bombay Municipal Corporation*,¹⁶ slum pavement dwellers brought an action to prevent eviction from their shelters without provision for alternative accommodation. They contended that their eviction would deprive them of their economic livelihood and hence their right to life under article 21 of the Indian Constitution,¹⁷ because their shelters were the only place where they could reside in close proximity to their employment. The Indian Supreme Court agreed with their contention and held among other things that

The sweep of the right to life conferred by *article 21* is wide and far reaching. It does not mean merely that life cannot be extinguished or taken away, as for example by the imposition and execution of the death sentence except according to a procedure established by law. An equally important facet of that right is the right to livelihood because no person can live without the means of living that is the means of livelihood. If the right to livelihood is not treated as part of the constitutional right to life, the easiest way of depriving a person of his right to life would be to deprive him of his means of livelihood to the point of abrogation. Such deprivation would not only denude the life of its effective content and meaningfulness but it would make life impossible to live... Deprive a person of his right to livelihood and you shall have deprived him of his life.

Significantly, the right to food standard amounts simply to access to adequate food. Accessed food must be adequate in terms of quality and quantity. Access to adequate food has been defined in terms of intake of nutrients, calories and proteins. Hunger and malnutrition are the consequences of lacking access to adequate food, which in turn often results from poverty. Overall availability of adequate food is irrelevant if it cannot be accessed by the people in question.¹⁸ The United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in its General Comment No. 12 is emphatic that ‘the right to adequate food is realized when every man, woman and child, alone or in community with others, have physical or economic access at all times to adequate food or means for its procurement’. The right to adequate food shall therefore not be interpreted in a narrow or restrictive sense which equates it with a minimum package of calories, proteins and other specific nutrients. The right to adequate food will have to be realized progressively although States have a core obligation to take the necessary action to mitigate and alleviate hunger even in times of natural and other disaster.¹⁹ The core content of the right to adequate food implies: (a) The availability of food in a quantity and quality sufficient to satisfy the dietary needs of individuals, free from adverse substances, and acceptable within a given culture; and (b) the accessibility of such food in ways that are sustainable and that do not interfere with the enjoyment of other human rights. The ultimate objective of the right to adequate food is to achieve nutritional well-being. Nutritional well-being is dependent on parallel measures in the fields of education and health care. In this broader sense, the right to adequate food is to be understood as the right to adequate food

¹¹ Chapter 4, paragraph 49.

¹² Commitment 7.4. of the World Food Summit Plan of Action.

¹³ Resolution 1998/23 adopted on April 11, 1998.

¹⁴ Kaufmann, P., Kuch, H., Neuhauser, C., and Webster, E., (eds.), *HUMILIATION, DEGRADATION, DEHUMANIZATION Human Dignity Violated*, (New York, Springer, 2011).

¹⁵ *Article 11(1)* of the ICESCR, 1966.

¹⁶ [1986] AIR (Sup. Ct.) 180.

¹⁷ The Constitution of India, 1950 as variously amended and reproduced as The Constitution of India (As on 1st April 2019), 2019 by GOVERNMENT OF INDIA, MINISTRY OF LAW AND JUSTICE LEGISLATIVE DEPARTMENT, <https://legislative.gov.in/sites/default/files/COI-updated.pdf>. Accessed 31/7/25.

¹⁸ ESC Rights Committee in General Comment No. 12 adopted at the 20th Session on 12 May 1999 (Contained in Document E/C.12/1999/5).

¹⁹ 20 Paragraph 6 of General Comment No. 12, ESC Rights Committee in General Comment No. 12 adopted at the 20th Session on 12 May 1999 (Contained in Document E/C.12/1999/5).

and nutrition. The realisation of the right to food is inseparable from social justice, requiring the adoption of appropriate economic, environmental and social policies, both at the national and international levels, oriented to the eradication of poverty and the satisfaction of basic needs.

The detailed analysis above buttress that the SDGs 1 and 2 are related to and flow from existing human rights provisions. When summarily presented, SDG 1 is headed towards adequate standard of living, social security, equal right of women in economic life. SDG 2 is headed towards ensuring adequate food and international cooperation targeting ending hunger and starvation while human rights are the most holistic framework for addressing development issues, including new aid modalities. Irrespective of its controversial philosophical underpinnings, the basic attributes of human rights are that they are rights possessed by all persons, by virtue of their common humanity, to live a life of freedom and dignity. Human rights are universal as they are the same for everyone, everywhere irrespective of colour, race, creed or ethnicity. Human rights have no geo-political or spatio-temporal constraint or limitation. They are inviolable, sacrosanct, immutable and inalienable as they can neither be taken away nor given up without lawful excuse or circumstance. They are holistic and indivisible as there is no hierarchy among rights (at least theoretically), and no right can be suppressed in order to promote another right.

4. Differences between human rights and SDGs 1 and 2

It is apposite to emphasise that while human rights and the SDGs 1 and 2 may share commonalities and be mutually reinforcing, they cannot be conflated as their respective frameworks are not one-and-the-same. Identified key differences between human rights and SDGs 1 and 2 include but are not limited to the following:

- (a) Human rights are wider in scope as they deal with the human condition in the broadest sense. By contrast, the SDGs 1 and 2 are more limited in scope, focusing on key areas for achieving human development. SDGs 1 and 2 can be described as a sub-agenda within the bigger picture of human conditions enveloped under human rights.
- (b) Human rights target and are applicable in all countries because although both promote an inclusive agenda, the countries that the SDGs 1 and 2 speak to are developing countries, whilst human rights deal with all people in all countries – developed and developing.
- (c) Human rights are legally binding and formal as they are enshrined in the UDHR and subsequent, binding, international conventions and various national constitutions. Human rights standards are embodied in the armada of internationally agreed human rights treaties, instruments and laws most which are already ratified by the State parties or which has become part of International Customary Law. By contrast, the SDGs remain a recommended set of development objectives adopted by a large number of countries which have or enjoy no legal status.
- (d) Human rights have no deadline for when they must be realized. By contrast, the SDGs had an agreed timeline of 2030 in which they are to be achieved.
- (e) In terms of measurement, while the SDGs are more conducive to measurement- the SDGs feature well established indicators used to monitor progress, measuring enjoyment of human rights is much more complex, and less commonly attempted.²⁰

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has shown that SDGs 1 and 2 keyed into existing and related human rights norms in many ascertainable and noteworthy ways. Although there are remarkable differences between human rights and the SDGs, they do not necessarily conflict instead they reinforce one another. The future of SDGs 1 and 2 lies with recourse to human rights as an enduring recipe for development and social justice. It is acknowledged that the human rights standards and the SDGs are both geared towards enhancement of human dignity. Whereas the human rights standards serve as the benchmark or yardstick for human rights recognition, promotion and protection, the SDGs 1 and 2 are essentially programme of action derived from the human rights standards by the international community for a fixed period of fifteen years. It is therefore recommended that, while States continue to embrace and work assiduously towards attaining the SDGs 1 and 2 which will expire in the next five years, they must invest heavily and constantly in the enforcement and protection of the more durable human rights as the ultimate panacea for eradication of poverty and hunger.

²⁰UNDP, 'Human Rights and the Millennium Development Goals-Making the Link', file:///C:/Users/user/Downloads/Human%20Rights%20and%20the%20MDGs.pdf last accessed 3/6/25.