

Transforming Our World:

Human Rights in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

Summary: *The [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) marks a paradigm shift towards a more balanced model for sustainable development aiming to secure freedom from fear and freedom from want for all, without discrimination. Strongly grounded in international human rights standards, the new Agenda strives to leave no one behind and puts the imperative of equality and non-discrimination at its heart. Despite some gaps from a human rights perspective, the new Agenda goes far beyond the MDGs in encompassing issues related not only economic, social and cultural rights but also civil and political rights and the right to development. With its universal applicability and its importance in shaping development priorities, the 2030 Agenda will open up new avenues to integrate human rights into global and national policies in both developed and developing countries over the next 15 years. However, a strong accountability architecture must be established at national, regional and global levels. Indicators should be grounded in human rights and data should be disaggregated as far as possible according to the grounds of discrimination prohibited under human rights law. People should be empowered to hold their governments accountable for meeting the new Goals.*

After three years of intergovernmental negotiations and one of the most consultative processes in the history of the United Nations, UN Member States adopted and launched the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development on 25 September 2015.¹ This new Agenda for “people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership”, with its 17 Goals and 169 targets, is vitally important as it will strongly influence the direction of global and national policies relating to sustainable development for the next 15 years.

The 2030 Agenda is unequivocally anchored in human rights: The new Agenda is explicitly “grounded in the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, international human rights treaties” and other instruments, including the Declaration on the Right to Development (para 10). It states that the SDGs aim to “realize the human rights of all” (preamble) and emphasises “the responsibilities of all States... to respect, protect and promote human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, without distinction of any kind as to race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, disability or other status” (para 19). Importantly, the new Agenda is “to be implemented *in a manner that is consistent with the... obligations of states under international law.*”(para 18). This means that any gaps or ambiguities should be resolved in accordance with the requirements of international human rights law.

The SDGs offer a new, more balanced paradigm for more sustainable and equitable development: While the MDGs addressed only a narrow set of economic and social issues, the SDGs include 17 goals and 169 targets covering a wide range of issues that effectively mirror the human rights framework. Many of the SDGs relate closely to economic, social and cultural rights. Goal 16 on peaceful and inclusive societies also covers many dimensions of civil and political rights, including personal security, access to justice, and “fundamental freedoms”. Goal 17 and many of the international targets under each Goal address issues that are related to duties of international cooperation and the right to development.

The SDG targets are closely aligned with human rights standards: Although the SDGs themselves are not framed explicitly in the language of human rights, most targets explicitly reflect the content of corresponding human rights standards. For example, the SDGs address availability, accessibility, affordability and quality of education, health, water and other services related to those rights. There are targets on access to safe, nutritious and sufficient food for all, universal health coverage, free equitable and quality primary and secondary education, access to safe and affordable water, sanitation, hygiene and housing, and access to “safe, effective, quality and affordable essential medicines and vaccines for all.”

However, where there are gaps or inconsistencies, it will be critical to ensure that implementation of the targets is consistent with international human rights law: Examples include sexual and reproductive health and rights (Target 5.6), targets limited to the requirements of national law (Targets 5.a and

¹ See <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld>

16.10), and Targets 16.2 (ending violence and torture) and 16.10 (“fundamental freedoms”). In other cases, inconsistencies with human rights standards may be implicit. For example Target 6.2 aims to eliminate open defecation but, with means of implementation unspecified, may risk criminalising the poorest people in practice. These kinds of unintended effects must be anticipated and prevented.

The 2030 Agenda aims to combat inequalities and discrimination and “leave no one behind”, and contains a strong commitment to the disaggregation of data: The 2030 agenda reaffirms the responsibility of all States, to “respect, protect and promote human rights, without distinction of any kind as to race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinions, national and social origin, property, birth, disability or other status” (para. 19). The SDGs include two dedicated goals on combating inequality and discrimination (Goal 5 on achieving gender equality and Goal 10 on reducing inequalities within and between States). The goals and targets aim to “leave no one behind” and “reach those furthest behind first” (para 4). The Agenda calls for the follow-up and review processes for the SDGs to be based upon evidence and data disaggregated by “income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts” (para 74, and Target 17.18).

The new agenda includes perhaps the most expansive list of groups to be given special focus of any international document of its kind. There is a strong focus on women and girls and gender issues, and the inclusion of children, youth, persons with disabilities, people living with HIV/AIDS, older persons, indigenous peoples, refugees and internally displaced persons and migrants (e.g. para 23). There is an important new commitment of Member States to welcome the positive contribution of migrants and ensure that migration takes place with “full respect for human rights and the human treatment of migrants regardless of migration status, of refugees and of displaced persons” (para 35). However there are also major gaps such as the lack of explicit reference to minorities and LGBTI.

The SDGs are universal and indivisible and all goals must be implemented for all people in all countries: Like the human rights agenda, the 2030 Agenda is a *universal* agenda and is universally applicable for all people in all countries, including developed and developing countries. The new Agenda recognises the different levels of development of countries but expects each country to implement the new Agenda in accordance with their different national realities, resources and capacities. At the same time, the goals and targets are indivisible and an integral whole. Hence, progress must be made on all goals, and the new Agenda cannot be taken as an *à la carte* menu.

A strong accountability framework should be established at national, regional and global levels, including accountability for non-state actors: The 2030 Agenda commits governments to establishing a “robust, voluntary, effective, participatory, transparent and integrated follow-up and review framework” and sets out important principles to guide the review process at all levels, including gender sensitivity and respect for human rights. Details will be defined in intergovernmental negotiations in 2016. A robust accountability mechanism is needed at the global level under the High Level Political Forum. Universal country reviews and thematic reviews should systematically draw upon information and recommendations from the UN human rights mechanisms. Participatory monitoring mechanisms are also needed at the national and regional levels. The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, which were recognised in the 2030 Agenda, should provide the framework for the accountability of the private sector.

A human rights-sensitive SDG indicator framework is needed, to monitor progress for all people, everywhere. The high ambitions of the 2030 Agenda must not be diluted in the development of SDG indicators. The “data revolution” for sustainable development must fully embrace not only human rights-sensitive indicators, but also a human rights-based approach to the collection, production, analysis and dissemination of data. The indicator framework must give effect to the 2030 Agenda’s strong commitment to the collection and disaggregation of data to measure progress in “leaving no one behind,” especially individuals and groups suffering discrimination. Data should be collected and disaggregated by all grounds of discrimination prohibited under international human rights law, which will require developing new partnerships, methods and data sources, including non-traditional data sources and data gatherers including civil society.

For more information and OHCHR position papers on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Agenda, please see: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/MDG/Pages/MDGPost2015Agenda.aspx>