

Sustainable Development and Respect for Human Rights: A Complex Relationship of Dependence

DJAFOUR Islam

Associate Professor (Class A).

Faculty of Law and Political Sciences

Mouloud Mammeri University -Tizi-ouzou Algeria

e-mail: islam.djafour@ummto.dz

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Abstract:

The recognition of sustainable development(SD) in international law has evolved through several stages. These developments have demonstrated that the human person is central to SD and that SD is closely linked to human rights (HR).

The international community, led by the United Nations (UN), seeks to achieve the SDgoals, which aim to ensure a decent standard of living for all in a healthy environment. However, achieving SD depends on respect for the HR enshrined in various international instruments.

Keywords:Sustainable development (SD); Environment; Rio de Janeiro Conference; Human rights (HR); International Covenant on Economic and Social Rights (ICESR).

INTRODUCTION

The environment provides the setting in which individuals exercise the rights recognized under international legal instruments. For those rights to be exercised effectively, the environment must be healthy and free from conditions that impede their enjoyment.

The UN increasingly recognized the adverse environmental effects of human activity, particularly industrial activity. It therefore called on states to preserve the environment. These efforts led to international conferences emphasizing the need for a healthy environment that enables all people to live with dignity.

Against this background, SD emerged as a concept integrating environmental, social, and economic concerns and highlighting their connection with human rights (HR). Its principal objective is to ensure a decent standard of living in a healthy environment without compromising environmental protection or the rights of future generations.

SD initially focused primarily on environmental protection and the preservation of nature. International conferences and reports later placed human beings and the enjoyment of their rights at the center of SD. This raises two main questions: How has SD gained recognition in international law, and what is its relationship with human rights (HR)?

Section One: Recognition of the Principle of Sustainable Development (SD) in International Law

The international community recognized the need for development that addresses the major dimensions of human life. This gave rise to the principle that present needs should be met without

compromising the rights of future generations. This approach was reflected in major international declarations and reports, particularly the Stockholm Conference and the Brundtland Report, followed by the Rio and Johannesburg Conferences.

First Requirement: Recognition of the Principle at the 1972 Stockholm Conference and in the 1987 Brundtland Report

The UN called for measures to create an environment in which people could pursue dignity and well-being. This approach is reflected in the 1972 Stockholm Conference and the 1987 Brundtland Report.

First Branch: Recognition of the Principle at the 1972 Stockholm Conference:

The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) adopted Resolution No. 2398¹, in which it affirmed its awareness of the effects of the environment on the human condition and on physical, mental, and social well-being, as well as on human dignity and the enjoyment of fundamental rights. It also expressed its conviction that attention to problems affecting the human environment was necessary for sound economic and social development².

On that basis, the General Assembly decided to convene a conference on the human environment in Stockholm, Sweden, from 5 to 10 June 1972³.

The General Assembly subsequently adopted Resolution No. 2996, endorsing the Stockholm Declaration and its principles for guiding future international environmental action.⁴⁵

The Stockholm Conference affirmed that human activities may cause irreparable environmental damage and that the human environment must therefore be protected through joint efforts at both the national and international levels. Although the participating states adopted no treaties, they approved an important instrument: the Declaration of Principles concerning the Preservation and Enhancement of the Human Environment, commonly known as the Stockholm Declaration.

Unlike international conventions, the Declaration is a non-binding instrument belonging to the category of soft law. It consists of 26 principles that subsequently formed the basis on which the 1992 Rio de Janeiro Declaration was developed⁶.

The Declaration recognized the fundamental right of every person to freedom, equality, and adequate living conditions in an environment that permits a life of dignity and well-being.⁷ It also emphasized the importance of a healthy environment to humanity's future well-being.⁸

¹ United Nations, Problems of the Human Environment, General Assembly Resolution No. 2398, adopted at the 23rd session, 1742nd plenary meeting, 16 December 1968.

² See paragraph 4 of Resolution No. 2398.

³ See item 1 of Resolution No. 2398.

⁴ United Nations, International Responsibility of States with Respect to the Environment, General Assembly Resolution No. 2996, adopted at the 27th session, 2112th plenary meeting, 15 December 1972.

⁵ United Nations, Report of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, Stockholm, 5-16 June 1972, available at: docs.un.org/fr/A/CONF.48/14/Rev.1

⁶ Anita M. Halvorssen, "International Law and Sustainable Development: Tools for Addressing Climate Change," *Denver Journal of International Law and Policy*, Vol. 39, No. 3, January 2011, p. 400.

⁷ See Principle 1 of the Stockholm Declaration.

⁸ Louis Pettiti, "Peace, Development, and Human Rights," *Les Cahiers de droit*, Vol. 28, No. 3, 1987, p. 664.

The Stockholm Declaration acknowledged the human entitlement to a healthy and sustainable environment for the advantage of both current and forthcoming generations, positioning that right among the essential HR of liberty and equality. Sustainable development aims to harmonize developmental strategies with human necessities, ensuring that contemporary requirements are fulfilled without jeopardizing the needs of future generations.⁹

Second Branch: Recognition of the Principle in the 1987 Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development

In 1983, the UNGA decided to establish the World Commission on Environment and Development, chaired by the then Prime Minister of Norway, Mrs. Gro Harlem Brundtland. Technical committees were also established to provide advice¹⁰.

The Commission issued its report in 1987. Known as the "Brundtland Report" and entitled *Our Common Future*, it emphasized the need to promote SD. This concept gradually became a fundamental pillar of international environmental law¹¹.

The Brundtland Report established a significant theoretical basis for sustainable development. The Commission was assigned the responsibility of evaluating worldwide environmental and developmental circumstances and recommending enduring methods for attaining sustainable development by the year 2000 and thereafter. Presented to the United Nations in 1987, the document established a crucial basis for the 1992 Conference on Environment and Development.¹²

The analysis showed that the developmental strategies adopted in both the Global North and the Global South did not meet the criteria for sustainability. While these developmental trends were effective by modern criteria, they were ultimately unsustainable as they jeopardized the requirements of future generations. The report additionally asserted that sustainable development necessitates addressing the fundamental needs of all individuals and offering everyone the chance to realize their ambitions for an improved existence¹³.

Second Requirement: Recognition of the Principle at the 1992 Rio de Janeiro Conference and the 2002 Johannesburg Conference

The UN continued its efforts to promote SD that addressed the needs and aspirations of people worldwide. It therefore convened an international conference on environment and development, followed by another conference to assess subsequent progress.

⁹Ali Mohamed Wagdy Nour El-Din, *International Protection of the Environment: From the 1972 Stockholm Conference to the 2012 Doha Conference*, Zain Legal and Literary Library, Beirut, 2016, pp. 23 et seq.

¹⁰Qana Zaki, "Sustainable Development and the International Dimension," *Journal of Economic Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2011, p. 135.

¹¹ Livinus I. Nwokike, "The aftermath of Brundtland commission's report: bedrock to international environment law, consciousness and sustainable development," *Journal of Africans Studies*, 2022, p. 17.

¹² Betty Quefflec, *La diversitébiologique: outild'unerecomposition du droit international de la nature - l'exemplemarin*, Doctoral thesis, Université de Bretagne occidentale, 2006, pp. 43-44.

¹³Qana Zaki, op. cit., p. 135 et seq.

First Branch: Recognition of the Principle at the 1992 Rio de Janeiro Conference

By Resolution No. 44/228, the UNGA approved the proposal submitted by the representative of the Government of Brazil to convene a conference on environment and development in Rio de Janeiro¹⁴.

Accordingly, the UN Conference on Environment and Development was held in Rio de Janeiro from 3 to 14 June 1992. Also known as the "Earth Summit," it was attended by 178 states, which discussed how the international community could address the challenges anticipated in the twenty-first century, particularly the following:

- Disparities among human societies, namely between the wealthy industrialized world and the poor developing world.
- The worsening of poverty, hunger, disease, and illiteracy as consequences of pollution.
- The deterioration of ecosystems and the resulting disruption of living organisms.

The Conference adopted the Rio Declaration, whose 27 principles helped integrate SD into international law.¹⁵ Although its principles are non-binding, they were formulated in strong legal terms. The Declaration refers to SD in 12 principles and is therefore regarded as a cornerstone in the development of the concept.¹⁶

The Declaration asserted that humanity is the focal point of sustainable development issues and has the right to a healthy and fruitful existence in alignment with nature¹⁷.

The Rio Declaration placed human beings, rather than nature alone, at the center of SD. It also affirmed that environmental protection must constitute an integral part of the development process and that failure to take this requirement into account may create further obstacles to SD¹⁸. Accordingly, one of the Conference's principal achievements was to establish an approach integrating environmental protection and development while placing human beings at its center.¹⁹

Second Branch: Recognition of the Principle at the 2002 Johannesburg Conference

The UNGA adopted Resolution No. 55/199²⁰, through which it decided to convene a conference on SD in South Africa²¹.

¹⁴ United Nations, United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, General Assembly Resolution No. 2398, adopted at the 44th session, 85th plenary meeting, 22 December 1989.

¹⁵ United Nations, Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, United Nations Conference held in Rio de Janeiro from 3 to 14 June 1992, available at: [Cours-appel-justice.fr/sites/default/files/2019-03/conference%des%Nations%20Unies%20sur%20%27](https://cours-appel-justice.fr/sites/default/files/2019-03/conference%des%Nations%20Unies%20sur%20%27)

¹⁶ Virginie Barral, "Sustainable Development in International Law: Nature and Operation of an Evolutive Legal Norm," *European Journal of International Law*, Vol. 23, No. 2, 2012, p. 379.

¹⁷ See Principle 1 of the Rio de Janeiro Declaration.

¹⁸ Bettina Laville, "Vingt ans après Rio, quelle viabilité pour le « foyer de l'humanité »?," *Vraiment durable*, No. 3, 2013, p. 27.

¹⁹ Hisham bin Issa bin Abdullah Al-Dalali Al-Shuhi, *The Right to Sustainable Development under the Rules of International Human Rights Law*, Master's thesis, Middle East University, 2017, p. 42.

²⁰ United Nations, Ten-Year Review of Progress Achieved in the Implementation of the Outcomes of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, General Assembly Resolution No. 55/199, adopted at the 55th session, 87th plenary meeting, 20 December 2000.

²¹ See items 1 and 2 of Resolution No. 55/199.

The primary aim of the Conference was to evaluate the advancements achieved in executing the results of the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development and to reinforce worldwide dedication to sustainable development. Specific focus was directed at sectors necessitating additional endeavors to execute Agenda 21. The Conference was thus characterized as a summit for the execution of SD.²²

The Conference culminated in the Johannesburg Declaration²³, in which states committed themselves to building a more humane and compassionate global community that respects human dignity²⁴ and to assuming collective responsibility for economic development, social development, and environmental protection. These were recognized as interdependent and mutually reinforcing pillars of SD at the local, national, regional, and global levels²⁵.

States identified poverty eradication, sustainable consumption and production, and the protection and sustainable management of natural resources as essential requirements for SD.²⁶

The Johannesburg Conference produced few major new outcomes and resulted in no new treaties. Nevertheless, certain new objectives were identified, including chemical safety and the reduction of biodiversity loss. The Conference has therefore been regarded by some commentators as a disappointing first major sustainable-development summit of the twenty-first century.²⁷

Despite efforts to promote well-being and human dignity without discrimination, the Johannesburg Declaration failed to bridge the gap between SD and HR.²⁸

Section Two: The Integrative Relationship between Sustainable Development and Human Rights (HR)

The international community increasingly recognized both the dependence of economic and social development on the environment and the environmental problems caused by development in developed and developing states alike. Environment and development are therefore closely interconnected. The environment provides the setting in which HR are exercised, while respect for those rights is essential to achieving SD.

First Requirement: The Close Relationship among the Environment, Development, and Human Rights

The relationship among environmental protection, economic and social development, and internationally recognized HR is therefore fundamental.

²² Abdelrazak Sahraoui, *Principles of Sustainable Development in International Environmental Law*, Doctoral thesis, University of Batna 1 - Hadj Lakhdar, Faculty of Law and Political Science, 2021, p. 85 et seq.

²³ United Nations, *Report of the World Summit on Sustainable Development, Johannesburg, South Africa, 26 August-4 September 2002*, available at: edd.enseigne-ac-lyon.fr/spip/IMG/pdf/rapport_sommet_onu_johannesbourg.pdf

²⁴ See Principle 2 of the Johannesburg Declaration.

²⁵ See Principle 5 of the Johannesburg Declaration.

²⁶ See Principle 11 of the Johannesburg Declaration.

²⁷ George Pring, "The 2002 Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development: International Environmental Law Collides with Reality, Turning Jo'Burg unto Joke'Burg," *Denver Journal of International Law and Policy*, Vol. 30, No. 3, 2002, p. 420.

²⁸ Sarah Jamal, "La synergie entre droits de l'homme et objectifs du développement durable," *Droits Fondamentaux*, No. 21, January-December 2023, p. 4.

First Branch: The Relationship between the Environment and Development

The Stockholm Conference adopted a broad understanding of the environment, defining it as the stock of material and social resources available at a particular time and place to satisfy human needs and aspirations. French legislation defined the environment as encompassing nature, animal and plant species, air, land, and mineral resources. Algerian legislation, in turn, defined it as abiotic and biotic natural resources, including air, the atmosphere, water, land and its subsoil, animals and plants, including genetic heritage, the forms of interaction among these resources, and the interaction between places and natural landscapes²⁹.

The expansion of factories and power-generating facilities, combined with the unsustainable exploitation of natural resources, has increased air, water, and land pollution.

SD seeks to balance the requirements of development with the need to preserve the environment. This objective is reflected in international legal instruments, including the instrument establishing the Global Environment Facility, which finances priority environmental projects in support of SD.³⁰

The relationship between the environment and SD is also reflected in the Rio de Janeiro Declaration, which indicated that the right to development must take into account the needs of present and future generations and that environmental protection must be placed at the heart of development processes.

The Convention on Biological Diversity stipulates that developed nations are obligated to supply new and supplementary financial resources to assist developing nations in covering the total agreed incremental expenses associated with fulfilling their commitments under the Convention and reaping its benefits³¹.

The Rio Conference sought to reconcile environmental protection and development through the principle of SD, balancing the two in the common interest. The Rio Declaration expressly recognized that environment and development are interdependent and inseparable.³²

Second Branch: The Connection between Sustainable Development (SD) and Human Rights (HR)

SD is based on the integration of social inclusion, environmental protection, and economic growth. HR are therefore a fundamental pillar of inclusive SD and an essential component of its social, environmental, and economic dimensions.

Accordingly, meaningful development is impossible where human dignity is undermined. The connection between development and HR is therefore clear: genuine development is measured by people's quality of life, not solely by economic indicators.

²⁹ Hassouna Abdelghani, *Legal Protection of the Environment within the Framework of Sustainable Development*, Doctoral dissertation, Mohamed Khider University of Biskra, Faculty of Law and Political Science, 2013, p. 14 et seq.

³⁰ Gama Sa, *The Global Environment Facility*, Doctoral Thesis in Law, University of Law, Economics and Sciences of Aix-Marseille, Faculty of Law and Political Science, 2011, p. 23.

³¹ Mouka Abdelkarim and Karimi Rima, "The Interrelationship between Environmental Protection and Sustainable Development within the Framework of Respect for Human Rights," *Journal of Studies on the Effectiveness of the Legal Rule*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2022, p. 41.

³² See Principle 25 of the Rio de Janeiro Declaration.

One of the principal aims of the UN 2030 Agenda is to ensure a dignified, high-quality life for all, regardless of color, sex, or affiliation. However, pursuing SD without simultaneously protecting HR would undermine both confidence in the Agenda and its underlying purpose.³³

SD and HR may be closely connected without SD itself being classified as a human right. The recognition and protection of certain rights can promote SD. For example, recognizing and protecting the right to a healthy environment necessarily requires consideration of sustainable-development principles.

Respect for sustainable-development principles also strengthens the protection of HR. The two can therefore be closely connected without being treated as equivalent legal concepts.³⁴

The environment provides the foundation for economic development and the setting in which HR are exercised. HR include the right to the environment and the right to development. Accordingly, integrating environmental protection and development through SD helps create the conditions necessary for the effective enjoyment of HR. By contrast, conflict between environmental protection and development can undermine HR.

The Stockholm Declaration recognized the right to live in conditions compatible with human dignity. The Brundtland Report likewise emphasized an environment conducive to health and well-being, while the Rio Declaration linked the right to development with environmental protection. Human beings cannot benefit from development in a degraded and unhealthy environment³⁵.

Second Requirement: The Impact of Respect for Human Rights on the Achievement of Sustainable Development (SD) Economic and Social Rights as a Model

Respect for HR is fundamental to human dignity, while violations of those rights undermine that dignity. This is reflected in the extensive body of law devoted to HR. Because SD places human beings at its center, it cannot be achieved without respect for HR.

First Branch: The Impact of Economic Rights

Since the late 1990s, the United Nations has endeavored to include HR into its diverse initiatives by formulating a strategy focused on the right to development. In this framework, the UN aimed to enhance the linkage between environmental safeguarding and HR via scholarly discourse and deliberations within its organizations. The 1994 draft Declaration of Principles on HR and the Environment was supplemented with a study acknowledging a human right to a secure and healthy environment that satisfies current requirements without jeopardizing the rights of future generations. This advancement reinforced the linkage between HR and sustainable development³⁶.

³³ Innocent Onohomhen Ebbih, "Human rights and sustainable development: Exploring the interplay and implications for Nigeria's Development agenda," *African Journal of Legal Research*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2025, pp. 252-253.

³⁴ Pritam Baruah, "Human Rights Theory and Sustainable Development," *Journal of Indian Law and Society*, Vol. 7, 2016, p. 65.

³⁵ Mouka Abdelkarim and Karim Rima, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

³⁶ Christel Cournil, "The Link between Human Rights and Sustainable Development after Rio+20: Influence, Origins, and Scope," *Droits fondamentaux*, 2013, p. 4.

The 1948 Universal Declaration of HR³⁷ identified economic rights, which are essential to individual dignity and the free development of the human personality. The wording of the Declaration indicates that social security was regarded at the time as the principal means of guaranteeing those rights.

The Universal Declaration recognizes several categories of economic rights. For example, it recognizes everyone's right to work and to freely choose their employment.³⁸ The right to work is closely connected with several related economic rights. Workers are entitled to non-discriminatory remuneration, freedom to organize in defense of their interests, and just working conditions. The Declaration considers remuneration adequate when it ensures workers and their families a life consistent with human dignity, an objective also central to SD³⁹.

The ICESR also recognized a set of economic rights. It recognizes the right to decent work as fundamental to economic development. This right extends to all peoples and constitutes an important indicator of development.⁴⁰

The right includes the opportunity to earn a living through freely chosen work and requires appropriate measures for its protection, including technical and vocational guidance, training programs, and policies promoting sustainable economic development and full and productive employment while respecting political and economic freedoms.⁴¹

The Covenant also provides for equal remuneration for men and women performing work of equal value⁴² and equal opportunities for promotion based on seniority and competence⁴³.

The ICESR also recognized the right of all peoples to benefit from and exploit their resources without interference from any party. Peoples have the freedom to pursue their economic development and to dispose freely of their wealth, while no person may be deprived of the means of subsistence⁴⁴.

Respect for economic rights creates conditions conducive to human progress and prosperity. This objective lies at the heart of international efforts, led by the UN, to achieve SD for present and future generations.

Second Branch: The Impact of Social Rights

International institutions increasingly recognize poverty and vulnerability as serious human-rights concerns. The UN has played a leading role in promoting rights to health, education,

³⁷ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 10 December 1948, available at: [Ohchr.org/sites/default/files/UDHR/Documents/UDHR_Translations/fm.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/UDHR/Documents/UDHR_Translations/fm.pdf)

³⁸ See Article 23 of the Declaration.

³⁹ Lucie Lamarche, "Le droit international des droits économiques de la personne et le Quart monde occidental: a-t-il parlé pour ne rien dire?," *Revue québécoise de droit international*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 1993, p. 37.

⁴⁰ United Nations, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, General Assembly Resolution No. 2200, adopted at the 21st session, 1496th plenary meeting, 16 December 1966.

⁴¹ See Article 6 of the International Covenant on Economic and Social Rights.

⁴² Sudershan Kumar Pathania, "Sustainable development goal: Gender equality for women's empowerment and human rights," *International Journal of Research - Granthaalayah*, Vol. 5, No. 4, April 2017, pp. 72-82.

⁴³ See Article 7 of the Covenant.

⁴⁴ See Article 1 of the Covenant.

housing, and security worldwide. This approach is also reflected in UNESCO's establishment of a dedicated section on HR and human security.⁴⁵

The relationship between poverty and HR is well established. Poverty can undermine social rights, while violations of those rights can push individuals into poverty or prevent them from escaping it, depriving them of the basic conditions required for a dignified life. This relationship has been recognized by numerous international bodies, both within the UN system and within regional HR systems.

The Universal Declaration of HR envisaged a world in which human beings are free from fear and poverty and recognized a set of social rights essential to human dignity. Among the most prominent of these is the right to an adequate standard of living. The Declaration also recognized the right of every person to a social order in which all rights and freedoms can be realized⁴⁶.

In this framework, the ICESR acknowledged the entitlement of each person to social security and the right to a sufficient quality of living that ensures food, clothing, and shelter, together with the ongoing enhancement of living conditions. To fulfill this goal, nations must enhance food production and preservation while ensuring its distribution aligns with the need of each state⁴⁷.

The entitlement to education is classified as a social right and is acknowledged by the Universal Declaration of HR, which stipulates that every individual has the right to education, that primary and foundational education should be provided at no cost, that primary education must be mandatory, and that access to tertiary education should be equally granted based on merit⁴⁸.

Education is addressed by SD Goal 4 of the 2030 Agenda. The goal seeks to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities, including the skills needed to support SD.⁴⁹

SD cannot be achieved without adequate physical and mental health. In view of its importance, the ICESR recognized the right of every person to enjoy the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.

The right to health includes access to essential health services, disease prevention and treatment, epidemic control, and necessary medicines. It also includes access to an integrated health-protection system and participation in decisions about health services that affect individual life and well-being.⁵⁰

⁴⁵Blandine Destremau, "Human Rights: Social Rights for the Poorest in Developing Countries?," HAL-02968404, 2008, p. 2.

⁴⁶ Ruth Martinon Quintero, "Social sustainability, Agenda 2030 and human rights. An opportunity to reinforce economic, social and cultural rights in developed countries," *Ordineinternazionale e dirittiumani*, 2023, p. 796.

⁴⁷ See Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic and Social Rights.

⁴⁸ See Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

⁴⁹ Areej Ali Jabr and Taghreed William Saad Odeh, "Contributions of Human Rights Culture and Education to Sustainable Development," *Annals of the Arts of Ain Shams*, Vol. 52, January-March 2024, p. 187.

⁵⁰ Houcine Misbah Al-Allam, "Sustainable Development and Human Rights: A Study in Light of the 1966 International Covenant," *African Journal of Advanced Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol. 4, No. 4, 2025, p. 588; see Article 12 of the International Covenant on Economic and Social Rights.

These examples demonstrate that respect for social rights is integral to achieving SD. However, serious violations of these rights at both national and international levels continue to impede SD and the protection of human dignity.

CONCLUSION

The world needs equality and justice. These objectives cannot be achieved without respect for HR and accountability for human-rights violations. Greater national and international efforts are therefore needed to achieve global development objectives and protect human dignity for present and future generations.

SD seeks to balance economic and social development with environmental protection. Its purpose is to ensure a minimum level of well-being for present and future generations. However, this objective depends on respect for HR. Achieving SD therefore depends on the effective exercise of legally guaranteed rights and freedoms.

International practice continues to reveal serious and systematic HR violations. These violations prevent many people from enjoying a decent standard of living consistent with human dignity. Accordingly, it cannot yet be said that the SDgoals have been fully achieved.