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A HUMAN RIGHTS–BASED APPROACH TO ACHIEVING THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

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ABSTRACT

The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the United Nations in 2015 marked a significant shift in the global development agenda, emphasizing inclusivity, sustainability, and universality. The 17 SDGs aim to eradicate poverty, reduce inequalities, ensure environmental sustainability, and promote peace and justice. Parallel to this, the framework of human rights has evolved as a legally binding system that safeguards the dignity, equality, and freedom of individuals across the globe. This paper critically examines the interrelationship between sustainable development and human rights, with a particular focus on the Human Rights–Based Approach (HRBA) as a mechanism for achieving the SDGs.

The paper argues that while the SDGs provide a broad and ambitious policy framework, they lack enforceability. In contrast, human rights law imposes binding obligations on states and provides mechanisms for accountability. By integrating human rights principles into SDG implementation, a more effective, inclusive, and equitable development model can be achieved. The HRBA emphasizes participation, accountability, non-discrimination, transparency, and empowerment, thereby ensuring that development processes benefit all sections of society, particularly marginalized communities.

The research adopts a doctrinal methodology, analyzing primary sources such as constitutional provisions, international conventions, and judicial decisions, along with secondary sources including books, journal articles, and reports. Landmark and contemporary case laws are examined to illustrate how courts have expanded the scope of human rights in ways that align with sustainable development objectives. These judicial interpretations play a crucial role in bridging the gap between policy and enforcement.

The paper concludes that sustainable development and human rights are mutually reinforcing frameworks. Without the incorporation of human rights principles, the SDGs risk becoming mere aspirational goals. Therefore, a Human Rights–Based Approach is essential to ensure that development is not only sustainable but also just, inclusive, and accountable.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals, Human Rights, HRBA, Equality, Accountability.

INTRODUCTION

Sustainable development has emerged as one of the most significant global priorities in the 21st century. The adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015 reflects a collective commitment to addressing global challenges such as poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, and lack of access to basic services. The SDGs represent a comprehensive framework aimed at achieving a balanced approach to development that integrates economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection.

At the same time, human rights have long been recognized as fundamental to the dignity and well-being of individuals. Since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948, the international community has developed a robust legal framework to protect civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights. These rights impose obligations on states to respect, protect, and fulfill the rights of individuals.

The relationship between sustainable development and human rights is deeply interconnected. Both frameworks share common objectives, such as the eradication of poverty, promotion of equality, and protection of the environment. However, there exists a fundamental difference between the two: while human rights are legally binding and enforceable through judicial mechanisms, the SDGs are largely aspirational and lack direct enforcement mechanisms.

An important dimension that strengthens the SDG framework is its close association with the principles of human rights. Historically, development policies often overlooked the needs and rights of marginalized communities, leading to unequal distribution of resources and opportunities. However, the integration of human rights into development discourse has transformed this approach by emphasizing equity, participation, and accountability. Human rights ensure that development is not merely about achieving numerical targets but about

improving the quality of life for all individuals, particularly those who are most vulnerable.

Another significant aspect of the SDGs is their universal applicability. Unlike the earlier Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which primarily focused on developing countries, the SDGs apply equally to all nations, irrespective of their level of development. This universality reflects a shared responsibility among states to address global challenges collectively. It also reinforces the idea that human rights are universal and must be protected in every context, whether in developed or developing nations.

This paper seeks to critically examine the intersection between sustainable development and human rights, with a particular focus on the Human Rights–Based Approach as a tool for achieving the SDGs. It aims to analyze how integrating human rights principles into development policies can enhance accountability, promote inclusivity, and ensure long-term sustainability. By exploring legal frameworks, judicial decisions, and policy mechanisms, the study highlights the importance of a rights-based approach in addressing contemporary global challenges.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a **doctrinal research methodology**, which primarily involves the analysis of legal principles, statutes, judicial decisions, and scholarly writings relating to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and human rights. Doctrinal research is suitable for this study as it focuses on the interpretation and evaluation of existing legal frameworks rather than empirical data collection.

The research is based on both **primary and secondary sources**. Primary sources include constitutional provisions, international conventions such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and judicial pronouncements of courts. These sources provide the legal foundation for understanding the relationship between human rights and sustainable development. Secondary sources include books, journal articles, reports of international organizations, and online databases, which provide theoretical insights and critical perspectives.¹

The study follows a **descriptive and analytical approach**, examining the conceptual framework of SDGs and human rights, and critically analyzing the effectiveness of a Human

Rights-Based Approach (HRBA). A comparative perspective has also been adopted to understand global developments in this field.²

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To critically analyze the concept and significance of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):

This study aims to examine the origin, evolution, and global importance of SDGs as a comprehensive framework for addressing economic, social, and environmental challenges. It focuses on understanding how SDGs contribute to inclusive and sustainable development at both national and international levels.

2. To examine the scope and legal framework of human rights in the context of development:

The study seeks to explore the nature of human rights, including civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, and their recognition under international conventions and the Indian Constitution. It emphasizes how these rights form the foundation for ensuring dignity, equality, and justice in development processes.

3. To explore the interrelationship between SDGs and human rights:

This objective focuses on identifying the areas of convergence between SDGs and human rights principles. It analyzes how various SDGs correspond to fundamental human rights and how their integration can lead to more effective and equitable development outcomes.

4. To evaluate the role of the Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) in achieving sustainable development:

The study aims to assess how HRBA integrates principles such as participation, accountability, non-discrimination, and transparency into development policies. It examines how this approach strengthens governance and ensures that development benefits reach marginalized and vulnerable groups.

5. To analyze judicial contributions and case laws linking human rights with sustainable development:

This objective examines the role of the judiciary, particularly in India, in expanding the scope of fundamental rights through landmark judgments. It highlights how courts have

1. United Nations, Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2015).
2. M. Kaltenborn et al., Sustainable Development Goals and Human Rights (Springer, 2020).

interpreted rights related to environment, health, and livelihood in alignment with sustainable development.

HYPOTHESIS OF THE STUDY

The present study is based on the central hypothesis that the effective realization of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is significantly dependent on the integration of human rights principles. While the SDGs provide a comprehensive and ambitious framework for addressing global challenges such as poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation, they are largely non-binding in nature. In contrast, human rights are legally enforceable and impose binding obligations on states. Therefore, integrating human rights into the SDG framework ensures that development is not only goal-oriented but also legally accountable and just.

The hypothesis further assumes that the absence of enforceable mechanisms within the SDG framework limits its effectiveness. Since SDGs rely primarily on voluntary commitments by states, their implementation may vary significantly across different regions. This creates a gap between policy objectives and actual outcomes. A Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) helps bridge this gap by introducing legal accountability and ensuring that states are obligated to respect, protect, and fulfill the rights of individuals during the development process.

Another important aspect of the hypothesis is that human rights principles such as equality, non-discrimination, participation, and transparency play a crucial role in strengthening development outcomes. These principles ensure that development policies are inclusive and that marginalized and vulnerable groups are not excluded. By focusing on empowerment and participation, HRBA transforms individuals from passive beneficiaries into active rights-holders, thereby enhancing the overall effectiveness and sustainability of development initiatives.

The hypothesis also recognizes the significant role of the judiciary in linking human rights with sustainable development. In countries like India, courts have adopted a progressive approach by expanding the scope of fundamental rights under Article 21 to include rights related to environment, health, and livelihood. Landmark decisions such as *Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan* and *Olga Tellis v. Bombay Municipal Corporation* have contributed to aligning domestic legal frameworks with sustainable development principles.

Finally, the hypothesis acknowledges that various institutional and socio-economic challenges hinder the effective integration of human rights into SDG implementation. Factors such as lack of awareness, weak governance structures, inequality, and limited resources act as barriers to achieving sustainable development. Therefore, the study assumes that addressing these challenges through stronger legal frameworks, policy reforms, and increased awareness is essential for ensuring that the SDGs are achieved in a manner that is inclusive, equitable, and sustainable.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between sustainable development and human rights has been widely explored in academic literature. Scholars have emphasized that development cannot be meaningful unless it is grounded in human dignity and equality.

M. Kaltenborn, M. Krajewski, and H. Kuhn argue that human rights provide a **normative and legally binding framework** that strengthens the implementation of SDGs. They point out that while SDGs are policy-oriented, human rights impose enforceable obligations on states.

United Nations reports highlight that a large proportion of SDG targets are directly linked to internationally recognized human rights standards. These reports advocate the adoption of a Human Rights–Based Approach to ensure inclusivity and accountability in development policies.

In the Indian context, scholars have examined the role of the judiciary in expanding the scope of fundamental rights under Article 21 of the Constitution. Judicial activism has played a crucial role in recognizing rights related to environment, health, and livelihood, thereby aligning domestic law with sustainable development goals.

However, despite extensive literature, challenges remain in practical implementation. Many studies focus on theoretical aspects without addressing issues such as lack of awareness, weak governance, and socio-economic disparities. This study attempts to bridge this gap by combining doctrinal analysis with judicial perspectives.

CONCEPT OF HUMAN RIGHTS–BASED APPROACH (HRBA) OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Meaning and Definition

A Human Rights–Based Approach (HRBA) represents a comprehensive and transformative framework that integrates the norms, principles, and standards of international human rights law into the processes of development planning, implementation, and evaluation. Unlike traditional development models that primarily focus on economic growth or welfare distribution, HRBA emphasizes that development must be rooted in the protection and promotion of human dignity, equality, and freedom. ¹ It recognizes that development is not merely a matter of policy discretion but a legal obligation that must be fulfilled by the state.

This approach fundamentally shifts the perspective of development from a charity-based or needs-based model to a rights-based model. In this framework, individuals are no longer seen as passive beneficiaries of governmental schemes but as active **rights-holders** who are entitled to claim their rights. Correspondingly, the state and its institutions are viewed as **duty-bearers** with a legal responsibility to respect, protect, and fulfill these rights. This shift ensures that development initiatives are guided by established legal standards rather than political convenience or administrative discretion. Furthermore, HRBA emphasizes that development must be inclusive and equitable, ensuring that the benefits of growth reach all sections of society, particularly those who are marginalized or disadvantaged.

Core Principles of HRBA

The Human Rights–Based Approach is grounded in a set of fundamental principles derived from international human rights law, which collectively ensure that development processes are just, inclusive, and accountable. One of the most important principles is participation, which guarantees that individuals have the right to actively engage in decision-making processes that affect their lives. This ensures that development policies are not imposed from above but are shaped by the needs and aspirations of the people themselves.

Another key principle is accountability, which requires that governments and institutions be answerable for their actions and omissions. This principle is closely linked to the rule of law, as it ensures that mechanisms such as judicial review and grievance redressal are available to address violations of rights. Non-discrimination and equality form the cornerstone of HRBA, ensuring that all individuals, regardless of their social, economic, or cultural background, have equal access to opportunities and resources. This is particularly important in addressing

systemic inequalities and ensuring that vulnerable groups are not excluded from development benefits.

Transparency is another essential element, as it ensures that information regarding policies, decisions, and resource allocation is accessible to the public. This fosters trust and enables citizens to hold authorities accountable. Empowerment, on the other hand, focuses on strengthening the capacity of individuals to claim their rights and challenge injustices. Together, these principles create a framework that not only promotes development but also ensures that it is carried out in a manner consistent with human rights standards.

HRBA and Sustainable Development Goals

The relationship between the Human Rights–Based Approach and the Sustainable Development Goals is both intrinsic and complementary. The SDGs, adopted as part of the 2030 Agenda, provide a comprehensive framework for addressing global challenges such as poverty, inequality, health, education, and environmental sustainability. However, their non-binding nature means that their implementation largely depends on the willingness and commitment of states. This often results in inconsistencies and gaps in achieving the intended outcomes.

HRBA addresses these limitations by providing a legal and normative foundation that strengthens the implementation of SDGs. By aligning development goals with human rights obligations, HRBA ensures that states are not merely pursuing policy objectives but are fulfilling legally recognized duties. For instance, the goal of eradicating poverty is closely linked to the right to an adequate standard of living, while the goal of ensuring quality education corresponds to the right to education. Similarly, environmental sustainability is connected to the right to a healthy and safe environment.

Through this integration, HRBA transforms the SDGs from aspirational targets into enforceable commitments. It also ensures that development is inclusive and that no one is left behind, particularly marginalized and vulnerable populations. In this way, HRBA enhances both the effectiveness and legitimacy of the SDG framework.

Legal and Institutional Framework

The Human Rights–Based Approach is supported by a robust legal and institutional framework at both the international and national levels. Internationally, instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights establish the foundational principles of human rights and impose obligations on states

to ensure their realization. These instruments provide a normative basis for integrating human rights into development policies and programs.

At the national level, particularly in India, the Constitution plays a pivotal role in reinforcing the principles of HRBA. Fundamental Rights enshrined in Part III of the Constitution guarantee essential freedoms and protections, while the Directive Principles of State Policy guide the state in promoting social and economic justice. The judiciary has been instrumental in bridging the gap between human rights and sustainable development through progressive interpretations of constitutional provisions.

The expansion of Article 21 to include rights such as the right to livelihood, health, and a clean environment demonstrates the dynamic nature of human rights jurisprudence in India. Judicial decisions have effectively incorporated principles of sustainable development into domestic law, thereby strengthening the legal framework for HRBA. This interplay between international norms and national legal systems ensures that the principles of HRBA are not merely theoretical but are actively implemented.

Significance of HRBA

The significance of the Human Rights–Based Approach lies in its ability to transform development into a process that is not only economically viable but also socially just and legally accountable. By prioritizing human dignity and equality, HRBA addresses the root causes of poverty and inequality rather than merely their symptoms. It ensures that development policies are inclusive and that the benefits of growth are equitably distributed across society.

Moreover, HRBA enhances governance by establishing clear responsibilities for state authorities and providing mechanisms for monitoring and accountability. It promotes transparency and public participation, thereby strengthening democratic processes. The focus on empowerment ensures that individuals are equipped with the knowledge and resources necessary to claim their rights and challenge injustices.

In addition, HRBA contributes to long-term sustainability by ensuring that development initiatives are environmentally responsible and socially inclusive. It bridges the gap between legal obligations and policy implementation, ensuring that development is not only effective but also aligned with the principles of justice and equity. Ultimately, HRBA provides a holistic framework that integrates law, policy, and practice, making it an essential tool for achieving sustainable development in a comprehensive and meaningful manner

IMPORTANT CASE LAWS

1. Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan¹

Facts

The case arose after the brutal gang rape of Bhanwari Devi, a social worker in Rajasthan, who was targeted for attempting to prevent child marriage in her village. Despite the seriousness of the offence, there was a failure of the legal system to provide adequate protection and redress. At that time, India lacked specific legislation addressing sexual harassment at the workplace. This led to the filing of a public interest litigation by various social activists and organizations seeking the enforcement of fundamental rights of working women under the Constitution.

Judgment

The Supreme Court recognized sexual harassment at the workplace as a violation of fundamental rights under Articles 14, 15, and 21 of the Constitution. The Court relied on international conventions, particularly the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and laid down the Vishaka Guidelines to prevent sexual harassment at workplaces. This case is significant as it established the principle that international human rights norms can be incorporated into domestic law in the absence of specific legislation. It directly supports a Human Rights–Based Approach by promoting gender equality and dignity, aligning with SDG 5 (Gender Equality).

2. Olga Tellis v. Bombay Municipal Corporation²

Facts

The case involved the eviction of pavement dwellers and slum residents in Mumbai by municipal authorities. The petitioners argued that eviction would deprive them of their means of livelihood, as they lived close to their workplaces. They contended that such eviction without rehabilitation would violate their fundamental rights under Article 21 of the Constitution.

Judgment

The Supreme Court held that the right to livelihood is an integral part of the right to life under Article 21. The Court emphasized that eviction without providing alternative accommodation would deprive individuals of their means of survival and hence violate their fundamental rights. However, the Court also balanced the need for urban development by allowing eviction with

1. *Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan*, (1997) 6 SCC 241.

2. *Olga Tellis V Bombay Municipal Corporation*, (1985)3SCC 545

reasonable procedure. This case reflects the integration of human rights into development policies and aligns with SDG 1 (No Poverty)

3. M.C. Mehta v. Union of India³

Facts

This case involved the leakage of oleum gas from a factory in Delhi, which caused significant harm to the public. The incident raised serious concerns regarding industrial safety, environmental protection, and the liability of enterprises engaged in hazardous activities.

Judgment

The Supreme Court evolved the principle of **absolute liability**, holding that enterprises engaged in hazardous activities are strictly liable for any damage caused, regardless of fault. The Court emphasized the importance of protecting the environment and public health, thereby strengthening the right to a clean and safe environment under Article 21. This judgment is a landmark in environmental jurisprudence and aligns with SDG 13 (Climate Action), reinforcing the principles of sustainable development through a human rights lens.

4. Paschim Banga Khet Mazdoor Samity v. State of West Bengal⁴

Facts

The case concerned a person who suffered serious injuries in a train accident and was denied treatment at several government hospitals due to lack of facilities. The petitioner approached the Court alleging violation of his fundamental rights due to the failure of the state to provide timely medical treatment.

Judgment

The Supreme Court held that the right to health is an essential part of the right to life under Article 21. The Court directed the state to improve medical infrastructure and ensure timely treatment to all individuals. It emphasized that the government has a constitutional obligation to provide adequate healthcare facilities. This case aligns with SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and highlights the role of HRBA in ensuring access to essential services.

5. Vellore Citizens Welfare Forum v. Union of India⁵

Facts

The case dealt with environmental pollution caused by tanneries in Tamil Nadu, which

3. M.C. Mehta v. Union of India, (1987) 1 SCC 395.

4. Paschim Banga Khet Mazdoor Samity v. State of West Bengal, (1996) 4 SCC 37.

discharged untreated effluents into water bodies, affecting agriculture and public health. The petitioners sought judicial intervention to address environmental degradation and protect the rights of affected communities.

Judgment

The Supreme Court recognized the concept of **sustainable development** as part of Indian law and introduced the **Precautionary Principle** and the **Polluter Pays Principle**. The Court held that environmental protection is essential for the enjoyment of fundamental rights. This case is a landmark in integrating environmental sustainability with human rights, aligning with SDGs related to environmental protection.

6. Narmada Bachao Andolan v. Union of India⁶

Facts

This case involved the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam on the Narmada River, which led to large-scale displacement of local communities. The petitioners challenged the project on the grounds of environmental damage and violation of the rights of displaced persons.

Judgment

The Supreme Court upheld the construction of the dam but emphasized the importance of rehabilitation and resettlement of displaced persons. The Court balanced the need for development with environmental protection and human rights considerations. It highlighted that sustainable development requires a balance between economic growth and social justice

SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The effective implementation of a Human Rights–Based Approach (HRBA) to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) requires a comprehensive and multi-dimensional strategy that integrates legal, institutional, and policy reforms. One of the primary recommendations is the need to strengthen the legal framework by explicitly incorporating human rights principles into national laws and development policies. While the SDGs provide a broad developmental agenda, their non-binding nature often leads to weak enforcement. Therefore, aligning domestic legislation with international human rights standards can ensure greater accountability and transform policy commitments into enforceable obligations.¹

5. *Vellore Citizens Welfare Forum v. Union of India*, (1996) 5 SCC 647.

6. *Narmada Bachao Andolan V Union Of India* (2000)10 SCC 664

1. *United Nations, Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2015)*.

2. *S. P. Sathé, Judicial Activism in India (Oxford University Press, 2002)*.

Another important recommendation is the enhancement of institutional mechanisms to ensure transparency and accountability in governance. Independent monitoring bodies and human rights institutions must be empowered to oversee the implementation of SDGs and address violations effectively. Strengthening judicial mechanisms is equally essential, as courts play a crucial role in interpreting and enforcing human rights in the context of development. Judicial activism, particularly in countries like India, has significantly contributed to expanding the scope of fundamental rights, and continued judicial engagement is necessary for ensuring that development remains inclusive and rights-oriented.²

Further, there is a pressing need to promote awareness and capacity-building among stakeholders, including government authorities, civil society organizations, and the general public. Lack of awareness about human rights and SDGs often acts as a barrier to effective implementation. Educational programs, training initiatives, and public campaigns should be conducted to empower individuals to claim their rights and participate actively in development processes. This participatory approach ensures that development policies are responsive to the needs of the people and do not exclude marginalized and vulnerable groups.³

In addition, inclusive governance must be prioritized to ensure that the benefits of development reach all sections of society. Special attention should be given to disadvantaged groups such as women, children, minorities, and economically weaker sections. Policies should be designed in a manner that addresses structural inequalities and promotes social justice. The principle of “leaving no one behind,” which is central to the SDG framework, can only be achieved through targeted interventions that focus on the most vulnerable populations.⁴

Finally, there is a need for effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to track the progress of SDG implementation. Governments should establish transparent systems for data collection, reporting, and assessment to ensure that development goals are being achieved in a timely and efficient manner. Collaboration between governments, international organizations, and civil society is essential for sharing best practices and ensuring coordinated efforts. By adopting these measures, a Human Rights–Based Approach can be effectively implemented, thereby ensuring that sustainable development is achieved in a manner that is equitable, inclusive, and legally accountable.⁵

3.UNDP, Human Development Report (2020).

4.United Nations, Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2015).

CONCLUSION

The study of a Human Rights–Based Approach (HRBA) to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) highlights that sustainable development cannot be effectively realized without the integration of human rights principles into development frameworks. While the SDGs provide a comprehensive and globally accepted roadmap for addressing issues such as poverty, inequality, health, and environmental protection, their non-binding nature often limits their practical implementation. In contrast, human rights establish legally enforceable obligations on states, thereby ensuring that development is not merely aspirational but grounded in accountability and justice.

The analysis further demonstrates that the core principles of HRBA, including participation, accountability, non-discrimination, transparency, and empowerment, play a crucial role in making development inclusive and equitable. These principles ensure that all individuals, particularly marginalized and vulnerable groups, are able to participate in and benefit from development processes. By emphasizing dignity and equality, HRBA transforms development into a people-centered process rather than a purely economic or policy-driven exercise.

Judicial intervention has also emerged as a significant factor in strengthening the connection between human rights and sustainable development. Through progressive interpretations of fundamental rights, courts have expanded the scope of rights to include essential aspects such as livelihood, health, and environmental protection. These developments have contributed to aligning domestic legal systems with broader sustainable development objectives, thereby reinforcing the importance of a rights-based approach.

However, the study also recognizes that several challenges continue to hinder the effective implementation of HRBA in achieving SDGs. Issues such as weak institutional frameworks, lack of awareness, socio-economic inequalities, and limited resources create barriers to inclusive and sustainable development. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated efforts in terms of legal reforms, policy improvements, and increased public participation.

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