

# »» How does the 2030 Agenda relate to human rights?



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For a long time, human rights have formed the common foundation upon which development aid donors and recipient countries cooperate. Many donor countries have even transitioned in the last few years into using human rights explicitly as a standard when defining development goals and forming processes (a human rights based approach to development).

At the same time, the General Assembly of the United Nations in September 2015 adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in which the UN for the first time agreed on a unified global set of goals known as the *17 Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs).

Consequently, it is important to ask how the 2030 Agenda actually relates to human rights.

### The content of both overlaps to a great extent, particularly the social goals

Human rights and the SDGs are both intended to contribute towards enabling people to enjoy a dignified quality of life. Human rights focus primarily on the individual perspective, that is, the rights of each individual, while the SDGs take a global perspective (sustainable development). However, the 2030 Agenda includes many different references to human rights.

The motto for the agenda is "*leave no one behind*" (LNOB) and corresponds with the principle of non-discrimination and of equality which is stipulated in every key human rights contract. The individual SDGs do not actually employ the language of human rights, however it is clear in many places from the content (particularly for economic, social and cultural human rights) that they have a common basis.

Human Rights	2030 Agenda
Right to an adequate standard of living (Article 11 ICESCR)	No poverty (SDG 1)
Right to food (Article 11 ICESCR)	Zero hunger (SDG 2)
Right to health (Article 12 ICESCR)	Good health and well-being (SDG 3)
Right to free education (Article 13 ICESCR)	Quality education (SDG 4)
Equality principle (Article 26 ICCPR, Women's Rights Convention)	Gender equality (SDG 5)

Source: author's representation

The Danish Institute for Human Rights connects almost 156 of the 169 SDG targets with the human rights instruments and working standards.

### Some thematic differences, particularly for civil/political rights and climate/environmental goals

On the other hand, there are also numerous human rights which are not addressed explicitly in the SDGs. Above all, this affects civil and political rights. Indirect reference can however be drawn since they can be understood as a requirement for achieving SDG 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions). Conversely, there are also many SDGs that do not have a direct correlation to human rights. Climate and environment goals in particular cannot be allocated directly to a human right without further extrapolation, although these also comprise content that makes clear reference to human rights. An intact environment is, for example, understood to be a prerequisite for the human rights to life and health.

### Human rights and SDGs are legally binding to differing degrees

Human rights are part of international law – and, in most cases, also part of regional and national law – meaning that they are binding and enforceable before the courts. In addition, there are a number of independent instruments at international

level (e.g. the UN committees and special correspondents) that serve to monitor and interpret human rights.

The 2030 Agenda, on the other hand, is contained within a legally non-binding UN resolution. Whether and to what degree a state implements the SDGs is primarily at the particular state's discretion and, unlike human rights, cannot be reinforced with any direct sanctions. There is, however, the *High Level Political Forum*, which monitors the implementation of the SDGs and serves as a voluntary peer review mechanism.

### Conclusion: Human rights and SDGs complement each other well

Human rights themselves, but also human rights standards and principles (such as participation, transparency, cultural acceptance, accessibility etc.), are incredibly important legal and procedural principles for achieving the SDGs and are also partly reflected in the SDGs, although they are less clear and not as firmly regulated. Moreover, human rights analyses and recommendations provide information on key needs for action as part of the SDGs. In contrast, the indisputable advantages of the SDGs include the extension of content to incorporate collective aims (environment, climate, peace) under the umbrella of global sustainability and the provision of specific time and quantitative targets that are closely monitored. The exclusion of civil and political dimensions from the objectives and the less legally binding nature of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development were the political price for achieving a consensus on the joint, global system of sustainable development goals. Overall, human rights and the global 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development complement each other well, particularly in areas where it is currently not possible to reach an international consensus on binding regulations. ■