

TYING HUMAN RIGHTS AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS TOGETHER IN A MUTUALLY REINFORCING WAY

With the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, world leaders unprecedentedly committed to a coherent and comprehensive global agenda for sustainable development. The Agenda builds on and connects the outcomes of numerous international processes and decisions, and unites the environmental, social and economic dimensions that constitute sustainable development.

The Agenda is grounded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights treaties. The commitment to “leaving no one behind” is a further reflection of this foundation in human rights.

Likewise, the Agenda specifies that the follow-up and review processes at national, regional and global levels should be guided by the principles of accountability, participation and non-discrimination – which are at the core of the human rights-based approach to development.

Hence, human rights offer guidance for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, while the SDGs can contribute substantially to the realization of human rights. However, in order to fully operationalise this convergence in the complex, multi-faceted and long-term implementation processes towards 2030, we need to use human rights not as abstract principles but as tools.

Focusing on human rights as tools, the Danish Institute for Human Rights has developed the **Human Rights Guide to the SDGs**¹. The Guide is constructed as a searchable database in 5 languages (Arabic, English, French, Russian, Spanish) with multiple search functions.

The Guide shows how human rights and SDGs are tied together in a mutually reinforcing way, in which binding human rights obligations underpin the political commitment to the SDGs. Concretely, the Guide shows that 156 of the 169 targets (more than 92%) reflect substantial provisions of international human rights and labour standards. The Guide allows the user to work with the convergence of human rights and the SDGs in planning, programming, monitoring, evaluation and reporting.

¹ Visit the Guide at: <http://sdg.humanrights.dk/>

The Guide can, inter alia:

- Identify the human rights implications of a given goal and target.
- Specify how specific human rights and labour conventions link to the goals and targets and;
- Identify the implications for specific rights-holders such as women, children, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and migrant workers.

Operationally, this will also contribute to efficiency and cost-effectiveness in follow-up and review processes as, for example:

- States can build on existing reporting mechanisms to report on SDG implementation
- Human rights mechanisms can contribute to monitor and guide SDG implementation

When we started developing the Guide, with limited resources, we were focusing on the core human rights and labour standard instruments as a starting point, knowing that we were pushing other important instruments, including the Aarhus Convention, to a second phase.

We are fully aware that the Aarhus Convention is grown out of Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration that framed our thinking on sustainable development, and is key in connecting the human rights to public participation, access to information and accountability to the environmental dimension of the sustainable development agenda.

I am therefore very happy to inform you that we have now done the preliminary linking of the provisions of the Aarhus Convention to the relevant targets under the 2030 Agenda. Our next step is to seek expert advice from the Secretariat and others, to verify the substantial linkages, we have identified. Subsequently, we hope to be able to formally include the Aarhus Convention in the SDG-HR Guide within the coming weeks.

With the caveat that we still need to have the links verified, let me share with you some of the preliminary conclusions we can draw:

We have made a relatively conservative assessment, only including links where either the rights enshrined in the Convention and/or the factors covered by the Convention are explicitly addressed in the target. Still, we estimate that 49 of the 169 targets (app. 29%) have substantial links to provisions of the Aarhus Convention.

This reaffirms the strong relevance of the Convention to the adequate implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

We have also looked at how the linkages to the Convention are distributed across the goals. Goal 15 (about life on land) is clearly where there are most direct links to the Convention (9 links). Goals 11 (sustainable cities and communities), 14 (life below water), 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions) and 17 (partnerships for the goals) all have 5 targets that are linked to the Convention. This clearly shows that the Convention has broad relevance for the SDGs, and is not confined to the more “environmental” goals.

It is also important to note that the links between the Convention and the SDG targets are found across the three pillars of the Convention.

- For example, target 4.7. to ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, relates to the Convention’s article 3.3. to promote environmental education and environmental awareness among the public.
- Target 5.5. to ensure women’s full and effective participation at all levels of decision-making in public life relates to the Conventions provisions on public participation and non-discrimination.
- Target 16.3. to promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all relates to the Convention’s provision on access to justice.
- Target 3.9. to substantially reduce the number of deaths and illnesses from hazardous chemicals and air, water and soil pollution and contamination basically refers to all the main provisions of the Convention.

We hope this work is useful for the Parties to the Convention – and can serve to inspire others to use the Convention actively as a key instrument in their pursuit of sustainable development. In particular, as a National Human Rights Institution, we will look forward to sharing this with our approx. 100 sister organisations across the globe – and seek further dialogue on how to apply the Convention to our new common development agenda.