

Children's Rights and the Sustainable Development Goals

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the complex relationship between child rights and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Recognising the vital need to protect children's well-being and ensure a sustainable future, this study critically examines the diverse legal dimensions, challenges, and opportunities that intersect as these two frameworks converge. By conducting a comprehensive analysis of the SDGs, international treaties, and various regional agreements, this chapter aims to shed light on the complex legal landscape and identify avenues for strengthening children's rights in the context of sustainable development. The discussion encompasses various aspects, including quality education (SDG 4), gender equality (SDG 5), the right to a quality life (SDG 14), life on land (SDG 15), and global partnerships (SDG 17), examining how progress in these areas can have a profound impact on children's rights. Furthermore, this chapter explores the role of states, international organisations, and civil society in promoting children's rights within the framework of the SDGs. Overall, this chapter highlights the critical need to align SDGs with international child rights standards and offers recommendations to address gaps, strengthen legal protection, and ensure children's active participation in pursuing a sustainable future.

KEYWORDS

children's rights, sustainable development goals, global partnerships, child participation in sustainable development, youth empowerment

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ESD – Education for Sustainable Development

MDGs – Millennium Development Goals

ODA – Official Development Assistance

SDGs – Sustainable Development Goals

UN – United Nations

CRC – the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

UNICEF – United Nations Children's Fund

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“We must rise higher to rescue the Sustainable Development Goals – and stay true to our promise of a world of peace, dignity and prosperity on a healthy planet.”

– *ANTÓNIO GUTERRES*

SECRETARY-GENERAL OF THE UNITED NATIONS

1. Introduction

Art. 1 of the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) explicitly defines children as individuals aged up to 18 years.¹ This deliberate choice aimed to extend the protection and rights to the broadest age range feasible under the Convention. As of September 2024, and according to the latest data from the United Nations Children’s Fund (also known as UNICEF), the global population of individuals under 18 stands at approximately 2.415.319.658.² International efforts have played a crucial role in advancing children’s rights, with the Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child 1924 and the UN General Assembly Declaration of the Rights of the Child 1959 serving as key milestones. Notably, in 1959, the adopted declaration laid out children’s fundamental rights, including protection, education, healthcare, shelter, and adequate nutrition. In 1989, a landmark development began with the adoption of the CRC, which has since emerged as the most swiftly and extensively ratified international human rights treaty in history. This monumental agreement marked a paradigm shift in the perception and treatment of children, recognising them not as passive recipients of care and charity but as individuals possessing an inherent set of rights. The widespread acceptance of the CRC reflects a global commitment to implementing children’s rights.

Since the Convention’s inception, noteworthy progress has been made in protecting children, ranging from declining infant mortality rates to substantially increasing school enrolment. However, despite these advancements, significant challenges persist and continue to highlight the importance of protecting children worldwide. Critical issues include ensuring universal access to quality education,³ addressing

1 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx> (Accessed: August 17, 2023).

2 United Nations Children’s Fund, How many children under 18 are in the world?, 2023. Available at: <https://data.unicef.org/how-many/how-many-children-under-18-are-in-the-world/> (Accessed: September 3, 2024).

3 The Guardian, 2023. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/oct/04/world-needs-44m-more-teachers-in-order-to-educate-every-child>. (Accessed: October 8, 2023).

health disparities,⁴ combating child labour,⁵ and safeguarding against various forms of exploitation and abuse.⁶ Ensuring the welfare of children is a critical imperative driven not only by ethical considerations but also by efforts to ensure the future well-being and prosperity of societies. This emphasises the need for a pioneering conceptual model that places child health at the forefront of the 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), emphasising the urgency of reshaping approaches to prioritise children's health.⁷ A multifaceted approach, including international conventions, national regulations, and SDGs, guides the implementation of children's rights, providing a comprehensive foundation for delineating children's rights and protections on a global scale.

Some of the major international conventions intended to be essential legal tools for protecting children worldwide include those outlined herein. The CRC,⁸ ratified in 1989, is the most comprehensive international treaty for safeguarding children's rights, delineating various civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights of children. Fundamental principles enshrined in the CRC include non-discrimination, the paramount consideration of the child's best interests, the right to life, survival, and development, and the entitlement of children to express their views in all matters affecting them. The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (also known as OPAC),⁹ adopted in 2000, was designed to shield children from recruitment and use in armed conflicts. This protocol mandates an increase in the minimum age for recruitment to armed forces and explicitly prohibits the use of children in hostilities. Also adopted in 2000, the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution, and Child Pornography (also known as OPSC)¹⁰ strives to shield children from sexual exploitation and abuse, addressing critical issues related to child trafficking, prostitution, and pornography. The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on a Communications Procedure (also known as OPIC),¹¹ endorsed in 2011 empowers individual children or their representatives to lodge complaints of rights violations directly with the Committee on the Rights of the Child. The International Labour Organization (also known as ILO) Convention No. 182

4 Addo-Atuah et al. (2020), *Research in Social and Administrative Pharmacy*, 16(11), pp. 1614–1618.

5 Baqutayan et al. (2020), *Journal of Social Sciences Research*, 6(9), pp. 826–837.

6 M'jid, 2020.

7 Alfvén et al. (2019), *Global Health Action*, 12(1), pp. 1–4.

8 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989.

9 United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict*, 2000.

10 Ibid.

11 United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on a Communications Procedure*, 2011.

on the Worst Forms of Child Labour,¹² established in 1999, aims to eradicate the most egregious forms of child labour, including forced labour, trafficking, hazardous work, and other exploitative practices.

Investing in the realisation of children's rights has emerged as a pivotal strategy in fostering a world that is not only just and equitable but also sustainable. International conventions (e.g. the CRC) and national regulations tailored to specific contexts play a vital role in shaping the legal and policy landscapes for safeguarding children and their rights. By acknowledging the strides made thus far and recognising the persistent challenges, collective global efforts are spurred to sustain the crucial work required to ensure a brighter and safer future for every child. Collaboration between international agreements, national legislations, and sustainable development initiatives stands to form a powerful alliance for advancing children's rights and, consequently, contribute to establishing a more resilient and compassionate global community. Another tool designed to empower the path towards development is the SDGs, which emphasise the interconnectedness of social, economic, and environmental dimensions and are positioned as powerful tools for advancing and safeguarding children's rights. The integration of children's rights into the broader framework of the SDGs has evolved into a comprehensive and far-reaching set of objectives that address various aspects crucial for the well-being and development of children.

Since its inception, the SDGs have become a paramount legal tool for protecting children globally. However, several challenges persist worldwide, particularly in Africa and least developed countries,¹³ as children in many regions still face barriers to accessing quality education owing to factors such as poverty and a lack of infrastructure. Meanwhile, health challenges, including preventable diseases and inadequate healthcare, remain obstacles to the well-being of children. Specifically in the context of Africa, some additional challenges include the following.

Poverty: Economic disparities and persistent poverty in certain regions hinder children's access to basic necessities, including education and healthcare.

Conflict and Instability: Many African nations grapple with conflict and political instability, leading to displacement, violence, and an increased risk of child exploitation.

Disease Burden: Certain African regions face health crises, with diseases such as malaria, HIV/AIDS, and other preventable illnesses disproportionately affecting children.

Access to Clean Water and Sanitation: Adequate access to clean water and sanitation facilities, which are critical for children's health, remains a challenge for various African communities. While the SDGs provide a robust framework for addressing these challenges, concerted global efforts and targeted interventions are essential

12 International Labour Organization (ILO), Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention (No. 182), 1999. Available at: https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C182 (Accessed: August 17, 2024).

13 United Nations, Civil society plays critical role to deliver on the SDGs, 2023.

to ensure their effective implementation and meaningful impact on children's lives worldwide, particularly in Africa. This chapter addresses the impact of the SDGs on protecting children and their rights, the challenges facing children, and their prospects. In order to achieve a successful investigation, we see the need to present a retrospective study of the mechanisms that have enabled and continue to allow global development and provide better opportunities for the world's population, including children.

2. Paving the Path to SDGs: Introducing the Millennium Development Goals¹⁴

Several mechanisms and frameworks to achieve global development goals were established before the SDGs' introduction in 2015. To fully understand the SDGs' impact, results, and challenges, it is mandatory to clearly understand their origin and the achievements and challenges of similar mechanisms targeting the enhancement of global development goals. More specifically, the predecessors to the SDGs were the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which were eight international development goals established following the Millennium Summit of the UN in 2000. *The eight MDGs that addressed poverty, hunger, gender equality, education, and healthcare by 2015 were set as follows.*

Eradicate Extreme Poverty and Hunger (MDG 1): The goal was to halve the proportion of people living in extreme poverty and hunger by 2015 by addressing income poverty, food security, and malnutrition.

Achieve Universal Primary Education (MDG 2): The objective was to ensure that all boys and girls could complete the entire primary education course, emphasising the importance of education as a fundamental right.

Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women (MDG 3): This goal sought to eliminate gender disparities in primary and secondary education and promote gender equality in employment, recognising the importance of women's rights.

Reduce Child Mortality (MDG 4): The aim was to reduce the under-five mortality rate by two-thirds by focusing on improving child health, preventing diseases, and enhancing healthcare access.

Improve Maternal Health (MDG 5): This goal sought to reduce maternal mortality and secure universal access to reproductive health services, recognising the importance of women's health in overall development.

Combat HIV/AIDS, Malaria, and Other Diseases (MDG 6): This goal aimed to combat major diseases (e.g. HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other infectious diseases) through prevention, treatment, and global partnerships.

14 United Nations, Millennium Development Goals. New York: United Nations, 2000. Available at: <https://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/> (Accessed: August 20, 2023).

Ensure Environmental Sustainability (MDG 7): This goal targeted environmental sustainability and addressed issues such as access to safe drinking water, sanitation, biodiversity conservation, and slum improvement.

Develop a Global Partnership for Development (MDG 8): The final goal emphasised the need for a global partnership for development, including trade, aid, debt relief, and technology transfer.

2.1. MDGs and Children's Rights

The MDGs directly impacted children's rights and reflected a commitment to ensuring their well-being and future. The educational, health, and protection goals were all linked to children's rights, with the goals of reducing child mortality (MDG 4) and promoting universal primary education (MDG 2), explicitly addressing children's rights to survival and education. Moreover, the gender equality (MDG 3) and maternal health (MDG 5) goals were crucial for securing women's rights and, by extension, children's rights within families, as a healthier and more empowered maternal population contributes to children's overall well-being. While the MDGs did not exclusively focus on children's rights, they laid the foundation for recognising and addressing the fundamental rights of children within the broader context of global development. The successes and lessons learned from the MDGs informed the subsequent development of the SDGs, which continue to emphasise the importance of securing children's rights in a more equitable and sustainable world.

The evaluation of specific countries' achievements or shortcomings in implementing the MDGs is complex because of the diverse nature of their progress across the various indicators. Nevertheless, insights based on general trends and reports offer a glimpse into the outcomes, albeit it is necessary to recognise that the success or failure of MDGs is often gauged on a goal-specific basis, with some nations excelling in specific areas and facing challenges in others. Below is a list of the progress of 10 nations on the MDGs.

Countries	Achievements and Progress
China	Remarkable success in poverty reduction, education, and health indicators.
Brazil	Strides made in poverty reduction, education, and healthcare.
Maldives	Notable progress in healthcare, particularly in maternal health and child mortality reduction.
Vietnam	Significant advancements in achieving universal primary education and improving healthcare outcomes.
Rwanda	Progress in healthcare, poverty reduction, and education.
Ghana	Strides in improving access to education, healthcare, and reducing poverty.
Bangladesh	Progress in improving maternal health, reducing child mortality, and achieving gender parity in education.
South Korea	Rapid economic growth, poverty reduction, and improvements in healthcare and education.
Ethiopia	Progress in healthcare, poverty reduction, and education.
Thailand	Success in healthcare, particularly in reducing the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Other nations, however, struggled to implement the MDGs fully, such as those outlined below.

Countries	Challenges faced
Democratic Republic of Congo	Challenges in various MDGs, including poverty reduction and healthcare.
Haiti	Natural disasters in the region exacerbate the nation's challenges in achieving education and healthcare goals.
Yemen	The conflicts in the nation worsened struggles with poverty reduction, healthcare, and education.
Afghanistan	Challenges in achieving healthcare and education goals owing to internal conflict and instability.
Mozambique	Challenges in achieving healthcare and education goals.
Nigeria	Challenges in healthcare and education, particularly in conflict-affected regions.
Sierra Leone	The impact of the Ebola epidemic compounded challenges in healthcare and education.
Central African Republic	Struggles with poverty reduction, healthcare, and education, which are exacerbated by conflict.
Syria	Internal conflicts significantly hinder progress across various MDGs, including healthcare and education.
Zimbabwe	Challenges in healthcare, education, and economic stability.

Regardless of the individual nations struggling with the MDGs above, an analysis of the outcomes of the MDGs based on the 2015 UN Report¹⁵ underscores substantial accomplishments in global development initiatives from 2000 to 2015. Regarding MDG 1, focused on eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, we saw a remarkable reduction in the number of people living on less than \$1.25/day, with hunger affecting over 200 million fewer individuals.

MDG 2 was significant for children and youth worldwide, as the global net enrolment rate was 91% by 2015. Moreover, global progress in primary education is evident, as the number of out-of-school children of primary school age has nearly halved (i.e. from 100 million in 2000 to 57 million in 2015). Particularly noteworthy is the substantial improvement in primary education in sub-Saharan Africa, surpassing all other regions since the establishment of the MDGs; from 2000 to 2015, the region achieved a remarkable 20% increase in net enrolment rate, a notable improvement compared with the 8% gained between 1990 and 2000. There has also been a positive global trend in literacy rates among youth aged 15–24 years, with the literacy rate increasing from 83% to 91% between 1990 and 2015. This improvement also highlights the narrowing of the gender gap, signifying progress towards gender equality in education. These achievements underscore the global commitment to enhance primary education and literacy, with substantial gains in reducing the number of out-of-school children and promoting educational opportunities, especially in sub-Saharan Africa.

MDG 3, emphasising the just-mentioned gender equality, has also witnessed progress, with the proportion of girls enrolled in primary school reaching parity with boys in many countries. However, women still face underrepresentation in leadership roles and have higher poverty rates than men.

MDG 4 aimed to mitigate child mortality, and significant efforts have been made to achieve this objective globally. The under-five mortality rate declined substantially, more than halving between 1990 and 2015 (i.e. from 90 to 43 deaths per 1,000 live births). Moreover, despite the population growth in developing regions, the total number of deaths among children under five globally has significantly decreased, dropping from 12.7 million in 1990 to nearly 6 million in 2015. There has been a substantial acceleration in the reduction rate of under-five mortality globally since the early 1990s (i.e. more than tripled during this period). In sub-Saharan Africa, progress has been even more remarkable, with the annual reduction rate of under-five mortality being more than five times faster during 2005–2013 than during 1990–1995. Immunisation efforts have also prevented child deaths,¹⁶ with measles vaccination alone having helped prevent nearly 15.6 million deaths between 2000 and 2013, contributing to a 67% decline in globally reported cases of measles.

15 United Nations Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 27 July 2015: 69/313. Addis Ababa Action Agenda of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development (Addis Ababa Action Agenda), 2015. Available at: <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n15/232/22/pdf/n1523222.pdf> (Accessed: September 3, 2024).

16 World Health Organization, Female genital mutilation, 2023. Available at: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/female-genital-mutilation> (Accessed: October 3, 2023).

The increased coverage of measles vaccines is evident, with approximately 84% of children worldwide receiving at least one dose in 2013, which is a significant improvement from the 73% in 2000. These achievements underscore the effectiveness of global health initiatives and vaccination programs in saving the lives of children under five years.

MDG 5 focused on enhancing maternal health, and since 1990, there has been a remarkable 45% global reduction in the maternal mortality ratio, with the most significant progress being observed after 2000. In Southern Asia, the maternal mortality ratio saw a substantial decline of 64% between 1990 and 2013; in sub-Saharan Africa, it dropped by 49%. Furthermore, more than 71% of births globally were attended by skilled health personnel in 2014, marking an increase from 59% in 1990. Notably, Northern Africa experienced a substantial increase in the proportion of pregnant women who received four or more antenatal visits (from 50% to 89% between 1990 and 2014). Moreover, there has been a positive trend in contraceptive use prevalence among women aged 15–49 years, married, or in a union, which surged from 55% in 1990 to 64% in 2015.

MDG 6 was dedicated to combating HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases, and notable progress has been made. Between 2000 and 2013, there was a 40% reduction in new HIV infections, dropping from an estimated 3.5 million cases to 2.1 million. By June 2014, the global number of people receiving antiretroviral therapy reached 13.6 million, a substantial increase from 800,000 in 2003. The widespread use of antiretroviral therapy played a pivotal role in averting 7.6 million deaths from AIDS between 1995 and 2013. Substantial advancements have also been made in the fight against malaria, with over 6.2 million malaria-related deaths being prevented between 2000 and 2015, primarily among children under five years of age in sub-Saharan Africa. The global malaria incidence rate has witnessed a notable decrease of 37%, and the mortality rate due to malaria has been reduced by 58%. Furthermore, an impressive initiative delivered more than 900 million insecticide-treated mosquito nets to malaria-endemic countries in sub-Saharan Africa between 2004 and 2014. Regarding tuberculosis, interventions focusing on prevention, diagnosis, and treatment saved an estimated 37 million lives between 2000 and 2013. During this period, the tuberculosis mortality rate experienced a substantial 45% decline, with a 41% reduction in prevalence rates between 1990 and 2013. These achievements underscore the global commitment to address the complex challenges of HIV/AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis.

MDG 7 focused on ensuring environmental sustainability. Since 1990, substantial progress has been made in eliminating ozone-depleting substances, and the ozone layer is expected to recover by the middle of the century. Across various regions, terrestrial and marine protected areas have seen significant increases, such as in Latin America and the Caribbean, where the coverage of terrestrial protected areas rose from 8.8% to 23.4% between 1990 and 2014. In terms of water, notable achievements include the fact that 91% of the global population used an improved drinking water source in 2015, whereas this rate was 76% in 1990. Moreover, among the 2.6 billion people who gained access to improved drinking water since 1990, 1.9 billion now have

piped drinking water on their premises. Globally, 147 countries have met the drinking water target, 95 have achieved the sanitation target, and 77 have met both targets. Access to improved sanitation has also been extended to 2.1 billion people, with the proportion of those practising open defecation nearly halving since 1990. Additionally, the proportion of the urban population living in slums in developing regions has decreased from approximately 39.4% in 2000 to 29.7% in 2014.

MDG 8, which focused on developing a global partnership for development, has seen a 66% increase in official development assistance (ODA) from developed countries between 2000 and 2014, reaching \$135.2 billion at the end of the period. In 2014, Denmark, Luxembourg, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom exceeded the UN's official development assistance target of 0.7% of the gross national income, and 79% of imports from developing to developed countries were duty-free in 2014, up from 65% in 2000. The proportion of external debt service to export revenue in developing countries fell significantly, from 12% in 2000 to 3% in 2013. Technological advancements are evident, with 95% of the world's population being covered by mobile cellular signals as of 2015. Mobile cellular subscriptions have increased tenfold in the last 15 years, growing from 738 million in 2000 to over 7 billion in 2015. Internet penetration has surged from just over 6% of the world's population in 2000 to 43% in 2015, connecting 3.2 billion people to a global network of content and applications.

An analysis of the performance of countries in implementing the MDGs provides valuable insights. Countries such as China and Brazil have showcased effective strategies for poverty reduction, education, healthcare, and poverty alleviation. Conversely, the challenges faced by countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Yemen highlight obstacles hindering progress. This analysis underscores the importance of political will, socio-economic conditions, and effective governance. The MDGs played a pivotal role in setting global development priorities. However, in recognition of the shortcomings of the MDGs, the SDGs have emerged and attempted to address the issues of narrow focus, lack of inclusivity, and insufficient attention to environmental sustainability. The lessons learned from MDG implementation are used to inform the formulation and execution of SDGs, emphasising informed strategies, tailored interventions, and targeted resource allocation to achieve sustainable development on a global scale.

3. SDGs and Children's Rights¹⁷

A crucial initial step in creating a comprehensive narrative for the SDGs was to incorporate insights from the MDGs.¹⁸ Unlike the MDGs, which were primarily directed at developing nations, the SDGs go beyond geographical boundaries to

17 United Nations, Bringing dry land in the Sahel back to life, 2022. Available at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/01/1110322> (Accessed: August 17, 2024).

18 Kumar et al. (2016), Indian Journal of Community Medicine, 41(1), pp. 1-4..

embody a collective global responsibility, constituting a 15-year agenda applicable to all countries that marks a significant shift in approach regarding these global goals. The framework comprises a universal agenda for transformation and features 17 goals, 169 targets, and 231 unique indicators¹⁹ that attempt to assert the following: synergise economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability; recognise the interdependence of these facets in fostering enduring development; integrate economic growth with social inclusion and environmental sustainability; acknowledge the interdependence of these dimensions in fostering lasting development. Accordingly, the SDGs serve as a comprehensive roadmap for global development, aiming to create a more equitable, sustainable, and prosperous world by 2030. The interconnected nature of the goals reflects the understanding that progress in one area can positively influence other areas.

Children are central to the SDGs as direct beneficiaries and agents of change. The goals recognise the unique vulnerabilities of children and emphasise their rights, which are encompassed in SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). Moreover, the overarching goal of leaving no one behind inherently includes children, ensuring that the developmental benefits extend to all regardless of age, gender, or socioeconomic status. By addressing the root causes of poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation, the SDGs lay the groundwork for a more secure and promising future for children. In the context of the SDGs, education becomes a tool for empowerment; healthcare serves as the foundation for growth, and sustainable practices guarantee a healthy planet. The success of the SDGs in enhancing overall development hinges on global collaboration, effective governance, and a commitment to realising the shared vision of a better world by 2030.

While the SDGs may not explicitly focus on children, they can be interpreted as powerful tools for empowering the well-being of children and contributing to the vision of a better society by 2030. Each of the 17 SDGs represents a continuum from the MDGs, with progress encountering obstacles that are exacerbated by the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and armed conflict in certain regions. SDG 1, aiming to 'End poverty in all its forms everywhere', protects children's rights significantly. Children living in poverty often face vulnerabilities that affect their health, education, and development. International conventions, such as the CRC, stress the link between poverty and children's rights. Art. 27 of the CRC emphasises the right of every child to a standard of living conducive to their physical, mental, spiritual, moral, and social development, whereas poverty directly obstructs these rights. Therefore, SDG 1 indirectly protects children's rights by striving to eradicate poverty, albeit achieving this goal necessitates the implementation of policies and programs that alleviate poverty and ensure children's access to essential services such as education and healthcare. Target 1

19 United Nations, SDG Indicators, 2023. Available at: [https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/indicators-list/#:~:text=The%20global%20indicator%20framework%20includes,different%20targets%20\(see%20below\)](https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/indicators-list/#:~:text=The%20global%20indicator%20framework%20includes,different%20targets%20(see%20below).). (Accessed: September 15, 2023).

of SDG 1 specifically advocates equal rights to economic resources for all, aligning with the principles of non-discrimination and equality outlined in the CRC. Unfortunately, the battle against poverty has witnessed a setback over the last four years, primarily due to the impact of COVID-19. The working poverty rate rose from 6.7% in 2019 to 7.2% in 2020, marking the first increase in over two decades.²⁰ The projections also indicated a surge in the number of people living in extreme poverty, which reached 676 million in 2022 and signified a rise from the pre-pandemic estimate of 581 million. This reversal underscores the urgent need for global collaboration to address the pandemic's socio-economic fallout, ensure children's well-being worldwide, and prevent setbacks in the fight against poverty.

SDG 3, on “Good Health and Well-being”, focuses on ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all, directly benefiting children. Furthermore, the CRC recognises every child's right to the highest attainable standard of health (Art. 24), and achieving SDG 3 safeguards children's right to health, including access to essential healthcare services, vaccination, and nutrition. SDG 3 thus contributes towards reducing child mortality rates and ensuring that children survive and thrive.

SDG 4, on “Quality Education”, aims to ensure inclusive and equitable education. The CRC emphasises the right to education (Art. 28). It highlights the importance of free and compulsory primary education. SDG 4 builds on this by addressing broader educational quality, inclusivity, and relevance. Ensuring quality education aims to empower children with knowledge and skills, promote their overall development, and enable them to participate in society actively.

SDG 5, on “Gender Equality”, seeks to achieve gender equality and empower both women and girls. The CRC promotes gender equality in various articles by recognising the rights of girls and boys without discrimination. At the same time, SDG 5 further emphasises ending discrimination, violence, and harmful practices based on gender. By addressing gender inequality, SDG 5 contributes to creating an environment in which the rights of all children, regardless of gender, are protected.

SDG 6, on “Clean Water and Sanitation”, focuses on ensuring water and sanitation availability and sustainable management. Access to clean water and sanitation is crucial for children's health and well-being. The CRC recognises the right to a standard of living adequate for health, including access to clean water (Art. 27), which is complemented by SDG 6 through its aim of securing universal access to safe and affordable drinking water and sanitation, thereby directly benefiting children.

SDG 14, on “Life Below Water”, aims to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources. Although not directly related to children's rights, a healthy marine environment is vital for the overall well-being of current and future generations, including current and future children. The CRC emphasises the right to live in an environment that supports physical and mental development (Art. 29), and SDG 14 contributes to safeguarding this right by promoting environmental sustainability.

20 United Nations, *Bringing dry land in the Sahel back to life*, 2022.

SDG 15, on “Life on Land”, focuses on protecting, restoring, and promoting the sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems. Similar to SDG 14, SDG 15 indirectly contributes to creating a healthy environment for children. The CRC recognises the right to a healthy environment (Art. 24), and the alignment of SDG 15 with the CRC lies in its promotion of biodiversity conservation and sustainable land use.

SDG 17, on “Partnership for the Goals”, emphasises the importance of global partnerships for securing sustainable development. While not directly tied to children's rights, the achievement of all SDGs is interconnected. The CRC recognises the importance of international cooperation in realising children's rights through various of its articles. At the same time, SDG 17 underscores the need for collaborative efforts to address global systemic issues that affect children.

In summary, the SDGs contribute to protecting children's rights by addressing various aspects of their well-being, including health, education, gender equality, access to clean water, and a sustainable environment. The CRC provides a foundational framework upon which the SDGs build to create a comprehensive approach to ensure a better future for all children.

4. The 17 SDGs and Africa

The decision to adopt the 17 SDGs reflects a comprehensive and integrated approach to global development, where each SDG addresses a distinct aspect of sustainability, and the number of goals is not arbitrary. These 17 goals were also designed to be interlinked, recognising the complexity and interconnectedness of global challenges. Therefore, the SDGs aim to provide a universal and inclusive framework that spans the economic, social, and environmental dimensions, fostering a more balanced and sustainable future, and their moral and strategic imperatives underscore the global relevance of child rights within SDGs. Children constitute the foundation of human capital investment and actively contribute to social progress; thus, investing in children's well-being can help break the poverty cycle and foster responsible citizenship. The SDGs provide a holistic framework that links education, health, gender equality, poverty reduction, and environmental sustainability.

With its burgeoning young population, Africa plays a pivotal role in the global pursuit and implementation of the 17 SDGs. The linkages between Africa, its young demographics, available resources, sustainability efforts, and the SDGs are multifaceted, shaping the continent's trajectory on the global development agenda. The demographic structure of Africa thus necessitates strategic investments in education, healthcare, and employment opportunities to harness the potential of the youth population. The African Union's ‘Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want’ is a comprehensive framework that outlines the continent's vision for the future, emphasising sustainability, inclusivity, and development. Legal instruments such as national development plans and regional agreements also contribute to implementing the SDGs in Africa, where they have heightened significance in Africa because the population

is the youngest and fastest growing in the world. Still, harnessing the demographic dividend requires protecting children's rights, breaking the poverty cycle, promoting gender equality, ensuring environmental sustainability, and contributing to social stability. Amid these challenges and opportunities, this study seeks to illuminate the intricate relationship between child rights and sustainable development so as to offer insights into a more equitable and prosperous future for Africa and the world.

Agenda 2063: Recognising and prioritising the needs and rights of children in Africa is essential for its sustainable development. Through strategic investments in education, healthcare, and social infrastructure, Africa can harness the energy and creativity of its young population and foster a brighter and more prosperous future for the entire continent. To do so, the African Union implemented a strategic framework, Agenda 2063, that emphasises protecting and promoting children's rights as a fundamental component of its vision for the continent's future. Although the Agenda does not have specific goals exclusively focused on children, its broader aspirations and commitments contribute to creating an environment that supports children's well-being, development, and rights. The goals to be achieved by Agenda 2063 are as follows:²¹

1. Focusing on quality education and healthcare contributes to creating an environment where children can thrive, ensuring their right to education and health.
2. Ending child marriage and female genital mutilation to ensure children's rights to protection, health, and a safe environment, as well as promote gender equality and inclusive and equitable development.
3. Securing a "Safe and Secure Environment", as the agenda recognises the importance of peace and security for the continent and that creating a safe and secure environment is crucial to safeguard the rights of children affected by conflict and instability.
4. Ensuring "Access to Justice for Children", with the agenda promoting good governance, rule of law, and access to justice, which are essential for protecting children's rights, ensuring legal safeguards, and addressing child labour and exploitation issues.

The prospects for protecting children's rights under Agenda 2063 include continued efforts to strengthen the educational system, healthcare infrastructure, and legal frameworks to safeguard children's rights in alignment with the SDGs. Additionally, a reporting mechanism presents a comprehensive overview of the progress made on several SDGs while underscoring persistent challenges. The report also serves as a critical call to action, emphasising the urgency of addressing the climate crisis and other global issues to foster a future that is both sustainable and equitable.²²

21 African Union, Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: African Union, 2013. Available at: <https://au.int/en/agenda2063/overview> (Accessed: August 26, 2024).

22 See: United Nations, Bringing dry land in the Sahel back to life, 2022.

5. Selected SDGs and their implementation in Africa

5.1. SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being

Progress in maternal and child health has been achieved, yet the glaring regional inequalities demand attention. According to the report, the presence of skilled health professionals during childbirth helped reduce maternal and newborn morbidity and mortality.²³ Globally, from 2015 to 2021, approximately 84% of births were attended by skilled professionals, a notable increase from the estimate of 77% from 2008 to 2014. However, in sub-Saharan Africa, the coverage lagged 20% behind the global average. Advances in under-five and neonatal mortality have been observed, with the global under-five mortality rate having decreased by 14% from 2015 to 2020 (i.e. from 43 to 37 deaths per 1,000 live births). The neonatal mortality rate has dropped by 12% during the same period (i.e. from 19 to 17 deaths per 1,000 live births). Still, many children continue to perish, with approximately 5 million children having died in 2020 before their fifth birthday, even if this is an actual decrease from the 5.9 million in 2015. Of those that died in 2020, 2.4 million deaths occurred within the first month of life. Sub-Saharan Africa maintained the highest under-five mortality rate globally at 74 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2020, which is 14 times higher than the risk in Europe and North America.

The global adolescent birth rate has declined from 47.9 births to 41.2 births per 1,000 adolescents (i.e., individuals aged 15–19 years) between 2010 and 2020. Significant reductions were especially noted in Central and Southern Asia, where the rate dropped from 43.6 births to 23.7 births during the period. Meanwhile, early childbearing (i.e. among girls aged 10–14 years) is more prevalent in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Nonetheless, most countries with measurable early childbearing rates have witnessed a reduction since 2000, and although data assessing the complete impact of COVID-19 on maternal and child health and adolescent fertility are not yet available, growing concerns suggest that the pandemic may have inadvertently hampered progress in these areas. Addressing these disparities and sustaining positive trends requires continued global efforts and targeted interventions to ensure the well-being of mothers, newborns, and adolescents worldwide.

5.2. SDG 4: Quality Education

Encouragingly, global net enrolment rates in primary and secondary education have risen to 91% and 84%, respectively, showing progress since the year 2000. Nevertheless, stark reality forces millions of children, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, to be denied access to education. The quality of education is also a growing concern, as many children do not acquire the foundational skills necessary for future success. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused severe disruptions in educational systems worldwide, and the repercussions of school closures have been

23 Ibidem, pp. 23–29.

particularly alarming for children's learning and well-being, having significantly impacted girls and disadvantaged groups, including children with disabilities, rural residents, and ethnic minorities. Shockingly, an estimated 147 million children have missed over half of their in-person instruction over the past two years.²⁴ Consequently, this generation of children faces a potential collective loss of 17 trillion USD in their lifetime earnings. To address this crisis, governments must undertake ambitious programmes to ensure the return of all children to school, mitigate learning losses, and address their psychosocial needs.

5.3. SDG 5: Gender Equality

Significant advancements have been achieved in terms of gender equality, with girls' primary school enrolment reaching parity with that of boys in many countries. Women's wage employment proportion has also increased, even if challenges remain. For example, according to the report, the world might not achieve gender equality by 2030, and the repercussions of the pandemic have exacerbated the challenges. This can be seen in the progress regarding crucial areas such as unpaid care and domestic work, decision-making on sexual and reproductive health, and gender-responsive budgeting, which is lagging. Women's health services, which are already inadequately funded, have experienced substantial disruptions, and violence against women persists. It also persists that despite their pivotal role in responding to COVID-19, women continue to face obstacles in securing rightful decision-making positions. Urgent commitment and bold actions are imperative to expedite progress and require promoting laws, policies, budgets, and institutions to advance gender equality. Enhanced investment in gender statistics is also crucial because less than half of the data necessary to monitor SDG 5 is currently available.

Regarding children's rights, child marriage and female genital mutilation persist as human rights violations, hindering the advancement of the rights of girls and women.²⁵ Regarding child marriage, in 2021, almost one in five young women globally were married before turning 18, with the highest rates observed in sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia, where 34% and 28% of young women, respectively, experienced early marriage.²⁶ While the global child marriage prevalence has decreased by approximately 10% in the past five years, the COVID-19 pandemic's impact, including its economic shocks and disruptions in social services, has increased the risk for more girls. By 2030, up to 10 million additional girls are projected to face the risk of becoming child brides, adding to the 100 million who were already at risk before the pandemic.

Female genital mutilation, an extensively documented problem in developing nations, continues to be a widespread phenomenon that affects at least 200 million

24 United Nations, *Bringing dry land in the Sahel back to life*, 2022, p. 2.

25 United Nations Children's Fund, 2021.

26 Ibid.

girls and women in 30 countries.²⁷ In many nations, this practice persists at levels similar to those three decades ago, and even where progress has been made, it needs to be accelerated tenfold to meet the global target of eliminating female genital mutilation by 2030. Education plays a pivotal role in the eradication efforts, with opposition to female genital mutilation being the highest among educated women and girls. Girls with mothers who finished primary education were 40% less likely to undergo female genital mutilation than those with mothers lacking education. These persistent challenges underscore the critical need for intensified global efforts to safeguard the rights and well-being of girls and women.

5.4. SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation

Art. 24 of the CRC enshrines the right to health for children, emphasising the child's right to enjoy the highest attainable standard of health and access to medical services. Ensuring access to clean water, sanitation, and hygiene aligns directly with this provision and contributes to children's holistic well-being. Other international conventions also emphasise the crucial link between children's rights and access to water, sanitation, and hygiene, with an example being the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (also known as ICESCR), which recognises the right to an adequate standard of living, encompassing access to safe drinking water and sanitation. Furthermore, the International Decade for Action 'Water for Sustainable Development' underscores the importance of water-related goals in achieving broader sustainable development, echoing the interconnectedness between children's rights and water access.

If we recognise this link between children's rights and SDG 6, it becomes evident that addressing water and sanitation challenges is integral to upholding the rights and well-being of children worldwide. Furthermore, while the achievement of SDG 6 by all nations in 2030 remains uncertain, there has been some progress in this regard in recent years. Specifically, the proportion of the world's population with access to safely managed drinking water services increased from 70% in 2015 to 74% in 2020. However, the stark reality is that 2 billion people still lack these services, and 1.2 billion do not have access to basic services. This disparity becomes particularly pronounced in rural areas and least-developed countries. Unfortunately, the current trail of progress indicates a shortfall in achieving the 2030 target, leaving 1.6 billion without safely managed drinking water. Regarding sanitation service coverage, it increased from 47% in 2015 to 54% in 2020, with open defecation decreasing by one-third during the period. Nevertheless, hand hygiene, which is crucial for disease control, remains lacking for over one in every four people, and achieving universal access to clean water and sanitation by 2030 to save 829,000 lives annually will require a fourfold increase in current progress.

These water and sanitation challenges are intricately linked to children's rights, particularly the rights to health and a safe environment. Inadequate access to clean

27 World Health Organization, Female genital mutilation, 2023.

drinking water and sanitation affects children disproportionately, making them more vulnerable to waterborne diseases and infections. Moreover, the lack of proper hygiene facilities, including handwashing, poses a severe risk to children's health and hinders their overall well-being and development.

5.5. SDG 14: Life Below Water

Progress is evident in life below water, with marine fish stocks within sustainable levels increasing from 60% in 2000 to 65% in 2017 and marine protected areas having expanded from 1% in 2000 to 8% in 2021. However, overfishing and pollution, compounded by the adverse effects of climate change, pose ongoing threats to marine life. Human activities also jeopardise the world's oceans, affecting the largest ecosystem on earth and the lives of billions. Ocean acidification, rising temperatures, pollution, and the drastic loss of coral reefs all pose severe threats to marine life. The depletion of fish stocks due to increased consumption and poor fishery management also intensifies the strain on ocean health. This entails the need for urgent measures to secure a sustainable blue economy, which should emphasise a "source-to-sea" approach.

Marine pollution, primarily plastic pollution, is also escalating, with more than 17 million metric tons entering the ocean in 2021. This volume is expected to double or triple by 2040, thereby threatening marine life. Coastal areas face increasing eutrophication, leading to more "dead zones". Furthermore, the strategic placement of marine protected areas remains an important issue, even in light of the growth in marine protected areas, covering 8% of global waters in 2021. It is also a fact that key biodiversity areas lack protection, with 55% remaining exposed on average. Addressing these challenges is crucial for securing environmental sustainability and directly contributes to securing a healthy environment for current and future generations, ensuring the realisation of SDG 14 and Arts. 24.1 and 27.1 of the CRC.

5.6. SDG 15: Life on Land

Species extinction and habitat loss directly affect children's rights. SDG 15 underscores the importance of the ecosystem, while the CRC emphasises children's well-being, which in turn is hindered by ecosystem degradation as it jeopardises food, water, and a stable environment. Urgent measures to tackle such degradation include reversing habitat loss, transforming land management practices, and adopting sustainable agriculture. Despite a decline in global forest areas, efforts to combat deforestation have resulted in a 35% increase in certified forest land and a rise in long-term management plans. The latest SDGs report notes that over 700 million hectares are under legal protection, comprising 18% of global forest land and contributing to SDG 15 by safeguarding the environment for current and future generations and aligning with children's rights in international conventions and national constitutions. It remains that the implementation of SDG 15 faces challenges, particularly in regions affected by drought and climate change, with Africa's Sahel region, for example, having to

employ innovative techniques, such as half-moon ploughing, to enhance harvest.²⁸ Furthermore, ecosystems, which are crucial for sustenance, face various threats, with 40,000 species at risk, 10 million hectares lost annually, and over half of key biodiversity areas lacking protection. Human activities, such as logging and agriculture, endanger habitats and place 20% of reptile species at risk. The recovery process from the COVID-19 pandemic also neglected biodiversity, having led to a 9.2% Red List Index²⁹ deterioration, and disproportionately affecting Central and Southern Asia, Eastern and Southeast Asia, and small island developing states. These challenges affect children and future generations by hindering farming, life on land, and overall ecosystem sustainability, thereby affecting SDGs 1, 2, 3, and 4. Achieving SDG 15 globally is crucial for children's well-being.

5.7. SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals

Regarding global partnerships that would facilitate the achievement of SDG 17, developing nations continue to struggle to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, and this is despite a surge in ODA, global foreign direct investment, and remittance flows. In particular, rising inflation, interest rates, and impending debt burden hinder the economic recovery of developing nations, and those countries with limited fiscal space find it challenging to rebound. The unequal distribution of vaccines during the COVID-19 pandemic also threatens a differentiated recovery from COVID-19 worldwide.

Accordingly, achieving the SDGs may require a comprehensive transformation of international financial and debt structures. In 2021, ODA by the OECD Development Assistance Committee countries reached \$177.6 billion, a 3.3% increase from 2020, yet fell short of the 0.7% target. Despite a 20% increase in ODA since 2015, the ongoing crises have strained ODA, with one example being the Ukraine–Russia war, which impacted ODA in 2022 and influenced refugee-related spending. Global foreign direct investment rebounded to \$1.58 trillion by 2021, but uneven regional growth persists, with developed economies having experienced a 64% increase by 2021, whereas developing economies and least developed countries grew by 30% and 13%, respectively. SDG-related investments in developing countries rose by 70% by 2021, particularly in renewable energy, but least-developed countries received a reduced share (15%) compared with 2020 (19%). Meanwhile, remittance flows to low- and middle-income countries are expected to reach \$605 billion by 2021, surpassing foreign direct investment and ODA combined. High transaction costs, averaging at 6.0% (i.e. double the 3% target) persist despite robust remittance growth. SDG 17 emphasises the importance of effective partnerships to address these challenges, aligning with children's rights protection under international conventions and the CRC.

28 United Nations, *Bringing dry land in the Sahel back to life*, 2022.

29 The International Union for Conservation of Nature, 2023.

In summary, the UN Sustainable Development Goals Report³⁰ 2022 delivers a direct message, signalling a concerning deviation from achieving the SDGs by 2030. This underscores the need for immediate, unified efforts to address the climate crisis and other pressing global challenges. The report serves as an imperative call to action to forge a future characterised by sustainability and equity for every individual worldwide. This imperative resonates deeply with the protection of children's rights, as enshrined in various international conventions and, most notably, the CRC, which outlines the fundamental rights to which every child is entitled and underlines the need for a world in which children can grow, learn, and thrive in a safe and nurturing environment. The SDGs, including SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), align closely with the CRC principles, emphasising the interconnectedness between sustainable development and children's well-being. Moreover, the SDGs Report 2022 delineates the urgency of addressing global challenges collectively, which aligns with the spirit of international cooperation and collaboration outlined in various legal instruments beyond the SDGs, such as the Paris Agreement and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Protecting children's rights is intricately linked to these global initiatives and underscores the shared responsibility of nations to create a world where every child's right is respected, protected, and fulfilled.

In essence, the SDGs Report 2022 not only sounds the alarm for urgent global action but also reinforces the interconnected nature of sustainable development achievements and safeguarding the rights and well-being of children. It should serve as a powerful catalyst for nations to reevaluate their commitments, strengthen international cooperation, and redouble their efforts to ensure a future that is sustainable, equitable, and conducive to the flourishing of every child on the planet.

6. The European Approach

Europe's strategic approach to SDGs comprises exemplary practices and future trajectories. In this study, the strategies explored are those outlined herein.³¹

Integrated National Strategies: European nations have embraced the SDGs by comprehensively harmonising their national strategies with these goals, in that their national strategies intricately outline specific targets and indicators for each goal. This allows these nations to foster a unified, cross-sectoral approach to sustainable development. Indeed, the European Union (EU) seems committed to aligning its policies with sustainable development objectives, with prime examples being key initiatives such as the EU Green Deal³² and The New European Bauhaus,³³ showcasing

30 United Nations, 2022, Sustainable Development Goals. Available at: <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/> (Accessed: August 25, 2024).

31 European Commission, 2023.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

a steadfast dedication to sustainable practices and providing a comprehensive framework for incorporating environmental, economic, and social considerations into policymaking. The EU Climate Law³⁴ also establishes the groundwork for achieving climate neutrality by 2050 in harmony with SDG 13 (Climate Action), while the European Solidarity Corps actively encourages the involvement of young people in solidarity activities, promoting social inclusion and contributing to SDG 10 (Reduced Inequality). These endeavours underscore the EU's dedication to fostering a holistic approach to development in accordance with the SDGs and addressing the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

Stakeholder Engagement: At the heart of the implementation of SDGs in the EU is inclusive governance, which is characterised by the active engagement of diverse stakeholders. This entails that civil society, businesses, and local communities are regarded as integral participants in contributing varied perspectives and nurturing a collective sense of responsibility towards achieving the SDGs.

Data Monitoring and Reporting: The EU employs robust mechanisms for monitoring data and effectively tracking progress towards SDG targets. The routine reporting by European countries also helps with enhancing transparency and accountability, providing crucial insights into areas of success and those requiring attention.

Policy Coherence: European nations strive towards policy coherence across sectors, ensuring that domestic policies align with and support the attainment of the SDGs. The synchronisation of national policies with sustainable development objectives enhances the overall effectiveness of implementation efforts.

Innovation and Technology: Europe harnesses innovation and technology as pivotal tools for SDG realisation. Initiatives concentrate on sustainable practices, clean energy technologies, and digital innovations that contribute to economic growth while minimising the environmental impact.

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD): European Educational programs seamlessly incorporate ESD, and in so doing cultivate citizens' awareness and understanding of sustainable development principles. Integrating SDG-related topics into formal education curricula ensures that future generations are equipped with the knowledge required for sustainable living.

Green Economy Initiatives: European nations actively pursue a green economy model by investing in renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, and circular economy practices. These initiatives significantly contribute to SDGs related to clean energy (SDG 7), responsible consumption and production (SDG 12), and climate action (SDG 13).

Global Partnerships: The EU is actively and collectively engaged in global partnerships to address the challenges outlined in the SDGs, with collaborative efforts involving financial contributions, knowledge-sharing, and joint initiatives,

34 European Union European Climate Law, 2021. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32021R1119> (Accessed: September 3, 2024).

underscoring the interconnected nature of global issues and the importance of international cooperation.

Results and Challenges:³⁵ The *Sustainable development in the European Union – monitoring report on progress towards the SDGs in an EU context – 2023 edition* document highlights substantial advancements in the EU's journey to achieve the SDGs. Notably, the EU has made significant strides in achieving the three pivotal SDGs, which are decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), reduction of poverty (SDG 1), and gender equality (SDG 5). Furthermore, commendable progress has been made in the domains of reducing inequalities (SDG 10), ensuring quality education (SDG 4), and fostering peace, personal security, access to justice, and trust in institutions (SDG 16). Despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU has also demonstrated noteworthy advancements in health and well-being (SDG 3). Positive strides have also been made in innovation and infrastructure (SDG 9). These statistics underscore the EU's commitment and effective measures in realising various SDGs, reflecting the states and civil society's dedication to sustainable development.

7. Other Legal Regulations Empowering Global Sustainable Development

In the dynamic quest for global sustainable development, a robust legal framework of pivotal agreements has been meticulously crafted, one which has now seemingly transcended the scope of the SDGs. Each instrument in this framework represents a unique facet of the intricate challenge of fostering sustainability and offers a nuanced perspective on global progress. These tools collectively form a holistic approach to stimulating global development that underscores the interplay between sustainable development's environmental, social, and economic dimensions. Some noteworthy contributions are explored hereinafter.

World Summit on Sustainable Development (also known as WSSD):³⁶ Held in Johannesburg in 2002, the World Summit on Sustainable Development sought to build on the achievements and challenges identified in the MDGs. It focused on sustainable development and its interconnected environmental, social, and economic dimensions. This landmark summit was a deliberate effort to build upon the achievements and challenges identified in the MDGs, marking a transition towards a more comprehensive and inclusive approach. The gathering brought together leaders, policy-makers, and stakeholders worldwide to deliberate on strategies that promote lasting and balanced development. The outcomes of the Summit provided a roadmap for global initiatives and policies, reinforcing the understanding that true sustainability

35 Eurostat, How has the EU progressed towards the SDGs? 2023. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/wdn-20230524-1> (Accessed: September 3, 2024)

36 United Nations, World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), Johannesburg Summit, 2002. Available at: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/milestones/wssd>. (Accessed: October 3, 2023).

requires the harmonious integration of environmental protection, social equity, and economic resilience. The legacy of this event has endured and continues to shape discussions, policies, and actions aimed at achieving the broader and more ambitious objectives encapsulated in the SDGs.

Paris Agreement:³⁷ Focused on addressing climate change, the Paris Agreement, adopted in 2015, aims to limit global warming to below two degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. This encourages countries to submit nationally determined contributions outlining their climate action plans. Moreover, the agreement aligns with children's rights and the SDGs by addressing climate change, a critical factor influencing children's well-being and future. The Agreement recognises the vulnerability of children to the impacts of climate change and emphasises the need to protect their rights and those of future generations, as well as describes the need to engage in the following

- a) **Mitigation and Adaptation Measures:** The Agreement commits its parties to undertake ambitious efforts to limit global warming to well below two degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels, with an aspirational goal of limiting it to 1.5 degrees Celsius. By aiming for lower temperature thresholds, the Agreement seeks to mitigate the adverse effects of climate change, such as extreme weather events, rising sea levels, and ecosystem disruptions, all of which can disproportionately affect children.
- b) **Safeguarding the Right to Health and Survival:** Climate change exacerbates health risks, and children are particularly vulnerable to related changes. The Agreement's focus on limiting temperature increases helps safeguard children's rights to health and survival by reducing the prevalence of climate-related diseases, malnutrition, and other health challenges.
- c) **National Determined Contributions:** Each country must submit nationally determined contributions outlining its climate action plans. Numerous nationally determined contributions include measures to enhance resilience, protect ecosystems, ensure sustainable development, and benefit children and future generations.
- d) **Financial and Technological Support:** The Agreement recognises the importance of providing financial and technological support for developing countries in their climate mitigation and adaptation efforts. This support can enhance access to clean energy, education, and healthcare, thereby positively affecting children's well-being.
- e) **Education and Capacity Building:** The Agreement emphasises the importance of education and capacity building in enhancing climate resilience. Education is a key aspect of children's rights, and building climate literacy helps children contribute to climate action and adaptation in their communities.

37 United Nations, The Millennium Development Goals Report 2015, New York: United Nations, 2015.

- f) Interlinkages with SDGs: The Agreement's goals are inherently linked to several SDGs, including SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), and SDG 15 (Life on Land).
- g) Achieving the Agreement's objectives contributes to a more sustainable and equitable world that aligns with the broader agenda of the SDGs.

The overall impact of the Paris Agreement on children's rights lies in its potential to create a safer, healthier, and more sustainable world for the current and future generations. By addressing the root causes of climate change, the Agreement aims to secure a better future for children worldwide. Moreover, it underscores the interconnectedness of climate action, children's rights, and the broader SDGs, and its measures to mitigate climate change, enhance adaptation, and promote sustainable development are aligned with creating a world in which children can thrive in a healthy and resilient environment.

Addis Ababa Action Agenda (also known as AAAA):³⁸ Adopted at the Third International Conference on Financing for Development in 2015, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda outlines a global framework for financing sustainable development. This comprehensive agenda extends beyond rhetoric to outline a robust global framework specifically tailored to address the complex issue of financing sustainable development. The Agenda is a testament to the recognition that financial resources are the lifeblood of any transformative agenda, delving into key facets of financing, including domestic resource mobilisation, international public finance, and the crucial engagement of the private sector. By acknowledging the interconnectedness of these elements, the Agenda emphasises the need for a multi-stakeholder approach to effectively mobilise resources and ensure their targeted allocation for sustainable development initiatives. These characteristics render the Agenda not a mere declaration of intent but a pragmatic guide for nations and stakeholders, one that affords those invested in the matter with actionable strategies to navigate the intricate landscape of financing sustainable development – which can be easily considered a foundational element in achieving the SDGs.

Agenda for Humanity:³⁹ Launched during the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, the Agenda for Humanity focuses on reducing human suffering and delivering improved humanitarian assistance. It provides a guiding set of principles and commitments that nations and organisations are encouraged to adopt, and that serve as a compass for shaping policies and actions that prioritise the alleviation of human suffering. Thus, it creates a vision where compassion and justice are integral to global development efforts. The principles are as follows:

38 United Nations, Addis Ababa Action Agenda of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development (Addis Ababa Action Agenda), 2015.

39 Agenda for Humanity, An Agenda for Action and Change, 2016. Available at: <https://agenda-forhumanity.org/> (Accessed: September 3, 2024).

- a) **Prevention:** The Agenda for Humanity underscores the importance of prevention as a cornerstone of humanitarian efforts. By emphasising proactive measures to avert crises before they escalate, the framework recognises the efficacy of addressing root causes and vulnerabilities to mitigate the impact of disasters and conflicts.
- b) **Localisation:** Another crucial aspect of the Agenda for Humanity is the emphasis on localisation, acknowledging the significance of tailoring humanitarian responses to the specific needs and contexts of the affected communities. This approach ensures that interventions are culturally sensitive, contextually relevant, and directly responsive to the unique challenges communities face during a crisis.
- c) **Increased Collaboration:** Collaboration among humanitarian actors is a central theme in the Agenda for Humanity, which advocates for enhanced cooperation and coordination among various stakeholders, including governments, nongovernmental organisations, and international organisations. This collaborative approach aims to amplify the impact of humanitarian efforts by leveraging the strengths and resources of diverse entities.

New Urban Agenda:⁴⁰ Adopted at the UN Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III) in 2016, the New Urban Agenda represents a pivotal framework within the broader context of the SDGs and has significantly impacted children's protection and well-being. It particularly addresses the challenges associated with urbanisation and recognises that a substantial proportion of the global population, including children, resides in urban areas. Accordingly, it prioritises sustainable urbanisation by envisioning inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable cities, which the following aspects should characterise.

- a) **Child-Centric Urban Development:** One noteworthy aspect of the New Urban Agenda is the explicit consideration of children in the urban development discourse. The framework acknowledges the unique vulnerabilities of children in urban settings and emphasises the need for policies and strategies to ensure their safety, well-being, and overall development. Recognising children as active participants in urban life, this agenda underscores the importance of creating environments that cater to specific needs, including access to education, healthcare, and recreational spaces.
- b) **Inclusive Cities for Children:** The New Urban Agenda strongly emphasises inclusivity, aiming to create cities where no one, including children, is left behind. It advocates urban planning that considers the diverse needs of different population segments, focusing on vulnerable groups such as children. It also encourages measures to combat issues such as child poverty, lack of

40 United Nations, New Urban Agenda, 2016. Available at: <https://unhabitat.org/about-us/new-urban-agenda> (Accessed: October 3, 2023).

- access to quality education, and inadequate healthcare services, thereby realising specific SDGs related to child rights and well-being.
- c) **Safe and Resilient Spaces:** Safety and resilience are integral components of the New Urban Agenda and directly affect the protection of children in urban environments. The framework calls for measures to create secure city spaces that are free from violence and exploitation. By addressing issues such as child trafficking, exploitation, and unsafe living conditions, the agenda aligns with the SDG targets related to protecting children from harm, abuse, and exploitation.
 - d) **Sustainability for Future Generations:** The New Urban Agenda aligns with the broader SDG narrative by promoting sustainable development. Meanwhile, creating sustainable urban environments addresses immediate challenges related to children and contributes to a better future for them. This creation surely involves environmental sustainability, access to green spaces, and measures to mitigate the impact of climate change on urban communities, directly supporting the SDGs that emphasise environmental conservation and climate action.
 - e) **The New Urban Agenda serves as a crucial link between the SDGs and the protection of children,** envisioning urban spaces that prioritise the rights, safety, and well-being of the youngest members of society. Through its inclusive and child-centric approach, this framework contributes significantly to the realisation of the targets of SDGs related to child protection, education, health, and overall sustainable development in urban contexts.

ESD:⁴¹ Although it is among the EU's approaches to achieving sustainable development, ESD is a global initiative led by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, and it plays a pivotal role in the broader framework of the SDGs, particularly in creating a world that prioritises the protection, education, and well-being of children. Launched in response to the increasing recognition of the interdependence of environmental, social, and economic challenges, ESD underscores education as a transformative force for sustainable development. Its inclusion in the SDGs framework amplifies the understanding that children, as beneficiaries and agents of change, play a central role in global sustainability.

- a) **Holistic Education for Children:** A significant contribution of ESD to the SDGs lies, specifically, SDG 4 (Quality Education) in its focus on providing children with holistic education beyond traditional academic knowledge. It also contributes to other health, well-being, and environmental conservation goals by emphasising the values, skills, and knowledge essential for sustainable living. Children are not merely recipients of information in ESD; they are

41 UNESCO, What is education for sustainable development? 2023. Available at: <https://www.unesco.org/en/education-sustainable-development/need-know> (Accessed: October 3, 2023).

- rather empowered with the understanding and tools required to actively participate in building a sustainable future.
- b) **Fostering Sustainable Values:** ESD emphasises instilling values that align with sustainability principles. Through education, children understand the importance of environmental stewardship, social responsibility, and economic inclusivity. This aligns with SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) and SDG 13 (Climate Action), which emphasise the role of education in shaping responsible and environmentally conscious global citizens.
 - c) **Skills for a Sustainable Future:** In the context of the SDGs, ESD recognises that children need knowledge and practical skills to contribute meaningfully to sustainable development. By integrating skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and innovation into the educational curriculum, ESD aligns with SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure), ensuring that children are prepared for the challenges and opportunities of a rapidly changing world.
 - d) **Global Citizenship and Collaboration:** ESD goes beyond national boundaries to cultivate a sense of global citizenship among children. This aligns with SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), which emphasises the importance of international collaboration in achieving sustainable development. By fostering a global perspective and a sense of interconnectedness, ESD contributes to the development of a generation that actively engages in collaborative efforts to address global challenges.
 - e) **Addressing Inequalities in Education:** ESD addresses the critical issue of unequal access to quality education and contributes to SDG 10 (Reduced Inequality). By promoting inclusive and equitable education, this initiative ensures that children, regardless of their socioeconomic backgrounds, can acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for sustainable development.
 - f) **ESD serves as a cornerstone of the SDGs, particularly in relation to the protection and empowerment of children.** By integrating sustainability principles into education, ESD supports the achievement of specific targets of the SDG and lays the foundation for a future in which children actively contribute to building a more just, equitable, and sustainable world.

The legal framework supporting global sustainable development comprises diverse mechanisms, international agreements, treaties, and conferences. While the SDGs are a comprehensive and integrated framework, a nuanced and targeted response to specific focus areas becomes possible through the synergy of complementary mechanisms. Each instrument – from the landmark Paris Agreement addressing climate change to the Addis Ababa Action Agenda outlining a global financing framework and the Agenda for Humanity emphasising humanitarian assistance – contributes uniquely to global efforts to achieve the SDGs. The New Urban Agenda and ESD further diversify these avenues, emphasising sustainable urbanisation and holistic education as integral components of global sustainable development. Together, these

mechanisms provide a robust legal foundation, offer a roadmap for sustainable development, foster collaboration and innovation in the face of the complex global challenges outlined in the goals set for accomplishment by 2030, and create a multifaceted approach to tackling the world's pressing challenges.

8. Conclusion

The 2023 Special Edition of the Sustainable Development Goals Report reveals alarming progress toward achieving the SDGs.⁴² With only seven years remaining until the 2030 Agenda deadline, over 50% of the global population is falling behind, with critical areas such as poverty, hunger, and climate experiencing weak or stalled progress. The compounded effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution highlight the urgent need for comprehensive reforms to the outdated international financial system. Climate finance remains insufficient and promises from developed countries to provide financial assistance for climate change have yet to materialise.⁴³ To address these global financing issues, UN Secretary-General António Guterres has proposed completely restructuring international financial institutions to ensure their universal benefits and create a safety net for all nations. Moreover, there is an urgent need to expand social protection, promote decent jobs, address the education crisis, tackle gender inequality, and enhance digital inclusion.

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights emphasises the critical intersection between child rights and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The progress in achieving SDGs aligned with the CRC and its Optional Protocols has been slow. The CRC provides a comprehensive set of rights essential for the SDGs, covering health, education, housing, non-discrimination, and protection from violence. To realise the “Leave no one behind” promise, monitoring and review processes, development frameworks, policies, and programs must integrate children's rights and prevent actions that jeopardise them.

Children's rights are foundational to sustainable and equitable development worldwide. This chapter encourages a broader discussion about the complex interconnections among the SDGs and invites reflection on practical steps for implementation. It also prompts consideration of the global community's challenges and shared responsibility to safeguard children's well-being and foster sustainable development.

The role of States is central in translating SDG commitments into concrete actions for children. National strategies aligned with the SDGs should serve as roadmaps, outlining policies and programs that address the unique vulnerabilities of children.

42 United Nations, The Sustainable Development Goals Report: Special edition 2023. New York: United Nations, 2023. Available at: <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2023/> (Accessed: August 25, 2024).

43 Puko, 2023.

Regional organisations have largely embraced this approach, integrating SDG targets into their agendas.

International organisations act as catalysts for global collaboration, facilitating the exchange of best practices and resources. Agencies such as UNICEF, UNESCO, and others accompany states in implementing SDG-aligned programs. These organisations leverage their expertise to address cross-border challenges such as refugee crises and child trafficking, recognising that collective action is vital to ensuring no child is left behind. However, it is essential to mention that some institutions' actions are unsustainable. Kate Donald argues in her article in the *Bretton Woods Observer* that institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which focuses on economic growth, often implement austerity policies that harm the poor and vulnerable. She also notes that IMF loan conditionality policies can undermine the SDGs by requiring countries to cut public spending on social services.⁴⁴

The civil society, comprising non-governmental organisations and community-based groups, is influential in advocating for children's rights. Since its establishment in 1945, the UN has actively embraced collaboration with non-governmental organisations and recognised their significance in advancing its ideals.⁴⁵ The primary platform for direct NGO involvement is through consultative status with the UN ECOSOC. Initially, 41 NGOs were granted this status in 1946; today, that number has grown to 5,593, representing diverse sectors, including those aligned with SDGs (e.g., education, health, poverty eradication, human rights, and gender equality). NGOs have become essential in facilitating the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development since its adoption in 2015, especially in advocating for children's rights. Many NGOs conduct awareness campaigns, lobby for policy changes, and directly support children in need. Grassroots initiatives driven by civil society have significant community-level impacts, contributing to achieving SDGs related to poverty reduction, education, and health. These community-based approaches, often led by local organisations, gain traction due to their rapid implementation by local actors.⁴⁶ Larger organisations benefit from engaging with grassroots initiatives and addressing specific concerns that need attention. These grassroots groups also act as first responders to crises, offering solutions tailored to local contexts. Collaboration between grassroots organisations and international entities becomes especially effective when addressing community-specific needs, as these groups provide a nuanced understanding of complex challenges and contribute to SDGs associated with poverty reduction, education, and health. Their involvement fosters community trust, validating innovations' potential benefits, identifying shortcomings, and suggesting necessary iterations.

However, opinions vary when assessing civil society's role in SDG implementation. Some argue that the SDGs provide a valuable asset for businesses, as they enhance

44 Donald, 2019.

45 United Nations, SDG Indicators, 2023.

46 Bettencourt, 2023.

alignment between policymakers, civil society, and the private sector.⁴⁷ Others propose rethinking civil society to understand its dynamics better and identify ways to support its transformative potential.⁴⁸ On the other hand, some still emphasise that while civil society participation is crucial for SDG attainment, its impact is often limited by the power it is given.⁴⁹

Overall, achieving the SDGs by 2030 requires addressing global challenges faced by humanity in general and children in particular. Children's rights at the heart of every state's development agenda; policies and programs are vital to ensuring a better future.

47 Pedersen (2018), *Procedia CIRP*, 69, pp. 21-24.

48 Kontinen and Millstein (2017), *Forum for Development Studies*, 44(1), pp. 69-89.

49 Sénit (2020), *Environment and Planning C*, 38(4), pp. 693-712.

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