

# **ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF THE UN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS RESEARCH AND POLICY**

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Edited by Ranjula Bali Swain and Peter Dobers

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS PROMISE AND BEYOND**

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# 1

# THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS PROMISE AND BEYOND

*Ranjula Bali Swain and Peter Dobers*

## 1.1 Introduction

Referred to as comprehensive, universal, anthropocentric, and utopian, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have been unanimously embraced by United Nations member states in 2015, signifying a worldwide pledge toward specific objectives to accomplish by 2030. The SDGs aim to eradicate poverty and injustice, establish socio-economic inclusion, and protect the planet and its biospheres. The SDGs function as a forum for a global dialogue on efficacious resolutions to core issues pertaining to poverty and ecological deterioration.

The absence of a lucid implementation blueprint leaves the decision-making for suitable actions primarily to individual governments, many of which confront resource constraints or lack a national governance or a majority of people strongly supporting important steps toward achieving the goals. Not necessarily political by themselves, the SDGs have become tools in political discourse and become increasingly discredited by some political forces. While the SDGs have been presented as a panacea to current challenges of civilization, studies suggest there exists a potential inconsistency in the SDGs (Niklasson, 2019), particularly between the socio-economic development and the environmental sustainability goals.

## 1.2 Critiques of the Sustainable Development Goals

The SDGs represent a science-based and global consensus on the most pressing challenges facing our world and provide a road map for addressing them. Like any large-scale initiative, they are subject to ongoing debate and refinement. SDGs have been criticized for being inconsistent, difficult to quantify and implement. Critiques also raise questions on the measurability and monitoring of the broadly framed SDGs. The goals are non-binding, with each country being expected to create their own national or regional plans. Moreover, the source(s) and the extent of the financial resources and investments for the SDGs are ambiguous.

Despite their label as Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), they are often perceived more as aspirations than concrete objectives (Koehler, 2023). The absence of a robust accountability framework means that responsibility for their achievement remains vague when nations or the international community fail to meet targets when meeting at so-called Conferences of the Parties, where representatives from many nation-states agree on steps to move forward.

The economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic has widened the already-substantial gap in funding for the SDGs, transforming it into a gaping funding challenge (Park, 2022), albeit there are ideas and principles for the transparency and interdependence of global funding (Sachs and Schmidt-Traub, 2017) or the role of fintech in funding sustainable development (Michael and Latkovska, 2021).

Critics contend that the SDGs overlook deep-rooted inequalities inherent in the global system (Driel et al., 2023; Lorenzo, 2024). The prevailing world order disproportionately benefits a wealthy minority. Addressing sustainable development necessitates a profound overhaul of systems, such as trade regulations, governance beyond nation-states, and abstaining of power by the influential, which for instance will further be put on trial now that we know of the Donald Trump presidency in the USA 2025–2029.

Despite their noble intentions, the UN-adopted SDGs face criticism for inconsistency, complexity (Fu et al., 2019), and the difficulty in quantifying, implementing, and monitoring progress (Costales and Zeyen, 2022; Greenland et al., 2023).

### **1.3 Missing Parts of the Sustainable Development Goals**

And there are areas that the current system of Sustainable Development Goals do not address enough, or not at all. The SDGs do not directly address issues related to global power imbalances, such as the influence of multinational corporations or the super-rich such as Elon Musk on local economies and the impact of global trade agreements on developing countries. We need to acknowledge that partnerships for SDGs also underlie power imbalances, harbor conflicting interests, and at times have limited democratic representation (Horan, 2021) when, for instance, crowdfunding helps leverage sustainability-promoting activities (Gellers, 2016).

While the SDGs mention the importance of inclusive societies, they do not explicitly address the rights and contributions of Indigenous peoples and the need to preserve cultural diversity and traditional knowledge, like, for instance, the significance of Myanmar Indigenous rights (Liljeblad, 2022) and Sámi rights (Cambou and Ravna, 2024; Larsen and Raitio, 2023; Dahlström et al., 2021).

The SDGs call for peace and justice, but they do not explicitly address the role of the military–industrial complex and arms trade in fueling conflict and instability. There are many war-ridden areas in the world that could be mentioned here: As mentioned before, we see the Russian war in Ukraine well into its third year, with its wide-ranging carbon emissions (Sasmoko et al., 2023); the wider Middle East war in general and the Israeli– Hamas–Palestine conflict in particular; the long-ongoing Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict; or the Myanmar situation.

As we have seen in previous studies (Dobers and Halme, 2009), Africa is an especially war-ridden continent (Akinola, 2023) that challenges governance ambitions in line with Agenda 2030 based on climate crises–based migration, linking also to war, conflicts, and security issues. Military conflicts, and functioning arm trade treaties, are thus of high importance (Nave, 2019) yet missing in the current system of the SDGs, albeit somewhat addressed by SDG 16 (Milton, 2021).

Also, the SDGs aim to ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns. The relation between sustainable consumption and growth can be questioned, and attempts are made to show some complementarities (Salimath and Chandna, 2021; Kreinin and Aigner, 2022). However, they do not directly address the issue of overconsumption in developed countries and its impact on global sustainability.

Further, the SDGs focus on preserving biodiversity and ecosystems but do not explicitly mention animal rights (Schapper and Bliss, 2023), wild species (Fromentin et al., 2023), and the welfare

of the one health that intersects animal, human, and plant health (Verniers and Brels, 2021). These aspects have also been suggested as the SDG 18, for instance (Visseren-Hamakers, 2020).

When the SDGs and Agenda 2030 were formulated, the world was heavily invested in digital technologies already, when considering how economies and the lives of many had been impacted by digital technologies, social media apps, and digital services. But the SDG system neglected to include digitalization (Mondejar, 2021), and artificial intelligence was not really on the radar for many but currently is very important to relate to sustainable development as well (Sætra, 2021; Visvizi, 2022; Raper et al., 2022; Nasir et al., 2023; Lau et al., 2023).

Another good overview of how targets of the 17 SDGs can be improved in light of biophysical and planetary limits can be found in the book *Ecological Limits of Development: Living with the Sustainable Development Goals* (Kish and Quilley, 2022).

### 1.4 From Sustainable Development Goals to Inner Development Goals

When hosting the annual conference 2022 in Stockholm for ISDRS, the International Sustainable Development Research Society (ISDRS), during the “Stockholm+50” month of June 2022, we had as one of the guest speakers in one of our panels Jakob Trollbäck, the founder and CEO of the New Division. While at the New York offices of this company, Mr. Trollbäck linked up with film director Richard Curtis to discuss how to make the Sustainable Development Goals famous. Curtis and Trollbäck recognized the importance of creating a communication system that could resonate universally and inspire action.

Insights from UN ambassadors and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) played a crucial role in shaping this endeavor. They emphasized the need for icons that could be easily understood across cultures and languages. The resulting designs and color palette were carefully crafted to



Figure 1.1 The 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

ensure cross-cultural relevance and symbolism. One of the key visual elements is the circular logotype for the master brand, which symbolizes unity and utilizes the full color palette from the icon system. Its symbols and colors have become widely known as the 17 SDGs.

The outcome of this collaborative effort was a comprehensive communication system that received approval from all 193 member nations. Today, it stands as a universally embraced tool and a symbol of hope and a catalyst for change, motivating individuals worldwide to pursue the global goals by 2030. In addition to the 17 main goals, there are 169 targets connected to these goals. These targets define specific measures necessary to achieve the broader objectives. To make the agenda even more accessible, the visual language was extended to include these targets. Each target is summarized in a short understandable headline, and powerful visual symbols were created to represent them. By the use of bright colors and bold typography, families of symbols were associated with the main goals, expressing determination and optimism. (See more at the United Nations web page for the SDGs: <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>.) So when asked if he could speak to the ISDRS 2022 annual conference, Mr. Trollbäck was happy to do so but insisted on speaking about a more recent undertaking of his, namely, the inner development goals (IDGs). As shown on the ISDRS 2022 playlist on YouTube, Trollbäck speaks out about these new goals<sup>1</sup> about 59:30 minutes into the video.

He talks vividly about empowering people to pursue the SDGs. About 1,000 persons replied to a survey for what capacities and skills we need to fulfil the SDGs. And then Mr. Trollbäck briefly presented 23 skills in five categories. The background, method, and IDG framework have been documented in a report (Jordan, 2021). Our understanding of the IDGs is that they foster an understanding for what skill sets may be needed for working toward sustainable development and achieving many of the promises set forth by the SDG framework. The IDGs are about an inner growth as individuals, nurturing also the existential aspects of life on the planet and enabling us to grow as individuals beyond a material and economically based growth, empowering business models and people toward dematerialization (Dobers and Wolff, 1999; Sun, 2000). There is something attractive to the collaborative and explorative concept of skill sets for fostering the achievement of the SDGs, where the IDGs are just one system of capacities and skills of individuals (Ankrah et al., 2023; Shtaltovna et al., 2024) among similar ideas, such as ethics, responsibility, and sustainability competences, recently being explored in academia (Laasch et al., 2023).

### **1.5 About the Routledge SDG Handbook**

Two-thirds through Agenda 2030, this edited volume is an assessment of Agenda 2030 and

- investigates if these 17 SDGs have been effective in achieving the transformative change toward sustainable development;
- investigates thematic, regional, and country levels and provides examples of possible applications, implications, and best practices;
- identifies some missing aspects of Agenda 2030 and critically evaluates SDGs;
- employs inter- and transdisciplinary research from across the various continents to present experience and evidence on SDGs; and
- suggests building blocks for the post-SDG 2030 Agenda.

The volume is aimed at a diverse audience, including policymakers, university researchers, college students, practitioners, stakeholders in the private and public sectors, and civil society.

Part 1 of the handbook brings together seminal research to define, identify, and present conceptual frameworks for a sustainable future. The handbook is not SDG- and target-specific; instead, individual chapters maintain the focus on one or two main SDGs, while investigating their mid-term progress from the interlinkages perspective and the connections with other SDGs. Part 2 of the handbook focuses on the policies, practices, and implementation part of the SDGs.

The sustainable goals inherently and emphatically recognize development to be multidimensional, encompassing economic, social, and environmental aspects of life. SDG 1 particularly emphasizes ending poverty in all its forms everywhere. In Chapter 2, Alkire investigates the progress in multidimensional poverty, past the mid-point of the SDGs in a post-pandemic world driven by crises and uncertainty. The chapter systematically sets out the ways that measure multidimensional poverty indices (MPIs) and their engagement with Agenda 2030 and summarizes their insights and policy tools.

Leichtweiss and Soares delve into the crucial role of the 5Ps (“people,” “planet,” “prosperity,” “peace,” and “partnership”) within the framework of Agenda 2030. Chapter 3 further explores their relationship with the SDGs. As an illustrative example, the chapter examines SDG 7, which focuses on affordable and clean energy. While traditionally associated with *prosperity*, energy is also central to the dimensions of *people*, *planet*, *peace*, and *partnership*. By recognizing this interconnectedness, we can better address the complex challenges posed by the SDGs. It is a critical and interdisciplinary endeavor that problematizes mainstream interpretations of this relationship, seeking to understand how the 5Ps can be better used to guide action toward the implementation of the goals. Further, the chapter shows ways to overcome fragmentation, strengthen integrated links between the SDGs, and better detect synergies and trade-offs between them, but also the external connections within the legal-political environment that shapes their implementation.

The main development patterns and challenges that lie ahead in reaching the targets set in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with a particular focus on SDG 1 (No Poverty), 2 (Zero Hunger), and 5 (Gender Equality), are explored in Chapter 4 by Sepahvand. The chapter examines how the SDGs are impacted by the economic and societal factors caused by the crises and shocks, such as political instability, violent conflict, and the COVID-19 pandemic, in the Sahel region of Burkina Faso in Africa. In a world committed to end poverty and hunger and “leave no one behind,” what are the challenges and opportunities to implement it? Chapter 4 aims to address these issues and the enormous challenges from climate change, political insecurity, and violent conflict while accounting for the progress in the efforts to reduce hunger and food insecurity in Africa’s Sahel region.

Sustainability is increasingly established as a master frame for transformation in public communication processes and influences social practices, attitudes, and behavior on an individual level by adding value and morality to it (i.e., differentiating “good” from “bad” consumption behavior). The question of how far sustainability is a normative principle, and the Sustainable Development Goals the related normative framework that guides and potentially moralizes food-related decision-making, is explored and answered with empirical data from an exploratory qualitative study. In Chapter 5, Weder, Lemke, and Fenzl conduct three series of guideline-based interviews with national and international respondents from Austria (25) and national respondents from Australia (5) and Indonesia (5) to gather information on individual perceptions of food choices and eating behaviors (Weder et al., 2025). Interview data was analyzed using inductive category formation. Based on the results of the study, they hypothesize that sustainability is not a defining moment in decision-making, however has the character of a moral imperative related to a specific eating behavior. Despite methodological limitations, outlined at the end of the chapter, the research insights challenge existing literature on food consumption and environmental

communication which treats sustainability as a “new” or “normalized,” and therefore established, norm and ask for more empirical research on defining non-mediated communicative moments leading to behavior changes.

Energy poverty is a vital global concern affecting the lives of millions across the world. Deprivation of access to clean, affordable, and reliable energy sources is acute in developing countries like India. The consequences of being energy-poor are reflected in the quality of life via different means, including educational outcomes. In this study, they examine the impact of energy poverty on educational outcomes among Indian households. In Chapter 6, Manasi B. and Mukhopadhyay measure energy poverty through electricity access, clean cooking fuel access, and a multidimensional energy poverty index. They find a significant negative impact of energy poverty on various educational outcomes through different channels.

Chapter 7 assesses the interactions among SDGs for the case of women’s economic empowerment. For illustration purposes, Niaz, Islam, Kambhampati, and Ashraf single out two forms of hidden gender inequalities within education (i.e., gender bias in learning materials and educational leadership) that may potentially undermine interlinkages between SDGs 4 and 5. They present descriptive secondary evidence on the broken and intact interlinkages between female schooling and women’s employment, followed by a discussion of the policy lessons from South Asia and Southeast Asia—two regions with contrasting experience in harnessing synergistic developments and positive interlinkages for women’s development. They conclude that if gender inequality within the production of education is overlooked, schooling girls will not be enough for economic empowerment of women and may even reinforce the broken links between SDGs 4 and 5.

Dev, Acharya, and Kushwala examine the pursuit of achieving gender equality (SDG 5), in the context of India, in Chapter 8. Considering the measures implemented by both the central and the state governments, they use data from two rounds of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS). They assess the policy impact on achieving the SDG 5 target on women’s empowerment in India. Additionally, they explore the theoretical connections between SDG 5 and other Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Through empirical research, their study establishes interconnections between SDG 5 indicators across time. They consider how district-level averages of empowerment measures related to decision-making and freedom of movement from NFHS-4 influence individual-level outcomes regarding employment, education, and family planning in the subsequent NFHS-5 round. Their chapter underscores the significance of tailoring data surveys and refining target visions to align with worldwide diverse cultural contexts.

The intricate interplay between water, energy, and food resources and their management plays a pivotal role in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Zhou, Mitra, and Sukhwani explore the critical interlinkages among these essential components and their profound impact on achieving the SDGs in Chapter 9. Water resources, as a fundamental pillar, not only sustain life but also underpin agriculture, industry, and energy production. Energy, in turn, is indispensable for water management and food production. Simultaneously, agriculture, as a primary source of food, demands water and energy inputs. These intricate connections form the nexus that is vital for addressing the SDGs, especially those related to poverty reduction (SDG 1), zero hunger (SDG 2), clean water and sanitation (SDG 6), affordable and clean energy (SDG 7), and sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11). To illustrate the profound implications of this nexus for SDG advancement, they present a case study of the Ganges River Basin. The Ganges, spanning multiple countries in South Asia, serves as a representative of the complex interdependencies among water availability, energy security, and food production. By applying climate change scenarios and integrated assessment methodologies, they scrutinize the future challenges and opportunities within

this basin. Their findings highlight the necessity of holistic and synergistic approaches to resource management. These insights underscore the importance of embracing the water–energy–food nexus as a guiding framework for policy development and implementation to catalyze progress toward the SDGs. By addressing this nexus with a comprehensive perspective, the transformative pathways for sustainable development may be unlocked.

Protection of water resources is critical to accomplish SDG 6, notably Target 6, linked to clean water and, indirectly, the other Earth goals. The extant plans, policies, and institutional protection mechanisms for water resource conservation and management in Bangladesh tend to be weak and to exhaust ecosystems and human health and accelerate poverty rate. In Chapter 10, Sultana and Akter attempt to analyze Bangladesh’s existing legislation and policies for the conservation and management of water resources to balance the environment and attain the SDGs, as well as their regulation, by its environmental and development-related policies and plans. The chapter focuses on the limitations of existing instruments to find out the robust solution for water resources conservation. It concludes that excessive pollution, demand for fresh water, lack of synergy between multiple institutions, and lack of coordination with other SDGs remain a persistent concern for Bangladesh. This is detrimental to maintaining environmental equilibrium, the SDGs, and other relevant national targets.

Bali Swain and Sjöberg, in Chapter 11, examine if markets can promote sustainable development. They discuss the challenges posed by climate change and sustainable development, and the limitations of the market system. The chapter further discusses if the markets should be discarded or if their shortcomings can be overcome. Or can markets become sustainable in the sense of fostering sustainability outcomes?

Damberg, Fritz, and Saari explore how the principal values and drivers of born-sustainable companies are built into the core of their business models and are crucial to achieve some of the critical SDGs. Chapter 12 analyzes how born-sustainable and sustainability-driven companies present themselves, including how they have built their businesses, by focusing on their core sustainability values. These components offer guidance for companies that need to develop their business models to become more sustainable in alignment with the SDGs. They apply a case study methodology to assess companies from the clothes and apparel to cosmetics and food industries and use secondary data. They present a conceptual model of how these case companies build their business models on a sustainable foundation that promotes key SDGs. This helps build more sustainable business and practices, which will help ensure overall well-being in society and have a positive impact on the natural environment.

Governments worldwide are grappling with the urgent challenges posed by climate change and the looming specter of ecological collapse, threats that imperil social stability and economic continuity. Simultaneously, the private sector is navigating its role in addressing these global crises while adhering to its core principles of investment and return on investment. According to Thomas and Bruckner in Chapter 13, this delicate balance requires innovative approaches that align financial interests with environmental and social imperatives. Global movements are gaining momentum, advocating for the integration of climate and nature considerations into financial decision-making. These movements recognize that financial institutions and organizations wield significant influence over sustainability outcomes. As a result, the way businesses invest and conduct their operations is undergoing a profound shift.

Innovations are a critical to long-term growth. Frugal innovation strategically reduces resource utilization, including raw materials, energy, and financial resources, enhancing technology’s affordability and accessibility while lessening ecological impact. This connection positions frugal innovation at the intersection of economic, social, and ecological sustainability. Bhattacharjya

and Nath comprehensively review the existing literature in Chapter 14, revealing strong evidence affirming a positive relationship between frugal innovation and sustainability. Limited cases indicate negative impacts. Frugal innovation significantly contributes to multiple Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDGs 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), 10 (Reduced Inequalities), 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), and 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure), as evidenced by the cases studied in this chapter.

A policy to fight climate change involves making fossil fuels more expensive. A justification for implementing the proposed border carbon adjustment (BCA) tariff is that stringent environmental regulation (generally) makes footloose polluting industries move to countries with lower regulation. Even if the relocation does not occur, strict climate change policies cause carbon-intensive sectors to contract in countries where carbon is priced higher. Existing firms' output changes, causing "carbon leakages". Such a tax would correct this. Sen, in Chapter 15, argues that there are problems with a BCA of measurement, compatibility with trade laws, and equity issues (underlying the common but differentiated responsibilities). The attainment of SDGs 13 (climate change) and 17 (global partnership for sustainable development) especially would receive a setback.

Sustainable Development Goal 15 involves the development of terrestrial and freshwater ecosystems in a way that does not deleteriously affect resource use for future generations. Through a series of targets, it aims for no loss of biodiversity, sustainable forest management, increased coverage of protected areas, halting desertification, and reducing land degradation. Progress to achieving these targets by 2030 has been slow and patchy across the world. The business sector is becoming aware that its future prosperity and sustainability depend on healthy ecosystems and the services these provide. Many progressive and innovative corporations have committed to becoming nature-positive and ensuring their operations leave a better environmental footprint. However, there are others that have been accused of greenwashing, in which their claims of sustainable practices are without foundation. Wallis and Cole present a case study in Australia in which damage to agricultural production has been averted using a humane and effective use of raptors to disperse large flocks of native birds that threatened to consume a large almond crop. The technique has been used to solve problems caused by birds not only in agricultural production but also in infrastructure damage and disruption to sporting and cultural activities. In Chapter 16, they find that the technique works best when the period of damage activity is discrete, the area small, and the financial risk of damage by the birds high. However, the method is labor-intensive and does not work in certain other circumstances. The chapter also discusses the potential improvement in the effectiveness of the technique if lethal take of some of the pest birds is encouraged. The case study has relevance to other SDGs besides 15, such as SDGs 2 and 12.

Over the past 20 years, there has been a significant surge in global plastic consumption, leading to a corresponding rise in pollution. Addressing this plastic pollution has become a top priority on both global and local scales. Among the international initiatives aimed at tackling environmental challenges, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) stand out, albeit with a relatively minor emphasis on plastic waste. Chapter 17, by Kathuria and Jardosh, delves into the origins of the plastic pollution crisis and evaluates the potential effectiveness of the SDGs in addressing it. Ultimately, while the SDGs have influenced the discourse and regulatory frameworks, their tangible impact on plastic waste management remains modest, reflecting broader patterns observed across various SDG-related issues.

The focus on social innovation and how entrepreneurs and government officials are using it indicates an increased ability of civil society to creatively intervene in response to long-standing social issues, like unemployment, and new challenges caused by digitalization, climate change, and environmental sustainability. This attention highlights the potential for positive change

through social innovation. From this perspective, social innovation can function as a tool for sustainable development. It is a proposal for development that stems from cross-sector partnerships and entrepreneurial initiatives designed to create social and environmental impact. Moreover, it can contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals outlined in the 2030 Agenda published by the United Nations in 2015. This fact has served as a narrative element to shift the development paradigm within the European Union. Specifically, it is a key element of the Europe 2020 strategy aimed at mitigating the economic crisis, climate change, and other global issues, collectively referred to as “grand challenges.” Ruela, Simão, and Almeida, in Chapter 18, aim to theoretically support the points of contact between social innovation and sustainable development through a literature review. It discusses the significance of social innovation’s contribution to implementing the United Nations 2030 Agenda and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals at the local level.

Chapter 19 focuses on the intricacies of the goals SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), particularly in an age of disinformation. Often depicted to be enabler goals which serve as tools to achieve other goals, they are often taken for granted to uphold and synergize with other goals. What are neglected are the complicities and trade-offs in the decision-making process involved in both goals, especially when there are threats involved, such as the spread of disinformation. By taking the case of how SDG agents decide in handling information, Jonsson illustrates the individual intricacies and dilemmas involved in actualizing strong institutions and partnerships. Various simulation scenarios are presented to show how the interplay of cooperation, organized fake news machineries, and sanctions affects the knowledge commons, exposing how SDG attainment can become more elusive in the presence of disinformation.

Chapter 20 critically analyzes the law in theory and practice on free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) as part of the right to self-determination of Indigenous peoples in ASEAN by looking at international law standards. Hassan, Nordin, Wook, and Ab Rahman evaluate the issues and challenges in applying the principle of FPIC in Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia according to domestic law compared to international law standards. The study found that the FPIC in ASEAN member states remains a regime of unfulfilled promises. This chapter suggests several legal reforms to improve the recognition of FPIC as part of the right to self-determination of the Indigenous peoples. It will substantially complement the realization of the SDG’s central pledge to “leave no one behind” (LNOB) and Goal 16 in promoting a just, peaceful, and inclusive society. It is vital to advance the right of Indigenous peoples, thus assisting ASEAN member states in achieving Targets 16.7 and 16.10 of SDG 16.

The remaining chapters in the handbook’s Part 2 are oriented toward policy and practice.

COVID-19 has caused numerous casualties worldwide. Nonetheless, it has also led to the recovery of the global environment due to an economic slowdown. However, this is not the case in Taiwan. With almost no lockdown in early 2020, Taiwan’s economic growth has improved. Consequently, concerns about revising the Climate Change Act of 2015 to improve carbon emissions reduction from mid-April 2020 emerged. The main objective was to implement a carbon fee scheme. Such measure is related to the EU’s proposed carbon border adjustment mechanism (CBAM) under the EU Green Deal since March 2020. After two legislative proposals provided by the Environmental Protection Administration (EPA) in 2020 and 2021, the cabinet adopted its version in April 2022, which was then submitted to Parliament and adopted by Parliament in January 2023. Parallel to this development, the government adopted “Taiwan’s Pathway to Net-Zero Emissions in 2050” on March 30, 2022, and announced the detailed action plans. These measures are intended to address net-zero, EU CBAM, and SDG 13. In Chapter 21, Gao aims to provide an

overview of this legislative development and the key issues in advancing carbon emission reduction and meeting CBAM's need.

In Chapter 22, Mitchell aims at investigating the relationship between the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and contract law in a comparative and interdisciplinary perspective. In fact, scholars are still at the beginning of researching how closely concepts, methodologies, and instruments of private law, including but not limited to contract law, can contribute to the greatest challenges of our time. Precisely, this exploration grounds on three main issues. Mitchell aims at discussing whether contract law may contribute to enhancing and governing the SDGs. In this respect, it considers three case studies, consisting of (1) the standardization and certification processes of SDG indicators, (2) the agreement concerning the enforcement of some of the SDGs included in the Bangladesh Accord, and (3) the practice of incorporating sustainability contractual clauses (SCCs) into international supply chain agreements. Second, it analyzes the nature and scope of the interplay of contract law and sustainable development (SD) and the enforcement problem of contractual clauses dealing with the goals of SD. Third, the chapter considers the potential need and possibilities for contract law to respond to the public challenges of the SDGs and to come up with new orientations.

The UN has encouraged national governments to build their own National Sustainable Development Strategies to align with Agenda 2030 and sustainability policies. To make this possible, an integrated approach that includes methodologies and operational tools of co-design, with a focus on environmental, social, and economic sustainability and involving communities and public investments, is necessary. At the metropolitan level, RC Metro Citizens in Transition has been undertaken to build the Metropolitan Agenda and align with the National Strategy for Sustainable Development. Through knowledge transfer and capacity building, the project has involved a wide range of actors, resulting in progress toward multiple SDGs. The medium-term results and educated community aim to project themselves on integrated trajectories of the Metropolitan Strategic Plan and launch innovative sustainable projects. The ultimate goal is to align with the provisions of the Recovery and Resilience Plan and to positively impact the indicators related to knowledge and skills on the issues of ecological and digital transition of young people under 35. Poncibò discusses this in Chapter 23.

For Agenda 2030 and sustainability policies, the UN has encouraged national governments to build their own National Sustainable Development Strategy capable of “territorializing” the SDGs at local level. If, on one hand, global initiatives, “in the context of policies for Climate Change and Sustainable Development, change the paradigms of the transition to economic and social, as well as environmental scenarios of the Fourth Industrial Revolution,” on the other it seems necessary to adopt an integrated approach to generate programs and projects for the “dissemination of urban and territorial issues, experimenting best practices . . . , pursuing processes of involvement of communities and engaging public investments” (Nave, 2019). It means applying in a “trans-disciplinary” way methodologies and operational tools of co-design in multi-level and multi-actor project experiences (Schütz et al., 2019) in order to co-design actions in which the aspects related to environmental, social, and economic sustainability are closely related to the ability to transfer them to the communities, preparing the necessary field of knowledge and skills on contemporary scenarios for sustainable development and digital and ecological transition according to “fair and equitable” mechanisms (Pianta and Lucchese, 2020). According to Mangano in Chapter 24, this trajectory is currently being experimented at local level with the project “RC Metro Citizens in Transition,” aimed at the construction of the Metropolitan Agenda in the implementation of the National Strategy for Sustainable Development (NSDS) (Mangano). Through knowledge transfer and capacity-building actions, like “Knowledge Metrocity” (seminars and co-design workshops

on sustainability, innovation, and enabling technologies), which has involved an open “civic ecosystem” (professionals, university and high school students, institutions, associations, citizens, etc.), it has been possible to act on the targets of SDGs 4 (Quality Education), 7 (Clean and Accessible Energy), 9 (Business, Innovation, and Infrastructure), 11 (Sustainable Communities and Cities?) 12 (Responsible Production and Consumption), and 13 (Climate Action) and activate the monitoring processes of the projects in accordance with the set of the 43 indicators shared by the National Sustainable Development Table for the “Planet” and “Prosperity” areas of the NSDS. The results obtained in the medium term, and the creation of a community educated on the issues of transition, have the ambition to project themselves on identified integrated trajectories of the Metropolitan Strategic Plan, with particular reference to the possibility of launching innovative experimentations with high regenerative rate in territorial areas, such as the inner areas of the metropolitan city of Reggio Calabria, in the implementation of the provisions of the Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP).

Voci and Karmasin, in Chapter 25, aim to address the crucial absence of the media and communications field in the SDG implementation strategy, emphasizing the substantial advantages and potentials linked to its inclusion for the SDGs’ achievement. The only mention of media and communication can currently be found in Target 16.10: “Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms.” An unfortunate formulation, we argue, as it fails to recognize the fundamental role of responsible media and communications in the creation of the public sphere and—moreover—the maintenance of democracies. Thus, they aim to demonstrate that “public access to reliable information” is not just a prerequisite but also an enabler to “protect fundamental freedoms,” by arguing that media and communications’ contribution to sustainable development extends beyond information transmission. Indeed, public access to reliable information requires responsible sustainability communication, including responsible information production and consumption. This, in turn, requires support from media education, media literacy, and the existence of a strong, independent Fourth Estate. Media literacy is also a crucial tool to combat the growing issue of politicization of the sustainability discourse. As the discussion around sustainability and its development transitions from the scientific to the political realms, the primary communicators shaping this narrative have shifted from scientists to politicians. Rather than leading the “SDG agenda,” politicians often prioritize their political agendas, aiming to secure votes during elections. In this context, media literacy assumes a key role by ensuring that individual behavioral decisions within a media-literate society are founded on a balanced and thoughtful examination of information and scientific facts, rather than being influenced by political opinions and preferences. Chapter 25 concludes that it is essential to underscore that responsible sustainability communication and media literacy are not realizable without the presence of a strong and independent Fourth Estate, as they are interlinked necessities. Placing these elements at the forefront of sustainable development strategies is crucial to fostering a media landscape that facilitates the dissemination of accurate information, encourages responsible citizen engagement, and holds stakeholders accountable. This, in turn, safeguards fundamental freedoms and significantly contributes to the achievement of the SDGs and the building of a more sustainable future.

The achievement of net-zero emissions is in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), mainly SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy) and SDG 13 (Climate Action). In the debate on various options to achieve carbon neutrality before 2060 in China, scholars and practitioners have been mainly focusing on the decarbonization of the coal power sector and the transition to renewable energy, while the development and employment of carbon dioxide removal (CDR) technologies to remove CO<sub>2</sub> from the atmosphere have not yet received sufficient attention. The corresponding legal research remains a gap. In Chapter 26, Du aims to

explore the regulation of three categories of CDR techniques in China and the role of CDR in the mitigation policy portfolio for carbon neutrality. The chapter first describes the status quo of the policy setting of the commitment to carbon neutrality and the features of the main CDR techniques. Then, via examining the current legal and policy frameworks for CDR in China, three regulatory gaps are identified: the underdevelopment of explicit regulation on CDR, the inconsistency with international law in regulating ocean-based CDR, and a lack of financial and market mechanisms. Third, this chapter provides suggestions on the future development of CDR in contributing to the achievement of carbon neutrality in China. The chapter concludes that the supplementary role of CDR in achieving carbon neutrality needs to be recognized by future climate policy. The implementation of different CDR techniques should be managed appropriately to avoid the unbalancing between carbon neutrality and the other Sustainable Development Goals.

Universities face major challenges in producing knowledge capable of promoting sustainability in the contemporary world. The relationship between university, civil society, market, and government actors is marked by the challenge of recognizing valid knowledge for the change toward sustainability. One of the strategies to overcome these challenges involves the development of socio-environmental programs and projects capable of linking researchers and students with communities. In the Brazilian reality, a series of devices standardize the activities related to the interaction between university and society, seeking the construction of collaborative projects, which allows the materializing of an agenda of social inclusion, citizenship, and humanist education. This agenda of activities brings the need for important changes in the way teaching, research, community relations, and internationalization activities are developed by universities. In Chapter 27 Melo, dos Santos de Sousa Teodósia, Costa Resende, and Simão Abuhid analyze the experience of a Brazilian university through a qualitative case study. The results point to the possibilities, risks, and pitfalls of modernizing the role of the university as one of the relevant actors for the promotion of sustainability in contemporary societies.

Aligned with the objectives of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) and 5 (Gender Equality), there is an expanding global emphasis on championing optimal menstrual health. Recognized not only as a public health priority but also as a fundamental human rights matter, achieving quality menstrual health is essential to realizing the broader aims set by the SDGs. Despite this, many low- and middle-income countries continue to primarily subsidize disposable sanitary pads. While intended to support women, this approach inadvertently impedes SDG progress by contributing to environmental waste and excluding numerous marginalized women who cannot afford these pads, thereby exacerbating gender inequities. In light of the pivotal role of sustainability in the SDGs, particularly concerning SDGs 3 and 5, it is paramount to identify solutions that address menstrual health needs while also curtailing environmental impact. In Chapter 28, Babbar and Garikipati discuss how one such promising solution are reusable menstrual products, notably menstrual cups. However, their adoption in several low- and middle-income nations, including India, faces obstacles rooted in deep-seated taboos and misconceptions about menstruation and reproductive health, especially since these products necessitate vaginal insertion. The chapter utilizes comprehensive data from the National Family Health Survey, India's counterpart to the Demographic Health Survey, spanning 2019–2021. Through this analysis, the authors aim to shed light on menstrual cup adoption patterns and the socio-demographic dynamics influencing their use. They conclude by outlining policy implications and suggesting routes to bolster menstrual cup adoption in low- and middle-income contexts, advancing the principles of SDGs 3 and 5.

In Chapter 29, Lernborg and Atallah explore the critical nexus between biodiversity and its financing in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Focused on the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a biodiversity-rich region confronting pressing challenges like deforestation and habitat loss, the chapter scrutinizes its potential contribution to SDG 15 amidst new global commitments. It offers an overview of biodiversity financing, underscoring the importance of payment for ecosystem services (PES) as a tool for incentivizing sustainable land management practices and biodiversity conservation in developing regions. Drawing on global and local case studies, the chapter highlights PES's potential to drive economic development while preserving ecosystems yet acknowledges its limitations. Through a review of PES success factors and an examination of national initiatives, it elucidates both the opportunities and hurdles associated with implementing such programs in the Global South.

The 2030 Agenda is grounded in international human rights norms, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) seek to realize the human rights of all. The interlinkage between the SDGs and human rights are substantial, but how do they intersect in practice, and how much attention are states paying to one another when it comes to monitoring and reporting to respective international bodies? Reis, Skriver Jørgensen, Møller Winterskov, and Soler Torramilans showcase examples and tools which facilitate the operationalization of an interconnected approach between SDGs and human rights in Chapter 30. In addition, the research will investigate the prevalence of human rights issues in the voluntary national review (VNR) and the prevalence of the SDGs in states' report to the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), which is the universal human rights monitoring mechanism. This analysis intends to uncover examples of good practices and shortcomings in how states are reporting on progress to the SDGs and human rights mechanisms, and if there are lessons to improve coherence and efficiency in their reporting practices to international bodies. The lessons are drawn from employing artificial intelligence to support the text mining of the VNRs and UPRs from 2016 until 2023.

This handbook investigates the effectiveness of the 17 SDGs in achieving transformative change toward sustainable development from the interlinkages perspective. It explores the application, implications, and best practices of these goals at thematic, regional, and country levels, providing specific examples where possible. Additionally, it identifies missing aspects of Agenda 2030, critically evaluates the SDGs, and suggests future directions for the post-SDG 2030 Agenda. By employing inter- and transdisciplinary research from various continents, the handbook is a mid-term evaluation of the SDGs and provides comprehensive experiences and evidence related to the SDGs and their interlinkages.

### Note

- 1 [www.youtube.com/watch?v=IObpvWs5zco&list=PLu-70cD5hTjNf2X3ppxTBx6444mqo86pA&index=5](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IObpvWs5zco&list=PLu-70cD5hTjNf2X3ppxTBx6444mqo86pA&index=5).

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