

**HUMAN RIGHTS AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT:
EXPLORING THE INTERPLAY AND IMPLICATIONS FOR
NIGERIA'S DEVELOPMENT AGENDA**

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Abstract:

The essence of every responsible governments is the development of the state as well as the welfare of her citizens. The reality of Nigeria as a nation shows that it is one of the poorest in the world with over 50% of the population living on less than 1 dollar per day and only about 25 per cent having access to affordable homes. The 2024 World Human Rights and Rule of Law Index ranks Nigeria as number 120 out of 140 countries scoring below average and falling behind military-ruled Niger, gang-plagued El Salvador and war-torn Ukraine. This paper therefore examines the intricate relationship between human rights and sustainable development, with a focus on Nigeria's development agenda. The research analyses the impact of human rights violations on development outcomes and explores strategies for integrating human rights into development policies and programmes. Drawing on international human rights law and development frameworks, this study aims to inform policy reforms and promote a rights-based approach to sustainable development in Nigeria.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) otherwise known as 2030 agenda was adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015 at the climax of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), is intended to provide a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future. Human rights and sustainable development are foundational pillars of modern governance.¹ We however cannot be talking about sustainable development without giving adequate attention to the rights of the people. This was beautifully captured in the preamble to the 2030 Agenda thus:

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 targets which we are announcing today demonstrate the scale and ambition of this new universal Agenda. They seek to build on the Millennium Development Goals and complete what they did not achieve. They seek to realize the human rights of all and to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls².

Thus, human rights guarantee individual freedoms and dignity, sustainable development on the other hand ensures that economic, social, and

¹ OHCHR, 'Sustainable Development through Human Rights' (*United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, 23rd May, 2025*) available at:

<<https://www.ohchr.org/en/topic/sustainable-development-through-human-rights>>

Accessed 22nd August, 2025

² United Nations General Assembly Resolution A/70/L.1 Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by the General Assembly on 25 September 2015.

environmental goals are pursued without compromising future generations.³ It is therefore impossible for Nigeria to experience a meaningful achievement in the pursuit of sustainable development if there is no serious commitment to the protection and promotion of human rights⁴. Our challenge as a nation therefore, is poverty, inequality, and governance deficits intersecting between human rights and sustainable development⁵. For there to be true and genuine development in any nation, human rights must form the bedrock and foundation upon which it will be built. There cannot be meaningful development when the citizens do not have access to education, good and affordable health care, housing/ shelter, freedom of expression, etc.⁶ The interplay between these domains is critical for addressing poverty, inequality, and governance deficits in Nigeria.

It is therefore imperative for Nigeria as a nation to integrate human rights into her developmental planning and considerations due to the prevailing socio-economic disparities. Sustainable development, as outlined in the United Nations' 2030 Agenda, emphasizes the principle of "leaving no one behind," which is in alignment with the core tenets of human rights⁷. This interplay offers both opportunities and challenges for Nigeria's development agenda, demanding a holistic approach that ensures accountability, participation, and equity.

³ OHCHR, 'Sustainable Development through Human Rights'

⁴ Ogujiuba Kanayo, Ehigiamusoe Uyi Kizito and Udefuna, Patrick, 'The Challenges and Implications of Sustainable Development in Africa: Policy Options for Nigeria', *Journal of Economic Cooperation and Development*, [2013], 34(4), 77-112

⁵ Ibid

⁶ World Health Organisation, 'Human Rights and Health', available at <<https://who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/human-rights-and-health>>. Accessed 22nd June, 2025.

⁷ United Nations, 'Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' available at <<https://sdgs.unn.org/2030agenda>> Accessed 22nd June, 2025

This paper therefore, using the doctrinal method, explores the dynamic relationship between human rights and sustainable development in Nigeria, examining how their convergence can shape policies, empower marginalized communities, and foster long-term national progress.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Human Rights

The idea of human rights began at the creation when God declared,
Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion ... over all the earth... So God created man in his own image... male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it...⁸

It is clear from the scripture above that God intentionally didn't make any of the sex's inferior to the other – 'let them have dominion'. This is the idea of human rights – equality of all irrespective of sex, race, or colour. Human rights today has been asserted to be the cornerstone of modern civilization.⁹ Cyrus the Great (Cyrus Cylinder) on conquest of Babylon in 539BC coming to the understanding of the equality of man, made a proclamation for freedom for all slaves and equality for every man.¹⁰ This action can be viewed as the foundation of human rights declaration by man and as the

⁸ Genesis 1:26-28 KJV

⁹ Aishwarya Agrawal, 'Evolution and Historical Development of Human Rights' (*Human Rights Blog*, India, June, 10th 2024) <<https://lawbhoomi.com/evolution-and-historical-development-of-human-rights/>> Accessed 23rd August, 2025

¹⁰ United for Human Rights, 'A Brief History of Human Rights' Available at: <<https://www.humanrights.com/what-are-human-rights/brief-history/>>. Accessed 23rd August, 2025

first charter on human rights.¹¹ The concept of human rights have evolved spanning several centuries shaped and influenced by philosophical, religious and legal traditions.¹² The idea of human rights has spread from Babylon/ Persia to India, Greece and then Rome where it was viewed as a concept of “natural law”.¹³ By natural law, it is meant “that people tended to follow certain unwritten laws in the course of life” inherent in every human.¹⁴ The idea of human rights have grown through the centuries from what might be termed as individual rights like the Magna Carta in 1215 to the Petition of Right in 1628, and to the US Bill of Rights in 1791. These documents can be said to be the foundation of today’s human rights.¹⁵

The concept of human rights borders on some key principles such as universality and inalienability, interdependence and indivisibility, equality and non-discrimination, participation and inclusion, and accountability and Rule of Law.¹⁶ Human rights apply to everyone, everywhere and cannot be taken away, except in specific situations and in accordance with the provisions of the law.

According to the United Nations, human rights are the “rights inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status.”¹⁷ Human rights encompass civil, political,

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Aishwarya Agrawal, ‘Evolution and Historical Development of Human Rights’

¹³ United for Human Rights, ‘A Brief History of Human Rights’

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Aishwarya Agrawal, ‘Evolution and Historical Development of Human Rights’

¹⁷ OHCHR, ‘What Are Human Rights’ *United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights*, available at: <[https://www.ohchr.org/en/what-are-human-rights#:~:text=What%20are%20human%20rights%3F%20Human%](https://www.ohchr.org/en/what-are-human-rights#:~:text=What%20are%20human%20rights%3F%20Human%20rights)

economic, social, and cultural rights.¹⁸ These provisions have also been enshrined in the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria (Chapter IV) and international instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (1981).

2.2 Sustainable Development

The United Nations Brundtland Commission in 1987 in their report defined sustainability as, “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”¹⁹ This definition “emphasizes the delicate balance between fulfilling human needs today while preserving the environment, social equity, and economic systems for the future.”²⁰ It also provides the basis and platform for engagement on the how to build a just and equitable society that is ‘resilient and capable of adapting to changing global dynamics’.²¹ Though the concept can be interpreted in a number of ways, it has been argued that ‘at its core is an approach to development that looks to balance different, and often competing, needs against an awareness of the environmental, social and

20rights%20are%20inherent,-

%20they%20are%20not%20granted%20by%20any%20state.> Accessed 5/9/2025

¹⁸ Cierra Tolentino, ‘The Evolution, Growth and History of Human Rights’ (*History Cooperative*, 31st October, 2024), <<https://historycooperative.org/history-of-human-rights/>> accessed 5th September, 2025

¹⁹ United Nations, ‘Sustainability’, *Academic Impact*, <<https://www.un.org/en/academic-impact/sustainability> 5/9/2025> Accessed 5th September, 2025.

²⁰ Social Work Institute, ‘Sustainable Development: Balancing Present Needs with Future Generations’ (*Social Work and Social Development*, 6th June, 2024) <<https://socialwork.institute/social-development/sustainable-development-balancing-needs-future-generations/>> Accessed 5th September, 2025.

²¹ Ibid

economic limitations we face as a society’.²² It has therefore been observed that it ‘aims to maintain economic advancement and progress while protecting the long-term value of the environment.’²³ It has also been argued that the concept is not only just about the environment but ‘also about ensuring a strong, healthy, and just society. This means meeting the diverse needs of all people in existing and future communities, promoting personal well-being and social inclusion, and creating equal opportunity’²⁴. Sustainable development in achieving the needed balance, can thus be said to rest on three pillars – economic development, social development and the environmental protection.²⁵ Sustainable development does not necessarily mean focusing on the future and jettison the present, but is ‘about finding better ways of doing things, both for the future and the present.’²⁶

2.3. Nigeria’s Development Agenda

Nigeria as a nation had at different times and by different administrations come up with various plans and strategies with a bid to making the nation better. These ‘national economic plans, *are aimed* to stimulate growth,

²² Sustainable Development Commission, ‘What is sustainable development’ available at: <<https://www.sd-commission.org.uk/pages/what-is-sustainable-development.html>> Accessed 5th September, 2025

²³ Rachel Emas, ‘The Concept of Sustainable Development: Definition and Defining Principles’ (*Florida International University*, January 2015) DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.34980.22404, also available at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/339003550_The_Concept_of_Sustainable_Development_Definition_and_Defining_Principles> Accessed 5th September, 2025.

²⁴ NEXT IAS, ‘Sustainable Development: Meaning, Features, Objectives & More’ (*Environment and Ecology*, 8th August, 2025), <https://www.nextias.com/blog/sustainable-development/> Accessed 5th September, 2025

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Sustainable Development Commission, ‘What is sustainable development’

reduce poverty, and build resilience across various sectors'²⁷. These development agendas speaks of the focus of the government of the day with regards to its development plan for the nation.²⁸ The Nigeria's sustainable development agenda which is also known as "Nigeria Agenda 2050" was approved by the National Economic Council in February, 2023. The agenda is 'designed to take the country through to Upper Middle-Income Country and subsequently to the status of High-Income countries'.²⁹ It is posited that 'Nigeria Agenda 2050 is a perspective plan designed to transform the country into an "Upper-Middle Income Country", with a significant improvement in per capita income.'³⁰ The aim of the plan, though ambitious, is to 'fully engage all resources, reduce poverty, and achieve social and economic stability'.³¹ According to Muhammadu Buhari³² the development plan of his administration is 'anchored on committed to delivering on the three key areas that we promised – That is improving security, tackling corruption and revitalising the economy'.³³ The United

²⁷ Bassey Ekpenyong Anam, 'Toward Agenda 2030: Integrating Nigeria's Social Interventions and Economic Plans within an Integrative Social Development and Sustainability (ISODS) Framework' *International Journal of Scientific Research in Humanities Legal Studies and International Relations (IJSRHLIR)*, [2024] Vol. 8(1)

²⁸ Bassey Ekpenyong Anam, 'Toward Agenda 2030: Integrating Nigeria's Social Interventions and Economic Plans within an Integrative Social Development and Sustainability (ISODS) Framework'

²⁹ State House Press, 'National Economic Council Endorses Nigeria Agenda 2050' (14th February, 2023) <<https://statehouse.gov.ng/news/national-economic-council-endorses-nigeria-agenda-2050/>> accessed 5th September, 2025.

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Ibid

³² President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2015 – 2023.

³³ City People Magazine, 'Nigeria's Economic Recovery & Growth Plan (ERGP, 2017 – 2020)' (An address delivered by President Muhammadu Buhari on ERGP 2017 – 2020) *City People Magazine*, (5th April, 2017) <<https://www.citypeopleonline.com/full-text-nigerias-economic-recovery-growth-plan-ergp-2017-2020-muhammadu-buhari/>> accessed 5th September, 2025

Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a global blueprint for achieving this vision by 2030.

3. UNDERSTANDING THE LINK BETWEEN HUMAN RIGHTS AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Sustainable development, as conceptualized by the United Nations' 2030 Agenda, is predicated on the integration of social inclusion, environmental sustainability, and economic growth³⁴. It is thus posited that “human rights are essential to achieving sustainable development that leaves no one behind and are central to all its three dimensions - social, environmental, and economic.”³⁵ It is therefore not possible to talk about development and undermine the dignity of persons. It is against this backdrop it is said that “human rights and the 2030 Agenda are tied together in a mutually-reinforcing way. This convergence creates a number of operational opportunities for pursuing integrated approaches to implementation and monitoring.”³⁶ Thus, this link and interplay between development and human right is that correct development is measured by the quality of life of the citizens and not necessarily about economic indicators.³⁷

³⁴ United Nations, ‘Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’

³⁵ European Regional Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, ‘ABOUT THE 2030 AGENDA FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND HUMAN RIGHTS’ *United Nations*, available at <https://europe.ohchr.org/human-rights/sustainable-development-goals>. Accessed 22nd June, 2025.

³⁶ Danish Institute for Human Rights, “HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE 2030 AGENDA FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT” (compiled by Nadja Filskov and Birgitte Feiring with input and guidance from Eva Grambye.) and available at <https://www.humanrights.dk/sites/humanrights.dk/files/media/dokumenter/sdg/hr_and_2030_agenda-web_2018.pdf> Accessed 3rd September, 2025.

³⁷United Nations, ‘Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’

The preamble to the UN SDGs clearly points out that sustainable development goals and human rights “are integrated and indivisible and balances the three dimensions of sustainable development: the economic, social and environmental.”³⁸ This link and interplay is reflected by goals 4, 5, 10 and 16 which borders on gender equality, access to education, reduction of inequalities, and peace and justice.³⁹ Point three of the introduction to UN Resolution states that:

We resolve, between now and 2030, to end poverty and hunger everywhere; to combat inequalities within and among countries; to build peaceful, just and inclusive societies; to protect human rights and promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls; and to ensure the lasting protection of the planet and its natural resources. We resolve also to create conditions for sustainable, inclusive and sustained economic growth, shared prosperity and decent work for all, considering different levels of national development and capacities.⁴⁰

One of the main focus of the 2030 agenda of the United Nations is the attainment of quality life for the human race irrespective of colour, sex, nation or continent. However, pursuing sustainable development without a corresponding push for human rights will only undermine the trust and essence of the 2030 Agenda, and lead to a collapse of the system.

³⁸ United Nations General Assembly Resolution A/70/L.1 Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by the General Assembly on 25 September 2015.

³⁹ United Nations General Assembly Resolution A/70/L.1 Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

⁴⁰ Ibid

It has however been argued that though the Sustainable Development Goals referred to fundamental human rights, they however “lack systematic references to the core human rights treaties with their related instruments.”⁴¹

4. NIGERIA’S DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGES AND THE ROLE OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Though Nigeria is blessed with vast natural and human resources, it still continues to face challenges of widespread poverty, ethnic and religious conflict, access to quality health and education, limited access to essential services, and a fragile democratic system⁴². Looking closely at these challenges, it can be seen that the root cause is corruption/ lack of accountability and systemic human rights violations which ranges from discrimination of all sorts to freedom of expression⁴³. For instance, after almost sixty-five years of independence, UNICEF reports that Nigeria has 1 out of every 5 out of school children in the world and the northern part of Nigeria still accounts for 53% of that number due to economic, cultural and religious factors.⁴⁴ The effect and implications of this is that it increases the poverty rate of the nation and thus, underdevelopment⁴⁵. Similarly, the

⁴¹ Madgalena Bexell, Thomas Hickmann and Andrea Schapper ‘Strengthening the Sustainable Development Goals through Integration with Human Rights.’ *Springer Int Environ Agreements* [2023] 23:133–139 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10784-023-09605-x>

⁴² Rasaki Stephen Dauda & Olusola Joel Oyeleke, ‘Poverty and Inequality: The Challenges to Sustainable Development in Nigeria’ *Ilorin Journal of Economic Policy*, [2021], Vol. 8(2)

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ UNICEF Nigeria, ‘The Challenge’ available at <https://www.unicef.org/nigeria/education> accessed 22nd June, 2025

⁴⁵ Khalimath Oyekan, Ayodotun Ayorinde, and Oreoluwa Adenuga, ‘The Problem of Out of School Children in Nigeria’ *Rise*, Available at

South – Southern part of Nigeria though very rich in crude and producing more than half of Nigeria's wealth, degradation of the environment has deprived communities of their right to a healthy environment and sustainable livelihoods⁴⁶. The killing of the Ogoni leaders for daring to challenge the indiscriminate exploitation of the region illustrate the degree of human rights abuse which has continued unabated and thereby directly undermining developmental goals.

Reporting the National Review of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2017 to United Nations High Level Political Forum⁴⁷ the Senior Special Assistant to the President of Sustainable Development Goals pointed out that part of the challenges to attaining the SDGs borders on human rights. According to her, these challenges includes Humanitarian Crisis in the NE, 8.5 million people in need of humanitarian assistance, 1.9 people still in IDP camps, 5.2 million people currently in need of food assistance, etc.⁴⁸ From the forgoing, it is obvious that you cannot be talking about sustainable development while undermining or paying lip service to provision and protection of human rights. As have been asserted, that human rights are inalienable rights inherent to man and no individual, group of persons or

<https://riseprogramme.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/Problem%20of%20Out-of-School%20Children%20in%20Nigeria_0.pdf>. Accessed 21st June, 2025

⁴⁶ Wafaa Taleb, 'Environment-related Human Rights Violations in the Niger Delta in Nigeria' *International Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies* [2017] Vol. 4(3) Also available at

<https://www.academia.edu/128761633/Environment_related_Human_Rights_Violations_in_the_Niger_Delta_in_Nigeria>

⁴⁷ Princess Adejoke Orelope-Adefulire, 'Nigeria's Voluntary National Review on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda and SDGs' available at

<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/25541NIGERIA_VNR_PPT_Presentation.pdf> accessed 21st June, 2025.

⁴⁸ Ibid

government can take away from man. They are inherent because it was not and cannot be granted – they are God given rights to man.⁴⁹ It will therefore be absurd to think of sustainable development without adequate provisions for the guarantee and protection of the rights of the citizens.

5. INSTITUTIONAL AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

For any nation like Nigeria to fully harness the potential of sustainable development, there must be a deliberate effort to embed human rights principles into its policy-making, planning, and implementation frameworks⁵⁰. In order for this to be in place, Nigeria must ensure transparency, enforce accountability, and foster meaningful participation of all citizens and in particular, the marginalized groups in development processes.⁵¹

Laws and institutions must be strengthened to protect rights, redress grievances, and promote social justice. For example, policies that empower women, ensure freedom of information, and protect the rights of indigenous communities are essential for an inclusive development agenda.⁵² Aligning

⁴⁹ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights ‘What are human rights?’ available at <<https://www.ohchr.org/en/what-are-human-rights#:~:text=Human%20rights%20are%20inalienable.%20They%20should%20not%20be,law.%20All%20human%20rights%20are%20indivisible%20and%20interdependent>>. Accessed 22nd June, 2025

⁵⁰ Justice Mensah, ‘Sustainable Development: Meaning, History, Principles, Pillars, and Implications for Human Action - Literature Review’ *Cogent Social Sciences* [2019], 5: 1653531 <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2019.1653531>

⁵¹ Stevens, C., Kanie, N., ‘The Transformative Potential of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)’ *Int Environ Agreements: Politics, Law, and Economics* [2016] Vol. 16, 393–396

⁵² United Nations Women, ‘Gender-Responsive Policies and Institutions’ *UN Women Strategic Plan 2022 – 2025*. Available at <<https://www.unwomen.org/en/un-women-strategic-plan-2022-2025/policies-and-institutions>> Accessed 10th November, 2025

national development plans, such as the Nigeria Vision 2050 and the National Development Plan (2021–2025), with human rights standards will ensure not only progress but sustainability. But looking at all the different agendas and programmes of successive governments since independence, it is obvious that though ‘social objectives are frequently embedded in economic plans, implementation remains fragmented, under-resourced, and weakened by institutional and political inconsistencies.’⁵³

6. THE WAY FORWARD: TOWARD INCLUSIVE AND EQUITABLE DEVELOPMENT

Nigeria has an opportunity to transform its development trajectory by embracing a human rights-based approach. Civil society organizations, media, and community leaders play a vital role in advocating for these rights and holding authorities accountable. International partnerships and frameworks can also provide valuable support, but the commitment must be home-grown and consistent.

By fostering a culture of respect, inclusion, and equity, Nigeria can unlock its potential and ensure that development is not just measured by GDP but by the well-being and dignity of its people.

7. CONCLUSION

The synergy between human rights and sustainable development offers a powerful vision for Nigeria’s future. As the country navigates complex social, economic, and environmental challenges, embracing this dual

⁵³ Bassey Ekpenyong Anam, ‘Toward Agenda 2030: Integrating Nigeria's Social Interventions and Economic Plans within an Integrative Social Development and Sustainability (ISODS) Framework’ *International Journal of Scientific Research in Humanities Legal Studies and International Relations (IJSRHLIR)*, [2024] Vol. 8(1)

framework can serve as a catalyst for transformative change. Ensuring that no one is left behind is not merely a slogan—it is a moral imperative and a strategic necessity for true national progress.