

INTRODUCTION: SDG 16, HIGHER
EDUCATION, AND THE BENEFITS
OF NEW APPROACHES TO
TEACHING AND RESEARCHING
HUMAN RIGHTS

Sarah E. Mendelson

Carnegie Mellon University, USA

ABSTRACT

Why and how should scholars, students, and practitioners engage the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to help reframe and refresh how human rights is taught, understood, and lived? This chapter, and indeed all the chapters in this edited volume, answer this question from a variety of perspectives. Binding them together is the belief that business as usual is not working; while international and national legal frameworks are necessary, they are not sufficient for delivering justice, particularly when it comes to addressing socioeconomic gaps. Getting all this right is more than an academic or UN-driven exercise. Closing these gaps is essential to democracies delivering and requires paradigm shifts. In an era of doom and gloom, the good news is that innovations

in higher education, another binding theme, can help grow the next generation that will deliver human rights and sustainable development well beyond 2030.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals; human rights; data; democracy delivering; paradigm shift; experiential learning

Why would or should the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and SDG 16 in particular (“peace, justice, and strong institutions”) be of interest to scholars researching human rights, to professors engaging students on human rights, to students who are beginning their careers hoping to advance human rights, and indeed, to practitioners working to make human rights real?¹ In short, because of both the universality and the intersectionality of the SDGs, and how they represent a 21st century way of understanding the range of rights encompassed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).² Rights cannot be separated from development, and development cannot be siloed from peace.

In 2015, the global community adopted the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs with the principle of “leave no one behind.”³ This framework is scheduled to run through 2030. The relevance of the framework, however, will likely extend for decades to come. Moreover, the SDGs were presciently built to address the challenges that have emerged as urgent in many communities – from inequality to the climate crisis, from pandemics to declines in life expectancy, from an increase in violence and conflict to the enabling of corruption. It is a framework that recognizes development happens

¹ United Nations General Assembly, “Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,” A/Res/70/1, September 25, 2015, https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/Resolution_A_RES_70_1_EN.pdf.

² On the UDHR, see <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

³ “Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,” Resolution adopted by General Assembly on September 25, 2015, A/Res/70/1, https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_RES_70_1_E.pdf.

everywhere – not just in the “global south” or in so-called “developing” countries.

Awash in crises at the midpoint of the world’s commitment to the 2030 Agenda, there are numerous calls to “rescue” the SDGs, most prominently from the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General.⁴ Meanwhile, in the human rights community, a downbeat cottage industry has arisen (again) around pessimistic themes such as the “end times” and a failed, “last utopia.”⁵

This volume details multiple pathways out of such doom and gloom and helps advance the closely aligned and timely endeavors of creating peaceful, just, and inclusive communities – exactly what SDG 16 is all about. The volume explores ways in which innovations in higher education, and specifically, how human rights and the SDGs are taught, can help make relevant human rights in the 21st century for new generations. Universities have a critical role to play in creating SDG literacy as well as a refreshed approach to human rights education, or a paradigm shift, helping to grow what I have called “Cohort 2030.”⁶

⁴ “Rescuing the SDGs: General Assembly Highlights ‘World’s to do List,’” *UN News*, September 19, 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/09/1126981>.

⁵ Stephen Hopgood, *The Endtimes of Human Rights* (Cornell University Press, 2013); Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Belnap Press, 2012). Lamenting specific aspects of human rights, including a decrease in effectiveness, is not unique to the last decade. See David Rieff, “The Precarious Triumph of Human Rights,” *New York Times*, August 8, 1999, <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/08/08/magazine/the-precarious-triumph-of-human-rights.html> and Sarah E. Mendelson, “Dusk or Dawn for the Human Rights Movement?,” *The Washington Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (2009, April): 103–20. https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/journals/twq/v32i2/f_0016183_13957.pdf. It’s also worth noting that some scholars worry specifically about the harm caused by negative framing around human rights. See Kathryn Sikkink, “A Cautionary Note about the Frame of Peril and Crisis in Human Rights Activism,” in *Rising to the Populist Challenge: A New Playbook for Human Rights Actors*, ed. César Rodríguez-Garavito and Krizna Gomez (Dejusticia, 2018), 171–82, <https://dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/37143007/rising-to-the-populist-challenge-version-final-para-web-1.pdf?sequence=6&isAllowed=y>.

⁶ Sarah Mendelson, “Young People, the Sustainable Development Goals, and the Liberal World Order: What is to be done?” *Medium*,

In this introduction, I reflect briefly on why such a paradigm shift is needed. John W. McArthur, the Brookings Institution scholar, reminds us that “doing things differently is central to the purpose of the SDGs.” Quoting the 2030 agenda, he notes that the SDGs are about “transforming our world,” and the “universal, integrated, and interrelated nature” of the SDGs “seek(s) to realize the human rights of all.”⁷ While those statements may be commonplace to some readers, many in the human rights community know nothing about the SDGs or may feel that because they are voluntary and not legally binding, they are not relevant. There is, however, something of a counter movement developing, including and going beyond senior scholars and practitioners from the human rights community represented in this volume.⁸ There is a growing sense that the emphasis on legal frameworks has been too abstract and that the type of rights most associated with the human rights movement, namely political ones, has been too narrow, too predictable, and often disconnected from the pressing, unmet needs of local populations.

The UDHR continues to be *the* framing document on rights relevant for the 21st century. But many aspects of it have been unevenly adopted. The United States, despite its role as a global leader on human rights, has downplayed the socioeconomic elements of the UDHR for decades. This oversight – intentional during the Cold War, and largely unchallenged in the post-Cold War triumphalist period – helped contribute to the extreme inequalities and inequities plaguing the country 25 years into the 21st century. The United

October 9, 2018, <https://medium.com/sdg16plus/young-people-the-sustainable-development-goals-and-the-liberal-world-order-what-is-to-be-done-fc648e3b2d21>.

⁷ John W. McArthur, “The ‘Second Half’ of the Sustainable Development Goal era: Ideas for doing things differently,” *The Brookings Institution*, April 5, 2023. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-second-half-of-the-sustainable-development-goal-era-ideas-for-doing-things-differently/>.

⁸ César Rodríguez-Garavito, “Human Rights 2030: Existential Challenges and a New Paradigm for the Field” (Public Law and Legal Theory Research Paper Series, Working Paper No. 21-39, June 2021). <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/648b6a7183cd201b2ba91d28/t/648c6f4b95e1153483c682e0/1686925141063/Human+Rights+2030.pdf>.

States is not the only democracy failing to deliver for large swathes of its populations; authoritarian forces are taking advantage of that fact. At the same time, the downbeat and pessimistic academic cottage industry concerning human rights has developed precisely because the legal frameworks are so often ignored. Thus, the doom and gloom loop.

Another factor driving the need for new approaches to human rights relates to what might be understood as “the health of civil society.” As a Russia scholar, starting over 20 years ago in the early 2000s, I was exposed to gross human rights violations, the phenomenon of closing space and other threats to civil society – all signs to come of the ever more catastrophic trouble wrought by the Putin regime. I was, however, also aware that many in the Russian human rights community had little interest in engaging the larger public – a condition that would surely contribute to their societal and political isolation. The activists were more closely aligned with donors in New York and Geneva than their neighbors in Moscow, Perm, or Ryazan.⁹ That struck me then as a serious problem. Fast forward 20 years later, most members of the Russian human rights movement have either been murdered, jailed, or live in exile.

The health of civil society would only get worse and not just for Russian human rights activists. By the time I was serving in the Obama administration, between 2010 and 2017, what was known as “the closing space phenomenon” around the world would evolve into its own epidemic.¹⁰ In many places, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) were portrayed as “alien” or “foreign agents.” Governments would share laws country-to-country and then adopt

⁹ Sarah E. Mendelson and Theodore P. Gerber, “Activist Culture and Transnational Diffusion: Social Marketing and Human Rights Groups in Russia,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 23, no. 1 (2007): 50–75, <http://investigadores.cide.edu/crow/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Mendelson-Gerber-2007-Activist-Culture-and-Transnational-Diffusion-Social-Marketing-and-Human-Rights-Groups-in-Russia.pdf>.

¹⁰ Sarah E. Mendelson, “Why Governments Target Civil Society and What Can Be Done: A New Agenda,” CSIS, April 2015, <http://investigadores.cide.edu/crow/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Mendelson-Gerber-2007-Activist-Culture-and-Transnational-Diffusion-Social-Marketing-and-Human-Rights-Groups-in-Russia.pdf>.

draconian versions in their own country not unlike the Russian ones – which have been on overdrive with 50 new, repressive laws passed between 2018 and 2023.¹¹ The murder of Russian political activist Alexei Navalny in February 2024 shocked most but did not surprise many given the long list of those the Kremlin considered enemies and who have since perished.¹² In country after country, the public and policy responses to such violence have largely been full of sentiment but not much else. More signs of trouble concerning the health of global civil society.

While the closing space phenomenon was gaining speed, however, between 2012 and 2015, the SDGs were also coming together. From my perch at USAID, leading the agency's democracy, human rights, and governance work (and, in the US interagency process for what eventually became SDG 16), that emerging framework held the promise of stimulating a possible refresh, or renewal, with the potential to help deliver rights – a way to drive outcomes, results, and relevance. The SDG framework recognized that development happens everywhere and revealed the interconnectedness of so many issues that had previously been siloed, including rights and development. It could enable tackling problems domestically in the United States that by the 2020s were clearly seen as relevant to the global human rights movement, such as deep and sustained inequalities. Addressing them would also be important for credibility in US foreign policy advancing human rights and democracy around the world. Specifically, the SDGs elevated socioeconomic issues which, from an American perspective, had been set aside or siloed in favor of issues relating to political rights – by not just the US government but many in civil society.¹³

¹¹ International Federation for Human Rights, "The Last 50: Russian Repressive Laws Since 2018," *Mediazona*, June 8, 2023, https://en.zona.media/article/2023/06/07/50rep_en.

¹² Alexey Gusev, "Navalny's Death Highlights a New, Global Division on Political Violence," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, February 21, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/91699>.

¹³ Sarah E. Mendelson, "Inequality, the SDGs, and the Human Rights Movement in the US and Around the World," *The Brookings Institution*, June 12, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/inequality-the-sdgs-and-the-human-rights-movement-in-the-us-and-around-the-world/>.

The bill for that bargain in the United States came due in 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic powered multiple dynamics including a long over-due reorientation. The previously prioritized gaze to abuses abroad rather than across town became untenable for many of us who had worked internationally all our lives. The vast inequalities in the United States emerged as both development and human rights issues. The SDGs seemed even more relevant, not less.¹⁴

With the adoption of the SDGs, I was not alone in viewing a 21st-century way of understanding the range of rights encompassed in the UDHR. Most recently, that understanding has been boosted by none other than the UN's Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. The High Commissioner, Volker Türk, notes that the SDGs come from the human rights treaty bodies and mechanisms that have existed for 75 years. Speaking in April 2023 in Washington at CSIS, he argued "95% of SDGs are anchored in human rights obligations."¹⁵

Fundamentally, what is relevant about the SDGs for the health of civil society and other communities, shared by those in this volume and others who joined us in May 2023 for a strategic convening at The Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Center, is taking the concept of "leave no one behind" seriously, and then using data – especially disaggregated data by gender, race, class, locality – to help shape demand-driven policy responses to the social justice gaps that, in fact, have left many behind. Compared with traditional approaches to human rights, this method is different from an exclusive focus on treaties or conventions that states have or have not signed on to.

¹⁴ Sarah E. Mendelson, "The US Is Leaving Millions Behind: American Exceptionalism Needs to Change by 2030," *The Brookings Institutions*, April 10, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-us-is-leaving-millions-behind-american-exceptionalism-needs-to-change-by-2030/>.

¹⁵ "The UDHR at 75: A Conversation with UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk," *CSIS Human Rights Initiative*, April 18, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/events/udhr-75-conversation-un-high-commissioner-human-rights-volker-turk>. See also "The Human Rights Guide to the Sustainable Development Goals," *The Danish Institute for Human Rights Methodology*, https://sdg.humanrights.dk/sites/sdg.humanrights.dk/files/SDG%20database%20methodology_0.pdf.

This approach does not negate the importance of legal frameworks. It is rather to suggest an additional approach is needed, particularly when researching and engaging students as well as local communities: growing a Community of Practice – including the authors in this edited volume and going well beyond, to include those who are engaged in field building using the SDGs to improve the quality of people’s lives – to refresh and renew how we think of and measure human rights using disaggregated data.

Creating a discipline that listens and responds to people’s justice needs is one important aspect of democratic renewal described in several chapters in this book. Such a discipline should not be understood as merely academic. To quote Claudia López, the then-mayor of Bogotá, Colombia, speaking in April 2023 at the “Cities Summit of the Americas” in Denver,

*The future of humanity lives in cities. How do we build the cities according to the SDGs... [to meet] the social justice challenges? Colombia won't meet the SDGs without cities...take care of people first if we want them [people] to take care of democracy...dictators who don't care about their own people don't care about the planet.*¹⁶

At this midway point to 2030, we need to work differently and field build sustainable development.¹⁷ While several chapters in this volume explicitly address access to justice (SDG 16.3), the focus in other chapters goes beyond SDG 16 to enliven what is referred to as the SDG16+ agenda for peaceful, just and inclusive communities.¹⁸ Multiple SDGs – including SDG 1 (no poverty), SDG 2 (zero hunger), SDG 3 (good health and well-being), SDG 4 (quality education), SDG 5 (gender equality), SDG 10 (reduced inequalities), SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities), and SDG 17

¹⁶ <https://www.citiessummitoftheamericas.org/agenda>.

¹⁷ Sarah E. Mendelson, “Building the Field of Sustainable Development,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Winter 2020, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/foundations_should_invest_in_building_the_field_of_sustainable_development.

¹⁸ <https://cic.nyu.edu/program/pathfinders-for-peaceful-just-and-inclusive-societies/>.

(partnerships for the goals) – are touched on in various ways in several chapters.

This volume, like most, is a product of its time. It emerged from Zoom discussions held in the summers of 2020 and 2021 as part of the Brookings Institution and The Rockefeller Foundation flagship “17 Rooms” exercise with several of the authors joining me (and Nancy Lindborg in 2020 as co-moderator, and Elizabeth Andersen in 2021 as co-moderator).¹⁹ This volume also benefited from discussion at the Bellagio Center in May 2023 as well as an earlier related event in July 2019. I thank the participants in all of these convenings for sharing their insights.

In summer 2020, as communities around the world hunkered down in isolation due to COVID-19, and as the United States underwent a (partial) social justice awakening, in Room 16 (of 17), we posited that there might be a real break with the past – and the opportunity for a “just recovery” going forward.²⁰ With trillions of dollars being spent around the world, we thought the moment for a reset was possible; whatever pressing social justice gaps that preceded the pandemic might successfully be closed. In summer 2021, we continued with that line of inquiry although by then, we had some data to suggest that the hoped for “just recovery” had not and would not come to pass.²¹ The issues that were laid bare by the pandemic, however, necessitated thinking differently concerning what we understood to be pressing human rights issues as well as the delivery of human rights, one refreshed by association with the framework of the SDGs.

The authors of these chapters have deep experience in human rights and are engaging the SDGs to help refresh approaches to human rights. In Chapter 2, Elizabeth Andersen discusses the contributions that higher education can make to help the 5.1 billion people globally who have unmet justice needs. Closing the

¹⁹ <https://www.brookings.edu/projects/17-rooms/>.

²⁰ Nancy Lindborg and Sarah Mendelson, *Room 16*, November 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/16.pdf>.

²¹ Elizabeth Andersen and Sarah Mendelson, *Room 16*, November 2021, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/2021-Room-documents_Room16.pdf.

massive justice gap requires new ways of thinking about justice services, and universities can play a significant role by bringing contemporary data analytics, multi-disciplinary collaboration, and innovation to bear in advancing a new people-centered approach to delivering “equal access to justice for all.” Alvaro Herrero’s Chapter 3 analyzes the nexus between the judiciary and the SDGs, with a particular focus on the experiences of justice sector institutions in localizing SDG 16. In general, judiciaries have been reluctant, or at least passive, in taking responsibility for measuring and implementing the goals of the 2030 Agenda. Herrero makes specific recommendations on how higher education can help shift the culture that permeates justice sector institutions in Latin America and the Caribbean. Thomas Probert’s Chapter 4 is especially poignant as he reflects on the power of the work that his mentor and our friend Christof Heyns, a giant in the field of international human rights law and to whom this volume is dedicated, did as he pioneered merging moot courts and the SDGs. Thomas begins by highlighting the significance of human rights education as part of a broader SDG16+ agenda, and on two methods developed in the sphere of human rights education – moot courts and shadow reporting – and contemplates the broader application of these participatory techniques as vehicles to activate the next generation as champions of sustainable development. He proposes means for research and advocacy around topics of interest and concern to students in their local context and argues that an appropriate introduction to the mechanics of development work, at both national and international levels, can excite and inspire engagement with Agenda 2030. In Chapter 5, Ariel Armony explores three questions relating to the SDGs and Higher Education: How can we incorporate the SDG agenda across the Higher Education curriculum? Are SDGs a marketing strategy for universities? How can the SDG agenda help improve collaborations between Higher Education institutions in the global south and global north? Gaea Morales, Anthony Chase, Michelle E. Anderson, and Sofia Gruskin in Chapter 6 explore what the SDGs and human rights look like in practice at the local level drawing on a partnership between local universities and the office of the mayor of Los Angeles. The co-creation of student “Task Forces” with city officials and the use of the SDGs in

planning over time showed how localization created opportunities to identify and act on human rights issues through SDG implementation at the city level. In Chapter 7, with contributions from CMU students, I report on an effort to assess the impact of COVID-19 relief funds in two American cities and find social justice needs unmet. Like my colleagues in this volume, most of my professional life has been focused on international human rights and development. The dramatic inequities that the pandemic laid bare led many of us to assess disparities closer to home. The research grounds my argument for a paradigm shift in how we teach and train human rights using the SDGs.

Uptake of the SDGs by those researching and teaching human rights is in no way guaranteed. A large share of the global human rights community does not embrace – let alone know about – the SDGs. Ambivalence in this community is driven (again) in part by the voluntary nature of the SDG agenda, as opposed to one shaped by legal obligations. (Although, as one State Department lawyer pointed out to me, almost all of what the UN does is not legally binding.) The authors of this volume and I, however, hope that our chapters will collectively tackle some of that ambivalence. A new approach that goes beyond laws does require a paradigm shift in the methods that currently dominate human rights education. We are proposing that this takes place through partnership with a Community of Practice – a network of experts using new models and generating innovative learning agendas together with local stakeholders. If you, reader, are interested in such a community, we invite you to engage with us.

This volume has obvious limitations. Our chapters do not cover the world. There is much more to be written about concerning the intersection of human rights and the SDGs plus the numerous challenges confronting the globe. We hope that this volume, however, will stimulate additional research and help show younger as well as older generations how the SDGs are relevant to addressing these and many other challenges that have yet to be solved.