

THE ROLE OF LEGAL MECHANISMS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGs)

Laura Ozdamirova¹, Marina Dzhamaldinova², Chulpan Samatova³

^{1,2}Kadyrov Chechen State University, RUSSIA

³Kazan (Volga Region) Federal University, RUSSIA

laura.beara@mail.ru

Abstract

This article examines the pivotal role that legal frameworks play in achieving the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs, established in 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, represent a global commitment to addressing social, economic, and environmental challenges.

The implementation of these goals requires a coordinated effort across national, regional, and international levels, where legal mechanisms are key enablers of effective action. The text explores how laws, regulations, and policies can help institutionalize the SDGs by embedding sustainable development principles into legal systems. This includes integrating international agreements into national legislation, ensuring accountability through judicial and non-judicial bodies, and creating enforcement mechanisms to monitor compliance. Specific examples of legislation that support SDG implementation include environmental protection laws (SDG 13: Climate Action), gender equality policies (SDG 5: Gender Equality), and economic regulation aimed at reducing poverty and inequality (SDG 1: No Poverty, SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities). Moreover, the article discusses the challenges that arise in the harmonization of legal systems across different jurisdictions, particularly in developing countries with limited legal infrastructure. It highlights the need for legal capacity building, effective governance structures, and international cooperation to strengthen the legal enforcement of SDG-related commitments.

In conclusion, legal mechanisms are essential for translating the SDGs from global aspirations into tangible actions. They provide the structure for implementing sustainable policies, ensuring accountability, and fostering an environment where sustainable development can thrive. By supporting a rule-based approach, legal systems play a crucial role in advancing the global sustainability agenda.

Keywords: sustainable development goals (SDGs), legal mechanisms, international law, national legislation, environmental protection, accountability, governance, legal frameworks

I. Introduction

The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Fig.1) were established by the United Nations as a "universal call to action" to eliminate poverty, safeguard the environment, and guarantee that by 2030, everyone can experience peace and prosperity. These goals have gained significant traction among managers in both public and private sectors. Many organizations have begun including their contributions to specific SDGs in formal reports to stakeholders, such as annual reports. Although not originally intended for this purpose, the SDGs are increasingly being used as a tool for accountability. However, their use in this capacity comes with challenges. One issue is that organizations may—either deliberately or unintentionally—report only on activities

that align with a limited set of goals, which fails to provide the comprehensive information necessary for the SDGs to function effectively as an accountability mechanism.



Figure 1: Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Despite their widespread appeal, little is known about the broader implications (both positive and negative, intended and unintended) of incorporating SDGs into organizational management practices. This leads to the central question of the research: "What is the potential role of the SDGs as an accountability mechanism?" While some studies have examined the drivers and outcomes of SDG reporting, they have predominantly been quantitative. To better understand the SDGs' potential as an accountability tool, qualitative research is essential, as it allows for deeper exploration of new phenomena without imposing pre-existing frameworks. This study focuses on the infrastructure sector, where many organizations have adopted and reported on the SDGs. This sector is especially relevant due to its critical role in providing essential services, such as electricity, heating, transportation, and water, which are foundational to society. As a result, infrastructure agencies operate in a highly regulated environment. This raises an important question: How can accountability to societal needs be effectively ensured for organizations responsible for vital infrastructure? Changing the mindset of organizations that manage key technological systems, such as power grids, water supply systems, or rail networks, is crucial for broader accountability. However, these organizations face challenges in implementing societal needs, as they are constrained by legal requirements and shareholder expectations. This article explores how infrastructure organizations are using the SDGs as an accountability mechanism. It first provides an overview of the SDGs and the concept of accountability, followed by a case study methodology. The research is based on interviews with employees from three infrastructure organizations. Through this case study, the authors analyze the key tensions that arise when using the SDGs for accountability. In conclusion, the article argues that while the SDGs offer a useful tool for making organizations more accountable to societal needs, significant changes in the design of accountability mechanisms are required to achieve meaningful accountability.

II. Methods

To investigate how the SDGs function as an accountability mechanism in the infrastructure sector, this study employs a qualitative case study approach. This method allows for in-depth exploration and understanding of complex phenomena in their real-life context. The research focuses on three organizations within the infrastructure sector, chosen for their critical role in

providing essential services (electricity, water, and transportation) and their adoption of SDG reporting.

The study uses semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method, targeting key employees involved in SDG implementation and reporting. These interviews provide insights into how these organizations integrate the SDGs into their management practices, how they report on their contributions, and the challenges they face in using the SDGs as an accountability tool. The semi-structured format allows flexibility in exploring new themes that arise during the interviews.

In addition to interviews, document analysis is conducted on relevant organizational reports, including annual reports and sustainability documents, to understand how these organizations publicly communicate their alignment with the SDGs. This analysis helps verify the consistency between the organizations' internal practices and their external communication.

The data collected is then analyzed using thematic analysis, which involves coding the interview transcripts and documents to identify recurring themes and patterns related to SDG reporting and accountability. This method facilitates the identification of key tensions and challenges, as well as the broader implications of using the SDGs as an accountability mechanism.

The results of the case study are presented in a narrative format, discussing the specific findings from the infrastructure sector while drawing broader conclusions about the use of SDGs in organizational accountability.

III. Results

On 25 September 2015, the UN General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, an ambitious action plan aimed at improving the lives of individuals, protecting the planet, and fostering prosperity. This agenda, which also strives to promote universal peace and freedom, was introduced as a means to achieve targets that the Millennium Development Goals had failed to meet. The agenda includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 specific targets, with a strong focus on realizing human rights for all, promoting gender equality, and empowering women and girls.

The 2030 Agenda is more ambitious than its predecessor, extending its objectives beyond poverty reduction and environmental protection. It emphasizes five key areas of action, often referred to as the 5Ps: people, planet, prosperity, peace, and partnership. These areas work together across the three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social, and environmental. The SDGs are seen as a potential new social contract for the era of globalization, offering a framework for security and freedom worldwide.



Figure 2: The 5Ps of Strategy

Although the SDGs are not legally binding, the countries that have adopted them are expected to establish national or transnational frameworks to support their implementation. At the European level, the agenda aligns with existing sustainable development initiatives. The European Union was already well-positioned in terms of sustainability and played a key role in advocating for SDG 16, which focuses on promoting peaceful, inclusive societies. The agenda encourages a holistic approach, where policies at international, EU, and member state levels should address the interconnected areas of the 5Ps, avoiding compartmentalization and promoting integration across different policy areas to achieve progress in all SDGs simultaneously. The responsibility to understand and implement the SDGs is universal, as all individuals and entities are regarded as key actors in this global effort. Public authorities and civil society are called upon to be both active participants in achieving the goals and beneficiaries of the progress made across the 17 SDGs. However, the 2019 Progress Report by the UN Economic and Social Council highlights that progress has been slow, with the most vulnerable populations and countries continuing to face the greatest challenges. The report emphasizes that the global response has not been ambitious enough.

To address the slow progress, there is a growing emphasis on collaborative efforts in research and education, particularly in the field of law. Universities, through legal research and teaching, play a crucial role in advancing the SDGs. The academic and scientific communities have recognized the importance of contributing to these goals. This paper aims to explore how civil law and procedural law have created mechanisms to protect rights, reduce inequalities, and promote legal sustainability. The study will also identify existing gaps and challenges in ensuring that legal frameworks support the achievement of the SDGs.

IV. Discussion

The goal of eradicating poverty, outlined in SDG 1, must be approached at both the international and national levels. This involves developing policies focused on poverty eradication and ensuring that states take concrete legislative actions. Poverty has numerous consequences that affect various aspects of life, which is why legal frameworks must address the tools available to mitigate its effects. These frameworks also support a sustainable approach by aligning with SDG 10, which aims to reduce inequality within and among countries. Poverty serves as a condition of vulnerability that perpetuates inequality, and thus, legal systems' interventions serve to address both issues simultaneously.

The vulnerability associated with poverty often leads to difficulties in asserting the rights and interests of those affected, particularly in instances of rights violations. The EU has been actively implementing actions and strategies to combat poverty and social exclusion. In November 2017, the European Parliament, the Council, and the Commission proclaimed the European Pillar of Social Rights, which articulates 20 principles designed to support effective and equitable labor markets and welfare systems. These principles emphasize equal opportunities, access to employment, fair working conditions, and comprehensive social protection and inclusion.

Among these principles, Principle 11 specifically addresses children's right to protection from poverty and outlines measures aimed at enhancing equal opportunities for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The European Commission has also put forth an Action Plan for the Pillar, detailing specific actions required for its implementation. This Action Plan aims to revitalize efforts to tackle poverty and social exclusion within the EU, with a target of reducing the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion by 15 million by 2030, or at least by 5 million.

Furthermore, the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child emphasizes that "children will have access to quality education and healthcare, and families will have sufficient resources to meet their children's needs." The Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee underscores the EU's commitment, alongside its Member States, to lead in implementing the UN 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals, including those focused on eradicating

poverty. The aim of this Recommendation is to prevent and combat social exclusion by ensuring access for children in need to essential services. This includes integrating a gender perspective to address the different circumstances of girls and boys, combating child poverty, and promoting equal opportunities.

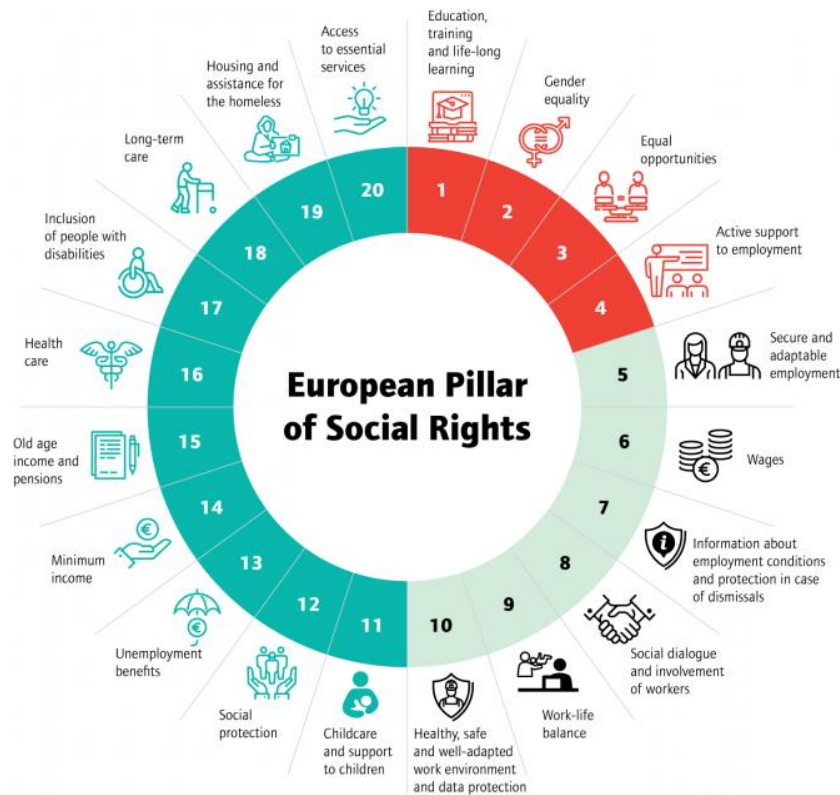


Figure 3: The 20 principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights

Lastly, the European Platform on Combating Homelessness has introduced a series of actions to ensure meaningful progress in the efforts of Member States to combat homelessness.

Objective 10 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasizes the need to reduce inequality both within and among countries. This commitment begins with the elimination of all forms of discrimination, as articulated in various Declarations of Rights. A pertinent example is the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union which prohibits discrimination on several grounds, including disability. Specifically, target 10.2 seeks to “empower and promote the social, economic, and political inclusion of all, irrespective of disability.”

Disability often constitutes a unique vulnerability, exacerbated by legislative frameworks that have historically denied legal capacity to individuals with mental or psychological impairments. Recognizing legal capacity is essential for achieving target 10.3, which focuses on ensuring equal opportunity and reducing inequalities in outcomes. This includes eliminating discriminatory laws and practices while promoting appropriate legislative measures.

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) marked a significant advancement in recognizing disability as a human rights issue on a global scale. The Preamble of the CRPD underscores the importance of individual autonomy and independence for persons with disabilities, emphasizing their right to make personal choices. The Convention defines persons with disabilities as those who experience long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments, which may hinder their full and effective participation in society due to various barriers.

The CRPD obligates signatory states to “promote, protect, and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to respect their inherent dignity.” Notably, Article 12 of the Convention mandates that states

recognize that persons with disabilities enjoy legal capacity on an equal basis with others in all aspects of life and that they are entitled to the support necessary to exercise this capacity, accompanied by safeguards that respect their rights, will, and preferences.

Furthermore, SDG 9, which focuses on building resilient infrastructure, promoting inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and fostering innovation, is particularly relevant to industrial property regulations, specifically patents. Targets 9.4 and 9.5 advocate for specific adaptations within the regulatory framework of industrial property to facilitate innovation and sustainable industrial practices.

SDG 12.a calls for support to developing countries to enhance their scientific and technological capacities towards more sustainable consumption and production patterns. This necessitates robust protection of exclusive rights, along with the flexibility and speed required for fostering innovation and research. Industrial property rights are enshrined in Article 17(2) of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU, and numerous Directives reflect the significance attributed to these rights.

The EU's legislative framework regarding industrial property is largely encapsulated in the European Patent Convention, established on October 5, 1973, and the Directive 98/44/EC on the legal protection of biotechnological inventions, enacted on July 6, 1998.

Regarding SDG 3, specifically target 3.8, which aims to achieve universal health coverage—including financial risk protection and access to quality essential health care services—there are EU regulations that address patent systems to support disadvantaged countries. Notably, Regulation (EC) No 816/2006 outlines the framework for the compulsory licensing of patents concerning the manufacture of pharmaceutical products for export to countries facing public health challenges. This Regulation aims to alleviate public health problems in least developed and other developing countries by improving access to safe, effective, and affordable medicines, ensuring their quality is guaranteed.

The rule of law is essential for the effective functioning of any society. Despite its universal importance, it remains a complex and multifaceted concept, interpreted and applied in diverse ways. This contribution delves into the intricacies of the rule of law, focusing on its role as a foundational value in the European Union's (EU) political and legal framework. It seeks to address the challenges associated with educating students on the core components of the rule of law and proposes effective teaching methods for enhancing their understanding.



Figure 4: *Fighting for Human Rights: Social Entrepreneurs Advocating for Equality and Justice*

The Complexity of the Rule of Law.

1. Empowering Marginalized Communities: Kiva.

Kiva is a pioneering social enterprise that facilitates global connections through micro-lending. By providing small loans to entrepreneurs in underserved communities, Kiva enables them to start or expand businesses, lifting themselves and their families out of poverty. This approach fosters economic development and empowers marginalized individuals to achieve self-sufficiency, actively participating in their local economies.

2. Promoting Education for All: Teach for All.

Teach for All is a global network of social enterprises dedicated to providing quality education universally. By recruiting and training talented young leaders as teachers, Teach for All addresses educational disparities and empowers students to reach their full potential. Through innovative teaching methods and community engagement, these initiatives are transforming children's lives worldwide, fostering a more equitable and just society.

3. Breaking the Cycle of Poverty: BRAC.

Originally founded in Bangladesh, BRAC is now among the world's largest development organizations, exemplifying effective social entrepreneurship. With a holistic approach to poverty alleviation encompassing education, healthcare, microfinance, and social empowerment, BRAC empowers individuals and communities with resources and skills to break the cycle of poverty, fostering inclusivity and sustainable progress.

4. Advocating for Gender Equality: Global Fund for Women.

The Global Fund for Women is a leading advocate for women's rights globally. Through grants to grassroots organizations and activists, it supports efforts to combat gender-based violence, promote economic empowerment, and ensure women's full participation in decision-making processes. These initiatives drive systemic change toward a more equitable world.

5. Protecting the Environment: Patagonia.

Patagonia, a renowned outdoor company and certified B Corporation, leads in environmental stewardship. Through initiatives like donating 1% of sales to environmental causes via the 1% for the Planet program, Patagonia showcases how social entrepreneurship can mitigate ecological impact and advocate for climate justice.

6. Providing Access to Clean Water: charity: water.

Charity: water revolutionizes global water access by funding sustainable projects in developing nations. Through transparent practices and accountability, it ensures communities gain reliable access to clean drinking water, inspiring a new generation of social entrepreneurs to address urgent global challenges.

7. Fighting Food Insecurity: The Hunger Project.

The Hunger Project mobilizes a global movement to end hunger and poverty. By empowering communities with sustainable solutions and strategic partnerships, it enables self-reliance and tackles the root causes of food insecurity, exemplifying the transformative power of social entrepreneurship.

8. Promoting Accessible Healthcare: LifeSpring Hospitals.

Life Spring Hospitals in India innovatively provides affordable, quality healthcare to underserved communities. Through a sustainable business model, it demonstrates that healthcare can be accessible and financially viable, improving health outcomes and reducing disparities.

9. Supporting Fair Trade: Ten Thousand Villages

Ten Thousand Villages is a nonprofit promoting fair trade by empowering artisans worldwide. It provides market access and ensures fair wages, enabling artisans to build sustainable livelihoods and raising awareness about ethical consumerism.

10. Empowering Refugees: Re

Empowers refugees through skills training and employment opportunities. By harnessing refugees' talents and fostering integration, Re

challenges stereotypes and promotes inclusivity, showcasing the transformative impact of social entrepreneurship.

These examples highlight how social entrepreneurship addresses critical societal issues, promoting equality, justice, and sustainability to create a more inclusive global community.

The rule of law transcends mere compliance with legal rules; it embodies the principle that law governs everyone, including the state and its citizens. Its primary rationale is to safeguard individuals from arbitrary power, ensuring that governmental authority is limited and accountable. Given its context-dependent nature, the interpretation of the rule of law varies based on historical, geographical, and cultural factors. Consequently, while the concept of the rule of law is globally recognized as essential, various approaches—such as formal versus substantive interpretations—have emerged, influenced by differing compliance levels with the rule of law.

Formal vs. Substantive Rule of Law.

The formal dimension emphasizes adherence to legal norms and the characteristics of law itself, including clarity, stability, and non-contradictory rules. This aspect is crucial for the functioning of political systems and underpins civil and political rights fundamental to democracy. However, it is essential to recognize that a robust rule of law does not automatically equate to a healthy democracy. For instance, democracies can still exhibit significant deficiencies in their rule of law—exemplified by Hungary's 'illiberal democracy'—while established democracies may also face rule of law challenges.

In the EU, the rule of law stands as a cornerstone of its political and legal order, serving as both a guiding principle and a measure of member states' adherence to democratic norms. Recent developments, particularly instances of rule of law backsliding in certain member states, have highlighted the EU's unique challenge of safeguarding this foundational value against systematic violations. This situation creates an imperative for educators teaching the rule of law within the context of EU values, necessitating effective communication of the importance and implications of the rule of law to students.

Educational Approaches to Teaching the Rule of Law:

1. Pedagogical Framework.

The contribution emphasizes the need for a comprehensive pedagogical framework that encompasses the complexity of the rule of law. Educators should adopt a multidimensional approach that integrates historical, theoretical, and practical perspectives, allowing students to appreciate the nuances of the rule of law in various contexts.

2. Methodological Strategies.

Methodological tools for teaching should be tailored to promote active learning and critical thinking. This could include case studies that illustrate real-world applications and challenges of the rule of law, simulations of legal processes, and discussions that encourage students to analyze and debate contemporary issues surrounding the rule of law.

3. Interdisciplinary Perspectives.

Integrating perspectives from political science, sociology, and ethics can enrich students' understanding of the rule of law. This interdisciplinary approach enables students to grasp how the rule of law intersects with broader societal values and the impact of political structures on legal frameworks.

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