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CHAPTER 30 INTERLINKAGE BETWEEN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN STATES REPORTS TO INTERNATIONAL MECHANISMS

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INTERLINKAGE BETWEEN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN STATES REPORTS TO INTERNATIONAL MECHANISMS

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30.1 Introduction

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a groundbreaking and comprehensive plan that aims to build a more equal and peaceful society by 2030. It takes an interconnected approach to humanity's development challenges, addressing economic, social, and environmental issues in a holistic manner.

From a human rights perspective, the Agenda is groundbreaking because it translates and brings together internationally agreed-upon human rights laws and principles into one plan of action. This plan is easy and attractive to communicate, and it connects rights which are often dealt with in two separate categories as a consequence of geopolitical dynamics (Jensen, 2017; Roberts, 2015), namely, (1) economic, social, and cultural rights (ESCR), such as the rights to quality education, to food, and to work, and (2) civil and political rights (CPR), such as access to justice and participation in public affairs. In other words, this is an *agenda* which understands that integral development can only be achieved if the ambition to end poverty and inequalities is matched with the tools for the people to freely and safely claim their rights and have a voice in building their future.

The SDGs draw from internationally agreed-upon instruments, and most targets are directly connected to the core international human rights conventions, as well as environmental instruments and labor standards.¹ Therefore, identifying how they connect in practice is an important step toward more efficient and coherent use of government resources. It can help close gaps in the implementation of development and human rights plans, foster cross-fertilization of information and data between the two sectors, and lead to better reporting practices to national, regional, and global fora.

Despite the substantial interlinkage between the SDGs and human rights, little research has been conducted on how they intersect in practice and how different reporting mechanisms can support one another.

Through text mining analysis, this chapter approaches the interconnectedness between SDGs and human rights in two types of states reporting. The main focus of the investigation is on how states integrate human rights in SDG reporting through the Voluntary National Review (VNR). Complementarily, it looks into the national reports to the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) to highlight the interconnection between this human rights monitoring mechanism and the SDGs. The analysis is based on VNRs and UPRs from 151 countries between 2016 and 2023.

This study is the first of its kind to systematically analyze VNR and UPR reports to uncover trends, gaps, and connections between SDGs and human rights. The results show high convergence between issues related to human rights and SDGs in both VNRs and UPR reports, respectively. Nonetheless, it shows little coherence in how states address their human rights obligations in the VNRs and how they explicitly refer to the SDGs in UPR reports.

When investigating on the 2030 Agenda pledge to leave no one behind, it also reveals that selected rightsholder groups, such as children, women and girls, and youth, are mostly visible across the VNRs, while others—for example, Indigenous peoples and LBGTI+ groups—vary in the degree of absence across regions.

This work further demonstrates how the use of tailored artificial intelligence (AI) can aid the analysis of large amounts of text to uncover trends at global and regional levels and expose which rightsholder groups, sustainable development goals and targets, and human rights issues are most prominent and silent in state reporting. The analysis is not intended to be exhaustive but, rather, to shed light on examples of what can be extracted from the reports using AI to inspire future projects.

In the sequence, the chapter first describes the conceptual interlinkages between human rights and the SDGs. Afterward, it explains the methodology of the text mining algorithm and the data sources. Finally, it presents the findings and conclusions from the analysis.

30.2 Conceptual Interlinkages Between Human Rights and the Sustainable Development Goals

It is beyond discussion that there is a close connection between human rights and the SDGs (Kaltenborn et al., 2020).

When writing the preamble of the 2030 Agenda, states were explicit in the ambition for the SDGs to realize human rights for all without leaving anyone behind (United Nations, 2015). This means that achieving the Goals implies respecting internationally agreed-upon laws, principles, and standards to protect, promote, and fulfil the rights of all peoples.

30.2.1 Inherent Interconnectedness

According to the “Human Rights Guide to the SDGs”² developed by the Danish Institute for Human Rights (DIHR), more than 90% of the SDG targets align with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the core international human rights treaties,³ and other international instruments. Table 30.1 shows examples of these connections.

Scholars and practitioners have argued that the protection and promotion of human rights are essential for sustainable development and that achieving the SDGs contributes to the realization of human rights. Some studies discuss the overall connections (Forum-Asia, 2018; Feiring and König-Reis, 2020), while others investigate the relation between specific SDGs and human rights, such as in the field of poverty (Sano, 2020) and health (Dovlo, 2020; Kaltenborn, 2020).

By understanding and using interconnectedness, states can create a solid foundation for policies which contribute to states’ commitments to both agendas (Migowe et al., 2024). For example, if

Table 30.1 Examples of how the SDGs connect to human rights instruments⁴

<i>Sustainable Development Goals</i>	<i>Examples of related human rights</i>
1. No Poverty	Right to an adequate standard of living [UDHR Art. 25; ICESCR Art. 11; CRC Art. 27]; right to social security [UDHR Art. 22; ICESCR Art. 9; CRPD Art. 28; CRC Art. 26]
2. Zero Hunger	Right to food [UDHR Art. 25; ICESCR Art. 11; CRC Art. 24(2)(c)]
3. Good Health and Well-Being	Right to health [UDHR Art. 25; ICESCR Art. 12; CEDAW Art. 12; CRC Art. 24]
4. Quality Education	Right to education [UDHR Art. 26; ICESCR Art. 13; CRC Arts. 28, 29; CRPD Art. 24]
5. Gender Equality	Elimination of all forms of discrimination against women [CEDAW Arts. 1–5; CRC Art. 2]
6. Clean Water and Sanitation	Right to safe drinking water and sanitation [ICESCR Art. 11]
7. Affordable and Clean Energy	Right to an adequate standard of living [UDHR Art. 25; ICESCR Art. 11]
8. Decent Work and Economic Growth	Labor rights [UDHR Art. 23; ICESCR Arts. 6, 7, 10; CRPD Art. 27]
9. Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure	Right to an adequate standard of living [UDHR Art. 25; ICESCR Art. 11]
10. Reduce Inequality	Right to equality and non-discrimination [UDHR Art. 2; ICESCR Art. 2(2); ICCPR Arts. 2(1), 26; CERD Art. 2(2); CEDAW Art. 2]
11. Sustainable Cities and Communities	Right to adequate housing [UDHR Art. 25; ICESCR Art. 11]
12. Responsible Consumption and Production	Right to food and the right to safe drinking water [UDHR Art. 25(1); ICESCR Art. 11]
13. Climate Action	Right to life [UDHR Art. 3; ICESCR Art. 12]
14. Life Below Water	Right of all peoples to freely dispose of their natural resources [ICCPR, ICESCR Art. 1(2)]
15. Life on Land	Right of all peoples to freely dispose of their natural resources [ICCPR, ICESCR Art. 1(2)]
16. Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions	Right to life, liberty, and security of the person [UDHR Art. 3; ICCPR Arts. 6(1), 9(1); ICPEL Art. 1]; right to access to justice and due process [UDHR Arts. 8, 10; ICCPR Arts. 2(3), 14–15; CEDAW Art. 2(c)]; right to participate in public affairs [UDHR Art. 21; ICCPR Art. 25]
17. Partnerships for the Goals	Right to development [UDHR Art. 28; ICESCR Art. 2(1); CRC Art. 4; CRPD Art. 32(1)]

states treat SDG 3 (Health and Well-Being) and SDG 4 (Quality Education) as both a development goal and a universal human right, they can leverage the practices and standards established by longstanding human rights mechanism to draw stronger health and education policies.

30.2.2 The Reporting and Monitoring Mechanisms

Ever since the Millennium Development Goals (2000–2015), the distance between the human rights community and the development community has been discussed (Alston, 2005; Kaltenborn,

2020). This continues to affect the processes, reporting, and monitoring of the SDGs and human rights, which have been criticized for working in silos despite the clear interconnectedness (Migowe et al., 2024; Muñoz Carmona, 2023).

The international human rights monitoring mechanisms, established at global and regional levels, offer much guidance for the implementation of the SDGs and human rights. While the SDG progress is reviewed at the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) through voluntary reporting on non-binding commitments, the international human rights treaties are binding and have their own accountability system, which includes the UPR. On the other hand, the SDG follow-up and review process was set up by the 2030 Agenda to be vibrant, triggering participatory approaches at subnational, national, regional, and global levels, including in the preparation of VNRs. Both processes have a lot to offer each other.

There are tools which facilitate the operationalization of the integrated approach. The “SDG–Human Rights Data Explorer”⁵ helps identify country-specific guidance from the recommendations emitted by the human rights monitoring mechanisms with their connection to the SDG targets. This tool is also used to filter the recommendations which are relevant for specific rights-holder groups, such as Indigenous peoples, women and girls, and children, to be used as reference in development plans that affect them.

30.2.3 National Human Rights Institutions and the SDGs

National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) play a crucial role in understanding and implementing the synergies between the SDGs and the human rights obligations in practice (Rudolf, 2020; Feiring et al., 2017).

NHRIs are independent state institutions with a mandate to promote and protect human rights in a given country. In 1994, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) encouraged member states to establish or, “where they already exist, to strengthen national institutions for the promotion and protection of human rights and to incorporate those elements in national development plans” (A/RES/48/134). On the same occasion, UNGA adopted the Paris Principles, which set the standards for competences, independence, and operation of NHRIs.

In a significant move to integrate these institutions into the global sustainable development agenda, the “existence of independent [NHRIs] in compliance with the Paris Principles” became an SDG indicator (Indicator 16.a.1). In turn, in 2015, the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI) adopted the Mérida Declaration,⁶ “which outlines the functions and activities that NHRIs can undertake in order to promote a human-rights-compliant, transparent, participatory, and inclusive implementation of the SDGs” (Breuer and Leininger, 2021).

As of April 2023, there are 88 countries with a fully compliant NHRI accredited by GANHRI. Additionally, there are 32 countries with partially compliant institutions.⁷ Many of these institutions have been engaging with national and global sustainable development processes.⁸ They have inter alia been considered data sources for SDG indicators, offered advice and guidance to other state institutions, and brought them to account regarding their human rights obligations in the enactment of national development plans and programs (Breuer and Leininger, 2021).

30.3 Methodology and Data

This analysis was conducted with the support of AI. In this section, we describe the methodology behind the algorithm and the data sources used in the analysis.

30.3.1 Methodology: Text Mining of Large Amounts of Text

To process and draw insight from large amounts of qualitative data, such as the VNR and UPR reports, we use a text mining algorithm named Text Classify 8⁹ (TC8), developed by the DIHR, in collaboration with Specialisterne.¹⁰ The algorithm works on small extracts of text (text snippets), which typically correspond to a paragraph. Essentially, TC8 analyzes patterns in the text snippets to identify relevant thematic categories. A text snippet can be linked to none, one, or multiple categories. Specifically, TC8 can classify text into human rights themes, SDGs, and rightsholder groups.¹¹

30.3.1.1 The Algorithm Categories Used in the Analysis

30.3.1.1.1 HUMAN RIGHTS CATEGORIES

The human rights categories of the algorithm were developed in collaboration with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).¹² OHCHR has classified 100 human rights themes, and 86 were used in this study. The human rights categories reflect themes related to (1) CPR, such as freedom of opinion, human trafficking, and arbitrary detention; (2) ESCR, such as the rights to social security, food, health, education, water and sanitation, work, and adequate housing; and (3) cross-cutting issues, such as equality and non-discrimination, or human rights and environment.¹³ The human rights categories are used in the analysis of the VNRs.

30.3.1.1.2 RIGHTSHOLDER CATEGORIES

The algorithm is also trained to identify text related to selected rightsholder groups, specifically, women and girls; children; Indigenous peoples; persons with disabilities; migrants; refugees and asylum-seekers; internally displaced persons; human rights defenders; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI+); older persons; and youth. The rightsholder categories are used in the analysis of the VNRs.

30.3.1.1.3 SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT CATEGORIES

The sustainable development categories are based on the 17 SDGs and their 169 targets. The algorithm identifies sustainable development categories at target level.¹⁴ The SDG categories are primarily used in the analysis of the UPR reports and in specific examples of the VNRs.

30.3.1.2 The Training Methodology Behind the Algorithm

The algorithm relies on *ground truth* (also known as training data). The ground truth consists of paragraphs of text that have been tagged by a human who is an expert within the field of sustainable development and human rights. Using the text tagged by the experts, TC8 identifies statistical patterns of words and standing expressions that have the most potential to be linked to a thematic category. For instance, the term *trafficking of women* is used to identify examples for SDG Target 5.2 (*eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls*).

Using the *ground truth* in combination with an *expert dictionary* (list of words and expressions most relevant to a given theme created by an expert), the algorithm constructs the probability that any paragraph of text is annotated within a given category. If this probability is higher than the

established threshold, the text is assigned to the category. Otherwise, the text is not tagged, as there is not enough certainty of the link created between the text and the category.¹⁵

30.3.1.3 Accuracy of the Algorithm

Using a machine learning algorithm like TC8 makes one able to classify a large amount of text in a very short time. It does, however, come with the possibility that some texts will be misclassified. *Misclassification* means that some snippets will be linked to a category even though they do not belong in that category (false positive) and, contrarily, that some snippets will not be linked to a category even though they should have been (false negative). Most misclassifications are related to ambiguous and/or rare categories.

To evaluate how well the algorithm is performing, a performance measure is calculated. This is an indication of the likelihood of false positives/false negatives within a category and aids in determining the need for category refinement and/or providing more training data.¹⁶

When working with supervised machine learning, one should also be aware that the tagging of the ground truth is done by humans, and therefore, it can introduce potential for disagreement, errors, and bias. Furthermore, TC8 works positively, meaning, that it identifies categories in text but does not confirm the absence of categories if none are detected. Instead, it indicates that TC8 could not find any categories in the text paragraph.¹⁷

30.3.2 The Data

This analysis looks at two sets of state reports, namely, the VNR and UPR national reports between 2016 and 2023.¹⁸

The **VNR** is the state report on the SDGs' progress. It serves as a basis for regular reviews by the HLPF and aims to facilitate sharing experiences, including successes, challenges, and lessons learned, in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.¹⁹ According to the "UN Secretary General Common Reporting Guidelines for the Production of VNRs,"²⁰ countries are encouraged to report on all SDGs, not just those under review in a given year. This approach ensures a comprehensive assessment of progress and challenges across the entire spectrum of Sustainable Development Goals. The VNR is voluntary by nature, and states do not receive institutionalized feedback on their report.

The **UPR** is a monitoring mechanism under the Human Rights Council (HRC) where states undergo a peer review regarding the progress and compliance vis-à-vis the international human rights obligations every 4.5 years. Based on the information submitted in the national report, as well as the input from the NHRI and civil society, states receive and are expected to follow up on recommendations from other UN member states to improve their human rights compliance.²¹

30.3.2.1 Country Representation in the Analysis

The analysis includes 151 UN member states. It looks at 265 VNRs and 210 UPR reports submitted in the period 2016–2023 (observe that the number of VNRs is higher due to a more frequent reporting practice by some states at the HLPF). The UPRs are, on average, 21.5 pages long, while the VNRs have, on average, 130 pages.

Not all countries which produced VNR and UPR reports are included in this analysis due to challenges related to PDF formatting and language (i.e., the algorithm can only analyze text written in English or Spanish, and some reports are exclusively available in Russian, French, or

Arabic). For consistency, countries that did not have both a VNR and a UPR report in accessible format and matching language have been excluded from this analysis.

It is important to highlight the resulting regional bias specifically for Africa, where many VNRs were only available in French. If we calculate the representativity of the states in this analysis, compared to the total number of UN member states in each region, there are only 55.5% of African states considered in this analysis, compared to 80.8% from Asia, 91.4% from the Americas, 90.7% from Europe, and 85.7% from Oceania (Figure 30.1).

30.3.2.2 Data Preparation—Text Snippets

To prepare the data for the analysis, we used a PDF extraction method which relies on PDF location markers. The text is extracted from the PDF in paragraph-sized “text snippets” based on predefined, logical paragraph criteria. In this chapter, we use both the number of reports and text snippets as analysis units.

30.3.2.3 Text Mining the VNR and UPR Reports

The algorithm is the main tool used for mining the data in this analysis. On some occasions, the tagging of the algorithm is complemented with the search of specific keywords. This is the case



Figure 30.1 Countries included in this analysis.

Note: The dark color indicates the countries included in the analysis.

Source: DIHR 2024 team. © Tom Tom, © Microsoft Corporation, © OpenStreetMap.

when searching for specific human rights treaties and bodies, explicit mentions of NHRIs, as well as references to specific SDGs.

To examine the data, we assess the prevalence of categories and keywords per number of file and throughout the text of the reports, exploring differences among countries and regions over time. Our approach involves using descriptive statistics and exploratory analysis to identify patterns, relationships, and gaps.

30.4 Human Rights in the Voluntary National Reviews

The VNRs have emerged as a crucial tool for states to report and exchange insights on their progress towards realizing the SDGs. They offer valuable insights into implementation challenges, opportunities, and evolving perspectives on sustainable development within each country.

Considering the strong connection between the 2030 Agenda and human rights, VNRs should reflect on the latter (Muñoz Carmona, 2023). In this section, we investigate if and how this is taking place by assessing the prevalence of human rights themes, instruments, mechanisms, and institutions in the VNRs. We also explore which rightsholder groups are most prevalent or absent in the reports.

30.4.1 Prevalence of Human Rights Issues in the VNRs

Given the demonstrated synergies between the SDGs and human rights issues, it comes as no surprise that in the VNRs we find a prevalence of human rights themes throughout the reports. The ESCR are particularly prevalent, given their overlap with several SDGs. From Figure 30.2,

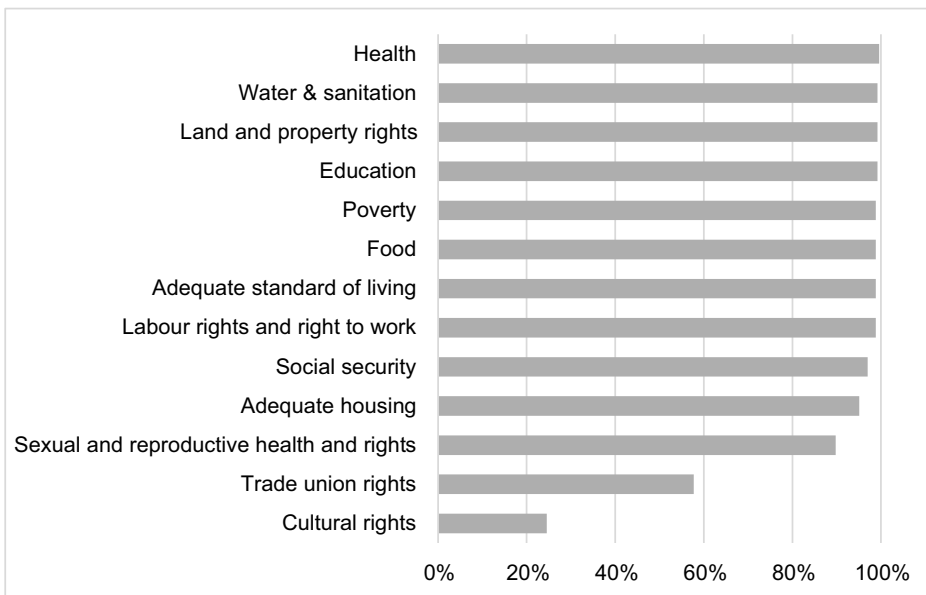


Figure 30.2 Percentage of VNRs linked to economic, social, and cultural rights themes.

Source: DIHR 2024 team calculation based on the application of the algorithm categories related to ESCR in 265 VNRs from 2016 to 2023. Unit of analysis: number of reports.

we see that issues related to the rights to health, water, food, work, and education, among others, are present in all or most of the 265 VNRs. Cultural rights are the exception, appearing in only one quarter of the reports, followed by trade union rights, which are reflected in just over half of them.

While the CPR themes comprise nearly double that of ESCR, the connection with the SDGs is, to some extent, concentrated around what is called SDG 16+, which comprises SDG 16 (on peaceful, just, and inclusive societies) and related targets.²² Perhaps consequently, the prevalence of CPR in the VNRs is more diverse (Figure 30.3).

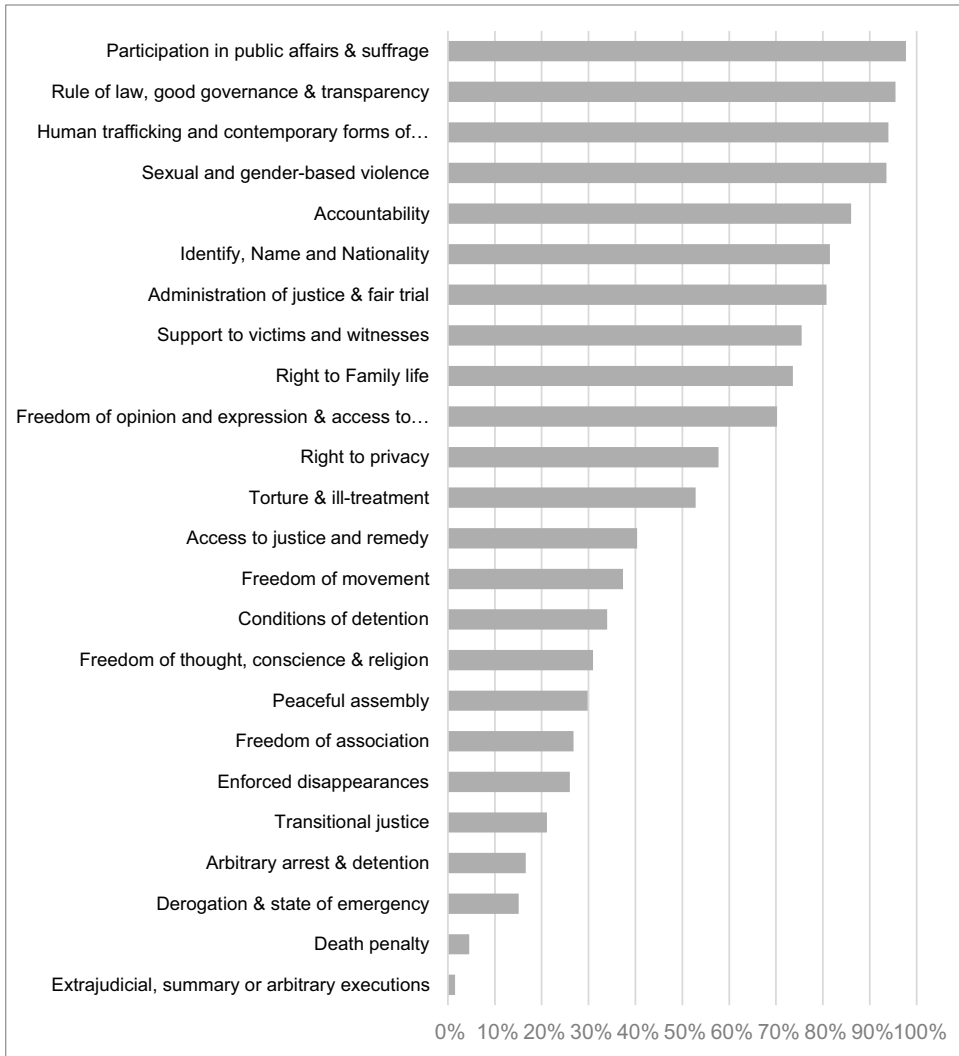


Figure 30.3 Percentage of VNRs linked to civil and political rights themes.

Source: DIHR 2024 team’s calculation based on the application of the algorithm categories related to CPR in 265 VNRs from 2016 to 2023. Unit of analysis: number of reports.



Figure 30.4 Top five human rights themes most frequently mentioned throughout the VNRs, by region.

Note: The graph shows the top five human rights themes most mentioned in the VNRs in relation to the total number of text snippets (equivalent to paragraphs) in the reports.

Source: DIHR 2024 team's calculation based on the application of the algorithm categories related to human rights themes in 265 VNRs from 2016 to 2023. Unit of analysis: number of text snippets.

Issues related to participation, rule of law, human trafficking, and sexual and gender-based violence, among others, are reflected in most reports. On the other hand, issues related to the fundamental freedoms (of movement, association, thought, and opinion) are only reported to a certain extent by countries, despite clear overlap with SDG Target 16.10 (ensure public access to

information and protect fundamental freedoms). A similar scenario appears for arbitrary detention and access to justice (related to SDG Target 16.3).

Additionally, we observe that the theme on the human rights principle of “equality and non-discrimination” is notably prevalent throughout 99% of the VNRs. This prominence can be attributed to its close alignment with SDGs 5, 10, and 16 and the crosscutting nature of these themes regarding the entire 2030 Agenda and the pledge to leave no one behind.

Some human rights themes with limited visibility in the VNRs include “extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions” (four reports) and “arbitrary arrest and detention.” The latter is found in less than 17% of VNRs, despite its explicit link to SDG issues such as rule of law, access to justice, and the protection of fundamental freedoms.

If we shift our focus to the prevalence of human rights themes within the reports in which they appear—meaning, how frequently they are discussed in relation to the number of paragraphs in the reports—we observe some regional differences (Figure 30.4). The right to health appears universally prominent across regions, on top of the prevalence list for all. In the sequence, reports from Europe emphasize themes related to “equality and non-discrimination” and “business and human rights,” while “water and sanitation” comes high in the reports from Asia. Oceania’s top concerns revolve around the environment, with categories like “environment,” “water,” “climate,” and “land” taking precedence. In Africa, combatting “poverty” emerges high on the prevalence list, along with “water,” “education,” and “adequate standard of living.” These trends offer valuable insights into the nuanced challenges and priorities shaping each region’s human rights agenda.

30.4.2 Approaching Sustainable Development Issues as a Right

From the preceding section it is observable that human rights themes are strongly present in the VNRs, particularly those with an explicit connection to the Sustainable Development Goals and their targets. Nonetheless, this investigation merits the question of whether this prevalence is vague or whether states are intentionally approaching the SDGs as a matter of rights and in connection to their international human rights obligations. In this section we will also analyze how rightsholders and NHRIs are reflected in the reports.

30.4.2.1 Prevalence of Issues Specifically Referred to as “Rights”

When looking at examples in the VNR reports, we see that the human rights principles of “equality” and “non-discrimination” are most prominently being portrayed in connection to rights. In fact, among the text snippets identified by the algorithm as pertaining to this theme, 24% have the explicit word “right,” often emphasizing “equal rights and freedoms.”

The same applies to the themes related to “sexual and gender-based violence” and “violence against women,” which are directly tied to SDG 5 (Gender Equality). Respectively, 24% and 21% of the text snippets within these categories contain reference to rights, particularly “women’s rights.”

Conversely, themes related to the “environment,” which are very prevalent in the VNRs (99.2% of the reports), show minimum connection to rights. In fact, only 5.4% of the related texts contain the word “right.” This is an area with ample opportunity for states to improve on, given that outside the reporting arena, environment-related issues, such as the impact of climate change on human rights, are raising the interest of courts, rightsholders, academia, and other stakeholders, with useful resources and lessons to help connect the dots.²³

30.4.2.2 Connecting SDG Issues to International Human Rights Obligations

As showcased in the “Human Rights Guide to the SDGs,”²⁴ most Sustainable Development Goals and their targets are connected to international human rights treaties, labor standards, and environmental instruments. There is therefore an opportunity for states to approach them coherently in their implementation and reporting efforts. Intentionally connecting their human rights obligations with their commitments under the 2030 Agenda can foster efficiency in the programming, planning, and monitoring of both SDGs and human rights.

When analyzing the VNRs, we observe little coherence in how states connect SDG issues to their obligations under binding international instruments. Although most reports (60% of them) refer to at least one of the nine core international human rights treaties,²⁵ this is neither done systematically nor consistently with the average of states ratification of these instruments.²⁶

SDG 5 (Gender Equality), for example, is among the most prominent goals in the VNRs (it appears in 88% of the reports). We observe nonetheless that only 36.6% of VNRs reference the Convention or the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). This absence is particularly striking, considering that at the time of writing, 189 countries are party to the Convention.

Similarly, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is perceived as of crosscutting relevance for all SDGs, in addition to aligning explicitly to targets under SDGs 5, 8, and 16. The CRC and the SDGs mutually reinforce each other, as the CRC establishes a comprehensive framework for children’s rights, which are integral to all aspects of sustainable development.²⁷ However, despite this symbiotic relationship, the CRC is mentioned in only 27% of analyzed VNRs.

It does not go unnoticed that countries connecting their international obligations on children’s rights in the SDG context bring strong elements for the realization of both SDGs and human rights. The VNR from Zimbabwe (2017), for instance, illustrates how the countries’ obligations vis-à-vis the CRC and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child have triggered the Constitutional Court in 2016 to pass “a judgement outlawing marriage of persons below the age of 18,” therefore also contributing to SDG Target 5.3 (eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early, and forced marriage and FGM).

In the Irish VNR (2023), the government recycled information received by and submitted to the human rights monitoring mechanism. They mention that “criticism was levelled [by the mechanism] against the Irish Government due to the lack of disaggregated data about human rights issues affecting children” and recognized that “[t]he absence of disaggregated data in this regard renders pupils living in Direct Provision almost invisible.” The report reflects about the impact of this data gap for the implementation of the SDGs for this group.

These examples highlight an important reason for improved coherence between SDGs and human rights reporting. The accountability features of the human rights system require a certain level of detail from states in their reporting on progress vis-à-vis the Conventions. In addition, they provide feedback, guidance, and recommendation which support states in realizing and protecting rights. This mechanism is therefore a rich source of relevant information for states to use in both the implementation and reporting of related SDG issues.

30.4.2.3 Illustrating a Human Rights Perspective to SDG Implementation and Reporting

Generally, the ratification of binding international treaties triggers processes at national level to facilitate its implementation. This includes change in legislation, the adoption of national action plans, and the establishment of national mechanisms for reporting, implementation, and follow-up.

Perceiving the SDGs in light of human rights obligations can not only benefit more coherent and effective reporting but also opens access to resources, tools, data, and mechanisms which can help strengthen implementation. In the VNRs, some countries highlighted their efforts to promote an integrated approach.

Bosnia and Herzegovina (2023), for example, reported on its efforts to “enhance cooperation among relevant institutions responsible for monitoring human rights, statistical agencies and institutes, civil society organizations,” among others.

Similarly, Mozambique (2020), highlighted the importance of having a human rights perspective and abiding to the international human rights framework to contribute to building peaceful societies regarding, among others, “the rights of women, children, the elderly and people with disabilities” and to “address elements related to peace and violence—such as torture, human trafficking and political and civil rights.”

In the example of Costa Rica (2017) we observe the state leveraging the human rights-based approach when developing policies to implement SDG 3 (on health). It specifically mentions the “installation of specialized units with a human rights perspective to provide dignified care to LGBTIQ persons.”²⁸ Similarly, it emphasizes the efforts to “improve the care and treatment of people with mental health disorders in the community from a human rights perspective.”²⁹

30.4.3 Rightsholder Groups in the Voluntary National Review

The 2030 Agenda articulates the unequivocal commitment of member states to leave no one behind. This commitment implies addressing discrimination and inequalities and providing for policy solution which addresses the specific needs of all persons. To operationalize this commitment at country level, it is essential to identify who is being left behind and which are the root causes and systemic barriers preventing progress for these groups.

The VNRs are not the only monitoring process countries use to track progress on the sustainable development, but it certainly is one which encourages a participatory approach and generates national and international visibility to issues prioritized in the report.

Visibility for rightsholder groups in the VNRs can be interpreted as a sign that their needs and claims are on the radar of governments. Invisibility, on the other hand, indicates a gap in how groups are addressed at the national level. The silence about some groups in the VNRs could also be related to a literal interpretation of the 2030 Agenda by some countries, which then report only on groups which are specifically mentioned in the SDG targets and indicators. This represents, naturally, a big gap in the pledge to leave no one behind and speaks to the importance of acknowledging beyond the usual suspects in the global sustainable development agenda.

According to Figure 30.5, “youth” (98.5%), “children” (96%), and “women and girls” (94%) are mentioned in nearly all VNRs. “Migrants,” “persons with disabilities,” and “older persons” come in the sequence with relatively high prevalence. “Indigenous peoples” and “refugees and asylum-seekers” appear in about half of the reports. On the lower side appears “human rights defenders” (28%), “internally displaced persons” (42%), and “LGBTI+” persons (47%).

When zooming into an example of regional prevalence, we observe that “Indigenous peoples” is the 7th (of 11) most mentioned group in the Americas, appearing in 40% of the reports in the region. It is noticeable that among the reports mentioning this group, the frequency is quite high: Indigenous peoples are the 4th most mentioned groups within the reports in which it appears.

One can also explore which SDGs are mostly reported on in relation to different rightsholder groups. For instance, Figure 30.6 shows the top 10 SDG targets which appear in connection to Indigenous groups in the VNRs from the Americas.

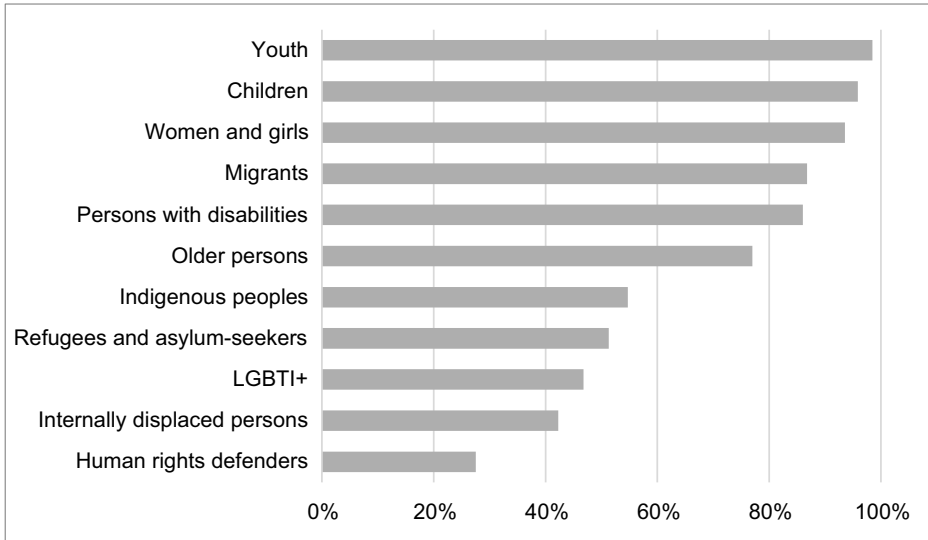


Figure 30.5 Percentage of VNRs linked to the rightsholder groups.

Source: DIHR 2024 team’s calculation based on the application of the algorithm categories related to rightsholder groups in 265 VNRs from 2016 to 2023. Unit of analysis: number of reports.

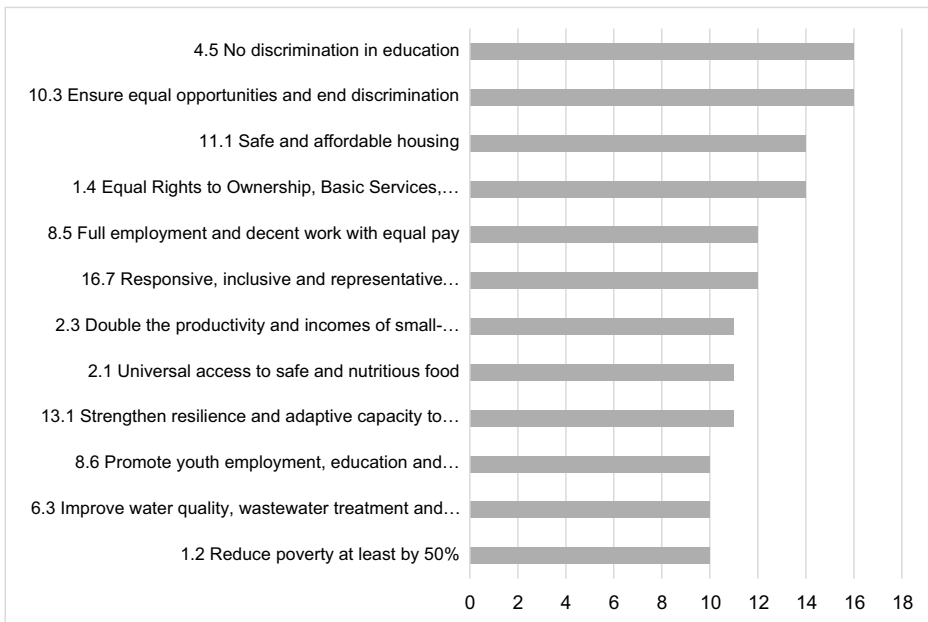


Figure 30.6 Top 10 SDG targets in connection to Indigenous peoples in the VNRs from the Americas region.

Note: The graph shows the number of VNRs that contain at least one text snippet tagged simultaneously to the algorithm categories on indigenous peoples and on sustainable development (SDG target).

Source: DIHR 2024 team’s calculation based on the application of the algorithm in 57 VNRs from the Americas from 2016 to 2023.

When exploring examples in the prevalence of groups per number of VNRs by region, “LGBTI+” persons appear among the three least mentioned groups in Africa, Asia, and Oceania, contrary to the Americas, where it appears in the top five. “Human rights defenders” appears consistently among the three most invisible groups in all regions, despite being the focus of one important SDG indicator for human rights (SDG Indicator 16.10.1).

30.4.4 Leveraging the Mandate of National Human Rights Institutions for the Sustainable Development Goals

UNGA and HRC resolutions³⁰ have encouraged member states and the UN system to leverage the mandate of NHRIs in support of SDG implementation. Given their independent nature, mandate, and expertise in the human rights field, there is a unique role for them to play in support of the “leave no one behind” pledge.

Considering the specific SDG indicator on the existence of NHRIs (SDG Indicator 16.a.1) and the fact that 120 countries have a fully or partially compliant NHRI, there is a relatively low level of reporting on these institutions in the VNRs (Figure 30.7). Additionally, there are varied practices among states regarding how they report on their NHRI in connection with the SDG processes.

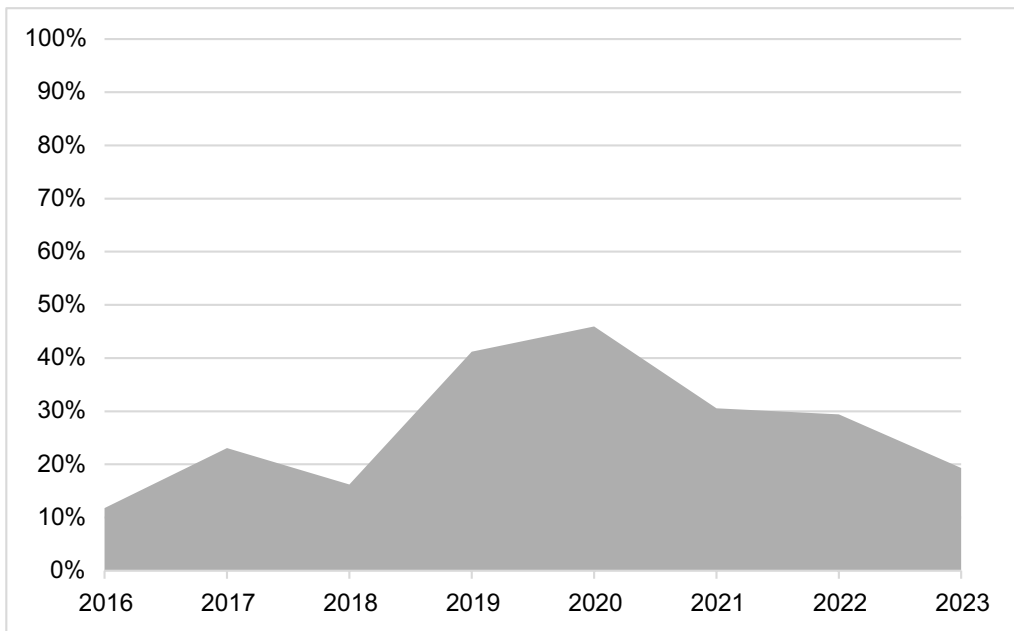


Figure 30.7 Percentage of VNRs with explicit mention of their own NHRI over time.

Note: This figure should be interpreted with attention to the fact that not all countries have an NHRI. As of April 2023, there are 120 countries with a fully or partially compliant NHRI, and they might not be equally represented throughout the years. Specifically, 19 countries with an NHRI are not included in this analysis due to the limitations explained in section “3.2.1 Country representation in the analysis.”

Source: DIHR 2024 team’s calculation based on a word search of the GANHRI’s list of NHRIs³¹ in 265 VNRs from 2016 to 2023. Unit of analysis: number of reports.

While countries like Rwanda (2019 and 2023) and Malaysia (2021) simply mention the existence of their NHRI, we found good practices of substantive reporting on the contribution of these institutions to advance the SDGs in reports from other countries. Ireland (2023), for instance, included in its VNR the integral parallel report with recommendations and assessments on the SDGs from the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission.

Ghana (2019 and 2022) highlighted the role of the Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice in the development of legislation and policies on gender equality (SDG 5) and in addressing human rights violations through receiving complaints from citizens and conducting investigations.

Finally, Hungary (2018) acknowledged “the engagement of the Office of the Commissioner for Fundamental Rights . . . in the process of preparing the VNR.” It also highlighted the importance of realizing the recommendations from human rights institutions for the national implementation of the SDGs, particularly in areas “related to law-making and to the conduct of public authorities.”

30.5 Sustainable Development in UPR Reporting

There is ample potential for using human rights monitoring to assess progress and gaps in the SDG implementation: from identifying key issues and vulnerable populations to improving efficiency, coherence, and accountability. To foster this, the UN created a repository on good practices on how the universal human rights monitoring process (the UPR) can be used to maximize impact for sustainable development.³²

Complementing this effort, in this section we use AI to assist in identifying content that can be useful for the SDGs from one element of the UPR process, namely, the national reports. Firstly, we analyze the presence of SDG-related issues in the reports and, secondly, we search for explicit mentions of the SDGs.

30.5.1 SDG-Related Issues in National Reports to the Universal Periodic Review

The striking convergence between SDGs and human rights is exposed when running the algorithm on UPR reports: Several SDGs are tagged in 100% of them (Figure 30.8). In addition, 70% of all text snippets (equivalent to the report paragraphs) address SDG-related issues, signifying that these are prominently discussed throughout the text.

Not surprisingly, SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) appears as the most mentioned throughout the reports (in 29% of text snippets). SDG Targets 16.3 (rule of law and access to justice) and 16.7 (responsive, inclusive, and participatory decision-making) are the most prevalent. SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 4 (Quality Education) come in the sequence, appearing in 16.5% and 13% of the text snippets, respectively.

When assessing trends over time, we observe that issues related to SDG 13 (Climate Action) are increasingly being picked up in UPR reports, with a steady rise from 52% in 2016 to 71% of the reports in 2023. This is consistent with the notable surge in awareness and attention toward issues related to human rights and the environment over the past decade, culminating in the UN formally recognizing the *right to live in a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment for everyone, everywhere*, in 2021 (A/HRC/RES/48/13).³³

At the lowest side of prevalence appears SDG 14 (Life Below Water), SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy), SDG 15 (Life on Land), and SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure).

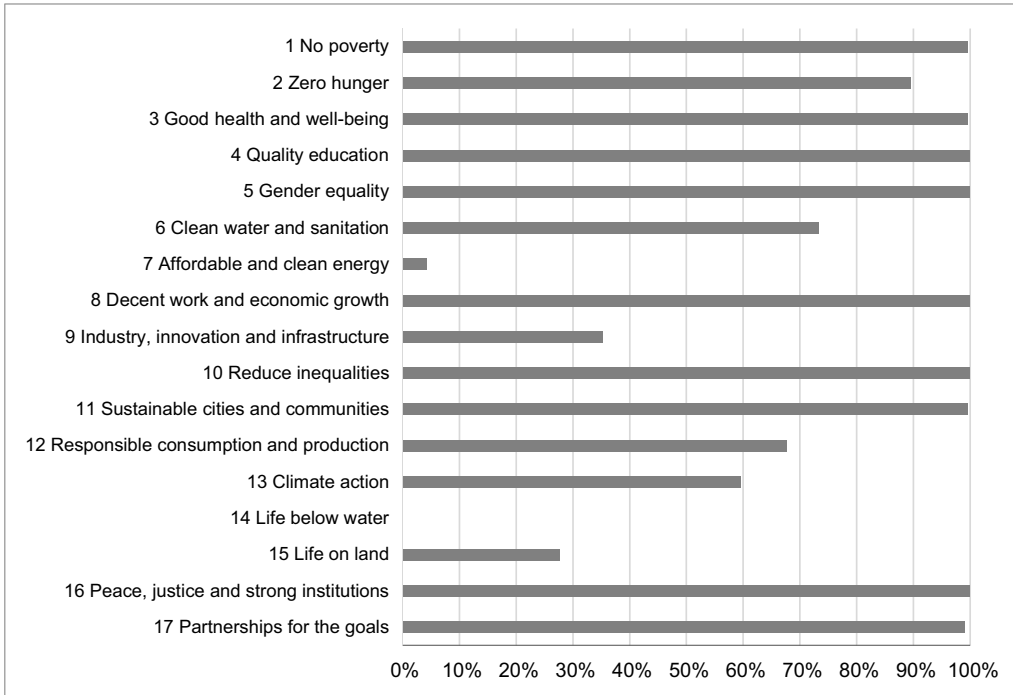


Figure 30.8 Percentage of UPR reports linked to the SDGs.

Source: DIHR 2024 team’s calculation based on the application of the “sustainable development” categories of the algorithm in 210 UPR national reports from 2016 to 2023. Unit of analysis: number of reports.

The small attention dedicated in the UPRs to these issues could indicate an oversight of this body regarding the human rights impact to specific rightsholder groups. This opens an opportunity for the human rights system to learn from sustainable development knowledge and practices in these areas. For example, extensive studies from DIHR on SDG 14 demonstrate the devastating consequences of the big fishery and aquaculture industry to the rights and livelihoods of small fishery communities.³⁴

30.5.2 SDGs Mentioned Explicitly in the UPR Reports

From early days, the human rights system undertook the task of understanding how the 2030 Agenda intersected with human rights and which role the system and the human rights actors could play in leveraging it as an opportunity to advance rights. For instance, by 2024, the Human Rights Council had organized six Intersessional Meetings on Human Rights and the 2030 Agenda³⁵ to, among other things, provide a multistakeholder space for dialogue and exchange of good practices, achievements, challenges, and lessons learned.

The increased awareness of human rights actors to the SDGs is observed in the UPR reports, where we capture a trend of explicit mentions of SDGs and in a higher number of reports over time. The trend, nonetheless, appears to be losing tracking in most recent years (Figure 30.9).

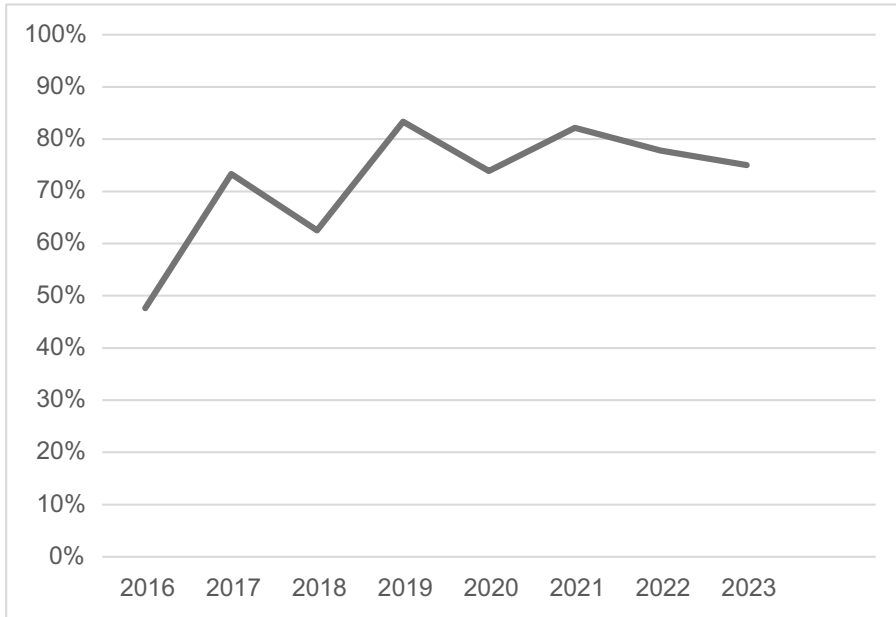


Figure 30.9 Percentage of UPRs with explicit mention of the SDGs over time.

Source: DIHR 2024 team’s calculation based on word search of the SDGs in 210 UPR national reports from 2016 to 2023. Unit of analysis: number of reports.

When analyzing the content of the reports, we observe that the SDG–human rights connections are often related to how measures triggered by the human rights system contribute directly to the implementation of specific SDGs and targets. Lesotho (2019), for instance, reported on how the “training of teachers that are conversant in teaching methods for the different types of disabilities” is partially helping it meet SDG 4.5 “by ensuring that persons with disabilities have equal access to education premises.”

We also observe states using data from the SDG monitoring processes to substantiate their UPR report. Botswana (2023), for example, cites the UN Water SDG 6 snapshot to report that “78% of monitored water bodies in Botswana had good ambient water quality in 2020.”

The explicit mention of the SDGs in UPR reports adds an important layer of accountability to the 2030 Agenda. Differently from the HLPF, where states do not receive formal feedback on the status of their SDG implementation, the UPR brings states to account based on their own report, as well as those presented by civil society organizations and the NHRI.

According to the UN good practices report on how the UPR process supports sustainable development, “on average each state receives over two hundred [UPR] recommendations covering all human rights including specific issues relating to women and children, health, education, labour, the environment, climate, migration, displacement” (UNDP, 2022).³⁶ The recommendations received by states in the UPR process not only bring attention to shortcomings in human rights and related SDG implementation but also shows the way forward.

30.6 Conclusion

The interlinkages between the SDG commitments and human rights obligations are substantial, but there is a perceived lack of intentionality in how states address them in implementation and reporting. With the support of AI, this analysis attempted to shed light on examples of practical interconnectedness in states' reports to prominent monitoring systems in both fields, namely, the VNR and UPR reports.

The chapter investigated the prevalence of human rights in the VNRs, both intentionally and as a mere consequence of thematic overlap, to better understand how these connections are made in practice. Moreover, it examined the prevalence of the SDGs in the UPR national reports to highlight how this mechanism can support and provide information to SDG reporting, implementation, and prioritization.

The study showed that human rights issues, in particular, but not limited to, those related to ESCR, are highly reflected in the VNRs. Nonetheless, further examination revealed little coherence in how states connect them to their obligations under binding international instruments. Even so, there were interesting examples of countries highlighting the role of their NHRIs and explicitly reporting on the human rights-based approach used in SDG-related processes and programs. When examining the prevalence of rightsholder groups, children, women and girls, and youth appear significantly prominent in the VNRs, while human rights defenders are mostly invisible in the reports across regions. Other groups, including LGBTI+ and Indigenous peoples, vary from region to region, reflecting the different priorities around the world.

As for the UPR reports, the analysis reflected an enormous prevalence of SDG-related issues and exposed a vast potential to utilize this mechanism for enhancing SDG accountability and for building on the synergies to demonstrate how human rights further the advancement of the SDGs.

This work showcased how tailored AI opens opportunities for understanding regional and global trends and gaps that can help inform policies and decision-making processes. AI can help extract meaningful patterns and point to insights beyond the human capacity, to help digest the ever-increasing amount of information on SDGs and human rights out there. In this study, the use of AI complemented the human intervention, which remained indispensable for a deeper analysis and extraction of detailed information.

The analysis was not exhaustive, but it illustrated the potential of delving deeper into the findings across different thematic categories of the algorithm. The study aims to inspire further investigations, specifically to gain a more detailed understanding of how specific rightsholder groups are addressed in connection with SDGs and human rights issues in documents beyond the VNRs and UPR reports. This type of analysis can shed light on the imbalance in how certain groups and human rights issues are prioritized within states' agendas. Ultimately, it adds a layer of accountability to states' commitments regarding human rights obligations and their efforts to leave no one behind.

Notes

- 1 The instruments linked to the SDGs by the Danish Institute for Human Rights are available at: <https://sdg.humanrights.dk/list-goals-targets>.
- 2 Explore the links between the SDGs and human rights on the Human Rights Guide to the SDGs, available at: <https://sdg.humanrights.dk>.

- 3 The list of the nine core international human rights treaties are available at: www.ohchr.org/en/core-international-human-rights-instruments-and-their-monitoring-bodies.
- 4 Adapted from OHCHR, available at: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Development/SR/AddisAbaba/SDG_HR_Table.pdf.
- 5 Explore the recommendations from the human rights monitoring mechanisms applicable to countries and connected to the SDGs at the SDG–Human Rights Data Explorer, available at: <https://sdgdata.humanrights.dk/>.
- 6 The Mérida Declaration, available at <https://cfnhri.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Merida-Declaration-FINAL.pdf>.
- 7 Chart on accreditation of NHRIs as of April 2023, available at: <https://ganhri.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/StatusAccreditationChartNHRIs.pdf>.
- 8 See the GANHRI website for information and resources related to NHRIs engagement with SDG processes: <https://ganhri.org/ganhri-hrc54-statement-sdgs/>.
- 9 TC8 is the AI used in the SDG–Human Rights Data Explorer (reference 5), which classifies about 220,000 human rights recommendations to the different SDG targets. OHCHR has also adopted it to aid expert thematic tagging of recommendations in their Universal Human Rights Index (<https://uhri.ohchr.org/en/>).
- 10 Specialisterne is a Danish social enterprise harnessing the talents of people with a diagnosis on the autistic spectrum to secure meaningful employment opportunities for them.
- 11 For this analysis, if a text snippet within a report is linked to a certain category, the entire report is classified as related to this category.
- 12 OHCHR human rights categories, available at: <https://uhri.ohchr.org/assets/search-human-rights-recommendations>.
- 13 See all categories at “Performance calculations of the Algorithm,” available at: <https://sdgdata.humanrights.dk/sites/sdgdata.humanrights.dk/files/media/document/Performance%20calculation%20notes.XLSX>.
- 14 For a list of SDGs and targets, visit “The 17 Goals,” available at: <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>.
- 15 For more information on the technicalities of the algorithm, please refer to “Textclassify algorithm and its use,” available at: <https://sdgdata.humanrights.dk/files/media/document/Technical%20note%20-%20TextClassify%20algorithm%20and%20its%20use.pdf>.
- 16 For detailed performance assessments of each category using the training data, see “Performance calculations of the Algorithm,” available at: <https://sdgdata.humanrights.dk/sites/sdgdata.humanrights.dk/files/media/document/Performance%20calculation%20notes.XLSX>.
- 17 For more information on the technical aspects of the algorithm, please visit Methodology | SDG–Human Rights Data Explorer, at <https://sdgdata.humanrights.dk/en/methodology>, or contact the authors.
- 18 Access the VNRs at <https://hlpf.un.org/countries>, and the UPR reports at www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/documentation.
- 19 More information on VNR process: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/>.
- 20 Voluntary common reporting guidelines for voluntary national reviews, available at: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/27171SG_Guidelines_2021.final.pdf.
- 21 More information on the UPR process: www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/upr-home.
- 22 Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies, *The Roadmap for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies—A Call to Action to Change our World* (New York: Center on International Cooperation, 2019). Available at www.sdg16.plus/resources/the-roadmap-for-peaceful-just-and-inclusive-societies/.
- 23 The Submission of the OHCHR to the 21st Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change offers guidance to states in connecting human rights and climate change. Available at: www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/ClimateChange/COP21.pdf.
- 24 Human Rights Guide to the SDGs, available at: <https://sdg.humanrights.dk>.
- 25 The nine core international human rights treaties are available at: www.ohchr.org/en/core-international-human-rights-instruments-and-their-monitoring-bodies.
- 26 Number of states which ratified the core human rights treaties, by their acronyms: CCPR: 173; CESCR: 171; CERD: 182; CMW: 58; CED: 69; CAT: 173; CEDAW: 189; CRC: 196 CRPD: 186.
- 27 Women’s Major Group, “Sustainable Development Goals and UN Human Rights Mechanisms from a Feminist Perspective,” 2021. Available at <https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/2021-07/SDG%20from%20a%20Feminist%20Perspective%20-%20CRC.pdf>.
- 28 Translated from the original: “se han instalado unidades especializadas con enfoque de derechos humanos, que atienden dignamente a personas LGBTIQ.”

- 29 Translated from the original: “mejorar la atención y tratamiento de personas con trastornos mentales en el ámbito comunitario bajo un enfoque de derechos humanos.”
- 30 For example: HRC Resolution A/HRC/RES/51/31 and UNGA Resolution A/RES/78/204.
- 31 Chart on accreditation of NHRIs as of December 2023, available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/tools-and-resources/current-chart-accreditation-nhris>.
- 32 UNDP, “UN Good Practices: How the Universal Periodic Review Process Supports Sustainable Development” (New York, 2022). Available at: www.undp.org/publications/un-good-practices-how-universal-periodic-review-process-supports-sustainable-development.
- 33 Resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council on October 8, 2021 (A/HRC/RES/48/13).
- 34 See DIHR page dedicated to the work on SDG 14: www.humanrights.dk/promoting-human-rights-fisheries-aquaculture.
- 35 Information about the latest and previous Intersessional Meetings on human rights and the 2030 Agenda at the Human Rights Council is available at: www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/sixth-intersessional-meeting-human-rights-and-the-2030-agenda.
- 36 UNDP, “UN Good Practices” (2022). Available at: <https://www.undp.org/publications/un-good-practices-how-universal-periodic-review-process-supports-sustainable-development>.

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