



Research Paper

Global Governance and the Sustainable Development Goals: Issues and Challenges in Developing Economies

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Abstract

Sustainable development has emerged as one of the most significant global priorities in the twenty-first century, particularly in the context of rising environmental degradation, social inequality, and economic instability. At the same time, global politics plays a crucial role in shaping how sustainable development goals are framed, negotiated, and implemented across countries. This paper examines the relationship between sustainable development and global politics, with a special focus on India and other developing nations. It explores how international power structures, global institutions, and political interests influence sustainability outcomes. The paper discusses the role of global governance institutions such as the United Nations, World Bank, and World Trade Organization, and highlights the political challenges faced by developing countries in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Issues such as climate justice, North–South inequality, financing constraints, and geopolitical tensions are analysed in detail. India’s approach to sustainable development—through national policies, climate diplomacy, and global leadership—is examined as a case study. The paper concludes that while global political cooperation is essential for sustainable development, existing power asymmetries often disadvantage developing nations. Strengthening inclusive global governance, ensuring fair climate finance, and respecting the developmental needs of poorer countries are essential for achieving truly sustainable and equitable global development.

Keywords: Sustainable Development, Global Politics, SDGs, India, Developing Nations, Global Governance

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I. Introduction

Sustainable development has become a central concern of global policy discussions in recent decades. Rapid industrialization, population growth, climate change, and widening social inequalities have raised serious questions about the long-term sustainability of current development models. In response, the international community has adopted various frameworks, most notably the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to promote balanced economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection (United Nations [UN], 2015).

However, sustainable development does not operate in a political vacuum. Global politics—defined by power relations among states, international organizations, and non-state actors—plays a decisive role in determining how sustainability agendas are designed and implemented. Decisions related to climate change mitigation, environmental regulations, trade policies, and development finance are often shaped by political interests rather than purely environmental or social concerns (Bernstein, 2017).

For developing countries like India, the link between sustainable development and global politics is especially important. These countries face the dual challenge of achieving economic growth to reduce poverty while simultaneously addressing environmental and social sustainability. At the same time, they must navigate global political pressures from developed nations, international financial institutions, and global climate regimes. This paper seeks to examine how global politics influences sustainable development outcomes, with particular emphasis on India and other developing nations.

II. Conceptual Understanding of Sustainable Development

The concept of sustainable development was formally defined in the Brundtland Report as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development [WCED], 1987). This definition highlights the intergenerational dimension of development and emphasizes the need for balance.

Sustainable development rests on three interconnected pillars:

1. **Economic sustainability** – ensuring long-term economic growth and stability
2. **Social sustainability** – promoting equity, inclusion, and human well-being
3. **Environmental sustainability** – protecting natural resources and ecosystems

The SDGs adopted by the United Nations in 2015 operationalize this concept through 17 goals and 169 targets covering issues such as poverty eradication, climate action, gender equality, clean energy, and responsible consumption (UN, 2015).

III. Understanding Global Politics

Global politics refers to interactions among countries and international actors on issues that cross national boundaries. It includes diplomacy, international negotiations, global governance institutions, and geopolitical rivalries. Power asymmetries between developed and developing countries significantly influence global political outcomes (Gilpin, 2001).

In the context of sustainable development, global politics determines:

- Who sets global sustainability agendas
- How responsibilities are shared
- Which countries receive financial and technological support

Thus, sustainability goals are often shaped by political bargaining rather than purely scientific or ethical considerations.

IV. Global Governance and Sustainable Development

Global governance institutions play a central role in promoting sustainable development. Organizations such as the United Nations, World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and World Trade Organization (WTO) influence development trajectories through funding, policy advice, and rule-making.

The United Nations acts as the primary platform for sustainability discussions, especially through forums such as the UN General Assembly and annual climate conferences (COPs). However, implementation largely depends on national governments, leading to uneven outcomes across countries (Biermann et al., 2012).

International financial institutions provide crucial funding for development projects but often impose policy conditions that may limit policy autonomy in developing countries. Critics argue that such conditionalities sometimes prioritize economic reforms over social and environmental concerns (Stiglitz, 2002).

V. North–South Divide and Climate Justice

One of the most contentious issues in sustainable development is the persistent North–South divide. Developed countries have historically contributed the most to environmental degradation, particularly greenhouse gas emissions, while developing countries bear a disproportionate share of climate impacts (Roberts & Parks, 2007). Developing nations argue for the principle of **Common but Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR)**, which recognizes differing historical responsibilities and capacities. This principle is central to global climate negotiations, including the Paris Agreement (UNFCCC, 2015).

Despite this recognition, developing countries often face pressure to adopt strict environmental standards without receiving adequate financial and technological support. This creates tensions between development needs and environmental commitments.

VI. India’s Approach to Sustainable Development

India provides an important case study in understanding the link between sustainable development and global politics. As a rapidly growing economy with a large population, India faces significant sustainability challenges related to poverty, pollution, energy security, and climate change.

At the domestic level, India has integrated the SDGs into national planning through initiatives such as:

- National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC)
- Swachh Bharat Abhiyan
- National Solar Mission

Internationally, India has positioned itself as a strong advocate for climate justice. It emphasizes the right to development and calls for greater responsibility from developed countries. India’s leadership in initiatives like the International Solar Alliance demonstrates its growing role in global sustainability governance (Dubash, 2019).

However, India also faces criticism for continued reliance on fossil fuels. This reflects the complex trade-offs between economic growth and environmental sustainability faced by many developing nations.

VII. Sustainable Development in Other Developing Nations

Other developing countries face similar challenges. Many African and South Asian nations struggle with limited financial resources, weak institutional capacity, and vulnerability to climate change. Political instability and external debt further constrain sustainability efforts.

Global political dynamics often marginalize these countries in decision-making processes. Although they are most affected by climate change, their voices are often underrepresented in global negotiations (Okereke & Coventry, 2016).

VIII. Geopolitics, Energy, and Sustainability

Geopolitics increasingly intersects with sustainability, particularly in the area of energy transition. Competition over renewable technologies, critical minerals, and green investments has become a new arena of global power politics.

For developing countries, access to affordable clean energy is crucial for sustainable growth. However, geopolitical rivalries and trade restrictions can limit technology transfer and increase costs (Meckling et al., 2015).

IX. Challenges in Linking Global Politics and Sustainable Development

Several challenges hinder effective integration of sustainability and global politics:

- Weak enforcement of international agreements
- Conflicting national interests
- Insufficient climate finance
- Political instability and conflicts

These challenges disproportionately affect developing nations, slowing progress toward SDGs.

To achieve sustainable development globally, stronger international cooperation is essential. Global governance institutions must become more inclusive and responsive to the needs of developing countries. Adequate climate finance, technology transfer, and capacity-building are critical.

India and other developing nations can play a greater role by forming strategic alliances, strengthening South–South cooperation, and actively shaping global sustainability norms.

X. Conclusion

Sustainable development and global politics are deeply interconnected. While sustainability goals aim to promote collective global welfare, their implementation is shaped by political power structures and national interests. For developing countries like India, global politics presents both challenges and opportunities. Achieving truly sustainable development requires not only economic and technological solutions but also fair and inclusive global political arrangements. Without addressing global inequalities and power imbalances, the promise of sustainable development will remain incomplete.

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