



Manipulation of Sustainable Development: Framing of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals by Authoritarian Regimes

REPORT
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Executive Summary

Background

In 2015, the United Nations adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as an ambitious, universal roadmap to end poverty, reduce inequality, and tackle climate change by 2030. Designed to be inclusive and transformative, the SDGs are rooted in principles of equity, justice, and sustainability. With less than four years remaining, however, only 16% of the SDG targets are on track to be met. The world is not only falling short of meeting the goals; it is drifting further away from them.

About

This report argues that one critical yet underexamined reason for the underperformance lies in how authoritarian regimes have engaged with the SDGs. While these regimes frequently invoke SDG-aligned rhetoric and participate in SDG-themed global forums, their actions reveal a pattern of manipulation, superficial commitment, and instrumental use of the SDG framework to serve regime interests. In contexts where repression, absence of civil society, and impunity prevail, these regimes repurpose the Goals as tools of control, propaganda, and international legitimization rather than engines of genuine development.

Purpose

This report seeks to understand whether sustainable development, as envisioned in the 2030 Agenda, is possible to achieve without democracy, accountability, or respect for human rights. It looks into the history and design of the SDGs, aiming to identify strengths and weaknesses in the SDG framework. It analyses how autocrats reshape the SDG agenda to further their regime objectives, exposing the risks of authoritarian engagement with the Goals. Ultimately, the report aims to offer concrete recommendations for democratic states and international actors to uphold the integrity of the SDGs, now and in the post-2030 development framework.

Scope and Methodology

This report examines the first decade of the SDG era, tracking developments from the Goals' adoption in 2015 through 2025 — ten years of SDG implementation. It evaluates the sincerity of authoritarian SDG engagement through qualitative analysis of public policy, reporting practices, and regime behaviors. To reflect a range of political systems and regions, the report uses case studies from Azerbaijan, Belarus, China, Iran, North Korea, Nicaragua, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela.

Findings

Based on the analysis, the report presents ten key findings:

- 1. The SDGs are fundamentally incompatible with authoritarianism.** More than 90% of the SDG targets are linked to specific human rights obligations, and core democratic principles such as transparency, participation, and accountability are embedded throughout the framework.
- 2. The SDGs are vulnerable to manipulation.** As a non-binding political declaration, the SDGs rely on voluntary self-reporting, which enables authoritarian regimes to selectively showcase progress and conceal violations, using instruments like Voluntary National Reviews more for image management than accountability.
- 3. Authoritarian engagement is selective and symbolic.** While many regimes embed SDGs into national plans, localization is narrow and often framed as a continuation, not a reform, of authoritarian agendas.
- 4. SDG policy architecture in authoritarian regimes is incoherent and contradictory.** Regimes may adopt progressive environmental or social laws even as they enact policies that negate the impact of those laws.
- 5. Policies are rarely enforced.** Even when SDG-aligned policies are passed, enforcement is weak or politically constrained. Oversight and implementing institutions are often sidelined or silenced.
- 6. Regime priorities override SDG commitments.** Authoritarian objectives of revenue extraction and political control routinely undermine sustainability promises. Corruption and clientelism divert SDG-related efforts.
- 7. The SDGs are weaponized to justify repression.** Regimes have weaponized the SDGs to justify state violence, displace communities, and frame coercive practices as development initiatives.
- 8. The SDGs are used in regime propaganda.** Through state-controlled media and official communications, regimes turn SDG engagement into propaganda, projecting an image of progress that belies the reality on the ground.
- 9. The SDGs enable the co-optation of civic and international actors.** Regimes create symbolic civic initiatives and use SDG branding to draw foreign partners into dependency relationships under the guise of sustainable development.
- 10. The SDGs are used to legitimize authoritarian rule.** By positioning themselves as champions of sustainability, autocrats deflect international criticism, demand relief from sanctions, and portray internal repression as necessary for achievement of the SDGs.

Recommendations

In light of these findings, the report offers five recommendations for democratic states, civil society, and multilateral institutions:

- 1. Update SDG measurement to reflect human rights and democracy.** Scoring frameworks such as the SDG Index must incorporate the level of rights compliance and governance quality.
- 2. Reassess SDG engagement with authoritarian regimes.** Avoid partnerships or participation in SDG-branded initiatives led by regimes whose practices violate the 2030 Agenda's principles.
- 3. Condemn and hold accountable regimes that undermine the SDGs.** Publicly condemn and hold regimes that manipulate and undermine the SDGs accountable through coordinated international pressure and disinvestment from development projects.
- 4. Reform the post-2030 agenda to incorporate human rights and democracy.** The post-2030 development framework must explicitly incorporate human rights and democratic governance in its core structure through dedicated goals and indicators grounded in international human rights law.
- 5. Replace voluntary reporting with mandatory, independent oversight.** Establish enforceable, periodic reporting requirements and link tangible development benefits to genuine, actionable efforts verified by independent review.

Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are 17 interconnected, universal objectives — blueprints for a more just, equitable, and sustainable world. When the United Nations adopted them in 2015, the SDGs were meant to create a detailed pathway to a more sustainable future by resolving issues of poverty, inequality, and climate change by 2030. Since the SDGs confront the world's most urgent and universal challenges, their achievement demands the collective effort of everyone, everywhere.

However, as the world approaches the target year, it has become evident that the SDGs are far from being achieved: according to the 2026 Sustainable Development Report, only 16% of SDG targets are on track to be met, while the remaining 84% are stalled or regressing.¹ With time running short, full achievement of the SDGs appears increasingly out of reach.

This moment offers a critical opportunity to reflect on the factors behind the regression, consider what can still be changed, and ensure that any future frameworks developed to tackle these global challenges do not face the same fate.

Among the several factors behind the SDGs' shortfall is the disconnect between rhetoric and action. States continue to actively engage in sustainability-themed rhetoric and attend high-profile conferences and forums, yet fail to drive meaningful change.²

One of the most vocal groups of states in the SDG discourse are authoritarian regimes.³ They frequently address sustainability and the SDGs in public statements⁴ and

actively organize and participate in conferences, forums, and initiatives on the topic.⁵ However, these states have lower SDG performance scores than democratic ones.⁶

This gap between appearance and reality raises important questions about both the SDGs and the nature of authoritarian regimes' engagement with them:

- Can true sustainable development, as envisioned in the SDGs, be achieved in non-democratic countries where freedoms are suppressed and human rights are routinely denied?
- How do authoritarian regimes think and make decisions, and what place does sustainable development hold in their worldviews and priorities?
- Finally, when authoritarian regimes engage with the SDGs, is it a genuine effort — or simply a tool to strengthen their grip on power?

Without reducing the underperformance in achieving the SDGs solely to political determinants, this report seeks to answer these questions and analyze the nature of the SDGs and the motivations of authoritarian regimes pursuing them. The analysis covers ten years of SDG implementation, from the Goals' adoption in 2015 through 2025, and examines case studies from Asia-Pacific, Eastern Europe, Central Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, and Latin America, assessing nations' commitments to SDG progress and instances where autocrats may have used sustainability commitments to advance their own goals.

To this end, the report is structured as follows:

- Section 1 (“What are the Sustainable Development Goals?”) explains the history, scope, and principles of the SDGs and their links to human rights and democracy.
- Section 2 (“How Do Authoritarian Regimes View Sustainable Development?”) explores how authoritarian regimes act, the strategies they use to maintain power, and how sustainable development may be integrated into these strategies.
- Section 3 (“How Are Authoritarian Regimes Acting on the SDGs?”) analyzes authoritarian regimes’ actual engagement with the SDGs in the Asia-Pacific, Eastern Europe, Central Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, and Latin America.
- Sections 4, 5, and 6 (“Findings,” “Recommendations,” and “Conclusion”) formulate the main findings and offer recommendations for policymakers and the international community on how to address the challenges of authoritarian engagement with the SDGs.

Important caveat: Measuring progress toward the SDGs is inherently difficult, as the Goals are often criticized for their limited comparability across countries and contexts. Accordingly, this report does not attempt a country-by-country scorecard. Instead, it treats the SDGs as a universal aspiration requiring sincere political commitment. The analysis focuses on assessing the sincerity of authoritarian

regimes’ engagement with the SDGs rather than how successfully they achieve them, and explores their underlying motivations, aiming to present a clear, though not exhaustive, picture of autocrats’ actual commitment to sustainable development.

¹ 2026 Sustainable Development Report, United Nations, accessed June 23, 2026, <https://dashboards.sdgindex.org/chapters/>.

² See Frank Biermann et al., “Scientific Evidence on the Political Impact of the Sustainable Development Goals,” *Nature Sustainability* 5, no. 9 (September 2022): 795–800.

³ The classification of states in this report as authoritarian is based on the Human Rights Foundation’s Tyranny Tracker, which classifies countries and territories as “democratic,” “hybrid authoritarian,” or “fully authoritarian.” See Human Rights Foundation, *Tyranny Tracker* (2026), <https://tyrannytracker.org/>.

⁴ “Russia and Allies Warn UN That SDGs in Jeopardy Without Sanctions Relief,” *Moscow Times*, September 19, 2023, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/09/19/russia-and-allies-warn-un-that-sdgs-in-jeopardy-without-sanctions-relief-a82505>.

⁵ UNITAR and CIFAL Saudi Arabia Lead Conference on Sustainable Development Goals, *UNITAR*, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://unitar.org/about/news-stories/news/unitar-and-cifal-saudi-arabia-lead-conference-sustainable-development-goals>.

⁶ See “Rankings,” *Sustainable Development Report 2026*, <https://dashboards.sdgindex.org/rankings>. Authoritarian states are, on average, ranked lower than non-authoritarian states in SDG performance. None of the authoritarian states listed here rank in the top 25: Belarus (Rank 35, Score 78.33), China (Rank 49, Score 74.71), Russian Federation (Rank 51, Score 74.47), Uzbekistan (Rank 65, Score 72.95), and El Salvador (Rank 96, Score 68.10). Meanwhile, the top 10 are dominated by democratic nations such as Finland (1), Sweden (2), Denmark (3), Norway (4), and Germany (5), with scores across the top 10 ranging from 82.21 to 87.40.



What Are the Sustainable Development Goals?

Before asking how authoritarian regimes engage with the SDGs — and how genuine their engagement truly is — it is worth asking what, exactly, the SDGs are. Are they merely aspirational promises to tackle climate change and social inequality? Or do they embody a more transformative agenda, one that could challenge entrenched political structures, drive deeper societal change, and be achieved only when freedoms are guaranteed and human rights are protected and respected?

The answer carries significant implications for how we interpret authoritarian engagement with the Goals. This section therefore begins by reviewing the history and core purpose of the SDGs before turning to the broader factors — such as democracy and human rights — that are essential for their genuine implementation.

The History and Content of the Sustainable Development Goals

The SDGs were adopted not in isolation, but as a response to the growing awareness of urgent global challenges such as rising inequality, persistent poverty, and accelerating climate change. Nor do the SDGs represent the international community's first attempt to tackle these problems; they were preceded by a previous effort and earlier global frameworks.



United Nations Headquarters
in New York City.
Photo credit: USGS



The Millennium Declaration,⁷ adopted in 2000, contained a global commitment to human development, aiming to free future generations from war, protect human rights and the environment, and promote social progress under the banner of “larger freedom.”⁸ Central to this commitment, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) set eight goals, 18 targets, and 48 indicators targets for reducing poverty, hunger, disease, and inequality by 2015.⁹ States were expected to take a variety of actions to meet the commitments, including policy development and reform, to align with the benchmarks.

Despite relative successes in reducing poverty and improving health and education,¹⁰ none of the MDG targets were globally met by 2015.¹¹ This underperformance was due to the leading role that higher-income states took in their formulation, which lacked substantial contributions from lower-income nations.¹² In particular, the MDGs overlooked pre-existing obstacles and lacked applicability to local contexts and accountability mechanisms, while also favoring a top-down implementation strategy.¹³ Observers noted that sustainability had become more distant than before the adoption of the MDGs, with certain goals — specifically those related to the environment — showing signs of regression since their adoption.¹⁴ The international community needed a balanced and more inclusive approach if it wanted to achieve truly global sustainable development.

Similar to the Millennium Declaration, the 2030 Agenda was adopted as a declaration, not a treaty, in the form of a United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resolution. Declarations are not binding under the general principles of public international law.¹⁵ Instead of containing legal provisions, they typically articulate aspirations.¹⁶ Similarly, UNGA resolutions are non-binding and contain provisions of a

recommendatory nature.¹⁷ The United Nations and its Member States have emphasized their intention to keep this declaration non-binding in order to retain freedom in the implementation of the SDGs.¹⁸

⁷ “United Nations Millennium Declaration,” *United Nations General Assembly*, A/RES/55/2 (September 18, 2000), https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_RES_55_2.pdf.

⁸ “In larger freedom: towards development, security and human rights for all,” *United Nations Secretary-General*, A/59/2005 (March 21, 2005), <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/543857?ln=en>.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁰ *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2015: Summary* (New York: United Nations, 2015), 3, 5, https://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/2015_MDG_Report/pdf/MDG%202015%20Summary%20web_english.pdf.

¹¹ Jan Vandemoortele, “From Simple-Minded MDGs to Muddle-Headed SDGs,” *Development Studies Research* 5, no. 1 (2018): 84.

¹² Maya Fehling et al., “Limitations of the Millennium Development Goals: a literature review,” *Global public health* 8, no. 10 (2013): 1111.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1114.

¹⁴ *Supra* note 11, Jan Vandemoortele, 84.

¹⁵ International law is a consent-based system, which means that states are largely bound by rules to which they have agreed. This consent can be given explicitly through formal agreements (treaties) or implied by a state’s general and consistent practice, undertaken out of a sense of legal obligation (custom).

¹⁶ “Declarations,” *Glossary*, United Nations Treaty Collection, accessed July 6, 2025, https://treaties.un.org/pages/Overview.aspx?path=overview/glossary/page1_en.xml.

¹⁷ “What Is the Difference Between a Resolution and a Decision?” *Dag Hammarskjöld Library*, United Nations, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://ask.un.org/faq/14484>.

¹⁸ See, for example: “UN General Assembly resolutions represent ‘the conscience of humanity’,” President says,” *UN News*, United Nations, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://news.un.org/en/interview/2023/11/1143847>; “Are the Sustainable Development Goals legally binding?” *The Sustainable Development Agenda*, United Nations, accessed July 6, 2026, <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/development-agenda-retired/>.

Due to the non-binding nature of the 2030 Agenda, Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) have become a crucial element in implementing the SDGs. States voluntarily assess and report their progress in achieving the 17 Goals through VNRs.¹⁹ Despite the voluntary status of such reporting, a significant number of countries have participated, demonstrating widespread commitment to the agenda: Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda in 2015, at least 190 countries and the European Union have carried out VNRs at least once, totaling 409 VNRs as of June 2025.²⁰ The guidelines for what to include in the VNRs are not strictly defined, providing countries with the flexibility to tailor their reports to their unique circumstances.²¹ However, this approach also makes the VNRs susceptible to potential biases, over-optimization, and selective reporting.

The SDGs were designed to tackle the root causes of poverty; foster economic growth; address health, education, and social needs; and protect the environment. The 2030 Agenda lists 17 interconnected SDGs and 169 targets,²² marking a significant expansion compared to the MDGs. The 17 SDGs can be categorized in five broad areas according to the main pillars: People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, and Partnerships.²³

Given the broad scope of the 17 SDGs, the analysis below focuses on these five overarching pillars of the 2030 Agenda — the 5 Pillars — rather than on individual Goals — while acknowledging that they are highly interconnected.

PILLAR	MOST RELEVANT SDGS	DESCRIPTION
People	SDG 1 End Poverty SDG 2 End Hunger SDG 3 Healthy Lives SDG 4 Quality Education SDG 5 Gender Equality	This pillar focuses on ending poverty and hunger and ensuring health, education, and gender equality, aiming for a world where everyone can thrive in dignity and equality.
Planet	SDG 6 Clean Water SDG 12 Responsible Consumption and Production SDG 13 Climate Action SDG 14 Life Below Water SDG 15 Life on Land	This pillar focuses on climate change and environmental degradation, advocating for clean water, sustainable energy, and conservation efforts to protect natural habitats and combat climate change.
Prosperity	SDG 7 Clean Energy SDG 8 Economic Growth SDG 9 Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure SDG 10 Reduced Inequalities SDG 11 Sustainable Cities	This pillar seeks sustainable and equitable economic growth, focusing on inclusive employment, resilient infrastructure, innovation, and sustainable practices for a prosperous future for all.
Peace	SDG 16 Peace	This pillar emphasizes the importance of peace, justice, and strong institutions, promoting societies free from fear and violence with inclusive and accountable governance.
Partnerships	SDG 17 Partnerships	This pillar highlights global solidarity and cooperation to address the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable, ensuring participation and shared responsibility across various domains for the successful implementation of Agenda 2030.

¹⁹ “Voluntary National Reviews,” *High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development*, United Nations, <https://hlpf.un.org/vnrs>.

²⁰ “Countries who have presented their Voluntary National Reviews,” *High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development*, United Nations, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://hlpf.un.org/countries>.

²¹ “UNDESA, *Handbook for the Preparation of Voluntary National Reviews: 2024 Edition*, “Annex 2: Secretary-General’s Voluntary Common Reporting Guidelines for VNRs,” *High-Level Political Forum*

on Sustainable Development, 48 (October 2023), https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/vnrs/handbook/VNR%20Handbook%202024%20EN_0.pdf.

²² *Supra* note 17, 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

²³ Chris Ryan, “Session 5: Introduction to the 5 Ps,” presentation at the FSM National VNR Workshop 2, February 24–26, 2020, Pohnpei, Federated States of Micronesia, ESCAP Pacific Office, <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/development-agenda-retired/>.





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Human Rights and Democracy in the Sustainable Development Goals

Since both democratic and authoritarian countries helped shape the SDGs,²⁴ it is worth asking what kind of political vision for development they actually represent. While addressing varied aspects of sustainable development, none of the 17 SDG titles explicitly mentions human rights²⁵ or democracy.²⁶ Moreover, the substance of the Goals, along with their targets and indicators, contain almost no reference to human rights or democracy. However, this exclusion does not suggest that democracy and human rights are not essential in achieving the SDGs or that sustainable development can be realized without them.

Despite little focus on human rights in the 17 Goals, the 2030 Agenda is built on a foundation of human rights, drawing from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and relevant international treaties. The Agenda envisions “a world of universal respect for human rights and human dignity,”²⁷ and the SDGs, as the preamble of the Agenda states, explicitly aim “to realize the human rights of all,”²⁸ intertwining the pursuit of development with the fulfillment of human rights. In fact, as mapped by the Danish Institute for Human Rights, 156 of the 169 SDG targets (more than 92%) are linked to human rights obligations, dictating a human rights-based approach to SDG implementation.

For the purposes of this report, this linkage can be organized as follows:²⁹

- **The People SDGs** link to the right to an adequate standard of living, the right to social security, women’s equal rights in economic life, the right to adequate food, the right to health, the right to education, and the right to equality and nondiscrimination.³⁰
- **The Planet SDGs** link to the right to a safe, clean, healthy, and sustainable environment; the right to adequate food and safe drinking water; and people’s right to freely use their natural wealth and resources.³¹
- **The Prosperity SDGs** link to the right to work under just and favorable conditions, the prohibition against slavery and forced labor, equal employment rights for women, the prohibition of child labor, and the rights to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress, access to information, and adequate housing.³²
- **The Peace SDGs** link to the right to life, liberty, and personal security; the prohibition of torture; the protection of children from violence, abuse, and exploitation; access to justice and due process; legal identity; participation in public affairs; and access to information.³³
- **The Partnership SDGs** link to the right to self-determination, the right to development and international cooperation, the right to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress, and the right to privacy.³⁴

Therefore, the absence of explicit references to human rights in the 17 SDGs should not be interpreted in a reductive or isolated manner or as suggesting that implementation of the Goals ignores fundamental human rights. On the contrary, human rights are intrinsically linked to the SDGs and mutually reinforcing.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ The preamble and the main text of the Declaration use the term “human rights” 11 times. However, the specific SDGs and their targets explicitly mention “human rights” only once.

²⁶ Agenda 2030 briefly acknowledges the significance of democracy, good governance, and the rule of law as pivotal for attaining sustainable development, yet refrains from elaborating. Additionally, among the 17 SDGs, their 169 targets, and 231 indicators, only a single indicator explicitly mentions the term “democracy.”

²⁷ *Supra* note 17, 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ See *The Human Rights Guide to the Sustainable Development Goals*, The Danish Institute for Human Rights, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://www.humanrights.dk/files/media/migrated/SDG-HR-Indicators%20full%20guide.pdf>.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 5–44.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 45–49, 82–92.

³² *Ibid.*, 50–81.

³³ *Ibid.*, 93–106.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 107–114.

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The interconnection between the SDGs and democratic principles is similarly not immediately evident but derived from how the SDGs are implemented. The Goals indirectly reference democratic principles and values through their emphasis on equality, inclusivity, accountability, rule of law, and participatory governance even though the SDGs do not explicitly use the term “democracy.”

The Peace SDGs, particularly Goal 16, specifically address the core principles of democracy by advocating for the establishment of peaceful, inclusive societies; the provision of justice for all; and the creation of effective,

accountable institutions at every level. The SDG targets — such as the promotion of the rule of law and equal access to justice,³⁵ along with the development of transparent and accountable institutions³⁶ — underline democratic principles of fairness, transparency, and accountability to citizens. Encouraging inclusive decision-making³⁷ and ensuring legal identity for all³⁸ reflect the democratic values of participation, inclusion, and legal empowerment. Moreover, the focus on strengthening institutions to combat violence and crime³⁹ and promoting nondiscriminatory laws for sustainable development⁴⁰ emphasizes the democratic values of a just and equitable society.

Additional SDG themes indirectly contribute to democracy:

- **The People SDGs** reference democracy through their emphasis on equality and individual well-being, enabling all people to participate fully in political, economic, and social life.
- **The Prosperity SDGs** promote economic empowerment and freedom of expression by addressing issues such as forced labor, modern slavery, and ensuring access to information and technology.



- **The Planet SDGs**, mostly concerned with the environment, advance democracy through their emphasis on participatory management of natural resources and combating climate change.
- **The Partnerships SDGs** promote principles of inclusivity, fairness, equality, and collective action through their emphasis on empowering marginalized and underrepresented communities.

Sustainable development fundamentally depends on democratic governance, the rule of law, and the active participation of all people—an opinion also shared within the

United Nations,⁴¹ despite the 2030 Agenda's evident silence on the issue. Public participation in governance, a strong and independent civil society, and robust accountability mechanisms are essential for holding leaders responsible for their actions. These elements help maintain public trust, prioritize the well-being of people and the planet, and ultimately support effective implementation of the SDGs.

Human rights, democracy, and sustainable development are thus intertwined, with the realization of human rights and democratic principles being essential for achieving the SDGs.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 94, ¶16.3.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 98, ¶16.6.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 98, ¶16.7.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 101, ¶16.9.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 104 ¶16.a.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 105, ¶16.b.

⁴¹ "‘Everyone Has a Voice, Use It!’: Democracy Fundamental to Achieving SDGs, Says Deputy Secretary-General," *Democracy Fund*, United Nations, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://www.un.org/democracyfund/news/everyone-has-voice-use-it-democracy-fundamental-achieving-sdgs-says-deputy-secretary-general>; "The Role of Democracy in Sustainable Development," *United Nations Development Program*, September 14, 2023, <https://www.undp.org/blog/role-democracy-sustainable-development>.



How Do Authoritarian Regimes View Sustainable Development?

The SDGs suggest that genuine commitment to sustainable development must also advance democratization and greater respect for human rights. Being deeply intertwined with principles of democracy and rights in this way, the Goals seem to stand in tension with the core nature of authoritarian regimes, which are typically defined by their suppression of both sets of principles. Yet even though pursuing the SDGs could threaten the very foundations of

their rule, many authoritarian governments continue to engage with the Goals. Why is that?

To answer that question, this section examines patterns in authoritarian behavior and develops a theoretical framework for understanding how authoritarian regimes view sustainable development and how the SDGs might actually serve certain interests of those regimes.

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Wikimedia Commons/Flickr



Characteristics and Behavior of Authoritarian Regimes

Authoritarian regimes are distinguished from democracies by the absence of authentically free and fair elections and independent institutions that ensure transparency and accountability.⁴²

Common characteristics of these regimes are centralized control, limited or absent political pluralism, and the marginalization of individual human rights.⁴³ They deny the right to equal

treatment and due process under the law and refuse to uphold the freedoms of expression and association and rights such as mobility, conscience, property, and political participation.⁴⁴

An autocrat, whether acting alone or as part of a collective, aims to maximize their chances of staying in power or the benefits they gain from their position.⁴⁵ As a consequence of their repressive practices, autocrats confront myriad internal and external threats and must maneuver through turbulent waters to stay in power.⁴⁶ Internal challenges to authoritarian regimes include the risk of popular uprisings, coup d'état attempts by the military or elites,⁴⁷ economic crises,⁴⁸ and organized political opposition.⁴⁹ Externally, threats include foreign intervention through direct military actions⁵⁰ and economic sanctions.⁵¹

To counter these threats, autocrats use a variety of strategies, including:

- **Repression**, which some autocrats employ to maintain power through terror, involves the suppression of freedoms and dissent through measures of varying severity, from civil cases and administrative pressure to murder, torture, and purges.⁵² Repression can be domestic and transnational, silencing dissenters wherever they may be.⁵³
- **Co-optation** involves incorporating key societal groups into politics and cooperation, thereby compensating for the absence of democratic participation and stabilizing the regime's base of support in times of crisis. Co-optation can be realized in multiple ways, including economic incentives, political appointments, and controlled opposition members in legislative bodies, public services, and welfare

programs.⁵⁴ Like repression, co-optation can also operate transnationally, offering material benefits, legal rights, or social ties in exchange for political loyalty or compliance.⁵⁵

- **Censorship and propaganda** involve convincing the public of the autocrat's competence through crafted information that portrays the ruler in a competent and positive light and limits access to independent media that could convey negative or contradictory information.⁵⁶
- **Legitimation** involves ideological indoctrination, creating a sense of inevitability about autocrats' power and manipulating democratic procedures to project an appearance of the regime's legitimacy, both domestically and externally.⁵⁷ This strategy seeks to delegitimize opposition and justify the government's focus on maintaining control, casting any challenge to its authority as a risk to security and stability.⁵⁸

Authoritarian regimes, intent on maintaining their grip on power and extending their rule amid ongoing threats, employ a variety of these strategies. Their engagement with sustainable development and the 17 SDGs can also be understood as part of this practice.

⁴² Milan W. Svobik, "Introduction: The Anatomy of Dictatorship," in *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1–18.

⁴³ Natasha Lindstaedt, "Authoritarianism," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, June 21, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/authoritarianism>.

⁴⁴ For an overview per nation, see *World Report 2025* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2025), <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025>.

⁴⁵ Ronald Wintrobe, *The Political Economy of Dictatorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 106; Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman, "How Modern Dictators Survive: An Informational Theory of the New Authoritarianism," *National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper Series*, no. 21136 (April 2015), 1–10; see also Adam Przeworski, "Formal Models of Authoritarian Regimes: A Critique," *Perspectives on Politics* 21, no. 3 (2023), 979.

⁴⁶ Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman, "How Modern Dictators Survive: An Informational Theory of the New Authoritarianism," *National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper Series*, no. 21136 (April 2015), 1–10.

⁴⁷ Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz, *How Dictatorships Work: Power, Personalization, and Collapse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018): 177–181. For an overview of the impact of coups on authoritarian regimes' survival, see Clayton L. Thyne and Jonathan M. Powell, "Coups d'état or Coup d'Autocracy? How Coups Impact Democratization, 1950–2008," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12, no. 2 (April 2016): 192–213.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 186–187.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 181–185.

⁵⁰ Abel Escribà-Folch and Joseph Wright, "Foreign Pressure and the Politics of Autocratic Survival," *Oxford Studies in Democratization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015): 211–249.

⁵¹ *Supra* note 52, Barbara Geddes.

⁵² Wittman, Donald A., and Barry R. Weingast, eds, *The Oxford Handbook of Political Economy* (Oxford: Oxford Academic, 2008), 698–700.

⁵³ Gerasimos Tsourapas, "Global Autocracies: Strategies of Transnational Repression, Legitimation, and Co-Optation in World Politics," *International Studies Review* 23, no. 3 (September 2021): 616–644.

⁵⁴ *Supra* note 57, Wittman., 701–702.

⁵⁵ *Supra* note 58, Tsourapas.

⁵⁶ Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman, "Informational Autocrats," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 33, no. 4 (2019): 100–127.

⁵⁷ Ivar Kolstad, "Legitimising Autocracy: Reframing the Analysis of Corporate Relations to Undemocratic Regimes," *Contemporary Politics* (2023): 100–127.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

*Oil derrick in Baku,
Azerbaijan. Photo credit:
zaoark via Adobe Stock*



Authoritarian Regimes and Sustainable Development

A public commitment to the SDGs appears to conflict with the primary objective of authoritarian regimes: to maximize their chances of remaining in power. Genuine implementation of the SDGs requires the creation of governance systems that are rooted in human rights and democracy and characterized by inclusivity, accountability, and equality — elements that directly challenge the stability of authoritarian regimes.

Nevertheless, Human Rights Foundation classifies around 50% the 193 United Nations Member States that voted to adopt the 2030 Agenda⁵⁹ as either hybrid or fully authoritarian regimes.⁶⁰ Moreover, 14 of the 70 participants in the United Nations Open Working Group⁶¹ that formulated the SDGs are authoritarian regimes. These states actively engage in global forums and programs focused on sustainable development, appearing to be deeply involved in the promotion and implementation of the SDGs.

Although authoritarian regimes appear to engage in self-destructive behavior, in reality this behavior aligns with the strategies of repression, co-optation, propaganda, and legitimization. Autocrats actively participate in and

manipulate international legal instruments and mechanisms, repurposing them to advance their own goals.⁶² They participate in international organizations to enable economic cooperation, delegitimize democracy, and create networks for the mutual repression of dissidents.⁶³

They also sign and ratify treaties, affecting rulemaking and the interpretation of rules, deflecting criticism, and undermining liberal democratic principles.⁶⁴ For example, by acceding to human rights treaties, dictatorships expect to secure a certain increase in international standing⁶⁵ and legitimization of their violations,⁶⁶ offer a limited concession to domestic opposition through co-optation, create favorable media narratives using propaganda,⁶⁸ or facilitate repressive tactics through demonstrations of strength and signaling their regimes' intent to violate human rights regardless.⁶⁹

⁵⁹ "Historic New Sustainable Development Agenda Unanimously Adopted by 193 UN Members," *Sustainable Development Goals News*, United Nations, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2015/09/historic-new-sustainable-development-agenda-unanimously-adopted-by-193-un-members/>; for the full list of the UN members, see "Member

States," *United Nations*, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/member-states>.

⁶⁰ See Human Rights Foundation, *Tyranny Tracker (2026)*, <https://tyrannytracker.org/>.

⁶¹ Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals, "Members," *Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform*, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/owg.html>.

⁶² Tom Ginsburg, "How Authoritarians Use International Law" *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 4 (October 2020): 44–58.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Emilie M. Hafner-Burton and Kiyoteru Tsutsui, "Human Rights in a Globalizing World: The Paradox of Empty Promises," *American Journal of Sociology* 110, no. 5 (March 2005): 1373–1411.

⁶⁶ See also Kenneth Roth, "China's Global Threat to Human Rights," *Human Rights Watch* (2019), <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/global>.

⁶⁷ James Raymond Vreeland, "Political Institutions and Human Rights: Why Dictatorships Enter into the United Nations Convention against Torture," *International Organization* 62, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 65–101; see also Richard A. Nielsen and Beth A. Simmons, "Rewards for Ratification: Payoffs for Participating in the International Human Rights Regime?" *International Studies Quarterly* 59 (2015): 197–208.

⁶⁸ For example, see James Loeffler, "Human Rights Treaties Promised a Better Future. Why Did They Fail?" *Washington Post*, December 20, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/human-rights-treaties-promised-a-better-future-why-did-they-fail/2018/12/20/bfd843ec-ffc0-11e8-83c0-b06139e540e5_story.html.

⁶⁹ James R. Hollyer and B. Peter Rosendorff, "Why Do Authoritarian Regimes Sign the Convention Against Torture? Signaling, Domestic Politics and Non-Compliance," *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 6, no. 3–4 (2011): 275–327.

Oil derrick in Baku, Azerbaijan.
Photo credit: zaoark via Adobe Stock



Authoritarian regimes can manipulate and weaponize international legal instruments, including human rights treaties, due to the low cost of noncompliance with international legal norms. Public international law is often criticized for its weak enforcement mechanisms; as a consent-based system without a central policing authority, it depends entirely on the voluntary participation and cooperation of the involved states for enforcement, a reality that often results in selective compliance and inadequate sanctions.⁷⁰ Thus, states have considerable leeway to evade meaningful compliance without

facing significant consequences.⁷¹ The absence of effective enforcement mechanisms in international law thereby facilitates noncompliance, making the ratification of treaties, including human rights treaties, a low-risk strategy for authoritarian regimes that have no real intention of fulfilling their commitments.⁷²

In rare instances where authoritarian states could actually comply with human rights, they would be more inclined to implement regime-neutral⁷³ programs for economic, social, and cultural rights rather than pro-democratic civil and political rights.⁷⁴ By focusing on providing essential

services and improving living standards through economic, social, and cultural initiatives, authoritarian regimes can improve their domestic and international image, allowing them to maintain a tight grip on power because these rights do not directly challenge their authority in the same way as civil and political rights, such as freedom of expression or assembly.

The structure and formulation of the 17 SDGs permit similar exploitation. Because the 2030 Agenda and its 17 SDGs were adopted as an UNGA resolution that does not impose legally binding obligations, even the consent-based enforcement mechanisms



typical in public international law do not apply, making SDG compliance entirely voluntary. This non-binding nature provides authoritarian regimes with a virtually cost-free opportunity to manipulate the Goals to further their own unrelated objectives. Voluntary reporting, moreover, allows a state to showcase its self-determined level of compliance, further blurring its public image. Authoritarian regimes are more likely to commit to implementing SDGs that align with economic, social, and cultural rights (such as those under the “People,” “Planet,” and “Prosperity” pillars), and less likely to prioritize pillars related to civil and political rights (such as “Peace” and “Partnerships”).

Therefore, similar to their engagement with human rights treaties, autocrats can manipulate the SDGs to advance agendas unrelated to sustainable development. While there may be isolated instances of SDG implementation (limited to the “People,” “Planet” and “Prosperity” Goals) when doing so serves a regime’s interests, overall compliance is low, with regimes’ behavior typically falling under one or more of the four strategies of legitimization, propaganda, co-optation, and repression.

⁷⁰ Andrew T. Guzman, “Against Consent,” *Virginia Journal of International Law* 52, no. 4 (2012): 752.

⁷¹ Alan O. Sykes, “The Inaugural Robert A. Kindler Professorship of Law Lecture: When Is International Law Useful?” *New York University* (adapted from a lecture delivered October 17, 2012): 807–810.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), *General Comment No. 3: The Nature of States Parties’ Obligations* (Art. 2, Para. 1, of the Covenant), E/1991/23 (14 December 1990), https://www.refworld.org/legal/general/cescr/1990/en/5613_118.

⁷⁴ Michael Freeman, “Conclusion: Reflections on the Theory and Practice of Economic and Social Rights,” in *The State of Economic and Social Human Rights: A Global Overview*, ed. Lanse Minkler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013): 365.



How Are Authoritarian Regimes Acting on the SDGs?

The previous section suggested that authoritarian regimes likely use the SDGs to serve their own goals rather than to promote true sustainability. After all, the SDGs are based on values, such as democracy and human rights, that run counter to authoritarian rule.

But is this really the case? How do these regimes actually engage with the SDGs, and to what extent does their behavior align with this hypothesis?

The answer requires looking at how genuinely these regimes engage with the SDGs. Accordingly, this analysis focuses on four elements:

- **General Framework** — the formal national policy framework related to SDG implementation, including an overview of national strategies, laws, and official endorsements that signal the regime's stated commitment to the SDGs and an analysis of its participation in voluntary national reporting
- **Specific Policy Efforts** — the domestic policies that either facilitate or impede achievement of the SDGs, including new laws and policy changes relevant to the five SDG pillars

- **Reported Practices** — actual domestic practices relevant to SDG implementation, including state actions, patterns of enforcement, and relevant behaviors of state and non-state actors, again organized around the five SDG pillars
- **Instances of manipulating the SDGs** — cases where an authoritarian regime has exploited its commitments to the SDGs to pursue unrelated political or strategic objectives, including public statements and government actions to identify where SDG language serves as a façade, masking activities that contradict the spirit of sustainable development

The analysis covers the first decade of SDG implementation, from the Goals' adoption in 2015 through 2025 — ten years of regime engagement with the framework.

To capture the variation and context across regions and political cultures, this report focuses on Azerbaijan, Belarus, China, Iran, North Korea, Nicaragua, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela.

Azerbaijan

The Aliyev family has ruled Azerbaijan autocratically since 1993. Current President Ilham Aliyev inherited power from his father, Heydar Aliyev, who governed from 1993 until his son's succession in 2003. Over the years, the Aliyevs have consolidated political power over the nation. The regime has maintained its control through systemic corruption, leveraging the country's oil and gas wealth to dominate the political and economic spheres. Key sectors of the economy are controlled by state-owned enterprises and companies closely tied to the ruling elite, fostering a culture of rent-seeking and entrenched corruption.



*Photo credit: Press Service of
the President of the Republic of
Azerbaijan via President.az*

Summary

The 2026 Sustainable Development Report ranks Azerbaijan 52nd out of the 169 evaluated countries.⁷⁵ Despite challenges in achieving gender equality and strengthening justice systems, Azerbaijan has reported progress in areas such as education, access to health care, digital infrastructure, and poverty reduction.⁷⁶

The reality of the situation is far worse than the rankings suggest. The regime established a general framework for SDG implementation but has focused on the “Prosperity” SDGs, using infrastructure development as a vehicle for systemic corruption, one of its central tools for maintaining control. The regime has shown little genuine commitment to the rest of the SDG agenda in its policies or in practice, neglecting entire Goals and targets while perpetuating environmental destruction, discrimination, and widespread human rights abuses. In the meantime, the government cynically exploits SDG narratives for propaganda to legitimize its control and enable repression, including in annexed regions of Armenia.

General Framework

Azerbaijan has integrated the SDGs into its institutional framework. The regime established the National Coordination Council on Sustainable Development (NCCSD) to oversee the implementation of the SDGs,⁷⁷ with a focus on aligning state programs,

strategies, and action plans with the SDGs.⁷⁸ Under the NCCSD, the regime has created four thematic working groups tasked with implementing the SDGs at the national level.⁷⁹

Azerbaijan has adopted two strategic documents localizing the SDGs — Azerbaijan 2020: “The Vision of the Future,” and, more recently, “Vision 2030: National Priorities for Socio-Economic Development.” Under Vision 2030, the regime identifies five national priorities in its strategy of socioeconomic development for 2022–2026: “sustainable economic growth,” “dynamic and inclusive society,” “competitive human capital,” “return to liberated territories,” and “green growth.”⁸⁰ The strategy highlights that these national priorities are mapped to the SDGs⁸¹ — and they do, in fact, vaguely tackle economic growth, society, human capital, innovation, and environment, reflecting the “People,” “Prosperity,” and “Planet” pillars and partially overlapping with “Peace” and “Partnerships.” At the same time, some aspects of the national priorities diverge significantly from the SDGs in both spirit and substance, advancing unrelated aims under the guise of the sustainable development narratives.

The regime has allocated specific budget resources toward SDG implementation via the national priorities,⁸² and has submitted VNRs four times: in 2017, 2019, 2021, and 2024.⁸³

⁷⁵ SDG Index & Dashboards: Azerbaijan, accessed June 24, 2026, <https://dashboards.sdgindex.org/profiles/azerbaijan>.

⁷⁶ SDG Index & Dashboards: Azerbaijan – Indicators, accessed June 24, 2026, <https://dashboards.sdgindex.org/profiles/azerbaijan/indicators>.

⁷⁷ Centre for Analysis of Economic Reforms and Communication, “National Coordination Council for Sustainable Development,” October 7, 2016, 10:35 a.m., <https://ereforms.gov.az/en/media/xeberler/dayaniqli-inkisaf-uzre-milli-elaelendirme-surasi-yaradildi-223>.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Sustainable Development Goals in Azerbaijan, SDG-Lens, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://www.sdg-lens.org/network/azerbaijan/>.

⁸⁰ “Order of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Approval of ‘Azerbaijan 2030: National Priorities for Socio-Economic Development,’” *President of the Republic of Azerbaijan*, February 2, 2021, <https://president.az/en/articles/view/50474>

⁸¹ *Ibid.* (“The above-mentioned National Priorities are of particular importance to the fulfillment of our commitments arising from ‘Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’ of the United Nations.”)

⁸² “UN Positively Assesses Azerbaijan’s Innovative Financing for SDG Implementation,” *Azernews*, April 20, 2025, <https://www.azernews.az/nation/240645.html>.

⁸³ “Azerbaijan,” High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://hlpf.un.org/countries/azerbaijan/>.

Specific Policy Efforts

Azerbaijan has adopted laws and policies aimed at advancing the “People,” “Planet,” and “Prosperity” SDGs, but such efforts have been marked by an inconsistent legislative agenda, conflicting priorities, and a reluctance to address pressing challenges. At the same time, the regime has pursued policies that undermine human rights and good governance, hindering progress toward the “Peace” and “Partnership” SDGs.

Under the “Planet” SDGs, Azerbaijan has implemented several environmental protection policies since 2015, including an amendment to the 1999 Environmental Protection Law to strengthen environmental impact assessment requirements,⁸⁴ 2021 laws on renewable energy and energy efficiency,⁸⁵ and the launch of budget reforms that have increased environmental spending.⁸⁶ The country also adopted a national strategy for biodiversity conservation and expanded protected areas.⁸⁷ At the same time, the regime continues to politically support oil and gas production⁸⁸ and has failed to include any legal mandate or regulatory framework for phasing out fossil fuels,⁸⁹ while presidential statements continue to celebrate hydrocarbons and downplay their global environmental impact.⁹⁰

Under the “People” and “Prosperity” SDGs, Azerbaijan has adopted infrastructure and public-private partnership legislation⁹¹ and investment frameworks.⁹² It has also introduced regulations and institutional architecture to improve access to health care⁹³ and laws promoting equal access to education. Meanwhile, although laws on gender equality exist,⁹⁵ no policies or legal protections are in place to safeguard the LGBTQ+ community from pervasive discrimination.⁹⁶

At the same time, Azerbaijan has adopted or maintained laws and policies that not only fail to advance the “Peace” and “Partnerships” SDGs, but also actively undermine them. For example, the regime’s 2022 Media Law institutionalizes censorship, restricts media content,⁹⁷ and enables the swift suspension of outlets and the arrest of journalists.⁸⁸ Amendments to Azerbaijan’s Criminal Code have broadened the government’s powers to detain activists and opposition figures under vaguely formulated defamation and “separatism” provisions,⁹⁹ bypassing due process, shrinking civic space, and undermining sustainable development efforts. Laws targeting nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and media organizations receiving foreign funding have not been repealed, enabling heavy oversight and stifling civil society and international partnerships.¹⁰⁰ On top of that, experts note that Azerbaijan’s legal framework enables corruption through loopholes that fail to clearly identify corruption-related behavior.¹⁰¹

Reported Practices

In addition to the inconsistent policies described above, their enforcement — as well as concurrent practices endorsed or tolerated by the regime — reveals a lack of genuine willingness to engage meaningfully with most of the SDGs.

Contrary to the “Planet” SDGs, Azerbaijan’s environmental practices reveal gaps between policy and implementation. Fossil fuel dependency remains deeply entrenched, with oil and gas still accounting for the bulk of exports and government revenue.¹⁰² Even as it launches renewable projects, the state simultaneously increases natural gas production and exports (especially to Europe),¹⁰³ and maintains large fossil fuel subsidies that encourage carbon-intensive consumption.¹⁰⁴ Enforcement of environmental regulations is also

⁸⁴ “Azerbaijan Imposing New Requirements on Industrial and Household Waste,” *Azernews*, May 9, 2020, <https://www.azernews.az/nation/164938.html>.

⁸⁵ James E. Hogan and Ulvia Zeynalova-Bockin, “Client Alert on the New Law ‘On the Use of Renewable Energy Sources in the Production of Electricity,’” *Dentons*, July 23, 2021, <https://www.dentons.com/en/insights/alerts/2021/july/23/on-the-new-law-on-the-use-of-renewable-energy-sources-in-the-production-of-electricity>.

⁸⁶ “Azerbaijan Unveils Green Budget Expenditures for First Time,” *Report*, November 25, 2024, <https://report.az/en/finance/azerbaijan-unveils-green-budget-expenditures-for-first-time/>.

⁸⁷ *National Strategy of the Republic of Azerbaijan on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Biodiversity for 2017–2020*, FAOLEX database, adopted 2016, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://www.fao.org/faolex/results/details/es/c/LEX-FAOC169417/>.

⁸⁸ For example, in 2017, the regime approved an amended and restated Azeri-Chirag-Deepwater Gunashli (ACG) Production Sharing Agreement, extending it and signaling a long-term commitment to boosting oil and gas output; see “25 More Years in the ACG Field,” *Equinor News Archive*, September 14, 2017, <https://www.equinor.com/news/archive/25-more-years-acg-field>.

⁸⁹ Attracta Mooney, “COP29 Host’s Own Climate Plans Are ‘Critically Insufficient,’ Says Expert Group,” *Financial Times*, September 25, 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/8ca61260-743a-4e4b-8699-e937a07d7cfc>.

⁹⁰ “COP29 Bulletin Day 2: Aliyev Defends Fossil Fuels, G77 Unites on Finance Goal,” *Climate Change News*, November 12, 2024, <https://www.climatechangenews.com/2024/11/12/cop29-bulletin-day-2-aliyev-doubles-down-on-fossil-fuels/>.

⁹¹ For example, in 2016, Azerbaijan introduced legal foundations for BOT-style (Build-Operate-Transfer) infrastructure projects, enabling infrastructure development through private investment; see *Azerbaijan – PPP Legislative and Regulatory Framework Development*, EBRD, approved November 25, 2020, <https://www.ebrd.com/home/work-with-us/projects/tcpsd/11389.html>. In 2022, Azerbaijan enacted another public-private partnerships law, further defining terms, procedures, competitive tenders, direct negotiation, risk-sharing, compensation, and state support; see *Azerbaijan: New Law on Public-Private Partnerships Published*, Global Legal Monitor (Law Library of Congress), February 6, 2023, <https://www.loc.gov/item/global-legal-monitor/2023-02-06/azerbaijan-new-law-on-public-private-partnerships-published/>.

⁹² See, for example, *Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Investment Activity*, enacted March 1, 2024, https://heqt.gov.az/upload/tercume-edilmis-aktlar/eng/law-on-investment-activity-11-03-2024_FILE_D770B3-6E7E74-1A393F-045542-3BE16A-F4BF8D.pdf.

⁹³ Ainur Aiykhanova, Azerbaijan’s Compulsory Health Insurance Expanded to 100% of Population from April 1, 2021, *P4H – Global Network for UHC and Health Financing*, May 10, 2021, <https://p4h.world/en/news/azerbajians-compulsory-health-insurance-expanded-to-100-of-population-from-april-1-2021/>.



⁹⁴ For example, Azerbaijan passed the 2019 General Education Law, defining the state's responsibility to guarantee that every child in Azerbaijan has access to general education, without discrimination; see *Decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan on the Application of the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan No. 1532-VQ Dated March 29, 2019, "On General Education,"* issued May 27, 2019, 7:05 p.m., <https://president.az/az/articles/view/33281>.

⁹⁵ See, for example, *Law on State Guarantees of Equal Rights for Women and Men; Law No. 150-IIIQ of the Republic of Azerbaijan on State Guarantees of Equal Rights for Women and Men*, FAOLEX Database, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://www.fao.org/faolex/results/details/en/c/LEX-FAOC211323/>.

⁹⁶ "LGBT Rights in Azerbaijan," *Equaldex*, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://www.equaldex.com/region/azerbaijan>.

⁹⁷ *Azerbaijan Adopts New Media Restrictions, Freedom of Media Alert*, CoE, created January 19, 2022; updated July 25, 2023, <https://fom.coe.int/en/alerte/detail/107636954>.¹⁰³ Urgent Action, *Azerbaijan: Journalists Face New Charges and Extended Detention*, Amnesty International UK, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/urgent-actions/journalists-face-new-charges-and-extended-detention>.

⁹⁸ Urgent Action, *Azerbaijan: Journalists Face New Charges and Extended Detention*, Amnesty International UK, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/urgent-actions/journalists-face-new-charges-and-extended-detention>.

⁹⁹ For example, in 2016, Azerbaijan amended its Criminal Code to establish criminal liability for criticism made anonymously on the internet; see *Analysis of Azerbaijani Legislation on Freedom of Expression* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2017), 11, <https://rm.coe.int/azerbaijan-analysis-of-legislation-on-freedom-of-expression-december-2/16808ae03d>. Moreover, in 2023, Azerbaijan effectively criminalized political activism and the independent reporting of military-related information, even when such information is shared publicly, suppressing criticism of its aggression in the Nagorno-Karabakh region; see "Azerbaijan Amends Criminal Code: Investigation to Be Initiated by State Security Service," *Azernews*, January 24, 2024, <https://www.azernews.az/nation/220746.html>.

¹⁰⁰ Kelly Chaib De Mares, "After a Decade of Constrictions, How Are NGOs Operating in Azerbaijan? It Is Almost Impossible for NGOs to Get International Funding," *Global Voices*, June 7, 2023, <https://globalvoices.org/2023/06/07/after-a-decade-of-constrictions-how-are-ngos-operating-in-azerbaijan/>.

¹⁰¹ *Azerbaijan – Country Brief (Government Defence Integrity Index 2020)*, Transparency International Defence & Security, published October 2021, 6, https://ti-defence.org/gdi/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2021/11/Azerbaijan_GDI-2020-Brief.pdf ("Gaps in the legislative framework leave space for collusion and corruption, and there is no legal stipulation for public oversight over the procurement system").

¹⁰² *Azerbaijan 2021 Energy Policy Review*, International Energy Agency, June 2021, <https://www.iea.org/reports/azerbaijan-2021> ("Oil and natural gas bring in around 90% of Azerbaijan's export revenues, and they finance around 60% of the government budget. They also supply 98% of primary energy and more than 90% of the country's electricity").

¹⁰³ "Azerbaijan Pursues Clean Energy to Export More 'God-Given' Gas to Europe," *Climate Change News*, May 17, 2024, <https://www.climatechangenews.com/2024/05/17/azerbaijan-pursues-clean-energy-to-export-more-god-given-gas-to-europe/>.

¹⁰⁴ *Supra* note 107, International Energy Agency, "Setting the Scene: Energy Efficiency in Azerbaijan" ("Between 2016 and 2021, average annual explicit and implicit subsidies for natural gas, electricity and oil were USD 2.3 billion, accounting for just over 5% of GDP.").



inconsistent. Although the new laws since 2015 were meant to police pollution, in practice, powerful state-linked companies in sectors such as oil, mining, and construction often operate with impunity.¹⁰⁵ The regime's complicity has already resulted in a severe environmental situation: Azerbaijan-affiliated companies' decades of offshore drilling and refinery operations have caused chronic oil leaks and chemical discharges in the Caspian Sea and Absheron Peninsula.¹⁰⁶

Independent environmental activism is severely constrained (often labeled as extremism or foreign interference when it becomes inconvenient),¹⁰⁷ limiting community input on projects that affect biodiversity or public health. For example, local protests against mining or industrial pollution have been swiftly suppressed in recent years,¹⁰⁸ reflecting the regime's priority of economic gain over actual implementation of its policies related to the "Planet" SDGs.

In violation of the "Prosperity," "Peace," and "Partnership" SDGs, the regime also enables and benefits from widespread, systematic corruption. Corrupt practices are tacitly favored, and there is no effective enforcement of anticorruption legislation.¹⁰⁹ Corruption undermines the major pillars of governance, including the judiciary, with judges reportedly receiving extra-salary payments to remain loyal to the regime.¹¹⁰ Corruption also negatively affects projects implemented under SDG-

related initiatives, since public procurement in Azerbaijan is marred by widespread bribery, favoritism, and diversion of funds to regime-affiliated firms contracted to implement large infrastructure projects.¹¹¹ Azerbaijan also exports corruption; investigations have found that Azerbaijani officials used bribery to buy influence in the Council of Europe and its Member States (so-called “caviar diplomacy”).¹¹² However, no meaningful domestic legal reforms have followed to address this external corruption.

Contrary to the “Peace” and “Partnership” SDGs, the regime’s enforcement apparatus routinely violates fundamental rights: Arbitrary detentions, harassment of activists, and constraints on freedom of assembly are common.¹¹³ The regime also targets the family members of activists and disbars critical lawyers,¹¹⁴ increasing pressure on civil society.¹¹⁵ Peaceful rallies, even small ones, are routinely dispersed by force, with protesters often arrested and charged under overly broad laws.¹¹⁶ Police and security services routinely subject detainees to severe physical and psychological abuse to extract confessions or punish dissent.¹¹⁷ Independent NGOs, including human rights watchdogs and environmental organizations,¹¹⁸ are arbitrarily shut down or frozen,¹¹⁹ and police have raided NGO offices, seized computers, and blocked operations.¹²⁰

Most notably, and contrary to the core principles of the “Peace” SDGs, Azerbaijan has engaged in aggressive actions abroad. Since 2020, Azerbaijani troops have crossed several kilometers into Armenia’s Syunik and Gegharkunik provinces, occupying possibly as much as 215 km² of internationally recognized Armenian territory.¹²¹ Through these actions, Azerbaijan also regained control over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region, subjecting the area and its

population to artillery shelling and missile strikes¹²² and the mass displacement of approximately 100,000 ethnic Armenians.¹²³

Contrary to the “People” SDGs, Azerbaijan frequently enables discrimination against minority populations, particularly the ethnic

¹⁰⁵ “Hundreds of Thousands in COP29 Host Country at Risk from Gas Flaring Pollution,” *Global Witness*, published November 14, 2024, <https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/fossil-fuels/hundreds-of-thousands-in-cop29-host-country-at-risk-from-gas-flaring-pollution/>.

¹⁰⁶ “Environmental Impacts of Oil Production in Azerbaijan,” *GRID*, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://www.grida.no/resources/5737>.

¹⁰⁷ For example, economist and environmental advocate Gubad Ibadoghlu, who criticized fossil-fuel governance, was arrested in July 2023; see Zhala Bayramova and Bayram Zeynalova-Bockin, “I Need International Support to Save My Father’s Life: Azerbaijani Academic Gubad Ibadoghlu’s Child Speaks About Their Father’s Treatment in Detention,” *Amnesty International*, November 25, 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2024/11/bayram-zhala-bayramova-gubad-ibadoghlu/>. Moreover, ahead of COP29 in 2024, the regime detained even more climate activists; see Esme Stallard and Ilkin Hasanov, “COP29 Hosts Accused of Detaining Climate Defenders,” *BBC News*, November 15, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cq52l95dd3vo>.

¹⁰⁸ *Azerbaijan: Crackdown on Environmental Protest against Gold Mine Tailing Dam Continues, as Activists Detained & Movement Restricted in Nearby Community*, Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, June 2023, <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/azerbaijan-crackdown-on-environmental-protest-against-gold-mine-tailing-dam-continues-as-activists-detained--movement-restricted-in-nearby-community/>.

¹⁰⁹ For the overview of corruption in Azerbaijan, see *Azerbaijan Risk Report*, GIN Integrity, updated November 5, 2020, <https://www.ganintegrity.com/country-profiles/azerbaijan/>.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*; see also “Azerbaijan’s Corrupt Construction Sector to Blame for Cut Corners,” *Meydan TV*, March 5, 2017, <https://www.meydantv/en/article/azerbajians-corrupt-construction-sector-to-blame-for-cut-corners/>.

¹¹² *Council of Europe Body Expels 13 in Azerbaijan Bribe Case*, Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, July 3, 2018, <https://www.occrp.org/en/news/council-of-europe-body-expels-13-in-azerbaijan-bribe-case>; see also *News Report: The Caviar Diplomacy Scandal and Human Rights-Linked Money Laundering in Germany*, OFOHR, May 22, 2025, <https://www.ofohr.com/en/news-report-the-caviar-diplomacy-scandal-and-human-rights-linked-money-laundering-in-germany/>.

¹¹³ For an overview of Azerbaijan’s repression, see *World Report 2025: Azerbaijan – Events of 2024*, Human Rights Watch, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/azerbaijan>.

¹¹⁴ *Harassed, Imprisoned, Exiled: Azerbaijan’s Continuing Crackdown on Government Critics, Lawyers, and Civil Society*, Human Rights Watch, October 20, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/10/20/harassed-imprisoned-exiled/azerbajians-continuing-crackdown-government-critics>.

¹¹⁵ *Azerbaijan: New Crackdown Threatens Civil Society*, Freedom Now, January 24, 2024, <https://www.freedom-now.org/azerbaijan-new-crackdown/>.

¹¹⁶ “Azerbaijan: Peaceful Rallies Dispersed Violently,” Human Rights Watch news release, October 22, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/10/22/azerbaijan-peaceful-rallies-dispersed-violently>.

¹¹⁷ “Ex-Karabakh Official Held by Azerbaijan Claims Torture, Lack of Speedy Trial,” *Reuters*, October 3, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/ex-karabakh-official-held-by-azerbaijan-claims-torture-lack-speedy-trial-2024-10-03/>; see also Arzu Geybullayeva, “Torture, Abuse, and Degradation Are Rampant in Azerbaijani Prisons: The Situation Is Particularly Dire for LGBTQ+ People,” *Global Voices*, November 17, 2024, <https://globalvoices.org/2024/11/17/torture-abuse-and-degradation-are-rampant-in-azerbaijani-prisons/>.

¹¹⁸ *Mirror of Political Control: The Struggle for Environmental Participation in Azerbaijan*, Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung (South Caucasus), November 6, 2024, <https://geboell.org/en/2024/11/06/mirror-political-control-struggle-environmental-participation-azerbaijan>.

¹¹⁹ “We Try to Stay Invisible”: Azerbaijan’s Escalating Crackdown on Critics and Civil Society, Human Rights Watch, October 8, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/10/08/we-try-stay-invisible/azerbajians-escalating-crackdown-critics-and-civil-society>; ¹²⁰ *Azerbaijan: Authorities Raid Civil Society Offices in Continued Crackdown on NGOs*, PWYP, May 18, 2015, <https://pwyp.org/azerbaijan-authorities-raid-civil-society-offices-in-continued-crackdown-on-ngos/>.

¹²⁰ *Azerbaijan: Authorities Raid Civil Society Offices in Continued Crackdown on NGOs*, PWYP, May 18, 2015, <https://pwyp.org/azerbaijan-authorities-raid-civil-society-offices-in-continued-crackdown-on-ngos/>.

¹²¹ *Azerbaijan Has Occupied at Least 215 Square Kilometers of Armenian Territory Since 2020*, CivilNet, April 14, 2023, <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/697545/azerbaijan-has-occupied-at-least-215-square-kilometers-of-armenian-territory-since-2020/>.

¹²² “Azerbaijani Forces Strike Armenian-Controlled Karabakh, Raising Risk of New Caucasus War,” *Reuters*, September 19, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/azerbaijan-says-six-its-citizens-were-killed-by-land-mines-karabakh-2023-09-19/>.

¹²³ Patrick Reeve, “Over 100,000 Armenians Have Now Fled Disputed Enclave Nagorno-Karabakh,” *ABC News*, September 30, 2023, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/93000-armenians-now-fled-disputed-enclave-nagorno-karabakh/story?id=103596275>.

Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh and Indigenous communities such as the Talysh and Lezgin peoples.

Regarding the Armenian population, from December 2022 to September 2023, the Azerbaijani regime orchestrated a blockade of the Lachin corridor — Nagorno-Karabakh's sole humanitarian lifeline — using state-backed groups masquerading as “eco-activists” to obstruct essential supply deliveries.¹²⁴ These actions directly contravened the core “People” SDGs and exploited and weaponized the environmental agenda for the aggressive goals of depopulating and weakening Nagorno-Karabakh.¹²⁵ While the government talks of “reintegrating” the “liberated territories,” in practice, those lands have been emptied of their longstanding communities.¹²⁶ The regime's development plans for Nagorno-Karabakh involve resettling the areas with Azerbaijani citizens and exploiting resources, clearing traces of the history and culture of the Armenian people¹²⁷ in an approach fundamentally at odds with the SDGs.

Simultaneously, Indigenous groups such as the Talysh and Lezgins face significant cultural repression and exclusion from political and economic participation.¹²⁸ Language rights, cultural autonomy, and political representation for these minorities remain heavily restricted, undermining the inclusivity envisioned by the SDGs and perpetuating structural inequalities.¹²⁹ Such targeted discrimination and demographic engineering fundamentally contradict the objectives of the SDG framework.

Instances of Manipulation

Despite lacking genuine commitment to advancing the SDGs, Ilham Aliyev's regime actively deploys SDG narratives to pursue goals entirely unrelated to sustainable development, using them as tools for propaganda, legitimization, and even repression.

As a part of its propaganda strategy, the regime uses the SDGs to reinforce its narrative of stability and prosperity under Aliyev's rule. State-run media and official statements regularly celebrate achievements such as improved drinking water access, new hospitals and schools, or digital government services, explicitly linking these to the SDGs.¹³⁰ These narratives consistently emphasize “safe” topics such as economic growth, construction, and technological innovation¹³¹ while omitting discussion of political freedoms or inequality.

Azerbaijan also actively exploits SDG-related rhetoric as a clear legitimization tool, deflecting international criticism and improving its geopolitical standing. For example, President Aliyev bragged in a 2021 United Nations address that Azerbaijan was among the first countries to submit three VNRs and touted its SDG Index ranking as “the best result in the region,” highlighting progress in areas such as poverty reduction and women's labor participation.¹³² By selectively citing favorable statistics, he portrayed the regime as a modernizing success story in sustainable development, despite objective evidence of widespread human rights abuses and limited SDG implementation efforts.

One example that merits closer attention is the misuse of SDG narratives to legitimize the regime's ethnic cleansing in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Under the “return to liberated territories” national priority,¹³³ which was also declared to be related to the SDGs, the regime effectively reframes the subjugation of Nagorno-Karabakh as an SDG-aligned development opportunity. Aliyev announced the reconstruction of these areas, declaring the region a “green energy zone” and inviting international partners to invest in renewable energy there.¹³⁴ By calling the occupied lands “liberated” and emphasizing plans for

eco-friendly reconstruction and smart cities, the regime seeks to legitimize its ethnic cleansing efforts for territories acquired through systematic violations of international humanitarian law, an approach that fundamentally contradicts both the foundational principles of the 2030 Agenda and, above all, the United Nations Charter.

Most concerning, however, is the regime's cynical exploitation of SDG-branded initiatives in Nagorno-Karabakh not only to attain legitimacy for its actions, but also to further its repression of the region's population. One particular example, according to human rights groups, is the regime's use of its SDG-branded massive solar, wind, and hydropower projects to greenwash.¹³⁵ These projects are being built on disputed territory without peace agreements, often damaging cultural sites and intended to erase Armenian heritage, while powering Azerbaijan's oil and gas infrastructure.¹³⁶

In summary, the Aliyev regime masks and enables human rights abuses using SDG-themed narratives, glossing over the displacement of the Armenian population and shifting the focus to infrastructure, green energy, and economic reintegration.

¹²⁴ *Azerbaijan: Blockade of Lachin Corridor Putting Thousands of Lives in Peril Must Be Immediately Lifted*, Amnesty International, February 9, 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/02/azerbaijan-blockade-of-lachin-corridor-putting-thousands-of-lives-in-peril-must-be-immediately-lifted/>.

¹²⁵ Simon Maghakyan, “How Azerbaijan Weaponized Environmentalism to Justify Ethnic Cleansing,” *Time*, February 22, 2023, <https://time.com/6257467/armenia-azerbaijan-nagorno-karabakh-lachin-environment-icj/>.

¹²⁶ *Why Are There No Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh?*, Special Report, Freedom House, June 27, 2024, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2024/why-are-there-no-armenians-nagorno-karabakh/>.



¹²⁷ Yusuf Khan, "At COP29, the Host Boasted About Its Renewable-Energy Plans. They Just Happen to Be on Disputed Territory," *Wall Street Journal*, December 20, 2024, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/at-cop29-the-host-boasted-about-its-renewable-energy-plans-they-just-happen-to-be-on-disputed-territory-62928d38>.

¹²⁸ *IRFS Addresses Discrimination Against Talysh Minority in Azerbaijan's Media Landscape*, IRFS, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://www.irfs.org/en/news-feed/irfs-addresses-discrimination-against-talysh-minority-in-azerbajians-media-landscape/>.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ For example, the government-owned daily, "Azərbaycan," covered the release of the country's VNR and proclaimed that the "SDGs are being successfully implemented in Azerbaijan," crediting that success to Aliyev's regime; see "Sustainable

Development Goals Are Being Successfully Implemented in Azerbaijan," *Azerbaijan News*, July 19, 2019, <https://www.azerbaijan-news.az/az/posts/detail/dayaniqli-inkishaf-meqsedleri-azerbaycanda-ugurla-reallashir-193507>.

¹³¹ For example, the government news agency AZƏRTAC reported on Aliyev invoking the SDGs while boasting about the regime's achievements in education, health care, and access to clean water; see "President İlham Aliyev Made a Video Speech at the General Debate of the 75th Session of the UN General Assembly," *Azerbaijan State News Agency (AZƏRTAC)*, September 24, 2020, https://azertag.az/xeber/prezident_ilham_eliyev_bmt_bas_assambleyasinin_75_ci_sessiyasinin_umumi_debatlarinda_videoformatda_chixis_edib_video-1594345.

¹³² "President: Azerbaijan Ranks 55th Out of 165 Countries in 2021 Sustainable Development

Report," *Azerbaijan State News Agency (AZƏRTAC)*, September 24, 2021, https://azertag.az/en/xeber/president_azerbaijan_ranks_55th_out_of_165_countries_in_2021_sustainable_development_report-1883911.

¹³³ Order of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Approval of "Azerbaijan 2030: National Priorities for Socio-Economic Development," issued February 2, 2021, <https://president.az/en/articles/view/50474>.

¹³⁴ In Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan's Net Zero Vision Clashes with Legacy of War, *Climate Home News*, May 15, 2024, <https://www.climatechangenews.com/2024/05/15/in-nagorno-karabakh-azerbajians-net-zero-vision-clashes-with-legacy-of-war/>.

¹³⁵ *Supra* note 132, Khan.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

Belarus

Dictator Alexander Lukashenko has ruled Belarus since 1994. His authoritarian regime tightly controls political life, suppresses dissent, and restricts media freedom, maintaining its grip through an extensive security apparatus and controlled elections that completely lack transparency and fairness. In 2020, Belarus experienced significant sociopolitical upheaval following the disputed presidential election on August 9 that led to widespread protests against Lukashenko's claimed victory and a subsequent harsh crackdown on dissent, including mass arrests and allegations of human rights abuses.



Photo credit: Presidential Executive Office of Russia/Kremlin.ru via Wikimedia Commons

Summary

The 2026 Sustainable Development Report ranks Belarus 35th out of the 169 evaluated countries.¹³⁷ The report describes progress in areas such as poverty reduction, health indicators, education access, and infrastructure development,¹³⁸ although these advancements stand in contrast to setbacks in climate action and governance institutions.¹³⁹

Despite a relatively high spot in the rankings, Belarus' approach to the SDGs functions largely as a façade, projecting an image of commitment to sustainable development that masks deeper governance failures and human rights abuses. Belarus has adopted a comprehensive framework for localizing and implementing the SDGs, but has failed to demonstrate meaningful, genuine commitment. Many policies that appear to advance the SDGs on paper remain largely declarative and inconsistent, focusing superficially on “People,” “Planet,” and “Prosperity.” In practice, the regime's repressive actions undermine the entire set of SDGs, particularly “Peace” and “Partnerships,” while sidelining efforts across other SDG spheres. This reflects the state's readiness to compromise sustainable development whenever these efforts conflict with its repressive priorities.

At the same time, the government actively exploits the SDG narrative as part of its broader strategy of legitimization, co-optation, and propaganda. It leverages the SDGs to enhance its international image and lobby for sanctions relief. The regime also uses SDG-themed initiatives to co-opt young activists interested in sustainability, drawing them into state-led structures and indoctrinating them. Finally, state-controlled media heavily promotes SDG branding to portray Lukashenko's regime as

successful in achieving the Goals, even as its practices contradict the fundamentals of the SDG framework.

General Framework

Belarus has formally integrated the SDGs into its national agenda through the “National Sustainable Development Strategy Until 2035,” aligning them with its socioeconomic development programs.¹⁴⁰ To monitor progress, the country established a National SDG Reporting Platform that tracks 229 of the 267 SDG indicators.¹⁴¹ The regime's 2018 adoption of the law “On Regulatory Legal Acts” mandates that new regulatory acts align with SDGs, emphasizing socioeconomic conditionality in policymaking.¹⁴²

As a part of nationalizing the SDGs, Belarus joined a Russia-funded project to support integration of the SDGs into Belarus' national and regional planning systems through funding,

¹³⁷ “Belarus: Profile,” *Sustainable Development Report 2025*, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://dashboards.sdgindex.org/profiles/belarus>.

¹³⁸ “Belarus: Indicators,” *Sustainable Development Report 2002*, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://dashboards.sdgindex.org/profiles/belarus/indicators>.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *Protocol of the Meeting of the Presidium of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus No. 3: National Sustainable Development Strategy of the Republic of Belarus Until 2035* (Протокол заседания Президиума Совета Министров Республики Беларусь от 4 февраля 2020 г. № 3: Национальная стратегия устойчивого развития Республики Беларусь на период до 2035 года), adopted February 4, 2020, in Russian, <https://economy.gov.by/uploads/files/NSUR/NSUR-2035.pdf>.

¹⁴¹ *The National Review by the Republic of Belarus of the Progress Achieved towards the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, 2022, High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (VNR): 3*, accessed July 6, 2025, https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/vnrs/2022/VNR_2022_Belarus_Report_English.pdf.

¹⁴² Article 6(8), *Law of the Republic of Belarus “On Normative Legal Acts”* (Закон Республики Беларусь «О нормативных правовых актах»), No. 130–3, adopted July 17, 2018, in Russian, <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=H11800130>.

technical support, expertise, and coordination, while engaging citizens and improving how progress is tracked and reported.¹⁴³

The state claims that around 70% of the national budget supports the 2030 Agenda through mainstream public programs¹⁴⁴ and asserts that SDG implementation is integrated via results-based budgeting across sectors.¹⁴⁵ In the financial sector, this includes the “Public Finance Management and Financial Market Development” program, which ran until 2025.¹⁴⁶ However, independent experts argue that in practice, virtually no direct budget financing is allocated to many SDG-related initiatives.¹⁴⁷

Belarus has completed three VNRs,¹⁴⁸ with its most recent presented at the United Nations High-Level Political Forum in July 2025.¹⁴⁹

Specific Policy Efforts

Since 2015, Belarus has launched several national initiatives aimed at addressing the SDGs. However, these efforts have remained largely declarative, with official narratives often contrasting starkly with independent assessments of their effectiveness.

Under the “People” SDGs, for example, the country updated its legal education framework with the adoption of a new code and a strategic concept in 2022¹⁵⁰ and implemented an action plan for gender equality, focusing on combating domestic violence and human trafficking.¹⁵¹ However, some of these efforts have clearly undermined the SDGs; the new education code, for example, has tightened state control over schools, forcing private institutions to close if they fail ideological inspections, while enabling widespread indoctrination and restricting access to independent, high-quality education.¹⁵² In 2018, the regime rebranded the unpopular



“social parasitism” law but retained its punitive core, keeping a policy that punishes the unemployed, risks deepening poverty, undermines social protections, and fails to promote decent wages or working conditions.¹⁵³

Under the “Planet” SDGs, Belarus has adopted state programs focusing on water management,¹⁵⁴ environmental protection, and the sustainable use of natural resources.¹⁵⁵ Belarus has also engaged in climate action by adhering to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and updating its Nationally Determined Contribution in 2021 to target a 35% reduction in emissions by 2030.¹⁵⁶ Yet despite formal commitments,

independent experts note that efforts remain largely declarative,¹⁵⁷ with Belarus presenting unreliable data and excluding civil society and most nongovernmental initiatives.¹⁵⁸ There is no clear strategy for a circular economy, and climate risks are treated as secondary to economic goals.¹⁵⁹ Moreover, the regime’s climate-related actions in the policy sphere have been inconsistent: In 2022, Belarus officially withdrew from the 1998 Aarhus Convention on Environmental Democracy, significantly limiting public oversight of Environmental Impact Assessments, silencing climate watchdogs and eliminating avenues to challenge high-emission projects.¹⁶⁰

Under the “Prosperity” SDGs, Belarus has passed several laws and programs that, at least on paper, advance inclusive growth, sustainable industry, and innovation. For example, it has implemented policies advancing the information technology sector, granting near-zero profit and value-added tax rates to related projects and liberalizing crypto/blockchain operations.¹⁶¹ Under another set of policies, the regime has lowered regulatory barriers for small businesses,¹⁶² created a legal framework for public-private partnerships,¹⁶³ and planned to reduce dependence on hydrocarbon raw materials and increase the use of local fuels.¹⁶⁴

At the same time, the regime has adopted measures that undercut the very essence of the “Prosperity” SDGs. A 2022 decree requires investors from “unfriendly” countries to secure government approval and pay a budget contribution of at least 25% of the state-assessed market value before selling Belarusian shares or real estate, a cost that can be imposed on either the buyer or the seller.¹⁶⁵ This heavy, arbitrary levy effectively erodes property rights and discourages investment.

Some poorly designed policies have produced effects that similarly undermine the “Prosperity” SDGs. In 2022, for example, in an effort to produce an image of effective governance, the regime introduced a price control policy that abruptly banned price increases.¹⁶⁶ Although in force for less than 20 days, the policy triggered arrests and prosecutions of entrepreneurs.¹⁶⁷ Its replacement, a vague price-monitoring system covering 370 goods, continues to expose businesses and officials to legal risks, fueling fear and repression in the private sector.¹⁶⁸

Additionally, Belarus has not enacted any policies or laws that promote the “Peace” and “Partnerships” SDGs.

Instead, the regime has implemented several regressive measures that obstruct the relevant Goals. Over the last few years, it has adopted a number of legislative efforts aimed at centralizing power, restricting public assemblies,¹⁶⁹ tightening media regulations,¹⁷⁰ and imposing harsh penalties, including the death

¹⁶³ MFA: Belarus Will Receive \$3.5 Million from Russia for SDG Localization Project, Belarus. by – Government Events, March 6, 2023, https://www.belarus.by/en/government/events/mfa-belarus-will-receive-35m-from-russia-for-sdg-localization-project_i_153796.html.

¹⁶⁴ *Supra* note 146, Belarus’ VNR 2022: 7.

¹⁶⁵ *Country Profiles on SDG Localization: Local and Regional Governments Stepping Forward for Achieving the 2030 Agenda*, United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG): 305, accessed July 6, 2025, https://gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/country_profiles_on_sdg_localization_final_version.pdf.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ See Yauheniya Shershunovic and Natalja Apanasovich (BEROC), *An Environmental Perspective on Belarus’s Sustainable Development*, October 2024, <https://freepolicybriefs.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/20241007.pdf>.

¹⁶⁸ *Voluntary National Review*, Sustainable Development Goals, Belarus, accessed June 24, 2026, <https://sdgs.by/en/voluntary/>.

¹⁶⁹ *Belarus to Present Two National Reports at UN in 2025*, BelTA (Belarusian Telegraph Agency), June 12, 2025, <https://eng.belta.by/politics/view/belarus-to-present-two-national-reports-at-un-in-2025-168868-2025/>.

¹⁷⁰ “Education in the Republic of Belarus,” *Official Internet Portal of the President of the Republic of Belarus*, n.d., <https://president.gov.by/en/belarus/social/education>.

¹⁷¹ “Belarusian Government Approves National Action Plan for Gender Equality for 2021–2025,” *Belarus.by*, January 6, 2021, https://www.belarus.by/en/government/events/belarusian-government-approves-national-action-plan-for-gender-equality-for-2021-2025_i_123617.html.

¹⁷² Kamil Kłysiński and Piotr Żochowski, “Education Serves the Regime: The Ideologisation and Militarisation of the Belarusian Education System,” *OSW Commentary*, May 17, 2023, Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW), Poland, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2023-05-17/education-serves-regime-ideologisation-and-militarisation>.

¹⁷³ “Belarus: Unemployed Will Pay More for Public Services,” *IndustriALL Global Union*, February 5, 2018, <https://www.industriall-union.org/belarus-being-unemployed-continues-to-be-workers-fault>.

¹⁷⁴ *Resolution of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus No. 91: On the National Strategy for Water Resource Management under Climate Change Conditions Until 2030* (Постановление Совета Министров Республики Беларусь № 91: О Национальной стратегии

управления водными ресурсами в условиях изменения климата на период до 2030 года), adopted February 22, 2022, in Russian, <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=3871&p0=C22200091>.

¹⁷⁵ *Strategy for Environmental Protection of the Republic of Belarus Until 2035* (Стратегия в области охраны окружающей среды Республики Беларусь на период до 2035 года), approved by Order No. 370–ОД of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection of the Republic of Belarus, December 24, 2021, in Russian, <https://minpriroda.gov.by/uploads/files/2021/strategija-okr-okr.sredy-do-2035g..pdf>.

¹⁷⁶ *Nationally Determined Contribution of the Republic of Belarus to the Reduction of Greenhouse Gas Emissions Until 2030*, submitted under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, accessed July 6, 2025, https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/NDC/2022-06/Belarus_NDC_English.pdf.

¹⁷⁷ *Supra* note 152, Shershunovic and Apanasovich.

¹⁷⁸ *Belarusian Civil Society Report on Sustainable Development Goals Implementation: Trends since 2016* (Vilnius: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Office Belarus, 2022), accessed July 6, 2025, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/belarus/19382.pdf>.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ “Belarus Has Withdrawn from the Convention on Environmental Democracy,” *Amika*, July 20, 2022, <https://amika.org/en/news/belarus-has-withdrawn-from-the-convention-on-environmental-democracy>.

¹⁸¹ “Government and HTP Administration: About Decree No. 8,” *Tech Park Belarus*, March 27, 2018, <https://www.park.by/en/press/news/post-1856/>.

¹⁸² “Lukashenko Signs Key Document to Improve Business Climate in Belarus,” *Belarus.by*, November 23, 2017, https://www.belarus.by/en/press-center/news/lukashenko-signs-key-document-to-improve-business-climate-in-belarus_i_0000069304.html.

¹⁸³ *Public-Private Partnership in the Republic of Belarus*, National Agency of Investment and Privatization, January 15, 2024, <https://investinbelarus.by/en/press/news/public-private-partnership-in-the-republic-of-belarus/>.

¹⁸⁴ “State Program ‘Energy Saving’ for 2021–2025 Is Approved,” *SDGs.by*, March 12, 2021, <https://sdgs.by/en/news/state-program-energy-saving-for-2021-2025-is-approved/>.

¹⁸⁵ “Overview of Business Law in Belarus,” *EPAM Law Firm*, <https://mergerfilers.com/guide.aspx?expertjuris=Belarus#guidebook>.

¹⁸⁶ Lev Lvovskiy, “The Belarusian Economy Under Sanctions Since the Start of Russia’s War in Ukraine,” *SCEEUS Guest Platform for Eastern Europe Policy*, no. 33, March 9, 2023, <https://sceeus.se/en/publications/the-belarusian-economy-under-sanctions-since-the-start-of-russias-war-in-ukraine/>.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁹ “Belarus: New Laws Will Severely Deteriorate Human Rights Situation in the Country,” *FIDH (International Federation for Human Rights)*, April 21, 2021, <https://www.fidh.org/en/region/europe-central-asia/belarus/belarus-new-laws-will-severely-deteriorate-human-rights-situation-in>.

¹⁷⁰ “Proposed Law Amendments in Belarus Pose Serious Threats to Freedom of Expression and

penalty,¹⁷¹ for activities it deems threatening to national security. These amendments have enhanced state power over civil liberties and democracy.

Belarus has adopted or amended various laws governing nonprofit and civil society organizations, imposing stringent requirements that can limit these organizations' ability to operate effectively and participate in international partnerships.¹⁷² The recent tightening of Belarus' extremism law significantly broadens the definition of extremist activities. Now, any form of assistance to activities deemed extremist could lead to an organization or individual being labeled as extremist, threatening their operations and international engagement.¹⁷³

On top of this, Belarus has withdrawn from the First Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, effectively blocking the United Nations Human Rights Committee from receiving and reviewing human rights complaints from individuals inside the country.¹⁷⁴ This action removed one of the few remaining international mechanisms available to Belarusian citizens seeking to challenge government abuses.¹⁷⁵

Reported Practices

Despite its policy efforts, however inconsistent, the regime engages in widespread practices of violence and oppression, undermining all pillars of the SDGs whenever they conflict with its immediate interests.

Relevant to the "People" SDGs, public health has suffered collateral damage due to the regime's violent suppression of dissent. Following protests against the presidential election in August 2020, medical workers who treated injured protesters faced repression, leading to widespread dismissals among medical professionals.¹⁷⁶ This

significantly affected the availability of health care.¹⁷⁷ The regime also facilitates the dissemination of hate speech against LGBTQ+ people in the state media.¹⁷⁸

In clear violation of the "Prosperity" SDGs, the regime has unleashed a wave of raids and asset seizures targeting businesses it deems "disloyal." Security forces have carried out surprise inspections, closed offices, revoked licenses, and confiscated property from companies whose owners supported the 2020–2021 protests or criticized the government.¹⁷⁹ Under official pressure, hundreds of employees have been dismissed and exiled entrepreneurs have seen their homes and businesses seized.¹⁸⁰ The most high-profile example is the state's takeover of Belgazprombank,¹⁸¹ Belarus' sixth-largest bank, and the imprisonment of its CEO, Viktor Babaryka. Experts further note that most of the regime's economy-oriented laws and policies remain declaratory and are not being enforced.¹⁸³

The state has carried out severe repression of civil society organizations, negatively affecting the "Partnership" SDGs by liquidating hundreds of NGOs, including those with foreign participation, and effectively preventing any international cooperation in Belarus.¹⁸⁴ Such acts also have an impact on the "Planet" SDGs; the systematic crackdown has not spared environmental organizations, including Ecodom, Belarus' oldest environmental NGO, and environmental activists.¹⁸⁵

The "Peace" SDGs have seen the most significant deterioration, with the judicial system exhibiting extensive discrimination and the police known for using violence and torture.¹⁸⁶ The regime aggressively suppresses dissent, detaining hundreds of protesters and dissidents.¹⁸⁷ In other words, the absence of a national

human rights institution and persistent issues with corruption, state-led violence, lack of freedom of speech, and access to information have prevented the realization of SDGs related to this pillar.

Finally, evidence suggests that the limited policy efforts mentioned above advance implementation of the SDGs only in theory; they are often unenforceable in practice due to the absence of a clear legal framework and a lack of genuine political will to implement them.¹⁸⁸

Press," *CIVICUS Monitor*, May 28, 2021, <https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/proposed-new-law-amendments-belarus-pose-serious-threats-freedom-expression-and-press/>; "New Belarusian Media Law Allows for Bans on Foreign Media," *Committee to Protect Journalists*, July 6, 2023, <https://cpj.org/2023/07/new-belarusian-media-law-allows-for-bans-on-foreign-media/>.

¹⁷¹ "Belarus: New Death Penalty Law Is the Ultimate Attack on Human Rights," *Amnesty International*, May 19, 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/05/belarus-new-death-penalty-law-is-the-ultimate-attack-on-human-rights/>; "Belarus Passes Law to Execute Officials Convicted of Treason," *Associated Press*, March 9, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/belarus-lukashenko-death-sentence-treason-c9908533c6f9d0c2c788ef19109a64e6>.

¹⁷² *Law on Public Associations. Key Amendments: Analytical Note*, November 2024, <https://legislationline.org/sites/default/files/2024-11/Law-on-Public-Associations.pdf>.

¹⁷³ "Belarus Misuses Counter-Terrorism and Anti-Extremism Legislation to Stifle Dissent," *Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights*, October 26, 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/10/belarus-misuses-counter-terrorism-and-anti-extremism-legislation-stifle-dissent>.

¹⁷⁴ "Belarus' Withdrawal from Individual Complaints Procedure a Serious Setback for Human Rights Protection, UN Human Rights Committee Says," *Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights*, November 25, 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/11/belarus-withdrawal-individual-complaints-procedure-serious-setback-human>.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁶ "At Least 35 Convicted, Mass Arrests and Dismissals: How Doctors Are Being Persecuted in Belarus (Минимум 35 осужденных, массовые задержания и увольнения: как в Беларуси преследуют врачей)," *SPRING96*, November 11, 2023, in Russian, <https://spring96.org/ru/news/113292>.

¹⁷⁷ *Belarus: Crackdown on Medics, 'Do You Want One of Your Children to Disappear?'*, Amnesty International (Europe and Central Asia Office),



June 2021, <https://eurasia.amnesty.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/belarus-crackdown-on-medics.pdf>.

¹⁷⁸ "Belarus Calls LGBT Lives 'Pornography'," Human Rights Watch, April 12, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/04/12/belarus-calls-lgbt-lives-pornography>; *Annual Review of the Human Rights Situation of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex People Covering the Period of January to December 2024*, ILGA-Europe, published February 2025, <https://www.ilga-europe.org/files/uploads/2025/02/Annual-Review-2025-Belarus.pdf>.

¹⁷⁹ "Belarus: Political Retaliation against Businesses," *Human Rights Watch*, May 9, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/05/09/belarus-political-retaliation-against-businesses>.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁸¹ Ben Aris, "Belarus Central Bank Puts Interim Management in Charge of Belgazprombank, Charges Top Management with Money Laundering," *Intellinews*, June 15, 2020, [https://www.intellinews.com/belarus-central-bank-](https://www.intellinews.com/belarus-central-bank-puts-interim-management-in-charge-of-belgazprombank-charges-top-management-with-money-laundering-185436/)

[puts-interim-management-in-charge-of-belgazprombank-charges-top-management-with-money-laundering-185436/](https://www.intellinews.com/belarus-central-bank-puts-interim-management-in-charge-of-belgazprombank-charges-top-management-with-money-laundering-185436/).

¹⁸² "Viktar Babaryka: Belarusian Banker and Public Figure, Presidential Candidate, Sentenced to 14 Years in Prison," *SPRING96*, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://prisoners.spring96.org/en/person/viktar-babaryka>.

¹⁸³ *Belarus Country Report 2024*, Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI), accessed July 6, 2025, <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/BLR#pos5>.

¹⁸⁴ "Belarus: Sweeping Closure of Dozens of NGOs as the Crackdown on Civil Society Continues," *Amnesty International*, July 23, 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2021/07/belarus-sweeping-closure-of-dozens-of-ngos-as-the-crackdown-on-civil-society-continues/>.

¹⁸⁵ "Concern as Authorities Continue Systematic Retaliation against Civil Society," *CIVICUS Monitor*, February 4, 2022, <https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/concern-authorities-continue-systematic-retaliation-against-civil-society/>.

¹⁸⁶ For example, Belarus' security forces, often

operating without identification and wearing plain clothes and masks, frequently use excessive force against detainees, peaceful protesters, independent journalists, and ordinary citizens. Reports from human rights NGOs indicate that security forces also abuse and mistreat individuals during investigations, with police routinely beating and torturing people during detentions and arrests. See Belarus: Systematic Beatings, Torture of Protesters, Human Rights Watch, September 15, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/09/15/belarus-systematic-beatings-torture-protesters>.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁸ For example, despite policies promoting inclusivity, non-discrimination, and human rights, Belarus fails to enact anti-discrimination laws, create independent national human rights institutions, or allow judicial redress for rights violations. See *Implementation of SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions*, Report, Belarusian Helsinki Committee, accessed July 6 2025, https://belhelcom.org/sites/default/files/bhc_16_sdg_web_eng_2_version.pdf.

Instances of Manipulation

Despite clear and well-documented shortcomings in advancing the SDGs, Belarus actively exploits SDG-related narratives to support its propaganda, legitimization, and co-optation strategies.

Belarus frequently employs discourse related to the SDGs as a part of its legitimization strategy, challenging sanctions and positioning them as a barrier to sustainable development, thereby deflecting criticism of its own actions. The Belarusian deputy foreign minister emphasized sanctions from Western countries as a major impediment to SDG attainment.¹⁸⁹ In a 2024 speech at the New York Summit of the Future conference, Sergei Khomenko, the leader of the Belarusian delegation to the United Nations Summit on Sustainable Development, praised the regime's achievements in SDG implementation despite sanctions and called on Western nations to "abandon neocolonial policies." "Otherwise," he said, "all responsibility for failures in implementing the 2030 Agenda and the results of the Summit of the Future will lie with you."¹⁹⁰ Khomenko advocated for a global acknowledgment of the detrimental effects of unilateral sanctions on SDG progress and expressed hope for a shift in perspective among nations that implement such sanctions.¹⁹¹

As part of its co-optation strategy, Belarus has established the "Youth Ambassadors of the Sustainable Development Goals" initiative.¹⁹² Framed as a grassroots educational program, it is tightly coordinated by state institutions such as the Ministry of Education and affiliated youth centers.¹⁹³ The initiative co-opts young people by offering them symbolic roles within strictly controlled structures, substituting genuine civic participation with regime-sanctioned visibility and loyalty incentives.

Belarus also actively employs the SDGs in a propaganda strategy to enhance its domestic public image, with state-controlled media frequently reporting on the regime's successes in achieving the Goals. The regime has established a "Media Coordination Group for the Promotion of the Sustainable Development Goals,"¹⁹⁴ ensuring that SDG messaging aligns tightly with government narratives. In March 2021, for example, a state-controlled news agency quoted Anatoly Isachenko, deputy chairman of the Council of the Republic and SDG national coordinator, as saying Belarus' "smart government policy" had placed the country at 18th in the SDG Index and framing it as a flagship success story.¹⁹⁵

¹⁸⁹ "Belarus Calls on UNICEF to Assess Negative Impact of Sanctions on Progress towards SDGs," *Belarus.by*, December 8, 2022, https://www.belarus.by/en/government/events/belarus-calls-on-unicef-to-assess-negative-impact-of-sanctions-on-progress-towards-sdgs_i_0000150503.html.

¹⁹⁰ "Belarusian Delegation Takes Part in the Summit of the Future in New York," *SDGs.by*, September 23, 2024, <https://sdgs.by/en/news/belarusian-delegation-takes-part-in-the-summit-of-the-future-in-new-york/>.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹² "Youth Ambassadors of the Sustainable Development Goals," *SDGs.by*, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://sdgs.by/en/architecture/molodyozhnye-posly-czelej-ustojchivogo-razvitiya/>.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ "Media Coordination Group for the Promotion of the Sustainable Development Goals," *SDGs.by*, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://sdgs.by/en/architecture/gruppa-po-koordinacii-raboty-smi-po-prodvizheniyu-czur/>.

¹⁹⁵ "Opinion: Belarus' Progress on SDGs Is Due to Smart Government Policy," *Belarus.by*, March 3, 2021, https://www.belarus.by/en/press-center/speeches-and-interviews/opinion-belarus-progress-on-sdgs-is-due-to-smart-government-policy_i_126490.html.





On December 20, 2023, a meeting of the Council for Sustainable Development was held in Minsk.

Photo credit: Sustainable Development Goal in Belarus

China

China has long been ruled by the autocratic Chinese Communist Party, today governed by President Xi Jinping. This authoritarian regime employs extensive censorship, surveillance, and propaganda to suppress dissent and maintain social stability while pursuing economic growth and technological advancement to strengthen its global influence. The Chinese Communist Party has maintained a tightened grip on civil society, curtailed freedoms in regions such as Hong Kong and the Uyghur Region, and increasingly persecuted dissent.



Photo credit: Presidential Press
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Summary

According to the 2026 Sustainable Development Report, China ranks 49th out of the 169 evaluated countries.¹⁹⁶ The country has reportedly made improvements in areas such as poverty alleviation, zero hunger, and universal education.¹⁹⁷ However, the report does not capture the full picture of China's approach to the SDGs, presenting a more favorable portrayal than reality suggests. Despite formally endorsing the 2030 Agenda and aligning the SDGs with national development plans, China's implementation of sustainable development remains selective, instrumentalized, and deeply compromised by systemic human rights violations.

The regime has integrated the SDGs into its Five-Year Plans and enacted reforms supporting the "People," "Planet," and "Prosperity" pillars (such as poverty reduction programs, environmental protection laws, and green investments), these efforts often serve broader political aims rather than reflecting a genuine commitment to the SDG framework. Policies justified under the SDG banner, such as poverty alleviation through labor transfer, have enabled forced labor, particularly of Uyghur and other ethnic minorities, while environmental regulations are used as tools of social control and repression. Green development initiatives have resulted in forced relocations and criminalization of poor or dissenting populations, undermining the very rights the SDGs seek to protect under the "Peace" and "Partnership" pillars.

Simultaneously, China leverages the SDG agenda as a tool for propaganda and foreign policy. By showcasing selected successes in areas such as carbon reduction and poverty alleviation, it legitimizes its authoritarian governance model and masks ongoing human rights abuses. Through initiatives like its Global

Development Initiative and Belt and Road projects, framed around SDGs, China advances geopolitical interests, deepens the dependence of foreign states, and expands its global influence under the guise of sustainable cooperation. This manipulation of the SDG narrative allows China to present itself as a responsible global actor while its practices, domestically and abroad, frequently contradict the fundamental values of the 2030 Agenda.

General Framework

China has officially endorsed the implementation of the SDGs and sustainable development at large, with President Xi continuously emphasizing how sustainable development is the "golden key" to fixing global problems.¹⁹⁸ The regime has integrated the SDGs into its national development policy¹⁹⁹ and established a designated lead unit at the level of foreign affairs to coordinate and implement the SDGs across ministries.²⁰⁰ Much of the 2030 Agenda aligns with China's domestic policy priorities;²⁰¹ China's current (14th) Five-Year Plan (2021–2025), set out in 65 chapters, prioritizes the "Planet," "People," and "Prosperity" SDGs by incorporating 20 indicative or binding "main indicators of economic and social development."²⁰²

¹⁹⁶ "China: Profile," *Sustainable Development Report 2026*, accessed June 23, 2026, <https://dashboards.sdgindex.org/profiles/china>.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁸ "Xi Says Sustainable Development 'Golden Key' to Fixing Current Global Problems," *Xinhuanet*, November 17, 2023, <https://english.news.cn/20231117/cfa043a6751145c3bcb947376efc325/c.html>.

¹⁹⁹ Wen Sheng, "China Leads Global Efforts to Realize UN Sustainable Development Goals for 2030," *Global Times*, June 27, 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202306/1293251.shtml>.

²⁰⁰ *Supra* note 150, UCLG, 196.

²⁰¹ *China, United Nations Sustainable Development Goals: Policy Priorities & Business Strategies*, The Conference Board, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://www.conference-board.org/ChinaSustainabilityGoals>.

²⁰² *China's 14th Five-Year Plan*, United Nations Development Program, July 2021, <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/cn/UNDP-CN-v2Issue-brief-9--14th-5-year-plan.pdf>.



*Photo credit: UN Photo/
Jean-Marc Ferré, UN
Geneva via Flickr*

However, China has not created a dedicated SDG-related budget²⁰³ line in its annual national budget, although some funding is channeled through broader budget categories that align with the “People,” “Planet,” and “Prosperity” SDGs.²⁰⁴ The country did complete VNRs in 2015 and 2021.²⁰⁵

Specific Policy Efforts

Most of China’s post-2015 policy efforts toward implementing the SDGs align with the “People” and “Prosperity” SDGs,²⁰⁶ specifically through policy instruments on poverty eradication²⁰⁷ and health.²⁰⁸ To advance implementation of these policies, China has adopted new laws and amended others.²⁰⁹ Additionally, the regime has implemented macroeconomic policies to support households and market participants, advancing the “Prosperity” SDGs.²¹⁰ It has enacted laws and regulations to establish a legal framework that fosters economic growth through e-commerce.²¹¹

China has also made several institutional and policy improvements advancing the “Planet” SDGs. For example, it formed the Ministry of Ecology and Environment, the Ministry of Natural Resources, and the Ministry of Emergency Management, centralizing responsibilities for ecological conservation and environmental protection, and has adopted domestic policies in global climate and sustainability governance,²¹² including ecological conservation policy reform and ecological and environmental protection initiatives during China’s 13th Five-Year Plan period.²¹³

Specifically, China adopted the Law on the Protection of the Yangtze River and amended the Environmental Protection Law and the Law on the Prevention and Control of Atmospheric

Pollution.²¹⁴ China amended its Water Pollution Prevention and Control Law in 2017 to strengthen regulatory oversight and enforcement mechanisms. The revised law imposed stricter pollution discharge limits, enhanced monitoring of industrial wastewater, and held local governments accountable for water quality management.²¹⁵ It also introduces harsher penalties for violators and mandates public disclosure of water pollution data to improve transparency.²¹⁶

At the same time, the regime either disregards the “Peace” and “Partnerships” SDGs or gives them minimal attention. China issues white papers and official statements that highlight its commitment to related SDGs, such as “China’s Progress in Poverty Reduction and Human Rights,”²¹⁷ but fails to adopt hard law instruments or coherent regulations. Independent experts categorize the “Peace” and “Partnership” SDGs in the “neglected zone” as receiving low attention from the regime.²¹⁸

Some policies framed as sustainability-oriented efforts carry significant negative human rights consequences. For instance, the policy of “Poverty Alleviation through Rural Surplus Labor Transfer” justifies forced labor by mandating Uyghur farmers and others to work in factories.²¹⁹ Under this program, China has forced Uyghur persons, mostly farmers, to become “docile industrial workers”²²⁰ in the service of poverty alleviation policies.²²¹ Some laws, such as the 2015 National Security Law and the 2018 Regulation on Religious Affairs, restrict freedom of religion and expression for ethnic minorities, making it difficult to advance the “Peace” and “Partnerships” SDGs.²²²

²⁰³ “Policy Efforts,” *SDG Index & Dashboards: China*, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://dashboards.sdgindex.org/profiles/china/policy-efforts>.

²⁰⁴ See *China’s Progress Report on Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (2021), Center for International Knowledge on Development, September 2021, <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/jj/2030kcxzfzyc/202406/P020240606605159427708.pdf>.

²⁰⁵ “China,” *High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development*, United Nations, <https://hlpf.un.org/countries/china>.

²⁰⁶ *China’s VNR Report on Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, June 2021, https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/280812021_VNR_Report_China_English.pdf.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 75.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 75.

²¹² Xiheng Jiang, “How China is Implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,” *OECD Development Matters* (blog), February 28, 2020, <https://oecd-development-matters.org/2020/02/28/how-china-is-implementing-the-2030-agenda-for-sustainable-development/>.

²¹³ *Supra* note 211, China’s 2021 VNR, 75.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*

²¹⁵ *Water Pollution Prevention and Control Law of the People’s Republic of China (Amended in 2017)*, Ministry of Ecology and Environment, https://english.mee.gov.cn/Resources/laws/environmental_laws/202012/t20201211_812662.shtml.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*

²¹⁷ *China’s Progress in Poverty Reduction and Human Rights*, China SCIO, October 17, 2016, www.scio.gov.cn/zfbps/ndhf/2016n/202207/t20220704_130510.html.

²¹⁸ Hongpeng Fu, Lingbo Fu, Lóránt Dénes Dávid, Qikang Zhong, and Kai Zhu, “Bridging Gaps towards the 2030 Agenda: A Data-Driven Comparative Analysis of Government and Public Engagement in China towards Achieving Sustainable Development Goals,” *Land* 13, no. 6 (2024): 818.

²¹⁹ Adrian Zenz, “Coercive Labor and Forced Displacement in Xinjiang’s Cross-Regional Labor Transfers: A Process-Oriented Evaluation,” *Jamestown Foundation*, March 2021, updated December 2021, https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Coercive-Labor-and-Forced-Displacement-in-Xinjiangs-Cross-Regional-Labor-Transfers-A-Process-Oriented-Evaluation_Updated-December-2021_.pdf.²

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

²²² “Eliminating Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief and the Achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 16”, submission by Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion

Reported Practices

Advancing the “Planet” SDGs, China has made substantial investments in renewable energy, with the goals of reaching peak carbon emissions by 2030 — having achieved a 48.4% lower carbon intensity in 2020 compared to 2005²²³ — and achieving carbon neutrality by 2060. However, while China reports substantial efforts to promote environmental sustainability, independent reports indicate that the country still faces significant environmental challenges. Various reports have highlighted that China remains the world’s largest emitter of greenhouse gases and, due to inconsistent enforcement of environmental laws, many regions continue to grapple with severe air and water pollution.²²⁴

Reports indicate that China has used its environmental and SDG-related policies to tighten political control, suppress dissent, and expand surveillance under the guise of green policy enforcement, effectively undermining human rights protections and consolidating authoritarian power.²²⁵ Poor communities in particular face fines or detention for failing to comply with unaffordable regulations, while the regime uses land seizures and forced relocations to support green infrastructure.²²⁶ Surveillance technologies monitor behavior under vague legal standards, and environmental activists are censored or jailed.²²⁷ In regions such as Tibet and the Uyghur Region, green policies have enabled repression and forced labor.²²⁸

China’s implementation of the socioeconomic project occurs at the expense of human rights, particularly those concerning ethnic and religious minorities, undermining the “People,” “Prosperity,” and “Peace” SDGs. Under its “Poverty Alleviation through Labor

Transfer” program, China’s regime is coercively transferring Uyghur farmers into industrial labor under the guise of poverty reduction. Numerous reports highlight widespread human rights abuses against ethnic and religious minorities and political activists — including mass detentions, forced labor, and cultural suppression, which contravene human rights standards.²²⁹ Additionally, reports indicate that China’s “re-education camps” in the Uyghur Region have held more than 1 million Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities, with detainees undergoing indoctrination, forced labor, and religious repression.²³⁰

China’s repression of dissidents, activists, and human rights defenders has persisted despite its adoption of the SDGs, with activists, lawyers, and citizen journalists routinely subjected to harassment, arbitrary detention, torture, and vague national security charges.²³¹ In many cases, their family members have also been targeted and intimidated. The death penalty is believed to be widely used in politically motivated cases. In 2024, China introduced new judicial guidelines prescribing the death penalty for “diehard” supporters of Taiwanese independence.²³²

China has also actively repressed LGBTQ+ activism through censorship, arbitrary detentions, and interrogations.²³³ At the same time, the regime has systematically banned watchdog organizations and independent NGOs,²³⁴ effectively blocking cooperation or advocacy on issues central to sustainable development.

Instances of Manipulation

China strategically employs the SDGs as a component of its foreign policy and diplomatic strategy, aiming to bolster its global influence, positively

shape its public image, and engage in soft power diplomacy.

China uses the SDGs as a part of its legitimization strategy, actively participating in international forums and summits dedicated to sustainable development to showcase its commitment to the Goals and using the opportunity to enhance its international reputation as a responsible and proactive contributor to global development. President Xi made a notable statement at the UNGA General Debate in 2021, emphasizing China’s support for the SDGs, their alignment with China’s development priorities, and China’s efforts in poverty alleviation, environmental protection, and renewable energy development.²³⁵

China also leverages SDG-aligned rhetoric as a part of its repression strategy to mask and facilitate the regime’s continued mistreatment of ethnic and religious minorities, including Uyghurs and Tibetans. Specifically, China frames its cross-regional “labor transfer” campaigns as poverty alleviation and SDG-style development projects, yet the same programs systematically coerce Uyghur farmers and other minorities into factory work.²³⁶ The United Nations Human Rights Council and independent watchdogs such as Amnesty International have documented widespread human rights violations occurring during this process, including forced labor, mass surveillance, and restrictions on religious and cultural practices.²³⁷

Moreover, China has used the SDGs to improve international relations and mitigate international criticism of the regime as a part of its co-optation strategy, drawing foreign states into deeper cooperation and increasing dependence on Beijing. It launched the Global Development Initiative,

a program allegedly aiming to revive global efforts to achieve the SDGs by 2030.²³⁸ In reality, China seeks to use this initiative (and the larger Belt and Road Initiative) to reposition itself as a global leader in development by offering aid, finance, and public goods under a “China model” rooted in state-led growth and soft conditionality.²³⁹

The Global Development Initiative relies heavily on development finance framed around the SDGs. Participation in the initiative is often perceived as a prerequisite for continued Chinese economic support, drawing foreign states into deeper cooperation and increasing dependence on China.²⁴⁰ For instance, the regime markets its Global Development Initiative projects in Cambodia as direct contributions to the SDGs.²⁴¹ Public coverage of China’s co-optation efforts in Cambodia reinforces the message of sustainability-driven cooperation, casting China-funded highways, airports, and bridges as pillars of Cambodia’s own SDG roadmap, the Pentagonal Strategy 2030.²⁴²

By wrapping its investments in this development narrative, China has strengthened its leverage, garnering benefits unrelated to sustainable development. For example, Cambodia now grants Chinese access to the Ream naval base and has upgraded the annual “Golden Dragon” joint military exercises.²⁴³ In other words, China has used the SDGs in its foreign policy to enhance its influence in other countries.

In other words, by using SDGs in its foreign policy, China has been able to enhance its influence in foreign countries.

or Belief ahead of the 75th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, n.d., <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Religion/Submissions/CSOs/25.csw-1.docx>.

²²³ “The Carbon Brief Profile: China,” *Carbon Brief*, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://interactive.carbonbrief.org/the-carbon-brief-profile-china/index.html>.

²²⁴ “China,” *International Energy Agency*, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://www.iea.org/countries/china>.

²²⁵ “Beijing’s Green Fist,” *Human Rights Watch*, March 29, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/29/beijings-green-fist>.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*

²²⁷ *Ibid.*

²²⁸ *Ibid.*

²²⁹ Solene Lesegretain, “China’s ‘Sustainability’: Exploring Tensions Between the Uyghur Genocide and China’s Economic Leverage Over International Actors,” *Consilience*, April 3, 2022, <https://journals.library.columbia.edu/index.php/consilience/blog/view/437>; see also *Supra* note 227, Christian Solidarity Worldwide.

²³⁰ Lindsay Maizland, “China’s Repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, last updated September 22, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/background/china-xinjiang-uyghurs-muslims-repression-genocide-human-rights>; “China’s Hidden Camps: What’s Happened to the Vanished Uyghurs of Xinjiang,” *BBC News*, October 24, 2018, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/1dt-sh/China_hidden_camps.

²³¹ “China: Human Rights Defenders Criminalised as Well as Face Harassment, Surveillance and Transnational Repression,” *CIVICUS Monitor*, November 27, 2024, <https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/china-human-rights-defenders-criminalised-as-well-as-face-harassment-surveillance-and-transnational-repression/>.

²³² Alisha Rahaman Sarkar, “China Introduces Death Penalty for ‘Diehard’ Taiwan Independence Supporters,” *The Independent*, June 22, 2024, <https://www.independent.co.uk/asia/china/china-taiwan-independence-death-penalty-b2567050.html>.

²³³ Darius Longarino, “How a Crackdown Transformed LGBTQ Activism in China,” *ChinaFile*, September 26, 2024, <https://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/viewpoint/how-crackdown-transformed-lgbtq-activism-china>.

²³⁴ Edward Wong, “Clampdown in China Restricts 7,000 Foreign Organizations,” *New York Times*, April 28, 2016, [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/29/world/asia/china-foreign-ngo-](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/29/world/asia/china-foreign-ngo-law.html)

[law.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/29/world/asia/china-foreign-ngo-law.html).

²³⁵ Xi Jinping’s Full Speech at the U.N.’s 76th General Assembly, Nikkei Asia, September 22, 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Xi-Jinping-s-full-speech-at-the-U.N.-s-76th-General-Assembly2>.

²³⁶ Adrian Zenz, “The Conceptual Evolution of Poverty Alleviation through Labour Transfer in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region,” *Central Asian Survey* 42 (2023): 1–25.

²³⁷ See “China,” *Amnesty International*, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/asia-and-the-pacific/east-asia/china/report-china/>; UN Human Rights Office Issues Assessment of Human Rights Concerns in Xinjiang, China, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, August 31, 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/08/un-human-rights-office-issues-assessment-human-rights-concerns-in-xinjiang>.

²³⁸ *Global Development Initiative, Building on 2030 SDGs for Stronger, Greener and Healthier Global Development*, Concept Paper, circulated September 21, 2021, during the high-level week of the 76th session of the United Nations General Assembly, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/jj/GDI_140002/wj/202406/P020240606606193448267.pdf.

²³⁹ Michael Schuman, Jonathan Fulton, and Tuvia Gering, “How Beijing’s Newest Global Initiatives Seek to Remake the World Order,” *Atlantic Council*, June 21, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/how-beijings-newest-global-initiatives-seek-to-remake-the-world-order/>.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁴¹ “China’s Global Development Initiative Vital for Least Developed Countries: Cambodia’s Top Diplomat,” *Xinhua News Agency*, July 16, 2022, <https://en.people.cn/n3/2022/0716/c90000-10123981.html>

²⁴² “Guest Opinion: China’s BRI Transforms Infrastructure, Development in Cambodia,” *Xinhua Silk Road Information Service*, December 4, 2024, https://www.china.org.cn/world/Off_the_Wire/2024-12/04/content_117587480.htm.

²⁴³ “China’s Grip on Cambodia’s Ream Base Tightens Despite Japan’s Visit,” *Mizzima*, May 1, 2025, <https://eng.mizzima.com/2025/05/01/21885>.

Iran

Iran has been governed since 1979 by a theocratic authoritarian regime, led from 1989 until February 2026 by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who was killed in joint U.S.-Israeli strikes and succeeded by his son, Mojtaba Khamenei. Despite holding elections and maintaining the appearance of republican institutions, power in Iran is centralized in the hands of unelected clerics and security elites, with democratic mechanisms circumscribed by religious doctrine and political control. The regime tightly controls media and suppresses dissent in an effort to uphold Islamic principles and maintain control over the populace. The Iranian ruling elite prioritize self-preservation over democratic governance or human rights.



Photo credit: Khamenei.ir via
Wikimedia Commons

Summary

In the 2026 Sustainable Development Report, Iran ranks 89th out of the 169 evaluated countries.²⁴⁴ It showcases relative performance in areas such as access to electricity and hunger reduction,²⁴⁵ but faces significant challenges in gender equality, press freedom, environmental sustainability, and political rights.²⁴⁶

Iran's limited efforts toward implementing the SDGs reveal a clear absence of genuine commitment to the 2030 Agenda. While Iran has established coordinating bodies and incorporated some SDGs into its five-year development plans, its engagement remains selective, reflecting deep ideological resistance, particularly to SDGs related to gender equality and civil liberties. Efforts under the "People," "Planet," and "Prosperity" pillars are narrow in scope and weakened by poor implementation and institutional dysfunction. Most programs and policies exist largely on paper, while corruption and mismanagement have driven inequality and degradation across the SDGs.

Human rights abuses further undermine the "Peace" and "Prosperity" SDGs. The regime represses dissent, violently targets protesters, and uses sexual violence as a tool of control, especially against women and girls. Ethnic and religious minorities, particularly the Baha'i, face systematic discrimination.

At the same time, Iran exploits the SDG framework as a part of its legitimization strategy, using its SDG commitments to bolster its case for sanction relief in international forums.

General Framework

Iran has expressed commitment to all 17 SDGs and even taken steps to formally integrate the SDGs into its national framework, including embedding some of the SDGs in the

National Five-Year Development Plans.²⁴⁷ The National Committee for Sustainable Development, initially established in 1994, was revamped to serve as the central body for coordinating and reporting on all SDG-related activities across the country.²⁴⁸ However, Iran's endorsement of the SDGs remains selective. Senior officials have openly opposed aspects of the SDG agenda, particularly related to gender equality in education, citing inconsistencies with Iran's interpretation of Islamic values.²⁴⁹

Iran has not allocated a dedicated budget explicitly toward the SDGs. Instead, it has sector-specific budget allocations aligned with some of the Goals to advance the National Development Plan, primarily in the economic sector.²⁵⁰ Iran has never submitted a VNR.

Specific Policy Framework

Since 2015, Iran has adopted a few laws and policies under the "People" and "Planet" pillars. Under the "People" SDGs, Iran enacted a policy plan to facilitate the achievement of universal

²⁴⁴ "Iran, Islamic Rep: Profile," *Sustainable Development Report 2026*, accessed June 23, 2026, <https://dashboards.sdgindex.org/profiles/iran-islamic-rep>.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁷ *Key Messages of Iran's Voluntary National Review (VNR) on SDGs 2017 HLPF*, Islamic Republic of Iran, circulated July 17, 2017, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/14994Iran.pdf>.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁹ "Iranian Education Minister Criticizes UNESCO's Gender Equality Agenda," *Iran International Newsroom*, May 5, 2024, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202405033888>.

²⁵⁰ "Iran to Implement 26 Economic Growth Packages in 2025," *Tehran Times*, April 13, 2025, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/511746/Iran-to-implement-26-economic-growth-packages-in-2025>.

health coverage,²⁵¹ but “administrative challenges” reportedly prevented proper implementation of the plan.²⁵² Iran has also implemented several welfare-oriented programs and strategies, including those aimed at reducing hunger.²⁵³ However, reports suggest that these initiatives have been ineffective in their implementation.²⁵⁴

Under the “Planet” SDGs, Iran has adopted a plan tackling climate change²⁵⁵ and enacted strict environmental standards and regulations²⁵⁶ designed to mitigate pollution by mandating the production of higher-standard, cleaner-burning petroleum products. The regulations include established punishments and fines for violators;²⁵⁷ however, enforcement of these measures remains limited.²⁵⁸

At the same time, repressive laws and regulations negatively affect the implementation of SDGs under the “People” and “Peace” pillars. For example, Iran has enacted multiple laws that exacerbate gender-based discrimination and violence.²⁵⁹ A recent law introduced stricter penalties for women who do not wear the mandatory Islamic headscarf in public and for those who support them, increasing prison terms and fines for women and girls who violate the dress code.²⁶⁰ The law also grants immunity to those enforcing veiling and punishes those intervening against such enforcement.²⁶¹ The age of criminal responsibility for girls is set at nine lunar years, significantly younger than for boys, which is set at 15 lunar years.²⁶² This means that girls as young as approximately eight years and nine months can be held criminally responsible.

Additionally, Iran has implemented a series of regulations that significantly compromise civil and political rights.

In particular, the regime has passed legislation to increase the monitoring of online activity and restrict access to information by outlawing the use of tools such as virtual private networks (VPNs).²⁶³

Reported Practices

What truly casts a long shadow over Iran’s already controversial policies are the state’s ongoing practices that detrimentally affect the implementation of all 17 SDGs across all elements, especially the “People,” “Planet,” and “Peace” pillars.

Contrary to the “People” SDGs, gender-based discrimination remains deeply entrenched in Iran.²⁶⁴ The government’s approach contributes to high rates of domestic violence and sexual abuse among child brides: approximately 21% of child brides report being forced into sexual relations, and many experience physical abuse.²⁶⁵ The Iranian regime also perpetuates continuous discrimination and oppression of minority groups. In particular, the Baha’i community, the largest unrecognized religious minority in Iran, faces systematic persecution²⁶⁶ in the form of arbitrary arrests, confiscation of property, denial of education and employment opportunities, and other types of discrimination enforced by state policies.²⁶⁷

Contrary to the “People” and “Prosperity” SDGs, government mismanagement and corruption — along with self-imposed isolation and economic sanctions resulting from the regime’s aggressive behavior — have led to rampant poverty in Iran.²⁶⁸ State neglect also affects education; the quality of public education is rapidly declining due to reduced per capita investment by the regime, a growing socioeconomic divide that

leads affluent families to choose private schooling, and economic strains from poverty and unemployment that restrict families’ educational investments.²⁶⁹

According to the World Bank, Iran’s poverty rate has increased steadily due to economic mismanagement, state-sponsored corruption, high inflation, and sanctions, with one-fifth of the population living below the poverty line as of 2025.²⁷⁰ Unemployment remains high, particularly among youth, with 27% of young people unemployed.²⁷¹ The government has been criticized for its lack of transparent economic policies and failure to address income inequalities, both of which obstruct meaningful advancements toward poverty reduction and inclusive economic growth.²⁷²

The gap between regulatory frameworks and their implementation has resulted in ongoing environmental degradation, affecting the ecosystem and public health alike and undermining progress toward the “Planet” SDGs.²⁷³ Iran is experiencing a severe water crisis due to the government’s mismanagement of water storage facilities and to cyclical droughts, exacerbated by unsustainable industrial practices and urbanization pressures, that further increase environmental degradation.²⁷⁴ In September 2022, as Iranians took to the streets to denounce the regime’s intentional murder of Mahsa Amini, a young woman from the Kurdish minority, protesters made a point to call out the regime for its ongoing destruction of the environment. The dried-up Urmia salt lake and Zayandeh river have become symbols of the regime’s disregard for its people and environment.²⁷⁵

Photo credit: Official Khamenei
Website/Handout via REUTERS



²⁵¹ S. Ghasemyani, S. Raoofi, H. Hamidi, and R. Khodayari-Zarnaq, "Iran's Health Transformation Plan; Main Issues and Opportunities for Improvement: A Systematic Review," *Iranian Journal of Public Health* 51, no. 9 (September 2022): 1977–1989.

²⁵² *Ibid.*

²⁵³ M. Pourghaderi, N. Omidvar, A. Takian, A. S. Ville, H. M. Kangarani, and H. Eini-Zinab, "Who really counts in Iran's National Food Assistance Program? Lessons from multi-stakeholder processes in the wicked policy area of food security," *Cadernos de Saúde Pública* 38, no. 1 (January 12, 2022).

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁵ *National Strategic Plan on Climate Change, Iran, Climate Change Laws of the World*, accessed July 6, 2025, https://climate-laws.org/document/national-strategic-plan-on-climate-change_cbe2.

²⁵⁶ "Clean Air Act Regulations Ready for Enactment," *Financial Tribune*, January 15, 2018, <https://financialtribune.com/articles/environment/80061/clean-air-act-regulations-ready-for-enactment>.

²⁵⁷ Farnak Bakhtiari, "Clean Air Law 'up in the air,'" *Tehran Times*, January 8, 2021, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/456746/Clean-Air-Law-up-in-the-air>.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁹ "Iran: Institutional Discrimination Against Women and Girls Enabled Human Rights Violations and Crimes Against Humanity in the Context of Recent Protests," press release, *United Nations*, March 8, 2024, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/03/iran-institutional-discrimination-against-women-and-girls-enabled-human>.

²⁶⁰ Iran's Parliament Passes a Stricter Headscarf Law Days after Protest Anniversary, *AP News*, September 20, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/iran-hijab-women-politics-protests-6e07fae990369a58cb162>.

eb6c5a7ab2a.

²⁶¹ Iran: New Hijab Law Adds Restrictions and Punishments, *Human Rights Watch*, October 14, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/10/14/iran-new-hijab-law-adds-restrictions-and-punishments>.

²⁶² Iran: Submission to the Committee on the Rights of the Child for the 71st Pre-Session Working Group, *Human Rights Watch*, March 13, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/03/13/iran-submission-committee-rights-child>.

²⁶³ "Iran Tries To Tighten Grip On Internet By Officially Outlawing VPN Use," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, February 23, 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-vpn-banned-internet-restrictions/32832544.html>.

²⁶⁴ "Iran: Institutional Discrimination Against Women and Girls Enabled Human Rights Violations and Crimes Against Humanity in the Context of Recent Protests," press release, *United Nations*, March 8, 2024, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/03/iran-institutional-discrimination-against-women-and-girls-enabled-human>.

²⁶⁵ *High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development Goals: Civil Society Organization Assessment, Islamic Republic of Iran*, July 2017, Impact Iran: 9, <https://impactiran.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/SDG-2017.pdf>.

²⁶⁶ "Iran: Persecution of Baha'is," *Human Rights Watch*, April 1, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/04/01/iran-persecution-bahais>.

²⁶⁷ "Iran: Institutional Discrimination Against Women and Girls Enabled Human Rights Violations and Crimes Against Humanity in the Context of Recent Protests," press release, *United Nations*, March 8, 2024, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/03/iran-institutional-discrimination-against-women-and-girls>.

enabled-human.

²⁶⁸ Kourosh Ziabari, "Iran: A Resource-Rich Country Reeling from Rampant Poverty," *Arab Center in Washington DC*, April 3, 2023, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/iran-a-resource-rich-country-reeling-from-rampant-poverty/>.

²⁶⁹ Majid Mohammadi, "Iran's Public Education Heading Back To The 19th Century," *Iran International*, February 4, 2024, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202402042980>.

²⁷⁰ "Iran," *Macroeconomic Poverty Outlook*, The World Bank, 2025, 156, <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/77351105a334213c64122e-44c2efe523-0500072021/related/mpo-sm25.pdf>.

²⁷¹ *Islamic Republic of Iran Employment and Environmental Sustainability Factsheet*, International Labour Organization, November 2022, <https://www.ilo.org/publications/islamic-republic-iran-employment-environment-climate-nexus-employment-and>.

²⁷² Mansoureh Galestan, "Iran's Economic Crisis Isn't a Mystery – It's the Regime's Legacy," *NCR-Iran*, April 21, 2025, <https://www.ncr-iran.org/en/news/economy/irans-economic-crisis-isnt-a-mystery-its-the-regimes-legacy/>.

²⁷³ Michael Scollon, "Iran's Environmental Standards, Polluted Reality Mix Like Oil And Water," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 1, 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-environmental-standards-pollution-smog/32385813.html>.

²⁷⁴ "Shirin Hakim: Iran's Environmental Challenge," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, July 11, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/shirin-hakim-irans-environmental-challenge>.

²⁷⁵ "Ciara Nugent, 'Iran's Water Crisis Will Make It Harder for the Regime to Regain Control,'" *Time*, December 8, 2022, <https://time.com/6239669/iran-protests-water-crisis/>.

Contrary to the “Peace” and “Partnership” SDGs, Iran’s regime has escalated its use of the death penalty, with more than 1,100 executions reported in 2024 — a 20% increase from the previous year.²⁷⁶ Executions often target political dissidents, ethnic minorities, and women, raising concerns about their use as a tool of political repression.²⁷⁷

The regime also disproportionately and unjustly uses lethal force against protesters.²⁷⁸ Thousands of women who protested against the state of women’s rights in Iran faced brutal arrests and experienced sexual assault and groping by security personnel as they were transported to detention centers.²⁷⁹ Women were arrested at their residences for participating in protests, indicating that the regime used surveillance tactics to target them. Women activists advocating for human rights and those seen as influential in protests were detained or called on to serve previously suspended sentences as a means of deterring their participation in demonstrations.²⁸⁰ Girls were also arrested during the protests and held in detention facilities alongside adults, in juvenile centers, or in mental health facilities that sought to “reform” them. Detained women and girls were subjected to sexual abuse and violence as means of punishment and to instill fear and humiliation among the protestors.²⁸²

Instances of Manipulation

The Iranian regime employs the SDGs as a part of its legitimization strategy, using its SDG commitments to bolster its case for sanctions relief in international forums.

For instance, in his opening remarks at the 2023 Water Conference,

Iran’s ambassador and permanent representative to the United Nations attempted to justify the country’s problems in implementing the SDGs by citing the negative effects of sanctions, which he said hampered access to clean water and sanitation.²⁸³ In reality, the regime has itself to blame, more than international sanctions, for the mismanagement of its water resources; Iran has historically damaged its own water supply as a result of drilling over a million wells and building around 700 dams.²⁸⁴ While only 15% of the country is cultivated, Iran’s agricultural sector is responsible for 92% of water consumption. Agricultural pursuits take a toll on the natural water cycle, causing aquifers, rivers, and wetlands to dry up,²⁸⁵ resulting in further environmental degradation and sparking widespread political unrest.²⁸⁶

Another example of Iran leveraging its supposed commitment to sustainable development for sanctions relief occurred in 2021 at the United Nations’ 26th Climate Change Conference. Iran’s representative, Ali Salajegheh, stated that the country would fully join the Paris Agreement, the global pact aiming to limit greenhouse gas emissions, if economic sanctions were lifted, arguing that the sanctions severely hindered Iran’s ability to take meaningful climate action.²⁸⁷ Salajegheh referred to the sanctions as “economic terrorism” that had effectively blockaded the country, placing the blame for Iran’s lack of climate engagement on the restrictions rather than domestic policy choices. This demonstrates how Iran uses its participation in global agreements such as the Paris Climate Accord as bargaining tools to push for sanctions relief.





²⁷⁶ *Annual Report on Human Rights in Iran: 2024*, Iran Human Rights Monitor, January 7, 2025, <https://iran-hrm.com/2025/01/07/annual-report-on-human-rights-in-iran-2024/>.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁸ *Iran: UN Condemns Violent Crackdown Against Hijab Protests*, UN News, United Nations, September 27, 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/09/1128111>

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁰ *Iran: Institutional Discrimination Against Women and Girls Enabled Human Rights Violations and Crimes Against Humanity in the Context of*

Recent Protests, press release, United Nations, March 8, 2022: 6, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/03/iran-institutional-discrimination-against-women-and-girls-enabled-human>.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁸³ *Statement Delivered by H.E. Mr. Amir Saeid Iravani, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the United Nations, on the 2023 Water Conference*, UNHQ, New York MFA, March 24, 2023, <https://newyork.mfa.ir/portal/product/10785/451/Statement-on-2023-Water-Conference-UNGA>.

²⁸⁴ Matt McGrath, "Climate Change: Iran Says Lift Sanctions and We'll Ratify Paris Agreement," *BBC News*, November 11, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-59242986>

²⁸⁵ Ciara Nugent, "Iran's Water Crisis Will Make It Harder for the Regime to Regain Control," *Time*, December 8, 2022, <https://time.com/6239669/iran-protests-water-crisis/>.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁷ Maia Golzar Anderson, "Bringing Iran to the Climate Action Table," *Middle East Institute*, September 22, 2023, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/bringing-iran-climate-action-table>.

North Korea

Since the split of the Korean peninsula in 1948, the dynasty of the Kim family (currently headed by Kim Jong-un) has led a totalitarian regime in North Korea, where the state exercises absolute control over all aspects of society. The regime relies on a combination of propaganda, surveillance, and repression to maintain power, isolating its citizens from the outside world and enforcing strict loyalty to the rulers through a pervasive cult of personality. Reports from defectors and international monitoring bodies expose a regime marked by systemic human rights abuses, forced labor, severe food insecurity, and inadequate health care.



Photo credit: Presidential Executive Office of Russia/Kremlin.ru via Wikimedia Commons



Summary

North Korea's approach to the SDGs is fundamentally performative and strategically manipulated. While the regime claims alignment between the SDGs and its national development priorities, its actual practices reveal a systematic effort to reshape and subvert the goals to serve authoritarian objectives.

Nominal progress under the "People," "Planet," and "Prosperity" SDGs is undermined by chronic human rights abuses, forced labor, systemic discrimination, and state-led exploitation. Laws that claim to guarantee health care, education, and environmental protection remain hollow in practice, with critical infrastructure underfunded and services restricted to the ruling elite. Discrimination against women and minority groups, widespread coercion, and brutal repression are routine, contradicting the very spirit of the Agenda.

Worse still, the regime actively uses the SDG platform as a tool of international legitimization and a means to facilitate its repression. The regime blames foreign sanctions for obstructing North Korea's achievement of SDGs, deflecting responsibility for decades of domestic mismanagement and repression.

By recasting SDGs, especially those under "Peace," as a consolidation of the socialist system and by narrowing "Partnership" to regime-friendly alliances, North Korea strips the Goals of their democratic and rights-based foundations and facilitates its repressive practices under the umbrella of SDG-related actions.

General Framework

North Korea vocally expressed its support of the 2030 Agenda,²⁸⁸ acknowledging the SDGs, aligning

them with the country's national development strategy, and affirming its commitment to achieving the Goals by 2030.²⁸⁹ North Korea also created an institutional implementation framework by establishing the National Task Force for Sustainable Development to oversee SDG implementation and adapt the Goals to align with national priorities.²⁹⁰

Led by senior officials, the task force includes six technical committees for socio-demography, science and education, public health, economy and energy, environment and ecosystems, and disaster risk management.²⁹¹⁻²⁹² The committees are responsible for integrating, monitoring, and evaluating the SDG implementation process.²⁹³

North Korea officially endorsed all 17 goals but committed to only 95 of the 169 targets and just 143 of the 248 indicators.²⁹⁴ To institutionalize the SDGs, the North Korean government has adopted the concept of "our style" (woorisik) national development

²⁸⁸ H.E. Mr. Ri Su Yong, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, "Statement at the United Nations Summit for the Adoption of the Post-2015 Development Agenda," September 27, 2015, *Democratic People's Republic of Korea Permanent Mission to the United Nations*, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21023dprk.pdf>.

²⁸⁹ 2021 Progress Report on the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, 3, <https://action4sd.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Democratic-Peoples-Republic-of-Korea-2021-Progress-Report-on-the-Implementation-of-the-Sustainable-Development-Goals.pdf>.

²⁹⁰ "Democratic People's Republic of Korea," *Sustainable Development Goals Knowledge Platform*, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/memberstates/dempeoplesrepublickorea>.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*

²⁹² Democratic People's Republic of Korea, *Voluntary National Review on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda*, June 2021, <https://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/en/2021/democratic-people%E2%80%99s-republic-korea-voluntary-national-review-implementation-2030-agenda-7313>.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

*Photo credit: Presidential Executive
Office of Russia/Kremlin.ru via
Wikimedia Commons*



goals, an approach that aligns the SDGs with the regime’s strategic priorities.²⁹⁵ In particular, formulated national development goals aim to reinforce “the people’s government” with a “people-first” approach, promising to enhance every sector through science and education, to establish a self-sufficient and knowledge-driven economy, and to develop a socialist culture — claims that are difficult to reconcile with the country’s actual record.²⁹⁶

Specific Policy Efforts

According to its most recent VNR, North Korea has introduced several laws and regulations advancing the implementation of the “People,” “Prosperity,” and “Planet” SDGs. Specifically, the regime has enacted laws protecting social security²⁹⁷ and apparently guarantees universal and free health care and free housing in relevant legislation,²⁹⁸ advancing the “People” SDGs. North Korea remains a party to multiple environmental conventions; since 2015, the regime has implemented regulations for sustainable fishing and promotes

sustainable forest management, contributing to the “Planet” SDGs.²⁹⁹ After experiencing a 40% decline in forest cover from 2001 to 2015, the regime has reversed this trend by enacting laws that led to a forestation rate of 45% by 2019.³⁰⁰ The rebound has been concentrated especially around Pyongyang and in South Pyongan Province, while deforestation has continued near remote rural villages.³⁰¹

As for the “Prosperity” SDGs, the government has reportedly increased investment in research and development, local culture, and

domestic tourism development,³⁰² and has plans to modernize and connect transportation infrastructure.³⁰³

Meanwhile, the Goals susceptible to political developments (those under the “Peace” and “Partnerships” pillars) are either disregarded or receive minimal attention, with no significant policy or legal development recorded.³⁰⁴

Reported Practices

Based on reports collected from North Korean defectors by the Database Center for North Korean Human Rights,³⁰⁵ there is strong witness evidence of the government’s minimal practical efforts toward actual implementation of SDGs, contrary to officially voiced commitments and self-reported success. Reported negative practices in North Korea reveal a range of human rights abuses and systemic failures of SDG implementation across elements.

The state almost completely neglects the “People” SDGs, enabling widespread discrimination and modern slavery. Citizens are coerced into contributing labor and financial resources to state projects under threats of fines, resembling forced labor.³⁰⁶ The government’s compulsory seizure of harvested crops left farmers with nothing, resulting in widespread starvation.³⁰⁷ Regime-orchestrated discrimination in the education sector also persists, with access to educational institutions, from kindergartens to universities, reportedly limited to families from the broader ruling class.³⁰⁸

Discrimination extends to women, who face numerous obstacles when seeking administrative positions in the government.³⁰⁹ Reports from human rights NGOs confirm that women face extreme discrimination, lack of access to justice, and severe human rights violations.^{310–311} A similar issue exists

with respect to the alleged universal and free health care for all citizens. According to World Health Organization findings, the health system suffers from severe resource shortages, insufficient medical equipment, and inadequate infrastructure.³¹² Inadequacies include poor care for infants with abnormalities, a resurgence of tuberculosis, reliance on methamphetamine for medical ailments, and practices such as reusing syringes.³¹³

North Korea’s approach to implementing the “Prosperity” SDGs highlights the regime-oriented approach to economic development. For example, reports indicate that while the government invests in infrastructure construction projects, it prioritizes those benefiting the country’s rulers³¹⁴ and relies significantly on modern slavery.³¹⁵ UNICEF’s findings confirm that economic policies have led to a deterioration in living conditions, food insecurity, and access to education.³¹⁶

²⁹⁵ Gyubin Choi and Hong, Jea Hwan, “North Korea’s Implementation of SDGs: Focused on ‘Voluntary National Review’,” *Korean Institute for National Unification*, Online Series 1–21, July 20, 2021, 4, <https://www.kinu.or.kr/pyxis-api/1/digital-files/062f09b0-b27b-4bfb-8725-e9706ac9d07a>.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁷ *Supra* note 297, North Korea’s 2021 VNR, 35.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 12, 18–21.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 39 – 45.

³⁰⁰ “North Korean Forestlands Have Rebounded in Recent Years,” *38 North* (Stimson Center), <https://www.38north.org/2020/12/bchung201231/>.

³⁰¹ *Id.*

³⁰² *Supra* note 297, North Korea’s 2021 VNR, 30–39.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 36.

³⁰⁴ Chad Miller et al., *Democratic People’s Republic of Korea 2021 Progress Report on the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals* (Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, 2021), 3, <https://action4sd.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Democratic-Peoples-Republic-of-Korea-2021-Progress-Report-on-the-Implementation-of-the-Sustainable-Development-Goals.pdf>.

³⁰⁵ “SDGs and North Korean Escapees,” *North Korea and the Sustainable Development Goals*, accessed July 6 2026, <https://web.archive.org/>

web/20221021094532/https://en-nksdg.org/sdgs_es/#s20220221df1bec395a668.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, SDG 1, Interview by NKDB in 2017 (NKDB Unified Human Rights Database).

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, SDG 2, Interview by NKDB in 2017 (NKDB Unified Human Rights Database).

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, SDG 4, Interview by NKDB in 2017.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, SDG 5, Interview by NKDB in 2020, Interview by NKDB in 2017.

³¹⁰ Park, Ju-Min. 2015. “In North Korea, Men Call the Shots, Women Make the Money,” *Reuters*, May 24, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-women/in-north-korea-men-call-the-shots-women-make-the-money-idUSKBN0C9OY020150524/>.

³¹¹ For example, before COVID-19, North Korean women were estimated to make up more than 70% of the country’s household income due to their ability to work in informal markets (*jangmadang*), while men were forced to go to official workplaces with pay caps. However, women’s economic independence and public presence made them targets for sexual harassment and exploitation by state officials. To regain control, the regime imposed harsh restrictions to curb the spread of the virus, effectively shutting down markets – the primary source of income for many women – and established “buffer zones” along the borders with China and Russia. In August 2020, soldiers were ordered to “unconditionally shoot” anyone entering or leaving without permission, a directive that remains in force, further cutting off women’s main funnel of income and deepening their economic vulnerability. See “North Korea: Covid-19 Used as Pretext to Seal Border,” *Human Rights Watch*, November 17, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/11/17/north-korea-covid-19-used-pretext-seal-border>.

³¹² Democratic People’s Republic of Korea [Country overview], World Health Organization, 2024, <https://data.who.int/countries/408>

³¹³ See *Global Tuberculosis Report 2020, country profile supplement*, World Health Organization, 2020, <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/hq-tuberculosis/global-tuberculosis-report-2020/country-profile-2020-final-web-min.pdf?Responding%20to%20COVID-19%20UNICEF%20Annual%20Report%202020.pdf>.

³¹⁴ *Supra* note 310, North Korea and the Sustainable Development Goals, SDG 9, Interview by NKDB in 2017 (NKDB Unified Human Rights Database).

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, SDG 1, Interview by NKDB in 2017.

³¹⁶ For example, the World Food Program’s 2020 Report states that more than 10 million North Koreans (about 40% of the population) are food insecure, with insufficient food rations and strict government control over agricultural production leading to malnutrition and widespread hunger. Clean drinking water is scarce, forcing residents to consume poorly treated water. See *2020 Comprehensive Food Security and Vulnerability Analysis*, World Food Program, June 28, 2022, <https://www.wfp.org/publications/2020-comprehensive-food-security-and-vulnerability-analysis>.

For the “Planet” SDGs, North Korea’s efforts are similarly compromised by constant human rights violations and overreaching military interests. Although the government reportedly educates its citizens on the basics of climate change³¹⁷ and implements some conservation initiatives,³¹⁸ these efforts are marred by the use of forced labor;³¹⁹ the same is true for its fisheries practices.³²⁰

Moreover, North Korea’s pursuit of nuclear weapons has led to the proliferation of contaminated land.³²¹ Despite ratifying the Paris Agreement in 2015, the country’s weak economy, inadequate infrastructure, and centralized control over resource allocation hamper effective climate adaptation, leading to frequent flooding and droughts that exacerbate food insecurity.³²²

However, all these deficiencies and neglect in SDG implementation pale in comparison to state-sanctioned practices of violence and persecution that undermine not only the “People” and Partnership” SDGs, but also the very foundations of the 2030 Agenda. The police force in North Korea engages in routine physical abuse and torture.³²³ The judicial system is deeply marred by corruption, allowing sentences to be reduced or completely bypassed through the payment of bribes.³²⁴ And although the law technically permits appeals, doing so is discouraged and viewed as a risk that will provoke the regime’s anger rather than offering a pathway to justice.³²⁵

Citizens are coerced into contributing labor and financial resources to state projects under threats of fines, suggesting the use of forced labor.³²⁶ Such exploitation often ends in detention for those who resist or fail to comply, with reports describing severe abuse and torture, lack of medical care for injuries, and a flawed justice system where sentences can be reduced with bribes, highlighting a lack of judicial independence.³²⁷ Legal

representation lacks power, rendering fair trials unattainable, while the regime discourages and undermines appeals against injustices, ensuring they remain futile.³²⁸

The North Korean government actively isolates its citizens, restricting access to information and severing connections with the outside world.³²⁹ The regime also restricts internal information flows by using “rubber band (elastic) statistics,” a practice of manipulating statistical data by inflating or deflating actual figures.³³⁰ Isolation prevents any form of dialogue or cooperation not only among North Korean citizens, but also between citizens and the international community.

Beyond isolated (and deficient) policies aimed at advancing individual SDG elements, there is minimal evidence of North Korea’s genuine commitment to actually implementing the SDGs. The persistence of negative state-sponsored practices further contributes to this conclusion, with no signs of positive change.

Instances of Manipulation

North Korea has shown interest in engaging with the international community on issues related to sustainable development, employing the SDGs narrative and platforms as a part of its legitimization strategy, particularly aiming for relief from international sanctions.

In a statement at a high-level thematic debate on achieving the SDGs,³³¹ North Korea used the platform to advance its foreign policy goals, focusing on the geopolitical tensions with the United States and accusing it of imposing economic sanctions that hinder North Korea’s sustainable development efforts. By leveraging the SDG discussion, North Korea sought to portray itself as a victim of US aggression, calling for an end to sanctions and hostile policies while

asserting its right to self-defense, including the development of nuclear weapons.

At United Nations meetings, North Korea continues to leverage the SDGs to argue against “unfair” economic sanctions on developing countries, highlighting that such measures obstruct SDG implementation.³³² The regime also uses the SDGs to try to legitimize itself by showcasing the success of its sustainable development policies, particularly by alleging that it seeks to improve its citizens’ quality of life and make meaningful contributions to advance the 2030 Agenda.³³³

By redefining the SDGs in its national goals, North Korea has sought to advance repression: The regime has rebranded the “Peace” pillar — covering rule of law, human rights, and accountable institutions — as “consolidating the socialist system,” a euphemism for entrenching state control and suppressing dissent. Likewise, the “Partnership” pillar, which promotes global partnerships and cooperation, has been narrowed to “developing friendly partnerships,”³³⁴ carefully curated to exclude transparency, accountability, or external scrutiny. This deliberate reengineering of the SDG framework reflects the regime’s broader strategy — to strip the SDGs of their democratizing and humanitarian potential and recast them as instruments of state repression.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, SDG 13, Interview by NKDB in 2020.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, SDG 15, Interview by NKDB in 2017.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, SDG 14.

³²¹ *Ibid.*, SDG 12, Interview by NKDB in 2018.

³²² *Climate Change Impact Case Study: North Korea: Humanitarian Situation Overview*, Center for Excellence in Disaster Management & Humanitarian Assistance, accessed July 2025, <https://www.cfe-dmha.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=OuMNvo5o5f0%3D&portalid=0>.

³²³ *Supra* note 310, North Korea and the Sustainable Development Goals, SDG 16, Interview by NKDB in 2018.



Photo credit: Keith Martin via Flickr

³²⁴ *Ibid.*

³²⁵ *Ibid.*

³²⁶ United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea: Detailed Findings*, A/HRC/25/CRP.1, February 7, 2014, <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g14/108/71/pdf/g1410871.pdf>.

³²⁷ "North Korea: Events of 2022," *World Report 2023*, Human Rights Watch, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/north-korea>.

³²⁸ *Supra* note 310, North Korea and the Sustainable Development Goals, SDG 17;³²⁴ *Ibid.*, SDG 17, Interview by NKDB in 2017; Interview by NKDB in 2018.

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, SDG 17, Interview by NKDB in 2017; Interview by NKDB in 2018.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, Interview by NKDB in 2019.

³³¹ H.E. Mr. Ri Su Yong, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, "Statement at the United Nations High-Level Thematic Debate on Achieving Sustainable Development Goals," *Democratic People's Republic of Korea Permanent Mission to the United Nations*, April 21, 2016, <https://statements.unmeetings.org/media2/7657570/dprk.pdf>.

³³² United Nations General Assembly, "Summary Record of the 23rd Meeting, Held at Headquarters, New York, on Thursday, 21 November 2019, at 10 a.m.,"

A/C.2/74/SR.23 (16 December 2019), ¶23, <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n19/378/06/pdf/n1937806.pdf>.

³³³ H.E. Mr. Ri Su Yong, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, "Statement at the United Nations Summit for the Adoption of the Post-2015 Development Agenda," *Democratic People's Republic of Korea Permanent Mission to the United Nations*, September 27, 2015, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21023dprk.pdf>.

³³⁴ *Supra* note 300, Gyubin Choi and Hong, Jea Hwan.

Nicaragua

Nicaragua is ruled by dictator Daniel Ortega. After coming to power democratically in 2007, Ortega progressively eroded and ultimately co-opted all democratic institutions until he had consolidated a fully authoritarian regime characterized by a centralized power structure and limited political freedoms. Ortega's administration has suppressed opposition voices through tactics such as media censorship and crackdowns on protests, garnering widespread international criticism.



Photo credit: Fernanda LeMarie/
Cancillería del Ecuador via
Wikimedia Commons

Summary

According to the 2026 Sustainable Development Report, Nicaragua ranks 113th out of the 169 evaluated countries.³³⁵ Despite sporadic successes in meeting some indicators, Nicaragua's actual approach to the SDGs is marked by strategic manipulation, limited transparency, and selective implementation. The Ortega regime publicly aligns national policies with the SDG framework, but the claims often lack substantive backing.

Nicaragua has adopted laws and ratified international agreements advancing the “People,” “Planet,” and “Prosperity” SDGs, at least on paper, but enforcement remains virtually absent and plagued by regime-sponsored corruption, underfunded institutions, and repression of civil society. Repressive policies and practices directly undermine the “Peace” and “Partnership” SDGs, with the regime enacting repressive laws to criminalize dissent, curtail press freedom, suppress labor rights, and dismantle civil society.

At the same time, Nicaragua weaponizes the SDGs for international legitimization and sanctions relief. At United Nations forums, regime representatives have cited limited development progress while blaming “unilateral coercive measures” for obstructing SDG fulfillment. This rhetoric deflects accountability for domestic repression and mismanagement while aligning Nicaragua with other sanctioned states seeking to reframe the SDGs as tools of geopolitical resistance rather than democratic, rights-based progress.

General Framework

Nicaragua has publicly committed to the SDGs, integrating them into national policies and highlighting progress in areas such as renewable energy and universal health coverage.

For instance, the regime's 2022–2026 work plan emphasizes actions for secure, sustainable, and modern energy, aiming to increase the share of renewable resources in energy production.³³⁶ In 2022, Nicaragua's National Assembly formed a monitoring group to oversee progress on various SDGs.³³⁷ However, the group has not publicized any reports or concrete evidence. Two pages on the National Assembly's website show images from SDG-related meetings but lack descriptions of the topics discussed or any outcomes.³³⁸

Nicaragua has not allocated specific funds for SDG implementation. Instead, resources are channeled through regular sectoral budgets, with the majority directed toward initiatives that support projects tied to the “People” SDGs.³³⁹ Nicaragua has submitted only one VNR, in 2021.³⁴⁰

³³⁵ “Nicaragua: Profile,” *Sustainable Development Report 2026*, <https://dashboards.sdgindex.org/profiles/nicaragua/fact-sheet>.

³³⁶ Silvio Argüello and Daniela Matus, “The SDGs from an Energy Perspective in Nicaragua,” *Consortium Legal*, accessed on July 6, 2025, <https://consortiumlegal.com/en/2024/06/20/the-sdgs-from-an-energy-perspective-in-nicaragua/>.

³³⁷ “Nicaragua's innovative, rights-based approach to ensure no one is left behind,” *Inter-Parliamentary Union*, July 12, 2022, <https://www.ipu.org/news/case-studies/2022-07/nicaraguas-innovative-rights-based-approach-ensure-no-one-left-behind>.

³³⁸ Prensa-Asamblea Nacional, “Comisión de Asuntos Exteriores analiza cumplimiento de ODS y las 5 políticas institucionales,” *Noticias Asamblea Nacional de Nicaragua*, November 22, 2023, <https://noticias.asamblea.gob.ni/comision-de-asuntos-exteriores-analiza-cumplimiento-de-ods-y-las-5-politicas-institucionales>; Prensa-Asamblea Nacional, “Comisión de la Paz analiza cumplimiento de ODS en leyes y decretos aprobados en 2023,” *Noticias Asamblea Nacional de Nicaragua*, November 30, 2023, <https://noticias.asamblea.gob.ni/comision-de-la-paz-analiza-cumplimiento-de-ods-en-leyes-y-decretos-aprobados-en-2023/>.

³³⁹ *Análisis: Financiamiento verde y el presupuesto ambiental en Nicaragua*, Fundación Heinrich Böll Stiftung–San Salvador, August 2024, <https://www.divergentes.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Analisis-del-Financiamiento-Verde-y-el-presupuesto-ambiental-en-Nicaragua-1.pdf>.

³⁴⁰ *Voluntary National Review 2021*, Nicaragua, High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://hlpf.un.org/countries/nicaragua>.

Specific Policy Efforts

In pursuit of the “Planet” SDGs, Nicaragua has implemented several environmental laws and policies, starting with its 2017 accession to the Paris Agreement.³⁴¹ Nicaragua also ratified the Escazú Agreement, committing to strengthen environmental transparency, guarantee public access to environmental information, promote citizen participation in environmental decision-making, and protect the rights of environmental defenders;³⁴² and became a party to the Nagoya Protocol on Access to Genetic Resources and Benefit-Sharing, which regulates biodiversity conservation and recognizes Indigenous and local communities’ rights over genetic resources.³⁴³ Over the years, the regime has established and updated a national climate change policy,³⁴⁴ aiming to protect ecosystems and adapt to the impacts of climate change. To implement these policies, Nicaragua has adopted specialized legislation, addressing issues such as conservation³⁴⁵ and environmental permitting.³⁴⁶

Under the “People” and “Prosperity” SDGs, Nicaragua has adopted a series of strategies and programs related to infrastructure and social development. In 2018, the state launched its Social Housing Program, planning the creation of affordable homes for low-income families.³⁴⁷ Additionally, the state has implemented an education strategy,³⁴⁸ enacted legislation to improve access to health care,³⁴⁹ and adopted a national plan aimed at poverty reduction and human development.³⁵⁰ However, these commitments often lack substantive implementation.

Under the “Peace” and “Partnership” SDGs, Nicaragua has adopted several measures tackling gender-based violence and violence against minorities and youth.³⁵¹ However, there are no positive policy efforts

focused on curbing ongoing repression, with the sole exception of an amnesty law pardoning those who participated in what the VNR describes as the 2018 “failed coup,”³⁵² but was actually a series of protests against Ortega’s presidency that resulted in a brutal crackdown by his regime.³⁵³

At the same time, Nicaragua’s Ortega regime has enacted a series of repressive laws aimed at systematically silencing dissent, criminalizing opposition, and dismantling civil society, directly undermining the “Peace” and “Prosperity” SDGs. These laws penalize vaguely defined “false news,”³⁵⁴ label critics as “traitors,”³⁵⁵ and introduce vague “hate crimes,”³⁵⁶ effectively shutting down meaningful discourse on a wide range of issues, including those related to SDG reforms. In addition, Nicaragua’s recently enacted foreign agent legislation imposes strict controls on NGOs,³⁵⁷ severely restricting their ability to cooperate or form partnerships, even in areas vital to sustainable development.

Reported Practices

Although Nicaragua has implemented a few policies advancing the SDGs on paper, many of these initiatives lack concrete enforcement actions.

Under the “Planet” SDGs, independent reports note that enforcement of climate-oriented policies is often absent, marked by declining biodiversity and rising emissions.³⁵⁸ Specifically, proper enforcement is completely undermined by regime-sponsored, high-level corruption.³⁵⁹ This includes the manipulation of logging permits and selective enforcement of laws to benefit regime-linked actors.³⁶⁰ State-designated agencies responsible for implementing these policies suffer from chronic underfunding, politicization, and a lack of

autonomy.³⁶¹ As a result, they are unable or unwilling to take action against illegal deforestation, pollution, or violations of climate commitments.³⁶²

On top of that, independent environmental oversight is virtually impossible due to the regime’s repressive policies. Environmental NGOs and Indigenous activists face state intimidation³⁶³ and even violence for exposing ecological abuses,³⁶⁴ undermining not only the “Planet” SDGs, but also Nicaragua’s commitments under the Escazú Agreement. The proliferation of rights abuses and negative environmental practices even caused the United Nations Green Climate Fund to pull out of a forest conservation project in Nicaragua.³⁶⁵

Under the “People” SDGs, Nicaragua has been engaging in cultural recovery efforts aimed at promoting economic development among Indigenous populations through tourism and research. These programs aim to empower communities and preserve cultural heritage.³⁶⁷ Since 2015, the government has attempted to improve medical services and agricultural productivity³⁶⁸ and, by 2020, had improved digital infrastructure and access to essential services in some regions.³⁶⁹ However, progress remains uneven, with many rural communities still facing limited access to health care, education, and economic opportunities.³⁷⁰ The primary reason behind these gaps is corruption, a major obstacle to the effective implementation of state policies — especially those targeting poverty reduction, infrastructure development, and inclusive economic growth — that also undermines the “People” and “Prosperity” SDGs.

In the public procurement sector, widespread bribery, irregular payments, and diverted funds weaken the impact of infrastructure and human development programs.³⁷¹

The problems are compounded by weak enforcement of procurement laws and a lack of transparency and accountability.³⁷² These systemic issues directly hinder progress on SDG-related initiatives; for example, 96.7% of housing contracts in Managua were awarded to just 10 politically connected firms, distorting resource allocation and reinforcing inequality.³⁷³

At the same time, the regime has taken actions that negatively affect the implementation of all 17 SDGs, across all pillars.

Contrary to the “People” SDGs, enforcement of laws to protect women’s rights is weak and gender-based violence remains a significant problem.³⁷⁴ State-sponsored discrimination and violence against the LGBTQ+ community are also prevalent; Nicaragua’s non-discrimination framework for LGBTQ+ people is rudimentary and enforcement is nearly absent.³⁷⁵

Indigenous and minority groups in Nicaragua, particularly in the Caribbean regions, face escalating, state-sponsored discrimination and violence. The government has increasingly interfered in regional elections, marginalizing Indigenous organizations and consolidating control.³⁷⁶ The most pressing issue — the illegal occupation of Indigenous lands by mestizo settlers — has triggered violent conflicts, forced

to climate impacts, and raising public awareness. In 2021, the regime restructured this framework into the National System for Climate Change Management, an intersectoral platform coordinating climate actions across ministries. Subsequent decrees, including the 2022 National Climate Change Policy, reinforced principles such as climate justice, gender equity, and climate finance; see Arias, “New National Climate Change Policy in Nicaragua,” *Lexology*, accessed July 6, 2026, <https://www.lexology.com/library/detail.aspx?g=a6834e64-374b-4228-b736-f7816c8a131c>.

³⁴⁵ Rodrigo Ibarra and Kevin Humberto Castro, “New Law on Environmental Conservation in Nicaragua,” *World Law Group*, May 28, 2025, <https://www.theworldlawgroup.com/membership/news/news-new-law-on-environmental-conservation-in-nicaragua>.

³⁴⁶ Claralíz Oviedo, “Nueva regulación para certificación de permisos y autorizaciones ambientales en Nicaragua,” July 6, 2025, <https://alvaradoysociadoslegal.com/nueva-regulacion-para-certificacion-de-permisos-y-autorizaciones-ambientales-en-nicaragua/>.

³⁴⁷ Silvio Prado, “Eliminan a ‘parte de la población’ del programa ‘Bismarck Martínez’: Gobierno y Alcaldía de Managua ‘alteran’ bases del programa, ya que beneficiados se eligen por la capacidad de pago del solicitante,” *Confidencial*, October 9, 2024, <https://confidencial.digital/nacion/eliminan-a-parte-de-la-poblacion-del-programa-bismarck-martinez/>.

³⁴⁸ Ariel Blass, “Gobierno de Nicaragua presenta Nueva Estrategia Nacional de Educación,” *Ministerio de Educación (MINED)*, June 19, 2024, <https://www.mined.gob.ni/gobierno-de-nicaragua-presenta-nueva-estrategia-nacional-de-educacion/>.

³⁴⁹ *Ley No. 949, Ley creadora del Centro Nacional de Clínicas Móviles para la Salud*, publicada en *Gaceta Oficial No. 105* (6 junio 2017), <https://legislacion.asamblea.gob.ni/SILEG/Gacetas.nsf/5ee06480f-c3d3d90062576e300504635/5da4514190f3f9e-30625813700741ab7?OpenDocument>.

³⁵⁰ *Annual Report 2024, UNICEF Nicaragua*, 4, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://open.unicef.org/download-pdf?country-name=Nicaragua&year=2024>.

³⁵¹ *Supra* note 345, Nicaragua’s 2021 VNR, 81–103.

³⁵² *Ibid.*, 102.

³⁵³ G. R. Klein, J. Cuesta, and C. Chagali, “The Nicaragua Protest Crisis in 2018–2019: Assessing the Logic of Government Responses to Protests,” *Journal of Politics in Latin America* 14, no. 1 (2022): 55–83.

³⁵⁴ *Report: Human Rights in Digital Environments in Nicaragua*, Derechos Digitales, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://www.derechosdigitales.org/nicaragua-2023-eng/>.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁶ Ismael Lopez, “Nicaraguan Parliament Approves Controversial Hate Crimes Law,” *Reuters*, updated November 11, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/americas/nicaraguan-parliament-approves-controversial-hate-crimes-law-idUSKBN27R04W/>.

³⁵⁷ “Nicaragua Passes Controversial ‘Foreign Agent’ Law,” *AP News*, October 15, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/caribbean-nicaragua-daniel-ortega-396a5abc92e23e5cd1250a5b1d4247d/>.

³⁵⁸ Wilfredo Miranda Aburto, “Nicaragua Has ‘No Environmental Policy’, Admits Government Advisor,” *Havana Times*, September 17, 2016, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://havanatimes.org/features/nicaragua-has-no-environmental-policy-admits->

government-advisor/.

³⁵⁹ Sasha Chavkin et al., “Nicaragua’s Forgotten Deforestation Crisis,” *OCCRP*, November 1, 2021, <https://www.occrp.org/en/investigation/nicaraguas-forgotten-deforestation-crisis/>.

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*

³⁶² *Ibid.*

³⁶³ Sasha Chavkin, “Exile, Impunity, and Covering Nicaragua’s Environmental Crisis,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, December 1, 2021, <https://www.cjr.org/criticism/nicaragua-deforestation-ortega-press-freedom.php>.

³⁶⁴ Sasha Chavkin, Eli Moskowitz, Nathan Jaccard, Romina Colman, and Daniela Castro, “Deforestación, la otra crisis olvidada de Nicaragua,” *Confidencial*, November 2, 2021, <https://confidencial.digital/nacion/deforestacion-la-otra-crisis-olvidada-de-nicaragua/> (“En un momento en el que la preservación de los bosques tropicales es fundamental en la estrategia internacional para detener el cambio climático, el caso de Nicaragua es una advertencia sobre cómo la corrupción puede afectar los esfuerzos para proteger al planeta. El año pasado, según la oenegé Global Witness, el país fue el más letal del mundo per cápita para quienes defienden su tierra y el medio ambiente.”).

³⁶⁵ “UN climate fund axes Nicaragua forest project over human rights concerns,” *Climate Home News*, March 7, 2024, <https://www.climatechangenews.com/2024/03/07/un-climate-fund-axes-nicaragua-forest-project-over-human-rights-concerns/>.

³⁶⁶ *Case Study: Productive Cultural Recovery on the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua* (2017), <https://www.sdgfund.org/sites/default/files/Case%20Study%20-%20NICARAGUA%20-%20EN.pdf>.

³⁶⁷ For example, see “Nicaragua,” *UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage*, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/state/nicaragua-NI?info=projects>.

³⁶⁸ *Reducing the Digital Gap in Nicaragua*, Inter-American Development Bank, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://crf.iadb.org/en/2020-2023/stories/reducing-digital-gap-nicaragua>.

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁰ *Supra* note 355, UNICEF Annual Report 2024.

³⁷¹ *Nicaragua Risk Report*, Global Anti-Corruption & Integrity Forum (Gan Integrity), updated November 5, 2020, <https://www.ganintegrity.com/country-profiles/nicaragua/>.

³⁷² *Ibid.*

³⁷³ *Supra* note 352, Silvio Prado.

³⁷⁴ The Advocates for Human Rights, *Nicaragua’s Compliance with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women*, submitted to the 80th Session of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, 18 October – 12 November 2021 (submitted 20 September 2021), <https://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/Res/Nicaragua%20CEDAW%20DV%20Final%20Website.pdf>.

³⁷⁵ Karen Kampwirth, “LGBTQ Resistance and Political Protest in Nicaragua,” *NACLA*, September 22, 2021, <https://nacla.org/lgbtq-resistance-and-political-protest-nicaragua>.

³⁷⁶ *Electoral Farce in the Caribbean of Nicaragua*, *Divergentes*, March 5, 2024, <https://www.divergentes.com/electoral-farce-in-the-caribbean-of-nicaragua/>.

³⁴¹ Jonathan Watts, “Nicaragua to Join Paris Climate Accord, Leaving US and Syria Isolated,” *The Guardian*, October 23, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/oct/23/nicaragua-joins-paris-climate-accord-us-trump-syria>.

³⁴² “Nicaragua Ratifies Escazú Agreement,” *Zone-ES* (blog), May 23, 2022, <https://zone-es.com/en/nicaragua-ratifica-acuerdo-de-escazu/>.

³⁴³ Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, “Parties to the Nagoya Protocol,” *Convention on Biological Diversity*, <https://www.cbd.int/abs/nagoya-protocol/signatories>.

³⁴⁴ Examples of Nicaragua’s climate governance laws include the 2019 National Policy on Mitigation and Adaptation to Climate Change, which established a national framework for reducing emissions, adapting

displacement, and numerous killings, especially in the Bosawás Biosphere Reserve.³⁷⁷ Government complicity has facilitated these land grabs, often serving corrupt interests and without proper consultation or respect for Indigenous rights.³⁷⁸

State-sponsored violations of labor rights have included suppression of labor unions and strikes.³⁷⁹

Finally, Nicaragua's government has engaged in severe political repression, targeting opposition figures such as political leaders, activists, and journalists through arbitrary arrests and detentions without due process, practices that openly contravene the "Peace" SDGs.³⁸⁰ This crackdown extends to media freedoms, with the state raiding outlets, censoring content, and harassing journalists.³⁸¹ The country's judicial system is heavily politicized, undermining the rule of law and denying fair trials to those considered political prisoners;³⁸² at least 200 perceived government opponents have been imprisoned, many on politically motivated charges.³⁸³ Indigenous communities have reported forced displacements and violence, particularly related to conflicts over land and natural resources.³⁸⁴ There have been reports of government complicity in these abuses, often to favor economic projects or land grabs.³⁸⁵

Instances of Manipulation

Nicaragua is using the SDGs as a part of its legitimization strategy, using the SDG narrative as a bargaining tool to secure sanctions relief. At the 2023 United Nations Water Conference, for example, Nicaragua's representative stated that the country had achieved drinking water coverage in 93% of urban areas and that it had goals to further increase urban access to water and sanitary sewer systems. The representative also asserted that "imperialist countries" were seriously

affecting Nicaragua's efforts in this area due to "illegal sanctions and unilateral coercive measures."³⁸⁶

At a United Nations meeting on the SDGs in July 2023, Nicaragua's representative again brought up sanctions. The representative emphasized the importance of climate action as related to the SDGs, said countries were suffering from sanctions, and asserted that such sanctions were incompatible with the United Nations' aims of accelerating SDG attainment.³⁸⁷ In statements at UNGA, the Nicaraguan regime has argued that sanctions create obstacles to development, impeding its efforts to improve poverty reduction, education, and health care.³⁸⁸

Finally, Nicaragua signed a joint letter with Cuba, Russia, Venezuela, and other states, referring to sanctions as "unilateral coercive measures."³⁸⁹ Although the letter was specific to sanctions against Russia, it demonstrates how Nicaragua's stance on sanctions relief informs its alignment with other countries affected by sanctions. By framing these economic restrictions as barriers to achieving the 2030 Agenda, Nicaragua not only seeks sanction relief, but also uses the SDGs as a diplomatic tool to legitimize its own mismanagement and repressive actions, undermining sustainable development in the nation.

³⁷⁷ Maxwell Radwin, "UN Denounces New Attacks on Indigenous People in Nicaragua's Largest Reserve," *Mongabay*, March 21, 2023, <https://news.mongabay.com/2023/03/un-denounces-new-attacks-on-indigenous-people-in-nicaraguas-largest-reserve/>.

³⁷⁸ Maxwell Radwin, "Nicaragua Government Tied to Illegal Land Invasions in Wildlife Refuge, Documents Suggest," *Mongabay*, June 26, 2025, <https://news.mongabay.com/2025/06/nicaragua-government-tied-to-illegal-land-invasions-in-wildlife-refuge-documents-suggest/>.

³⁷⁹ 2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Nicaragua, US Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/nicaragua>.

³⁸⁰ "Nicaragua," *Amnesty International Report 2023/2024*, Amnesty International, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/americas/central-america-and-the-caribbean/nicaragua/report-nicaragua/>.

³⁸¹ "Nicaragua," *Reporters Without Borders*, accessed March 25, 2024, <https://rsf.org/en/country/nicaragua>.

³⁸² Julieta Pelcastre, "Rule of Law Virtually Nonexistent in Venezuela and Nicaragua," *Diálogo Americas*, December 14, 2022, <https://dialogo-americas.com/articles/rule-of-law-virtually-nonexistent-in-venezuela-and-nicaragua/>.

³⁸³ *World Report 2025: Nicaragua*, Human Rights Watch, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/nicaragua>.

³⁸⁴ Laura Furones and Francisca Stuardo, "As Democracy Continues to Deteriorate in Nicaragua, Indigenous Peoples Pay the Price," *Global Witness Blog*, March 24, 2022, <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/blog/democracy-continues-deteriorate-nicaragua-indigenous-peoples-pay-price/>.

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁶ "Stressing Risk of More Suffering, Death, Speakers Say Financing, Infrastructure, Policy Changes Crucial to End Global Water Crisis, as Conference Concludes," press release, *United Nations*, March 24, 2023, <https://press.un.org/en/2023/envdev2057.doc.htm>.

³⁸⁷ *Palabras de Nicaragua, Foro Político de Alto Nivel sobre Desarrollo Sostenible (HLPF)*, 2023, Representación Permanente de Nicaragua ante las Naciones Unidas, United Nations, July 19, 2023, 4, <https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/general-debate/2023/HLPF%202023%20General%20Debate%20Nicaragua.pdf>.

³⁸⁸ Mr. Moncada Colindres, A/76/PV.17, *General Assembly, Seventy-sixth Session: 17th Plenary Meeting*, Monday, 27 September 2021, 3 p.m., New York, United Nations, <https://docs.un.org/en/A/76/PV.17> ("The aggressive and coercive policies of imperialist Powers create overwhelming obstacles to poverty eradication and progress towards sustainable development. Amid a pandemic, such measures become a crime against humanity committed by those who impose them. For Nicaragua, they are unacceptable. We reject them and reiterate our condemnation and our solidarity with the more than 2 billion people suffering under such sanctions").

³⁸⁹ *Supra* note 4, *Moscow Times*.

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via Shutterstock*



Russia

Russia is ruled and internationally represented by dictator Vladimir Putin and a close circle of government officials and oligarchs close to him. This authoritarian regime restricts political freedoms, controls media outlets, and suppresses opposition to maintain its control. Despite having formal democratic institutions, including elections and a multi-party system, the state manipulates these structures to secure Putin's dominance, limiting genuine political competition. In 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in violation of all relevant international laws and norms. The regime's extensive efforts to fuel its aggression against Ukraine have led to the complete deterioration of sustainable development efforts.



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Kremlin.ru via Wikimedia Commons

Summary

According to the 2026 Sustainable Development Report, Russia ranks 51st out of 169 evaluated countries.³⁹⁰ It reportedly demonstrates progress in such areas as poverty alleviation and innovation, but in reality, Russia's regime instrumentalizes its engagement with the SDGs for authoritarian objectives. The country has no comprehensive national framework or political will to genuinely implement the 2030 Agenda. Instead, it selectively adopts SDG-related targets to advance domestic stability, geopolitical narratives, and regime legitimacy.

Russia has made formal commitments to global climate accords and introduced policies advancing the "Planet," "People," and "Prosperity" SDGs. However, these efforts have been undermined by insufficient funding, a lack of policy integration, and contradictory enforcement actions. The most serious violations concern the "Peace" and "Partnership" SDGs. In recent years, Russia has adopted sweeping, repressive laws to crush dissent, label independent actors as "foreign agents," and criminalize criticism of the government.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine represents not only an unprecedented act of aggression in the 21st century, but also a profound negation of the SDGs, resulting in mass atrocities, widespread destruction, and the reallocation of resources from sustainable development to warfare. Since the invasion, the regime has relaxed its SDG-related regulations, defunded programs, and increasingly targeted civil society, further undermining the 2030 Agenda.

Nonetheless, Russia continues to manipulate the SDG platform to deflect accountability and secure geopolitical leverage. At international

forums, it uses SDG-related narratives as a legitimization tool, framing economic sanctions as obstacles to sustainable development and arguing that sanctions inhibit SDG progress. Regionally, it seeks to integrate neighboring states into its economic orbit under the guise of SDG alignment, while domestically it co-opts youth through patriotic programs masquerading as sustainability initiatives.

General Framework

Russia's approach to the SDGs lacks a comprehensive national commitment. The country has not fully integrated the SDGs into any overarching national strategy or sectoral action plans. The Interdepartmental Working Group on Climate Change and Sustainable Development, under the Russian Presidential Administration, is responsible for coordinating state policy on sustainability,³⁹¹ but its efforts to incorporate the SDGs into Russia's broader policy framework have faced significant challenges. This is evident in the most recent Presidential Decree No. 309 of May 2024 on National Development Goals to 2030 and 2036, which sets out seven national goals and frames them around economic sovereignty,

³⁹⁰ "Russian Federation: Profile," *Sustainable Development Report 2025*, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://dashboards.sdindex.org/profiles/russian-federation>.

³⁹¹ *Decree of the President of the Russian Federation No. 563-rp of December 13, 2012, "On the Interagency Working Group under the Presidential Administration of the Russian Federation on Issues Related to Climate Change and Ensuring Sustainable Development"* (Распоряжение Президента РФ от 13 декабря 2012 г. № 563-рп «О межведомственной рабочей группе при Администрации Президента Российской Федерации по вопросам, связанным с изменением климата и обеспечением устойчивого развития»), Garant.ru, in Russian, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://base.garant.ru/70281186/>.

demographic growth, and traditional values, without any reference to the SDGs or the 2030 Agenda. National priorities are pursued through a set of national projects keyed to these goals rather than to the SDG framework.³⁹²

Russia's limited engagement with the SDG framework is further reflected in its budgeting priorities. National and federal budget documents do not explicitly mention the SDGs, signaling a lack of formal financial commitment to sustainable development goals.³⁹³

Specific Policy Efforts

Despite the lack of a national SDG framework, Russia has adopted several policies that align with parts of the SDGs, primarily in areas that support the “People,” “Planet,” and “Prosperity” pillars. However, these policy measures primarily serve to ensure the regime's stability rather than promoting meaningful sustainable development.

Before 2022, Russia had engaged in efforts to address climate change, implementing policies relevant to the “Planet” SDGs. It acceded to the Paris Agreement in 2019³⁹⁴ and the Kigali Amendment to the Montreal Protocol in 2020,³⁹⁵ consenting to binding commitments to reduce carbon intensity and greenhouse gas emissions in its national economy. Domestically, Russia adopted plans addressing climate change and carbon emissions³⁹⁶ and has enacted and amended several laws to enhance recycling efforts,³⁹⁷ accelerate the transition to green energy,³⁹⁸ and address environmental hazards.³⁹⁹ However, these efforts remained limited, serving as symbolic gestures rather than substantive commitments. Broader environmental goals remain underfunded and lack policy integration at the national level,⁴⁰⁰ while other policies are misused to undermine environmental efforts⁴⁰¹ or even explicitly contradict the declared environmental agenda. For example,



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Russia's Energy Strategy, adopted in 2021, “focuses almost exclusively on promoting fossil fuel extraction, consumption, and exports to the rest of the world.”⁴⁰²

Russia has also implemented some policies advancing the “People” and “Prosperity” SDGs, particularly its broad strategies aimed at poverty eradication, health care development, and food security.⁴⁰³ The regime has prioritized infrastructure development, particularly in transportation, to enhance connectivity across the country's vast and unevenly populated territory.⁴⁰⁴ However, most of these general measures have not been supported by substantial specialized laws or regulations.

At the same time, the regime has enacted laws and policies that severely undermine the “People” SDGs — implementing, for example, stringent controls on educational activities (restricting educational activities without government approval)⁴⁰⁵ and amending its Criminal Code to decriminalize domestic violence, exacerbating the issue of violence against women.⁴⁰⁶

Even before 2022, Russia had adopted a wide range of repressive measures that similarly undermined the “Peace” and “Partnership” SDGs. Since 2015, such measures have allowed the closure of foreign organizations and the criminalizing of cooperation with them, undermining the “Partnership”

SDGs by restricting international engagement.⁴⁰⁷ Russia also further expanded foreign agent laws, targeting media, civil society, and individuals and imposing burdensome reporting, stigma, and shutdown risks — actions that hamper the “Peace” SDGs by curbing political freedoms.⁴⁰⁸ Other rules criminalizing “unreliable” information and criticism of the regime further erode free expression and access to information.⁴⁰⁹ These are just a few examples.

Following its 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russia has largely shifted the focus of its policy and legislative efforts away from the SDGs. Despite implementing a few SDG-related policies since then,⁴¹⁰ most legislative initiatives have focused on consolidating domestic control, mitigating the economic effect of international sanctions, and intensifying aggressive actions abroad. These measures, accordingly, have come at a significant cost to the SDGs, undermining all five pillars of the 2030 Agenda.

Russia has enacted several new laws that substantially relax environmental regulations (including those for the production and distribution of automobiles)⁴¹¹ and reduce funding for climate-oriented programs.⁴¹² Other legislative actions have targeted environmental NGOs and activists by placing stricter controls under the guise of national security,⁴¹³ negatively affecting the “Planet” SDGs.

Regarding the “People” SDGs, Russia has introduced laws that expand discrimination even further in different spheres of public life, affecting access to health care and education. For example, Russia passed a law severely limiting the rights of transgender individuals by denying medical care and legal recognition⁴¹⁴ and extended the ban on LGBTQ+ “propaganda” to all age groups.⁴¹⁵ In 2023, Russia’s Supreme Court labeled the LGBTQ+ movement “extremist,”

³⁹² *Executive Order on Russia’s Development Goals through 2030 and for the Future until 2036*, May 7, 2024, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/73986>; see also 2020–2030: *Decade of Action in Russia, Challenges and Solutions*, Coalition for Sustainable Development of Russia (Moscow: 2020), <https://action4sd.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Russia-VNR-report-2020.pdf>.

³⁹³ *Russian Ministry of Finance Budget Review*, Ministry of Economic Development of the Russian Federation, September 24, 2024, <http://government.ru/en/news/52782/>; “Russian Federation: Policy Efforts,” *2025 Sustainable Development Report*, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://dashboards.sdgindex.org/profiles/russian-federation/policy-efforts>.

³⁹⁴ Natalie Sauer, “Russia Formally Joins Paris Climate Agreement,” *Climate Change News*, September 23, 2019, <https://www.climatechangenews.com/2019/09/23/russia-formally-joins-paris-climate-agreement/>.

³⁹⁵ “Russia Ratifies Kigali,” *Cooling Post*, October 8, 2020, <https://www.coolingpost.com/world-news/russia-ratifies-kigali/>.

³⁹⁶ Pavel Devyatkin, “Russia Unveils Climate Change Adaptation Plan,” *High North News*, January 8, 2020, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/russia-unveils-climate-change-adaptation-plan/>.

³⁹⁷ “Russia: Companies Must Comply with New Waste Rules or Face Environmental Tax,” *International Tax Review*, July 12, 2016, <https://www.internationaltaxreview.com/article/2a68rfy5bw2ycq0qbjkbc/russia-companies-must-comply-with-new-waste-rules-or-face-environmental-tax/>.

³⁹⁸ Dmitry Bogdanov and Thomas Heidemann, “In Review: Renewable Energy Policy and Regulation in Russia,” *Lexology*, August 28, 2019, <https://www.lexology.com/library/detail.aspx?g=e15b7e27-ae54-4495-a0bd-6103544cb0e1>.

³⁹⁹ For example, Resolution No. 49, *Certain Matters of Application of Legislation for Compensation of Damage caused to the Environment*, dated 30 November 2017, and Resolution No 21, *Application of Legislation on Liability for Violations of Environmental Protection and Nature Use Legislation*, dated 18 October 202; see <https://www.linklaters.com/en/insights/publications/2022/february/the-environment-and-climate-change-law-review-russia>.

⁴⁰⁰ For instance, in 2021, Russia enacted a law intended to address greenhouse gas emissions by assigning quotes for Russia’s largest companies but eventually removed all provisions that could have led to significant emissions reductions because of resistance from the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs. See “Russian Federation: Policies & Action,” *Climate Action Tracker*, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://climateactiontracker.org/countries/russian-federation/policies-action/>.

⁴⁰¹ Alexander Shytov, “Law as an Instrument of Forest Destruction in Russia,” *Trees, Forests and People* 12 (2023), <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2666719323000316>.

⁴⁰² “Russian Federation: Summary,” *Climate Action Tracker*, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://climateactiontracker.org/countries/russian-federation/>.

⁴⁰³ “Putin’s ‘Great Society’ Program: Russian Government Outlines 12 Major National Projects,” TASS, February 11, 2019, <https://tass.com/politics/1044056>.

⁴⁰⁴ “Transport Strategy of Russia until 2030 with Forecast until 2035,” *Port News*, December 3, 2021, <https://en.portnews.ru/news/32221/>.

⁴⁰⁵ “Russia Bans Unauthorized ‘Foreign Influence’ Educational Activities,” *Moscow Times*, June 1, 2021, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/06/01/russia-bans-unauthorized-foreign-influence-educational-activities-a74065>.

⁴⁰⁶ “Russian Parliament Backs Draft Law Easing Penalty for Domestic Violence,” *Reuters*, January 25, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/russian-parliament-backs-draft-law-easing-penalty-for-domestic-violence-idUSKBN15914G/>.

⁴⁰⁷ Victor Vladimirov and Liam Scott, “Russia Pushes to Expand Law on ‘Undesirable’ Organizations,” *Voice of America*, July 25, 2024, <https://www.voanews.com/a/russia-pushes-to-expand-law-on-undesirable-organizations/7713089.html>.

⁴⁰⁸ Daniel Salaru, “Ten Years of Russia’s Foreign Agent Law: Evolution of a Press Freedom Crackdown,” *International Press Institute*, July 25, 2022, <https://ipi.media/ten-years-of-russias-foreign-agent-law-evolution-of-a-press-freedom-crackdown/>.

⁴⁰⁹ Shannon Van Sant, “Russia Criminalizes the Spread of Online News Which ‘Disrespects’ the Government,” *NPR*, March 18, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/03/18/704600310/russia-criminalizes-the-spread-of-online-news-which-disrespects-the-government/>.

⁴¹⁰ For example, in October 2022, Russia updated Climate Doctrine enshrines a goal of achieving carbon neutrality by 2060; “Russia Approves New Climate Doctrine,” *Forum Vostok*, October 27, 2023, <https://forumvostok.ru/en/news/v-rossii-utverzhdena-novaja-klimaticheskaja-doktrina/>.

⁴¹¹ Olexandra Zelenaya, “Russia Slashes Environmental Protections as War Rages, Economic Crisis Looms,” *Moscow Times*, June 25, 2022, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/06/25/russia-slashes-environmental-protections-as-war-rages-economic-crisis-looms-a77562>.

⁴¹² Evgeny Pudovkin, “How the War Changed Russia’s Climate Agenda,” *BBC News*, December 10, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-67637803>.

⁴¹³ Vitaly Servetnik and Kjersti Album, “Human Rights Conditions for Environmental Civil Society in Russia: 2023 Status Update,” *Naturvernforbundet*, March 19, 2024, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250618082811/https://naturvernforbundet.no/human-rights-conditions-for-environmental-civil-society-in-russia-2023-status-update/>.

⁴¹⁴ “Russia: Trans Health Care, Families Bill Violates Rights,” *Human Rights Watch News*, July 15, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/07/15/russia-trans-health-care-families-bill-violates-rights/>.

⁴¹⁵ “Russia: Expanded ‘Gay Propaganda’ Ban Progresses Toward Law,” *Human Rights Watch News*, November 25, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/11/25/russia-expanded-gay-propaganda-ban-progresses-toward-law/>.

exposing its members to criminal prosecution and prison sentences of up to 12 years, further deepening inequality.⁴¹⁶ A 2025 law bars foreign-national children from public schools unless they prove Russian-language proficiency, undermining access to inclusive, high-quality education.⁴¹⁷

Russia has enacted laws creating investment uncertainty and sidelining the “Prosperity” SDGs in favor of state control. For example, the regime adopted measures allowing the confiscation of foreign-owned assets from sanctioning countries, targeting state and private holdings⁴¹⁸ as well as individuals who criticize Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.⁴¹⁹ A 2025 draft bill would expand this to all entities from “unfriendly” states, further discouraging foreign investment and harming business confidence and jobs.⁴²⁰ In 2024, Russia’s Constitutional Court ruled that statutes of limitation do not protect privatized assets, meaning the state can challenge and potentially reclaim previously privatized property long after the original sale, dramatically increasing unpredictability and expropriation risks.⁴²¹

Especially since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the “Peace” and “Partnership” SDGs have seen the most deterioration resulting from legal measures. Since the early days of the invasion, Russia has enacted laws to suppress criticism of its military actions⁴²² and criminalize statements that challenge the official pro-war narrative under a pretext of fighting against the “rehabilitation of Nazism.”⁴²³ The regime expanded the foreign agent law to include individuals, media, and NGOs under the vague label of “foreign influence,” enabling the state to target virtually anyone who dissents.⁴²⁴ The government has also broadened counter-extremism laws to prosecute pro-democracy advocates, anti-war

activists, and religious minorities.⁴²⁵ Additionally, amendments to the Criminal Code have expanded the definition of “high treason” to include assistance to any group deemed hostile, punishable by up to life in prison.⁴²⁶ These are just a few examples of Russia’s increasingly repressive legal framework. Together, they have almost completely dismantled Russia’s civic space and severely undermined the “Peace” and “Partnerships” SDGs.

Reported Practices

Under the “Planet” SDGs, Russia has launched several initiatives aimed at implementing environmental plans and regulations.⁴²⁷ Notable efforts include clean air initiatives in major industrial cities,⁴²⁸ water rehabilitation programs,⁴²⁹ waste management,⁴³⁰ and carbon-neutrality pilot projects.⁴³¹ However, the regime continues to rely heavily on fossil fuels, with progress on renewable energy remaining notably slow.⁴³² Biodiversity initiatives, such as expanding protected areas and reforestation programs, are undermined by persistent illegal logging and mismanagement,⁴³³ often linked to state-sponsored corruption. Institutional challenges such as weak enforcement, corruption,⁴³⁴ underfunding, and restrictions on civil society⁴³⁵ further hinder progress, resulting in ongoing environmental degradation despite the existence of formal strategies.⁴³⁶

Under the “People” SDGs, Russia has implemented initiatives targeting poverty reduction, social protection, health care, education, and antidiscrimination. According to official reports, health care projects have improved access (through, for example, more than 2,000 new clinics)⁴³⁷ and education efforts have reportedly resulted in the construction of more than 1,200 schools.⁴³⁸ However, insufficient

funding often hinders effective implementation.⁴³⁹ Discrimination based on gender,⁴⁴⁰ ethnicity,⁴⁴¹ religion,⁴⁴² and sexual orientation remains largely unaddressed⁴⁴³ and, in many cases, is encouraged by the state.⁴⁴⁴ Marginalized groups frequently face exclusion from services or benefits, exacerbated by local corruption, social stigma, and bureaucratic barriers.

Under the “Prosperity” SDGs, the Russian government has implemented several large-scale infrastructure projects focused on transport, energy, housing, and digital development. These include railway modernization, large-scale housing construction and renovation, and the development of domestic software platforms. Although official reports indicate high rates of budget execution, actual implementation has often lagged due to widespread, state-sponsored corruption, opaque contract allocation favoring Kremlin-linked firms, and weak enforcement mechanisms — systemic issues that have undermined project delivery and, ultimately, the achievement of these SDGs.

Meanwhile, Russia has engaged in practices that completely undermine the “Peace” and “Prosperity” SDGs. Even before its invasion of Ukraine, Russia employed repressive measures against peaceful dissent, civil society, and minority groups.⁴⁴⁵ Activists were subjected to harsh prison sentences.⁴⁴⁶ The regime targeted independent journalists, increased internet censorship,⁴⁴⁷ and actively subjected political prisoners to torture and ill treatment in detention.⁴⁴⁸ In addition, the government has increasingly cracked down on foreign cooperation and aid, restricting the activities of international organizations and labeling them as “undesirable” or “foreign agents.”⁴⁴⁹

As in the policy sphere, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine further eclipsed

⁴¹⁶ "Russia: Supreme Court Bans 'LGBT Movement' as 'Extremist'," *Human Rights Watch News*, November 30, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/11/30/russia-supreme-court-bans-lgbt-movement-extremist/>.

⁴¹⁷ "Discriminatory Testing Blocks Migrant Children's Right to Education in Russia," *Human Rights Watch News*, May 19, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/05/19/discriminatory-testing-blocks-migrant-childrens-right-education-russia/>.

⁴¹⁸ "Russian Federation Establishes a Legal Framework for Temporary Administration of Assets Owned by Certain Investors Associated with 'Unfriendly' States," *UNCTAD Investment Policy Monitor*, April 25, 2023, <https://investmentpolicy.unctad.org/investment-policy-monitor/measures/4321/russian-federation-establishes-a-legal-framework-for-temporary-administration-of-assets-owned-by-certain-investors-associated-with-unfriendly-states>.

⁴¹⁹ "Russia's Putin Signs Law to Seize Assets of Those Who Discredit Military," *Al Jazeera*, February 14, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/14/russias-putin-signs-law-to-seize-assets-of-those-who-discredit-military>.

⁴²⁰ "Russia to Widen Asset Seizing Power with New Legislation, Sources Say," *Reuters*, February 7, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-widen-asset-seizing-power-with-new-legislation-sources-say-2025-02-07>.

⁴²¹ "Russia's Constitutional Court Lifts Statute of Limitations for Anti-Corruption Asset Seizures," *Moscow Times*, October 31, 2024, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/10/31/russias-constitutional-court-lifts-statute-of-limitations-for-anti-corruption-asset-seizures-a86870>.

⁴²² Andrii Nekoliak and Elizaveta Klochkova, "Weaponizing Russia's Memory Law: On Russia's Mnemonic Dissidents," *Verfassungsblog*, July 11, 2023, <https://verfassungsblog.de/weaponizing-russias-memory-law/>.

⁴²⁴ "Russia: New Restrictions for 'Foreign Agents'," *Human Rights Watch*, December 1, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/12/01/russia-new-restrictions-foreign-agents/>.

⁴²⁵ *Russia, Belarus and Central Asia: Stop the Misuse of Anti-Terrorism and Extremism Laws*, ARTICLE 19, January 9, 2023, <https://www.article19.org/resources/russia-belarus-and-central-asia-stop-the-misuse-of-anti-terrorism-and-extremism-laws/>.

⁴²⁶ "Russian Lawmakers Approve New Bill Expanding the Definition of High Treason," *AP News*, updated December 17, 2024, <https://www.apnews.com/article/russia-parliament-crackdown-treason-4b83004965cc6ae81f4ca25a603da4d0>.

⁴²⁷ "Ecology" (National Project) («Экология» (национальный проект)), *National Projects Russia portal (official website)*, accessed

July 6, 2025, in Russian, <https://xn--80aapampemcchfmo7a3c9ehj.xn--p1ai/projects/ekologiya/>.

⁴²⁸ "Clean Air" («Чистый воздух»), *National Projects Russia portal (official website)*, accessed July 7, 2025, in Russian, https://xn--80aapampemcchfmo7a3c9ehj.xn--p1ai/projects/ekologiya/chistyy_vozdukh/.

⁴²⁹ "Preservation of Unique Water Bodies" («Сохранение уникальных водных объектов»), *National Projects Russia portal (official website)*, accessed July 6, 2025, in Russian, https://xn--80aapampemcchfmo7a3c9ehj.xn--p1ai/projects/ekologiya/sokhranenie_rek_i_ozher/.

⁴³⁰ "Integrated Municipal Solid Waste Management System" («Комплексная система обращения с твердыми коммунальными отходами»), *National Projects Russia portal (official website)*, accessed July 6, 2025, in Russian, https://xn--80aapampemcchfmo7a3c9ehj.xn--p1ai/projects/ekologiya/utilizatsiya_br_i_pererabotka_musora/.

⁴³¹ Olesya Astakhova and Katya Golubkova, "Russia Aims to Make Sakhalin Island Carbon Neutral by 2025," *Reuters*, June 2, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/business/environment/russia-aims-make-sakhalin-island-carbon-neutral-by-2025-2021-06-02/>.

⁴³² *Supra* note 407, Climate Action Tracker.

⁴³³ Miodrag Soric, "Russia's Forests Threatened by Illegal Logging," *Deutsche Welle*, March 26, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/russias-forests-threatened-by-illegal-logging/a-48060208>.

⁴³⁴ András Tóth-Czifra, "Something Is Rotten in the State of Russia: How Waste Management Became a Problem for the Government," *Institute of Modern Russia*, July 14, 2020, <http://imrussia.org/en/analysis/3136-something-is-rotten-in-the-state-of-russia>.

⁴³⁵ "Russia: 'Year of Ecology' a Sham," *Human Rights Watch*, November 21, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/11/21/russia-year-ecology-sham>.

⁴³⁶ Marianne Lavelle, "How Norilsk, in the Russian Arctic, Became One of the Most Polluted Places on Earth," *NBC News*, November 28, 2021, updated December 10, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/norilsk-russian-arctic-became-one-polluted-places-earth-rcna6481>.

⁴³⁷ "Development of the Primary Healthcare System" («Развитие системы оказания первичной медико-санитарной помощи»), *National Projects Russia portal (official website)*, accessed July 6, 2025, in Russian, https://xn--80aapampemcchfmo7a3c9ehj.xn--p1ai/projects/zdravookhranenie/polikliniki_i_feldsherskie_punkty/.

⁴³⁸ "Modern School" («Современная школа»), *National Projects Russia portal (official website)*, accessed July 6, 2025, in Russian, https://xn--80aapampemcchfmo7a3c9ehj.xn--p1ai/projects/obrazovanie/stroitelstvo_shkol/.

⁴³⁹ "Understanding Russia's Healthcare System," *International Citizens Insurance*, accessed July 7, 2025, <https://www.internationalinsurance.com/health/systems/russia.php>.

⁴⁴⁰ *Statement Submission to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women on Russia, 76th session*, Human Rights Watch, July 3, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/03/submission-committee-elimination-discrimination-against-women-russia/>.

⁴⁴¹ Andrei Soshnikov and Polina Kolesnikova, "'Ethnic Slavs Only:' Russian State Tenders Discriminate Based on Race," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 22, 2025, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-discrimination-government-tenders-racism-slavic-appearance/33355241.html>.

⁴⁴² Jason Le Miere, "It's Not Just Jehovah's Witnesses: Before Ban, Russia Among Biggest Abusers of Religious Freedom," *Newsweek*, April 26, 2017, <https://www.newsweek.com/jehovahs-witnesses-ban-russia-religion-590350>.

⁴⁴³ Enrique Anarte Lazo, "What Is It Like to Be LGBTQ+ in Putin's Russia?" *Context.News*, May 15, 2025, <https://www.context.news/socioeconomic-inclusion/what-is-it-like-to-be-lgbtq-in-putins-russia>.

⁴⁴⁴ For example, see "Must Have Slavic Appearance: Ethnic Discrimination in Russia Is Rampant, and Often Written Right into Government Contracts," *Meduza*, March 21, 2025, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2025/03/21/must-have-slavic-appearance>.

⁴⁵⁵ See *World Report 2021: Russia*, Human Rights Watch, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/russia>.

⁴⁴⁶ Anton Troianovski, "Russian Activist Navalny Sentenced to More Than 2 Years in Prison," *New York Times*, February 2, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/02/world/europe/russia-navalny-putin.html>; "Kremlin Critic Navalny Convicted of Extremism and Sentenced to 19 Years in Prison," *AP News*, August 4, 2023, <https://www.apnews.com/article/russia-navalny-opposition-crackdown-prison-term-b42769d2ba1beb99954279fbb93815d4>.

⁴⁴⁷ "Freedom on the Net 2023: Russia," *Freedom House*, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/russia/freedom-net/2023>.

⁴⁴⁸ Oliver Carroll, "'Torture' of Alexei Navalny Exposing Brutality of Russian Prison System; Kremlin Says Hourly Wake-Up Calls Part of a System of 'Discipline and Order'," *The Independent*, March 26, 2021, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/russia-alexei-navalny-prison-torture-b1823147.html>.

⁴⁴⁹ 'Foreign Agents' and 'Undesirables': *Russian Civil Society in Danger of Extinction?* European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS) Briefing, 2022, accessed July 6, 2025, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE%2F2022%2F729297/EPRS_BRI\(2022\)729297_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE%2F2022%2F729297/EPRS_BRI(2022)729297_EN.pdf).

the country's limited actionable efforts to implement all 17 SDGs. The regime's aggression against Ukraine, marking the largest conflict in Europe since World War II, has proliferated violence and is characterized by a staggering number of war crimes and crimes against humanity, including indiscriminate attacks and targeting of civilians, that have resulted in a terrifying number of casualties among the Ukrainian civilian population and the destruction of major infrastructure.⁴⁵⁰ Prisoners of war are being tortured and starved in Russian captivity.⁴⁵¹ These acts of unjustifiable violence are contrary to everything the SDGs stand for.

Russia's war efforts have subjugated all other spheres to the military cause, significantly undermining any efforts aimed at sustainable development. In particular, increased military spending has redirected funds, undermining many programs relevant to the achievement of the SDGs.⁴⁵² Most tragically, in addition to its aggression and war crimes abroad, Russia has launched an unprecedented campaign of domestic repression, enacting the repressive policies mentioned above and eliminating any progress towards the SDGs.

Since the invasion of Ukraine, Russia's regime has prosecuted more than 10,000 people under "fake news" laws⁴⁵³ and detained more than 20,000 for anti-war protests.⁴⁵⁴ Many have been subjected to beatings, electric shocks, and other abuse.⁴⁵⁵ Security forces have carried out violent home raids targeting dissenters,⁴⁵⁶ while arrests have expanded to include opposition members,⁴⁵⁷ protesters,⁴⁵⁸ activists,⁴⁵⁹ lawyers,⁴⁶⁰ journalists,⁴⁶¹ artists,⁴⁶² students,⁴⁶³ and virtually anyone expressing dissent. This wave of repression culminated in the extrajudicial killing of opposition leader Alexei Navalny in prison.⁴⁶⁴

The regime has also imposed near total control over freedom of expression and association. It has blocked more than 670,000 websites labeled as "extremist" or "fake news,"⁴⁶⁵ banned VPNs and circumvention tools,⁴⁶⁶ and silenced independent media.⁴⁶⁷ Numerous NGOs — including watchdogs,⁴⁶⁸ environmental,⁴⁶⁹ and educational organizations⁴⁷⁰ — have been banned or shut down, eliminating civil participation. Finally, Russia's exit from international bodies such as the Council of Europe⁴⁷¹ and the OECD's termination⁴⁷² of its accession process has further restricted opportunities for international cooperation.

The scale of deterioration is so sweeping that it undermines the achievement of all 17 SDGs, affecting every dimension of human rights, development, and governance in Russia.

Instances of Manipulation

Despite limited policy efforts toward achieving the SDGs and the persistence of practices incompatible with the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda, the Russian Federation remains an active participant in SDG-related international forums and continues to use the SDG framework in its domestic policy to advance interests that are unrelated to the Goals.

Internationally, as a part of its legitimization strategy, Russia uses the SDG narrative to challenge economic sanctions, presenting itself as committed to global sustainable development while emphasizing sanctions as a hindrance to SDG progress. At the 2023 High-level Political Forum on the SDGs, Russia's representatives argued that unilateral sanctions imposed by the United States and European Union limit its ability to meet SDG targets, calling for

sanctions relief under the guise of fostering international cooperation.⁴⁷³ During the G20 Parliamentary Speakers' Summit, Russia underscored the negative impacts of sanctions on global SDG progress, advocating for collective action to address these barriers. Regionally, Russia has led efforts within the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) to promote economic integration under SDG-aligned policies, seeking to increase the dependency of EAEU members on Russian energy markets as a counterweight to international isolation.⁴⁷⁴ This selective participation reflects Russia's use of the SDGs as a platform to bolster its international image and legitimize its domestic policies without a genuine commitment to the comprehensive achievement of the 2030 Agenda.

Domestically, Russia uses the SDGs to attract environmentally aware and sustainability-oriented young people, co-opting them into patriotic youth organizations that promote the government's agenda. The regime conducts this integration under the guidance of the National Youth Council of Russia, whose mission is to "advance the effective implementation of state youth policies focused on enhancing the civic, intellectual, and personal potential of the youth to uphold the interests of the state, bolster national unity, security, and territorial integrity of Russia."⁴⁷⁵ This council has faced allegations of endorsing activities that support Russia's military actions in Ukraine.

Finally, Russia employs the SDGs to enhance its public image as a part of a propaganda strategy, with state media frequently reporting on the government's successes in achieving the Goals and advancing sustainability considerations. In 2020, for example, the state-run RIA Novosti highlighted Russia's "achievements" toward the

SDGs in a clear effort to bolster the country's image with domestic audiences.⁴⁷⁶ In 2024, the agency reported that Moscow had "fully achieved six SDGs and is advancing projects toward eight more," using SDG progress as a propaganda tool.⁴⁷⁷

⁴⁵⁰ *UN Commission Concludes That War Crimes Have Been Committed in Ukraine, Expresses Concern about Suffering of Civilians*, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, September 23, 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/09/un-commission-concludes-war-crimes-have-been-committed-ukraine-expresses>.

⁴⁵¹ Manisha Ganguly, Shaun Walker, Piotr Sauer, Tetyana Nikolayenko, Anton Naumliuk, Artem Mazhulin, and Lucy Swan, "Inside Taganrog: Beatings, Electrocution and Starvation at Prison Where Ukrainians Were Tortured," *The Guardian*, April 30, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/apr/30/inside-taganrog-beatings-electrocution-and-starvation-at-prison-where-ukrainians-were-tortured>.

⁴⁵² Alexander Kolyandr, "Russia Budgets for Its Forever War," *CEPA*, October 11, 2024, <https://cepa.org/article/russia-budgets-for-its-forever-war/>.

⁴⁵³ "Russia Opens 10K Cases for 'Discrediting' Army Since Invasion – Medizona," *Moscow Times*, August 14, 2024, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/08/14/russia-opens-10k-cases-for-discrediting-army-since-invasion-medizona-a86022/>.

⁴⁵⁴ "More than 20,000 Detained in Russia for Anti-War Views over the Past Three Years, OVD-Info Reports," *The Insider*, February 24, 2025, <https://theins.ru/en/news/279105>.

⁴⁵⁵ "Russia: Brutal Arrests and Torture, Ill-Treatment of Anti-War Protesters," *Human Rights Watch*, March 9, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/09/russia-brutal-arrests-and-torture-ill-treatment-anti-war-protesters/>.

⁴⁵⁶ Merhat Sharipzhan, "Navalny Ally Volkov Says Father's House Raided in Russia by FSB," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, April 3, 2025, <https://www.rferl.org/a/police-raid-leonid-volkov-father-russia-opposition-zhdanov-navalny/33372701.html>.

⁴⁵⁷ "Russian Politician Faces Criminal Charge

for Condemning Ukraine War," *Reuters*, June 10, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/russian-politician-faces-criminal-charge-condemning-ukraine-war-2025-06-10/>.

⁴⁵⁸ Rachel Treisman, "Russia Arrests Nearly 5,000 Anti-War Protesters over the Weekend," *NPR*, March 7, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/03/07/1084967986/russia-arrests-more-protesters>.

⁴⁵⁹ Piotr Sauer, "Russian Human Rights Campaigner Sentenced to Jail for Denouncing War," *The Guardian*, February 27, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/feb/27/russian-human-rights-campaigner-oleg-orlov-sentenced-to-jail-for-denouncing-war>.

⁴⁶⁰ Paul Kirby, "Russia Jails Lawyers Who Acted for Late Opposition Leader Alexei Navalny," *BBC News*, January 17, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/ce3nnvq7kpl0>.

⁴⁶¹ "Russian Journalists Jailed for 5½ Years for Alleged Extremist Ties to Navalny," *Reuters*, April 15, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russian-journalists-jailed-5-12-years-over-navalny-links-2025-04-15/>.

⁴⁶² Andrew Roth, "Russian Artist Jailed for Seven Years over Ukraine War Price Tag Protest," *The Guardian*, November 16, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/nov/16/russian-artist-aleksandra-skochilenko-protested-against-ukraine-war-jailed>.

⁴⁶³ Steve Rosenberg, "Ukraine War: The Russian Student under Arrest for an Instagram Story," *BBC News*, February 14, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-64625127>.

⁴⁶⁴ "HRF Condemns the Murder of Russian Dissident Alexei Navalny," *Human Rights Foundation*, February 16, 2024, press release, <https://hrf.org/latest/hrf-condemns-the-murder-of-russian-dissident-alexei-navalny/>.

⁴⁶⁵ Georgi Kantchev, "Russia Crushes Dissent as Putin's System Ramps Up Repression: Wrongful Conviction of Wall Street Journal Reporter Evan Gershkovich Is Latest Blow Against Freedom of Expression in Russia," *Wall Street Journal*, July 21, 2024, <https://www.wsj.com/world/russia/russia-crushes-dissent-as-putins-system-ramps-up-repression-785c90f8>.

⁴⁶⁶ Matt Jancer, "Russia Is Working Harder to Take Down VPNs," *VICE*, March 24, 2025, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/russia-is-working-harder-to-take-down-vpns/>.

⁴⁶⁷ "Russia: Journalists and Independent Monitors Being Silenced to Stifle Reporting of Protests," *Amnesty International*, November 24, 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/11/russia-journalists-and-independent-monitors-being-silenced-to-stifle-reporting-of-protests-new-report/>.

⁴⁶⁸ "Russia: Amnesty International Declared 'Undesirable Organization' amid Escalating Crackdown on Dissent," *Amnesty International*, May 19, 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/05/russia-amnesty-international-declared-undesirable-organization-amid-escalating-crackdown-on-dissent/>.

⁴⁶⁹ Mary Ilyushina, "Russian Ban of Wildlife Fund Signals Isolation Even on Animal Protection," *Washington Post*, June 22, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/06/22/russia-world-wildlife-fund-ban/>.

⁴⁷⁰ Courtney Tanner, "Brigham Young University Is Now on Russia's 'Undesirable' List. Why?" *The Salt Lake Tribune/Fox 13 Now*, June 5, 2025, <https://www.fox13now.com/news/local-news/brigham-young-university-is-now-on-russias-undesirable-list-why>.

⁴⁷¹ "Russia Leaves the Council of Europe," *Deutsche Welle*, March 15, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/russia-formally-departs-council-of-europe/a-61136962>.

⁴⁷² "OECD Ends Russia's Accession Process and to Close OECD Moscow Office," *Reuters*, February 25, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/article/economy/oecd-ends-russia-s-accession-process-and-to-close-oecd-moscow-office-idUSFWN2V02DR/>.

⁴⁷³ "Russia and Allies Warn UN That SDGs in Jeopardy Without Sanctions Relief," *Moscow Times*, September 19, 2023, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/09/19/russia-and-allies-warn-un-that-sdgs-in-jeopardy-without-sanctions-relief-a82505>.

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⁴⁷⁵ "About Us," National Youth Council of Russia, January 1, 2015, <https://youthrussia.ru/en/news/about-us>.

⁴⁷⁶ "Experts Assessed Russia's Review on Achieving Sustainable Development Goals" («Эксперты оценили обзор России по достижению целей устойчивого развития»), *RIA Novosti*, July 13, 2020, in Russian, <https://ria.ru/20200713/1574294941.html>.

⁴⁷⁷ "Yefimov: City and ASI Will Advance Sustainable Development Agenda" («Ефимов: город и АСИ будут развивать повестку в области устойчивого развития»), *RIA Novosti*, January 10, 2024, in Russian, <https://ria.ru/20240110/efimov-1919035300.html>.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy governed by the Al Saud royal family, with power concentrated in the hands of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, or “MbS.” This regime maintains control through a combination of religious legitimacy, authoritarian rule, and extensive oil wealth, suppressing dissent and tightly regulating public expression to preserve stability and the status quo.



Photo credit: Saudi Press Agency (SPA)/Saudi Photos via Wikimedia Commons



Summary

According to the 2026 Sustainable Development Report, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia demonstrates mediocre results, ranking 104th out of the 169 evaluated countries for SDG achievement.⁴⁷⁸

Saudi Arabia's engagement with the SDGs is driven less by a genuine commitment to sustainable development and more by regime interests in image management, economic diversification, and geopolitical positioning. While the country has formally aligned the SDGs with its Vision 2030 blueprint, it has not issued an official endorsement of the 2030 Agenda, and it lacks a dedicated SDG budget or integrated implementation strategy beyond surface level coordination.

Saudi Arabia has made formal commitments to the “People,” “Planet,” and especially “Prosperity” SDGs, introducing policies to improve health, education, and environmental standards. Reforms include targets for renewable energy, reforestation campaigns, and modest advances in women's rights, such as allowing women to drive and travel. However, these efforts are undermined by deeply entrenched legal and structural inequalities, including the codification of male guardianship and discriminatory labor practices against migrant workers, who make up the majority of the workforce.

The most serious violations concern the “Peace” and “Partnership” SDGs. The regime continues to expand repressive laws restricting free expression, assembly, and association while enforcing severe penalties, including executions, for peaceful dissent. High-profile cases, such as the execution of journalist Turki Al-Jasser in 2025 and the long imprisonment of women's rights advocates, underscore the regime's systematic repression.

Nonetheless, Saudi Arabia continues to leverage the SDG platform to rehabilitate its global image. The regime strategically highlights its sustainability efforts in international forums; sponsors SDG-themed events, including women's football tournaments; and partners with United Nations agencies in high-profile workshops. These efforts serve as tools for legitimation and distraction from systemic abuses, allowing the kingdom to portray itself as a modernizing force while actively violating the principles of the 2030 Agenda.

General Framework

Despite not issuing an official statement endorsing the SDGs, Saudi Arabia formally aligned the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs with Saudi Vision 2030, an “ambitious development blueprint” and a strategic plan the regime implemented in 2015 to reduce the country's reliance on oil, diversify its economy, and develop public service sectors such as health, education, and tourism.⁴⁷⁹ The country has a designated central ministry unit — the Ministry of Economy and Planning — to coordinate SDG implementation across ministries, as well as other responsible bodies.⁴⁸⁰

Saudi Arabia does not have a designated budget explicitly for the SDGs, but has allocated funds to sectors aligned with certain SDG targets, mostly in sectors relevant to

⁴⁷⁸ “Saudi Arabia: Profile,” *Sustainable Development Report 2025*, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://dashboards.sdindex.org/profiles/saudi-arabia>.

⁴⁷⁹ Compilation of Main Messages for the 2018 Voluntary National Reviews, Note by the Secretariat, May 31, 2018, E/HLPF/2018/5, p. 56, <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n18/166/64/pdf/n1816664.pdf>.

⁴⁸⁰ *Accelerating to Achieve a Sustainable Future*, Saudi Arabia, Voluntary National Review, 2023: 10, https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/vnrs/2023/VNR_2023_KSA_Report.pdf.



the “People” and “Prosperity” SDGs.⁴⁸¹ Saudi Arabia completed VNRs in 2018⁴⁸² and 2023.⁴⁸³

Specific Policy Efforts

Saudi Arabia has adopted policies and laws that, on paper, advance the SDGs related to “People,” “Planet,” and “Prosperity” pillars. However, the regime has continued to implement measures that exacerbate inequality and enable repression, thereby undermining the “Peace” and “Partnerships” SDGs.

Regarding the “People” SDGs, Saudi Arabia has introduced several legislative reforms in the education

system⁴⁸⁴ and developed strategies to improve health services.⁴⁸⁵ At the same time, the regime has enacted a Personal Status Law that formalizes male guardianship by default.⁴⁸⁶ Although it has introduced limited reforms, such as allowing women to drive and travel abroad without a guardian’s approval, these changes are modest and fall short of global standards.⁴⁸⁷ Overall, the law reinforces male control across most aspects of women’s lives.

Regarding the “Planet” SDGs, the regime has amended environmental laws several times to improve domestic environmental rules and regulations.⁴⁸⁸ It increased targets

under its National Renewable Energy Program, aiming to generate 50% of energy from renewable sources by 2030 and eliminate 130 million tons of carbon emissions.⁴⁸⁹ Saudi Arabia also launched the Saudi Green Initiative and the Middle East Green Initiative to combat climate change and environmental degradation.⁴⁹⁰

In 2020, the regime revised its environmental regulations, known as RCER-2020, to include stricter emission limits, advanced monitoring systems, and compliance plans for older facilities to meet new environmental standards.⁴⁹¹ It has also formally committed to planting 10



billion trees within the kingdom,⁴⁹² generating 50% of the kingdom's electricity from renewables by 2030, and eliminating 130 million tons of carbon emissions.⁴⁹³

Regarding the Prosperity SDGs, the regime has launched several initiatives aimed at improving social development. These programs focus on enhancing recreational facilities, promoting tourism, and fostering cultural activities to elevate the quality of life for citizens.⁴⁹⁴ Additionally, Saudi Arabia has continued the adoption of policy efforts aimed at increasing employment among Saudi nationals, setting quotas for hiring local workers in the private sector.⁴⁹⁵

However, these measures often lead to discrimination against migrant workers.⁴⁹⁶

At the same time, Saudi Arabia has introduced several legislative measures that significantly undermine the Peace and Partnership SDGs. It codified restrictions on behavior, dress, photography, public affection, and speech, enabling surveillance and criminalizing everyday activities.⁴⁹⁷ Additionally, anti-cybercrime and counterterrorism laws effectively criminalize peaceful online criticism and impose severe penalties automatically.⁴⁹⁸

Saudi Arabia is also working on a penal code, the draft of which was leaked in 2022,⁴⁹⁹ that would codify severe restrictions on free speech, religion, and assembly; sets harsh penalties such as floggings and executions, even for minors; and fails to address gender-based violence.⁵⁰⁰ The draft has not been enacted yet, but the regime has shown little interest in making substantial revisions.

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⁴⁸⁶ Elizabeth Carr-Ellis, "Saudi Arabia: the Laws on What Women Can – and Can't – Do," *The Week UK*, last updated April 8, 2025, <https://theweek.com/60339/things-women-cant-do-in-saudi-arabia>.

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸⁸ "Environmental Laws in Saudi Arabia," *Saudi Legal (Derayah LLP)*, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://www.saudilegal.com/saudi-law-overview/environmental-laws>.

⁴⁸⁹ *Saudi Ministry of Energy Report*, IEA Saudi Renewable Energy Report

⁴⁹⁰ "Saudi Green Initiative Drives Sustainable Development and Climate Action," *Saudi Press Agency*, January 17, 2025, <https://www.spa.gov.sa/en/N2218015>.

⁴⁹¹ Ian James, "Saudi Arabia's 2021 Environmental Regulatory Reforms – Part 1," *WKC Group*, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://www.wkcgroup.com/news/saudi-arabias-2021-environmental-regulatory-reforms/>.

⁴⁹² *Proactively Tackling Climate Change Impacts*, Greening Saudi, Saudi & Middle East: Green Initiatives, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://web.archive.org/web/20240510014601/https://www.greeninitiatives.gov.sa/about-sgi/sgi-targets/greening-saudi/>.

⁴⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹⁴ *Quality of Life Program Delivery Plan 2021–2025*, Saudi Vision 2030, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/media/tlzdi3q2/2021-2025-quality-of-life-program-delivery-plan-en.pdf>.

⁴⁹⁵ Marianna Lopesciolo, Dana Muhajir, and Changyu Pan, "The Quest for Increased Saudization: Labor Market Outcomes and the Shadow Price of Workforce Nationalization Policies," *Harvard Growth Lab*, 2021, <https://growthlab.hks.harvard.edu/publications/quest-increased-saudization-labor-market-outcomes-and-shadow-price-workforce>.

⁴⁹⁶ "Discrimination Against Migrant Domestic Workers in Saudi Arabia: Passport Confiscation and Denial of Citizenship," *Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain*, February 14, 2025, <https://www.adhrb.org/2025/02/discrimination-against-migrant-domestic-workers-in-saudi-arabia-passport-confiscation-and-denial-of-citizenship/>.

⁴⁹⁷ *Saudi Arabia: Legislation Enacted on Regulating Public Decency*, Global Legal Monitor, Law Library of Congress, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://www.loc.gov/item/global-legal-monitor/2019-11-04/saudi-arabia-legislation-enacted-on-regulating-public-decency/>.

⁴⁹⁸ Dina Sadek, Layla Mashkoor, Iain Robertson, and Andy Carvin, "Intentionally Vague: How Saudi Arabia and Egypt Abuse Legal Systems to Suppress Online Speech," *Atlantic Council*, June 12, 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/intentionally-vague-how-saudi-arabia-and-egypt-abuse-legal-systems-to-suppress-online-speech/>.

⁴⁹⁹ "Saudi Arabia: Repressive Draft Penal Code Shatters Illusions of Progress and Reform," *Amnesty International*, March 19, 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/03/saudi-arabia-repressive-draft-penal-code-shatters-illusions-of-progress-and-reform/>.

⁵⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸¹ Abdelrahim Elbakheit, "Analysis of 2025 Saudi Budget," *Andersen Saudi Arabia*, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://sa.andersen.com/myblog/analysis-of-2025-saudi-budget/>.

⁴⁸² *Towards Saudi Arabia's Sustainable Tomorrow*, Saudi Arabia, Voluntary National Review, 2018, <https://www.undp.org/saudi-arabia/publications/voluntary-national-review-vnr-saudi-arabia>.

⁴⁸³ *KSA VNR Report 2023 – Accelerating to Achieve a Sustainable Future*, SDGs Knowledge & Learning, UNESCWA, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://arabsdgs.unescwa.org/index.php/en/read-voluntary-national-reviews-arab-vnrs/ksa-vnr-report-2023-accelerating-achieve-sustainable>.

⁴⁸⁴ May Alrudayni, "Moving towards Inclusive Education: Policy Evolution in Saudi Arabia," *International Journal of Educational Research* 130 (2025), <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0883035524002180>.

⁴⁸⁵ Abdullah M. Alarifi, Najim Z. Alshahrani, Hani Jokhdar, and Abdullah M. Asiri, "Advancing Health Through Sustainable Development Goals – Saudi Arabia's Mid-Journey Progress and Insights,"

Reported Practices

Despite the adoption of various policies, Saudi Arabia's practices demonstrate limited commitment to the genuine implementation and achievement of the SDGs, with the exception of those tied to economic prosperity. Most SDG-branded projects and initiatives either prioritize economic gains at the expense of other SDGs or serve primarily as image-washing efforts.

Specifically, Saudi Arabia's development projects have primarily aimed to enhance the regime's economic standing, falling under the umbrella of the "Prosperity" SDGs, especially as the country develops megaprojects such as NEOM, Boulevard World, Diriyah, and VIA Riyadh. These projects aim to attract foreign investment and improve economic indicators, yet they do little to reduce inequalities or directly address poverty in low-income communities.⁵⁰¹

In fact, many "Prosperity"-related projects are being implemented at the expense of all other SDGs, notably the "People" SDGs. Saudi's planned megaprojects are being built by migrant workers, who face egregious living and working conditions, passport confiscation, wage theft, and, often, denial of the right to return home. In 2021, the private sector employed approximately 6.17 million workers in Saudi Arabia, with foreign nationals constituting 76.4% of the workforce.⁵⁰² According to Human Rights Watch, migrants "routinely report abuse and exploitation" and the regime continues to impose the abusive kafala (visa sponsorship) system that gives employees power over migrant workers' mobility and legal status through practices such as delayed wages and passport confiscation.⁵⁰³

Although Saudi Arabia's development policies are often cited as a major effort to improve its environmental reputation,⁵⁰⁴ it has become increasingly evident that the regime is essentially using these SDG-related initiatives to greenwash its image. Most of Saudi Arabia's reported practices, in fact, undermine the "Planet" SDGs. For example, construction of its megaprojects leads to growing consumption of freshwater, with severe detriments to the environment. The kingdom has some of the highest freshwater consumption rates in the world, following the United States and Canada,⁵⁰⁵ and accounts for 55% of the world's brine — a high-concentration solution of salt in water⁵⁰⁶ that is a byproduct of the immense desalination efforts the country has undertaken to meet national demand in the face of scarce natural water sources. Because brine typically finds its way back into the sea, the growing consumption of desalinated water will have detrimental effects on local aquatic ecosystems, especially with studies indicating that desalination will increase significantly by 2030.⁵⁰⁷

It is also apparent that Saudi Arabia has engaged in a greenwashing campaign to compensate for the massive amount of carbon dioxide it produces.⁵⁰⁸ Despite the fact that the country is using more renewable energy resources, MBS's view of renewables is that they should complement, not replace, oil and gas. Aramco, the world's most profitable state oil company, produced 10.2 million barrels per day (bpd) of crude oil per day in 2015, a figure that rose to nearly 12.8 million bpd in 2024 and was held below 13 million bpd only by a Ministry of Energy directive to maintain its maximum sustainable capacity at 12 million bpd.⁵⁰⁹ This pattern reveals a lack of genuine commitment to the "Planet" and

"People" SDGs, casting doubt on Saudi Arabia's pledge to uphold these Goals under its Vision 2030 framework.

Furthermore, Saudi Arabia engages in practices that violate the core principles of the "Peace" and "Partnership" SDGs. Independent watchdogs report widespread torture in Saudi detention facilities, including beatings, electrocution, waterboarding, and prolonged incommunicado detention.⁵¹⁰ Between March 2022 and June 2023, Saudi border guards reportedly killed hundreds of Ethiopian migrants, acts that may amount to crimes against humanity.⁵¹¹ In 2018 and 2019, the regime conducted mass arrests of women's rights advocates, many of whom were tortured,⁵¹² sometimes in the presence of high-level officials.⁵¹³ Saudi courts routinely use counterterrorism laws to prosecute peaceful critics, religious scholars, and activists, often in secret trials resulting in long sentences, enforced disappearances, and harsh prison conditions.⁵¹⁴

The state has also executed activists and independent journalists, including the June 14, 2025, execution of journalist Turki Al-Jasser, imprisoned since 2018 on terrorism and treason charges for social media posts criticizing the royal family.⁵¹⁵ Others have been imprisoned with lengthy sentences, including Salma al-Shehab, a PhD student sentenced in 2022 to 34 years (later reduced) for tweets supporting women's rights.⁵¹⁶

Instances of Manipulation

Saudi Arabia is actively exploiting the SDG framework to improve its tarnished human rights image as a part of a legitimization strategy.

Saudi officials repeatedly emphasize how Vision 2030 aligns with the SDGs

as part of an international messaging strategy improve the kingdom's image despite its widespread human rights abuses.⁵¹⁷ In September 2023, the minister of economy and planning publicly stated that Vision 2030 "aligns powerfully with the UN SDGs," citing domestic reforms and international aid spending to boost Saudi Arabia's credibility.⁵¹⁸ The kingdom has also hosted major SDG-focused events, promoting its image on the international level. At the July 2024 United Nations High-Level Political Forum, Saudi Arabia's Quality of Life Program promoted its Vision 2030 initiatives as aligned with the SDGs.⁵¹⁹ An even more striking example of manipulation is the May 2019 Vision 2030 workshop with the United Nations Development Program and United Nations Human Rights Office in Riyadh,⁵²⁰ which the regime used to showcase its formal commitment to aligning national development goals with international human rights standards.

Another example of Saudi Arabia's strategic use of the SDGs as a part of its legitimization strategy is its sponsorship of SDG-branded sporting events, such as the Global Goals World Cup in 2022 and Global Goals World Cup Finals in 2024, which promoted SDG awareness through women's football,⁵²¹ a clear image-laundering strategy.⁵²²

Brookings Institution, February 14, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/a-new-kingdom-of-saud/>.

⁵⁰⁵ Achref Chibani, "The Costs and Benefits of Water Desalination in the Gulf," *Arab Center*, April 12, 2023, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-costs-and-benefits-of-water-desalination-in-the-gulf/>.

⁵⁰⁶ Edward Jones, Manzoor Qadir, Michelle T.H. van Vliet, Vladimir Smakhtin, Seong-mu Kang, "The State of Desalination and Brine Production: A Global Outlook," *Science of The Total Environment* 657 (2019): 1343–1356.

⁵⁰⁷ Achref Chibani, "The Costs and Benefits of Water Desalination in the Gulf," *Arab Center*, April 12, 2023, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-costs-and-benefits-of-water-desalination-in-the-gulf/>.

⁵⁰⁸ David Ottaway, "Saudi Arabia's Green Initiative Aims to Exonerate Fossil Fuel Advocacy," *Wilson Center*, November 1, 2021, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/saudi-arabias-green-initiative-aims-exonerate-fossil-fuel-advocacy>.

⁵⁰⁹ Sibel Morrow, "Saudi Arabia Orders Aramco to Cut Oil Capacity by 1M Barrels per Day," *Anadolu Agency*, January 30, 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/saudi-arabia-orders-aramco-to-cut-oil-capacity-by-1m-barrels-per-day/3122935>.

⁵¹⁰ "Saudi Arabia: New Details of Alleged Torture Leaked," *Human Rights Watch*, July 11, 2021, 5:00 PM EDT, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/07/11/saudi-arabia-new-details-alleged-torture-leaked/>.

⁵¹¹ "They Fired on Us Like Rain": Saudi Arabian Mass Killings of Ethiopian Migrants at the Yemen-Saudi Border," *Human Rights Watch*, August 21, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/08/21/they-fired-us-rain/saudi-arabian-mass-killings-ethiopian-migrants-yemen-saudi>.

⁵¹² For 2018, see "Saudi Arabia: Reports of Torture and Sexual Harassment of Detained Activists," *Amnesty International*, November 20, 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2018/11/saudi-arabia-reports-of-torture-and-sexual-harassment-of-detained-activists/>; for 2019, see "Saudi Arabia: New Wave of Arrests and Travel Bans Latest Assault on Freedom of Expression," *Amnesty International*, April 5, 2019, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2019/04/saudi-arabia-new-wave-of-arrests-and-travel-bans-latest-assault-on-freedom-of-expression/>.

⁵¹³ "Top MbS Aide Saud al-Qahtani 'Personally Oversaw' Brutal Torture of Saudi Female Activists," *The New Arab*, December 6, 2018, <https://www.newarab.com/news/mba-aide-qahtani-personally-oversaw-torture-saudi-women>.

⁵¹⁴ "Saudi Arabia: New Counterterrorism Law Enables Abuse," *Human Rights Watch*, November 23, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/11/23/saudi-arabia-new-counterterrorism-law-enables-abuse/>.

⁵¹⁵ Gabe Levin, "Saudi Arabia Executes a Journalist After 7 Years Behind Bars. Activists Say It Was Over His Tweets," *AP News*, updated June 15, 2025, <https://www.apnews.com/article/saudi-arabia-execution-journalist-aljasser-8d8a088a1c4290a3bae080d5152aa227>.

execution-journalist-aljasser-8d8a088a1c4290a3bae080d5152aa227.

⁵¹⁶ Mark Brown, "Leeds Student Jailed in Saudi Arabia for 34 Years over Tweets Is Released," *The Guardian*, February 10, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/feb/10/salma-al-shehab-saudi-woman-jailed-for-34-years-over-tweets-released>.

⁵¹⁷ "Saudi Minister Says Vision 2030 Aligns with UN SDGs," *Arab News*, September 20, 2023, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2377361/business-economy>.

⁵¹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵¹⁹ "Saudi Vision 2030 Ministerial Statement on Alignment with UN SDGs," *Saudi Press Agency*, July 10, 2024, <https://spa.gov.sa/en/N2136497>.

⁵²⁰ "Human Rights as Part of Saudi Vision 2030 and the SDGs," *UNDP Saudi Arabia*, May 8, 2019, <https://www.undp.org/saudi-arabia/news/human-rights-part-saudi-vision-2030-and-sdgs>.

⁵²¹ "GGWCUP Saudi Arabia 2022," *GGWCUP*, <https://ggwcup.com/saudi-arabia-2022>.

⁵²² "FIFA's Saudi Arabia World Cup Host Pick Sparks 'Sportswashing' Accusations by Rights Groups," *France 24*, December 11, 2024, <https://www.france24.com/en/sport/20241211-fifa-s-saudi-arabia-world-cup-host-pick-sparks-sportswashing-accusations-by-rights-groups>.

⁵⁰¹ Nirmal Narayanan, "Job Creation in Saudi Arabia to Continue Beyond 2030," *Arab News*, July 22, 2023, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2342351/business-economy>.

⁵⁰² "Total Number of Non-National Employed Workers in the Private Sector in Saudi Arabia from 2015 to 2021," *Statista*, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1325038/saudi-arabia-total-number-of-non-national-employed-workers-in-the-private-sector/>.

⁵⁰³ "Saudi Arabia: Events of 2022," *World Report 2023, Human Rights Watch*, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/saudi-arabia>.

⁵⁰⁴ Adel Abdel Ghafar, "A New Kingdom of Saud?"

Venezuela

Venezuela has been ruled by an authoritarian regime controlled until January 2026 by dictator Nicolás Maduro, when U.S. forces captured him and brought him to New York to face federal drug-trafficking charges. Power passed to his vice president, Delcy Rodríguez, as acting president, but most of the ruling structure remained intact, leaving the same regime in place under new leadership. The regime controls the country's economy and media, suppresses dissent through state security forces, and undermines democratic institutions, leading to political and economic crises marked by hyperinflation, widespread poverty, and mass emigration.



Marcelo Garcia/Vicepresidencia de Venezuela via Wikimedia Commons



Summary

According to the 2026 United Nations Sustainable Development Report, Venezuela ranks 107th out of the 169 evaluated countries.⁵²³ The performance results from the regime's lack of genuine commitment to the SDGs.

Despite Venezuela's formal endorsement of the SDGs in its national strategy, the regime's approach is defined by strategic co-optation, systematic repression, and pervasive corruption that altogether undermine the Agenda 2030.

Venezuela's legal and policy efforts have largely sabotaged the SDG framework. The regime has systematically blocked initiatives approved by the opposition-controlled National Assembly, such as reforms to environmental laws or electricity regulations. Simultaneously, the state has adopted negative policies that prioritize resource exploitation while bypassing environmental safeguards, Indigenous rights, and community consultation.

State-linked corruption has gutted important institutions, and billions siphoned from infrastructure projects have left public services in ruin. The result is a nation where sustainable development exists only as rhetoric.

Meanwhile, the government has passed laws criminalizing humanitarian aid and dissent, directly undermining the proper implementation of the SDGs even as Venezuela actively manipulates the SDG framework for international legitimation and sanctions relief. At the United Nations and other global forums, the regime has invoked SDG language to deflect from repression and economic collapse, blaming "unilateral coercive measures" for its failures.

The regime has co-opted development rhetoric and resources to extract rents while obstructing transparency and undermining public welfare; none of the substantial United Nations–affiliated funds for health and well-being that Venezuela received were spent properly. Ultimately, Venezuela's SDG engagement is a façade, cloaking a regime that has demolished democratic institutions, dismantled civil society, and converted development policy into a vehicle for regime survival and elite enrichment.

General Framework

Venezuela did mention incorporating the SDGs in its former Plan de la Patria 2019–2025,⁵²⁴ incorporating some SDG-linked targets and indicators related to the "People," "Planet," and "Prosperity" pillars. The newer Plan de la Patria 2025–2031 explicitly references the 2030 Agenda and aligns national priorities with the SDGs focused on "People," "Planet," and "Prosperity," while omitting the "Peace" and "Partnerships" pillars.⁵²⁵

The 2021 instructions about implementing the previous Plan de la Patria state only that actions taken to

⁵²³ "Venezuela, RB: Profile," *Sustainable Development Report 2026*, accessed June 24, 2026, <https://dashboards.sdgindex.org/profiles/venezuela-rb>.

⁵²⁴ República Bolivariana de Venezuela, "Proyecto Nacional Simón Bolívar, Tercer Plan Socialista de Desarrollo Económico y Social de la Nación 2019–2025," *Gaceta Oficial*, No. 6.446 Extraordinario, Caracas, lunes 8 de abril de 2019, 66, https://observatorioplanificacion.cepal.org/sites/default/files/plan/files/Venezuela_Plan%20de%20la%20Patria%202019-2025%20%2820.

⁵²⁵ *Ley Orgánica del Plan de la Patria de las 7 Grandes Transformaciones 2025–2031*, Asamblea Nacional, Año CLII, Mes VIII, Extraordinario No. 6 907 (Caracas), May 24, 2025, <https://www.desarrollominero.gob.ve/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Ley-Organica-7-Transformaciones.pdf>.

fulfill the plan should be in line with the SDGs, without any further elaboration beyond a graphic of the SDGs.⁵²⁶ The Interinstitutional Coordination Group and the Council of Vice Presidents for the Implementation and Monitoring of the 2030 Agenda oversee SDG implementation,⁵²⁷ but no specific strategies are outlined to ensure adherence to the Goals.

No specific budget has been allocated toward the SDGs, and the lack of transparency in budget management further complicates the identification of funds allocated for SDG-related areas.⁵²⁸ Venezuela's only VNR was published in 2015.⁵²⁹

Specific Policy Efforts

Few policies exist to demonstrate Venezuela's commitment to the SDGs. However, it is still possible to identify at least two areas of policy development under the "Planet" and "Prosperity" pillars.

Regarding the Planet SDGs, during the period when the opposition controlled the National Assembly, Venezuela approved several laws and policies aimed at advancing environmental protection. However, the regime systematically blocked their implementation. In 2015, for example, the opposition-led National Assembly approved a reform to the 2006 Organic Environmental Law, adding new articles that recognized climate and biodiversity protection and introduced strict criminal liability for environmental crimes.⁵³⁰ However, then-President Maduro refused to enact the reform, and on January 6, 2017, the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court declared it unconstitutional.⁵³¹ As a result, none of its provisions ever took effect.

Similarly, the Assembly approved a 2018 law aimed at protecting critical freshwater reserves in southern

Venezuela, but the law was never officially enacted, rendering it legally void and practically nonexistent.⁵³²

Meanwhile, Venezuela has adopted laws and policies that actively undermine the "Planet" SDGs. As one example, a 2016 decree created the Orinoco Mining Arc to promote large-scale extraction of rare minerals, offering incentives such as tax breaks and infrastructure support.⁵³³ The decree included few regulatory safeguards, and no credible environmental impact assessments were conducted, nor were Indigenous communities consulted.

Additionally, the government has enacted legislation, such as the Anti-Blockade Law (2020) and the Special Economic Zones Law (2022), that encourages investment in mining, oil, and agribusiness with minimal environmental or social oversight.⁵³⁴ These measures prioritize extractive industries while weakening environmental protections.

Regarding the "Prosperity" SDGs, Venezuela has introduced a few laws and policies intended to improve infrastructure and advance the relevant Goals. However, most of these initiatives have seen limited political backing from the regime. In 2016, for instance, the opposition-controlled National Assembly approved a new electricity law designed to improve service quality, reliability, and access for low-income communities,⁵³⁵ but the law was never formally enacted or published.⁵³⁶ As a result, the electricity sector has continued to operate under outdated regulations, with no significant legislative updates since Venezuela's 2000 Electricity Service Law.⁵³⁷ Other legislation, such as the Anti-Blockade Law (2020) and the Special Economic Zones Law (2022), also offers significant economic incentives in the mining sector. However, as detailed above, these policies often come at a

high environmental cost, undermining the "Planet" SDGs.

Regarding the "People" SDGs, with the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, Venezuela made a commitment to promoting education⁵³⁸ and discussed plans to increase educational access by building electronic infrastructure,⁵³⁹ but did not adopt a coherent legislative framework, and the implementation of the existing commitments remains weak. The country also took some steps to address gender-based violence by adding new categories of offenses and creating institutional support structures such as a national ombudsperson,⁵⁴⁰ but enforcement of such policies is weak.

At the same time, Venezuela has enacted several laws and policies that undermine the achievement of the SDGs, particularly those related to "Peace" and "Partnerships." Specifically, the regime has adopted laws criminalizing humanitarian and human rights work,⁵⁴¹ potentially hindering SDG-related initiatives and violating the right to freedom of association. Moreover, the regime has adopted legislative measures suppressing freedom of expression and political dissent,⁵⁴² potentially stifling public discourse on SDG-related issues.

⁵²⁶ "Lineamientos del Plan de la Patria 2021-2025," *Oficina Nacional de Presupuesto (ONAPRE)*, 10, <https://onapre.gob.ve/index.php/publicaciones/descargas/viewcategory/281-lineamientos-2020-2025>.

⁵²⁷ "No Hay Institucionalidad de Implementación de los ODS, el Encargado de Impulsar el Desarrollo Nacional es el Consejo de Vicepresidentes, infographic," *Cepei*, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://cepei.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/INFOGRAFIA-VENEZUELA-MANDATO.pdf>.

⁵²⁸ *Análisis de la Ley de Presupuesto Nacional 2024, Transparencia Venezuela*, June 2024, https://transparenciave.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Nuestro-Presupuesto-2024_TV.pdf.⁵³⁴ *Análisis de la Ley de Presupuesto Nacional 2024, Transparencia Venezuela*, June 2024, https://transparenciave.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Nuestro-Presupuesto-2024_TV.pdf.



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⁵²⁹ "Voluntary National Reviews (VNR)," *2030 Agenda in Latin America and the Caribbean*, Regional Knowledge Management Platform, <https://agenda2030lac.org/en/voluntary-national-reviews-vnr>.

⁵³⁰ "TSJ Declares Unconstitutional Reform of the Organic Law on the Environment" ("TSJ declara inconstitucional reforma de la Ley Orgánica de Ambiente"), *Efecto Cocuyo*, January 6, 2017, in Spanish, <https://efectococuyo.com/politica/tsj-declara-inconstitucional-reforma-de-la-ley-organica-de-ambiente/>.

⁵³¹ *Ibid.*

⁵³² "El Arco Minero Arrasa con la Amazonia Venezolana," *Correo del Caroni*, January 14, 2025, <https://correodelcaroni.com/sociedad/ambiente/el-arco-minero-arrasa-con-la-amazonia-venezolana/>.

⁵³³ *Gaceta Oficial de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela*, Año CXLIII, Mes V, No. 40 855 (Caracas), February 24, 2016, <https://engaceta.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/40855.pdf>.

⁵³⁴ Ramón Cardozo Álvarez, "La lucha contra el cambio climático en Venezuela," *Deutsche Welle*, December 27, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/es/la-lucha-contr-el-cambio-clim%C3%A1tico-en-venezuela/a-64201208>.

⁵³⁵ *Ley Orgánica del Sector Eléctrico*, Transparencia Venezuela, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://transparenciave.org/project/ley-organica-del-sector-electrico/>.

⁵³⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵³⁷ "Inversiones privadas para mejorar el sistema eléctrico requieren reforma de la Ley Orgánica del Servicio Eléctrico," *Banca & Negocios*, December 3, 2024, 3:10 p.m., <https://www.bancaynegocios.com/inversiones-privadas-para-mejorar-el-sistema-electrico-requieren-reforma-de-la-ley-organica-del-servicio-electrico/>.

⁵³⁸ UNESCO, "Venezuela National Statement of Commitment," *SDG 4 Knowledge Hub*, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://www.unesco.org/sdg4education2030/en/knowledge-hub/venezuela-national-statement-commitment>;

República Bolivariana de Venezuela, "Texto de Discurso en el marco de la Cumbre sobre la Transformación de la Educación," New York, September 19, 2022, https://media.unesco.org/sites/default/files/webform/ed3002/VENEZUELA_national_statement_commitment_0.pdf.⁵⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, at 2.

⁵³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴⁰ *Ley Orgánica sobre el Derecho de las Mujeres a una Vida Libre de Violencia*, as published in the UNESCO Siteal database, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://siteal.iiep.unesco.org/bdnp/1121/ley-organica-derecho-mujeres-vida-libre-violencia/>.

⁵⁴¹ "Venezuela Legislators Approve Law to Regulate NGOs," *Reuters*, August 15, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/venezuela-legislators-approve-law-regulate-ngos-2024-08-15/>.

⁵⁴² "Venezuela's New 'Anti-Hate' Law Seeks to Silence Media," *Committee to Protect Journalists*, November 9, 2017, <https://cpj.org/2017/11/venezuelas-new-anti-hate-law-seeks-to-silence-medi/>.

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Reported Practices

Despite making formal commitments to environmental protection, Venezuela failed to enforce them, continuing the pattern of neglect and governmental mismanagement and undermining the entire set of SDGs.

Under the “Planet” SDGs, Venezuela faces rampant environmental degradation due to oil spills, illegal mining, deforestation, poor waste management, and water shortages, with the government largely either causing or ignoring these issues to focus on economic improvement.⁵⁴³

Some measures that seemingly aim to achieve the “People” SDGs and alleviate poverty have had the opposite effect, undermining the very spirit of the 2030 Agenda. Specifically, Venezuela has apparently weaponized poverty⁵⁴⁴ and food aid to maintain political control amid a deepening humanitarian crisis.⁵⁴⁵ Through its food distribution program, the government manipulates access to essential supplies, favoring loyalists while marginalizing opponents. Moreover, despite commitments about improving education, the Venezuelan

education system receives inadequate funding from the government, leading to limited access to technology for students, especially in poverty-stricken regions.⁵⁴⁶

Corruption under the regime has permeated nearly all state institutions, severely undermining the SDGs, particularly those related to the “Prosperity” pillar. High-profile scandals have plagued key government programs, most notably the Local Committees for Supply and Production (CLAP) food aid initiative and the state oil company *Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A. (PDVSA)*, from which more than \$42 billion has been siphoned through fraudulent contracts and money laundering.⁵⁴⁷ Procurement fraud is widespread, characterized by ghost companies, rigged bids, and inflated pricing across sectors.⁵⁴⁸ As a result, infrastructure has collapsed: More than \$316 billion has been sunk into stalled or abandoned projects — including roads, hospitals, housing, and power systems — directly degrading public services and quality of life and, ultimately, the SDGs.⁵⁴⁹ Large portions of the economy now operate through criminal or informal networks tied to the regime,

further undermining sustainable development.⁵⁵⁰

On top of that, the regime implements a variety of measures that openly contradict the “Peace” and “Partnership” SDGs. The Venezuelan government is actively engaging in efforts that facilitate human rights violations to suppress opposition, including sexual and gender-based violence, torture, and arbitrary detentions.⁵⁵¹ Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, the government has made no fundamental reforms in the judiciary, intelligence, or security sectors, allowing state actors to continue systematic abuses.⁵⁵² Even more critically, judicial independence has all but disappeared; independent officials such as former Prosecutor General Luisa Ortega Díaz have been dismissed, and the judiciary has been systematically filled with loyalists.⁵⁵³ At the same time, the electoral system has been manipulated through disqualifying opposition leaders and the dissolution or forced re-registration of parties, all of which have severely curtailed genuine political participation.⁵⁵⁴



Human rights organizations long expressed concerns that Venezuela's 2024 presidential election could lead to increased government repression, a pattern observed in past elections.⁵⁵⁵ These fears have been realized, as the post-election period saw a significant escalation in human rights violations. Following the disputed July 28 election, the government initiated a severe crackdown on dissent, detaining more than 2,000 protesters, including minors, with many facing charges such as terrorism. Reports have emerged of at least three protesters dying in custody, raising serious concerns about the regime's treatment of detainees.⁵⁵⁶

Instances of Manipulation

Venezuela invokes the SDGs as a part of its legitimization strategy in an attempt to negotiate for sanctions relief, and has sought to align itself with other countries with similar aims. Along with Cuba and Nicaragua, Venezuela was a signatory to the 2023 letter opposing sanctions on Russia, exemplifying how its stance on sanctions and development has influenced its international relations.⁵⁵⁷ In September 2023, when

the United Nations passed a resolution expressing its commitment to ending global poverty, Venezuela's representative protested the resolution because it did not mention "unilateral coercive measures." The representative said that unilateral coercive measures were a "deliberate attack" on development⁵⁵⁸ and called for the lifting of sanctions.

⁵⁴³ Maxwell Radwin, "Venezuela's Environmental Crisis Is Getting Worse: Here Are Seven Things to Know," *Mongabay*, June 13, 2023, <https://news.mongabay.com/2023/06/venezuelas-environmental-crisis-is-getting-worse-here-are-seven-things-to-know/>.

⁵⁴⁴ The National Survey on Living Conditions (ENCOVI 2021) reveals that 94.5% of Venezuelans live in poverty, with 76.6% in extreme poverty; see Naky Soto, "Encovi 2021: Venezuela Is the Poorest Country in Latin America," *Caracas Chronicles*, September 30, 2021, <https://www.caracaschronicles.com/2021/09/30/encovi-2021-venezuela-is-the-poorest-country-in-latin-america/>.

⁵⁴⁵ Moises Rendon and Jacob Mendales, "The Maduro Diet: Food v. Freedom in Venezuela," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, July 9, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/maduro-diet-food-v-freedom-venezuela>.

⁵⁴⁶ "Higher Education in Venezuela," *The Borgen Project*, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://borgenproject.org/higher-education-in-venezuela/>.

⁵⁴⁷ "EEUU: 'Los compinches de Maduro se han robado millones del programa de ayuda alimentaria CLAP,'" *Intobae*, May 29, 2019, <https://www.intobae.com/america/eeuu/2019/05/23/eeuu-los-compinches-de-maduro-se-han-robado-millones-del-programa-de-ayuda-alimentaria-clap/>.

⁵⁴⁸ "Un historial de casos de corrupción en Pdvsa," *Transparencia Venezuela*, <https://transparenciave.org/un-historial-de-casos-de-corrupcion-en-pdvsa/>.

⁵⁴⁹ "Obras Inconclusas, '246 Monumentos a la Desidia y la Corrupción,'" *Transparencia Venezuela*, <https://transparenciave.org/obras-inconclusas-246-monumentos-a-la-desidia-y-la-corrupcion/>.

⁵⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵¹ "Venezuela," Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, March 14, 2025, <https://www.globalr2p.org/countries/venezuela/>.

⁵⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵⁵³ "Destituida la fiscal general de Venezuela," *Deutsche Welle*, August 5, 2017, <https://www.dw.com/es/destituida-la-fiscal-general-de-venezuela/a-39980250>.

⁵⁵⁴ José Ignacio Hernández, "¿Qué decidió la ANC en relación con los partidos políticos?" *Prodavinci*, December 30, 2017, <https://prodavinci.com/que-decidio-la-anc-en-relacion-con-los-partidos-politicos/>.

⁵⁵⁵ "Venezuela," Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, March 14, 2025, <https://www.globalr2p.org/countries/venezuela/>.

⁵⁵⁶ "Venezuelan Rights Group Reports 3rd In-custody Death Among People Detained in Post-election Unrest," *AP News*, December 16, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/venezuela-election-repression-maduro-arrests-opposition-edmundo-be94d74b2858b7b2b9cbbd11e5052b85>.

⁵⁵⁷ *Supra* note 4, *Moscow Times*.

⁵⁵⁸ "General Assembly Endorses Political Declaration Reaffirming Shared Pledge to Lift Millions from Poverty, Fight Extreme Hunger, as Called for in 2030 Agenda," press release, United Nations, September 29, 2023, <https://press.un.org/en/2023/ga12541.doc.htm>.

Findings

This report examines how selected authoritarian states engage with SDG implementation from 2015 to 2025. It does not aim to provide an exhaustive account of all practices, policies, or actors. Instead, it offers a focused analysis of specific actions and strategies that certain authoritarian regimes adopt in the context of SDG implementation, assessing them against the Goals’ stated content and underlying purpose.

Each main section of the report examines critical concerns about the integrity of the SDG framework and the nature of authoritarian regimes’ engagement with it. The report explores whether sustainable development, as envisioned in the SDGs, is truly attainable under authoritarian rule, which restricts political freedoms and routinely denies human rights. It examines how such regimes conceptualize development and where sustainable development fits within their broader political and strategic agendas. The analysis further considers whether these regimes’ engagement with the SDGs reflects a meaningful commitment to global progress or functions primarily as a tool to enhance legitimacy, deflect international criticism, and reinforce authoritarian control.

Based on the analysis, the report presents 10 findings.

Finding 1: The SDGs are fundamentally incompatible with authoritarianism and require a shift toward democracy.

While the SDGs do not explicitly mention democracy and make only limited reference to human rights, more than 90% of their targets are linked to specific human rights obligations. Core democratic principles such as transparency, accountability,

and participation are embedded throughout the SDG framework. Thus, meaningful engagement with the SDGs requires structural improvements in political conditions as well as respect for human rights and the rule of law. This, in effect, necessitates a shift away from authoritarian governance toward more open, representative democratic systems.

Finding 2: The SDGs are vulnerable to manipulation due to their non-binding nature and lack of consistent accountability mechanisms.

The SDGs, adopted as a non-binding political declaration, rely on voluntary national implementation and self-reporting through mechanisms such as the VNRs. Although this approach promotes inclusivity and broad participation, it also creates significant vulnerabilities. Without legally enforceable obligations or standardized reporting requirements, states — particularly those with limited transparency or democratic oversight — can selectively report progress, obscure shortcomings, or present a misleading picture of compliance. This leaves the SDGs open to manipulation and weakens their ability to drive actual development outcomes.

Finding 3: Endorsement and localization of the SDGs by authoritarian regimes is selective and symbolic.

Most of the regimes this report considers have embedded the SDGs into national planning frameworks (such as Azerbaijan’s Vision 2030 and China’s Five-Year Plans), but localization is often narrow in scope (Russia integrates only a third of the targets, while Iran formally endorses

the SDGs yet rejects parts of the Goals) and is framed as a continuation, not a reform, of authoritarian agendas (North Korea reframes the SDGs as “our style” goals to support the regime). Few governments allocate dedicated SDG budgets, and VNRs serve more as instruments of image management than accountability, with participation levels ranging from frequent (Azerbaijan’s four reports) to minimal or absent (Iran, Nicaragua, and Venezuela). Through their flexible and selective endorsement of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, authoritarian regimes thus treat the SDGs less as externally imposed obligations and more as a versatile narrative resource.

Finding 4: Authoritarian regimes’ policies are inconsistent and selectively prioritize the social, climate-related, and economic SDGs.

The SDG policy architecture in authoritarian regimes is selectively designed and often self-contradictory. Since the 2030 Agenda, most new laws adopted by authoritarian regimes have focused on the “People,” “Planet,” and “Prosperity” pillars, leaving the “Peace” and “Partnerships” SDGs neglected or actively undermined in the policy framework (as with China’s passing the Yangtze River Protection Law but avoiding civic-space reforms). Even under the favored pillars, policies are often contradictory, with progressive laws offset by measures that nullify their impact (for instance, Azerbaijan’s 2021 Renewable Energy Law coexists with fossil-fuel subsidies). Many regimes also sign global agreements without enacting the domestic laws that implementation of those agreements requires (for example, Nicaragua ratified the Escazú Agreement but failed to pass implementing legislation).

Finding 5: Authoritarian regimes rarely enforce policies on the SDGs.

Even when authoritarian regimes adopt SDG-related laws and policies, enforcement is typically weak, inconsistent, or politically constrained. The responsible agencies may ignore the adopted regulatory requirements or targets (as in Azerbaijan, where the environmental ministry overlooks infractions by state-linked oil firms), lack the resources to act effectively (as in Russia, where inspectors are underfunded and overruled by oligarchs), or be politically silenced (as in Saudi Arabia, where labor offices cannot challenge the kafala system and whistleblowers risk deportation).

Finding 6: Authoritarian priorities override commitments to the SDGs.

In the analyzed regimes, interests in revenue extraction and political control consistently override the SDG agenda. Required governance reforms under the “Peace” and “Partnership” SDGs are ignored or even further undermined to tighten control (for example, Russia’s “foreign agent,” “fake news,” and treason laws target dissent and block cooperation on SDG-relevant issues). In resource- and rent-dependent states, the SDGs are neglected despite formal promises and commitments (for instance, Azerbaijan boosts gas exports while subsidizing hydrocarbons, and Saudi Arabia promotes tree planting even as Aramco hits record outputs and megaprojects deplete freshwater). Regime-sponsored corruption and clientelism capture SDG-channeled budgets (as in Nicaragua, where 96% of housing contracts go to regime-linked firms). These trends persist due to a lack of accountability; without free media, courts, or civil society, failures face no domestic cost in authoritarian regimes, and restrictive laws block external scrutiny.

Finding 7: Authoritarian regimes weaponize the SDGs to fuel repression.

Authoritarian regimes often weaponize the SDGs to facilitate repression, undermining the core principle of “leaving no one behind.” They use the SDG brand to normalize coercive tactics (for example, Azerbaijan labels its ethnic-cleansing campaign in Nagorno-Karabakh as an SDG-aligned “return to liberated territories,” while erasing Armenian heritage and masking forced displacement, and North Korea reframes the SDGs as “consolidation of the socialist system”). They also disguise state violence as development (as in China, which presents its forced-labor programs in the Uyghur Region and Tibet as poverty alleviation programs, hiding repression behind United Nations language).

Finding 8: Authoritarian regimes use the SDGs in their propaganda.

State-controlled media and official agencies in authoritarian regimes convert their limited engagement with the SDGs into carefully curated success stories that reinforce an image of successful governance and efforts toward sustainability (for example, Azerbaijan’s constant celebration of SDG-branded projects as proof of “stability and prosperity” and headlines from RIA Novosti claiming that Russia has “fully achieved six SDGs”), while controlling the publicized information (as with Belarus’ “Media Coordination Group for SDG Promotion,” which controls the official narrative about SDG engagement).

Finding 9: Authoritarian regimes use the SDGs to co-opt domestic and international actors.

In contexts lacking independent civil society and oversight, authoritarian regimes create state-controlled or

symbolic initiatives under the SDG label that mimic civic engagement but ultimately serve regime interests (for example, Belarus frames its “Youth Ambassadors of the SDG” program as grassroots when it is actually run by state institutions to promote loyalty, and Russia’s patriotic youth organizations, presented as civic education, are used to instill pro-government sentiment and support for militarism). Internationally, these regimes use SDG branding to draw foreign governments into alliances and dependencies (as with China’s Global Development Initiative, which wraps geostrategic investments in SDG language to deepen economic and military influence in Cambodia and elsewhere). In doing so, regimes co-opt both domestic populations and foreign states under the guise of promoting sustainable development, using the SDGs to expand their influence.

Finding 10: Authoritarian regimes legitimize their rule using the SDGs.

Through SDG platforms and rhetoric, authoritarian regimes craft an image of modernity, responsibility, and progress (for instance, Azerbaijan’s self-portrayal as a development leader through its VNRs and SDG Index rankings, despite limited real implementation, and China’s use of high-profile United Nations platforms and speeches showcasing the regime’s “development leadership”). Many also frame international sanctions as obstacles to SDG progress, demanding relief while shifting blame away from domestic failings (as in Belarus, Nicaragua, North Korea, Russia, and Venezuela, which have argued that sanctions hinder SDG achievement; and in Iran, which links climate failures to sanctions, ignoring regime-caused mismanagement). In doing so, authoritarian regimes recast themselves as development-driven and globally engaged, seeking to justify their control and delegitimize international sanctions.

Recommendations

This report has documented that although authoritarian regimes formally endorse the SDGs, their actual engagement is largely superficial, instrumental, and often manipulative. The SDG framework's reliance on voluntary compliance, lack of accountability, and absence of explicit human rights and democratic requirements enables autocrats to selectively adopt and reframe the Goals to serve their regimes' interests. Ultimately, the report maintains that effective implementation of the SDGs is fundamentally incompatible with authoritarian governance.

Based on this conclusion, and to both address the observed malpractices under the current 2030 Agenda framework and prevent similar abuses in future iterations of the Goals beyond 2030, this report puts forward five recommendations addressed to civil society, public officials, and civil servants of democratic states and international organizations.

Recommendation 1: Update the SDG measurement frameworks to account for the fundamental importance of human rights and democracy.

The current SDG Index and similar measurement frameworks focus on ranking countries based on aggregate indicator scores but fail to account for the level of democracy and respect for human rights — elements, as this report has explained, that are inseparable from genuine sustainable development and essential for each of the 17 SDGs. As a result, the current rankings risk misrepresenting progress by placing authoritarian regimes (which suppress fundamental rights) on par with democratic nations, thereby masking the urgent need for political and human rights reforms.

To address this challenge, SDG measurement must incorporate weightings that reflect not only technical progress, but also the quality of governance and human rights conditions. Countries that violate civil liberties and restrict democratic participation should be penalized in the scores, regardless of specific SDG achievements, as true sustainability cannot exist in an environment of systemic oppression.

Recommendation 2: Reassess engagement with authoritarian regimes in the context of the SDGs.

The 2030 Agenda emphasizes inclusive and cooperative approaches to sustainable development, but authoritarian regimes exploit the SDGs and use SDG-branded initiatives (including multilateral partnerships, high-level forums, public diplomacy efforts, and development cooperation) not to advance sustainable development, but for repression, state propaganda, co-optation, and international legitimization efforts. Despite this reality, democratic states continue to participate in such initiatives, often unintentionally supporting autocratic regimes and enabling oppression. To preserve the integrity, credibility, and rights-oriented ambition of the SDGs, democratic states should refrain from entering into partnerships with — or participating in SDG-branded initiatives led by or clearly affiliated with — regimes whose practices violate the core values of the 2030 Agenda.

Recommendation 3: Condemn and hold accountable regimes that manipulate and undermine the SDGs.

The 2030 Agenda and its 17 SDGs lack oversight and accountability mechanisms, allowing autocrats to disregard or manipulate them without formal consequences. Authoritarian regimes often not only neglect their SDG commitments, but also actively violate them through oppressive and kleptocratic practices that harm the environment, hinder human development, and weaken public governance. These actions undermine global progress toward sustainable development.

The international community should go beyond reassessing engagement with such regimes by applying sustained public and institutional pressure to promote accountability, within the bounds of international law. This includes:

- Issuing public and coordinated condemnations
- Active participation in forums such as the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development to highlight and document violations
- Strategic disinvestment, including withholding support or investment, from development programs that legitimize or materially support regimes misusing the SDG framework

Recommendation 4: Ensure that the post-2030 development framework explicitly recognizes that sustainable development is inseparable from the fulfillment of human rights and democratic governance.

The current SDGs largely omit explicit references to human rights and democratic governance in their titles, targets, and indicators. This depoliticized framing weakens global development efforts by downplaying civic freedoms, public participation, and accountability — factors essential for inclusive and just development. The resulting absence of clear language enables authoritarian regimes to manipulate the SDG agenda while undermining its transformative potential.

As the MDGs evolved into the more ambitious SDGs, the post-2030 development framework must represent the next step forward, explicitly embedding human rights and democratic governance into the core of sustainable development. This includes:

- Clearly articulating the interdependence of sustainable development, human rights, and democracy in the structure, titles, and targets of future goals

- Introducing one or more standalone goals and dedicated targets on human rights and democratic governance to position them at the core of the new framework
- Referencing key international human rights instruments, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to establish a universally recognized normative foundation for the goals' rights-oriented implementation
- Developing and integrating democracy and human rights indicators throughout all goals, including measures for equality, access to justice, civic participation, institutional accountability, anticorruption mechanisms, and open government practices

Recommendation 5: The post-2030 development framework should replace voluntary reporting with mandatory periodic submissions subject to independent review.

The 2030 Agenda and its 17 SDGs lack effective oversight and accountability mechanisms, enabling authoritarian regimes to ignore or manipulate SDGs without independent oversight or formal consequences. While international condemnation and pressure can partially mitigate these issues, the absence of oversight and accountability mechanisms fundamentally limits the SDGs' impact.

The post-2030 development framework should introduce a more rigorous and enforceable accountability system that includes:

- Replacing voluntary reporting with mandatory periodic submissions subject to independent evaluation
- Establishing independent review bodies to verify submitted data and objectively assess progress, ensuring objective oversight beyond self-reporting
- Tying genuine efforts (adoption of policies and practices aimed at SDG implementation) to concrete benefits such as development aid, trade preferences, or other multilateral support
- Setting clear participation benchmarks as prerequisites for international recognition of progress toward sustainable development, preventing regimes from selectively highlighting accidental or nonexistent progress and ensuring recognition only when genuine efforts are present and attributable

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Conclusion

With less than four years remaining until 2030 and despite global commitments, the SDGs are far from being met and the world is not on track to achieve the vision laid out in the 2030 Agenda. While this report does not excuse the failures of democratic states, many of which have also fallen short in meeting their obligations, it highlights a deeper and more troubling dynamic at the heart of this underperformance: the deliberate manipulation and erosion of the SDG framework by authoritarian regimes.

The SDGs were never meant to be a distant or abstract vision. They were intended as a practical, collective solution to the planet's most urgent crises, from climate change to inequality, and demanded unified, global action. Even more, the SDGs had the potential to be a powerful engine of political transformation through their emphasis on equality and inclusivity. But that potential has been largely limited from the start.

The SDG framework is built on weak, depoliticized language and relies heavily on voluntary self-reporting, with no binding accountability mechanisms. It assumes that governments will act in good faith and that independent civil society actors will provide oversight through open, democratic discourse. This design has proven to be a critical flaw.

As this report has demonstrated, in dictatorships where those in power operate with impunity and civil society is silenced, the SDGs become tools not of development, but of

control. Authoritarian regimes have used the flaws in the SDGs' design to hijack the narrative, claiming progress where none exists, rewriting SDGs to fit their own agendas, and using the framework to cloak repression, spread propaganda, co-opt domestic populations and foreign states into cooperation, and legitimize their control. This trend continues because there is no one to push back, no one to call out the lies.

This core finding of the report is sobering but unsurprising. As Václav Havel once warned, "A state that does not hesitate to lie to its own people will not hesitate to lie to other states."⁵⁵⁹ The manipulation of the SDGs by these regimes is precisely such a lie. It distorts the global development agenda beyond recognition by delaying, derailing, or even reversing progress toward the SDGs. In doing so, it robs not only future generations within those regimes, but also the entire world, of a sustainable and just future.

The international community must recognize this for what it is: a serious threat to global progress. Democratic states and civil society must no longer be complicit in the erosion of the SDGs through silence or wishful thinking. The idea of "leaving no one behind" should never be twisted into an excuse for allowing authoritarian regimes to undermine the entire framework.

Drawing from both theory and empirical evidence, this report has underscored a fundamental truth: Sustainable development is inseparable from democracy and

human rights. No future that denies freedom, justice, and equality can truly be called "sustainable." The SDGs demand unified, honest, and rights-based action that is fundamentally incompatible with tolerating deception and repression.

Accordingly, the SDGs are still a powerful tool, but only if they are implemented with integrity and accountability. This report has offered a set of recommendations aimed at reinvigorating the stalled implementation of the Goals. These suggestions are not intended as definitive solutions, but rather as a starting point for renewed and targeted action.

Specifically, the international community must end its tolerance of authoritarian regimes' misuse of the SDG framework to legitimize repression, silence dissent, and spread misinformation. Instead, democratic states, multilateral institutions, and civil society must explicitly recognize that sustainable development requires more than environmental goals or economic targets; it requires democracy, human rights, and justice. These values must be demanded and upheld in every step taken toward the achievement of the SDGs.

Without these actions, there can be no sustainable future. That truth must guide every action from now to 2030 — and beyond.

⁵⁵⁹ Václav Havel, "Anatomy of a Reticence," trans. Erazim Kohák, in *Open Letters: Selected Writings, 1965–1990*, ed. Paul Wilson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 315.

Annex I – Level of SDG Commitment by Authoritarian Regime

The table below is illustrative; it does not aim to summarize all of the qualitative analyses presented in the report. Instead, it summarizes the commitment of authoritarian regimes to implementing the SDGs as categorized in the report:

1. **General Framework** (committed, selectively committed, not committed): Existence of national plans or strategies localizing the SDGs.
2. **Specific SDG Pillars** (committed, selectively committed, not committed): Level of actual policy implementation and actions taken for individual SDG pillars.

3. **Overall Conclusion** (committed, selectively committed, not committed): Overall assessment based on the completeness of frameworks and engagement across SDG pillars.

A regime is considered committed (C) if general framework or specific efforts are fully adopted and implemented; selectively committed (SC) if general framework or specific efforts are incomplete or inconsistently implemented; and not committed (NC) if general framework or specific efforts are absent or largely ignored.

COUNTRY	FRAMEWORK	SDG PILLARS					OVERALL
		PEOPLE	PLANET	PROSPERITY	PEACE	PARTNERSHIPS	
Azerbaijan	SC	SC	NC	NC	NC	NC	NC
Belarus	SC	SC	SC	NC	NC	NC	NC
China	C	SC	SC	SC	NC	NC	SC
Iran	SC	NC	NC	NC	NC	NC	NC
North Korea	SC	NC	NC	NC	NC	NC	NC
Nicaragua	SC	NC	NC	NC	NC	NC	NC
Russia	SC	NC	NC	SC	NC	NC	NC
Saudi Arabia	SC	SC	SC	SC	NC	NC	SC
Venezuela	SC	NC	NC	NC	NC	NC	NC

Annex II – Instances of SDG Manipulation by Authoritarian Regime

The table below is illustrative; it does not aim to summarize all of the qualitative analyses presented in the report. Instead, it summarizes instances of SDG manipulation by authoritarian regimes, as categorized in the report:

1. **Repression:** Use of the SDGs and related narratives to cloak harassment, at home or abroad, and extinguish dissent.
2. **Co-optation:** Use of the SDGs and related narratives to integrate domestic or international actors into cooperation with the regime.

3. **Propaganda:** Use of the SDGs and related narratives to craft a favorable image of the regime while blocking or discrediting independent sources that might contradict it.

4. **Legitimation:** Use of the SDGs and related narratives to manipulate relevant procedures and render the regime's rule lawful.

A manipulation strategy is deemed present (●) whenever the regime undertakes actions that meet that strategy's definition.

COUNTRY	SDG MANIPULATION			
	REPRESSION	CO-OPTATION	PROPAGANDA	LEGITIMATION
Azerbaijan	●		●	●
Belarus		●	●	●
China	●	●		●
Iran				●
North Korea	●			●
Nicaragua				●
Russia		●	●	●
Saudi Arabia				●
Venezuela				●

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