

## Redefining the Ethical perspective of and for achieving Sustainable Development Goals

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*Sustainable development is defined as ‘the development that meets the needs of the present generation, without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs’. Hardly five years away from the target year, the latest updates suggest that many of the SDGs cannot be achieved. Thus, it is important to understand the underlying causes for the slow progress of the SDGs and also set a path for the future course of action. This research paper looks into the ethical perspective of and for achieving the SDGs. The research paper refers to the ethical perspective through the core human values like human rights, equality, justice, along with development and sustainability as the foundations of SDGs.*

*The existing literature on SDGs highlight is the Triple ‘C’ crises, i.e., Covid-19, conflict and climate, for the slow and regressing pace of SDGs. The research paper highlights crony capitalism and corruption as the main drivers for the setback of SDGs. Finally, the paper suggests tangible measures to set the path to put the SDGs back on the track. The paper offers a comprehensive analysis and is the outcome of collective experiences across the world, especially in the developing world.*

**Keywords:** Sustainable Development, ethics, politics, poverty, corruption and crony capitalism

Sustainable development is defined as ‘the development that meets the needs of the present generation, without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs’. This concept provides an ideal framework for all forms of human progress, linking environmental protection, economic development, human health and well-being. From the 1987 report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (Brundtland Report), through Agenda 21, published at the Rio Summit, to the Millennium Development Goals

(MDGs: 2000 – 2015) to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs: 2016 – 2030) set by the UN, sustainable development has been on the forefront of policy making, across the world.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015, sets out 17 SDGs. These SDGs are comprehensive, interconnected objectives adopted by the UN for 2030, categorized by the ‘5 Ps’ framework: People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, and Partnership. (Rahm, L. et al 2025). These goals address global challenges including poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, and peace. Hardly five years away from the target year, the latest updates suggest that many of the SDGs cannot be achieved. Thus, it is important to understand the underlying causes for the slow progress of the SDGs and also set a path for the future course of action. This research paper looks into the ethical perspective of and for achieving the SDGs.

### **Objectives**

- To bring out the ethical perspective of SDGs.
- To invoke ethical considerations for achieving SDGs.
- To identify the challenges and address them.

### **Research Design**

The research design is qualitative, and employs, theoretical and conceptual analysis. The method used is explorative research method based on secondary data. It explores the theoretical framework of SDGs, to understand the ethical basis of these goals. Further, UN Reports on progress on SDGs, World Bank Reports on SDGs, UNDP reports have been studied to achieve the objectives of the research paper.

### **Review of Literature**

The theory of SDGs revolves around inter generational justice, intra generational equity and eco centric development, social justice, environmental stewardship, transparency and accountability. The paper refers to the ethical perspective through the core human values like human rights, equality, justice, along with development and sustainability as the foundations of SDGs.

The existing literature on SDGs highlight is the Triple ‘C’ crises, i.e., Covid-19, conflict and climate, for the slow and regressing pace of SDGs. However, there is not much research

on the political drawbacks existing in the countries causing regression in achieving SDGs. This paper tries to appeal ethical implications to the politics, not only at the national level, but also, at the international levels.

Thus, the research paper explores reasons beyond the existing literature and offers tangible solutions to achieve the SDGs. The paper offers a comprehensive analysis and is the outcome of collective experiences across the world, especially in the developing world.

### **Ethical Values imbedded in the SDGs**

Sustainable development and the stated 17 SDGs are embedded with several ethical values cherished by the humanity. These include human rights, human development, sustainability, equality and justice. Achieving these rights will make human rights a universal reality. SDGs aim at giving each and every individual a dignified and respectful life. They endure a human development approach, which gives importance to facts rather than figures; and does not rely on economic development alone. Humanity has progressed to a greater extent in terms of well being. However, not everyone is able to achieve the bare minimum level of development, which ensures a decent and dignified life. It includes food, shelter, clothing, education and health. Thus, MDGs and later SDGs have been framed to achieving these basic development criteria.

Sustainability has a deeper meaning that makes human rights not only universal but also perpetual. It ensures that the bare minimum rights of the future citizens of the world are not compromised in the process of achieving the same for the present generations. It includes protection of natural resources from unauthorised and unethical exploitation. The practice of sustainability is rooted in the transformation of the human beings, from nomadic hunter gatherer life to a settled farming life. It is then that the humans first learnt about coexisting with nature, without harming it. In the modern times, origins of the word sustainability can be traced to Hans Carl von Carlowitz, a German mining administrator. He coined the term *Nachhaltigkeit*, meaning sustainability. His book *Sylvicultura Oeconomica* deals with management of forestry in order to have a continuous supply of timber for the mining industry. Though the concept has a long history, it won international recognition only in 1987, through the Brundtland Report.

With the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, UN Member States pledged to ensure “no one will be left behind” and to “endeavour to reach the furthest behind first”. Five factors are proposed as key to understanding ‘who is being left behind and why’: discrimination; place of

residence; socio-economic status; governance; and vulnerability to shocks. Thus, equality forms the basis of SDGs. Without equality, it is impossible to sustain a peaceful human life on the earth. SDGs take into account each and every individual of the world, and seek to provide the equal rights and opportunities to sustain and develop.

Another important ethical value dealt under SDGs is justice. Justice is the most cherished goal of the humanity and human history had been a perpetual struggle for achieving justice. However, it is pertinent to note that life of the human race is impossible without the environment. Giving the environment its due importance is essential for sustaining human life on the earth. Thus, justice here encompasses a just life not only for the human beings, but also the plants and animals that live around, because, human existence is impossible without a just ecosystem composed of flora and fauna.

UN emphasis that sustainable development and climate action are linked – and both are vital to the present and future well-being of humanity and called for meeting the SDGs along with the targets for reducing emissions set in the Paris Climate Agreement of 2015. Overall, the sustainable development is a just balance between human development, economic development and the environment, not only in the present, but also in the future.

### **The progress of SDGs**

Sustainable development has been the most spoken phrase in the academic circles for the past quarter a century. However, the world did not see such equitably practical considerations across the world. The SDGs are reaching their deadline in 2030, which is hardly 5 years away and the world is seriously not on par with achieving these goals. According to the World Economic Forum, only 18% of the SDGs are on track, with nearly half progressing too slowly and close to a fifth even regressing. (World Economic Forum. 2025).

### **Triple C crises**

The main reason for the regression in achieving SDGs is attributed to COVID-19, followed by regional conflicts, wars and environmental disasters. These are together called as ‘Triple C crises’ (COVID-19, Conflict and Climate). The progression that unfolded, nearly approximating the marks of SDGs, faded away inadvertently under the dark cloud of job loss, lockdown, and closure of offices, institutions, shops, and markets, affecting millions especially so, in the context of poverty elimination and health upliftment of the marginalized societies.

(Mukhopadhyay, J. 2024). The world has witnessed new conflicts in the recent times: The Russia – Ukraine war, the conflicts in the Middle East and among the African scattered tribal communities are near to perpetual. Further, the climatic disasters like earth quakes, floods and droughts have left their impact on the advancement of SDGs.

### **Why the poor bear the brunt?**

Whether it is COVID, or conflicts or climatic disasters; they affect the poor and the marginalised sections, the most, across the world. The poorest have been further pushed back into deeper levels of poverty. The Middle East, North Africa, Afghanistan and Pakistan (MENAP) region and the Sub Saharan African (SSA) regions are the most affected regions that are facing extreme poverty, and have been marred by political and ethnic conflicts. The percentage of population living in extreme poverty has increased from 13.4 to 14.5 in MENAP region and slightly reduced from 46.2 to 43.3 in SSA region, during the period 2021 to 2026. (World Bank Group. 2026). Without a significant acceleration in efforts, 8.9 per cent of the global population will still be living in extreme poverty by 2030 under the revised international poverty line. (United Nations, 2025). The triple ‘C’ crises have affected the lower income groups within the nations and across the world thwarting the progress of SDGs.

#### ***1. Degrading politics***

Apart from the triple ‘C’s, two more ‘C’s operate in the present world: crony capitalism and corruption. These two factors have aggravated the damage caused by the triple ‘C’ crises. In any case of adversity, the capitalists, will never forgo their profits and resort to increasing the prices to recover the losses. According to Trading Economics, the global benchmark Brent crude oil jumped from roughly \$73 per barrel prior to the outbreak of the Iran conflict to peak at over \$114 per barrel. The capitalists all over the world have nexus with the political regimes and influence the policy decisions in their favour, which invariably go against the poor.

Under the cover of ‘Public Private Partnership’ (PPP) or Special Economic Zone or partial privatization, the crony capitalists manage to get excessively higher price for their output and services, profiting from exemption of taxes (at the cost of immature, inexperienced tax-payers), manipulated figures of capital investment, royalty, project longevity, uncertain costs etc (Jakhotia, 2019).

Capitalists borrow huge money from banks and often fail to repay in the due time. Recently, in March 2026, Minister of State for Finance, of India, Mr. Pankaj Chaudhary stated in the Parliament that banks have written off loans worth Rs 9.75 lakh crore over the last 11 financial years. (The Economic Times. 2026). Such writing off loans is practised in several African and South East European countries. This huge sum is definitely blocked and cannot be used for development activities. Further, any loss incurred by the government is again recovered from the people through taxes.

## ***2. Engulfing Economics***

The global south is further marred by intra-state and inter-state financial compulsions. Most of these countries are falling in the debt trap. Brahma Chellaney, Professor of Strategic Studies at the Centre for Policy Research writes: “Through its \$1 trillion ‘one belt, one road’ initiative, China is supporting infrastructure projects in strategically located developing countries, often by extending huge loans to their governments. The projects that China is supporting are often intended not to support the local economy, but to facilitate Chinese access to natural resources, or to open the market for low-cost and shoddy Chinese goods”. The UNCTAD reports a severe global debt crisis where 3.3 billion people—nearly half of humanity—live in 48 developing nations that spend more on debt interest payments than on essential public services like education and healthcare (UNCTAD).

Another, example comes from Sri Lanka. The country's Human Development Index (HDI) rose from 0.702 in the year 2000 to a peak of 0.782 in 2021. However, it lost access to concessional, low-interest loans from global institutions and received a setback due to Covid 19. From \$11.3 billion in 2005 to \$56.3 billion in 2020, Sri Lanka's foreign debt skyrocketed, accounting for 119 percent of its GDP by 2021 (Dubey, 2024), causes severe financial crisis in that island nation.

## ***3. Corruption***

François Valérian, Chair of Transparency International, notes, “Corruption is an evolving global threat that does far more than undermine development – it is a key cause of declining democracy, instability and human rights violations”. (Corruption Perceptions Index. 2024). According to the Global Financial Integrity (GFI) reports of 2026, South Sudan, Somalia, Venezuela, Yemen and Libya are the top five most corrupt countries in the world. These

countries are facing regression in achieving SDGs. GFI focuses on illicit financial flows, corruption, illicit trade and money laundering in order to address the harms inflicted by trade mis invoicing, transnational crime, tax evasion and kleptocracy. (Celik, M. 2025).

Welfare programmes are facing massive corruption, in the form of elite capture, document falsification, clientelism and fund embezzlement. Direct transfer of funds into the accounts of the beneficiaries is also not coming to the respite of the poor in the Global South. They are threatened with removal of their name from the beneficiary lists, if they don't offer bribe. Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in India, Social Relief of Distress (SRD) Grants in South Africa and the Local Committees for Supply and Production (CLAP) Programme in Venezuela are major examples of welfare schemes marred by corruption. However, it is often noticed that corruption is more structured and organised compared to the mechanisms involved in removing it. Several acts of corruption are two pronged, where both the parties benefit mutually, perpetuating corruption and harming the genuine beneficiaries of welfare schemes.

Further, the insufficient budget allocations and corruption add to the root of the problem. Guaranteeing basic social security floors in low and middle-income countries requires an additional \$1.4 trillion annually or 3.3 per cent of their aggregate GDP in 2024. (United Nations. SDGs). It is estimated that the developing countries are facing budget deficiency of up to \$4 trillion per year.

Thus, the most important cause, which is hindering the pace of SDGs comes from political environment. It is often seen that political benefits are given more consideration over development goals. Thus, several long term development goals are compromised for short term political gains. The politicians in the developing world are often lured by electoral gains and lack futuristic vision.

### **What is Politics?**

It is pertinent to understand the original meaning of politics. According to Aristotle, *"Politics is a noble activity in which men decide the rules they will live by and the goals they will collectively pursue."* This correlates with his definition of the State: *"State comes into existence originating in the bare needs of life and continues to exist for the sake of good life."* This meaning of politics is long forgotten thanks to what politics has become. If political

leaders had stick to this meaning of politics, we would have better governments and better lives.

David Easton called Politics as “*Authoritative allocation of values*”. Here values mean democracy, equality, liberty, justice and such other cherished goals of humanity. As long as these values are provided to the citizens by its government through politicians, there will be peace and prosperity. But since the politicians themselves have lost values at their personal level, higher political values like democracy, liberty, equality, justice and others, do not reach the people at all.

However, politics today are to be equated with all the actions – good and bad – of the political parties and leaders aimed at achieving or retaining power. Ethics are no longer valued in today’s politics and unethical means are used to achieve selfish and mean objectives.

### **Ethics and Value based Politics: Need of the Hour**

Mahatma Gandhi is often quoted to have said “*Politics without ethics is a sin.*” The erosion of these values has contributed to widespread corruption and weakened governance. Though SDGs cannot be achieved by 2030, steps should be taken to ensure that they are achieved at the earliest. Thus, two fold strategy is important to make politics a better of resolving problems of humanity.

- Firstly, measures must be taken for delinking development from degrading politics.
- Secondly, steps should be taken to invoke ethics into politics and restore the sanctity of politics as a noble activity.

### **Measures to be taken:**

#### ***1. Greater amounts of transparency in governance***

Greater transparency in policy making and policy execution is fundamental to control corruption. Further, people’s participation must be encouraged in policy making and policy implementation, especially at the grass-root level. Social auditing must be encouraged at all levels of government spending, especially, on the welfare programmes and public works. Villagers must be encouraged to learn the mechanism of social auditing. Further, all the public representatives must submit reports on spending of funds to the legislative bodies. Thus, social auditing will make public expenditure more transparent and efficient.

#### ***2. Safe, secure and speedy redressal of grievances and administration of justice***

Corruption can be controlled, if there is an easy and effective grievance redressal mechanism. Anonymity of the complainant must be protected to ensure that common people can bring to the notice of the higher officials about any discrepancies at any point of policy making and policy execution. Better framework for punishing corrupt officials is necessary. Justice delayed, is justice denied. Thus, time bound justice should be the order of the day. Goal 16 of the SDGs calls for “promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, providing access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.” Countries across the world are indeed maintaining online and offline mechanisms for tackling corruption. Kenya’s Ethics and Anti-Corruption portal is open to public for reporting corruption (even anonymously) and keep a track of the complaint. Further, all the reports are available online.

### ***3. Continuation of good policies, irrespective of governments***

It is usually observed that certain programmes are terminated, when governments change after elections. Sometimes, the nomenclature is changed, and sometimes, the programme is modified. The better option should be that the programmes related to achieving SDGs should be named without giving importance to political leaders. They should be continued, even after the governments change after elections. For example, the Pulse Polio programme launched in 1995, has continued in India, irrespective of changes in the governments, election after election. Though India has been declared polio free in 2014, the programme is still in progress. Such programmes have to be taken up for the sake of development, and not for political agenda. Sandra Naranjo Bautista writes on ‘Better Govs’ “A long-term view is an intangible asset for a country. It establishes the vision of the nation, regardless of the government in power. It summarizes the goal towards which the country is heading. State policies go beyond a government”.

### ***4. Replacing Freebie culture with Conditional Cash Transfer Programmes (CCTPs)***

Poverty alleviation has always been used by the politicians as a votes generating mechanism. Though it is absolutely necessary to provide certain basic amenities, free of cost, it must be target oriented. In the recent years, India witnessed political parties lofting more and more unconditional money transfer schemes. India stands under 0.7 on HDI score in 2025.

The Bosla Familia Programme (BFP) is a conditional cash transfer program, started in October 2003, in Brazil. The beneficiary family members of BFP must meet the program's health and education conditions like attendance to school, vaccination and health checkups. The success of this programme is seen through the reduction in under-five child mortality rate, improved nutrition levels and reduction on school dropouts. UN report reveals the country's cash-transfer scheme has played a key role in raising its Human Development Index score from 0.744 in 2012 to 0.805 in 2024, on a scale from 0 to 1 (Wong, J. et al).

Keluarga Harapan (PKH) is another such conditional cash transfer scheme introduced in 2007 in Indonesia, to achieve the MDGs and continues to make SDGs a reality. Between 2007 and 2025, Indonesia's HDI value changed from 0.649 to 0.728. Several more examples are the Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP) program of Ghana and the Cash Transfer for Orphans and Vulnerable Children (CT-OVC) of Kenya.

### **5. *Training in ethics and politics***

Each politician, from grass root level to national level must undergo a training session in ethics. The politicians must realise the need for ethics in politics. The training can take the help of religion, philosophy or facts to make the politicians accept ethics in politics as a means of achieving human excellence. They must also realise that being a politician is a greatest way of doing service to humanity and not an income generating means. Even common people should understand the necessity of adhering to ethics in day to day lives. Both politicians and the common people must be aware of the seriousness of the global issues and the need to achieve SDGs. Moral stories along with SDGs must be included in school curriculum and students must be trained to practice honesty and play their role in achieving SDGs.

### **6. *Good people must be encouraged to join politics***

Good people usually avoid politics, as they find the practices employed in politics unacceptable. Many such individuals, who want to do community service, take the route of NGOs. However, it reduces the scope of work and also the target groups. If the same people enter the political arena, they can make greater differences to the people at large. Thus, more and more good people must be encouraged to join politics and contribute towards achieving SDGs. Greek political philosopher, Plato, in *The Republic, Book I*, said, "The price good men pay for indifference to public affairs is to be ruled by evil men".

### ***7. People from NGOs and other social services should be engaged***

There are a number of people, forming NGOs and societies for social service. The governments should take their services into consideration for achieving SDGs. Recognition and funding such people and agencies with time bound targets will bring more progress, in the world. ‘Deep Jyoti Kalyan Sansthan’ (DJKS), ‘Pratichi Trust’ and ‘AMREF Health Africa’ are a few examples of NGOs operating in developing countries to improve the living conditions of the people.

### ***8. CSR and ESG***

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has been an important driver to integrate the private sector into social development. The private sector is making good profits all over the world and cannot remain aloof to the responsibilities towards the SDGs. Being stakeholders in the overall development of the respective countries and the globe in general; the private agencies are encouraged to contribute in terms of CSR. Further, such philanthropic activities are given certain tax exemptions.

ESG - ‘Environmental, Social and Governance’, is a novel mechanism to measure the impact on the society and the environment. Both the public and the private sectors are now expected to commit to the environmental standards, social responsibilities and democratic norms in the governance. Thus, CSR and ESG make organisations more accountable and responsible.

### ***9. International Political and Economic Actors***

There is an urgent need for the International political and economic actors to introspect if their policies are in consistence with SDGs. Developing countries are unable to repay the large amounts of debt. The external debt of developing economies reached \$11.7 trillion in 2024 draining vital public resources needed for development (UNCTAD. 2025). Further, the repayment of the debts has led to enormous burden of the environment. Matthew Soener, a professor of Sociology at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, says that IMF’s Structural loans conditions impose coercive market constraints, reforms that pressure borrowers to increase their exports, indirectly raising countries’ greenhouse gas emissions through greater agricultural or manufacturing activities (Forrest, S. 2024). SDGs are interconnected, and if fulfilling one objective is hindering another, the implementation must be

rectified. Greater responsibility lies on these international actors as, their policies and programmes effects great number of lives and usually, the impact is global.

## Conclusion

Human rights, sustainability, equality, development and justice are basic virtues of life. SDGs aim at achieving these very virtues for each and every individual, not only in the present, but also, in the future. Training of politicians in ethics and politics is important to make politics a medium of achieving the SDGs, rather than a hindrance. Finally, both national and international politics must be ethically corrected. SDGs may not be achieved by 2030, but a certain path shall be laid to ensure their achievement at the earliest.

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