

The Relationship Between Sustainable Development and Human Rights Protection: China's Practice of Advancing Both Simultaneously

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Abstract: *The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development provides a core framework and platform for global development, mainly characterized by the incorporation of human rights protection responsibilities and explicit acknowledgment of the shared role of development and human rights in safeguarding human dignity and well-being. Human rights responsibilities require states to prioritize human development within their development agenda, achieve human rights through development, and adhere to human rights principles and standards. Integrating human rights responsibilities into the development agenda not only makes development more comprehensive but also provides legal constraints and monitoring mechanisms for the implementation of development goals. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development redefines the relationship between development and human rights and is thus closely aligned with China's practice of advancing sustainable development and human rights protection simultaneously. Guided by the people-centered development philosophy and new development philosophy, China has accomplished the historic tasks of the fight against poverty and the building of a moderately prosperous society in all respects, while significantly enhancing human rights protection. These achievements have provided a unique country-specific experience of "promoting human rights through development" for the implementation of sustainable development goals.*

Keywords: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development ♦ human rights protection responsibilities ♦ promoting human rights through development

Preface

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (hereinafter referred to as the *Agenda*) serves as the United Nations system's overarching plan and blueprint for global development from 2015 to 2030, which establishes a holistic, authoritative, and systematic direction and goals for development. The high-level attention and firm commitments from political leaders worldwide, coupled with the formulation of country-specific plans for the implementation and evaluation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), have positioned the *Agenda* as the core framework and platform for global development.

The most notable change in the *Agenda* is the incorporation of human rights protection into the development goals. This transformation reflects both introspection

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on the shortcomings of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and a renewed understanding of the relationship between development and human rights. International organizations, including the United Nations, acknowledge that while human rights protection is not a panacea for all problems, it offers practical improvement strategies and implementation methodologies to advance sustainable development.¹

Historically, human rights and development were perceived as two distinct fields. However, incorporating human rights protection into the sustainable development process represents a precise interpretation of the essence of development, presenting new challenges for every nation. Despite the decade-long implementation of the *Agenda*, many countries continue to struggle with achieving their development goals, with issues such as underdevelopment, unbalanced progress, and environmental degradation remaining prevalent.² In response, H.E. Lachezara Stoeva, President of the United Nations Economic and Social Council, has fervently called for people-centered development as an urgent priority if the 17 SDGs are to be achieved by 2030.³

To better achieve the SDGs, China formulated a detailed and executable implementation plan in the same year the *Agenda* took effect.⁴ With the 2020 announcement that China had completed the historic tasks of eradicating absolute poverty and building a moderately prosperous society in all respects, many goals outlined in the *Agenda* were achieved a decade ahead of schedule⁵, garnering widespread acclaim from the international community. At the 44th session of the Human Rights Council, Olivier De Schutter, the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, noted, “Much of the progress reflected under the World Bank’s line is due not to any global trend but to exceptional developments in China.”⁶ It is undeniable that China’s rapid economic development and steady progress in human rights in recent years have laid down a solid foundation and provided valuable experiences for the successful implementation of the *Agenda*. These achievements are well worth summarizing, sharing, and building upon for further improvement.

Against this backdrop, this paper begins by examining the connotations of human rights protection responsibilities in the context of sustainable development. It then proceeds to discuss the value of human rights to development and make an in-depth analysis of the relationship between the two. Based on China’s practice, the paper

¹ See UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR): Claiming the Millennium Development Goals: A Human Rights Approach, 2008, page III, accessed January 3, 2025, http://www.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/WopiFrame.aspx?sourcedoc=/Documents/Publications/Claiming_MDGs_en.pdf&action=default&DefaultItemOpen=1.

² The United Nations’ preliminary assessment of approximately 140 specific targets under the SDGs reveals that only about 12% are on track to be achieved. More than half of the targets have shown progress but are either slightly or significantly off track, while around 30% have either stagnated or regressed below their 2015 baseline levels. Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals: Towards a Rescue Plan for People and Planet Report of the Secretary-General (special edition), A/78/80-E/2023/64, 2023, page 2.

³ <https://news.un.org/zh/story/2023/02/1114892>, accessed December 25, 2024.

⁴ “China’s National Plan on Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2016),” accessed December 2, 2024, http://infogate.fmprc.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/zt_674979/dnzt_674981/qtzt/2030kcxzfzyc_686343/zw/201610/P020210929391201738984.pdf.

⁵ the State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, “Moderate Prosperity in All Respects: Another Milestone Achieved in China’s Human Rights,” August 12, 2021, accessed December 2, 2024, <http://www.scio.gov.cn/ztk/dtzt/44689/46557/index.htm>.

⁶ The Parlous State of Poverty Eradication, Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, A/HRC/44/40, 2020, page 7.

explores the country's experiences in advancing sustainable development while ensuring human rights protection. The overarching objective is to promote the global implementation of the *Agenda*, achieving common progress in human rights and development and contributing to a world of shared prosperity.

I. The Responsibility of Human Rights Protection in Sustainable Development

The *Agenda*, built upon the framework of the MDGs, extends beyond its predecessor with not only broader and more ambitious development goals but also a major breakthrough: it formally announces development as the respect for human dignity and the purpose of development, positioning human rights protection as the goal, guiding principle, and methodology for sustainable development.⁷

The *Agenda*'s emphasis on the importance of human rights protection arises from unacceptable regrets and problems exposed by past development efforts. Evaluations by the United Nations and its affiliated agencies of MDG outcomes reveal: "Over half a million women still die each year from preventable or treatable complications in pregnancy or childbirth. Child mortality rates remain deeply troubling in Southern Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, and the number of people dying of HIV/AIDS worldwide stood at 2.1 million in 2007, with prevention measures failing to keep pace with the growth of the epidemic. The quantum, quality and predictability of aid remain problematic, as do distortions in international trade. Alarming, sub-Saharan Africa is at present not on track to achieve any of the Goals."⁸ These failures epitomize a profound imbalance in global development, underscoring the necessity to recalibrate development priorities and broaden their scope to encompass all facets of human development. This recalibration is critical to ensuring that marginalized groups — including the poorest communities, women, and other vulnerable populations — can equitably share development outcomes, thereby achieving harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature.

Therefore, the *Agenda* underscores three pivotal dimensions of development: economic growth, social progress, and environmental protection. Its 17 SDGs, encompassing 169 specific targets, are intrinsically linked to human rights protection. These SDGs address critical issues such as eradicating poverty and hunger; promoting health, well-being, equality in education, employment, and infrastructure development; reducing inequalities within and among countries; and fostering sister-city relations, strengthening environmental protection, improving partnerships, and building inclusive societies. The *Agenda* represents not only the international community's solution to the

⁷ The concept of "human rights-centered development" was initially proposed by non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) later refined this terminology into "human rights-based approach to development cooperation". See Human Rights Council of Australia, *The Rights Way to Development: Human Rights Approach to Development*, Sydney: Human Rights Council of Australia, 1995, <https://www.hrca.org.au/hrca-projects-and-resources/international/human-rights-approach-to-development/>; OHCHR, *Frequently Asked Questions on A Human Rights-based Approach to Development Cooperation*, http://www.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/WopiFrame.aspx?sourcedoc=/Documents/Publications/FAQen.pdf&action=default&DefaultItemOpen=1; Julia Hausermann, *A Human Rights Approach to Development* (London: Rights and Humanity, 1998), 32.

⁸ OHCHR, *Claiming the Millennium Development Goals: A Human Rights Approach*, 2008, page III.

unmet development goals of past decades but also a redefinition of development itself — one that is multifaceted and aims to promote human rights protection and realization. Specifically, the responsibilities of human rights protection under the *Agenda* cover the following dimensions:

A. Sustainable development aimed at respect for individuals and human rights protection

The *Agenda* places human development at the forefront of its mission, reaffirming this priority in its preamble, introduction, principles, and specific targets. It is stated in the preamble that the *Agenda* is a plan of action for people, planet, and prosperity. It seeks to realize the human rights of all, achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, and strengthen universal peace in larger freedom. The primary goal for human development is to ensure that all human beings can fulfill their potential in dignity and equality and in a healthy environment. In the introduction, the *Agenda* reiterates the critical importance of eradicating poverty and inequality, fostering peaceful, just, and inclusive societies, and safeguarding individual dignity worldwide. It underscores the need for sustainable, inclusive, and sustained economic growth that ensures shared prosperity and decent work for all, and that leaves no one behind. In its vision, the *Agenda* envisions a world free from hunger, fear, want, and violence, where human rights such as quality education and healthcare, safe drinking water, and sanitation are universally accessible. It aspires to establish a global order rooted in respect for human rights and human dignity, the rule of law, justice, equality, and non-discrimination.

The *Agenda* explicitly acknowledges the shared goals of human rights and development, elucidating their overlapping ideological and material foundations: human dignity and well-being. This alignment has inspired research by international organizations, research institutions, and scholars to clarify the relationship between development goals and human rights protection, guiding nations to integrate the latter into development strategies for sustainable progress. Notably, the Danish Institute for Human Rights has conducted meticulous studies aligning each SDG to specific human rights obligations, thereby facilitating their synergistic implementation.⁹ For instance, SDG 1 (No Poverty) is disaggregated into sub-targets such as raising living standards, ensuring equality, securing access to land and resources, enhancing resilience to shocks (e.g., social, natural, and economic disasters) for vulnerable groups, and formulating poverty reduction plans. Each sub-target corresponds to a matrix of human rights obligations, including:

- * The rights to self-determination and life under the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*;

- * The rights to self-determination, equality, education, social security, work, health, participation in cultural life, and the benefits of scientific progress under the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*.

Beyond these, states must also guarantee:

⁹ Danish Institute for Human Rights: Furthering the Right to Defend Rights Through the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, https://www.humanrights.dk/files/media/document/HumanRightsDefenders_Publication-English_2021.pdf.

* The right to equality under the *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination*;

* Children's rights to protection, adequate living standards, and state support for families under the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*;

* Women's rights to equal participation in economic and cultural life under the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*;

* The right to social protection for persons with disabilities under the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*;

* The right to national treatment in selected economic, social, and cultural interests for migrant workers and their families under the *International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families*.

The *Agenda* incorporates human rights protection responsibilities into development goals, underscoring the purpose and principle that development is aimed at advancing the realization of human rights. As the United Nations has recommended, any growth strategy must be part of a comprehensive set of policies and institutions consciously designed to convert resources into rights.¹⁰ This integrated framework applies to both the international and domestic spheres.

B. The role of sustainable development in the implementation of human rights principles and standards

The *Agenda* declares that the implementation of all development goals should be guided by the purposes and principles of the *United Nations Charter*, as well as legal instruments including the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, the *International Bill of Human Rights*, the *United Nations Millennium Declaration*, the *2005 World Summit Outcome*, and the *Declaration on the Right to Development*. In this regard, the United Nations document *Leverage Human Rights to Rescue the SDGs* specifically highlights the significance of human rights principles.¹¹ In the aforementioned documents, human rights standards are relatively well-defined. Regarding human rights principles, however, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and other institutions, as well as scholars, have provided the following interpretations.¹²

First, the human rights principles that development ought to follow should reflect the most fundamental attributes of human rights. That is, human rights are universal and inalienable; they are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. Civil and political rights are of equal importance to economic, social, and cultural rights. Therefore, equal attention, respect, and protection should be given to all these rights in the development process. Second, development should respect the principles of equality and non-discrimination. Incorporating this principle into the development process aims to ensure that every individual is not only granted equal opportunities for development but also equally entitled to the outcomes of social and economic prosperity brought about by

¹⁰ OHCHR, Frequently Asked Questions on A Human Rights-based Approach to Development Cooperation, page 10.

¹¹ Leverage human rights to rescue the SDGs, UN Human Rights key messages for the 2023 SDG Summit, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/sdgs/2023/SDG-Summit-2023-OHCHR-key-messages.pdf>.

¹² UNDP, The Human Rights Based Approach to Development Cooperation Towards a Common Understanding Among UN Agencies, 2003.

development. The realization of the principles of equality and non-discrimination in development is not a mere political commitment but should serve as a legal principle to constrain governmental behaviors. This implies that governments are not only responsible for identifying major systemic barriers that hinder people's access to opportunities and the improvement of their lives, but also obligated to provide legal remedies for those who suffer discrimination.¹³ Third, the principles of participation and empowerment. Participation implies genuine control over the development process. It is both a goal and means of development. From a human rights perspective, participation is the cornerstone for fostering people's critical awareness and decision-making capabilities. The right to participation means empowering individuals to engage in the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of development plans, and to express their expectations of the state and other duty-bearers, thereby enabling them to steer their development, as well as that of society and the nation. The principles of participation and empowerment are inseparable. The enjoyment and realization of various rights and capabilities serve as both prerequisites for and outcomes of participation, which can enhance the capacity to engage. Hence, empowerment is also a principle and objective of development. The principles of participation and empowerment exert a profound impact on development policies, as they alter the direction of development decision-making from a top-down approach to a bottom-up, integrated one.¹⁴ Last, the principle of accountability. Accountability is a pivotal link in realizing human rights and development. It can urge entities responsible for development to take proactive actions and be accountable for development policies and measures while being subject to supervision. Besides, it can promote the transparency, inclusiveness, and effectiveness of development policies by providing individuals with remedies for rights violations.

Objectively speaking, the human rights principles and standards outlined in the *Agenda* do not set new, independent development goals, nor do they offer concrete solutions for resource allocation and policy formulation. Instead, the *Agenda* provides a conceptual and regulatory framework to examine and assess whether development policies and measures are reasonable, transparent, beneficial to specific groups, as well as inclusive, equitable, and aligned with the value orientation of respecting human rights.

C. Sustainable development as an empowerment process

Sustainable development is a process that enhances the capabilities of duty-bearers, such as states, to fulfill their obligations and empowers individuals to claim their rights. It seeks to realize human rights by endowing both governments and individuals with the means to do so through development. This understanding of sustainable development further illustrates two relationships between development and human rights as follows.

¹³ R. Offenheiser and S. Holcombe, "Challenges and Opportunities in Implementing a Rights-based Approach to Development: An Oxfam America Perspective," *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, vol. 32, no. 2 (2003): 271.

¹⁴ Brigitte Hamm, "A Human Rights Approach to Development," *Human Rights Quarterly* 23 (2001): 1019-1020; M. Darrow and A. Tomas, "Power, Capture, and Conflict: A Call for Human Rights Accountability in Development Cooperation," *Human Rights Quarterly*, vol. 27, no. 2 (2005): 494-495.

First, it emphasizes development as the driving force and methodology for human rights protection and as a process of advancing human rights. Human rights are inextricably linked to development, which in turn provides the foundation for human rights protection. Therefore, development is an important part of a state's obligation to protect human rights. No one can deny the paramount importance of development, particularly economic growth, in realizing human rights. Only through development can a government enhance its capacity to protect human rights. As enhancing such rights requires investment in resources, development can spur economic growth and enable states to allocate revenues to protect the rights to education, health, and social security, thereby advancing the cause of human rights protection. Conversely, poverty at both the state and individual levels directly undermines the enjoyment and protection of human rights. For instance, MDG 2 aims to achieve universal primary education by 2015, yet practice revealed that unaffordable tuition fees disproportionately kept more girls out of school than boys, undermining the capacity of states to ensure gender equality in achieving this goal. Thus, as early as in the *Human Development Report 2003*, the UNDP pointed out that economic growth is a prerequisite for poverty reduction, increasing government revenue for investment in human development, and thus a *sine qua non* for realizing human rights.¹⁵ This understanding and recommendation — that human rights are realized through development — have been more explicitly validated in Asian countries. One economist has commented that “private sector-led growth abetted by Government has been the engine in Asia, lifting many of the poor with the benefits of steady employment.”¹⁶ Meanwhile, economic growth is vital for a rights-based approach to development.¹⁷ In recent years, the UN's evaluation reports on the progress of the Agenda have consistently reiterated the significance of economic recovery for achieving development goals and protecting human rights, urging states to increase financial investment in development goals and developed countries to provide economic assistance to developing ones.¹⁸

The goals of sustainable development are closely linked to the basis for realizing human rights, requiring substantial financial, human, technological, natural, and information resources in areas such as culture, education, healthcare, water and sanitation, employment, environment, land and housing, and infrastructure. Typically, states need robust capacity-building to achieve these development goals and establish the foundations and elements for protecting human rights through development. Therefore, to safeguard human rights, we cannot overlook the need for increased

¹⁵ UNDP, “Human Development Report 2003,” page 71-76, <http://www.undp.org/publications/human-development-report-2003>.

¹⁶ Stephen Smith, “The Millennium Development Goals and the struggle against poverty traps”, presentation at the meeting on “Eradicating poverty and hunger-Joining forces to make it happen” of the United Nations Economic and Social Council, April 2007, in Human Rights and the Millennium Development Goals in Practice: A review of country strategies and reporting, page 3, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Publications/HRAndMDGsInPractice.pdf>.

¹⁷ the report prepared by Professor S. R. Osmani of the Ulster University (UK) for the High-Level Seminar on the Right to Development, held in Geneva on February 9-10, 2004: “Study on Policies for Development in A Globalizing World: What Can The Human Rights Approach Contribute?” E/CN. 4/Sub. 2/2004/18, 2004.

¹⁸ The Report of the Secretary-General, “The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023: Special edition Towards a Rescue Plan for People and Planet,” <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2023/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2023.pdf>; Report of the Secretary-General, “Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals,” A/79/79-E/2024/54, 2024.

funding sources, let alone disregard the importance of development.

In summary, development plays a pivotal role in protecting human rights. It is not only an individual's right but also a collective right of a nation. It is also a top priority for states in protecting human rights and building capacity, particularly for developing countries with weak economic foundations. Only through development can states sustain and increase resource allocation for human rights protection and elevate their standards, making development itself a human rights obligation.

Second, it clarifies the relationship between the obligations and rights of states and individuals in the development process. For states, development constitutes an obligation and responsibility to realize human rights. Development empowers states with greater political and economic strengths to enhance people's quality of life, and improve management, governance, and service delivery, thereby creating a better living environment for the people and elevating the overall human rights status in a country. Capacity-building is a primary strategy for states in sustainable development and the purpose of formulating and implementing the MDGs and the *Agenda*. In this process, governments are tasked with the responsibility to promote overall development, including economic growth. Development serves as both a means and an objective for human rights protection.

For individuals, development is both a process of realizing human rights and a journey of capacity-building. First, development empowers individuals by enabling them to enjoy an adequate standard of living, sufficient food, housing, health, and other rights, thereby elevating their human rights status. It also allows individuals to participate in development by exercising their rights to work, education, vote, expression, and more, fostering better development outcomes. Empowering individuals through development provides them with stronger motivation, better conditions, more favorable results, and more sustainable prospects for development. Second, individuals possess the capacity to claim their rights in the development process. Development is no longer a charitable act by governments but a duty and responsibility for them. It is a process through which individuals realize human rights, including the right to development. As rights-holders, individuals are entitled to demand that states respect, protect, and fulfill their rights to development and other human rights.

In summary, the respect for human rights protection responsibilities in development fundamentally reflects an understanding of the political, economic, and social relations, acknowledging that human rights protection and economic development are two facets of the same interdependent and mutually reinforcing process.¹⁹

II. The Significance of Integrating Human Rights Protection into Sustainable Development

The integration of human rights protection responsibilities into the *Agenda* not

¹⁹ McKay and P. Vizard, "Rights and Economic Growth: Inevitable Conflict or 'common ground'?", Rights in Action conference paper (March 2005), page 48, https://sarpn.org/documents/d0002022/ODI_Human-Rights_Mar2006_Full.pdf#page=47.

only reflects the international community's introspection on the relationship between human rights and development but also deepens and materializes the process of mainstreaming human rights, as advocated by the United Nations. As the *Human Development Report 2000* states, "Human development and human rights are close enough in motivation and concern to be compatible and congruous, and they are different enough in strategy and design to supplement each other fruitfully."²⁰ Both human rights and development aim to promote well-being and freedom based on the inherent dignity and equality of all individuals. Human rights-centered development focuses on the realization of all fundamental elements, and development encompasses not only the satisfaction of physical needs or the prevention of diseases but also access to opportunities for development. The prerequisites for development largely overlap with the conditions for the realization of human rights. The integration of human rights into development not only empowers individuals to achieve greater freedom, equality, and overall development but also provides development with moral support, a normative framework, and a supervision mechanism, thereby facilitating the achievement of the SDGs.

A. People-centered development as an inevitable choice for sustainable development

Regarding human rights protection as both the goal and principle of development embodies the international community's profound empirical understanding of the laws governing development and serves as the value basis for sustainable development, which can foster all-round, free, and equitable development for nations, ethnic groups, and individuals alike.

First, only people-centered development can achieve sustainability and the integration of human rights protection with development is a historical inevitability. The evolution of the relationship between human rights and development, from mutual isolation to mutual integration, mirrors the intellectual evolution, concept renewal, and accumulation of practical experience over the years concerning the interactive dynamics between development and human rights at the national, ethnic, and individual levels.²¹ Decades ago, human rights and development were perceived as having independent values and conditions. Development emphasized economic growth, particularly the outcomes of economic development, prioritizing the value of efficiency. In contrast, human rights underscored individual dignity, the realization of rights, and equality among people. Development stressed the mobilization of all means to achieve greater economic value and growth, while human rights demanded the redistribution of resources and the provision of assistance to specific groups to achieve equality while ensuring freedom. Therefore, human rights were once regarded as an impediment to economic development. For a certain period of time, the values of development and human rights were seen as conflicting or belonging to entirely different fields. However, following the proclamation of the United Nations' First Development Decade, the relationship between human rights and development began to be re-examined. This

²⁰ UNDP, "Human Development Report 2000: Human rights and human development," page 19, http://hdr.undp.org/reports/view_reports.cfm?year=2000&country=0®ion=0&type=0&theme=0.

²¹ Philip Alston and Mary Robinson ed., *Human Rights and Development: Towards Mutual Reinforcement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

decade emphasized GDP growth, leading to governmental reforms in many countries, including the downsizing of government functions and the privatization of public services to achieve economic development with maximum efficiency. Nonetheless, this development model caused severe social problems in developing countries such as those in South America.²² For instance, individuals' rights to education, health, and social welfare were significantly compromised, leading to vast income disparities between the rich and the poor, severe social crises, and a paradoxical situation where linear economic growth was accompanied by a regression in the living standards of the general public.

In response, development practitioners began to recognize that the shared core of development and human rights should be the common goal of meeting human needs through a redefinition of the development concept,²³ giving rise to theories such as basic needs.²⁴

Moreover, the emergence of the right to development in the 1970s also facilitated the integration of development and human rights. Experts in the field of human rights began advocating for the right to development centered around equal opportunities for development and the responsibilities of developed countries, based on the analysis of the unjust impacts that the global economic order exerted on developing countries. They argued that poverty eradication, international cooperation, and financial assistance were not voluntary or matters of charity but legal commitments of developed nations. The establishment of the right to development implies that development is a human right, not merely an economic issue; without this human right, developing countries are deprived of equal opportunities for development. Development should be grounded in legitimate rights rather than political declarations.

Regrettably, however, the above reflections on the relationship between development and human rights did not last long, as concerns about human rights were soon eclipsed by the pursuit of economic prosperity. Influenced by neoliberal economic theories, the global economy achieved further growth, but the problems caused by such development were also strikingly pronounced. Among them, African countries made almost no economic progress in the 1980s, a decade regarded as the "lost decade" for Africa. Meanwhile, the right to development, lacking support from developed countries, was not effectively guaranteed or realized.

At the turn of the millennium, the future trajectory of human rights and development stood at a crossroads. Faced with development disparities among countries as well as poverty and inequality within nations, the theoretical consistency between human rights and development had never been more prominent. Diverse development and social issues threatening world peace prompted development experts to contemplate new development strategies and incorporate human rights into development. Simultaneously, the strong demand for the right to development and

²² Brady Tyson, "Economic Growth and Human Rights in Brazil: The First Years of Military Tutelage," *The American Journal of International Law* 67 (1973): 208-213.

²³ Dudley Seer, "The Meaning of Development," *Institute of Development Studies Communication Series* 44 (1969), <https://www.ids.ac.uk/publications/the-meaning-of-development-2/>.

²⁴ Frances Stewart, "Basic Needs Strategies, Human Rights, and the Right to Development," 11 *Human Rights Quarterly* 3 (1989): 347.

economic, social, and cultural rights also led human rights experts to rediscover the value of development for human rights. A consensus gradually emerged between the development and human rights communities, prompting the international community to recognize that the shared aspiration for human freedom and development is the foundation for integrating development and human rights.²⁵ In this regard, former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan pointed out in his 2005 reform report, *In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Security and Human Rights For All*, that the challenges of human rights, development, and security are so intricately intertwined that none can be effectively addressed in isolation.

The *United Nations Millennium Declaration* explicitly placed human rights commitments and development goals at the core of the development agenda. However, problems such as uneven development, resource shortages, wealth inequality, and the marginalization of specific groups that emerged during the implementation of development goals prompted the international community to further reform its development strategies and strengthen human rights protection responsibilities in the *Agenda*. In 2019, facing persistent human rights issues in sustainable development, the United Nations even set the core development goals for the period 2020 to 2030 as eliminating growing inequality, empowering women and girls, and addressing the climate emergency. These adjustments to development strategies collectively reflect the international community's concern for equitable development and its respect for and protection of human rights.

Looking back on the history of development, human rights protection responsibilities have provided sustainable development with more comprehensive goals, focusing on the development of all humanity and helping every country and individual truly enjoy the prosperity of development. The *Agenda's* reflection on and incorporation of human rights values have shifted the value orientation of development from free development to equitable and coordinated development, promoting the common progress of human rights development and modern economic and technological progress, and enhancing the security and harmony of human society.

B. The contribution of human rights protection to achieving comprehensive and sustainable development

Development is an upward-moving process characterized by the advancement and transformation of various elements. Human rights protection responsibilities are integral to sustainable development, as such responsibilities endow every country, ethnic group, and individual with equal opportunities and capabilities to participate. They aid in addressing issues such as development imbalances and mistakes in development strategies, fostering social equity, and enabling universal development.

First, human rights protection standards serve as a remedy for development imbalances and injustices, mitigating social conflicts during the development process

²⁵ Hans-Otto Sano, "Development and Human Rights: The Necessary, but Partial Integration of Human rights and Development," *Human Rights Quarterly* 22 (2000): 735 and 751; Luc Stevens, "Human rights and development: two sides of the same Coin," <http://www.Nationmultimedia.com/opinion/Human-Rights-and-development-two-sides-of-the-same-30195846.html>.

and facilitating sustainable development. In social development, unequal access to or distribution of resources often leads to unfair development outcomes. Under a free-market economic policy, a small number of powerful entities may monopolize resources, creating a significant wealth gap. This, in turn, triggers social problems, fundamentally hinders overall development, and may even lead to international or domestic conflicts.²⁶ Therefore, to realize comprehensive and sustainable development, it is imperative to incorporate human rights protection standards to assist countries in formulating better development strategies. On the one hand, the principle of equality embedded in human rights protection obligations requires governments to acknowledge the disadvantages faced by specific groups in the development process. By taking proactive measures and offering appropriate policy preferences, governments can narrow the capability and resource gaps among different groups. This prevents the social elite from monopolizing the development process, policies, and programs, as well as the marginalization of specific groups, ensuring that no one is left behind in the development journey. On the other hand, human rights protection obligations enable governments to formulate agendas and legal frameworks that promote equitable development and create an inclusive development environment that ensures the common development of all. All individuals are empowered with equal opportunities, capabilities, and rights, which enables them to actively participate in development, fully unleash their potential, and share the benefits of development. In essence, human rights protection responsibilities reinforce national policy implementation and legal guarantee for fairness and justice in development, which is of positive significance for the sustainable development of all countries and the global community.²⁷

Second, human rights protection responsibilities offer human rights-dimensional evaluation criteria for sustainable development, which is capable of rectifying the adverse effects and wrong directions brought about by development.²⁸ Development requires harmonizing the relationships between humans and nature, humans and technology, as well as humans and society. Development that upholds human rights standards as a bottom line ensures that it remains on the path of sustainable development, thereby maximizing its benefits for human development.

Although development is fundamentally beneficial to human rights protection, imbalanced development may infringe upon human rights and even lead to their regression. For instance, development can increase fiscal revenue, allowing countries to allocate more funds for school and hospital construction and enhance the service levels of the social welfare system. However, in certain cases, it can also degrade the natural environment and lower people's living standards. Environmental pollution and climate change are not only development challenges faced by all countries but have also evolved into global crises. Statistics show that despite a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions in developed countries, greenhouse gas concentrations reached a record high in 2022. Currently, carbon dioxide levels have soared to 150 percent of pre-

²⁶ World Bank, *World Development Report 2006: Equity and Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

²⁷ Simon Maxwell, "The Washington Consensus is dead! Long live the meta-narrative!," page 6, [https:// www.files.ethz.ch/isn/22683/wp243.pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/22683/wp243.pdf).

²⁸ UN, "Claiming the Millennium Development Goals: A human rights approach," page 7.

industrial levels. From 2021 to 2022, public funds for the production and consumption of oil, coal, and natural gas more than doubled, impeding the transition towards net-zero emissions and posing a continuous threat to environmental rights.²⁹ Environmental problems can infringe upon a wide range of rights such as the rights to food and water, with particularly adverse impacts on specific groups. While protecting environmental rights may increase production costs, it can foster harmonious coexistence between humans and nature and even establish a positive correlation between environmental protection and sustainable development. Moreover, an excessive pursuit of development achievements while neglecting uncoordinated and unbalanced development issues can also infringe upon the rights of specific groups. For example, urbanization can improve the quality and efficiency of economic development, but may also result in inadequate protection of the rights to health and education for rural migrant populations. Additionally, the development of information technology, biotechnology, and the internet, while driving economic growth, industrial upgrading, and better living experiences, also poses significant risks of infringement upon human rights such as the rights to privacy, personal information, and health. In the face of the impact of technological advancement on human rights, only by strengthening the obligation of human rights protection can the alienation of humans by technology be prevented.

The significance of human rights protection responsibilities for sustainable development lies in two aspects. First, respecting, protecting, and realizing human dignity, freedom, equality, and specific human rights obligations provide an ethical, moral, and legal foundation for development, ensuring that all aspects for development, including economic and technological progress, are conducive to the overall, healthy, and sustainable development of humanity. Notably, human rights protection responsibilities can help set up a “human rights safety net” for the formulation of development policies and measures. For example, the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* imposes an obligation of “non-regression” on States Parties. This requires countries to fully assess the relevant impacts from a human rights perspective in their development policies and supplement them with positive intervention measures to safeguard the realization of human rights. Otherwise, they must provide adequate explanations for actions that lead to a decline in human rights standards.³⁰ Second, the existence of human rights protection responsibilities can also limit and counterbalance the side effects of development by strengthening individuals’ claims and remedies for their rights, helping individuals resist the negative impacts of development, and using rights to safeguard their equitable development.

Third, human rights protection responsibilities can assist countries in determining priorities in sustainable development and ensuring fair distribution of development resources. People-centered development goals can exert a profound, positive impact on the formulation of development policies, plans, and programs by countries, as well as the promotion of social equity.

²⁹ Report of the Secretary-General, “Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals,” A/79/79-E/ 2024/54, 2024.

³⁰ Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General comment No. 15, “On the Right to Water,” E/C. 12/2002/11, paras. 23-24.

Human rights protection responsibilities require countries, when faced with numerous development plans and goals, to prioritize development projects related to human rights protection, especially focusing on the core human rights obligations stipulated in international human rights law and the human rights issues that require priority protection. Sufficient policy support and resource investment should be provided to ensure the realization of relevant rights in the development process, thereby addressing the most fundamental and urgent human rights demands of the people. To better urge countries to formulate and implement development plans, the United Nations and other organizations have released a series of guidance documents, continuously urging countries to implement the human rights goals in the *United Nations Millennium Declaration* and the *Agenda*, as well as the human rights priorities identified by the human rights treaty bodies ratified by each country. These documents emphasize the need to prioritize the resolution of key human rights issues through development programs. For instance, priority should be given to the poorest people and discriminated groups. Even if not all goals can be achieved at once, efforts should be made to incorporate the development goals of these groups into the initial planning. Meanwhile, the analysis of the elements required for human development and the assessment methods for various human rights also help determine the order of priority for different rights, assisting countries in identifying which rights are the most important for specific groups at a particular time or the sequence in which the rights of specific groups should be addressed. These documents can encourage countries to align their development policies and measures with the core and priority issues of human rights protection, making development and human rights mutually reinforcing.

In summary, human rights protection responsibilities add value to development. By emphasizing respect for humans, safeguarding equal development opportunities, advocating the values of common participation in development and shared prosperity, and providing relevant human rights standards to regulate national development plans and measures, such responsibilities significant contributions to sustainable development.

C. The human rights obligation system enhances the binding force of the SDGs

Human rights protection responsibilities in sustainable development not only chart the direction and set the goals for development but also provide a human rights standard framework, reinforce the legally binding force of development obligations, and offer a supervision system and indicators.

1. The obligation systems under international human rights law and domestic law provide a legally binding force and an institutional framework for countries to implement the SDGs.³¹ First, the human rights protection obligations strengthen the legally binding force for achieving SDGs. The *Agenda* is a global development blueprint with no legally binding force for various countries. While implementing the SDGs is a shared responsibility of all nations, it is essentially a political commitment. Without robust supervision mechanisms, development goals are prone to inadequate implementation. Assessments of the *Agenda* reveal that many countries have failed to fulfill their due development obligations. At the domestic level, “575 million people

³¹ UNDP, “Human Development Report 2003”, page 71-76 and 133.

will still be living in extreme poverty in 2030, and only about one -third of countries will meet the target to halve national poverty levels. Shockingly, the world is back at hunger levels not seen since 2005, and food prices remain higher in more countries than in the period 2015-2019. The way things are going, it will take 286 years to close gender gaps in legal protection and remove discriminatory laws. And in the area of education, the impacts of years of underinvestment and learning losses are such that, by 2030, some 84 million children will be out of school and 300 million children or young people who attend school will leave unable to read and write.”³² At the international level, developed and developing countries shoulder “common but differentiated responsibilities” in the development process. Developed countries are expected to fulfill responsibilities such as international aid. However, because the development goals are non-binding, some developed countries have not honored their commitments to aid for various reasons.³³ The UN’s assessment of Goal 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) of the *Agenda* indicates that despite some progress in global development in areas such as development aid, remittance flows, and access to technology, financing for development remains a significant challenge. Geopolitical tensions and rising nationalism in some parts of the world have made international cooperation and coordination more difficult. In 2022, total official development aid accounted for 0.36 percent of gross national income, falling short of the UN target of 0.7 percent.³⁴ In 2021, total official concessional loans amounted to USD 55 billion while total official non-concessional loans were USD 107 billion. However, developing countries need an estimated USD 3.9 trillion by 2030 to invest in the transformations required to achieve the SDGs, resulting in a substantial gap between the loan amounts and the required funds.³⁵

From this perspective, applying the human rights obligation systems to development offers a better approach and guarantee for SDG implementation. It means that by aligning with human rights obligations, the SDGs can be better implemented within a legal framework and with an increased legally binding force. In the area of human rights-enabled development, the role of the right to development in promoting development deserves special attention. Its claims at both domestic and international levels provide a human rights basis for the implementation of the *Agenda*. The UN document *Human Rights for Sustainable Development* advocates that countries should integrate the protection of the right to development into their efforts to implement the SDGs. For specific development goals, the human rights obligation framework clearly provides more well-defined rights-based requirements and strong support. For instance, an individual’s assertion of the right to education based on the free and compulsory nature of primary education (Article 13 of the *International Covenant on Economic,*

³² “Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals: Towards a Rescue Plan for People and Planet,” Report of the Secretary-General (special edition), A/78/80-E/2023/64, 2023, page 2.

³³ “Human Rights and the Millennium Development Goals in Practice: A Review of Country Strategies and Reporting,” page 15.

³⁴ “Millennium Development Goal 8: The Global Partnership for Development at a Critical Juncture: MDG Gap Task Force report of 2010,” page 10, <https://www.undp.org/turkiye/publications/mdg-gap-task-force-report-2010the-global-partnership-development-critical-juncture>.

³⁵ “Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals: Towards a Rescue Plan for People and Planet, Report of the Secretary-General (special edition),” A/78/80-E/2023/64, 2023, page 25.

Social and Cultural Rights) is far more efficient and effective than the reinforced educational measures taken by the states based on the long-term observations of high economic returns on education investment.

Second, human rights protection standards can provide specific and detailed implementation rules and state obligations for achieving the SDGs. According to the *Human Rights Based Approach to Development Cooperation Towards a Common Understanding Among UN Agencies* adopted by the UNDP³⁶, where there are no rules, international human rights obligations can serve as regulations and offer corresponding testing standards. For example, in achieving Goal 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation) of the *Agenda*, rules safeguarding the right to water are playing an increasingly important role. The criteria of availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability in the international human rights obligation system, states' obligations to collect and monitor data by gender and other classification standards, as well as various human rights indicators and indices, not only guide states in providing clean water and sanitation facilities to individuals but also prevent discrimination in water resource allocation, ensuring the realization of the right to water for all.³⁷

Additionally, in the context of global development, industrial and commercial enterprises are assuming increasingly vital responsibilities. How to ensure that enterprises fulfill their corresponding development obligations and advance sustainable development has emerged as a critical concern for the international community and every nation. In response, a series of soft legal instruments concerning "Business and Human Rights" have provided rule-based guidance and implementation mechanisms for enterprises to engage in development and regulate their business operations in a manner that respects human rights, which have significantly contributed to achieving the SDGs. Mr. Volker Türk, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, has specifically emphasized that the UN will engage in strategic cooperation with states, industrial and commercial enterprises, civil society, and other key stakeholders to promote the application of the United Nations *Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights* to national, regional, and international legal and policy frameworks governing enterprises and other economic actors, as well as to corporate practices, thereby advancing the implementation of the SDGs.

2. Human rights mechanisms and indicators can be used to monitor the implementation of the SDGs and provide guarantees for their realization. Currently, systemized human rights monitoring mechanisms have been established at the international, regional, and domestic levels. Taking the UN human rights mechanisms as an example, the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), special procedures, and the state reporting process all have monitoring functions for sustainable development. In recent years, the UPR mechanism has strengthened its supervision over the *Agenda's* implementation in reviewed countries, putting forward a large number of human rights protection recommendations.³⁸ Additionally, to further push for the implementation of

³⁶ <http://hrbaportal.org/the-human-rights-based-approach-to-development-cooperation-towards-a-common-un-understanding-among-un-agencies>.

³⁷ Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General comment No. 15, "On the Right to Water".

³⁸ Taking China's third Universal Periodic Review (UPR) cycle as an example, human rights recommendations from 10 countries were closely linked to the implementation of the goals set out in the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable*

the SDGs and their integration with human rights obligations, many treaty bodies have revised their guidelines for the compilation of state reports,³⁹ guiding states to fulfill their human rights obligations in conjunction with development goals. In special procedures, experts responsible for issues such as extreme poverty and human rights, the rights of indigenous peoples, and water and sanitation facilities have been actively involved in monitoring the implementation of the MDGs and the *Agenda*.⁴⁰ The UN human rights mechanisms' monitoring of the SDGs can effectively promote actions at the international and domestic levels and the implementation of the *Agenda*, translating it from a mere political commitment and moral obligation into a legally binding one.

Meanwhile, human rights obligations, indicators, and indices also provide systemized standards for the international community and countries to monitor the implementation of the SDGs. To measure the implementation status of state obligations, in recent years, a number of international organizations including the UN have formulated more comprehensive and systematic human rights obligation standards for countries, as well as a series of structural, progress, and outcome indicators that can measure the implementation of human rights obligations with data. These indicators and indices are highly consistent with the SDGs, providing effective, scientific, and detailed guidance for the *Agenda*'s implementation. Therefore, the application of human rights obligations and standards not only strengthens the strategic planning of countries in fulfilling the SDGs but also provides mature scientific reference data to guide the reasonable, step-by-step, and phased implementation of development goals.

In summary, integrating human rights protection responsibilities into sustainable development can not only alleviate social conflicts, enhance social equity, and strengthen the sustainability of development but also reinforce states' development responsibilities and supervision over the development agenda, thereby effectively driving the achievement of the SDGs.

III. China's Practice of Pursuing Both Sustainable Development and Human Rights Protection

Human rights protection responsibilities incorporated into the *Agenda* have redefined the orientations, principles, and dimensions of development, aiming to promote social equity alongside economic development. By reshaping the relationship

Development. Some countries proposed strengthening the overall implementation of the *Agenda*, while others specifically highlighted China's achievements and challenges in achieving goals such as "No Poverty," "Reduced Inequalities," and "Peace, Justice and Strong institutions." In response, China addressed these recommendations in its national report for the fourth UPR cycle. See Human Rights Council, "Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: China," A/HRC/40/6, 2018; and "National Report Submitted in Accordance with Human Rights Council Resolutions 5/1 and 16/21: (Universal Periodic Review): China, A/HRC/WG.6/45/CHN/1, 2023.

³⁹ For instance, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) has formulated compilation guidelines. See "Guidance Note for States Parties for the Preparation of Reports under Article 18 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in the Context of the Sustainable Development Goals," CEDAW/C/74/3/Rev.1, 2002.

⁴⁰ the special procedures' report on "Cross-Cutting Thematic Issues" related to the sustainable development agenda, assessed February 1, 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures-human-rights-council/cross-cutting-thematic-issues>.

between development and human rights, the *Agenda* not only acknowledges the vital value of human rights to development but also inspires countries to explore how development can enhance human rights protection and ensure that the achievements of development are applied to improve the well-being of all humanity. While United Nations agencies have previously advocated a human rights-based approach to achieving development agendas such as the MDGs, there has been a notable lack of reflection and guidance on how to implement the *Agenda* and its human rights commitments through development and empowerment approaches. This has made some countries overlook the pivotal value of development in advancing human rights.

Given China's remarkable achievements in both development and human rights over the past decades, analyzing and showcasing China's practice of pursuing both sustainable development and human rights protection through a development-oriented approach can offer valuable insights for the implementation of the *Agenda* and bolster China's efforts to achieve its goals under the *Agenda* more effectively.

Since the adoption of the *Agenda*, China, as a responsible major country, has not only formulated the *China's National Plan on Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, but has also incorporated the SDGs into its 13th and 14th five-year plans for national economic and social development, development plans for women and children, and the third and fourth phases of the national human rights action plan. China has proactively submitted relevant reports to the United Nations, embraced international scrutiny, and engaged in experience-sharing,⁴¹ all of which clearly aim to advance the cause of human rights through development.

As a developing country, China views development as the master key to unlocking solutions to all challenges. Over the past few decades, it has achieved remarkable economic growth and made substantial progress in improving people's livelihoods. Facing challenges such as environmental degradation and unbalanced development, China has put forward a new development philosophy, which emphasizes people-centered high-quality development. This Chinese path of pursuing both sustainable development and human rights protection not only highlights the strengths of China's socialist system but also showcases China's theoretical and practical innovations in sustainable development as a developing country. It aligns closely with the people-oriented tenets of sustainable development, providing a robust institutional and practical foundation for China's effective implementation of the *Agenda*.

A. Institutional guarantee and pathways for “promoting human rights through development”

Development stands at the core of China's efforts to achieve national rejuvenation and serves as its pathway to advance the cause of human rights. Protecting human rights in development and fostering all-round development through human rights protection are embodied in China's commitment to safeguarding the right to development and throughout its sustainable development strategies. This means that states must not only strive to enhance people's well-being and realize their right to development through

⁴¹ Center for International Knowledge on Development, “China's Progress Report on Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2023),” November 21, 2023, accessed January 4, 2025, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ziliao_674904/zt_674979/dnzt_674981/qtzt/2030kcxzyc_686343/zw/.

development efforts but also endeavor to achieve higher levels of development by protecting the people's right to development.⁴²

1. The right to development as the primary institutional guarantee for human rights

The right to development integrates the objectives and values of promoting development and advancing human rights, safeguarding the individuals' rights to freely pursue development on an equal basis. It is a national and individual right established by developing countries based on their national conditions through unwavering efforts, to dismantle the old international political and economic order and secure equal development opportunities. Many developing countries firmly believe in the absolute value of development, asserting that it is the linchpin and top priority for resolving all issues.⁴³ In this regard, the *Declaration on the Right to Development* proclaims: "Equality of opportunity for development is a prerogative both of nations and of individuals who make up nations. Every human person and all peoples are entitled to participate in, contribute to, and enjoy economic, social, cultural and political development." At the international level, the right to development implies that developed countries should shoulder greater responsibilities, provide more assistance, and create a more favorable environment for countries to achieve political and economic development on an equal footing. At the domestic level, it means that governments should lead and regulate development through economic growth, thereby promoting the all-round development of their people. The establishment of the right to development not only provides a favorable international environment for equitable development among developing countries but also opens up new pathways and sets important goals for the respect, protection, and realization of human rights.

Based on its national conditions and the needs of its people, China has made an inevitable choice to establish the right to development as the most fundamental human right and prioritize development as the primary objective of human rights protection. This choice is deeply rooted in theoretical, historical, and practical foundations, highlighting the progressiveness and pragmatism of the contemporary Chinese perspective on human rights.⁴⁴ Most developing countries, represented by China, were once colonies or semi-colonies, characterized by low levels of domestic productivity and living standards in urgent need of improvement. The irrational international order has constrained the equal development opportunities of developing countries. Only through development can people's livelihoods be improved and various human rights enhanced; only by striving for equal development opportunities among nations can the endogenous vitality of an entire nation be activated.

Therefore, China protects the rights to subsistence and development as its primary human rights, continuously innovating its development philosophy to promote common progress in human rights and development. At the domestic level, the Chinese

⁴² the State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, "The Right to Development: China's Philosophy, Practice, and Contributions," December 1, 2016.

⁴³ Kishore Mahbubani, "Live and Let Live: Allow Asians to Choose Their Own Course," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, June 17, 1993, page 26.

⁴⁴ Wang Xigen, "The Rights to Subsistence and Development Are the Primary and Fundamental Human Rights," *People's Daily*, February 21, 2021.

government ensures the all-round development of every individual in economic, political, social, and cultural spheres through legal systems, development plans, and targeted initiatives. At the international level, China has made consistent efforts to promote the protection of the right to development. It has not only contributed to the adoption of the *Declaration on the Right to Development* but also actively proposed the right to development to the agenda within the United Nations framework and advanced soft law governance of the right to development. All these efforts have provided a platform for international cooperation to realize the right to development.⁴⁵ Furthermore, China has actively participated in global human rights governance and advanced the Belt and Road Initiative to facilitate the common development of developing countries, thereby effectively promoting the realization of the right to development globally. Therefore, China's protection and realization of the right to development represent a fruitful practice that advances both sustainable development and human rights protection, underpinned by institutional guarantee. This approach is worthy of sharing with other developing countries.

2. The concept and pathway of “promoting human rights through development”

By positioning development as a pathway to realizing human rights, China has accurately identified the driving force behind human rights protection. This approach illustrates China's invaluable experience in human rights protection, accumulated from its down-to-earth practice and development achievements as a developing country.⁴⁶ It resonates profoundly with the fundamental philosophy and development objectives outlined in the *Agenda*, outpacing the practice of many other countries.

The realization of human rights requires not only the equitable distribution of existing social resources to ensure individuals fully enjoy freedom and equality but also the continuous creation of new resources to promote the ongoing advancement of human rights and achieve complete emancipation. A stagnant society is fundamentally incapable of sustaining progress in human rights protection. Hence, development stands as an eternal theme and an obligation incumbent upon all nations, a duty with greater urgency for developing countries. Compared to their developed counterparts, developing countries generally lack the material foundations needed for human rights protection, particularly in areas such as the rights to education and health, which require substantial resource investments. Consequently, making development the engine of the human rights cause is an inevitable choice for developing countries. China's development achievements over the past few decades have demonstrated that development not only provides a material basis for the enjoyment of human rights but also dramatically improves people's livelihoods, enhances their happiness quotient, and comprehensively elevates their right to live with dignity and develop freely.

Adopting development as an approach to human rights protection reflects the Chinese government's renewed understanding of and solemn commitment to its human

⁴⁵ Sun Meng, “China's Participation in the UN Human Rights Mechanism and the Enhancement of Its International Human Rights Discourse Power: A Case Study of the Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council,” *Foreign Affairs Review* 3 (2019): 49-50.

⁴⁶ Liu Huawen, “How to Comprehend ‘A Happy Life for the People Constitutes the Greatest Human Right’,” *Guangming Daily*, June 17, 2022.

rights protection obligations. It signifies that, when confronted with the demand for individual development, the Chinese government must take proactive measures to provide resource support for the enjoyment and enhancement of human rights, continuously create conditions to expand available resources, and ensure sustainable development. This approach fosters individual development alongside social progress, thereby promoting the positive development of the entire nation. The approach of promoting human rights through development highlights the disparities between China and Western countries in terms of social, state, and political systems. It demands that the state not merely act as a passive observer but also as an active creator and provider. This concept also embodies the implementation of the *Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action*, which underscores that the primary responsibility for creating favorable conditions for the development of peoples and individuals rests with states. It also highlights that states should take steps to ensure the full exercise and progressive enhancement of the right to development, including the formulation, adoption, and implementation of policy, legislative, administrative, and other measures at the national and international levels.

Since the launch of reform and opening -up, China has risen to become the world's second largest economy through development, achieving two historic leapfrog developments in its people's livelihoods from poverty to adequate food and clothing, and then to a moderately prosperous society. China's development seamlessly integrates human rights protection, the improvement of people's living standards, poverty alleviation, and overall development. It has facilitated the comprehensive enhancement of a series of rights, including the rights to education, health, and social security, while consolidating poverty alleviation achievements through human rights protection, thereby achieving sustainable development. Development has not only eradicated poverty but also elevated the rights of the Chinese people to live with dignity and enjoy free development. These achievements demonstrate the success of promoting human rights through development and underscore the correctness of the path to realizing human rights through development.

Anchored in China's practice, the approach of promoting human rights through development is a distinctive pathway China has taken to protect human rights. It complements and transcends existing human rights theories with freedom and equality as fundamental principles, emphasizing the state's obligation to actively create conditions for the realization of human rights. This approach showcases China's innovative concepts and practical experience in advancing the human rights cause. With this approach, China is spearheading the progress of a human rights cause centered on the right to development, making unique contributions to the diversification of human rights culture.

B. The role of human rights protection responsibilities in comprehensively promoting China's sustainable development

China's development trajectory is a historical process, evolving from an "economic development-centric" approach to a people-centered development philosophy and a new development philosophy that promotes all-round development. Throughout this evolution, the path of development has remained unchanged, while the

concepts, dimensions, directions, and focal points of development have undergone transformation. This transformation is driven by the continuous elevation of China's outlook on development and its awareness of human rights protection, deeply reflecting China's holistic understanding and practice of sustainable development, as well as its commitment to advancing development and human rights in tandem.

The “people-centered development philosophy” fundamentally underscores the principle that development is for the people and by the people and that its fruits are shared by the people, embodying a fundamental advancement of the cause of human rights protection. This philosophy was proposed by Xi Jinping, general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee, at the Fifth Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee in 2015. The *CPC Central Committee's Proposal on Formulating the 13th Five-Year Plan (2016 – 2020) on National Economic and Social Development* (hereinafter referred to as the *13th Five-Year Plan Proposal*), adopted at the plenary session, underscores the necessity of adhering to a people-centered development philosophy, placing the enhancement of people's well-being and the promotion of their all-round development as the immutable goal of development. It emphasizes the development of people's democracy, the maintenance of social equity and justice, the protection of people's equal rights to participation and development, and the full mobilization of the people's enthusiasm, initiative, and creativity.⁴⁷ The people-oriented nature is the most distinctive feature of Marxism and the essential requirement for the CPC's governance in the new era.⁴⁸ It demonstrates the CPC's commitment to integrating human rights protection principles into development. The people-centered development philosophy, while highlighting the people's principal position in development, integrates the maintenance of fairness and justice, and the protection of people's equal rights to participation and development into China's development trajectory. It reveals a development concept that puts the people first and showcases China's policies, guidelines, and practice that prioritize both development and human rights. This aligns seamlessly with the objective of the Agenda for Sustainable Development of placing human development at the forefront of development efforts.

The *13th Five-Year Plan Proposal* set the all-round development of people as the principle of development and incorporated the concepts and institutional designs that safeguard the equal right to development. This represents not only a development path with Chinese characteristics but also a unique approach for China to protect human rights. It is an inheritance and development of the Marxist theory of development,⁴⁹ a sublimation of China's practical experience in the cause of human rights protection, and a supplement and transcendence of existing human rights theories. Specifically, it supplements another crucial dimension of human rights enjoyment on top of equality and freedom — all-round development.⁵⁰ This innovation in human rights theory is

⁴⁷ Wang Mingsheng, “Firmly Upholding the Fundamental Stance of Marxist Political Economy: An In-depth Study and Implementation of General Secretary Xi Jinping's Important Remarks on Adhering to the People-Centered Development Philosophy,” *Economic Daily*, June 16, 2017.

⁴⁸ Lu Guangjin, “The People-Centered Approach: The Core Essence of the CPC's Human Rights Doctrine in the New Era,” *Guangming Daily*, April 25, 2021.

⁴⁹ Ye Desheng, “The Theory and Practice of the New Development Philosophy,” *Hongqi Wengao* 4 (2021).

⁵⁰ Chang Jian, “The Developmentalist Theory of Human Rights and Its Fundamental Construction,” *Xueshujie* 12

achieved by China based on its national conditions, respecting standards outlined in international human rights conventions, and integrating its economic development and poverty reduction practice.

To comprehensively implement the people-centered development philosophy, the Fifth Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee, with a focus on development, further proposed the new development philosophy featuring innovative, coordinated, green, open, and shared development. The introduction of this new development philosophy marked a profound transformation in China's overall development strategy, reflecting the CPC's deepened understanding of the laws governing economic and social development. The new development philosophy summarizes the profound reflections on development experience and lessons and analyzes thoroughly the development trends at home and abroad. It is grounded in both a rich historical foundation and a broad practical basis, reflecting China's inherent development requirements as it transitions from a major country to a powerful one.⁵¹ From a development theory perspective, the new development philosophy enhances the integrity, coordination, balance, inclusiveness, and sustainability of development. It not only innovates and upgrades traditional development but also comprehensively elevates and expands the connotations and extensions of modern development.⁵² This is a full embodiment of the people-first thought⁵³ and the best interpretation and transcendence of the sustainable development concept.

In the new development philosophy, green, shared, and coordinated development simultaneously embodies the ideas and spirit of advancing sustainable development and human rights protection. Green development not only involves the rational utilization of resources and the maintenance of the ecological environment but also encompasses the respect for and protection of multiple human rights including environmental rights and the right to health. It represents a dimension of high-quality sustainable development. Green development is the core element of harmonious development between humans and nature, reflecting China's national responsibility for protecting the ecological environment. Coordinated development ensures the comprehensiveness of development, emphasizing its integrity, coordination, and balance. It is conducive to alleviating contradictions in development, serving as a guarantee for sustainable development. Shared development emphasizes the importance of maintaining fair and just social development, allowing people to share the outcomes of development and ensuring that no one is left behind, which is also a fundamental principle of the *Agenda*. It is especially worth mentioning that this concept of sharing has transcended national narrow-mindedness and is based on the concept of a community with a shared future for mankind, allowing the Chinese people and people worldwide to share in the

(2021).

⁵¹ "Leading Development with a New Development Philosophy to Secure a Great Victory in the Decisive Stage of Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects" constitutes the main portion of General Secretary Xi Jinping's speech delivered at the second plenary meeting of the Fifth Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee on October 29, 2015.

⁵² "The 'Five Development Concepts' Guide the Building of a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects," *Jiefangjun Bao (PLA Daily)*, November 12, 2015, republished on People's Daily Online at: <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2015/1112/c399243-27807932.html>.

⁵³ Ren Lixuan, "A Profound Transformation Pertaining to China's Overall Development," *People's Daily*, November 4, 2015.

outcomes of China's development. This aligns highly with the purposes and goals of the *Agenda*, demonstrating China's sense of responsibility as a major country.

On September 21, 2021, General Secretary Xi Jinping proposed the Global Development Initiative that emphasizes development as a priority, a people-centered approach, benefits for all, innovation-driven development, harmony between man and nature, and results-oriented actions. This initiative aims to urge the international community to build political consensus on accelerating development, forge synergies to implement the *Agenda* across the board, and drive global prosperity and the cause of human rights. It summarizes the development experience centered around the people, proposes new principles and directions for global development, and contributes China's wisdom to sustainable development.⁵⁴

C. China's concrete practice in protecting human rights through sustainable development

China pursues sustainable development against the backdrop of building a modern socialist country. The people-centered holistic development approach has been instrumental in China's victory over poverty, the monumental achievement of building a moderately prosperous society in all respects, and the continuous advancement of the human rights cause. To ensure that everyone shares in the outcomes of development, the Chinese government gives priority to implementing the principles of equality and participation. By empowering individuals, establishing accountability mechanisms, and refining governance systems, it actively promotes the enjoyment of various human rights, including the right to development, by all individuals in the pursuit of sustainable development.

1. Implementation of the equality principle in sustainable development

The equality principle stands as a cornerstone of human rights protection and a fundamental concept of sustainable development. Goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities) of the *Agenda* is specifically dedicated to advancing equitable development, while Goal 5 (Gender Equality) focuses on gender-related equality.

To achieve equality in development, China has proactively adopted various systems and measures to address development disparities between urban and rural areas, regions, social groups, and individuals, thereby fostering coordinated national development and social equity and justice. For instance, the Chinese government has consistently increased investment in rural and underdeveloped regions, steadily elevating the level of integrated urban-rural development. It has established and improved more equitable and sustainable public service and social security systems, gradually narrowing structural disparities and promoting the overall and balanced development of society. Additionally, the central and local governments have worked diligently to eliminate barriers such as identity discrimination, continuously promoting equal employment opportunities and actively optimizing income distribution. By refining the evaluation mechanism for minimum wage standards, they have safeguarded the rights and interests of groups such as caregivers, migrant workers, and

⁵⁴ "Statement by H.E. Xi Jinping, President of the People's Republic of China, at the General Debate of the 76th Session of the United Nations General Assembly ('Bolstering Confidence and Jointly Overcoming Difficulties To Build a Better World')," (September 21, 2021), accessed December 1, 2024, https://web.archive.org/web/20221020143720/https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/zyxw/202109/t20210922_9584018.shtml.

individuals in emerging forms of employment, thereby ensuring equal protection for all workers.⁵⁵ Statistics show that in 2024, investment in eastern China grew by 1.3 percent, while that in western China increased by 2.4 percent. The per capita disposable income of urban residents saw an actual growth of 4.4 percent compared to the previous year, whereas that of rural residents grew by 6.3 percent in real terms. The ratio of per capita disposable income between urban and rural residents stood at 2.34, a decrease of 0.05 from the previous year.⁵⁶

China's implementation of the equality principle in sustainable development is also evident in how it advances shared development. The concept of shared development aims to ensure that every individual has equal access to development opportunities, benefits equally from development, and further develops themselves, which embodies ethical concern and equal protection for human dignity.⁵⁷ In this regard, the Chinese government has underscored the principles of sharing and fairness in various development plans and human rights action plans. It attaches great importance to safeguarding the rights of specific groups such as ethnic minorities, women and children, the elderly, and people with disabilities, and actively formulates and implements relevant development policies and plans to promote their full participation in political, economic, social, and cultural life, as well as their equal enjoyment of the right to development. Among these efforts, China has continuously increased the representation of women in political, economic, and public life, safeguarding their equal right to participate in development decision-making and management. For example, the proportion of women among deputies to the National People's Congress was 26.5 percent in 2023, an increase of 3.1 percent from 2013.⁵⁸ Furthermore, the state places a high priority on addressing the living difficulties and needs of people with disabilities, effectively improving their living conditions by strengthening infrastructure construction and refining targeted support policies. For instance, as of 2024, barrier-free renovations were completed for 1,177,600 households of persons with serious disabilities facing difficulties.⁵⁹ By 2023, the state had supported the employment of 9,061,000 certified individuals with disabilities through preferential policies such as tax exemptions and subsidies, creating a more equitable and inclusive social environment for them and facilitating their equal development.⁶⁰

Despite the notable achievements China has made in promoting balanced

⁵⁵ the Notice from the General Office of the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security on Issuing the *Guidelines for Ensuring the Rights and Interests Related to Rest and Labor Remuneration of Workers in New Forms of Employment*, the *Guidelines for Publicizing Labor Rules of Workers in New Forms of Employment*, and the *Service Guidelines for Safeguarding the Rights and Interests of Workers in New Forms of Employment*, RSTF No. 50 [2023].

⁵⁶ National Bureau of Statistics, "Statistical Communiqué of the People's Republic of China on the 2024 National Economic and Social Development," February 28, 2025.

⁵⁷ Zhang Yantao and Zhang Yao, "'Shared Development': The Goal and Destination of Contemporary Chinese Development," *Qianxian*, August 17, 2017, and republished on *People's Daily Online*, accessed December 1, 2024, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2017/0817/c83859-29476980.html>.

⁵⁸ National Bureau of Statistics, "Statistical Monitoring Report of China National Program for Women's Development (2021-2030) in 2023," January 24, 2025.

⁵⁹ Xinhua News Agency, "China Has Completed the Barrier-Free Renovation for 1,177,600 Households of Persons with Serious Disabilities Facing Difficulties," December 3, 2024, accessed December 24, 2024, <https://www.news.cn/politics/20241203/106a205d1d8b46ac876b8362458edd19/c.html>.

⁶⁰ China Disabled Persons' Federation, "Statistical Bulletin on the Development of China's Undertakings for Persons with Disabilities in 2023," April 17, 2024.

development between urban and rural areas and among regions, as well as the equal development of specific groups, severely unbalanced and inadequate development persists in underdeveloped regions and among specific groups such as women and people with disabilities. There is still much room for comprehensively improving equal participation in economic and social development. In response, the Chinese government needs to further prioritize the enhancement of equitable development in its development plans during the implementation of the SDGs. By formulating relevant laws, regulations, policy systems, and planning documents, it should set clear development objectives and equality indicators, build a robust guarantee system, and refine working mechanisms to comprehensively promote the integrated development of urban and rural areas, collaborative progress between the eastern and western regions, as well as the synchronized and coordinated development of specific groups with the economy and society.

2. Implementation of the participation principle in sustainable development

The participation principle in sustainable development implies that individuals have the right to participate in decision-making processes regarding national, social, and personal development, as well as in the governance of the state and society, and to exercise autonomy and decision-making power over their development. This principle is reflected not only in the realization of civil and political rights, such as the right to stand for election and to vote, but also in the enjoyment of social, economic, and cultural rights, including the right to full employment. Engaging in the development process through the exercise of civil and political rights means that individuals have a say in, and the right to manage and oversee, development through various channels. In China, the right of individuals to participate in decision-making and other aspects of sustainable development is not only safeguarded by the principle of people's democracy but is also an inherent requirement of socialist democracy, embedded in every facet of national administration and social governance. Since the 18th CPC National Congress, the CPC has attached great importance to developing socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics, striving to refine the socialist democratic system and proposing the creative theory of whole-process people's democracy⁶¹ to facilitate the realization of various democratic rights. This has not only provided political and institutional guarantees for the implementation of the participation principle in development but has also expanded pathways for the people to exercise their right to participate. For instance, in 2020, to "integrate top-level design with soliciting public input and encourage the general public and all sectors of society to contribute ideas and suggestions to the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) through various means," the Chinese government solicited tens of thousands of proposals from across the country via online platforms in drafting the 14th Five-Year Plan, enabling ordinary citizens to exercise their right to participate in formulating national development plans.⁶²

Over the past four decades of reform and economic development, China has

⁶¹ Li Lin, "Gaining a Profound Understanding of the Rich Connotations of Whole-Process People's Democracy," *Beijing Daily*, October 25, 2021.

⁶² the Commentary on People's Daily Online, "The Solicitation of Opinions for the 14th Five-Year Plan: A Vibrant Practice of Chinese Democracy," August 28, 2020, accessed November 25, 2024, <https://export.shobserver.com/baijiahao/html/284374.html>.

actively advanced the implementation of policies and laws to remove barriers that prevent various market entities from participating equally in market competition. It has also enhanced regulation and supervision over the labor market, stepped up vocational training, and taken other measures to increase opportunities for individuals to fully participate in economic development and secure their freedom to pursue equitable development. In recent years, China has vigorously advanced platform network construction in the burgeoning digital economy, creating new entrepreneurial and employment opportunities for hundreds of millions of people and fostering a development model where “everyone can participate and benefit.” This development model aligns closely with the UN’s sustainable development principle of “leaving no one behind.”

Furthermore, in SDG implementation, China has adopted comprehensive policy measures to engage the entire society in sustainable development. For example, in achieving SDG 1 (No Poverty), China has adhered to targeted poverty alleviation strategies and promoted the participation of impoverished populations through development projects aimed at building up poverty alleviation capacities, enabling them to be both beneficiaries of poverty reduction and contributors to development, thus establishing a poverty alleviation model that involves the entire population. Similarly, in achieving SDG 13 (Climate Action), China has integrated the enhancement of ecological conservation into the national education system, encouraged the public to adopt green and low-carbon behaviors, and established a diversified and socialized participation mechanism to address climate change and protect the ecological environment.⁶³ In addition, China has actively promoted the realization of SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), providing infrastructure support and services for comprehensive participation in sustainable development. In 2023, China passed laws such as the *Law on Building a Barrier-free Living Environment* to support the participation of specific groups, such as the elderly and people with disabilities, in social life and development.

Currently, China has entered a stage of high-quality development, with the foundations and conditions required for sustainable progress. However, its existing innovation capabilities are not yet sufficient to meet the requirements of high-quality development. There is still a long way to go in ecological and environmental protection, and weaknesses remain in the social security system and social governance that call for deepening reforms.⁶⁴ Confronted with the challenges of future development, China needs to strengthen the development of a market economy with enterprises as the main players, reform the governance system, and promote the participation, initiative, and creativity of all members of society in economic life, maximizing support for technological innovation and unleashing new productive forces. It is also essential to improve consultation and cooperation mechanisms among the government, enterprises,

⁶³ Center for International Knowledge on Development, “China’s Progress Report on Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2023),” page 55.

⁶⁴ “Outline of the 14th Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development and the Long-Range Objectives Through the Year 2035 of the People’s Republic of China,” accessed February 1, 2025, https://www.ndrc.gov.cn/xxgk/zcfb/ghwb/202103/t20210323_1270124.html.

and social organizations in political, economic, and social areas, fully stimulating the development potential and cooperation capabilities of the entire society. On the other hand, it is crucial to further protect civil and political rights, ensuring that citizens fully enjoy a wide range of democratic rights through institutional guarantees; enhance the implementation of oversight mechanisms, thoroughly implement regulations on the disclosure of government information, and effectively protect the people's rights to information, participation, expression, and oversight, thereby enabling their full participation in economic development and state governance.

3. Implementation of the empowerment principle in sustainable development

The lack of rights can impede an individual's capacity for development. Only by bolstering personal capabilities and enhancing rights such as the right to development can we foster personal initiative in development and stimulate the internal impetus for social progress. Therefore, empowering individuals in development embodies the essence of sustainable development, fully affirming that development and human rights should share a common purpose. It is precisely based on this profound insight that the *Agenda* has integrated numerous human rights objectives into its development goals. For instance, Goal 2 (Zero Hunger), Goal 3 (Good Health and Well-being), Goal 4 (Quality Education), Goal 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), and Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) aim to advance the realization of the rights to food, health, education, water, and work through development, thereby empowering individuals to enjoy all-round and free development.

The above-mentioned development philosophy embedded in the *Agenda*, shaped through historical evolution, resonates with China's path of promoting human rights through development. In advancing national modernization, the Chinese government has consistently striven to empower the entire population to achieve sustainable development. On the one hand, these efforts are manifested in the fact that China's growth, prosperity, and strength have continuously driven greater achievements in its human rights cause. For example, in the pursuit of quality education, the government has steadily improved educational facilities and standards nationwide, increased the application of digital tools, and promoted educational equity, significantly enhancing the availability, accessibility, and equality of the right to education. Currently, China boasts the world's largest education system, with its overall educational modernization ranking among the upper-middle-income countries globally. The completion rate of nine-year compulsory education stands at 95.5 percent.⁶⁵ In terms of the fulfillment of health goals, China has significantly elevated the people's right to health by raising medical insurance coverage, enhancing medical subsidy reimbursement and improving medical treatment capabilities, leading to notable improvements in human rights indicators such as life expectancy. For instance, in 2023, the participation rate of national basic medical insurance remained above 95 percent, while that for low-income rural populations and those lifted out of poverty stabilized above 99 percent.⁶⁶ From

⁶⁵ Ministry of Education, "Statistical Bulletin on the Development of China's Education Undertakings in 2022," July 5, 2023, http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_sjzl/sjzl_fztjgb/202307/t20230705_1067278.html.

⁶⁶ National Healthcare Security Administration, "Statistical Bulletin on the Development of China's Healthcare Security Undertakings in 2023," July 25, 2024, accessed February 1, 2025, https://www.nhsa.gov.cn/art/2024/7/25/art_7_13340.html.

2015 to 2022, China's maternal mortality rate dropped from 20.1 per 100,000 to 15.7 per 100,000, with the hospitalization delivery rate remaining stable above 99 percent. The under-five mortality rate fell from 10.7‰ to 6.8‰, and the infant mortality rate decreased from 8.1‰ to 4.9‰.⁶⁷ These advancements in human rights protection are primarily attributable to China's rapid economic growth and outcomes of all-round development.

On the other hand, these efforts are reflected in China's promotion of development through human rights protection measures, integrating human rights protection, poverty alleviation, and development to continuously enhance people's living standards. For example, China regards the protection of the right to education as a vital component of poverty alleviation, comprehensively improving educational conditions in impoverished areas. Through measures such as providing living subsidies and targeted enrollment for students from impoverished regions, China effectively safeguards the right to education for disadvantaged groups, strengthens their capacity-building, and breaks the cycle of intergenerational poverty. Additionally, China has fully integrated the protection of the right to health into poverty alleviation efforts, intensifying work on health-related poverty alleviation. While enhancing medical and healthcare service capabilities in impoverished areas, China reduces the medical burden on poor populations, striving to prevent them from falling into or returning to poverty due to illness, and effectively enhancing their resilience in coping with health-related disasters. According to relevant statistics, China's national medical assistance expenditure reached RMB 74.6 billion in 2023. Various comprehensive medical insurance assistance policies benefited 186 million medical visits by low-income rural populations, reducing their medical expense burdens by RMB 188.35 billion.⁶⁸

Currently, the primary contradiction in Chinese society has evolved into one between the people's ever-growing needs for a better life and unbalanced and inadequate development. Promoting high-quality development, transforming development achievements into improved living standards, continuously elevating human rights protection, and enhancing the people's sense of gain, happiness, and security are both the goals and starting points for China's future development. To this end, on the one hand, China should continue to increase financial investment and establish a sound public service system and social security system in areas such as healthcare, thereby creating conditions for comprehensively enhancing the protection of the rights to education, work, health, and social security. On the other hand, it should strengthen human rights knowledge training for personnel in public sectors, enterprises, and institutions, and raise awareness of human rights protection. Additionally, while prioritizing and addressing livelihood issues such as education, healthcare, housing, and elderly care through systems and policies, China should urge economic development departments and other relevant departments to pay attention to human rights issues in development and strengthen the assessment and prevention of human rights risks, such

⁶⁷ Wang Meihua, "China's National Health Commission Holds a Press Conference: The Health Rights and Interests of Women and Children Are Effectively Protected," *People's Daily (Overseas Edition)*, June 1, 2023.

⁶⁸ National Healthcare Security Administration, "Statistical Bulletin on the Development of China's Healthcare Security Undertakings in 2023," July 25, 2024, accessed February 1, 2025, https://www.nhsa.gov.cn/art/2024/7/25/art_7_13340.html.

as those related to the environmental rights, effectively promoting human rights through development.

4. Implementation of the accountability principle in sustainable development

The implementation of the accountability principle in development aims to underscore the responsibility involved in formulating and executing development plans, thereby safeguarding the legitimacy, scientific basis, and sustainability of development while providing remedies for violations of relevant rights. The incorporation of the accountability principle and mechanisms into development is also a key component of Goal 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) of the *Agenda*.

To achieve this development goal and ensure both sustainable development and human rights protection, China has, in recent years, on the one hand, strengthened judicial protection for human rights, actively protected individuals' right to development, and provided remedies for those whose rights have been infringed upon during development. Furthermore, it has refined accountability mechanisms in the judicial system. For instance, in response to workplace discrimination, the Supreme People's Court issued the *Notice on Adding Causes of Action in Civil Cases* in 2018, introducing "disputes over the right to equal employment" as a cause of action, thereby enhancing the justiciability and protection of the right to equal work opportunities. Additionally, on November 1, 2023, the Supreme People's Procuratorate and the All-China Women's Federation jointly released typical administrative procuratorial cases aimed at safeguarding the legitimate land-related rights and interests of women in rural areas, reinforcing administrative procuratorial supervision to protect the legitimate rights of "married-out women."⁶⁹ Furthermore, in the face of the impact of technological advancements on human rights, China has enacted a series of laws and regulations, such as the *Personal Information Protection Law* and the *Cybersecurity Law*, to safeguard rights such as rights to online privacy and personal information, while strengthening administrative supervision and judicial protection for various rights. Judicial protection for human rights provides the most fundamental guarantee for the implementation of the accountability principle in development. On the other hand, governments at all levels have gradually established and refined a responsibility system in development, creating a systematic accountability mechanism for the implementation of policy plans, indicator systems, and human rights protection responsibilities in development. For example, to ensure accountability in poverty alleviation efforts, the central government has not only clarified responsibilities at all levels to ensure clear implementation entities, but has also established a supervision system to guarantee rigorous implementation processes and ensure the effectiveness of poverty alleviation and development through key spot checks, special inspections, and assessment systems.⁷⁰ In summary, the establishment and enhancement of these accountability mechanisms provide remedy channels for individuals while playing a significant role in supervising the legality and rationality of development decisions,

⁶⁹ the Online Press Release Platform of the Supreme People's Procuratorate at https://www.spp.gov.cn/spp/xwfbh/wsfbt/202311/t20231101_632622.shtml#1.

⁷⁰ Cheng Xiaoyu, "China's Unique Experience in Poverty Alleviation: 'Looking Back' to Address the Challenges of Precise Identification," *gmw.cn*, accessed December 26, 2024, https://theory.gmw.cn/2021-02/09/content_34611722.htm.

implementation measures, and work norms of state organs and their officials. These mechanisms are conducive to promptly addressing erroneous and irresponsible behaviors such as fraud, and they have achieved favorable development outcomes.

The establishment and reinforcement of the accountability principle and mechanisms are crucial links in establishing China's modern governance system, playing a pivotal role in promoting development and protecting human rights. Accountability mechanisms facilitate the optimization of political power relations, the enhancement of citizens' rights, and the resolution and coordination of contradictions among the state, society, and individuals in development. They contribute to realizing national and social public interests, and improving the efficiency of government management and the effectiveness of human rights protection. To further promote sustainable development, accountability mechanisms require the state to establish and improve supervision and monitoring mechanisms in development, intensify efforts to combat corruption, emphasize the political, administrative, and legal accountability of relevant organs, and enhance the political nature, precision, and effectiveness of accountability work.⁷¹ These efforts aim to effectively prevent and eliminate negative effects such as inaction and abuse of power in development, as well as acts infringing upon the people's interests, and to continuously enhance judicial protection for individual rights, thereby effectively promoting efficiency, equity, and justice in development.

To sum up, since the reform and opening up, China has made remarkable achievements in its development practice, forging a unique path of development and human rights protection with Chinese characteristics. Facing the development goals set forth in the *Agenda*, China still needs to press ahead, striving for greater development achievements in economy, social progress, and environmental protection.

Conclusion

Sustainable development and human rights protection are the main themes of our times in today's world. As the mainstreaming of human rights progresses, development and human rights have increasingly converged, mutually reinforcing each other and working in tandem.

The incorporation of human rights protection responsibilities into the *Agenda* highlights the international community's repositioning of development priorities and its emphasis on the value of human rights. The history of global development shows that progress devoid of human rights protection may impede effective improvements in people's living standards, marginalize specific groups, exacerbate social tensions, and even pose a threat to peace. Integrating human rights into development not only ensures the equity and sustainability of development, but also rectifies development-related mistakes and provides a robust supervisory framework for development.

Concurrently, the international community's incorporation of human rights responsibilities into development initiatives also demonstrates the pivotal role of

⁷¹ the Legislative Affairs Office of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection and the National Commission of Supervision, "Strive to Enhance the Political Nature, Precision and Effectiveness of Accountability Work," *Qiushi* 4 (2019).

development in advancing human rights. Development empowers both states and individuals, serving as a critical pathway and approach for the protection and realization of human rights. Whether through the United Nations' approach of aligning development and human rights objectives item by item or by mandating countries to report on their measures for sustainable development progress in human rights reports, these efforts underscore the inseparability of development and human rights. They affirm the notion that development is the driving force for human rights protection and an indispensable component in advancing human rights. Development and human rights share a common purpose rooted in the promotion of human dignity and equitable well-being. Development oriented towards human rights should achieve the requisite outcomes of enhancing people's lives and prioritize a more just and inclusive development process.

China's commitment to human rights protection in the context of sustainable development is evident not only in its people-centric development philosophy and the implementation of its new development philosophy but also in its human rights protection endeavors, which aim to "promote human rights through development." In its economic, political, and social development, China has proactively taken measures to mitigate development inequalities, address the needs of specific groups, and uphold social equity and justice. These efforts have not only bolstered human rights protection, but also facilitated individuals' all-round development by enhancing human rights such as the rights to education and health, thereby injecting the fundamental impetus for social progress. The philosophy and practice of advancing both development and human rights in parallel have not only enabled China to achieve multiple goals outlined in the *Agenda*, but also elevated its human rights cause to new heights, offering a valuable national model for the achievement of the sustainable development agenda.

(Translated by *LI Chunyan*)