

Environmental Sustainability and the Child- Prospects for 2050: A Study in Light of the UNESCO Report and the Wittgenstein Centre

Naoual ALLEG

¹ Lecturer A, University of Abdelhamid Ibn Badis, Faculty of Law and Political Science (Algeria), naoual.alleg@univ-mosta.dz

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Abstract:

The world has recognized the importance of sustainable development for the environment after experiencing serious threats such as pollution of water, air, soil, and the extinction of many plant and animal species. The irrational use of technology, inequality among countries in exploiting natural resources, the spread of armed conflicts, insecurity, poverty, diseases, and other factors have led countries to agree on the necessity of reconciling economic, social, and environmental requirements in a way that meets the needs of the current generation while preserving resources for future generations.

As children represent both the present and the future, being affected by and influencing the environment, this study explores the concept of sustainable development and the environment and its relationship with children by 2050, according to UNESCO and the Wittgenstein Center. The study concludes that while the international community has achieved undeniable results, reality remains far from meeting the goals set by the United Nations. Developed countries must fully assume their responsibilities in sustaining the environment and assisting developing countries in promoting children's environmental rights as a key factor in their development.

Keywords: Environmental sustainability, child, prospects for 2050.

**Corresponding author*

1. INTRODUCTION

Since their emergence on Earth, humans have lived in harmony with their surroundings, taking only what was necessary. However, over time, humans evolved, explored, and advanced technologically without considering the environmental destruction left behind, even though they are entirely dependent on the environment for survival. Pollution of seas, oceans, water resources, air, and land, along with deforestation and wildlife extinction, as well as the unequal use of natural resources, have become significant threats to life on Earth.

The international community has become aware of the dangers posed by the depletion of nature and non-renewable resources, not only for the present generation but also for future ones. As a result, actions have been taken to ensure the long-term sustainability of the environment for the well-being of all.

Given that children, as a vulnerable group, are more susceptible to having their rights violated in an unsustainable environment, (United Nations, 1989, p. 27) the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child serves as the primary reference for respecting childhood and ensuring all their rights without discrimination. This includes the right to an adequate standard of living for their physical, mental, spiritual, moral, and social development, the right to education at all levels, health, protection from harm to their best interests, and protection during armed conflicts.

Article 29 of the Convention focuses on educating children to develop their personality, talents, and physical and mental abilities, while respecting human rights and fundamental freedoms and the principles outlined in the UN Charter. It prepares them to take responsibility in a society characterized by peace, tolerance, gender equality, respect for people, and a commitment to the natural environment.

Children, as crucial human beings who both influence and are influenced by the environment, have experienced and continue to endure significant

depletion and ongoing destruction, which threatens all life on Earth. In response, the United Nations has intervened within the framework of human rights protection by hosting numerous international conferences aimed at raising awareness about environmental risks. These efforts urge countries to take necessary measures within the context of international cooperation to preserve a healthy environment for current generations and ensure its sustainability for future generations.

Therefore, the following question arises: What is the relationship between sustainable development, the environment, and the child? Additionally, what are the anticipated prospects for these elements by the year 2050? It is assumed that inherent relationships exist between sustainable development, the environment, and the child, with the goal of maintaining a safe and sustainable Earth for both current and future generations, which remains humanity's ultimate objective.

Through this study, we aim to explore these relationships and examine the expectations outlined by UNESCO and the Wittgenstein Center for children in the year 2050.

The most appropriate methodology for this study is the descriptive, analytical, and institutional approach. The research is divided into two key elements:

- The first: pertains to sustainable development and the environment.
- The second: focuses on children's rights in a healthy environment and sustainable development by 2050.

First Section: Sustainable Development and the Environment

Sustainable development and the environment are two interconnected concepts that cannot exist independently. This realization came to the forefront after the serious threats to life on Earth, which, if not adequately addressed, will continue to affect every human being, particularly children. This section will explore the concepts and their intrinsic relationship.

Subsection 1: Sustainable Development as a Global Concept

Before discussing the concept of sustainable development within the United Nations framework, it is essential to first define it both linguistically and terminologically.

First Branch: The Concept of Sustainable Development Linguistically and Terminologically

Sustainable development is a term consisting of two words: "development" and "sustainability." Linguistically, "development" is derived from the verb "to grow," meaning to cause something to grow. (Ibn Mandour, 1414 AH, p. 341) The term "sustainable," derived from "sustainability of something," refers to the goal of maintaining its permanence. (Ibn Mandour, 1414 AH, p. 213)

In terms of terminology, development refers to the expansion of resources, capacities, and production, encompassing economic, social, and human development. This enables the optimal utilization of natural and human resources and enhances individuals' abilities to harness available energies to achieve higher levels of freedom and well-being. However, because development in this form could lead to the depletion of these resources without consideration for future generations—which would violate their right to access them—the term "sustainable" was added in the Brundtland Commission's report titled *Our Common Future* in 1987.

Consequently, the concept of "sustainable development" expanded to include "activities aimed at investing environmental resources in a manner that fosters development, reduces pollution, protects and regenerates natural resources without depleting them, and primarily addresses the basic needs of human beings—food, clothing, medicine, housing, education—while respecting the rights of future generations to these resources." (Al-Awadi, 2003, p. 7)

The 1992 Earth Summit in Rio reinforced this idea in Principle 3 of its declaration, stating that the right to development must be fulfilled in a way that equitably addresses the developmental and environmental needs of both

present and future generations. This highlights that growth alone is insufficient, and that societies must meet the demands for productive development while ensuring equal opportunities for all. (Roche, 2006, p. 42)

Second Branch: The Concept of Sustainable Development within the United Nations Framework

The United Nations' definition of sustainable development is primarily derived from its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted in 2015. These goals call for the eradication of poverty, the protection of the Earth, and the assurance that all people enjoy peace and prosperity.

To achieve these objectives, the report emphasizes the establishment of infrastructure that can adapt to both current and future challenges, promoting sustainable manufacturing driven by innovation, and addressing inequalities between nations, as well as within individual countries. Furthermore, to cope with the challenges of rapid population growth, it is imperative to develop cities and densely populated areas in a manner that fosters inclusivity, ensuring that these urban environments are capable of adapting, withstanding, and maintaining sustainability. (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2025)

Other goals include the promotion of sustainable consumption and production patterns. The UN report also highlights the dangers posed by climate change and its far-reaching effects, urging immediate actions to mitigate these risks. Key actions include maintaining the health of seas, oceans, and marine resources to ensure their sustainable development, protecting forests, combating desertification, halting land degradation and biodiversity loss, and safeguarding and restoring terrestrial ecosystems, while supporting their sustainable utilization.

The SDGs also encourage the creation of communities where no one is left behind, as defined by the United Nations. This is to be achieved through the establishment of peaceful and safe societies, devoid of marginalization,

where everyone has access to justice, and where strong and effective institutions are built at all levels, while remaining under the rule of law.

To meet these goals, it is essential to strengthen means of implementation and foster global partnerships to fulfill the duty of achieving sustainable development. (United Nations, 2015, p. 2)

Subsection 2: The Environment and its Relationship to Sustainable Development

This section of the study will address the concept of the environment and the primary challenges it faces due to human activities, followed by an exploration of the inherent relationship between the environment and sustainable development.

First Branch: The Environment and the Problems it Faces

The term "environment" encompasses a variety of elements and aspects, with its meaning broadening or narrowing depending on the perspective from which it is examined. In general, many scholars agree that the environment consists of a set of social, economic, biological, chemical, and physical factors that influence the lives of living organisms, particularly humans. (Al-Kubaisi, 2000, p. 5) This includes the condition of water, air, and soil. Others define the environment as a combination of factors that affect the surroundings in which humans live. (Prieur, 2001, p. 1)

The excessive use of these resources has led to an imbalance in the ecosystem, posing a significant threat to life and its components on Earth. This includes the demographic explosion in various regions, which occurs without due consideration for the limited resources necessary to support it, as well as the exploitation of these resources through unhealthy and unsafe methods.

A key concern is the concentration of urban populations in vast numbers. (Adam, 2000, p. 4) These problems are not exclusive to developing countries;

industrialized nations are largely responsible for the environmental destruction and depletion.

Their production and consumption patterns often overlook the damage they inflict on the environment across its various components. (Ahmed, 2016, p. 20) Instead, their primary focus remains on achieving profit and controlling natural resources wherever they are located—sometimes even through the use of force, wars, and armed conflicts, which themselves are significant contributors to environmental degradation.

Such conflicts also result in the erosion of basic human rights, including access to food, infrastructure, health, and education, compounded by gender discrimination, which marginalizes half of humanity's potential in contributing to the sustainable development of the environment.

Second Branch: The Relationship Between the Environment and Sustainable Development

The environment and sustainable development are inseparable and interdependent concepts. Sustainable development is fundamentally anchored in the environment, human beings, and the economic model it generates. It is shaped by both economic activities and human behaviors, whether individual or collective, and has far-reaching implications across various facets of life. Consequently, protecting natural resources and using them judiciously is a core objective of sustainable development, which aims to prevent their depletion and pollution, ensuring their preservation and sustainability for future generations. (Al-Tawil, 2016, p. 46-47)

Failure to develop and maintain a sustainable environment disrupts the ecological balance, presenting a significant threat to life on Earth. As a result, the international community has raised alarm and called for global partnerships to protect the Earth's resources and achievements, ensuring they are preserved within a sustainable development framework that grants all nations the right to use resources without depleting or polluting them.

The United Nations Conference held in Stockholm from June 5 to 16, 1972, was the first global forum to directly address environmental issues, establishing environmental protection as a key global concern. The conference adopted a series of principles for environmental conservation and proper management, bringing together both industrialized and developing nations to examine the interconnection between economic growth, water and ocean pollution, air quality, and the well-being of populations. (Jumaa, 2011, p. 896)

The conference defined the environment as "the stock of physical and social resources available at any given time and place to meet human needs and aspirations." In Principle 25, it called on nations to ensure that international organizations play a coordinating, active, and effective role in the protection and enhancement of the environment. This vision sought to reconcile economic and social development with environmental conservation, establishing a model of development that respects the environment and ensures responsible resource management. (Soria, 2013, p. 48-49)

Acknowledging the risks of environmental degradation and unsustainability, the United Nations has played a crucial role in shaping international environmental law through the organization of conferences and the creation of specialized agencies, committees, and programs aimed at achieving sustainable development. (Kamas, 2021, p. 43-45)

As part of these global efforts, the United Nations Environment Programme, in collaboration with the International Council for Science, developed a global foresight report titled *The Health of the Planet and Human Well-being*. This report urges the world to address a set of existing challenges that will evolve into future threats to the health of the planet and its inhabitants. It identifies eight dangerous global transformations contributing to the threefold planetary crisis—climate change, biodiversity loss, and the degradation of nature, along with pollution and waste.

The report outlines eighteen change signals identified by global experts, based on regional consultations and stakeholder input, including children and youth. It advocates for creating a supportive environment for improved

decision-making through the establishment of a new social contract, the adoption of flexible and adaptive governance, and the availability of consistent, accessible data and knowledge. The report warns against prioritizing short-term gains at the expense of long-term prosperity, as this approach will inevitably undermine the health of the Earth. Furthermore, it acknowledges the vast potential and creativity of humanity to provide solutions to these environmental crises. (United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP] & International Council for Science, 2024)

Since human capital, particularly children, represents one of the most significant components of the environment and sustainable development, and given that children are subjected to the most severe violations of their human rights, UN member states adopted a set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 aimed at eradicating poverty, reducing racial discrimination and inequality, and ensuring that communities thrive in peace and prosperity by 2030. These goals also called for the creation of a world "where no one is left behind."

UNICEF (Debré, 1996, p. 327-343) collaborates with UN agencies, governments, and partners to assist developing countries in achieving these goals for both current and future generations of children. However, the first goal—eradicating poverty—remains the greatest challenge confronting humanity.

Despite data from 1990 to 2015 indicating that extreme poverty worldwide was reduced by more than half, approximately 800 million people still live on less than \$1.25 per day, lacking access to adequate food, sanitation, and clean water. South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa remain the most densely populated regions suffering from extreme poverty, particularly among women and children. This persistent poverty is attributed to multiple factors, including unequal access to education, employment, and property rights, compounded by security threats, climate change, and food insecurity.

The 2023 report on the state of children underscores the critical need to provide vaccinations against diseases to every child globally, without discrimination. However, many children still lack access to these essential

vaccinations, and the COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated their plight, significantly increasing their numbers. The report connects poverty to vaccination, noting that children who miss out on vaccinations are typically found in impoverished, marginalized areas of the world.

To address this, the report advocates for increased investment in health and healthcare professionals, particularly women, to enhance the sector's performance. It also calls for urgent measures to restore trust in vaccines, which were questioned during the pandemic, encouraging scientific and technological advancements to develop them and ensuring that every child receives the necessary vaccinations, thereby preventing them from being excluded from sustainable development. (UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2023)

What, then, are the expected prospects for the environment and sustainable development for children in 2050 according to the United Nations?

Section 2: Children's Right to a Healthy Environment and Sustainable Development by 2050

UNICEF and the Wittgenstein Center for Demography and Global Human Capital have developed scenarios, included in the 2024 report, based on various potential global trends and an analysis of decadal averages from 2000 to 2050. (UNICEF, 2024, p. 9) This section will explore children's right to a sustainable environment through the expectations outlined in the report, which addresses the state of children in 2024.

The report examines the progress the international community is making toward achieving sustainable development goals for children and their right to a healthy environment in the future. It also provides foresight on the necessary actions to ensure future generations are able to enjoy this right.

Subsection 1: The Future of Children According to the 2024 State of Children Report (Expectations)

UNESCO's study in the 2024 State of Children Report highlighted that if the current trajectory to achieve sustainable development for children by 2050 is followed, the following outcomes are anticipated:

First Branch: Child Mortality Rate

It is projected that the survival rate of newborns will increase by approximately four percentage points compared to the first decade of the century, reaching over 98%. The survival rate of children until the age of five, assuming life at birth, is expected to rise by one percentage point compared to the first decade of the century, reaching around 99%. Moreover, life expectancy at birth is forecasted to increase from 70 years for women and 66 years for men born in the first decade of the century to 81 and 76 years, respectively.

Second Branch: Climate and Environment

The risks associated with climate and environmental threats are anticipated to worsen, leading to a significantly larger number of children being exposed to climate-related risks than currently. The number of children exposed to extreme heat is expected to increase nearly eightfold, those exposed to severe river floods is projected to rise 3.1 times, those exposed to forest fires is expected to increase 1.7 times, those exposed to severe droughts is predicted to increase 1.3 times, and those exposed to severe tropical cyclones is anticipated to increase 1.2 times.

These projections indicate that environmental and climate conditions will continue to deteriorate, which will have substantial impacts on their development, sustainability, and the preservation of these as a right for future generations. In light of this grave climate and environmental threat, primarily caused by industrialized nations, it is essential to enforce international responsibility under international law. Nations responsible for these risks should be held accountable for remediating the pollution they have caused and compensating those harmed. (Rousseau, 1987, p. 30)

Third Branch: Social and Economic Conditions

The forecasts in the report indicate that by 2050, there will be substantial growth in the number of children residing in countries classified by the World Bank as low-income, based on the income-level classifications for 2023, particularly in regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa, and South and East Asia.(World Bank, 2023)

It is expected that 23% of the world's children will live in low-income countries, more than double their proportion in the first decade of the 21st century (11%). Furthermore, the report suggests that per capita income, based on Gross Domestic Product in East Asia, the Pacific, and South Asia, will more than double between the 2020s and 2050s.

Fourth Branch: Education

Improvements in education for children are expected to continue into the mid-century, leading to advancements in health, poverty reduction, economic growth, and child empowerment. It is projected that 95.7% of children will have access to primary education and 77% will gain access to secondary education. However, countries in East, South, West, and Central Africa will need to add 31 million teachers by the 2050s to ensure a significant proportion of children are enrolled in schools. The educational achievement gap between boys and girls is also expected to narrow.

Fifth Branch: Gender Equality

Gender equality is crucial for the sustainable development of children and for shaping a better future for them. (UNICEF, 2024, p. 9) The report forecasts a decline in global inequality levels, though regrettably, there will be regions where inequality will persist, particularly in Africa, where the majority of the world's children who are falling behind reside, as noted by the United Nations.

Sixth Branch: Conflict and Security

The decline in security and the occurrence of wars represent the most severe threats to human rights in general, and particularly to children's rights,

exposing their lives and safety to significant violations. It is projected that the number of children living in conflict-affected areas, without sustainable national frameworks (defined as lasting more than five years), (Hegre et al., 2016, p. 9) will decrease from 833 million in the first decade of this century to 622 million in the 2050s.

The number of children exposed to severe conflict risks in East and South Africa is expected to rise from 71 million in the first decade to 97.8 million by the 2050s. Similarly, in Central and West Africa, the number will increase from 5.1 million to 69 million.

Seventh Branch: Urban Expansion

The world is expected to see a significant rise in the number of children residing in urban areas in the coming decades. Consequently, it is critical to improve the health and security of urban environments to create a better world for future generations. By 2050, nearly 60% of children are projected to live in urban areas, compared to 44% in the first decade of the current century.

Latin America and the Caribbean are expected to experience the highest proportion, at 84%, while East and South Africa will remain less urbanized, at 45%. In West and Central Africa, the number of children in urban areas will triple, from 63 million in the first decade to 209 million in the 2050s.

Subsection 2: The Future of Children According to the 2024 State of Children Report (Future Outlook)

The 2024 report not only outlines expectations but also provides an in-depth analysis of the future in alignment with the sustainable development goals for both the environment and children. It stresses the importance of adhering to the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which countries committed to advancing children's human rights, ensuring non-discrimination, and considering their best interests.

UNICEF also recommends that governments, the public sector, businesses, NGOs, human rights organizations, and civil society focus their efforts on addressing the key trends outlined in the 2024 report to secure a better future for children. (UNICEF, 2024) The report urgently calls for action in three main areas:

First Branch: Readiness for Demographic Changes

UNICEF asserts that readiness for demographic changes should be addressed through investment in early, primary, and secondary education for children, with a focus on teacher training and expanding employment opportunities for youth. Attention should also be given to enhancing social protection systems, ensuring their adaptability to unforeseen challenges. This could include policies such as paid parental leave and benefits for children, as well as providing healthcare services for mothers, newborns, children, and adolescents, and ensuring access to sexual and reproductive health services, along with family planning.

The document also advocates for the creation of child-friendly cities, featuring adequate infrastructure, safe spaces, and childcare centers, with a focus on supporting marginalized children and those with special needs. Moreover, efforts must be made to ensure that rural areas, particularly those with low population densities, receive services comparable to those in urban areas, thereby guaranteeing equality across generations in communities that will experience an aging population, while prioritizing public services and children's rights.

Second Branch: Investment and Adaptation to Climate Change and the Environment, Mitigating Its Effects, and Educating in Schools

Studies and projections indicate the continued deterioration of the environment and climate, which will adversely affect the development of children. Therefore, issues related to climate adaptation must be integrated into local plans and infrastructure, including schools, healthcare systems, social support services, water and sanitation systems, hygiene, and overall

health. Children must be equipped with the necessary knowledge through climate education for sustainable development. Countries...

Third Branch: Ensuring Communication Rights and Safe Spaces for All Children

The 2024 *State of the World's Children* report, titled "The Future of Childhood in a Changing World," emphasizes the importance of ensuring digital equality by investing in infrastructure, removing barriers to full utilization, and enhancing traditional educational methods by improving children's and teachers' digital literacy. The report stresses the need for appropriate legislation to safeguard children's rights in the digital environment and implement mechanisms to combat cybercrimes. It also advocates for the adoption...

Conclusion

This study examined the concept of sustainable development and its relationship with the environment, with the aim of halting the ongoing environmental degradation and depletion for which the international community is responsible. This has prompted the United Nations to engage in various initiatives, such as conferences, reports, and partnerships, to align global perspectives and foster collaboration in preserving and sustaining resources for future generations.

The study focused on children's rights to a sustainable environment, as outlined by UNESCO and the "Wittgenstein" report, projecting expectations and aspirations for 2050.

A healthy and sustainable environment for present and future generations cannot be achieved without addressing the eradication of inequality, racial discrimination, and the exploitation of both people and resources. While developed nations hold developing countries accountable for environmental degradation due to delays in development caused by poverty, marginalization, environmental neglect, pollution, and depletion of non-

renewable resources—including the impacts of wars on the urban fabric of poor countries—the reality remains that environmental degradation is primarily the result of actions taken by industrialized nations.

They have given little consideration to the long-term consequences of their actions while using technology to achieve prosperity and well-being for their populations, often at the expense of others.

Therefore, to achieve a thriving and sustainable environment, which is a fundamental human right for all of Earth's inhabitants, particularly children, all actions outlined in the Stockholm Declaration and other principles contained in international legal instruments related to the environment and its sustainability must be executed. This must take place within the framework of international cooperation, enhancing the capacities of developing countries to catch up, as the United Nations aspires to do, while respecting the geogr...

Children must be actively involved in all aspects related to the environment and its sustainability, starting with:

- Prioritizing early childhood education in many countries, especially in Africa, where progress is lagging, in collaboration with international partners. At this stage, the child should be considered a full citizen entitled to all their rights, including the right to education and upbringing, which are essential foundations for cultivating generations that recognize the importance of preserving and sustaining the environment.
- Environmental education for children should be integrated into national educational programs, allowing the younger generation to understand the necessity of protecting the planet through the principles advocated by UNICEF, including continuous awareness and education on environmental issues. This approach will direct children's attention to improving the environment and enable them to comprehend their surrounding environment, including water, air, soil, and all natural and vital resources.

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