

Chapter 8

Sustainable Development Goals (Sdgs) Through Three-Dimensional Law

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Abstract:

This article analyzes the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) from Miguel Reale's three-dimensional theory of law, which integrates facts, values, and norms. It argues that the SDGs are not only international goals but also cultural assets that reflect social realities, ethical aspirations, and legal frameworks. Through this lens, it examines their implementation in Latin America and the United States, revealing contrasts in their fulfillment. Three-dimensionality allows for a critical assessment of the coherence between the commitments assumed and existing normative structures, proposing a deeper and more culturally situated reading of the 2030 Agenda.

I. Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represent one of the most ambitious global efforts to articulate a shared project of social, economic, and environmental justice, conceived as a universal roadmap toward the year 2030. The SDGs transcend a merely pragmatic character by condensing ethical aspirations, normative demands, and precise diagnoses regarding living conditions on the planet.

This article proposes an alternative reading of the SDGs, based on the three-dimensional theory of law developed by Miguel Reale. That theory holds that law is formed by a dynamic and dialectical interaction among three elements: fact, value, and norm. This view allows us to interpret the SDGs not only as international commitments but as complex legal phenomena that arise from concrete realities, are guided by universal values, and require effective normative translation.

From this perspective, we suggest that the SDGs should be understood as cultural assets—that is, as social-legal products that reflect a synthesis of historical contexts, shared ideals, and institutional normative frameworks that protect a superior value for a given society. Such an

approach enables a deeper assessment of their implementation, especially in contrasting contexts such as Latin America and the United States, where structural challenges and institutional responses vary significantly.

II. Three-Dimensionality of Law as an Analytical Tool

The complexity of contemporary legal phenomena demands robust and flexible analytical methodologies capable of capturing the dimensions that constitute law in an ever more interconnected reality. One of the most useful and comprehensive epistemological proposals in this regard is the three-dimensional theory of law formulated by Miguel Reale, which overcomes the limitations of earlier legal perspectives by proposing that law is not merely a normative system but dialectically incorporates three fundamental dimensions: the normative, the axiological (values), and the factual (facts).

Miguel Reale clearly states that “law is a social experience in which facts, values, and norms are dialectically integrated” (1997). This integration is not merely cumulative but interactive and dynamic, such that each dimension acquires full meaning and functionality in relation to the other two. From this perspective, law cannot be understood as something static or divorced from the social and cultural context in which it is embedded, but rather as a continuous and adaptive process.

The first dimension—the dimension of fact—refers to the material, social, historical, and cultural conditions in which law arises and operates. Reale underscores the importance of recognizing that no legal analysis is complete if it ignores the real and concrete circumstances in which laws and norms take place. This dimension connects law with empirical disciplines such as sociology, economics, and anthropology, thereby preventing legal analysis from being reduced to normative abstraction. Recognizing the relevance of facts ensures that law does not lose contact with the social reality it seeks to regulate—something crucial in contexts of social complexity and multiculturalism.

The second dimension—value—provides law with ethical, axiological, and interpretive orientation. For Reale, value is not a mere philosophical

abstraction; rather, the ethical foundation legitimizes and gives meaning to legal norms. This dimension also informs the interpretation of the norm. As Cano-Nava (2011) notes, the axiological dimension links law to ideals of justice, equity, liberty, and human dignity, making it a system of moral as well as legal ordering. Values are not fixed or universally constant; they are dynamic and contextual, which requires legal analysis and a deep understanding of the prevailing social ethics in each historical and cultural moment.

Lastly, the normative dimension represents the formal expression of law through statutes, regulations, legal principles, and judicial decisions. Reale maintains that the norm is crucial because it is the means by which law is concretely materialized in the social sphere. However, the norm in isolation loses meaning if it is not articulated with fact and value, becoming an empty, formalistic rule incapable of generating effective justice (Reale, 1997). The normative dimension therefore requires constant verification and adaptation to social reality and to the values pursued by society.

This dialectical interaction that characterizes the three-dimensionality of law makes it an extraordinarily powerful epistemological tool for comprehensive legal analysis. In contrast to positivist approaches that emphasize only the formal validity of legal norms or sociological perspectives that exclusively emphasize factual conditions, Reale's theory integrates all the essential dimensions of the legal phenomenon in a dynamic and balanced way. (Casillas Vioratto, 2027)

Moreover, the three-dimensional theory is notably useful across disciplines because it explicitly treats law as a cultural phenomenon and emphasizes how legal norms reflect, reproduce, or transform social values and structures. As *The Concept of Culture* (Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1998) argues, there is no law without culture, nor culture without a value system. Accordingly, any comprehensive legal analysis must be grounded in a cultural, historical, and philosophical understanding of the context in which norms operate.

Likewise, three-dimensional theory is well suited to contemporary analytical challenges. Today, law faces global phenomena, intercultural processes, and complex ethical conflicts. These situations require meth-

odologies capable of addressing simultaneously the empirical dimension of social problems, the ethical issues involved, and concrete and effective legal solutions. Three-dimensional analysis responds to these demands by providing a solid, critical, and flexible methodological framework for confronting such challenges with rigor and depth.

Accordingly, Miguel Reale's three-dimensional theory of law constitutes an integral analytical tool that allows us to approach the complexity of the legal phenomenon from a dialectical and multidimensional standpoint. Its capacity to integrate facts, values, and norms into a coherent and dynamic methodological framework makes it a key epistemological resource for legal research and critique—particularly relevant in contemporary contexts marked by diversity, social complexity, and global ethical challenges.

III. The Sustainable Development Goals

In 2015, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda, which sets forth the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This ambitious global agenda seeks to mobilize collective action and provide a clear and shared roadmap toward a more equitable, sustainable, and inclusive world. It consists of 17 goals and 169 specific targets. The SDGs encompass fundamental aspects such as eradicating poverty, combating hunger, improving health and education, achieving gender equality, ensuring environmental sustainability, and promoting peaceful and just societies (Gómez Gil, 2017).

The global impact of the SDGs has been significant, establishing a common basis for countries to orient their public policies toward sustainability and equitable development. However, despite their universal acceptance, effective implementation presents region-specific challenges due to socioeconomic, political, and cultural particularities (Sainz-Borgo, 2020).

Goal 1 relates to eradicating extreme poverty in all its forms. A quick comparison between Latin America and the United States shows that while the former has made significant progress, the latter still faces challenges in minority and rural communities (Lalama Franco & Bravo Lalama, 2019).

Goal 2 seeks to guarantee universal access to safe and nutritious food. In Latin America, Brazil notably reduced hunger through social programs; by contrast, in the United States, food insecurity disproportionately affects low-income communities. Even so, over the years the country has built a solid food-security system with subsidies and effective school-based programs (FAO, 2019). This suggests that Latin America maintains a protection-oriented approach centered on the development of social rights. In this sense, the Sustainable Development Goals can be read largely as an extension of ESC rights (DESCA); in practice, many SDGs map onto social rights, which reveals a slight advantage for Latin America over the United States.

Goal 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) promotes healthy lives for all, at all ages. In Latin America, countries such as Mexico and Brazil have reduced maternal and infant mortality, whereas the United States—despite its advanced health system—continues to face challenges of coverage, access, and equity (Uzcátegui U, 2016).

Goal 4 (Quality Education) is a truly formidable goal. Some Latin American countries stand out—Costa Rica is recognized for its high literacy rates, and Mexico for graduate programs with broad participation—yet elsewhere quality education remains tied to tuition payments, making it costly and inaccessible. The United States has internationally renowned institutions and robust student-aid programs, but it likewise faces coverage gaps and significant disparities in minority communities (Gómez Gil, 2017).

Goal 5 concerns substantive equality between men and women. There is no doubt that this is one of the most complex Sustainable Development Goals facing Latin America. Argentina, for example, has implemented advanced gender policies. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of other countries, where considerable inequality between men and women persists—especially with regard to the wage gap and basic human rights.

By contrast, the United States has made substantial progress in substantive equality, particularly in women's political and corporate representation; yet, as in Latin America, wage gaps persist and require ongoing attention. Speaking of gender equality is extremely complex: to eradicate a structural social problem, a deep sociological study is required. Even so, in the

Anglophone country, ten years after the SDGs were announced, there has been a considerable improvement in substantive equality (Bárcena, 2017).

Goal 6 relates to clean water and sanitation. This entails ensuring sustainable access to drinking water—another formidable challenge. Although Latin America is a region rich in water resources, there are still areas where access is limited, and in many others basic sanitation remains a distant aspiration. This is in fact one of the major structural challenges for the region's sustainable development. Chile has shown high coverage rates. The United States, for its part, maintains high overall standards of water quality and accessibility (Bárcena, 2017).

Goal 7 promotes the use of affordable and clean energy. Once again, Costa Rica leads in renewables. Unlike some Latin American countries that still rely heavily on carbon-based energy, the United States has managed to consolidate a strong economy with high employment, workforce-training policies, and a notable capacity for innovation (Barbier & Burgess, 2017).

Goal 8 is about decent work and economic growth, promoting full and productive employment. Chile and Uruguay are formidable cases in labor formalization. Likewise, the United States stands out for its innovation capacity and robust economy, and although it faces challenges related to labor inequality, these are generally less severe than those faced in Latin America (Bárcena, 2017).

Goal 9—industry, innovation, and infrastructure—is an area in which the United States is a global leader; across Latin America, there is no single country that can truly compete. The goal seeks to develop resilient infrastructure. Although Brazil and Mexico are advancing in sustainable infrastructure, the gap remains enormous (Barbier & Burgess, 2017).

Goal 10 should not be confused with its predecessor, SDG 5. While SDG 5 focuses on gender equality—a specific form of substantive equality—SDG 10 seeks to reduce economic, social, and territorial inequalities within and among countries. In this sense, SDG 10 covers a broader spectrum, referring to unequal income distribution, access to opportunities, and structural gaps in the population (Barbier & Burgess, 2017).

In Latin America, inequality continues to be one of the principal structural challenges. Although certain public policies have been implemented to mitigate it, progress has been limited and a profound change has yet

to be achieved. In contrast, the United States—despite facing economic, racial, and regional gaps—has developed mechanisms such as affirmative action and economic subsidies aimed at reducing these inequalities more systematically.

Goal 11 invites nations to promote safe and sustainable cities. A major example of urban transformation in Latin America is Medellín, Colombia. The United States, meanwhile, has developed various sustainability initiatives in cities such as Portland and Seattle (Bárcena, 2017).

Goal 12 seeks to foster sustainable practices in responsible production and consumption. Latin America faces challenges in responsible consumption, whereas the United States leads important initiatives in recycling and corporate sustainability (FAO, 2019).

Goal 13 addresses countries' commitment to take action against climate change. In general, both in the United States and throughout Latin America, countries have adopted significant positions and commitments regarding climate protection, undertaking concrete actions to counter climate change (Barbier & Burgess, 2017).

Goal 14 concerns life below water—conserving and sustainably using the oceans. Mexico and Chile are undertaking notable efforts in marine conservation, and the United States likewise maintains numerous marine protected areas and effective policies against overfishing (FAO, 2019).

Goal 15—life on land—focuses on managing and sustaining various ecosystems and conserving natural reserves. In Latin America, Costa Rica unquestionably stands out and has become an ecotourism destination. The United States also has extensive reserves and successful environmental conservation programs (Bárcena, 2017).

Goal 16, in the penultimate position, relates to peace, justice, and strong institutions, seeking to build peaceful and just societies. While Latin America faces challenges involving violence and corruption, the United States possesses solid institutions and a robust judicial system that—despite political polarization—has remained stable (Bárcena, 2017).

Goal 17 concerns partnerships for the goals, strengthening global means to implement each agreement effectively. Regional and international cooperation, as well as global financing, are key.

Thus, as we observed across these goals, Latin America has been characterized by high levels of economic and social inequality. The

SDGs have represented a key opportunity to address persistent structural problems. Although the region has made important advances in poverty reduction and improvements in social indicators, it still faces substantial difficulties in fully achieving the established goals.

The United States, for its part, is one of the world's largest economies, yet it presents its own particular challenges—distinct from those of Latin America. Despite ample economic and technological resources that could facilitate the implementation of these goals, the nation faces significant internal issues related to health care and sustainability, as well as a complex and dynamic domestic political landscape. To make matters more challenging, recent structural changes have generated additional obstacles to coordinated and effective action on the 2030 Agenda.

The Sustainable Development Goals offer a comprehensive and ambitious framework for addressing the global challenges of the twenty-first century. Their effective implementation will depend significantly on the specific conditions of each region. As noted above, international cooperation is key to advancing as a global community.

IV. How to Understand the SDGs from the Three-Dimensionality of Law?

Three-dimensional theory, as previously noted, offers a methodological tool that allows legal and social phenomena to be addressed with greater depth. This perspective enables us to understand phenomena, institutions, and elements through a three-dimensional lens.

The Sustainable Development Goals can be understood as norms and as cultural assets—pacts or agreements among nations to achieve aspirations of equality, justice, and well-being, among other superior values within a society. Nevertheless, although the normative statement and the underlying value are the same, each country interprets them according to its needs and traces a different path to make them tangible. By its very nature, the SDG framework is three-dimensional.

From a three-dimensional standpoint, the SDGs are not merely multilateral agreements adopted by various countries; rather, they are embedded cultural assets. The operation of these agreements enables each State to analyze its social and economic structures in order to change

them and achieve a greater good for the entire world. The premise is that if each country fulfills its Sustainable Development Goals, it will contribute to the well-being and continuity of a healthier, more enduring world—consistent with the concept of intergenerational solidarity.

To understand how the SDGs qualify as cultural assets, it is essential to clarify that a cultural asset is a three-dimensional category composed of:

1. Universal value, such as justice, equality, or dignity;
2. Legal norm that protects that value in the form of a right; and
3. Cultural reality that updates, demands, and re-signifies it (Mora Mora, 2023).

Under these three criteria, the SDGs are cultural assets. They are a concrete expression of a global factual need, guided by a precise ethical orientation toward social, environmental, and economic justice; and they invite the development and implementation of norms, public policies, institutions, and international treaties that make their realization—and protection—possible.

Analyzing the SDGs through three-dimensional theory allows us to understand how regions such as Latin America and the United States materialize the goals differently and yet comply with the agreements undertaken. On the factual plane, the SDGs emerge as a response to pressing social realities—poverty, inequality, climate change, unequal access to education and health, among others. These objectives respond to global-scale facts that affect both developed and developing countries.

From the standpoint of axiological historicism—a three-dimensional methodology—we can analyze structural challenges as well as significant problems and obstacles in each country. From the value dimension, the 2030 Agenda rests on the constant pursuit of human dignity, international cooperation, and respect for all living beings, as well as for nature and its renewable and non-renewable resources, in order to build a more integrated and just world. These are superior values and also extensions of human rights—an updating of the 1948 Declaration.

As for the normative dimension, law is always a synthesis of what is and what ought to be. The SDGs could not subsist across different countries without normative frameworks that legally obligate States to

implement the commitments assumed before the international community. At this point, legal semantics—another three-dimensional method—assesses whether the international commitments undertaken by countries are being effectively implemented in their domestic legal orders, or whether gaps persist between international discourse and the realities of each State.

Three-dimensional theory thus enables an integrative reading of the SDGs, understanding that no goal can be reduced to a mere empirical datum or to an isolated norm. Applying the three-dimensional approach not only enriches academic analysis but also allows for a critical evaluation of the degree of compliance, the coherence between public policies and declared values, and the effectiveness of legal and institutional frameworks. When implemented from a three-dimensional perspective, it becomes possible to compare different regional and international contexts, highlighting strengths, challenges, and opportunities in each of the States that are party to these agreements.

V. Conclusions

The analysis developed throughout this work allows us to affirm that the SDGs—far from being mere technical targets or instruments of international planning—should be understood as genuine cultural assets.

A cultural asset is the result of the interaction among significant social facts, values recognized by a community, and norms that translate those values into binding provisions. From this perspective, the SDGs synthesize real problems that affect humanity, express a shared axiology that guides collective action, and promote the construction of normative frameworks and institutions that give viability to their principles.

Applying the three-dimensional theory of law provides a useful and rigorous tool for interpreting the Sustainable Development Goals in their structural complexity. This approach makes it possible to examine not only the existence or absence of public policies associated with each goal, but also their embeddedness in countries' legal cultures, their ethical legitimacy, and their relevance to the real needs of the population. Such understanding is especially pertinent in the context of developing

countries, where structural challenges demand a more integrated reading of sustainable development.

To consider the SDGs as cultural assets is to recognize their role in the legal, institutional, and social transformation of nations. This entails not only formal compliance but also their critical appropriation by communities, governments, and legal practitioners. Only then will it be possible to consolidate a global legal culture oriented toward human dignity, environmental and social justice, and lasting peace among nations, as well as global well-being—principles that constitute the axiological core of the 2030 Agenda.

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