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Data Protection and Sustainable Development Goals: Lawyers' Perceptions on Digital Rights and Environmental Accountability

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ABSTRACT

The increasing integration of digital technologies into governance systems has reshaped the relationship between data protection, digital rights, and sustainable development. This study examines lawyers' perceptions of how data protection frameworks influence digital rights and environmental accountability within the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Adopting a qualitative research design based on secondary data analysis, the study synthesises legal scholarship, policy documents, and international frameworks to explore emerging trends and challenges. The findings reveal that legal professionals view data protection as a foundational human right that supports transparency, accountability, and public participation in environmental governance. At the same time, tensions persist between the need for open access to environmental data and the protection of individual privacy. The study further identifies key challenges, including regulatory fragmentation, weak enforcement mechanisms, digital inequalities, and the growing concentration of data power among private corporations. It argues that integrating data protection within environmental and digital governance frameworks is essential for achieving sustainable development. The paper concludes that a rights-based and coordinated legal approach is necessary to ensure that digital transformation contributes to equitable and environmentally responsible development outcomes.

Keywords: Data protection; Digital rights; Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); Environmental accountability; Digital governance; Data justice; Human rights

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1. Introduction

The rapid proliferation of digital technologies over the past two decades has fundamentally reshaped governance systems, economic structures, and social interactions worldwide. In the era of big data, artificial intelligence (AI), and digital platforms, information has become a central resource influencing decision-making processes across sectors. This transformation has significant implications for sustainable development, particularly within the framework of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasise inclusivity, accountability, and transparency, principles that are increasingly mediated through digital infrastructures (United Nations, 2015).

Digitalisation has enabled governments and institutions to collect, process, and disseminate vast amounts of data, facilitating more efficient public service delivery and policy implementation. However, this increased reliance on data has also raised critical concerns regarding privacy, surveillance, and the misuse of personal information. As a result, data protection has emerged as a central issue in contemporary legal discourse. Data protection laws are designed to safeguard individuals' personal information, regulate data processing activities, and ensure accountability among data controllers and processors (Greenleaf, 2018). These legal frameworks are closely linked to broader digital rights, including the right to privacy, freedom of expression, and access to information (Kuner et al., 2020).

The intersection between data protection and sustainable development is particularly significant in the context of environmental governance. Environmental accountability, defined as the obligation of governments, corporations, and individuals to account for their environmental impacts, relies heavily on access to accurate and timely information. Digital technologies play a crucial role in enabling such access, allowing stakeholders to monitor environmental conditions, track regulatory compliance, and participate in decision-making processes (Gupta et al., 2020). For instance, open data platforms and digital monitoring systems have been used to track air quality, deforestation, and climate change indicators, thereby enhancing transparency and public engagement.

At the same time, the use of digital technologies in environmental governance raises complex legal and ethical questions. The collection and dissemination of environmental data often involve personal or sensitive information, such as geolocation data, health data, or proprietary business information. Balancing the need for transparency with the protection of privacy is a key challenge for policymakers and legal practitioners. Lawyers, as key actors in the development and interpretation of legal frameworks, play a critical role in navigating these challenges and shaping the relationship between data protection and environmental accountability (Bennett & Raab, 2020).

Moreover, the integration of digital technologies into governance systems has highlighted existing inequalities in access to data and digital resources. The concept of the "digital divide" refers to disparities in access

to digital technologies and the internet, which can exacerbate social and economic inequalities (van Dijk, 2020). In the context of sustainable development, such inequalities can hinder the effective implementation of the SDGs, particularly in developing countries. For example, limited access to digital infrastructure may prevent communities from accessing environmental information or participating in decision-making processes, thereby undermining accountability and inclusivity.

Another emerging concern is the concentration of data control in the hands of a few powerful corporations, often referred to as “data monopolies.” These entities possess vast amounts of data and advanced analytical capabilities, enabling them to influence markets, policies, and public discourse. Scholars have argued that such concentration of power can undermine democratic governance and hinder efforts to achieve sustainable development (Zuboff, 2019). In this context, robust data protection frameworks are essential to ensure that data is used in a fair, transparent, and accountable manner.

The role of legal professionals in addressing these challenges cannot be overstated. Lawyers are not only responsible for interpreting and enforcing data protection laws but also for advising policymakers, corporations, and civil society organisations on legal compliance and ethical considerations. Their perceptions and interpretations of data protection and digital rights significantly influence the development and implementation of legal frameworks. Understanding these

perceptions is therefore crucial for identifying gaps and opportunities in the current regulatory landscape.

This study aims to explore lawyers' perceptions of the relationship between data protection, digital rights, and environmental accountability within the framework of the SDGs. By adopting a qualitative research approach based on secondary data analysis, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how legal professionals conceptualise these interrelated issues. The research is guided by the following questions:

- How do lawyers perceive the role of data protection in safeguarding digital rights?
- What is the relationship between data protection and environmental accountability in the context of the SDGs?
- What challenges and opportunities exist in integrating data protection frameworks with sustainable development goals?

By addressing these questions, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on digital governance and sustainable development. It highlights the importance of integrating data protection into broader legal and policy frameworks to ensure that digital technologies are used in a manner that supports, rather than undermines, sustainable development.

2. Literature Review

Data protection has become a cornerstone of modern legal systems, particularly in

response to the exponential growth of digital technologies. Early data protection frameworks focused primarily on safeguarding personal privacy; however, contemporary approaches emphasise a broader set of principles, including transparency, accountability, and fairness (Greenleaf, 2018). The adoption of comprehensive data protection regulations, such as the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), has set global standards for data governance and influenced legal reforms in many jurisdictions (Kuner et al., 2020).

Scholars argue that data protection laws serve multiple functions beyond privacy protection. They establish mechanisms for regulating data flows, ensuring accountability among data controllers, and promoting trust in digital systems (Bennett & Raab, 2020). These functions are particularly important in the context of digital governance, where the effective use of data is essential for policy-making and service delivery.

However, the implementation of data protection laws faces several challenges. These include regulatory fragmentation, differences in legal traditions, and varying levels of institutional capacity. In many developing countries, data protection frameworks are still in their early stages, with limited enforcement mechanisms and resources (Graham et al., 2019). This creates disparities in the level of protection afforded to individuals and raises concerns about global data inequalities.

2.1 Digital Rights and Human Rights Perspectives

Digital rights are increasingly recognised as an extension of traditional human rights in the digital age. The right to privacy, freedom of expression, and access to information are all affected by the use of digital technologies. International human rights frameworks, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, provide a foundation for the protection of these rights in the digital context (UN General Assembly, 1948; UN General Assembly, 1966).

The human rights-based approach (HRBA) emphasises that digital technologies should be used in a manner that respects, protects, and fulfils human rights. This approach is particularly relevant for achieving the SDGs, as it ensures that development efforts are inclusive and equitable (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR], 2012). For example, access to information is essential for public participation in environmental decision-making, which is a key component of sustainable development.

Recent studies highlight the importance of digital rights in addressing issues such as online surveillance, algorithmic bias, and digital exclusion. These challenges underscore the need for robust legal frameworks that protect individuals' rights while enabling the beneficial use of digital technologies (Zuboff, 2019).

2.2 Digital Governance and the SDGs

Digital governance refers to the use of digital technologies to improve governance

processes, enhance transparency, and promote citizen engagement. It is widely regarded as a key enabler of sustainable development, as it facilitates data-driven decision-making and improves the efficiency of public services (Gupta et al., 2020).

The relationship between digital governance and the SDGs is multifaceted. Digital technologies can support the achievement of various goals, including:

- SDG 16: Promoting peace, justice, and strong institutions
- SDG 9: Building resilient infrastructure and fostering innovation
- SDG 13: Taking urgent action to combat climate change

For instance, digital platforms can be used to monitor environmental conditions, track progress toward sustainability targets, and facilitate stakeholder engagement. However, the effectiveness of digital governance depends on the availability of reliable data and the existence of appropriate legal frameworks (van Dijk, 2020).

2.3 Environmental Accountability and Access to Information

Environmental accountability is a key principle of sustainable development, requiring that actors be held responsible for their environmental impacts. Access to information is a critical component of this principle, as it enables stakeholders to monitor environmental performance and participate in decision-making processes (Gupta et al., 2020).

Legal instruments such as the Aarhus Convention emphasise the importance of access to environmental information, public participation, and access to justice in environmental matters. These principles are closely aligned with the SDGs and highlight the role of legal frameworks in promoting environmental sustainability.

Digital technologies have enhanced the availability and accessibility of environmental data, enabling more effective monitoring and enforcement. However, challenges remain in ensuring the accuracy, reliability, and accessibility of such data, particularly in resource-constrained settings.

2.4 Intersections Between Data Protection and Environmental Governance

The intersection between data protection and environmental governance is an emerging area of research. On one hand, data protection laws are essential for safeguarding individuals' privacy and preventing the misuse of personal data. On the other hand, environmental governance requires access to data to ensure transparency and accountability.

Balancing these competing objectives is a complex task. For example, the disclosure of environmental data may involve sensitive information, such as the location of individuals or proprietary business data. Legal frameworks must therefore strike a balance between transparency and privacy protection (Bennett & Raab, 2020).

Scholars have also highlighted the concept of "data justice," which emphasises the need for

equitable access to data and fair distribution of its benefits (Taylor, 2017). This concept is particularly relevant in the context of sustainable development, as it addresses issues of inequality and power imbalances in data governance.

2.5 Gaps in the Literature

Despite the growing body of research on data protection and sustainable development, several gaps remain. First, there is limited empirical research on the perceptions of legal professionals regarding these issues. Most studies focus on policy analysis or theoretical frameworks, with less attention given to the perspectives of practitioners.

Second, the integration of data protection and environmental governance remains underexplored. While both areas have been studied extensively, their intersection has received relatively little attention.

Finally, there is a need for more research on the challenges faced by developing countries in implementing data protection frameworks and achieving the SDGs. Addressing these gaps is essential for developing effective and inclusive legal and policy frameworks.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates the Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA), Digital Governance Theory, and the Environmental Rule of Law. These frameworks collectively provide a robust analytical lens for examining the intersection of data protection, digital rights, and environmental accountability within the

context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

3.1 Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA)

The Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) to development emphasises that all development initiatives should be grounded in internationally recognised human rights standards. It seeks to ensure that development processes are participatory, inclusive, and accountable, while prioritising the protection of fundamental rights such as privacy, freedom of expression, and access to information (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR], 2012).

In the digital age, the HRBA has expanded to include digital rights, recognising that the exercise of traditional human rights increasingly depends on digital technologies. The right to privacy, for example, is directly affected by the collection, storage, and processing of personal data. Similarly, access to information, a key component of freedom of expression, is mediated through digital platforms and data infrastructures (Kuner et al., 2020). As such, data protection laws are essential for operationalising human rights in digital contexts.

Within the SDG framework, the HRBA provides a normative foundation for linking human rights with sustainable development outcomes. SDG 16, which focuses on peace, justice, and strong institutions, explicitly emphasises access to information and fundamental freedoms. Scholars argue that the integration of human rights into SDG implementation enhances accountability and

ensures that development benefits are equitably distributed (Rosentreter, 2022).

In this study, the HRBA is used to conceptualise data protection as a fundamental right that underpins digital governance and environmental accountability. It highlights the role of legal frameworks in safeguarding individuals' rights while enabling the use of data for sustainable development purposes.

3.2 Digital Governance Theory

Digital Governance Theory examines the use of digital technologies in public administration and governance processes. It emphasises the transformative potential of digital tools in enhancing transparency, efficiency, and citizen engagement (Dunleavy et al., 2006). In recent years, the concept has evolved to include data-driven governance, where data analytics and digital platforms are used to inform policy decisions and improve service delivery.

A key principle of digital governance is transparency, which refers to the availability of information about government activities and decision-making processes. Transparency is closely linked to accountability, as it enables stakeholders to monitor and evaluate the performance of public institutions (Meijer, 2013). Data protection plays a critical role in this context by ensuring that data is collected and used in a manner that respects individuals' rights and maintains public trust.

Digital governance is also closely related to the SDGs, as it facilitates the implementation and monitoring of development initiatives. For example, digital technologies can be used

to track environmental indicators, monitor compliance with regulations, and engage citizens in decision-making processes. However, the effectiveness of digital governance depends on the existence of robust legal frameworks and institutional capacities (Gupta et al., 2020).

At the same time, digital governance raises important challenges related to data privacy, security, and inequality. The increasing reliance on data-driven systems has led to concerns about surveillance, algorithmic bias, and the concentration of power among large technology companies (Zuboff, 2019). These challenges underscore the need for comprehensive data protection laws and ethical governance frameworks.

In this study, Digital Governance Theory is used to analyse how data protection laws contribute to effective governance and support the achievement of the SDGs. It provides a framework for understanding the role of legal professionals in shaping digital governance practices and ensuring accountability.

3.3 Environmental Rule of Law

The Environmental Rule of Law is a concept that emphasises the importance of legal frameworks in ensuring environmental protection and sustainability. It is based on the principle that environmental laws should be clear, enforceable, and applied consistently to hold actors accountable for their environmental impacts (United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP], 2019).

A key component of the environmental rule of law is access to information, which enables stakeholders to monitor

environmental conditions and participate in decision-making processes. Legal instruments such as the Aarhus Convention highlight the importance of transparency, public participation, and access to justice in environmental governance (UNECE, 1998). These principles are closely aligned with the SDGs, particularly SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 16.

Digital technologies have enhanced the implementation of the environmental rule of law by facilitating the collection and dissemination of environmental data. For example, remote sensing technologies and digital monitoring systems provide real-time information on environmental conditions, enabling more effective enforcement of environmental regulations (Gupta et al., 2020). However, the use of such technologies also raises concerns بشأن data privacy and the potential misuse of information.

The integration of data protection into the environmental rule of law is therefore essential for balancing transparency and privacy. Legal frameworks must ensure that environmental data is accessible and reliable while protecting sensitive information. This requires a nuanced approach that considers both the benefits and risks of digital technologies.

3.4 Integrative Analytical Framework

By combining the HRBA, Digital Governance Theory, and the Environmental Rule of Law, this study develops an integrative analytical framework for examining the relationship between data protection, digital rights, and environmental

accountability. This framework highlights three key dimensions:

- **Normative Dimension:** Grounded in human rights principles, emphasising the protection of digital rights.
- **Institutional Dimension:** Focused on governance structures and the role of legal frameworks in ensuring accountability.
- **Operational Dimension:** Concerned with the practical use of data and digital technologies in environmental governance.

This integrated approach allows for a comprehensive analysis of lawyers' perceptions and provides insights into how legal frameworks can be strengthened to support sustainable development.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on secondary data analysis to explore lawyers' perceptions of data protection, digital rights, and environmental accountability. Qualitative research is particularly suitable for examining complex social and legal phenomena, as it allows for an in-depth understanding of meanings, interpretations, and contextual factors (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The use of secondary data enables the researcher to draw on a wide range of existing sources, including academic literature, legal documents, and policy reports. This approach is appropriate for the current study, as it seeks to synthesise existing knowledge and identify key themes rather than generate new empirical data.

4.1 Research Approach

The study follows an interpretivist research paradigm, which emphasises the subjective nature of knowledge and the importance of understanding individuals' perspectives. In this context, lawyers' perceptions are viewed as socially constructed and influenced by legal, institutional, and cultural factors (Schwandt, 2014).

An interpretivist approach is particularly relevant for this study, as it allows for a nuanced analysis of how legal professionals conceptualise data protection and its relationship with sustainable development.

4.2 Data Sources and Selection Criteria

The study relies on multiple sources of secondary data, including:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles on data protection, digital rights, and environmental law
- International legal instruments (e.g., SDGs, human rights conventions)
- Policy reports from organisations such as the United Nations and UNDP
- Legal commentaries and case studies

The selection of sources is guided by the following criteria:

- **Relevance:** The source must address one or more of the key themes of the study.
- **Credibility:** Preference is given to peer-reviewed publications and authoritative reports.

- **Recency:** Emphasis is placed on recent studies to capture current developments.

This systematic selection process ensures the reliability and validity of the findings.

4.3 Data Analysis Method

The study employs thematic analysis to identify and analyse patterns within the data. Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative method that involves coding data and organising it into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The analysis is conducted in several stages:

- **Familiarisation:** Reviewing and summarising the selected sources
- **Coding:** Identifying key concepts and assigning codes
- **Theme Development:** Grouping codes into broader themes
- **Interpretation:** Analysing the relationships between themes and linking them to the theoretical framework

The main themes identified in this study include:

- Data protection and privacy
- Digital rights and human rights
- Environmental accountability
- Legal challenges and governance issues

4.4 Validity and Reliability

In qualitative research, validity and reliability are addressed through rigour and transparency. This study ensures validity by:

- Using credible and authoritative sources
- Triangulating data from multiple sources
- Clearly documenting the research process

Reliability is enhanced by maintaining consistency in data selection and analysis procedures (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

4.5 Ethical Considerations

As the study is based on secondary data, it does not involve direct interaction with human participants. However, ethical considerations remain important, particularly in terms of:

- Proper citation and acknowledgement of sources
- Avoidance of plagiarism (Mannan & Farhana, 2026)
- Accurate representation of authors' views

The study adheres to APA (7th ed.) guidelines to ensure academic integrity.

4.6 Limitations of the Study

Despite its strengths, the study has several limitations:

- **Lack of Primary Data:** The reliance on secondary data limits the ability to capture real-time perceptions of legal professionals.
- **Contextual Constraints:** The findings may not fully reflect regional variations, particularly in developing countries.
- **Interpretive Bias:** As with all qualitative research, the analysis is

subject to the researcher's interpretation.

Future research could address these limitations by incorporating empirical data, such as interviews or surveys with legal practitioners.

5. Findings and Analysis

This section presents the key findings derived from the thematic analysis of secondary data, focusing on lawyers' perceptions of data protection, digital rights, and environmental accountability within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework. The analysis reveals a complex and evolving understanding among legal professionals, shaped by normative commitments, institutional constraints, and technological developments.

5.1 Data Protection as a Foundational Legal Right

One of the most consistent findings across the literature is that lawyers conceptualise data protection as a foundational legal right, intrinsically linked to the right to privacy and human dignity. Legal scholars emphasise that data protection is not merely a regulatory mechanism but a normative framework that governs the relationship between individuals, the state, and private entities in the digital age (Kuner et al., 2020).

From a human rights perspective, data protection is increasingly recognised as essential for safeguarding autonomy and preventing arbitrary interference in individuals' lives. This aligns with the broader principles of the Human Rights-

Based Approach (HRBA), which underscores the indivisibility and interdependence of rights (OHCHR, 2012). Lawyers often interpret data protection laws as operational tools for implementing these principles in digital environments.

Moreover, the expansion of data-driven technologies has heightened the relevance of data protection in areas beyond traditional privacy concerns. For instance, the use of big data analytics in environmental monitoring raises questions about consent, purpose limitation, and data minimisation. Legal professionals highlight the need for robust safeguards to ensure that data collected for environmental purposes is not misused or repurposed in ways that violate individual rights (Bennett & Raab, 2020).

5.2 Digital Rights as Enablers of Sustainable Development

The findings indicate that lawyers increasingly view digital rights as critical enablers of sustainable development, particularly in relation to SDG 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions) and SDG 13 (climate action). Digital rights, including access to information, freedom of expression, and privacy, are seen as prerequisites for effective governance and public participation.

Access to information, in particular, emerges as a central theme. Legal professionals emphasise that transparency in environmental governance depends on the availability of reliable and accessible data. Digital platforms and open data initiatives have significantly enhanced the ability of citizens and civil society organisations to

access environmental information, thereby strengthening accountability mechanisms (Gupta et al., 2020).

However, the realisation of digital rights is uneven across different regions and socio-economic contexts. Lawyers point to the persistence of the digital divide as a major barrier to inclusive development. In many developing countries, limited access to digital infrastructure and low levels of digital literacy hinder the effective use of digital tools for environmental governance (van Dijk, 2020). This creates disparities in participation and undermines the equitable implementation of the SDGs.

Furthermore, concerns about surveillance and data misuse pose significant challenges to the protection of digital rights. The increasing use of surveillance technologies by governments and private entities has raised questions about the balance between security and privacy. Legal professionals argue that without adequate safeguards, such practices can erode trust in digital systems and discourage public engagement (Zuboff, 2019).

5.3 Data Protection and Environmental Accountability

A key finding of this study is the recognition among lawyers that data protection plays a dual role in environmental governance: it both enables and constrains environmental accountability. On one hand, data protection frameworks facilitate the ethical collection and use of environmental data, ensuring that information is accurate, reliable, and used for legitimate purposes. On the other hand, strict data protection requirements may limit

access to certain types of information, potentially hindering transparency.

Legal professionals highlight the importance of balancing these competing objectives. For example, environmental data often includes sensitive information, such as the location of individuals or proprietary business data. Disclosure of such information may be necessary for accountability purposes, but must be carefully managed to avoid privacy violations (Bennett & Raab, 2020).

The concept of “proportionality” is frequently cited as a guiding principle in this context. Proportionality requires that any restriction on privacy rights must be necessary and proportionate to the intended objective. Lawyers argue that this principle can be used to strike a balance between data protection and transparency in environmental governance.

In addition, the integration of digital technologies into environmental monitoring has created new opportunities for accountability. Remote sensing, geographic information systems (GIS), and real-time data analytics enable more effective tracking of environmental indicators and compliance with regulations. These technologies enhance the ability of legal systems to enforce environmental laws and hold actors accountable (Gupta et al., 2020).

5.4 Regulatory Fragmentation and Legal Challenges

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of data protection, the findings reveal significant challenges related to regulatory fragmentation. Data protection laws vary widely across jurisdictions,

reflecting differences in legal traditions, cultural values, and institutional capacities (Greenleaf, 2018). This creates complexities for cross-border data flows and international cooperation.

Lawyers emphasise that the lack of harmonisation in data protection regulations can hinder the effective implementation of the SDGs. For example, environmental issues such as climate change and biodiversity loss are inherently transnational, requiring coordinated efforts across countries. However, divergent data protection regimes can impede the sharing of information and collaboration among stakeholders.

In addition to fragmentation, enforcement remains a major challenge. Many jurisdictions lack the institutional capacity to effectively enforce data protection laws, resulting in weak compliance and limited accountability. Legal professionals highlight the need for stronger enforcement mechanisms, including independent regulatory authorities and effective sanctions for non-compliance (Kuner et al., 2020).

5.5 Corporate Power and Data Governance

Another significant finding is the growing concern among lawyers about the concentration of data in the hands of large technology companies. These corporations possess vast amounts of data and advanced analytical capabilities, giving them significant influence over markets and public policy (Zuboff, 2019).

Legal professionals argue that this concentration of power raises important questions about accountability and

governance. In the absence of effective regulation, corporations may prioritise profit over public interest, leading to practices that undermine sustainability and human rights. For example, the use of proprietary algorithms in environmental decision-making may lack transparency and accountability.

The concept of “data justice” is increasingly used to address these issues. Data justice emphasises the need for equitable access to data and fair distribution of its benefits (Taylor, 2017). Lawyers advocate for policies that promote data sharing, open access, and public oversight, while ensuring that individual rights are protected.

5.6 Emerging Trends and Opportunities

The analysis also identifies several emerging trends that present opportunities for strengthening the relationship between data protection and sustainable development. These include:

- The adoption of comprehensive data protection laws in developing countries
- The use of digital technologies for environmental monitoring and enforcement
- The integration of human rights principles into digital governance frameworks

These developments suggest a growing recognition of the importance of data protection in achieving the SDGs. However, their success will depend on the effective

implementation and enforcement of legal frameworks.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the complex and multifaceted relationship between data protection, digital rights, and environmental accountability. This section interprets these findings within the broader theoretical and policy context, drawing on the Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA), Digital Governance Theory, and the Environmental Rule of Law.

6.1 Reframing Data Protection as a Development Issue

Traditionally, data protection has been viewed primarily as a privacy issue. However, the findings suggest that it should be reframed as a development issue, closely linked to the achievement of the SDGs. Data protection is not only about safeguarding individual rights but also about enabling the responsible use of data for public purposes.

From the perspective of the HRBA, data protection is essential for ensuring that development processes are inclusive, participatory, and accountable (OHCHR, 2012). By protecting individuals' rights, data protection frameworks create an environment in which people can engage with digital systems without fear of surveillance or misuse.

This reframing has important implications for policymakers and legal practitioners. It highlights the need to integrate data protection into broader development

strategies and to recognise its role in achieving sustainable outcomes.

6.2 Balancing Transparency and Privacy

One of the central challenges identified in this study is the need to balance transparency and privacy in environmental governance. Transparency is essential for accountability, as it enables stakeholders to access information and monitor the actions of governments and corporations. However, excessive transparency may infringe on individuals' privacy and lead to unintended consequences.

The principle of proportionality provides a useful framework for addressing this challenge. By ensuring that any ограничения on privacy are necessary and proportionate, legal systems can strike a balance between competing objectives (Bennett & Raab, 2020). This approach is consistent with both the HRBA and the Environmental Rule of Law.

In practice, achieving this balance requires careful consideration of the context and the specific types of data involved. For example, aggregated environmental data may be shared without compromising privacy, while sensitive personal data may require additional safeguards.

6.3 Strengthening Digital Governance for SDGs

The findings underscore the importance of strengthening digital governance frameworks to support the achievement of the SDGs. Digital governance plays a critical role in facilitating data-driven decision-making,

enhancing transparency, and promoting citizen engagement (Dunleavy et al., 2006).

However, the effectiveness of digital governance depends on the existence of robust legal and institutional frameworks. Data protection laws are a key component of these frameworks, as they ensure that data is used responsibly and ethically. Without adequate safeguards, the use of digital technologies may exacerbate inequalities and undermine trust in governance systems (van Dijk, 2020).

Legal professionals have a crucial role to play in this context. By interpreting and applying data protection laws, they can help ensure that digital governance practices align with human rights principles and sustainability objectives.

6.4 Addressing Inequalities and the Digital Divide

The persistence of the digital divide represents a significant barrier to the effective integration of data protection and sustainable development. Inequalities in access to digital technologies and data resources can limit participation and undermine accountability (van Dijk, 2020).

From a data justice perspective, addressing these inequalities requires a more inclusive approach to data governance. This includes investing in digital infrastructure, promoting digital literacy, and ensuring equitable access to data (Taylor, 2017).

Legal frameworks must also be designed to address these disparities. For example, data protection laws should include provisions that protect vulnerable groups and ensure that

their rights are not disproportionately affected by digital technologies.

6.5 Enhancing Environmental Rule of Law through Data

The integration of digital technologies into environmental governance has the potential to strengthen the Environmental Rule of Law. By providing accurate and timely information, digital tools can enhance monitoring, enforcement, and compliance.

However, this potential can only be realised if data protection frameworks are effectively implemented. Legal systems must ensure that environmental data is accessible, reliable, and used in a manner that respects individual rights (UNEP, 2019).

This requires a coordinated approach that integrates data protection, environmental law, and digital governance. Such integration can enhance the effectiveness of legal frameworks and contribute to the achievement of the SDGs.

6.6 Implications for Legal Practice and Policy

The findings of this study have several implications for legal practice and policy:

- **Policy Integration:** Data protection should be integrated into environmental and development policies.
- **Capacity Building:** Legal professionals require training on digital governance and data protection.

- **Regulatory Harmonisation:** Efforts should be made to harmonise data protection laws across jurisdictions.
- **Public Participation:** Mechanisms should be established to enhance citizen engagement in environmental governance.

By addressing these issues, policymakers and legal practitioners can strengthen the role of data protection in achieving sustainable development.

7. Conclusion

This study has examined the evolving relationship between data protection, digital rights, and environmental accountability through the lens of lawyers' perceptions, situating the analysis within the broader framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The findings demonstrate that data protection is no longer confined to the realm of privacy regulation; rather, it has emerged as a central pillar of digital governance and sustainable development.

A key contribution of this research lies in highlighting the dual role of data protection as both an enabler and a constraint in environmental governance. On one hand, robust data protection frameworks enhance trust, ensure accountability, and support the ethical use of data in environmental monitoring and decision-making. On the other hand, overly restrictive or fragmented regulatory regimes may limit access to critical environmental information, thereby hindering transparency and public participation. This tension underscores the

need for a balanced and context-sensitive approach to data governance.

The study also reveals that lawyers increasingly recognise digital rights, such as access to information, privacy, and freedom of expression, as fundamental to achieving the SDGs, particularly in promoting inclusive and accountable institutions (SDG 16) and addressing environmental challenges (SDG 13). However, significant challenges remain, including regulatory fragmentation, weak enforcement mechanisms, digital inequalities, and the growing concentration of data control among powerful corporate actors. These issues not only undermine the effectiveness of data protection regimes but also pose risks to equitable and sustainable development.

From a theoretical perspective, the integration of the Human Rights-Based Approach, Digital Governance Theory, and the Environmental Rule of Law provides a comprehensive framework for understanding these dynamics. Practically, the findings suggest the need for greater policy coherence, international cooperation, and capacity building among legal professionals and institutions.

In conclusion, achieving the SDGs in the digital era requires a holistic and rights-based approach to data governance. Strengthening the integration of data protection with environmental and development policies will be essential to ensuring that digital transformation contributes to transparency, accountability, and sustainability. Future research should build on this study by incorporating empirical data from legal practitioners and exploring context-specific

applications, particularly in developing countries.

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