



Sustainability-Oriented Social Policy Approaches and the Changing Meaning of Welfare

Sürdürülebilirlik Odaklı Sosyal Politika Yaklaşımları ve Refahın Dönüşen Anlamı

ABSTRACT

In an era when welfare systems face the combined pressures of social inequality, economic uncertainty, and environmental degradation, the need for sustainability-oriented social policy becomes increasingly urgent. This study investigates how such policies transform the meaning of welfare by linking human development with environmental sustainability and by redefining progress beyond economic growth. Using cross-national data from the United Nations Development Programme Human Development Report 2025 and the World Bank Environment, Social and Governance Database, the analysis covers 181 countries with complete data for the Human Development Index (HDI, 2023) and per capita carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions (2020). Statistical analyses are conducted in SPSS Statistics, Version 29.0, employing Pearson and Spearman correlation tests. The results indicate a strong and statistically significant positive relationship between HDI and CO₂ emissions ($r = 0.601$, $p < 0.001$; $\rho = 0.870$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that higher welfare levels generally coincide with higher carbon intensity. Yet several countries demonstrate relative decoupling, maintaining high HDI values with lower emissions through coordinated policy frameworks that integrate social protection, employment, and environmental strategies. The study concludes that sustainability-oriented social policy redefines welfare as a multidimensional and future-oriented system that links social inclusion, ecological responsibility, and institutional resilience, reflecting the just transition principle of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Keywords: Sustainability, Decoupling, Social policy, Just transition, Welfare

ÖZET

Refah sistemlerinin toplumsal eşitsizlik, ekonomik belirsizlik ve çevresel bozulma baskılarıyla karşı karşıya olduğu günümüzde, sürdürülebilirlik odaklı sosyal politikalara duyulan ihtiyaç her zamankinden daha belirgin hale gelmektedir. Bu çalışma, insani gelişme ile çevresel sürdürülebilirlik arasındaki ilişkiyi ele almakta ve sürdürülebilirlik odaklı sosyal politikaların refah kavramını ekonomik büyümenin ötesine taşıyarak nasıl dönüştürdüğünü açıklamaktadır. Çalışmada, Birleşmiş Milletler Kalkınma Programı'nın 2025 İnsani Gelişme Raporu ile Dünya Bankası'nın Çevre, Sosyal ve Yönetişim veri tabanlarından elde edilen veriler kullanılmıştır. Analiz, 2023 yılına ait İnsani Gelişme Endeksi (HDI) ve 2020 yılına ait kişi başına düşen karbondioksit (CO₂) emisyonu verileri bulunan 181 ülkeyi kapsamaktadır. İstatistiksel analizler SPSS Statistics 29.0 sürümünü kullanılarak yürütülmüş; Pearson ve Spearman korelasyon testleri uygulanmıştır. Bulgular, HDI ile CO₂ emisyonu arasında güçlü ve anlamlı bir pozitif ilişki bulunduğunu, ancak bazı ülkelerin yüksek HDI düzeyini düşük karbon yoğunluğu ile birleştirerek kısmi ayrışma (decoupling) gösterdiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Elde edilen sonuçlar, sosyal koruma, istihdam politikası ve çevre stratejilerinin bütüncül biçimde uygulanmasının sürdürülebilir refahın temel koşulu olduğunu göstermektedir. Çalışma, sürdürülebilirlik odaklı sosyal politikanın refahı çok boyutlu, geleceğe dönük ve adil geçiş ilkesine dayalı bir sistem olarak yeniden tanımladığını vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sürdürülebilirlik, Ayrışma, Sosyal Politika, Adil Geçiş, Refah

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary discourse on welfare is increasingly shaped by the imperatives of sustainability and the urgent need for systemic transformation in social policy. Traditional welfare models, which historically prioritized economic growth and income redistribution, are being re-examined in light of planetary boundaries and environmental degradation (OECD, 2020; UNRISD, 2016). This paradigm shift reflects the growing recognition that sustainable welfare requires the alignment of social protection, labor market policies, and environmental strategies within an integrated policy framework (Fitzpatrick, 2014; Papadakis & Tzagkarakis, 2025). The pursuit of welfare can no longer be understood as the simple outcome of economic expansion; rather, it must encompass ecological integrity, social justice, and long-term human development (UNDP, 2022; İnce, 2023).

The United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development explicitly links social well-being with environmental and economic objectives through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Goals such as

Fatma İnce¹

How to Cite This Article

İnce, F. (2025). "Sustainability-Oriented Social Policy Approaches and the Changing Meaning of Welfare", International Social Mentality and Researcher Thinkers Journal, (Issn:2630-631X) 11(6): 807-813. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17768788>

Arrival: 04 October 2025
Published: 30 November 2025

Social Mentality And Researcher Thinkers is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

¹ Assoc. Prof. Dr., Mersin University, Faculty of Health Sciences, Department of Health Management, Mersin, Türkiye.



SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 13 (Climate Action) collectively underline that social progress and ecological balance are not mutually exclusive but interdependent (United Nations, 2015). Consequently, sustainability-oriented social policy aims to support welfare systems that are both socially inclusive and environmentally regenerative, facilitating what is now termed a just transition, a shift toward low-carbon and equitable economies without leaving vulnerable groups behind (ILO, 2022; European Commission, 2020).

This reconfiguration of welfare highlights the need to decouple human well-being from resource-intensive growth. Empirical evidence from global datasets suggests that higher levels of human development are often correlated with increased carbon emissions; however, emerging patterns of decoupling, where countries maintain high HDI levels while reducing per capita emissions, demonstrate that alternative development trajectories are possible (UNDP, 2025; World Bank, 2024). Such findings invite a deeper exploration of how social policy instruments, institutional reforms, and governance frameworks can enable sustainable welfare outcomes.

The present study analyzes this relationship by integrating cross-national data on the Human Development Index (HDI) and carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions per capita. It aims to empirically assess whether the transformation of welfare paradigms toward sustainability is reflected in global development patterns. Beyond the empirical analysis, the study discusses how sustainability-oriented social policy frameworks contribute to redefining welfare as a multidimensional construct linking social inclusion, environmental stewardship, and economic resilience under the broader principle of sustainable human development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

From Economic Growth to Sustainable Welfare

Historically, the welfare state is designed around the principles of economic expansion and redistribution, assuming that continuous growth provides the fiscal basis for social protection (Esping-Andersen, 1990). However, as environmental degradation intensifies, scholars question the compatibility of growth-driven welfare systems with ecological sustainability (Fitzpatrick, 2014; Gough, 2017). The concept of sustainable welfare emerges to bridge this gap, proposing that human well-being should be achieved within planetary boundaries and not at the expense of ecological systems (Gough, 2015; Papadakis & Tzagkarakis, 2025).

In this framework, welfare is no longer defined by material affluence alone but by the capacity to ensure equitable access to resources, environmental quality, and social stability across generations (OECD, 2020; UNRISD, 2016). This redefinition implies a transition from the growth redistribution nexus toward a sustainability well-being nexus, where the goal of social policy is to balance environmental limits with social justice and economic resilience. Previous analyses of circular economy practices show that upcycling and resource efficiency are essential for connecting environmental policy with social welfare (İnce, 2025b).

The shift from growth-based welfare to sustainable welfare requires not only conceptual but also institutional transformation. Recent debates highlight that welfare regimes must adapt their fiscal, social, and environmental instruments to operate within ecological boundaries while maintaining social legitimacy. This transformation involves integrating emission-reduction targets, green employment strategies, and equitable redistribution mechanisms into the design of social policy. It also underscores the need for policy coherence across environmental, labor market, and welfare domains to prevent contradictions between social protection and climate objectives (Hirvilammi & Koch, 2020). In this sense, the evolution toward sustainable welfare represents a structural reconfiguration of welfare states, where economic performance is no longer the primary benchmark of success but rather one of several dimensions of human and ecological well-being.

The Rise of Sustainability-Oriented Social Policy

Sustainability-oriented social policy represents an integrated approach that connects social protection, environmental responsibility, and economic inclusion (Papadakis & Tzagkarakis, 2025; UNRISD, 2016). Such policies emphasize ecological citizenship, sustainable consumption, and collective responsibility for the commons (Hirvilammi & Helne, 2014). Recent theoretical work expands this understanding by arguing that welfare states must actively enable environmental transitions through redistributive, regulatory, and participatory mechanisms (Büchs & Koch, 2017; Meadowcroft, 2014). In this sense, sustainability-oriented welfare is not an additional policy layer but a reconfiguration of the welfare state's core functions, linking social well-being to the stability of ecological systems and democratic governance.

At the European level, the implementation of sustainability-oriented social policy becomes increasingly visible through frameworks such as the European Green Deal and the Just Transition Mechanism (European

Commission, 2020). These initiatives couple decarbonization targets with employment protection, regional investment, and reskilling programs to ensure that environmental change does not deepen social inequalities (ILO, 2022). The European Environment Agency highlights that achieving absolute decoupling between growth and environmental pressure requires integrating social policy instruments into climate and energy frameworks (European Environment Agency [EEA], 2021). Progress reports from the European Commission indicate that sustainable welfare requires aligning fiscal incentives, green taxation, and public investment with long term well-being objectives rather than short term economic growth (European Commission, 2023).

The institutional dimension of sustainability oriented welfare also involves transforming the principles of labor markets and social protection. The ILO emphasizes that sustainability is fundamentally a social contract issue, requiring institutions to anticipate and mitigate the distributive effects of green transitions (ILO, 2023). This vision aligns with the concept of a green welfare state, where policy frameworks support low-carbon transitions through employment reforms, environmental taxation, and green job creation (Gough, 2016; Koch & Fritz, 2014). Moreover, sustainable welfare transformation depends on policy coherence between economic, social, and environmental domains to prevent contradictions between growth and justice (Spangenberg, 2019). Overall, sustainability oriented social policy represents a critical step toward an integrated welfare paradigm that combines equity, participation, and ecological responsibility.

Social Policy Instruments and the Decoupling Debate

One of the central challenges for sustainable welfare is the empirical decoupling of human well-being from carbon-intensive growth. The literature shows that while high-income countries historically expand welfare through energy-intensive industrialization, a growing number of economies demonstrate relative decoupling between welfare outcomes and emissions (OECD, 2020; UNDP, 2025). Policy instruments that support this trend include carbon-dividend schemes, green subsidies, sustainable public procurement, and social innovation programs (EEA, 2021).

Research also highlights that the success of such policies depends on strong institutional coordination and social legitimacy (Papadakis & Tzagkarakis, 2025; UNRISD, 2016). Welfare systems are therefore expected to integrate environmental objectives into social protection mechanisms, such as unemployment insurance linked to green reskilling, or climate adaptation measures embedded in health and housing policies (ILO, 2022; UNRISD, 2016). In this sense, sustainability oriented welfare reform is not only about mitigating climate risks but about reconfiguring the social contract toward intergenerational equity. Moreover, empirical studies confirm that public environmental awareness, behavioral engagement, and circular economy practices such as upcycling are central to achieving sustainable welfare outcomes (Zhou et al., 2022; İnce, 2025b). Recent cross-country analyses further suggest that diverse social welfare preferences and value systems significantly shape sustainability outcomes and progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals, underscoring the importance of socially inclusive and adaptive policy design (Liashenko et al., 2025; Boarini & D'Ercole, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

Data Sources

This study uses two official and publicly accessible datasets to examine the relationship between human development and environmental sustainability. The first dataset is the United Nations Development Programme Human Development Report 2025 Statistical Annex, which provides Human Development Index (HDI) values for 2023 across 193 countries (UNDP, 2025). The second dataset is the World Bank Environment, Social and Governance Data, released in October 2024, which includes carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions per capita measured in metric tons (World Bank, 2024). These two datasets represent the most recent and comprehensive cross-national measures available at the time of analysis.

Both datasets are harmonized to ensure compatibility in country names, codes, and reporting standards. Countries with missing or inconsistent data are excluded, resulting in a final sample of 181 countries with complete information for both indicators. The temporal difference between HDI (2023) and CO₂ emissions (2020) reflects the different reporting cycles of the two institutions. Both indicators represent stable and recent measures of welfare and environmental performance.

Analytical design

The study adopts a descriptive correlational design to assess the relationship between welfare outcomes and environmental impact. Human welfare is operationalized through HDI, while environmental pressure is represented by CO₂ emissions per capita. Pearson's correlation coefficient (r) and Spearman's rank correlation coefficient (ρ) are calculated, with the significance level set at $\alpha = 0.05$. All statistical analyses are conducted using SPSS Statistics, Version 29.0. The graphical component of the analysis includes scatter plots and regional comparisons to visualize cross-country variation and potential decoupling patterns, which are further discussed in the Findings section.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results show a clear but complex relationship between welfare and environmental impact. The empirical correlation analysis confirms a positive and statistically significant association between the Human Development Index (HDI) and carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions per capita ($r = 0.601$, $p < 0.001$; $\rho = 0.870$, $p < 0.001$). Countries with higher HDI levels generally report higher per capita emissions, reflecting the carbon-intensive structure of many advanced economies. This pattern aligns with previous evidence, suggesting that industrial and service-based welfare models typically depend on high energy consumption and resource use (OECD, 2020; Gough, 2017).

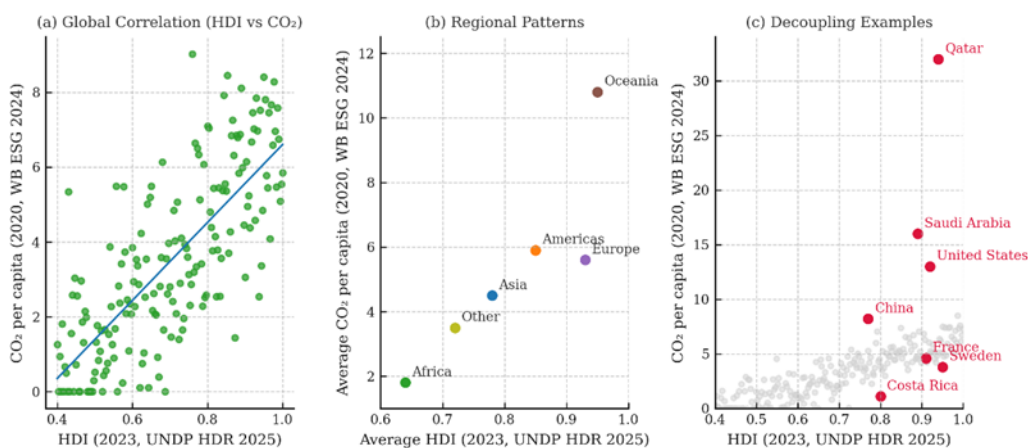


Figure 1a-1c: Global, Regional, and Decoupling Patterns between Human Development and CO₂ emissions

Note. Indicators refer to the most recent available years: HDI (2023) and CO₂ emissions (2020). Source: Author's own elaboration

However, the global scatterplot (Figure 1a) also shows a group of countries that achieve high levels of human development with moderate or low carbon emissions. This decoupling trend (Figure 1c) is most visible in Sweden, France, and Costa Rica, which combine strong welfare institutions with environmental efficiency. These countries invest heavily in renewable-energy and low-carbon transport systems, as well as social programs that integrate environmental goals into welfare delivery. Their experience demonstrates that welfare expansion and ecological responsibility can coexist when supported by coordinated policy design and social investment (European Commission, 2020; ILO, 2022).

Regional averages reveal significant variation (Figure 1b). Europe and Oceania maintain high HDI with moderate emissions, indicating relative decoupling between welfare and environmental degradation. Asia and the Americas display more heterogeneous outcomes, where some economies continue to rely on carbon-intensive development paths. Africa records both the lowest HDI levels and the smallest per capita emissions, illustrating persistent inequality in the global development–environment nexus. These regional contrasts highlight that sustainable welfare transitions depend on institutional capacity, fiscal space, and governance quality (UNRISD, 2016; UNDP, 2025).

The results support the argument that sustainability oriented social policy changes the meaning of welfare itself. Welfare is no longer defined solely through economic performance but through its compatibility with ecological boundaries and intergenerational equity. The countries that show relative decoupling combine social protection and environmental policy under a shared framework. This approach represents a practical manifestation of the just transition principle promoted by the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2022), ensuring that environmental change does not exacerbate social vulnerability.

In this sense, sustainability oriented social policy functions as both a developmental and corrective instrument. It integrates climate objectives into employment, education, health, and housing policies, fostering what can be

termed eco-social governance. This governance perspective shifts welfare systems from reactive compensation to proactive transformation. By linking decarbonization with redistribution and social inclusion, sustainable welfare policy helps maintain social cohesion during structural change (Papadakis & Tzagkarakis, 2025). These findings confirm that welfare expansion in most countries still depends on resource-intensive development models (Gough, 2017; İnce, 2025b; OECD, 2020).

The empirical findings therefore confirm that the sustainability turn in social policy is not only theoretical but visible in cross-national development patterns. The observed correlation does not imply causality but provides strong evidence of a structural link between welfare and environmental performance. The emergence of countries with decoupled welfare and emissions points to new models of sustainable well-being. These emerging models align closely with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 8 on decent work and SDG 13 on climate action, and with the European Union's broader vision for a just and green transition. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that sustainable welfare requires integrating environmental responsibility into the institutional logic of social protection and redefining progress beyond GDP growth. This aligns with the growing literature on sustainable welfare transitions, where countries integrate social, economic, and environmental objectives through coherent policy frameworks (European Commission, 2020; ILO, 2022; İnce, 2025a).

CONCLUSION

The findings confirm that sustainability oriented social policy reshapes the meaning and purpose of welfare. Welfare is no longer confined to the redistribution of economic growth but becomes a multidimensional system that combines social inclusion, environmental responsibility, and long-term human development. This transformation aligns with the global policy shift represented by the United Nations 2030 Agenda and the principle of just transition, both of which promote social progress within ecological limits (ILO, 2022; UNDP, 2025).

The evidence suggests that human development and carbon emissions are positively related at the global level, yet this relationship is neither uniform nor deterministic. A group of countries demonstrates relative decoupling between welfare and environmental impact, maintaining high levels of human development with moderate or low carbon intensity. Together, these examples illustrate that sustainable welfare outcomes are achievable through coherent policy integration, investment in renewable energy, and the inclusion of environmental objectives in social protection and labor market systems.

Sustainability oriented welfare systems thus operate as platforms for collective adaptation rather than passive compensation. They link social resilience with environmental resilience, enabling societies to pursue development without exceeding ecological boundaries. In this sense, social policy evolves into a form of ecological governance that manages the social implications of climate change and resource transition.

The study also underscores the role of global policy coordination. Achieving sustainable welfare requires international mechanisms supporting technology transfer, green finance, and equitable access to resources. Without such cooperation, welfare improvements in high-income regions may continue to depend on externalized environmental costs. The challenge for the next decade is therefore to institutionalize welfare models that balance prosperity with planetary sustainability, ensuring that social justice and environmental integrity reinforce rather than contradict each other.

Ultimately, the transition toward sustainability oriented social policy represents a redefinition of human progress. It replaces the growth centered paradigm of welfare with a framework grounded in equity, participation, and ecological balance. By integrating sustainability into the core functions of welfare institutions, societies move closer to realizing a vision of development that is both inclusive and sustainable.

REFERENCES

- Büchs, M., & Koch, M. (2017). *Postgrowth and wellbeing: Challenges to sustainable welfare*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-59903-8>
- Esping-Andersen, G. (1990). *The three worlds of welfare capitalism*. Princeton University Press.
- European Commission (2023). *Delivering the EU Green Deal – Progress towards targets* (JRC140372). Joint Research Centre: Publications Office of the European Union. <https://doi.org/10.2760/3105205publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu+2esdac.jrc.ec.europa.eu+2>
- European Commission. (2020). *A strong social Europe for just transitions*. Publications Office of the European Union. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_20_20

- European Environment Agency (EEA). (2021). *Growth without economic growth: Decoupling in the EU economy*. Copenhagen: EEA. <https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/analysis/publications/growth-without-economic-growth>
- Fitzpatrick, T. (2014). *Climate change and poverty: A new agenda for developed nations* (1st ed.). Bristol University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1sq5vtd>
- Gough, I. (2015). *Climate change and sustainable welfare: The centrality of human needs*. Cambridge Journal of Economics, 39(5), 1191–1214. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cje/bev039>
- Gough, I. (2016). *Welfare states and environmental sustainability: A comparative framework*. Environmental Politics, 25(1), 24–47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2015.1074382>
- Gough, I. (2017). *Heat, greed and human need: Climate change, capitalism and sustainable wellbeing*. Edward Elgar.
- Hirvilammi, T., & Helne, T. (2014). *Changing paradigms: A sketch for sustainable well-being and eco-social policy*. Sustainability, 6(4), 2160–2175. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su6042160>
- International Labour Organization (ILO). (2022). *A just transition for all: Delivering the Paris Agreement*. Geneva: ILO. <https://unfccc.int/event/unfccc-unfccc-ilo-a-just-transition-for-all>
- International Labour Organization (ILO). (2023). *Just Transition Policy Brief: Social protection for a just transition, key policy messages*. Geneva: ILO. https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40ed_emp/%40emp_ent/documents/publication/wcms_867426.pdf
- İnce, F. (2023). *Comparison of Japan and OECD countries in terms of well-being resources*. Problemy Ekorozwoju, 18(2), 78–85. <https://doi.org/10.35784/preko.3945>
- İnce, F. (2025a). *Gendered migration patterns and labor market dynamics (2010–2024): A longitudinal analysis of social support in employment outcomes*. Journal of Social Service Research. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01488376.2025.2579513>
- İnce, F. (2025b). *From waste to wealth: Leveraging upcycling to drive sustainable e-waste management*. Problemy Ekorozwoju, 20(2), 114–123. <https://doi.org/10.35784/preko.6976>
- Koch, M., & Fritz, M. (2014). *Building the eco-social state: do welfare regimes matter?* Journal of Social Policy, 43(4), 679–703. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S004727941400035X>
- Liashenko, O., Caraballo, M. Á., & Lozano, S. (2025). *Social welfare preferences and sustainable development goals. A multivariate analysis approach*. Sustainable Development. <https://doi.org/10.1002/sd.70115>
- Meadowcroft, J. (2014). Greening the state? In Steinberg, P. F., & VanDeveer, S. D. (Eds.) *Comparative environmental politics: Theory, practice, and prospects*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2020). *Beyond growth: Towards a new economic approach, new approaches to economic challenges*, OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/33a25ba3-en>
- Papadakis, N., & Tzagkarakis, S. I. (2025). Welfare state, social policy and social sustainability, within the context of the permacrisis. *Frontiers in Political Science*, 6, 1451406. [10.3389/fpos.2024.1451406](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2024.1451406)
- Spangenberg, J. H. (2019). Scenarios and Indicators for Sustainable Development: Towards a Critical Assessment of Achievements and Challenges. *Sustainability*, 11(4), 942. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su11040942>
- SPSS Statistics. (2023). Version 29.0 [Computer software]. Armonk, NY: SPSS Inc.
- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2022). *Human development report 2022: Uncertain times, unsettled lives, shaping our future in a transforming world*. New York: UNDP. <https://iiep.gwu.edu/human-development-report-2022-uncertain-times-unsettled-lives-shaping-our-future-transforming-world>
- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2025). *Human development report 2025: Breaking the cycle of vulnerability and inequality (2023 data edition)*. New York: UNDP. <https://hdr.undp.org/data>
- United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD). (2016). *Policy innovations for transformative change: Implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. Geneva: UNRISD.

United Nations. (2015). *Transforming our world: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development*. New York: United Nations. <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>

World Bank. (2024). *World development indicators: Environment, social and governance data* (2020 data edition). Washington, DC: The World Bank Group. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EN.ATM.CO2E.PC>

Zhou, Y., İnce, F., Teng, H., Kaabar, M. K., Xu, J., & Yue, X. G. (2022). Waste management within the scope of environmental public awareness based on cross-sectional survey and social interviews. *Frontiers in Environmental Science*, 10, 1030525. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fenvs.2022.1030525>