



Sustainability and human rights in TV: overlapping agendas

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Introduction

Taking action on the environment is fundamentally aligned to the international human rights agenda. By addressing both areas together, practitioners can build the business case for taking action and ensure that human rights are protected and enhanced as a result of sustainability actions.

The challenge is that sustainability on TV productions is often addressed in isolation of human rights issues including accessibility, mental health and wellbeing, safety, labour rights and land rights. This matters because productions have limited resources and where human rights actions are viewed as in competition with sustainability actions for attention and resources, one or both aspects will lose out.

At an online event in June 2024, the TV Industry Human Rights Forum facilitated a discussion about the overlap between sustainability and human rights in TV production. This paper sets out some of the ideas and opportunities discussed.

How the human rights framework supports climate action and environmental protection

Some of the human rights directly related to the environment:

Right to life (1948)	Environmental issues can kill people – whether through a lack of clean water, sufficient food or as a result of extreme weather.
Right to health (1948)	Climate change and environmental issues can impact people’s health, for example through heat stress or changes in water-borne or vector-borne diseases
Right to water (2010)	Climate change affects all key elements of the right to water: availability, accessibility, acceptability and quality.
Rights of indigenous peoples (2007)	The declaration recognises the fundamental role that indigenous knowledge, cultures and traditional practices plays in “sustainable and equitable development and proper management of the environment” and recognises the rights of indigenous people to the conservation and protection of the environment and productive capacity of their territories.
Right to a clean, safe and healthy environment (2021)	One of the most newly recognised human rights is defined as the right to clean air, healthy and sustainably produced food, access to safe water and adequate sanitation, non-toxic environments in which to live, work and play, healthy ecosystems and biodiversity

Opportunities for alignment

The below table sets out some ideas for solutions to environmental challenges that have both sustainability and human rights benefits.

Area	Suggested solution	Sustainability benefits	Positive human impact
Energy	Fewer working hours	Lower energy usage	Less fatigue, better worker health
	Battery-powered generator	Lower emissions than diesel, less polluting, less noise impact on wildlife	Worker health and wellbeing improved through breathing cleaner air and experiencing less background noise
	Replace halogen lights with LED	Lower energy demand	Lower fire risk
Travel	No late finishes	Makes using public transport more viable	Better work life balance
	Use local crew rather than sending large international crew	Reduces carbon footprint of flights	Supports development of local skills
Catering	Local sourcing of food	Fewer food miles and more seasonal ingredients	Better able to check working conditions of local suppliers
	Meat-free catering or sustainably sourced meat	Fewer carbon emissions and better animal welfare	Fair prices to farmers and their workers
	Pre-ordering food	Reduces food waste	Pressures on catering staff reduced as they are better able to plan
	Providing catering service or restaurant vouchers and restricting use of takeaways	Less packaging and excess plastic	Encourages workers to take proper break and easier to check working conditions of catering workers than gig workers
Waste	Distribute unused food to local charities	Reduces food waste, which has high carbon footprint	Supports local communities in need
Water	Do not shoot in water-stressed areas	Reduces chances of contributing to desertification	Ensures water needed by local communities and their crops is not otherwise diverted
Materials	Material sharing and re-use	Reduces waste and use of virgin materials	Mitigates risks in supply chains where there may be severe human rights abuses
	Local sourcing of materials	Reduces carbon emissions and samples can be viewed before purchase, avoiding potential waste generation.	Better able to do due diligence on suppliers that are local
Biodiversity	Use of non-toxic cleaning materials	Less impact on wildlife	Better for human health (incl. that of cleaners), cleaner water supply
	Knowledge transfer to local crew of good environmental practices	Leaves positive legacy on environment	Upskills local crew to make them more attractive to other productions

Changing the terminology

The language of ‘human rights’ can be challenging for productions to understand in full and it has negative connotations. When discussing the overlapping sustainability and human rights benefits, a phrase such as ‘positive human impact’ might have greater cut-through.

It may also be necessary to demonstrate the overlap through the language of increased profits and productivity, rather than a moral case, addressing upfront concerns that productions may have relating to resources and budgets.

Breaking down the silos

On a TV production, the person or people responsible for sustainability are usually different to those responsible for addressing human rights issues. Even if the person or people are the same, they may think of their sustainability responsibilities as separate to work they are doing on diversity, wellbeing or working conditions. However, there are many ways of integrating approaches, as seen in the table above and detailed below.

Safety, security and sustainability

Choosing to film in locations that offer the least impact on the environment can also reduce human rights risks for the crew considerably. The safety of those involved in a production may be directly affected by extreme weather conditions such as droughts, floods and wildfires. Such considerations may increasingly affect decisions around production locations or about numbers needed to travel to higher risk areas. Reducing business travel is also a sustainability goal so there are opportunities to align the work of different teams, for example by choosing to employ local crew in a location.

Closer to home, safety practices can enhance sustainability, for example by reusing materials to reduce waste, and using non-toxic cleaning products to minimise human exposure to toxic substances, with productions benefiting from fewer disposal fees or pollution fines. This also safeguards natural resources by preventing spills, contamination and toxic emissions into the environment.

Accessibility and sustainability

Bringing accessibility and sustainability together may identify opportunities for productions that meet both the needs of disabled people and the desire to be more environmentally friendly. These could include reusing and recycling access equipment efficiently and ensuring transport options that are non-polluting and can also be accessible.

Disabled people can be performers, contributors, crew and audiences, and so it is important that they are included in sustainability efforts. Attitude is Everything's¹ research on live events² found that disabled people felt there was a mistaken perception that they were not interested in sustainability. However, a large number of disabled people stated that they didn't get involved in climate change as they didn't understand the terminology. Therefore, it is important to reframe the terminology into Plain English, so that disabled people (and others too) are not left out of the sustainability conversation and initiatives due to the language used.

However, it is also important to acknowledge that there may not yet be solutions for some issues that are both environmentally friendly and accessible. For example, disabled people may need single use items (such as straws) and they should not experience blaming or shaming for this, or be prevented from using them.

Health, wellbeing and sustainability

Productions that find sustainable solutions can also offer a significant number of health and wellbeing benefits to those working on them. The use of battery-powered generators rather than diesel-powered can protect the health of crew and the impact on local communities and habitats through cleaner air and less noise pollution.

Where working hours can be reduced and production can take place in daytime, this can reduce fatigue (which impacts both mental and physical health) and lower the amount of energy used. In addition, by filming during the daytime, crew are able to travel more easily using sustainable travel

¹ <https://attitudeiseverything.org.uk/about/>

² <https://attitudeiseverything.org.uk/no-climate-action-without-us-toolkit/>

options such as public transport or cycling, which may not be available to them if travelling late at night or early in the morning.

Productions that can avoid working in locations with particularly high temperatures or limit the people and time needed for such shoots, will also find dual environmental and health benefits. Hotter locations will have significant energy needs for keeping equipment and crew at manageable temperatures and those more likely to be working outside, such as security guards or riggers, may be at particular risk of heat stress.

Labour rights and sustainability

There are significant labour rights risks in the supply chains for equipment, vehicles, garments and merchandise, as well as often high carbon footprints in their manufacturing and transport. Local sourcing and use of recycled materials can mitigate the chances of extreme exploitation in a production's supply chain and reduce the environmental impact of that production at the same time.

In addition, sustainability requirements for productions include recommendations on accommodation, ensuring it is close to a shoot and with good public transport links. Hospitality is also a risk area for labour exploitation worldwide, including in the UK, so checks on accommodation should include due diligence relating to working conditions, as well as their environmental credentials.

Land rights and sustainability

Sustainability teams are starting to address the need to protect biodiversity and restore impacts on nature when productions cause damage to a location. These locations may also provide livelihoods for local communities or be of cultural significance, which should be factored into the initial location due diligence. Where there are local indigenous communities, these are important stakeholders who could and should be consulted and worked with both in advance of a shoot and as part of any efforts needed to restore damaged lands, forests, waterways etc.

In addition, where sustainability teams use carbon offsets to mitigate their carbon footprints, they should do due diligence on the carbon offset projects to ensure that they have not involved physical or economic displacement of local communities from their land, without free, prior and informed consent.

Virtual productions: a sweet spot?

The use of virtual production studios are an example of where many environmental and human rights issues can be addressed at the same time. For example, if a production needs to film a night-time car chase, a virtual production studio can provide a range of benefits, such as:

- No need to take a large crew to a particular location – this reduces travel, supports local employment, is family friendly as people do not need to spend a long time away, and increases inclusivity for disabled people who may have access issues on location shoots
- Ability to recreate sensitive sites that could be damaged – protects nature and cultural heritage
- Ability to film during the day, even for night scenes – better working hours for crew and ancillary workers, and more flexible working hours for those with parental or caring responsibilities
- No need for crew to be filming with moving vehicles – safer for all participants
- No need to close roads – preventing noise, disruption and other impacts on local communities
- Pleasant working conditions - in a temperature-controlled environment rather than dealing with extremes of weather
- Studio is completely renewable and has lower emissions than the generators needed for location filming
- Less set construction required, leading to reduced carbon impacts

Unintended impacts of sustainability solutions

When sustainability is addressed in isolation of the human rights, there are risks that people will be negatively impacted. This can sometimes undermine the case for sustainability initiatives even though non-sustainable solutions (such as fossil fuels, plastics) have severe human rights impacts of their own. The below table sets out some of examples of how this can happen and suggestions as to how to mitigate these risks.

Sustainability solution	Examples of unintended risks to human rights	Suggestions and resources to help mitigate the human rights risks
Use of recycled plastic as a material	Much recycled plastic depends on informal waste pickers working in dangerous and unhealthy conditions, without a living income	Follow best practice due diligence, using this guidance: The Harmonised Responsible Sourcing Framework for Recycled Plastics https://www.thecirculateinitiative.org/responsible-sourcing/harmonized-framework-for-recycled-plastics
Use of solar panels	Many solar photovoltaic (PV) panels have components manufactured by state-sponsored forced labour	Follow best practice due diligence, using this guidance: Addressing modern slavery risks in solar PV supply chains https://www.actionsustainability.com/solar-pv-guidance/
Use of battery technology	The supply chain for minerals and components of batteries are widely linked to forced labour, child slavery and conflict	Insist on material traceability – consider the Global Battery Alliance’s Battery Passport - https://www.globalbattery.org/ ; use recycled batteries where possible
Use of HVO (hydrotreated vegetable oil) as a fuel source	Some HVO includes palm oil that contributes to deforestation and is linked to child labour and forced labour	Follow best practice due diligence, using this guidance: Responsible sourcing of HVO https://www.actionsustainability.com/hvo-guide-launch/
Banning single-use plastic	Single-use plastic items are essential for some disabled people and banning them at a site or location may reduce accessibility	Inclusive design of sustainability solutions and consultation with disabled people
Use of carbon offsets	Displacement of communities from land used for carbon projects and mismanagement of the projects themselves with human consequences	Adequate and comprehensive due diligence on carbon offset projects

Further reading

- Sustainability and human rights: Bringing a business and human rights lens to sustainable development (Shift) - <https://shiftproject.org/what-we-do/sdgs/>
- Built environment: dignity by design (Institute for Human Rights and Business) - <https://www.ihrb.org/focus-areas/built-environment>
- Just transitions: Business, human rights and climate action (Institute for Human Rights and Business) - <https://www.ihrb.org/focus-areas/just-transitions/>