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International Law: The Importance and Place of Lifelong Learning in Promoting Democratic Legitimacy

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Abstract

International law's legitimacy keeps taking hits, mostly because non-democratic states are still part of the global community—and honestly, that just makes things messier as time goes on. Human rights law is actually a pretty new development here. People have found different ways to give it more weight, and one strategy is to push for stronger democracy within the international legal system.

This article takes a closer look at three main ideas and the way they connect. First, democracy boils down to government by the people. Second, legitimacy means the public actually supports what's going on. Third, sustainable development treats democracy as both something you need to get started and something you get as a result. The argument is that if we want the rules of international law to really stick, they need legitimacy—and that comes from empowering people and making sure everyone gets a say, both at home and around the world. Sustainable development pushes for that kind of participation, which helps build the legitimacy that international law depends on.

Keywords: individuals, sustainable development, international law, democracy, legitimacy.

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1. Introduction

Legitimacy is a tough nut to crack in law. The whole idea gets even messier once you start thinking about all the ways legitimacy goes beyond just what's written in the books. Still, it's not something you can ignore. Every legal system leans on legitimacy—without it, nothing really works. If people don't see the system as legitimate, the rules just don't stick. Even international law depends on this, just like any other system.

But here's the thing: people rarely talk about what actually makes international law legitimate, or how to tackle its problems. And international law definitely has its share of legitimacy issues. The global community is all over the place—different countries, different levels of power, and a lot of inequality. That inequality doesn't just stay outside the law; sometimes it gets baked right into the rules, turning into real injustice. And while injustice isn't exactly the same as illegitimacy, it's a pretty big threat.

One of the more convincing theories is that legitimacy comes from public acceptance. In international law, that's often been taken to mean acceptance by states. But that idea is getting pretty outdated. These days, states aren't the only players. Individuals and all sorts of organizations have real influence now. So you can't just measure legitimacy by whether states are on board—especially since not every state is democratic anyway. Sometimes, non-democratic states get to make rules on the world stage, even when their own people don't support them. That's how you end up with international institutions that just don't feel legitimate.

To fix this, international law has started working some new ideas into its own structure. Sustainable development is a big one. It's got the potential to deal with a lot of international law's problems, but this study zooms in on just one: how sustainable development can help boost democracy.

The main question here is pretty direct: How can development around the world make international law more legitimate by pushing democracy forward? To answer that, the study looks into the legitimacy problem, how international law is trying to reinvent itself, and how sustainable development could help through its focus on democracy. The research sticks to how participation—getting more people involved—can tie sustainable development and democracy together.

At its core, the study's betting on this idea: it's possible to make international law more democratic, both directly and indirectly. When more people have a say and feel empowered—when they're actually part of shaping the world they live in—public acceptance goes up. And that's what gives international law the legitimacy it needs to hold together.

2. Introducing the concept of sustainable development into international law to address the legitimacy challenge

2.1 The legitimacy challenge in the existing international order

Legitimacy basically comes down to people believing an institution or rule deserves to be followed. When countries set up the international legal system, they were really betting on this idea—trusting that international rules and the system itself would benefit everyone, even though the world is full of wildly different players. Legitimacy brings some real weight to these rules, mostly by tying them to ideas like justice and fairness. If people see a rule as right and justified, that's what you'd call intrinsic legitimacy (Franck, 1988: 705-706).

Now, there's a debate: Do people trust a rule because of its actual content, or because of where it comes from and how it was created? Hurd (1999: 379-381) dives into that question. Some scholars argue for "process legitimacy" (Franck, 1990: 17)—meaning, as long as a rule follows the right process or comes from an accepted authority, it counts as legitimate. That fits pretty neatly with the positivist tradition in international law.

If you follow that logic, just sticking to the rules and procedures—or making sure a rule comes from the "right" source—means the rule is legitimate. There's no need to look at what the rule actually says. Content, in that view, doesn't matter much for legitimacy.

But let's not forget, the international community that decides what counts as legitimate has changed a lot over time. It used to be just states calling the shots, but things have gotten more complicated. New states have joined, and even individuals—though not entirely—have found a place in the conversation. So now, legitimacy isn't just about what a particular state, or even all states, value. More and more, human considerations, pushed by people themselves, shape these judgments.

And here's the thing: Just because something is legal in international law doesn't automatically make it legitimate. In reality, plenty of "legitimate" actions still get fiercely challenged by the global community. The early dreamers of international law imagined a world run by democratic states that truly represented their people—a kind of global utopia. But if we're honest, that vision hasn't quite come together the way they hoped.

A lot of international lawyers are actually pretty worried about where international law is headed—and whether it can even survive. People like Tasioulas and Besson really push the idea that we need to take a hard look at what's holding the current international order together. They're talking about the big stuff: human dignity, human rights, and global justice. Sellers even calls these the biggest challenges international law faces right now.

Let's be real, these problems aren't just theoretical—they're here, and they're serious. The whole system's at risk. If states and other players start bending the rules or pretending rules are fair when they're not, the system falls apart. We're not just talking about a technical glitch. If everyone ignores this, it's more than just a mistake—it's dangerous. In the end, that kind of neglect could bring the whole thing crashing down.

2.2 Identifying the concept of normativity Sustainable Development

Sustainable development shows up everywhere these days, and for good reason. It's become a core idea in international law, helping push for goals like peace and justice—big stuff that everyone cares about. People have tossed around a bunch of definitions, but most boil down to three big pillars: economic, social, and environmental progress. If you check Mensah (2019: 5-6), you'll see the classic take, which goes back to the Brundtland Commission's 1987 report. They put it simply: sustainable development means meeting our needs now without wrecking the chances for future generations to do the same.

When you strip it down, it's about creating a strong economic, social, and political system that actually keeps the environment in good shape.

It's not just about making money or growing cities—it's about helping people build better lives and protecting what matters for the long haul.

Livelihood development fits into this. It's all about giving people a fair shot—social and economic justice, plus making sure every generation gets the same opportunities. International development law used to be all about economics, but now it's shifted. The focus has widened to human and social development, so things like reducing poverty, creating jobs, improving education, and boosting health services are all part of the picture. There's also a lot more attention on protecting the environment, cutting down on waste, and making sure people get to take part in all of it. The goal? Empower people and help them build quality lives, not just survive.

Since the 1980s, sustainable development has been a hot topic in both research and policy circles. Jump to 1992, and you've got the Earth Summit—world leaders coming together to hammer out deals on climate change and other global problems. Out of that came the "21st Century Agenda," a real action plan. The first rule in the Rio Declaration makes it clear: people come first. Everyone deserves health and well-being. By 1997, leaders met again at the Rio 5+ meeting to check their progress. While they saw some wins, they admitted things hadn't gone as smoothly as hoped when it came to actually making changes happen.

The Johannesburg Declaration from 2002 really shaped how people think about sustainable development. It tried to bring the Millennium Development Goals and sustainability together in one conversation. That was a big deal. Then came the Rio+20 Summit in 2012, which marked twenty years since the original Rio Earth Summit. It stands out as one of the most significant meetings on sustainable development. At Rio+20, world leaders agreed on "The Future We Want," a document that makes it clear: reaching sustainable development goals takes teamwork—governments and regular people working side by side.

In that same spirit, the 2012 conference doubled down on the idea that sustainable development is about more than just economic growth. It's also about making sure human rights are realized for everyone, especially for people who are vulnerable or marginalized. Fast forward to 2015, the United Nations adopted the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. These goals gave everyone a clearer roadmap for real change—no one gets left out. It's all about getting everyone involved, fighting discrimination, and making sure everyone has a shot at a better life. The program calls on governments to make sure every person has the chance to grow, to take part, and to benefit from development. That's the promise at the heart of it all.

2.3 From ensuring the foundations of participation in development to strengthening the principles of Participation in International Law

2.3.1 Ensuring Public Participation in International Law for the Development of the Future

At its core, participation is all about democracy. It's the idea that people should have a real say in their own lives. Norouzi and Bakhtiari talk about this as sharing responsibility for our collective destiny, and the Vienna Declaration backs it up—it says people deserve to freely shape their political, economic, social, and cultural systems, and to take part fully in every part of life.

Put simply, public participation in international law means people get a voice and a chance to shape decisions that affect them. Bekhoven points out that this isn't just about being heard—it's about keeping power in check.

These days, big decisions that shape how we live often come from the international level. Countries then bring those decisions into their own laws. Mendes highlights this shift, and it really shows why we need to make more room for public participation, especially in international governance. If international law is going to have real legitimacy, people need to be involved. Some legal scholars call participation a way to support the rule of law, while others see it as a core principle of good governance. Either way, it's clear—participation is essential for making sure international rules are actually democratic.

Law starts with the public's will. People have the right to take part in making laws and rules. When people participate, it protects the public interest and guides decisions in a way that serves everyone. But for participation to work, it needs to be guaranteed and fit within the realities of global governance.

So, we need to build stronger foundations—both within countries and internationally—to make participation real, not just theoretical. This isn't just a lofty idea; it's how the world moves forward. When we give people real opportunities to participate at home, we set the stage for their voices to matter on the global stage too. But here's the thing: you can't create real public participation at the international level just by relying on each country's own laws. If you do, then governments get to decide how much participation happens, and that limits things. If we want a system where participation is a true commitment—accepted by countries and non-state actors alike—we need clear rules in the international system itself. That's the only way to make sure everyone gets a seat at the table.

The 2030 SDGs lay out a clear framework, rooted in international law, to strengthen public participation everywhere. It's not just a box to check—getting people involved is absolutely necessary for real, sustainable development. Sure, plenty of official documents say this, but at its core, participation actually sparks change in politics and society. That's how democracy grows. And all of this is grounded in international law.

It's worth pointing out that, while states are the main players in international law, things look different from a citizen's perspective—especially in liberal democracies with strong constitutions. For most people, the state is just the system they use to govern themselves and handle daily life (Kumm, 2004: 910).

Some even argue that international law works, even though it doesn't have a single world government to enforce it. States take these rules seriously and put them into practice because people in their own countries accept them. That public acceptance gives the law legitimacy, making international law more democratic over time (Franck, 1990: 25).

2.3.2 Commitment to public participation in sustainable development

Commitment to participation isn't just a passing idea—it's a core principle you see repeated in all the big sustainable development documents, from the 1992 Rio Declaration to the 2030 Agenda. Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration says states need to make sure people know what's going on and can actually get involved. Agenda 21 pushes countries to rethink how they make decisions, urging them to bring together economic, social, and environmental concerns and give the public a real chance to participate.

Fast forward to the 2030 Agenda, and you'll notice it pays special attention to including vulnerable groups—women, developing countries, people living in poverty—in decision-making. SDG 16 spells this out even more, putting responsible and inclusive decision-making at the center. These documents don't just sit on a shelf—they shape how countries and international organizations operate. They lay down the foundation for customs and new conventions (Ramadan Qavamabadi, 2010:110). Over time, softer rights—like participation—chip away at the rigid structures of government and gradually find their place inside them (Philosophical, 2011:488).

Participation isn't just a formal requirement in human rights documents; it's built into the way the system works. But it doesn't stop at just defining a right and telling states to honor it. These frameworks actually lay out how to reach those goals, weaving together different rights and freedoms into a bigger picture. And there's more. If you want real participation in sustainable development, you can't ignore things like poverty, empowerment, and basic human rights. People struggling with poverty or just fighting to meet their basic needs usually get left out of the conversation. Their voices often go unheard.

Eradicating poverty and empowering vulnerable groups isn't just about meeting basic needs like food, education, and healthcare. It's about creating the conditions for everyone to take part in decisions that shape their lives. When people get the tools and the freedom to set goals, design programs, take action, and look back on what worked, real change happens. That's what empowerment means—helping people become the agents of their own progress.

But it's not just about individuals. Building up the capacity of the whole society matters too. The Agenda pushes for fair access to economic and social resources for everyone. It calls for countries to ratify and enforce international agreements, like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and to put real systems in place for tracking and resolving cases of discrimination. You can't build a fair, peaceful society if people face bias because of their gender, background, or race. When opportunities and advantages aren't shared fairly, gaps widen, trust in institutions drops, and people grow frustrated with those in power.

If public institutions want people's trust, they need to treat everyone fairly—no exceptions. As societies grow and change, more people join groups, organizations, and associations. That kind of participation, grounded in empowerment, moves us toward a world where human rights and democracy are real for everyone, not just a promise on paper.

States are supposed to represent their people, not just act in their own interests. When people from all walks of life gain the power to shape their surroundings, they become more active in everything from local community groups to international organizations. Their voices get louder, and their influence spreads. At the heart of it, empowerment happens on two levels: individuals and communities. But honestly, every real shift in society starts with individuals—one person deciding to take action, and others following their lead. That's how change takes root.

Getting people involved really pushes governments to shake up how they work, and honestly, that's the only way to move toward real sustainable development. When we talk about the kind of governance you need for this, it's huge. You have to think about everything—from building fair political systems that actually represent people, right down to how civil society groups run things.

If you want sustainable development, you can't avoid people-focused changes everywhere: politics, society, you name it. Sure, you get the usual economic growth, but that's just one part. You also end up with decision-making that's open and inclusive, plans that actually get carried out, and real results. People start to feel like things are fair and just, and that sense of trust spills over into how much legitimacy governments have—both at home and on the world stage.

3. Legitimacy and the Promotion of Democracy in International Law Based on the Development of the Umhr

3.1 Drawing a Democratic Model for Assessing the Legitimacy of International Law

When we talk about whether a law is legitimate, the first thing that comes up is figuring out who the law is actually about—who it covers, who it speaks to. In a country's own legal system, it's pretty straightforward. The law spells out who's involved, and you get this clear, top-down structure—power flows from the top, and everyone knows their place. But things get messy when you look at international law. There's no neat hierarchy. You don't see one set group at the top calling the shots. Instead, you get all sorts of players—powerful states, big organizations, individuals, non-state actors—everyone on more or less the same level. It's less a pyramid and more a flat field, with lots of different people and groups involved.

This shift is important. Some people argue that, because it's not just about states anymore, you can't use a state's will as the only yardstick for whether international law is legitimate. They say you need to look at human rights—these should be the real measure for legitimacy, both at home and internationally. After all, states don't exist for their own sake. They're there for people. The state isn't more important than the individuals inside it.

Still, a state only works if there's a real, stable population backing it up. Ideally, under international law, states get recognized by other states when the people trust them to act on their behalf. In the end, international law isn't really about protecting the independence of states. It's about the welfare of people. Nowhere is this clearer than in international human rights.

Especially when it comes to international law—think human rights or the environment—states can't stand apart from people. States actually base their decisions to take on international obligations on what's best for individuals and on earning legitimacy for themselves. Sure, there's pressure to go along with certain norms, but at the end of the day, states make these choices for practical reasons (Franck, 2006: 105).

That's why some people argue we need global democracy to make sure international law, and especially international human rights, actually work. They say this is the only real way to give international law legitimacy in the eyes of states. Indirect democracy—where states speak for people—just doesn't cut it. What really matters is getting individuals directly involved in making the rules and shaping international legal processes (Kuyper, 2014: 763). For them, democracy only works if people themselves accept and legitimize it, and that's the real test.

Rights matter because they have a moral impact on people, so they need real justification. Put simply, laws have to be accepted by society (Reisman, 2005: 15). When a state places obligations on people, those

obligations need to feel morally binding—ignoring what people want or think just doesn't work.

Right now, this push for legitimacy is getting stronger. International law doesn't have great enforcement mechanisms, but over time, if rules win acceptance, they're more likely to stick. Of course, the nature of international law makes things messy, and enforcing rules is still a challenge. Plus, even though international civil society groups are growing, they don't always speak for everyone. Often, they just show the agreements and rights people demand from those in power—not the true will of the people (Islami and Bashkar Dana, 2013:55).

In the end, direct democracy—where individuals play a real part in shaping international law—could be the key to making those laws legitimate. If people get to vote, participate, and see themselves reflected in the rules, then those rules gain their real power and legitimacy from the acceptance of the people themselves.

Honestly, this situation feels a bit too perfect for how things actually work. Azienrou points out that, at its core, democracy in international law focuses on real people—those behind the governments—not just the states themselves. There's a layered approach here. Efforts to build connections between domestic and international law borrow a lot from early thinkers like Suarez and Grotius, who started shaping these ideas. International law has grown right alongside these theories (Da'i 2014:210, 212). When you look at it this way, the people—not just the state—keep governments in check, making sure things run according to justice, peace, and humanity, especially inside their own democracies.

3.2 The role of development in ensuring legitimacy by promoting democracy in the existing system

3.2.1 Development and legitimacy

Justice and legitimacy aren't the same thing, but when justice is missing, legitimacy starts to fall apart. People tend to see systems as less legitimate when they believe they're unfair. International law tries to fight inequality around the world, but it runs into trouble—sometimes because it can't get rid of inequality, and sometimes because inequality is baked right into the system. When people talk about justice and legitimacy in international law, the conversations often follow a similar path (Sanklecha, 2009: 14). One of the most important new ideas in international law is the development of human rights. It's seen as a direct answer to global inequality, working by building up democratic structures.

Respecting human rights and putting people at the center of the law is key. International law's push to make things fairer and to reduce inequality is a basic requirement for legitimacy. This focus encourages more people to get involved in democratic processes (Sanklecha, 2009: 11). Meyer, for example, argues that when you're committed to human rights, you can define solid, defensible ways for legal processes to be legitimate.

Sustainable development brings all human rights together as a single, unbreakable set. Real economic, social, and environmental justice—including fairness between generations—comes from sticking to sustainable development worldwide. But here's the real takeaway: sustainable development isn't just another way to smooth over differences or patch up unfairness in international law. The legitimacy of the whole system depends on people actually accepting and living out these principles.

International law seems to get this, and it's created space to strengthen itself as a real global rule. When people participate, it opens up new ways to solve the problems facing international law, and broadening that participation only makes the system stronger. By focusing on empowering people and encouraging participation in every part of society, sustainable development helps build lasting democracies. In countries like India, policymakers have put special emphasis on promoting human rights as a way to move democracy forward. India's National Education Policy (1986), for example, highlights the need to teach values that fight intolerance and violence, aiming to turn India into a more democratic and progressive country (Joseph, 2017: 130).

3.2.2 Sustainable Development and Democracy

When a country falls behind in development, you often see its leaders and their close friends getting rich off the system. The state starts acting like a predator—inside its own borders and beyond. That kind of behavior drives people into deep poverty, sparks violence, and puts everyone's safety at risk. Things only get worse when democracy is weak, and when those in power just want to grab more resources for themselves. In times like these, nationalism creeps in and leaders use it to win elections for their own benefit.

Poverty and chronic illness take a heavy toll too. They make it almost impossible for the weakest in society to speak up, which chips away at the core of democracy itself. Real democracy grows out of development—it depends on people who are educated and capable.

But there's more to it. Sustainable development isn't just about numbers or policies; it stands on a foundation of shared values. When those values line up with what people really care about, democracy has a real shot at lasting (UN Development Programme and UN Department of Political Affairs, 2013: 23). A country that achieves this kind of development lets its people truly decide how things run—not just at home, but on the world stage, representing actual human interests. You see, democratic states—despite what some skeptics say—do a lot to boost people's participation in shaping international law.

Take the right to self-determination, for example. It's a clear sign that democracy is taking root in international law. On top of that, the global movement for people's rights and self-rule shaped much of what we call the "Third World." As more people accepted and followed new rules, international law started to win their support—even if that support was sometimes cautious.

Basically, countries in the Third World wanted security and a real place in the international system. They didn't reject international law altogether; instead, they looked for ways to play a more active and effective role within it.

What really stands out here is how this idea took shape and found its way into international law. It wasn't just some top-down decision. People pushed for it. They wanted more legitimacy, justice, and equality, so they demanded a say in how things work. That's what opened the door for public participation to help solve the problems international law keeps running into.

Now, if you look at human development and what it actually aims for, it's not just theory anymore. These goals came from a real need to tackle major issues. Human development, in the broadest sense, gets that everyone needs to be involved. Real change in the legal system only happens when countries and people work together.

Think about it: if we want global security, we have to make things fair and just between countries. If economic growth is the goal, then everyone needs a fair shot at opportunities. And when it comes to keeping the environment alive, that only happens if everyone pitches in.

Participation sits at the heart of progress. Democracy isn't just a nice idea—it grows out of people getting involved, and it's also what makes that involvement possible. So, when people started taking part in fixing problems, international law picked up on that. It recognized participation as something essential and helped lift democracy's status in the global system. Honestly, participation isn't just a feature of development—it's one of its main building blocks.

When we talk about the development of human rights, it's not just about laws or declarations. It's about making sure different groups in society actually have their needs met and their well-being protected. A big part of that is building up civil institutions—things like public organizations, NGOs, and associations. International documents on human rights stress how important these groups are. Why? Because they help fight discrimination of all kinds—ethnic, religious, gender, you name it—and they give people real opportunities to get involved in decision-making at both national and international levels.

The more people get involved, the more legitimate a government looks. When the state steps back a bit and lets civil society breathe—when people actually have a say in how things run—it makes countries stronger and boosts their legitimacy (Rezaei, 2007:143).

You see this pattern in a lot of places. After communism fell in Eastern and Central Europe, civil society organizations flourished, and that played a huge role in building democracy. It's not just a European thing, either. Countries like South Africa and the Philippines have similar stories (Ishkanian, 2007:8). Since 1990, the number of civil society organizations worldwide has exploded. That's real proof that more people are getting involved, and democracy is, at least in some ways, on the rise (Ishkanian, 2007:8).

But not everywhere follows this script. Take Venezuela, for example. Back in the late 1980s, it was seen as one of the most stable democracies in Latin America. But over time, power began to concentrate at the top. Everything—from education to energy to the environment—became politicized and tightly controlled. Civil society shrank, and with it came more crime, more violence, more corruption. The government just couldn't do its job anymore (Gratius, 2010:13). So, while empowering people and civil organizations pushes countries toward justice and democracy, shutting them out does just the opposite.

Participation isn't just something people do—it's a process, and honestly, it's valuable all on its own. As a basic right, democratic participation lets people step in, shape their society, and actually influence decisions and actions. This is how justice happens. This is how people call out abuses of power and make sure their rights matter (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2003: 271).

Human rights aren't just a checklist—they're all tied together. When people have more freedom and real choices, that's the best way to make sure everyone's rights are protected (Donley, 2002: 247). Look at international law. These rules don't just exist in a vacuum. They work because real people want them to work (Kumm, 2004: 907). That's democracy at the global level.

As states lose some of their old power in international law, activists and other non-state players step up. At the end of the day, those activists are just regular people. So, international law ends up supporting the right of people to govern themselves (Kumm, 2004: 910). That idea isn't new—it's got roots in classic international law theory. Some of the early thinkers in the field argued that international law really comes down to the rights people have, created and shared between people (Trindade, 2010: 254). Sustainable development takes this even further by putting shared participation right at the center.

3.3 Feasibility of Commitment to Direct Democracy in the Structure of the Existing International Order

Trying to build a model of direct democracy that really captures the people's will has set off a whole chain of issues. It's made the flaws of relying too much on states in international law even more obvious, especially when it comes to reaching the real goals of that legal system. The international community still can't fully shift decision-making power away from states, and just because a country isn't a democracy doesn't mean international law treats it as illegitimate. But there are real structural problems here, especially when you think about how individuals can—or really, can't—object to or push back against international law or its institutions. There's just no clear way for people to hold these systems accountable.

Some folks point to civil society and NGOs as the answer, since they're supposed to represent people's interests. But in reality, even if they're people-driven, they don't really have any formal way to be held accountable (Anderson, 2011: 890).

Right now, we can't say that all the decisions made at the international level—like when international rules get set—actually reflect what people want. States and international organizations are still the main actors, and their choices aren't always rooted in the will of the people. There are plenty of governments out there that don't follow democratic principles, but they're still big players on the world stage and have a lot of influence.

People have called out the lack of democracy in how international organizations make rules (Robert, 1999: 20). Just getting nations to agree to founding treaties isn't always enough to make things truly democratic (Alvarez, 2005: 630, 631). Even when non-state actors get a seat at the table as organizations make big decisions, the fact that they can't actually vote means the system's core problem is still there.

Here's the thing: when organizations create their own standards, those rules just don't have the same legitimacy as domestic laws that go through a real democratic process (Alvarez, 2005: 630). So, when people argue that domestic laws always have to match up with international rules—as if international law should take priority—it's a pretty shaky claim.

Sure, direct democracy is a solid way to talk about legitimacy in international law. It puts the focus on what people actually accept, which makes sense. People have a right to that. But honestly, the legal system still needs some serious updates and reforms if we want it to really reflect what people want. Still, the idea of lifelong development has given these foundations a big boost. That concept has made the whole thing a lot stronger.

4. Conclusion:

International law really can't escape the reality of the world it serves. It has to wrestle with the same messiness, power plays, and questions of legitimacy that come with a global community. And legitimacy?

That's a real sticking point. If people or states don't see the system as legitimate, the whole thing starts to wobble.

One big problem is that the early thinkers hoped the world would become a club of democratic states, all worthy of being part of the community. That vision just hasn't panned out. These days, some states that aren't exactly democratic at home are pushing ideas on the global stage that don't represent anyone but themselves. In fact, their proposals often look like their own brand of authoritarianism, just polished up for international meetings. But here's the catch: all states, democratic or not, get to help write the rules. Just because a government says something is legitimate doesn't mean the people agree. If the people don't see the rule as fair or just, it won't feel legitimate—no matter what the official documents say.

So, when international institutions or rules come from non-democratic regimes, they just don't carry the same weight. People push back. The rules lack that all-important sense of buy-in.

Now, lifelong development—that's a different story. If states take it seriously, really commit to empowering people and involving them in decisions, it can actually help fix these legitimacy problems. When people have a real say in development, democracy starts to take root. That spirit of participation—of actually letting people shape their own future—drives the whole process of lifelong development. It's what gives it real power and meaning.

Real participation doesn't just happen on its own. People need to feel empowered first. When folks have decent living standards, respect for their rights, access to information, and a real say in their own lives, that's when they can truly get involved and make a difference.

When you empower people, you're not just helping individuals—you're actually building up society's capacity as a whole. These kinds of social changes push politics in the right direction, shaping the government into something that better reflects what people actually want.

A government that cares about human development works to make sure people can participate in all areas of society. That's how you get democracy to really grow from the inside. When that happens, the government's voice on the international stage actually mirrors what the people want, which gives it real credibility. Sometimes, this even opens the door for people to get involved directly at the international level.

Now, sure, we can't say direct democracy is fully alive and well in international law just yet. But pushing for more direct democracy definitely lifts the whole system, making international law more democratic and rooted in the will of the people. That's what gives it legitimacy. And let's not lose sight of the fact that international law isn't fixed—it's always moving and changing.

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