Thematic studies

IB DP Global Politics thematic studies: rights and justice, development and sustainability, peace and conflict

Thematic studies

- explain **human rights**, how they are protected, and the debate between **universalism** and relativism;
- explain the meanings of development and **sustainability** and how they are measured;
- explain the causes of conflict, the kinds of peace and the rules on the use of force;
- write a Paper 2 essay with a thesis, real cases, a counter-argument and a judgement.

Rights and justice

- **Human rights** are rights that every person has because they are human.
- The **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** (UDHR) was adopted by the UN General Assembly on 10 December 1948.
- In 1966 two treaties made its rights legally binding for the states that join them: one on civil and political rights, one on economic, social and cultural rights.
- **Universalism** says that the same rights apply everywhere. **Cultural relativism** says that rights must be understood within each society's culture and values.

Development and sustainability

- **Aid** : does it build schools and health systems, or create dependence and support weak governments? The answer depends on the type of **aid** and the institutions that receive it.
- **Trade** : exports helped East Asian economies grow fast, but rich countries' farm subsidies and tariffs can block poorer countries.

Development and sustainability (2)

- **Debt** : in the 1980s and 1990s the IMF and World Bank lent money on condition of **structural adjustment** (cuts to spending, privatisation, open markets). Critics say the conditions hurt the poor.
- **Inequality** : growth can reduce poverty while the gap between rich and poor widens, inside countries and between them.

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Peace and conflict

- **Conflict** can be **interstate** (between states) or **intrastate** (inside one state, such as a civil war).
- Since 1945 most wars have been **intrastate**, and many have outside states involved.
- The peace researcher Johan Galtung distinguished **negative peace**, the absence of direct violence, from **positive peace**, the presence of **justice**, fair institutions and cooperation.
- He also described **structural violence**: harm caused by unfair social structures, such as poverty or discrimination, even when no one is fighting.

Writing a Paper 2 essay

- The essay plan is the same as in history: a clear thesis, two or three arguments with named, recent cases, a counter-argument and a judgement.
- Use the theme's concepts by name.
- **Worked essay plan.** A sample question from the IB: *"To what extent is addressing **structural violence** increasingly important to achieving lasting peace?"*
- 1.

Sources for this lesson

- International Baccalaureate, *Global Politics guide* (first assessment 2026).
- United Nations, ***Universal Declaration of Human Rights*** (1948) and the *Charter of the United Nations* (1945), Articles 2(4) and 51 and Chapter VII.
- World Bank, *Poverty and Shared Prosperity* reports and the Poverty and **Inequality** Platform; World Bank and Development Research Center of the State Council, *Four Decades of Poverty Reduction in China* (2022).

Sources for this lesson (2)

- A. Sen, *Development as **Freedom*** (1999).
- J. Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research", *Journal of Peace Research* (1969).
- World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future* (the Brundtland Report, 1987).

Common errors

- Writing about rights as if every state agrees what they are; universalists and relativists disagree.
- Treating the **International Criminal Court** as able to act anywhere; it depends on states' cooperation and has no police of its own.
- Measuring development by GDP alone; Sen and the HDI include health, education and **freedom**.

Common errors (2)

- Using "peace" to mean only the absence of war; Galtung's **positive peace** also removes **structural violence**.
- Writing an essay with one case only, or with no counter-argument.
- Giving cases without dates, places or numbers.

Key terms

- **Human rights**: rights that every person has because they are human.
- **Universalism**: the view that **human rights** apply in the same way to everyone, everywhere.
- **Responsibility to protect (R2P)**: the principle that the international community should act when a state fails to protect its people from mass atrocities.

Key terms (2)

- **Sustainable development**: development that meets the needs of the present without harming the ability of future generations to meet theirs.
- **Positive peace**: not only the absence of war, but also the absence of **structural violence** such as poverty and discrimination.
- **Structural violence**: harm caused by social structures, such as unequal access to food, health or education.

Check yourself

- 1.
- What are the three generations of rights?
- Give an example of each. 2.
- Why was R2P used in Libya in 2011 but not in Syria? 3.