

Thematic studies

International Baccalaureate · IB Diploma · Global Politics · SL

IB Diploma Programme Global Politics SL (the guide first assessed in 2026). Besides the core, SL and HL students study three **thematic studies** : *rights and justice*, *development and sustainability*, and *peace and conflict*. Each is studied through real, recent cases. Paper 2 (1 hour 30 minutes; 40% at SL, 30% at HL) asks for **extended responses** (essays) on these themes.

In 1990 more than a third of the world's people lived in extreme poverty. By 2019 the share had fallen below one in ten. In China alone, close to 800 million people escaped extreme poverty after 1980, according to the World Bank. Over the same years, wars in Syria, Yemen and Sudan forced millions from their homes, and international courts tried to punish the people responsible for mass crimes. Each theme asks what changed, who made it happen, and whose rights, development or **peace** were left behind.

Must-know for the thematic studies:

Theme	Key content
rights and justice	UDHR 1948; three generations of rights; universalism and relativism; ICC; R2P
development and sustainability	development beyond income; HDI; MDGs and SDGs; aid, trade and debt; Brundtland
peace and conflict	types of conflict; negative and positive peace; structural violence; UN Charter; peacekeeping
Paper 2	essays that apply concepts to named, recent cases and reach 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.

Generation	Type of right	Examples
first	civil and political	free speech, a fair trial, the vote
second	economic, social and cultural	education, health care, work
third	collective	development, a clean environment, peace

Universalism says that the same rights apply everywhere. **Cultural relativism** says that rights must be understood within each society's culture and values. The debate matters because it decides who can criticise whom.

Most rights are enforced by states themselves. When a state will not act, international **justice** can step in. The **International Criminal Court** (ICC; Rome Statute 1998, working since 2002) tries individuals for genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity. More than 120 states are members, but the United States, China, Russia and India are not, which limits its reach.

In 2005 UN members agreed the **responsibility to protect** (R2P): each state must protect its people from mass atrocities, and if it fails, other states may act through the UN. In 2011 Security Council Resolution 1973 authorised action to protect civilians in Libya. Critics said the action went beyond protection and helped to remove the government. Afterwards, draft resolutions on Syria were vetoed, and the Council did not authorise action there.

Development and sustainability

Development is more than higher income. The economist Amartya Sen described it as expanding the real **freedoms** people have: to be healthy, educated and able to choose how to live. The UN's **Human Development Index** (HDI, since 1990) combines life expectancy, years of schooling and income per person.

Framework	Years	Goals
Millennium Development Goals	2000–2015	8 goals, mainly for poorer countries: poverty, schooling, child health
Sustainable Development Goals	2015–2030	17 goals for every country, linking poverty, inequality and the environment

Sustainable development was defined by the Brundtland Report (1987) as development that "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".

Key debates for essays:

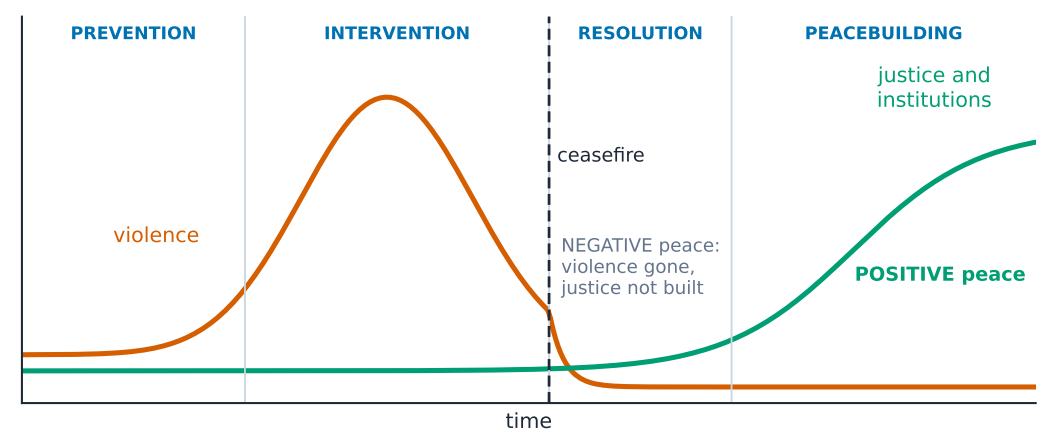
- **Aid** : does it build schools and health systems, or create dependence and support weak governments? The answer depends on the type of aid and the institutions that receive it.
- **Trade** : exports helped East Asian economies grow fast, but rich countries' farm subsidies and tariffs can block poorer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

- **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.

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. A ceasefire brings negative peace; positive peace takes years.



A ceasefire ends the violence; positive peace only arrives as justice and institutions are built.

The **UN Charter** (1945) bans the threat or use of force between states (Article 2(4)). There are two exceptions: **self-defence** (Article 51) and action authorised by the Security Council under Chapter VII. **Peacekeeping** operations are based on the consent of the parties, impartiality, and the use of force only in self-defence or to carry out the mandate.

Case	What happened	What it shows
Rwanda, 1994	about 800,000 people, mostly Tutsi, were killed in about 100 days; the UN reduced its small peacekeeping force	without political will, peacekeeping cannot stop mass killing
Northern Ireland, 1998	the Good Friday Agreement created a government shared by both communities	power-sharing can end violence, but trust takes much longer
Colombia, 2016	a peace agreement with the FARC rebels ended a war of more than 50 years	building positive peace (land reform, justice) is slower than a ceasefire

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. Thesis: to a large extent; most recent wars are intrastate and grow from inequality and exclusion, so a ceasefire alone does not last.
2. Argument: in Colombia, unequal land ownership was a cause of the war, so land reform is part of the 2016 agreement.
3. Argument: in Northern Ireland, power-sharing and equal rights in jobs and housing addressed old discrimination.
4. Counter-argument: direct violence must stop first; without security, reforms cannot happen, and some wars are driven by outside states or armed groups, not structures.
5. Judgement: stopping direct violence comes first, but lasting peace now depends more on reducing structural violence than in the era of interstate wars.

Checklist

- Paper 2: 1 hour 30 minutes; essays on the three themes; 40% SL, 30% HL.
- Rights: UDHR 1948 and the 1966 treaties; three generations; universalism and relativism; the ICC and its limits; R2P with Libya and Syria.
- Development: Sen’s freedoms; HDI; MDGs and SDGs; Brundtland; aid, trade, debt and inequality debates.

- Peace: interstate and intrastate conflict; Galtung's negative and positive peace and structural violence; Article 2(4), Article 51, Chapter VII; peacekeeping; Rwanda, Northern Ireland, Colombia.
- An essay plan with a thesis, cases, a counter-argument and a judgement.