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## **SDG 16: Peace, justice and strong institutions**

### *Introduction*

Decades of conflicts, weak institutions, and human rights violations have posed significant threats to peace, justice, and stability worldwide. Goal 16 of Agenda 2030 addresses these challenges by promoting peaceful and inclusive societies, ensuring access to justice for all, and building effective, accountable, and transparent institutions at all levels. It aims to reduce violence, combat corruption, strengthen the rule of law, and protect fundamental freedoms. Simply speaking, the 16th Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) is the answer to widespread injustice, lack of transparency in governance, and the persistence of violence and conflict in many parts of the world.

The first part of this chapter will outline the primary issues that the 16th SDG attempts to solve, along with their history. It will be beneficial to comprehend the underlying reasons of institutional weakness, instability, and corruption as well as the steps required to fortify democratic government and the rule of law. The targets and indicators covered in SDG 16, which aims to promote justice, peace, and robust institutions, will be described in the text's concluding section.

### *Main challenges addressed in the 16<sup>th</sup> SDG*

There are three main factors that threaten peace, justice, and strong institutions globally. The first and most severe challenge is violence and conflict, which undermine stability and hinder sustainable development. Armed conflicts, terrorism, and organized crime destabilize societies, leading to human suffering and displacement. The second critical factor is corruption and lack of transparency in governance. Corruption weakens public trust in institutions, diverts resources from essential services, and exacerbates social inequalities. The third major challenge is the violation of human rights and the absence of the rule of law, which prevent fair access to justice and democratic participation. When legal frameworks are weak, fundamental freedoms such as freedom of speech, press, and assembly are at risk. These three factors are interconnected, reinforcing each other and making it harder to build peaceful and just societies.



Societies rely on strong and fair institutions to ensure stability and development, yet many regions around the world experience prolonged conflicts and lawlessness. According to the UN, “one in four children live in conflict or disaster-stricken areas” (UNICEF, n.d.), which significantly affects their education, health, and future opportunities. Violent conflicts also fuel displacement; as of 2023, more than 100 million people worldwide have been forcibly displaced due to war, persecution, and human rights violations (UNHCR, 2023).

Corruption is another major obstacle to achieving SDG 16. The Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) reveals that more than two-thirds of countries score below 50 on a scale from 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean), highlighting widespread governance issues (Transparency International, 2024). Corrupt practices in both public and private sectors lead to inefficient allocation of resources and deepen inequality.

Lack of access to justice is yet another urgent problem. . According to the World Justice Project, 5.1 billion people—almost two-thirds of the global population—lack meaningful access to justice, facing barriers such as high legal costs, discrimination, and ineffective judicial systems (WJP, 2023). In many countries, marginalized communities are disproportionately affected, experiencing discrimination in legal proceedings and limited protection of their rights.

These challenges collectively hinder progress toward SDG 16. Without addressing violence, corruption, and the lack of justice, sustainable development in other areas becomes increasingly difficult. These problems will be looked at in further detail in the sections that follow, along with their causes and possible fixes.

### *SDG 16 Targets and indicators*

The indicators for **SDG 16 – Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions** are designed to measure progress toward creating peaceful, just, and inclusive societies. These indicators focus on reducing violence, ensuring access to justice, promoting effective institutions, and addressing key governance challenges.

#### **16.1 Reducing Violence**

One of the primary objectives of SDG 16 is to significantly reduce all forms of violence, which is a major barrier to sustainable development. This target aims to create safer environments where people can live without fear of intentional harm. To monitor progress, indicators track the number of victims of intentional homicide, deaths related to armed conflict, and other types of violence, including physical and psychological harm. These data provide



insight into the severity and prevalence of violence across different regions and communities. Reducing violence not only saves lives but also strengthens social cohesion and economic stability, as peaceful societies are more likely to thrive and attract investments. The United Nations emphasizes that addressing violence in all its forms is essential to breaking cycles of conflict and enabling development to progress uninterrupted (Krug et al. 2018).

### **16.2 Ending Abuse and Exploitation**

Protecting vulnerable populations—especially women, children, and marginalized groups—from abuse, exploitation, trafficking, and torture is another key focus of SDG 16. This target acknowledges that such violations severely limit the ability of individuals to participate fully in society and enjoy their rights. The relevant indicators measure the number of people who suffer from these abuses, shedding light on the extent and nature of the problem (ECPAT International 2021). Tackling exploitation requires coordinated efforts from governments, civil society, and international bodies to strengthen legal frameworks, provide support services, and raise awareness. Ending abuse and exploitation fosters societies where human dignity is respected and protected, creating an environment where everyone can pursue their potential without fear of harm.

### **16.3 Ensuring Access to Justice and Rule of Law**

A fair and functioning justice system is the backbone of peaceful and just societies. SDG 16 stresses the importance of equal access to justice for all, regardless of social or economic status. The indicators under this target track how many people can access justice services and how confident they feel that their rights are upheld by the law. In many regions, lack of access to legal services leads to injustice and marginalization, fueling social unrest. By strengthening judicial systems and ensuring transparency and fairness, countries can enhance the rule of law, which supports human rights, combats crime, and fosters trust in institutions (Ziegler 2018). This goal is vital for social stability and for empowering individuals to seek redress and protection under the law.

### **16.4 Combating Illicit Financial and Arms Flows**

Illicit financial flows, such as money laundering and tax evasion, along with illegal arms trafficking, pose serious threats to national and international security. These hidden economies often finance criminal organizations and conflicts, undermining governance and development efforts. SDG 16 targets the reduction of these illegal activities by tracking their estimated



monetary value and prevalence. Efforts to combat illicit flows include strengthening law enforcement, improving financial transparency, and promoting international cooperation. By cutting off resources for violence and corruption, these measures help build more secure societies and promote economic justice (UNODC 2020).

### **16.5 Reducing Corruption and Bribery**

Corruption and bribery erode public trust in governments and institutions, resulting in inefficiencies and inequality. The indicators here measure how many people report encountering corrupt practices, such as bribery in public services. Fighting corruption involves not only enforcing laws but also promoting transparency, accountability, and ethical behavior in governance (Transparency International 2023). Reducing corruption helps ensure that public resources are used effectively and that citizens receive fair treatment. It also creates an environment where investments can flourish, public services improve, and democracy strengthens. Efforts in this area are crucial for sustainable development and social justice.

### **16.6 Building Effective and Accountable Institutions**

Strong, transparent, and accountable institutions are vital for peace and justice. This target monitors the performance of public institutions in serving their populations efficiently and ethically. It includes assessing whether institutions uphold human rights, combat corruption, and respond to citizens' needs. When institutions are effective and trustworthy, they enhance social stability, enforce laws fairly, and facilitate development initiatives. Building such institutions often requires reforms, capacity-building, and citizen engagement, creating a virtuous cycle of governance that supports long-term peace and prosperity (United Nations, 2023).

### **16.7 Promoting Inclusive Decision-Making**

Inclusive governance ensures that all voices, including those of marginalized and vulnerable groups, are heard in decision-making processes. This target's indicators assess the representation of diverse populations—such as women, minorities, and youth—in political and public institutions. Inclusive decision-making helps create policies that are more equitable and responsive to the needs of the entire society. It fosters social cohesion and legitimacy of governments, which is critical for stability and development. Promoting participation and inclusion in governance processes strengthens democracy and helps prevent conflict by addressing grievances proactively (Hendriks (2019).



### **16.8 Strengthening Global Governance**

Global challenges, from conflicts to transnational crime, require strong international cooperation. SDG 16 encourages countries to actively participate in international agreements and institutions that promote peace and security. Indicators here measure the extent of country involvement in such global governance frameworks. Strengthening these cooperative efforts is essential to tackle issues that cross borders, including arms trafficking, terrorism, and illicit financial flows (Weiss, & Wilkinson 2023). International collaboration enhances trust among nations and enables coordinated responses to complex problems, contributing to a more peaceful and stable world.

### **16.9 Ensuring Legal Identity for All**

Having a legal identity, such as a birth certificate, is fundamental to accessing basic services like healthcare, education, and social protections. SDG 16 aims to provide legal identity to everyone, especially children who are often left undocumented. Indicators track the percentage of people with legal documentation. Without legal identity, individuals may face discrimination and exclusion from social and economic opportunities. Ensuring legal identity supports social inclusion and empowers people to claim their rights and participate fully in society, which is key for equitable development (Gelb, & Metz 2018).

### **16.10 Protecting Freedom of Information and Expression**

Freedom of information and expression are cornerstones of democratic societies. This target focuses on ensuring that people have access to diverse media sources and can express their opinions without fear of censorship or reprisal. Indicators measure media freedom, public access to information, and the safety of journalists. When these freedoms are protected, governments are held accountable, corruption is exposed, and citizens can engage in informed public debates. This openness promotes transparency, trust, and vibrant civic life, which are essential for sustainable development and peace (Freedom House 2022).

Together, these targets and their indicators build a comprehensive framework to create peaceful, just, and inclusive societies. By reducing violence, promoting justice, strengthening institutions, and encouraging transparency and participation, SDG 16 supports the foundations for long-term peace and sustainable development globally.

Considering recent and ongoing armed conflicts around the world — including wars, political instability, and widespread civil unrest — the importance of SDG 16 has only grown.



The devastating impacts of violence on human lives, governance systems, and economic stability highlight how essential it is to invest in peace, justice, and strong institutions. Conflicts not only cause immediate suffering but also erode trust in governments, destroy infrastructure, and reverse years of development progress.

Moreover, as global challenges like displacement, terrorism, cybercrime, and authoritarianism rise, the indicators outlined in SDG 16 serve as a roadmap to build societal resilience. They help guide international and national efforts to strengthen legal frameworks, support vulnerable populations, and ensure that justice and human rights are accessible to all. Upholding these values is especially crucial in post-conflict societies, where rebuilding trust and establishing inclusive governance structures are key to preventing future violence.

Thus, SDG 16 is not just a development goal - it is a critical safeguard for global peace and human dignity in a rapidly changing and often volatile world.

### *The Connection Between Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions*

Peace, justice, and strong institutions are deeply interconnected, forming the foundation for sustainable development and stable societies. Without peace, justice cannot be effectively enforced, and institutions cannot function properly. Conversely, without justice and strong institutions, lasting peace is difficult to achieve. SDG 16 recognizes these interdependencies and aims to address them holistically. **Peace as a Prerequisite for Justice and Strong Institutions.** Peaceful societies provide the necessary environment for justice systems and institutions to operate effectively. In conflict-ridden or unstable regions, the rule of law is often weak, and institutions struggle to enforce laws, protect human rights, or provide basic services. Violence and instability disrupt governance, making it difficult for people to access justice or trust public institutions.

**Justice as a Pillar of Peace and Institutional Strength.** Justice ensures that societies remain fair, inclusive, and free from oppression. When legal systems are weak or inaccessible, people lose trust in their institutions, which can lead to unrest, protests, or even violent conflicts. Ensuring equal access to justice helps to resolve disputes, protect human rights, and prevent marginalization, all of which are essential for maintaining long-term peace.

**Strong Institutions as a Mechanism to Uphold Peace and Justice.** Effective, transparent, and accountable institutions play a crucial role in promoting both peace and justice. Institutions such as courts, law enforcement agencies, and democratic governance bodies ensure that laws



are upheld fairly, corruption is minimized, and public services are delivered efficiently. Without strong institutions, justice becomes arbitrary, and peace remains fragile.

SDG 16 brings these three elements together because sustainable development is impossible without them. Societies that experience violence, corruption, and weak governance face persistent poverty, inequality, and human rights violations. By addressing these issues collectively, SDG 16 aims to create a world where people live free from fear, oppression, and injustice.

Additionally, peace, justice, and strong institutions contribute to other SDGs by creating a stable environment for economic growth (SDG 8), reducing inequalities (SDG 10), and ensuring access to quality education (SDG 4). Without them, achieving the broader 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development would be significantly more challenging.

In summary, peace, justice, and strong institutions are mutually reinforcing. Their integration within SDG 16 ensures a comprehensive approach to building societies that are not only free from conflict but also governed by fairness, accountability, and the rule of law.

### *Rethinking national law in the context of internationalization and the pursuit of peace*

The development of the states in the modern world happens in steps with the global processes and taking the national identity into consideration. Often, it is difficult for the states to follow this process of development maintaining the balance. The law should be the tool ensuring the optimal correlation of both– international and national – values. The observation on the cold war, its following period and the ongoing processes demonstrates that the states within the current globalization cannot develop independently from other states and peoples. The problems facing the world, such as, for instance, environmental protection, the fight against terrorism and other threats can only be defeated with unity. The supranational union of states serves primarily the goal of resolving these global problems. The states unite in such international communities through giving up portion of their sovereignty. Giving up this “portion” of sovereignty sometimes means limiting constitutional, national identity. The control of national identity is the barrier between the national and international (Phirts Khalashvili 2018, p. 43).

International law is one of the relevant elements of the global order. When the foundational values and order changes in the world, international law should be revised and new, different focuses should emerge of its policy priorities (Nolte 2015. pp 557-563). If this is



not the case, the law will not be capable to respond to the challenges and demands of the society, which has historically accompanied the evolution of humanity. According to some part of the scholars in this field, the “acceleration” of the ongoing processes in the world is the one inducing the constitutionalizing of international law (Habermas, 1999, 163; Bogdandy 2006).

In this context, it is noteworthy that Kofi Annan, the seventh Secretary General of the United Nations, established a special commission in 2004 with the goal of enacting novel amendments to the UN Charter and reforming the organization. This reform in and of itself strengthened the elements of international law's constitutionalizing (Fassbender 2005). It is a fact that the globalism of the present period is amazing. The states can hold wars without leaving their territories through cyber means. The threat of terrorism is immense, added with the problem of total inequality between the states. For historic development of the international law the ongoing trend, that the human rights are not only collectively, as a “part” of a state, but also individually, as rights of single persons, have deserved to be internationally protected, is highly significant. This is also supported by that a person beyond the borders of his/her state holds the tool for protecting the rights individually, without the mediation from the state. The filing of a personal suit with international courts serves as a prime illustration of this (Phirtsckhalashvili 2014). It enhances a person's rights as an independent individual on a global scale. A person is not seen as merely a part of a state, a citizen. People are entitled to human rights simply because they are human, not because they are citizens of a particular state.

### *Constitutionalism and strong institutions as a guarantee of peace*

The world was chaotic before state was created. Primitive humans were not aware of each other's rights. They constantly fought within each other for existence. Our ancestors soon realized that the society needed a certain order, such order, which would be obeyed by all – the strong and the weak. The order that, on the one hand, would protect them, while on the other - force them to respect each other. The idea of creation of a state is backed by strive towards establishing security and peace. Creating certain order within the state without binding rules and principles – without establishing legal provisions, – is impossible. Establishing the scope of and maintaining the law and the state governance is conditioned by the existence of constitutionalism (Phirtsckhalashvili 2018, p 45).

In classic sense, the constitutionalism envisages the domain of state power, which provides for the duties of government entities, scopes of their authorities and functions, on the one hand and the rights of a person, on the other hand (Haywood 2004, p 432). The content of



constitutionalism formally is strengthened by the creation or reform of the Constitution. While in modern sense, the constitutionalism reaches into the international and supranational legislation. The evidence of this, for instance, is the creation of unwritten fundamental rights and basis within the rule of law in the order of European community and European Union and raising other national values to the level of supranational by the judges (Arnold 2015, p 18).

The historic development has demonstrated that the interstate order could not be the guarantee for personal security. World peace is necessary for its achievement. The postulates of world peace are read in the “Perpetual Peace” written by Kant in 1795 (Kant 1795; Franck 1539; Penn 1693; de St. Pierre 1712; Rousseau 1782). Pursuant to the “democratic peace” theory of Kant, democracies do not have war with each other. Democratic regime, in Kant’s opinion, ensures the peaceful foreign affairs policy of a state. Kant proposed three prerequisites to the states for establishing and maintaining peace: 1. all states have to be democratic republics. According to Kant, unlike absolute feudal monarchies, western type, democratic governance has significant advantage. In his view, within republican system people become decision maker, thus the government acts within the mandate granted by the people, while war is seen as devastating for people’s wellbeing, the wish to start war decreases; 2. International law should be based on federal unity between free states; 3. International law shall become the world citizenship law and all should be loyal towards it. Kant establishes the theory of world state and underlies the fact that the world state will be the guarantee of perpetual peace and will be the type of state union, which limits the possibility of wars between its member states (Kant 1795, p 43).

This theory has a lot of critics, since it is considered utopic by the neorealism for several reasons.<sup>10</sup> The followers of neorealism criticize the theory of perpetual peace, on the one hand, because they doubt the Kant definition of democracy and, on the other hand, they have their own explanation for the reasons of peace between the democratic states. The realism and neorealism propose different versions of understanding the peace (Mearsheimer & Waltz 2006; Mearsheimer, 1994/1995, pp 5-49; Waltz 2000, pp 5-41; Mearsheimer 1990 pp5-56).

These positions doubt democracy having the essential function for peace and focus on other values, for instance, the cultural similarity between the western states (Kodua et al 2004 p 351) <sup>13</sup> See C. Layne, *Analysis* (n.11). Critics are mainly based on the existence of super-states in the world, since, they are defining international relations, their actions, particularly their wars, have massive impact on international system, unlike other weaker states.

Instead, it is the ideal that the educated humanity should eternally strive towards (Tavadze 2018). Kant’s realism towards perpetual peace is also demonstrated in the fact, that



he does not consider the possibility of realization of this ideal is instant. He discusses the steps, which, in case they are made, could bring the humanity to strongly take the path of achieving this ideal.

The issue of world peace became most relevant after World War II, as it demonstrated that protection of the rule of law and human rights merely at a national level, within a state is not sufficient for world security. However, even today, as is known, armed conflicts are taking place in the world: with wars waged by Russia and other imperialist countries, the international terrorism, massive human rights violations and global inequality, considering the cultural and economic globalization, discussions over the “constitutionalizing of international law” have become particularly topical.

Two world wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have brought the states to the idea of international community. The community of states – on the level of international organizations – is an attempt at reaching the global peace and security. The topic of “constitutionalizing” international law has emerged in the international society. In other words, the constitutional principle the states should be based on in classical sense, should also strengthen the order between the states or, more specifically, between the peoples. This very discourse has become the subject of scholarly discussions within the Western European scholars for the past decade (Diggelmann and Kaufmann 2015; Habermas 2004, p.113).

### *Summary*

Among the most urgent issues endangering the security and advancement of nations around the world are violence, corruption, a lack of justice, and weak institutions. These issues are deeply interconnected: injustice fuels conflict, conflict weakens institutions, and weak institutions enable corruption and human rights abuses. While some actors may prioritize short-term political or economic control, lasting peace and sustainable development can only be achieved through strong institutions that protect human rights, ensure the rule of law, and promote inclusive governance.

Ongoing conflicts and wars around the world have made it painfully clear: justice, strong institutions, and democracy are not optional—they are essential for peace. Without them, sustainable peace cannot be secured. In the short term, justice and peace might appear secondary to state power or economic growth. However, in the long term, they are essential for social cohesion, prosperity, and trust between people and their governments. Just as healthy ecosystems support life, fair institutions are the foundation for functional societies.



To address these challenges, the UN has developed a framework of targets under SDG 16 to guide nations in building more peaceful and just societies. Ultimately, achieving this goal depends on our collective willingness to strengthen democracy, accountability, and human rights at every level.

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