SDG 16: PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS

A LEGAL GUIDE

This Legal Guide to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was first published by Advocates for International Development (A4ID).

Disclaimer

The information contained within this Guide is correct as at the date of publication.

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About A4ID

Advocates for International Development (A4ID) was founded in 2006 to see the law and lawyers play their full part in the global eradication of poverty. Today, A4ID is the leading international charity that channels legal expertise globally toward the achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Through A4ID, the world's top lawyers are able to offer high-quality, free legal support to NGOs, social enterprises, community-based organisations, and developing country governments that are working to advance human dignity, equality, and justice. A4ID also operates as a knowledge and resource hub, exploring how the law can be better used to help achieve the SDGs through a range of courses, publications, and events.

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Foreword

The SDG Legal Initiative

There are now fewer than ten years left to meet the lofty ambitions of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with their target date of 2030. Aware of the challenge, Advocates for International Development (A4ID) has been continuing its innovative work towards meeting these targets, by harnessing the power of the law and the work of lawyers. A4ID's SDG Legal Initiative has been developed because it is now more important than ever that lawyers worldwide come together to use their skills to advance positive global change.

For this reason, A4ID's SDG Legal Initiative aims to reach every lawyer in the world and provide them with the knowledge and opportunities to take practical action to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity. The SDG Legal Initiative also aims to build thought leadership, to create communities of practice, and to amplify the role of the legal sector in achieving the SDGs.

Legal Guide to the SDGs

As part of its SDG Legal Initiative, A4ID has developed the world's first Legal Guide to the SDGs. The Legal Guide has been developed as a unique resource, providing a foundational analysis of the role that law can and should play in the achievement of the SDGs. Developed in collaboration with lawyers, academics, and development practitioners, the Guide is made up of 17 distinct chapters, each focussed on one of the 17 goals. Each chapter provides an overview of the relevant regional, national, and international legal frameworks, highlighting how the law can be applied to promote the implementation of the SDGs. The Guide also offers key insights into the legal challenges and opportunities that lawyers may encounter, presenting clear examples of the actions that lawyers can take to help achieve each goal.

Role of law in maintaining peace, upholding justice, and building strong institutions

SDG 16 is non-negotiable. Established on the foundations of rule of law, equality before justice, peace and accountability, it is the very bedrock upon which the SDG Agenda and wider international legal order has been built. As recent years have borne witness to a systematic dismantling of this framework – at the expense of basic human rights, access to justice, law and order – the role of the international legal community could not be more strongly witnessed than in the auspices of SDG 16 and its targets.

'Peace' and 'justice' are not just rhetoric in the role of law and lawyers. They speak to the very essence and existence of law;

one that is premised upon, and mutually dependent with, the democratic institutions by which we abide. For A4ID these notions are central to the law and justice systems, but also to the wider development agenda, as we seek to create a more sustainable, harmonious and fair world.

However, 'peace' and 'justice' as principles have little to offer if they are not lived in practice, supported by strong and accountable institutions; ones that are both capable for, and culpable to, all individuals and communities. Amid recent wars, growing insecurity, weak institutions, corruption, and limited access to justice, it is the actions of the legal community that will ensure these principles do not become hollow words.

This is especially critical for the many people currently excluded from the protections and opportunities the law ought to provide. Whether lacking legal identity, land tenure, residency papers, or because they are employed in the informal sector, many do not have access to proper healthcare, education, financial services or decent work opportunities.

Yasmin Batliwala

Chief Executive

"The rule of law matters to all of us, to the entire human family." — Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu.

Even where protections are offered, access to justice challenges are faced in countless countries, magnified in the wake of COVID-19. From mounting court backlogs and growing unmet legal need, to a rise in violent crime, digital divides, and the economic challenges posed by the cost-of-living crisis – SDG 16 is in urgent need of progress, partnerships and dedicated action.

It is time then, for the legal profession to lead the way, and become an active part of the sustainability solution. The more we are able to leverage the law as an instrument of justice and accountability, the more we can realise our commitments to the SDG Agenda by 2030.

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The Sustainable Development Goals

The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that all people can enjoy peace and prosperity.

Also known as the Agenda 2030, the SDGs were agreed in 2015 by the UN General Assembly (Resolution 70/1). They were adopted by all UN Member States, and 2030 was set as the deadline for achieving them.

Compared to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which they succeed, the SDGs cover more ground, with wider ambitions to address inequalities, climate change, economic growth, decent jobs, cities, industrialization, oceans, ecosystems, energy, sustainable consumption and production, peace, and justice. The SDGs are also universal, applying to all countries, whereas the MDGs had only been intended for action in developing countries.

The 17 interdependent goals are broken down into 169 targets. At the global level, progress is monitored and reviewed using a set of 232 indicators. The Addis Ababa Action Agenda provides concrete policies and actions to further support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Each year, the UN Secretary General also publishes a report documenting progress towards the targets. In addition, the annual meetings of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) continues to play a central role in reviewing global progress towards the SDGs.

At the national level, even though the SDGs are not legally binding, governments are expected to implement country-led sustainable development strategies, including resource mobilisation and financing strategies, and to develop their own national indicators to assist in monitoring progress made on the goals and targets.

SDG 17 stresses the importance of multi-stakeholder partnerships to achieve the goals. The mobilisation of governments, local authorities, civil society, and the private sector is needed to achieve this aim. Today, progress is being made in many areas, but overall, action to meet the SDGs is not yet advancing at the speed or scale required. This decade must therefore deliver rapid and ambitious action to meet the SDGs by 2030.

Key terms

SDG 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions.

For the purposes of SDG 16, the following terms are defined:

'Peaceful societies': While there is no universally acknowledged definition of 'peace', it is generally understood that this requires more than just the absence of conflict. As highlighted by the UN, a number of conditions are relevant to support a culture of peace - all of which hold new relevance within the sustainable development agenda and against the landscape of today's polycrisis. These conditions include:

- A culture of peace promoted through education,
- Sustainable economic and social development,
- Respect for all human rights,
- Equality between women and men,
- Democratic participation,
- Understanding, tolerance, and solidarity,
- Participatory communication and the free flow of information and knowledge, and
- International peace and security.[1]

In addition, the Institute of Economics and Peace offers an approach towards building 'peaceful societies' on the basis of 'Positive Peace.'[2] This comprises eight key pillars, namely:

i. Well-functioning government,
ii. Sound business environment,
iii. Equitable distribution of resources,
iv. Acceptance of the rights of others,
v. Good relations with neighbouring countries,
vi. Low levels of corruption,
vii. High levels of human capital, and
viii. Free flow of information.

'**Access to Justice**': According to the UN, "access to justice is a basic principle of the rule of law. In the absence of access to justice, people are unable to have their voice heard, exercise their rights, challenge discrimination or hold decision-makers accountable."[3] Strengthening access to justice involves raising awareness about legal rights as well as legal aid services to overcome financial obstacles in seeking justice or redress.

'**Inclusive Societies**': Within the Sustainable Development Agenda, the UN has committed to 'leaving no one behind'.[4] In 1995, the Copenhagen World Summit for Social Development defined an inclusive society as "a society for all, in which every individual, each with rights and responsibilities, has an active role to play."[5]

The UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs interrelates social inclusion with social cohesion, highlighting two key principles that should underpin 'inclusive societies.' These are:

1. Equality: "Social inclusion is the process by which efforts are made to ensure equal opportunities – that everyone, regardless of their background, can achieve their full potential in life. Such efforts include policies and actions that promote equal access to (public) services as well as enable citizens' participation in the decision-making processes that affect their lives."

2. Diversity: "Social cohesion is a related concept that parallels that of social integration in many respects. A socially cohesive society is one where all groups have a sense of belonging, participation, inclusion, recognition and legitimacy. Such societies are not necessarily demographically homogenous. Rather, by respecting diversity, they harness the potential residing in their societal diversity (in terms of ideas, opinions, skills, etc.). Therefore, they are less prone to slip into destructive patterns of tension and conflict when different interests collide."[6]

"We will all profit from a more diverse, inclusive society, understanding, accommodating, even celebrating our differences, while pulling together for the common good." – Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Former Justice of the US Supreme Court

'**Effective, accountable and inclusive institutions**': The UN recognises that it is both formal and informal institutions that determine "how decisions are made, how resources are allocated, how well markets function, how natural resources are governed, how conflicts are managed, and how violence and crime are prevented and addressed."[7]

Effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions are based on rule of law, responding to the needs of people and able to provide timely, appropriate and equitable access to services. Such institutions foster equality and trust among communities, businesses and people by securing their participation and engagement, and tackling corruption.

'**Rule of Law**': A report from the UN Secretary-General, issued in 2004, set out the following definition of the 'rule of law':

"The rule of law refers to a principle of governance in which all persons, institutions and entities, public and private, including the State itself, are accountable to laws that are publicly promulgated, equally enforced and independently adjudicated, and which are consistent with international human rights norms and standards. It requires, as well, measures to ensure adherence to the principles of supremacy of law, equality before the law, accountability to the law, fairness in the application of the law, separation of powers, participation in decision-making, legal certainty, avoidance of arbitrariness and procedural and legal transparency."[8]

During the process of deliberation on the SDGs, the UN General Assembly made the connection between the rule of law and development clear. A 2012 UN General Assembly Declaration States:

"The advancement of the rule of law at the national and international levels is essential for sustained and inclusive economic growth, sustainable development, the eradication of poverty and hunger and the full realisation of all human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the right to development, all of which in turn reinforce the rule of law, and for this reason we are convinced that this interrelationship should be considered in the post-2015 international development agenda."[9]

Overview of the targets

SDG 16 is not only a goal in itself but also necessary for the implementation of the entire 2030 Agenda. By building an international framework in support of all 17 goals, SDG 16 is a cornerstone for holding governments accountable to their 2030 commitments. At the same time, the ambitions of SDG 16 in ensuring responsive and representative decision-making, rule of law, access to justice and effective global governance, creates a foundation upon which international laws and policies can be delivered in support of the 17 SDGs.

In 2023, data was made available against the full suite of SDG 16 indicators for the first time, and the proportion of countries reporting on at least one target had more than doubled since 2019. Yet despite this expanded evidence base, SDG 16 continues to suffer from greater data gaps than many of the other global goals — particularly in low-income settings, where adequate resources for data collection and analysis remain scarce. This lack of nuanced and disaggregated data continues to obscure a more comprehensive understanding of how peace and justice is being secured for all segments of the global population. Indeed, latest available data identifies a worrying trend: as of 2025, none of the SDG 16 targets were on track to be achieved by 2030, with 15% in active regression.[10]

In many ways, this trend is unsurprising. UNDP, UN Human Rights and UNODC note that: "worldwide, trust in institutions is waning... [while] waves of unconstitutional transitions of power are undermining rule of law and human rights and weakening governance systems."[11] This sentiment is further reflected in on-the-ground realities, with conflict-related civilian deaths having seen a steep rise over three consecutive years, forced displacement having reached record highs, and press freedom having been identified as showing some of the most widespread reversal of progress globally.[12]

A further challenge arises due to the complex nature of SDG 16, in which many targets are incredibly nuanced and multidimensional. Target 16.3, for instance, seeks to promote the rule of law and ensure access to justice for all, but in reality, is only able to account for some of the ways in which these dynamic concepts can be measured. Additionally, several targets under SDG 16 are concerned with illicit and illegal activities (e.g.: human trafficking, organised crime, corruption, etc.), making it difficult to collect accurate data through official reporting channels. Perceived decreases in this area can also be symptomatic of more sophisticated covert operations rather than being reliably indicative of progress. In countries with higher corruption levels, conflicts of interest and/or political incentives can also compromise data integrity, producing datasets that paint governments and State institutions in a more favourable light.

In recent years, information manipulation including the spread of misinformation, disinformation and fake news, has created additional challenges for holding governments and institutions to account. This is further magnified by the role of social media algorithms in promoting divisive, highly polarised and often sensationalised narratives, with direct implications to SDG 16.6 and SDG 16.10.[13]

Data trends must therefore be approached with much caution and an especially critical eye when making assessments against SDG 16. As such, observers should remain cognisant of the ideological, political and pragmatic challenges of measuring progress against objectives for peace, justice and accountable institutions. The following breakdown of each target under SDG 16 provides an insight into the current global situation on social inclusion, access to justice, and accountability.

Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere.

SDG 16.1 is a highly ambitious target, aiming to reduce all forms of violence in all places. However, due to its wide scope, it is also more ambiguous than other targets, lacking a quantitative indicator of what 'significantly reduce' means in real terms.

Instead, the indicators used to measure progress against this target cover the effects of violent crime, including reported victims of intentional homicide, conflict-related deaths, the proportion of the population subjected to physical, psychological and sexual violence in the preceding 12 months, and the proportion of the population that feel safe walking alone after dark in the area in which they live.

While these indicators look toward individual harms and experiences, they are also inextricably linked to the national and international context. According to the International Monetary Fund, 1 billion of the world's population reside in countries affected by fragility, conflict, and violence (FCV).[14] Internal conflicts often generate external consequences like human displacement, increased crime, and terrorism, all of which transcend local borders and spill into the international community. Already-fragile countries such as Yemen, and regions such as the Sahel, have experienced food shortages linked to other conflicts such as the war in Ukraine.[15] Others, such as the conflict in Gaza, have had devastating impacts on civilian populations – with Occupied Palestinian Territories accounting for the overwhelming majority of conflict-related child (8 in 10) and female (7 in 10) deaths recorded in 2023–2024.[16] The ramifications of this conflict have spread, with the widening confrontation between the US, Israel and Iran drawing in multiple actors across Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq and Syria.[17]

The landscape of global violent conflict has shifted significantly in the past decade, severely reducing the stability of many global regions, especially during and in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Between 2021 and 2022, the UN recorded a 53% increase in civilian deaths associated with deadly armed conflict — the first increase since the beginning of the SDGs.[18] This rose 72%, year-on-year, with an additional 40% from 2023 to 2024, reaching at least 48,384 civilian deaths in that period alone.[19] As new conflicts emerge, making strides toward the attainment of targets under SDG 16 will be essential for the ongoing protection and emancipation of those most at risk. International law, peacekeeping and aid mechanisms are all under increasing strain to properly govern and alleviate such conflicts, thus hampering progress toward SDG 16.1.

Importantly, issues of widespread violence are not limited to those states directly engaged in conflict. Between 2007 and 2017, the global homicide rate was roughly stable at 6 per 100,000 people. However, 2021 saw the highest number of intentional homicides in two decades, at 450,000 globally, attributed partly to poor socio-economic conditions arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.[20] Indeed, there exists a direct correlation between social inequality and urban violence: homicide rates are higher in countries with a higher Gini index (representing high income inequality) than in more equal societies.[21]

According to current trends, the global homicide rate is projected to decrease to around 4.5 per 100,000 by 2030.[22] While the homicide rate has dropped overall, women and girls are affected disproportionately by homicide in domestic settings, and the rate of female versus male victims has decreased at a far slower rate (5% versus 14%, respectively).[23]

End abuse, exploitation, trafficking, and all forms of violence against and torture of children.

All forms of violence against children under 18 years old constitute 'violence against children'.[24] It can be physical, sexual, or emotional, and is often connected to personal, cultural, economic and social issues. Violence against children can also appear in multiple settings: at home, in schools, in all types of care, within the justice system, at work (which is often illegal), and on the internet.[25]

Protecting children against violence is particularly necessary, as failure to do so may result in a cyclical repetition of violent acts: those who are exposed to violence from a young age are at heightened risks for self-directed and inter-personal violence, which can carry over to the next generation of children, and so on.[26]

The following indicators are used to measure progress towards this target:

- the proportion of children who experienced physical punishment and/or psychological aggression by caregivers in the past month;
- the number of child victims of human trafficking; and
- the proportion of young women and men who experienced sexual violence by age 18.

Violent discipline at home is the most common form of violence experienced by children. All forms of violent discipline, physical and psychological, are a violation of children's rights. According to UNICEF, in a majority of countries, more than two thirds of children (1.6 billion) are subjected to violent discipline by caregivers in the home.[27] This issue is compounded, in that mechanisms to protect children from violent discipline remain insufficiently enforced. At present, only 68 States have fully prohibited all forms of corporal punishment against children worldwide.[28]

Human trafficking represents another important metric in measuring the exploitation of children worldwide. While we know that the number of victims of human trafficking worldwide is growing, it is unclear whether this increase is a sign of increased trafficking detection by authorities, or whether it reflects a growing trafficking problem in itself. Accordingly, while detection figures for this indicator fell during the COVID-19 pandemic, some have attributed this to the reduced capacity of authorities to identify victims and pursue traffickers rather than a real-terms fall in victims. Since then, the number of victims detected has seen a steady increase, up 31% from 2019 levels.[29]

Estimates show that over a third of identified trafficking victims globally are children. While reasons for trafficking vary greatly, girl victims are trafficked primarily for sexual exploitation (60%) and boys for forced labour (45%), forced criminality or forced begging (47%).[30] Migrant children, unaccompanied minors and children in other vulnerable circumstances represent some of the main targets of abuse and violence. Armed conflicts and displacements often result in the detention, forced labour and trafficking of children.[31]

Sexual violence is one of the most unsettling of children's rights violations, used to cover different types of sexual victimisation, from direct physical contact to unwanted exposure, to sexual language and images. Currently, poor data availability makes it difficult to properly evaluate progress toward this goal at a global level. That said, latest UNICEF estimates suggest that approximately 90 million children alive today have experienced sexual violence, underscoring the scale of the challenge even where comprehensive data remains elusive.[32]

Promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all.

This indicator is measured against the proportion of victims of violence who have reported their victimisation within the previous 12 months; the number of unsentenced detainees as a proportion of overall prison population, and; the proportion of the population who have experienced a dispute in the past two years and who accessed a formal or informal dispute resolution mechanism.

Reporting victimisation is the first step for victims seeking justice. When alerted, competent authorities should conduct proper investigations and administer the law effectively and efficiently. Unfortunately, a lack of trust in the police, courts and other authorities, as well as difficulties in accessing them, can negatively influence the reporting behaviour of victims. The principal method currently available to assess the amount of *unreported* crime globally, is through analysis of Crime Victimisation Surveys, which seek to uncover reasons for non-reporting.[33] Available data from 92 countries shows that reporting rates vary significantly by *type* of crime. For example, findings show the median proportion of victims reporting to authorities on robbery was 45%, compared to 35% for physical assault, and just 15% for sexual assault. This reflects a significant barrier to access, particularly for survivors of sexual violence.[34]

The second indicator is based on the principle that persons awaiting trial shall not be detained in custody unnecessarily. This, in turn, is premised on the right to be presumed innocent until proven guilty. From a development perspective, extensive use of pre-sentence detention can divert criminal justice system resources that are much desired in other areas, for example in better serving victims of crime. Moreover, over-reliance on pre-judgement detention has contributed to rampant overcrowding in prisons across the world, with almost two thirds of countries operating at over 100% of their intended capacity, and over a quarter at 150% capacity or higher.[35]

According to the UNODC, the proportion of prisoners held in detention without being sentenced for a crime has remained almost the same for the past twenty years, at 29-31% of the prison population. This statistic often occurs in correlation with a period of high administrative burden to the courts, forming a backlog when they are unable to process new cases.[36] However, detainment for long periods without trial represents a considerable procedural injustice; and in serious circumstances can constitute a breach of human rights.[37] By region, some notable shifts have occurred in this area. In Latin America and the Caribbean, the proportion of unsentenced detainees fell from 41% in 2015 to 30% in 2023. In contrast, Central and Southern Asia saw a marked increase rising from 50% to 60% over the same period, meaning that the majority of prisoners in the region were held without sentence. More broadly, the overall gender dimension to prison populations is also significant, with men making up over 94% of the prison population in 2023, while less than a million women were detained globally.[38]

The introduction of indicator 16.3.3 regarding dispute resolution mechanisms, represented a significant step towards broadening the framework beyond criminal justice. However, data remains extremely limited, with only ten countries having reported on this indicator to date.

The rule of law is a broad notion that encompasses many high-level jurisprudential doctrines, as well as more procedural and substantive aspects of the justice system, and the current indicator framework still captures only a fraction of the ways in which the rule of law can be measured. In 2023, the World Justice Project (WJP) estimated that 1.5 billion people worldwide had civil, administrative and criminal justice needs left unmet.[39] More broadly, the WJP's Rule of Law Index rates countries across eight dimensions, offering a more holistic picture of the rule of law than the current SDG indicator framework alone.[40]

By 2030, significantly reduce illicit financial and arms flows, strengthen the recovery and return of stolen assets and combat all forms of organised crime.

SDG 16.4.1 looks to measure the total value of inward and outward illicit financial flows (IFFs). However, at the development of this indicator, there was no universal agreement on what might constitute IFFs or how to measure them at a global level. This was not only problematic in assessing progress against the indicator, but in combatting IFFs given the international nature of financial flows. In an attempt to create consensus, joint efforts by the UNODC and UNCTAD led to the development of a 2020 Conceptual Framework for the Statistical Measurement of Illicit Financial Flows.[41] This framework sets out the main forms of IFFs, including tax evasion, mis-invoicing within trade transactions, market manipulation, and income generated from criminal activities, corruption and/or exploitative activities.

However, to date, only 34 countries have participated or are participating in pilot testing the new framework,[42] and tracking IFFs continues to be extremely challenging as funds are often deliberately hidden, multidimensional and complex.[43] At the same time, the prominence of offshore accounts and the availability of tax havens make it difficult to trace the movement of money, with an estimated 10% of global GDP held in offshore financial assets, and up to $7 trillion of the world's private wealth funnelled through tax havens and secrecy jurisdictions.[44]

Together with bribery and corruption, IFFs affect both the Global North and South in tandem, albeit with disproportionate impact on developing countries, and has led to recent changes in laws and oversight measures to prevent money laundering and terrorism financing. These efforts are most effective where they are deployed as cross border collaborations, leading to global initiatives such as the Financial Action Task Force, the Tax Justice Network and the Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative that seek to combat IFFs.

While not a direct cause of IFFs, the rise in digital technologies is also an important enabler in the movement of money, increasing the speed and ease at which large sums may be transferred, with oversight and regulation lagging behind. That said, digital technologies also offer solutions for detecting and disrupting IFFs if developed and deployed effectively.[45]

Linked to this, SDG 16.4.2 measures the flow of illicit arms. While there is a considerable focus on reducing the supply of illicit firearms and ammunition, a key challenge remains to develop policies and interventions that would reduce demand, particularly as today's geopolitical climate sees a rapid increase in armed conflicts and rising insecurity. As a result, one billion firearms are now thought to be in circulation globally, with many diverted from national stockpiles and a rising number having been created with the use of new technologies such as 3D printing.[46] Meanwhile similar challenges remain in the detection and disruption of illicit arms flows as with IFFs, with recent data from 55 countries suggesting that up to 25% of seized firearms are still untraceable.[47]

While efforts on the above indicators show promise, much work needs to be done in expanding and standardising approaches as general trend data for organised crime is too broad to be assessed under current metrics. That said, related criminal activities that operate tangentially to illicit financial and arms flows are on the increase globally, including the trafficking of drugs and certain protected species, and the operation of smuggling rings across various illicit goods.[48]

Substantially reduce corruption and bribery in all their forms.

Transparency International defines corruption as "the abuse of entrusted power for private gain," which undermines people's trust in the political and economic system, as well as in their institutions and leaders.[49]

While the true cost of corruption is difficult to ascertain, it is widely accepted that corruption causes a swathe of detrimental economic and social developmental effects, both within and among nations.[50] According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, "economic development in developing countries is stunted because foreign direct investment is discouraged, and small businesses often find it impossible to overcome the 'start-up costs' required because of corruption."[51] Corruption further hampers the ability of government institutions to function effectively, often resulting in the denial of basic services to those most in need of it, causing disproportionate harm to the poor and vulnerable. Thus, corruption has been named by the UN as one of the largest impediments to achieving its 2030 SDGs.[52]

There are two indicators under SDG 16.5, covering the proportion of persons and businesses, who had at least one contact with a public official and who paid a bribe to a public official, or were asked for a bribe by those public officials, during the previous 12 months.

Data for these indicators varies greatly between regions, both globally, and within countries. There are several correlative trends that provide some emerging ideas as to when and how corruption emerges, though each is qualified with reference to great variability within the data. For instance, individuals coming into contact with corruption appears most prevalent in low-income countries, with this prevalence reducing gradually the higher a nation's income. Moreover, early data suggest men are more likely to come into contact with corruption than women, largely due to the nature of male-dominated sectors, such as the police, customs and land administration.[53] In business, around 15% of companies globally face requests to bribe public officials.[54]

Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index is arguably the most widely used indicator of corruption worldwide, with a scoring system of 0 to 100 (0 indicating perceptions of 'high corruption' and 100 indicating perceptions of being 'very clean'). Recent scores demonstrate a long-term decline in tackling corruption, with the 2025 global average sitting at 42 (the lowest score to date), and over two thirds of countries scoring below 50. This decline is attributed to unaccountable leadership, weak standards and enforcement, growing restrictions in holding governments to account, and backsliding on anti-corruption efforts.[55]

In an effort to reverse recent trends in corruption, lawyers and the legal system have a critical role to play, with Transparency International calling for strengthened justice systems, greater oversight of public functions, protections of civic space, democracy and media freedom, and greater checks and balances to ensure public institutions remain independent, impartial and accountable.

"At a time of climate crisis, instability and polarisation, the world needs accountable leaders and independent institutions to protect the public interest more than ever – yet, too often, they are falling short." - Maíra Martini (CEO, Transparency International)

Develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels.

Building effective, accountable, and transparent public services, and strengthening public governance goes hand in hand with the aspirations of SDG 16.5 to combat corruption. As part of this, effective budgeting is necessary to ensure the delivery of quality public services. Indicator 16.6.1 is therefore measured by reference to how far government spending deviates from allocated resources.

In general, deviations had been improving for several concurrent years, reaching 0% in 2019. Since then, however, the situation has worsened, particularly in the period during the COVID-19 pandemic where global deviations rose to 12.6% in 2020 with low- and lower-middle-income countries experiencing higher volatility.[56] Public financial management (PFM) systems came under intense strain following this, and the 2022 Global Report on Public Financial Management concluded that PFM systems were largely insufficient to deal with crisis periods, failing in pertinent areas such as budget execution.[57]

While financial management may seem somewhat divorced from lived realities, this goal is inherently linked to *trust*, with public services and citizen-government relations coming under increasing scrutiny, particularly since the advent of the global polycrisis. As such the UN has identified 'enhancing public sector capabilities' as a high-impact area for accelerating progress toward 2030, reflecting a more general trend toward robust evidence-based policymaking, and linking citizen perceptions to improved governance.[58]

Accordingly, the second indicator under SDG 16.6 concerns accountability, and examines perceptions of public services, as experienced by users, looking specifically at healthcare, education and an array of government services. While perception-based surveys capture a wide variance in attitudes toward public services, they can be useful in providing a general aggregate of service performance that is comparable between nations.[59]

Available data for this indicator suggests that, globally, majority of people are satisfied with public services, with no significant disparities observed between genders. Here, administrative services receive the highest satisfaction rating (64%) followed by education (58%) and healthcare (57%). However, some variations are noted in the latter sector, with healthcare services ranging from 93% satisfaction in some countries, to only 9% in others.[60]

Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels.

This target addresses democratic governance focusing on participation within the electorate, political institutions and public institutions to ensure that leadership and decision-making is inclusive and representative of the populations it serves.

The following indicators are used to measure progress:

- the proportion of positions (by sex, age, persons with disabilities and population groups) in public institutions (national and local legislatures, public service, and judiciary) compared to national distributions; and
- the proportion of population who believe decision-making is inclusive and responsive, by sex, age, disability and population group.

As with many of the targets under SDG 16, national statistics offices around the world have traditionally not captured data related to these indicators, making global progress and trends difficult to monitor. That said, the turnover of more than 12,000 parliamentary seats in 2024, made it easier to see general trends within parliamentary representation, including incremental progress on youth representation and a backsliding in female representation:[61] with women's global representation in parliament standing at only 27.2% as of 1st January 2025.[62]

This is the case despite heightened conversations in recent years for greater female representation in public decision-making, prompted by the impacts of COVID-19. For example, unmistakable gender inequalities following the pandemic created urgent calls for greater female representation in building back better: with 2022 elections dominated by women's rights issues worldwide. This, coupled with a shift to digital campaigning offered greater flexibility for political responsibilities to be balanced with caregiving and domestic work, making parliaments more accessible workplaces. However, despite these developments, digital and financial exclusion within campaign management, along with a surge in violence against women, shrank the spaces in which women could actively and safely contribute.[63]

As a result, the UN stated that the 2024 'super election' year was "a missed opportunity to advance inclusive parliamentary representation and leadership,"[64] with it currently seen that "incumbents - typically older and male - maintain a tight grip on leadership positions" worldwide.[65]

Within public services and the judiciary, gender parity gaps are also witnessed, albeit to a lesser degree worldwide. However, aggregate figures mask regional disparities with female representation markedly lower in Central, Southern and Western Asia and North Africa. Even in regions where parity has been achieved (including overrepresentation of women in some countries), positions held are often less senior with limited decision-making potential. For example, women are still significantly underrepresented in senior government positions and high-level, constitutional and supreme courts.[66] To better understand the barriers to entry that contribute to glass ceilings such as these, lawyers can get involved with initiatives such as the "Raising the Bar: Women in Law" project being run by the International Bar Association.[67]

Ensuring that decision-making at all levels is responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative remains a global challenge, with less than half the population (44%), from data obtained in 83 countries, signifying approval.[68] Such decision-making processes often rely on traditional means of engagement that do not adequately represent all segments of the population, and dissatisfaction with inclusive decision-making is directly related to the increase in mass protests globally,[69] which are themselves becoming larger and more prolific.[70]

Broaden and strengthen the participation of developing countries in the institutions of global governance.

The structural design of many international institutions including the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and UN Security Council, as well as the distribution of voting rights within them, allows politically and economically powerful Global North States to exert disproportionate influence over the outcomes of key debates and policy outcomes. While Global South States are making gains in this area, the distribution is still far from equal; and all the while, the landscape is growing ever-more complex.[71] Others have argued that power shifts within international institutions need to be considered cohesively (i.e. in view of both rising and declining powers) to make accurate assessment of changes to the global order, and the institutions that modify it.[72]

"...the global financial architecture is outdated, dysfunctional, and unjust. It is no longer capable of meeting the needs of the twenty-first century world." – UN Secretary-General, António Guterres (2023)

Imbalances in international institutions are gaining increasing recognition, and efforts are being made to rebalance power within the current regime of global governance. SDG 16.8 recognises the importance of enhancing the inclusiveness and representation of developing countries within the decision-making processes of international institutions. The indicator used to measure progress towards this target is "the proportion of members and voting rights of developing countries in international organizations."

Organisations of the World Bank Group currently operate under complex a system, whereby the voting share of individual nations depends on the capital stocks held by members. While developing countries represent just under three quarters of the membership, they only have a voting share ranging from 32% (International Finance Corporation) to 38% (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development).[73]

Effecting changes to these statistics is a challenging process within international institutons, often entangled with international and geopolitical changes to power, conflict and the global order.[74] Indeed, some have suggested that international institutions perpetuate inequalities by reproducing existing circumstances of global stratification.[75]

There has been some progress towards addressing this imbalance: in 2016, a reform at the IMF shifted around 6% of quotas from over-represented to under-represented Member States, to further enhance the representation of emerging and developing countries. In 2020 however, a further proposed increase was reportedely stifled by souring US-China relations.[76] The latest round at the end of 2023 saw a 50% increase in quotas approved at the IMF, which while positive, does little to correct international power imbalances within the Fund.[77] Other high-profile calls for reform have proposed changes to the governance structure of the Fund, including the inclusion of a third chair for Sub-Saharan Africa on the IMF Executive Board in 2024, to increased representation in the region.[78]

By 2030, provide legal identity for all, including birth registration.

Legal identity has no single agreed definition under international law. For some, it is the recognition of a person's right to exist before the law. For the UN, it refers to "the basic characteristics of an individual's identity, conferred through registration and the issuance of a certificate by an authorized civil registration authority."[79] To access services such as health, education, financial and judicial services, people often need to prove their identity. Official identification is also crucial to protect children from child labour, child marriage, trafficking and exploitation.

Legal identity is a human right, recognised in various human rights instruments, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. As such target 16.9 was perhaps less controversial to adopt than other targets under SDG 16, though the exact definition of 'legal identity' remains elusive. This has caused consistency issues in implementation[80] – what (if any) legal rights does identity confer, to whom, and to what extent?

Presently, the indicator used to measure progress towards this target is "the proportion of children under 5 years of age whose births have been registered with a civil authority." Latest estimates place the number of people that lack legal identity at approximately 800 million, a slight improvement from 850 million in 2021,[81] and the number of unregistered children under 5 at 150 million.[82]

While legal identity is intended under the SDG framework as an inclusive formalisation of rights that grant access to other positive tangential outcomes (e.g. social protection, healthcare, economic participation) it also risks enhancing the opposite by formalising exclusionary practices. Without clear parameters as to what legal identity means, those excluded from the system can find themselves helpless to access many essential services.[83]

Legal identity then, is also linked to the issue of statelessness. This is because, under the vestiges of SDG 16.9, legal identity is directly linked to the process of registration, with statelessness defined by virtue of an unregistered status. This lack of documentation does not only pose dire consequences at an individual level but means that accurate data is difficult to come by.

The UNCHR officially reports that there are 4.4 million stateless people in the world, noting however, that the actual figure is likely far higher (in excess of 10 million). High-profile initiatives such as the UNHCR's #IBelong have helped raise awareness of these issues and reduce statelessness in the decade it has been active, though more action is still needed in combatting statelessness overall.[84]

"The day I held the Thai ID card in my hand, I felt happiness and massive relief. I now have the same rights. I don't have to live in fear anymore." - Meepia, former stateless person from Thailand.[85]

Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements.

The right to information is directly linked to the freedom of expression. It is recognised by multiple international instruments, including the UN Declaration of Human Rights and Resolution 59 of the UN General Assembly. Democracy is strengthened when access to information is free as governments can be held accountable for their actions and citizens can make informed decisions regarding their political choices.

The following indicators are used to measure progress towards this target:

- the number of verified cases of killing, kidnapping, enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention, and torture of journalists, associated media personnel, trade unionists, and human rights advocates in the previous 12 months
- the number of countries that adopt and implement constitutional, statutory and/or policy guarantees for public access to information

The first indicator measures the ability of people to exercise fundamental freedoms in expression and access to information without threat or interference. The killing of journalists, trade unionists, and other human rights defenders has a clear and direct effect on people's decision to exercise such freedoms.

According to latest year-on-year data, there was a 40% increase in killings of this nature, and a threefold increase in enforced disappearances in 2022.[86] As of 2024, these numbers continue to remain alarmingly high, with over 500 killings of journalists, trade unionists and human rights defenders documented across 44 countries, and 123 disappearances across 37 countries.[87] In particular, conflict is identified as a key driver, with the greatest risk posed to journalists in Northern Africa and Western Asia, while human rights defenders are most at risk in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Pertaining to the second indicator, public access to information is measured by the number of countries that adopt and implement constitutional, statutory and/or policy guarantees for public access to information. According to the most recent data, the number of countries that had laws guaranteeing the right to public information is now 140 (as of 2024), as compared with just 14 in 1990.[88]

While substantial growth in the formal recognition of these rights under the law is certainly cause for celebration, this also needs to be considered in light of existing challenges in implementation and enforcement. For example, Afghanistan is currently rated top in the world for the quality of its freedom of information laws[89] – while at the same time, 90% of its human rights defenders report being threatened with various acts of violence, aggression and other forms of harm or repression when they attempt to exercise such rights.[90]

"I'll turn the page on a growing empire of classified information, and restore the balance we've lost between the necessarily secret and the necessity of openness in a democratic society..." – Former US President Barack Obama

Strengthen relevant national institutions, including through international cooperation, for building capacity at all levels, in particular in developing countries, to prevent violence and combat terrorism and crime.

The presence of robust, independent institutions is essential to the success of SDG 16 as a whole, and in many respects, underpins the entirety of the SDG agenda. Public institutions are required to uphold the fundamental rights and liberties of individual citizens, and as such, must operate at the national level, established by statute or constitution. Crucially, these institutions must maintain their independence from State interference – particularly National Human Rights Institutions, which are monitored as part of indicator 16.A.1.

National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) are responsible for scrutinising and assessing the human rights performance of the State. They protect and promote human rights, and represent a necessary balancing force in upholding democracy and the rule of law. Common types of NHRIs include Human Rights Commissions, National Ombudsmen services, and Human Rights Institutes, though their exact nature can vary across States and jurisdictions.[91] The minimum standards to which NHRIs are expected to adhere were established by the Paris Principles.[92]

Positively, current data indicates that for the first time since 2015, more than half of countries worldwide (55%) have an NHRI that meets these standards. In addition, a further 25 countries hold NHRIs partially compliant with the Paris Principles. As such, the UN surmises that progress against this target is "on the right track, but the pace must be accelerated."[93]

The Danish Institute for Human Rights identified certain challenges in this area, particularly with regard to the balancing act of NHRIs, between advising and scrutinising the government, risking their legitimacy with human rights victims and advocates, and/or leveraging influence to ensure continuing authority amongst state actors.[94] Others have commented on the special position of NHRIs in upholding public perceptions of democracy more broadly.[95]

While effective NHRIs certainly assist in defending human rights violations, more data is needed to understand what kind of institutions and interventions best serve this purpose.

Promote and enforce non-discriminatory laws and policies for sustainable development.

The UN defines discrimination as: "any unfair treatment or arbitrary distinction based on a person's race, sex, religion, nationality, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, disability, age, language, social origin or other status."[96] Laws and policies serve as crucial instruments for promoting and enforcing formal equality, actively shaping national frameworks to reduce discrimination.

At the international level, harmonisation between jurisdictions can help ensure clarity and equal application across member states, which helps to prevent uneven and unjust outcomes amongst victims of discrimination. As such, there are a multitude of UN conventions that deal in more depth with specific forms of discrimination, for example the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and agencies that promote inclusion and emancipation, such as the pursuit of gender equality by UN Women.

While target 16.B directly references the use of law and policy

to eliminate discriminatory practices, the indicator provided measures the proportion of the population reporting having personally felt discriminated against or harassed in the previous 12 months on the basis of a ground of discrimination prohibited under international human rights law. As such, this indicator measures the perceptions of those affected, rather than the existence of laws and policies themselves.

New evidence from 119 countries has helped to identify trends in global discrimination, with a clear consensus that discrimination "is a widespread and patterned experience, rooted in social identity and status."[97] Through analysis of disaggregated data, the evidence establishes that approximately 1 in 5 people globally were subject to discrimination in the last twelve months, with women twice as likely to experience discrimination than men, and around a third of people with disabilities experiencing discrimination as compared with only 17% of persons without disabilities.[98]

Further analysis demonstrates that the likelihood of discrimination is linked to multidimensional inequalities that have resulted in stigmatization and social exclusion. As such, intersectional analysis is key to developing effective laws, policies and targeted educational programs for combating discrimination and fostering more inclusive societies.[99]

Key actions lawyers can take

The final section of this chapter provides more details on how the international legal community can engage in efforts to achieve SDG 16. However, the following short summary describes some of the key actions that lawyers can take to contribute to the sustainable development agenda on peace, justice, and strong institutions.

Learn and educate

Of all 17 SDGs, SDG 16 is the most directly relevant to the law and justice systems at both the national and international levels. Legal professionals should already be well versed in many of these objectives, but can work with partners to develop resources on the role of law and the legal profession in fostering peace, justice, and strong institutions around the world. This includes public legal education campaigns and advocacy efforts to promote the rule of law, ensuring that all persons and governments are held accountable for their actions.

Integrate

A global effort is underway to engage businesses and financial institutions in supporting the achievement of the SDG agenda. Corporate counsel, as well as lawyers who advise private sector clients, can play a key role in facilitating awareness and action in this respect.

The UN Global Compact is a leading corporate responsibility initiative, encouraging companies to support a core set of values in the areas of human rights, labour rights, environment, and anti-corruption. The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights also aim to provide an authoritative global standard for preventing and addressing the risk of adverse human rights impacts linked to business activities.

Act

In every country, the legal profession has a pivotal role in ensuring a well-functioning, accountable and transparent government. Justice institutions built on legal standards and citizens' experience of the law and legal services are also vital. Through pro bono work, advocacy, and community involvement, law firms around the world can contribute to ensuring access to justice for all. This includes protecting the global legal order by providing pro bono support to complex, multilateral law and policy making, strengthening access to justice and rule of law, and assisting civil society organisations and justice defenders around the world.

Elements of the international legal framework

Charter of the United Nations

Adopted: 26 June 1945

Entered into force: 24 October 1945

Status of ratification (as of April 2026): 193 Parties

The Charter that established the United Nations provides a substantive foundation for key elements of SDG 16. For example, the Charter's preamble expressly states a shared determination:

- to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war,
- to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small,
- to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained, and
- to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom.

Article 1 sets out the Purposes of the United Nations, including core commitments to "maintain international peace and security" and to promote and encourage "respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion."

Seventy-five years on, this international commitment to peace, security, and fundamental freedoms holds new relevance within the context of the Sustainable Development Agenda and the polycrisis now facing today's international community.

Statute of the International Court of Justice

Adopted: 26 June 1945 (as an annex to the Charter of the United Nations)

Entered into force: 24 October 1945

Status of ratification (as of April 2026): 193 Parties

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) is the principal judicial organ of the United Nations (as established by Article 92 of the UN Charter). As such, the ICJ is responsible for deciding legal disputes between States regarding interpretations of treaties or questions of international law. The Court may also render advisory opinions on legal questions raised by UN organs and agencies.[100] Under Article 38 of the Statute, the Court is to render decisions based on international conventions, international custom, general principles of law, and subsidiarily, judicial decisions and the teachings of the most highly qualified publicists of the various nations.

Between 22 May 1947, when the first case was filed, and 18 September 2025, 201 cases have been filed before the Court.[101] Herein the ICJ serves as a pillar of the post-war international legal order, contributing to the peaceful settlement of disputes and to the development of international law.

The seat of the Court is established in The Hague at the Peace Palace. In September 2018, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The Netherlands appointed the Peace Palace as the 'SDG 16 House', the first of its kind in the world.[102] The Carnegie Foundation, which owns and manages the Peace Palace is therefore a useful source of information on SDG 16, regularly hosting dialogues on contemporary issues in peacebuilding and international cooperation.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Adopted by the UN General Assembly: 10 December 1948

This landmark declaration urges all nations to promote respect for specified rights and freedoms, and to secure their universal and effective observance through progressive national and international measures. The articles contained within the Declaration set out a series of civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights. Although the declaration was not intended to create legally binding obligations, it now represents a common standard of achievement that is widely regarded as customary international law. Moreover, many of its provisions have subsequently been adopted in binding international human rights instruments.

Of relevance to the context of SDG 16 are Articles 2 (freedom from discrimination), 3 (right to life, liberty and security), 4 (prohibition of slavery), 5 (prohibition of torture and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment), 6 (right to recognition before the law), 7 (right to equality before the law), 8 (access to justice), 9 (freedom from arbitrary detention), 10 (right to a fair trial), 12 (right to privacy), 19 (freedom of expression), 21 (right to partake in public affairs) and 28 which provides that: "Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in the Declaration can be fully realized."

As the advancement of SDG 16 requires attention to the full range of human rights instruments and their implementation mechanisms, a further nine UN human rights conventions are currently in force and legally binding on the Member States to this effect. A number of these are also supplemented by optional protocols.

International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination

Adopted by the UN General Assembly: 21 December 1965

Entered into force: 4 January 1969

Status of Ratification (as of April 2026): 182 Parties

The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) seeks to ensure that human beings enjoy civil, political, economic and social rights without any distinction of race, colour, or national/ethnic origin. The ICERD requires States to both prohibit and eliminate racial discrimination in all its forms.

The Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination takes steps to monitor the work of States towards fulfilling their obligations under the Convention. To do so, periodic reports are submitted to the Committee by State parties. This includes processes for State-to-State complaints, as well as for individual complaints in the event that ICERD rights have been violated by a State party.

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

Adopted by the UN General Assembly: 16 December 1966

Entered into force: 23 March 1976

Status of Ratification (as of April 2026): 175 Parties

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) commits all parties to respect the civil and political rights of individuals. Along with the UDHR and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the ICCPR forms the International Bill of Human Rights.

An Optional Protocol, ratified by 116 States, further recognises the competence of the UN Human Rights Committee to consider complaints from individuals who claim their rights under the Covenant have been violated.

SDG 16 is based on the premise that sustainable development cannot progress without peace, stability, human rights and effective governance founded on the rule of law. The ICCPR in its entirety, is therefore directly relevant to SDG 16's objectives and ambitions.

In line with the objective of peaceful societies and the reduction of violence, Article 6 affirms the inherent right to life of every human being. Here it is iterated that the right to life must be protected by law, whereby no person can be arbitrarily deprived of their life.

Of paramount importance for the rule of law is Article 14 which enshrines the right to equality before courts and to a fair trial. This article aims to ensure the proper administration of justice. To this end, it guarantees a series of specific rights which form key elements of human rights protection and enforcement. These include:

- equality before courts and tribunal
- the right to a fair and public hearing before a competent, independent and impartial tribunal
- the presumption of innocence in criminal matters.[103]

Article 24 also recognises the right of every child to be registered at birth and to receive a name and a nationality.

Finally, Article 25 recognises and protects the right of every citizen to take part in the conduct of public affairs, the right to vote and to be elected, and the right to have access to public services. This is instrumental for responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making.[104]

International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights

Adopted by the UN General Assembly: 16 December 1966

Entered into force: 3 January 1976

Status of ratification (as of April 2026): 173 Parties

The International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), drawing on the UDHR, affirms human rights and encourages social progress. Legally binding on a large number of States, it indicates a wide consensus on economic, social and cultural human rights. However, to date, there remain a number of States that have signed but not ratified the ICESCR, notably Cuba, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, and the US.

Article 2 of the ICESCR reflects a 'progressive realisation principle', imposing a duty on parties to "take steps... to the maximum of its available resources, with a view to achieving progressively the full realisation of the rights recognised in the present Covenant by all appropriate means."

As SDG 16 encompasses the protection of fundamental freedoms and human rights, including all economic, social and cultural rights, the ICESCR is directly relevant to it in its entirety.

Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women

Adopted by the UN General Assembly: 18 December 1979

Entered into force: 3 September 1981

Status of ratification (as of April 2026): 189 Parties

The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) defines what comprises discrimination against women and sets an agenda to eliminate it. As with some other human rights instruments, a Committee is in place to monitor compliance with the Convention, including the responsibilities on States to guarantee the human rights and fundamental freedoms of women "on a basis of equality with men." This encompasses:

- the public sphere, with a focus on political life, representation and rights to nationality;
- the social and economic sphere, with a focus on education, employment and health; and
- the private sphere, with a focus on equality in marriage and family life.

Article 15 enshrines the equality of women and men before the law. State Parties must legally recognise that women have a legal capacity identical to that of men and the same opportunities to exercise that capacity. This includes equal rights to conclude contracts, administer property, and equal treatment in all stages of procedure in courts and tribunals.

With regards to inclusivity and representation of decision-making, Article 7 obliges State parties to take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in political and public life. In particular, States must guarantee for women, on equal terms with men, the rights:

- to vote in all elections and to be eligible to all publicly elected bodies;
- to participate in the formulation and implementation of public policies; and
- to participate in civil society organisations.

Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

Adopted by the UN General Assembly: 10 December 1984

Entered into force: 26 June 1987

Status of ratification (as of April 2026): 176 Parties

The Convention Against Torture (CAT) confirms the general prohibition of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, affirmed in various human rights instruments (e.g.: Article 5 of the UDHR or Article 7 of the ICCPR). The prohibition of torture is absolute: no exceptional circumstances whatsoever (war or a threat of war, internal political instability or any other public emergency) may be invoked as a justification of torture (Article 2.2).

The Convention obliges State parties to take active measures to prevent acts of torture in any territory under its jurisdiction. In addition, it offers the right to prompt investigation, adequate redress and compensation for victims of torture, including the right to rehabilitation.

Convention on the Rights of the Child

Adopted by the UN General Assembly: 20 November 1989

Entered into force: 2 September 1990

Status of ratification (as of April 2026): 196 Parties

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) sets out the civil, political, economic, social, health and cultural rights of children. It defines a child as "any human being under the age of 18, unless the age of majority is attained earlier under national legislation." The CRC is the most widely ratified international human rights treaty. Notably, the United States is the only country that has signed, but not ratified, the Convention.

SDG 16 contains explicit references to children's rights. For example, SDG 16.2 aims to end the abuse, exploitation, trafficking, violence, and torture of children. According to Article 19 CRC, State parties must take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social, and educational measures to protect children from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation. Articles 34 to 36 further contain specific obligations to protect children from sexual exploitation and trafficking.

Similarly, the ambitions of SDG 16.9, which are concerned with recognised legal identity, are enforced under Article 7 CRC which requires children to be registered immediately after birth, providing the right to a name and a nationality. The article also States that children should, as far as possible, know and be cared for by their parents.

In line with the objective of promoting peaceful societies, Article 38 further forbids States to recruit children younger than 15 years old into their armed forces.

Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families

Adopted by the UN General Assembly: 18 December 1990

Entered into force: 1 July 2003

Status of ratification (as of April 2026): 60 Parties

The International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (ICRMW) is the most comprehensive treaty on the rights of migrant workers. It defines a migrant worker as "a person who is to be engaged, is engaged, or has been engaged in a remunerated activity in a State of which he or she is not a national."

The Convention covers the civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights of migrant workers, with most provisions applicable to all migrant workers, both documented and non-documented, as well as extending to members of their families. Several provisions are specifically applicable to those who are considered irregular or non-documented migrants.

Compared to other UN human rights instruments, the ICRMW has achieved a much lower rate of ratification. Moreover, most of the ratifying States are in Africa and Latin America, traditionally regions where migrants originate from; however, thus far, none of the European States, the US, Australia or

Canada has signed or ratified the Convention.

Of particular relevance for SDG 16 is Article 9, which reaffirms the rights of migrant workers and their families to life; Article 13, which provides for the freedom of expression; Article 10, which offers protection against torture; and Article 16, offering protection against violence, physical injury, threats, intimidation and arbitrary detention. With respect to SDG 16's focus on inclusivity and participation, Article 41 also recognises that migrant workers and their families have the right to participate in public affairs, to vote, and to be elected in their State of origin. For their country of employment however, Article 42 only invites States to take account of any special needs, aspirations, and obligations of migrant workers and members of their families. The possibility for migrant workers and their families to vote in their State of employment is only to be 'envisaged as appropriate.'

Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

Adopted by the UN General Assembly: 13 December 2006

Entered into force: 3 May 2008

Status of ratification (as of April 2026): 193 Parties

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) affirms that all persons with any type of disability must enjoy all human rights and fundamental freedoms.

"Realizing the rights, agency, and leadership of persons with disabilities will advance our common future. We need everyone, including persons with disabilities, on board to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals" - Antonio Guterres (UN Secretary-General)

The Convention's guiding principles include respect for inherent dignity and individual autonomy, full and effective participation and inclusion in society, equality of opportunity, and accessibility.

In line with SDG 16.1, Article 16 of the CRPD calls for freedom against exploitation, violence and abuse for all persons, with responsibilities placed on the State to implement specific measures for the protection of persons with disabilities both within and outside the home.

Article 13 of the Convention further calls for the strengthening of the rule of law, ensuring that there is "effective access to justice for persons with disabilities on an equal basis with others" and suggesting useful mechanisms for this to happen.

Finally, Article 29 ensures that persons with disabilities can "effectively and fully participate in political and public life on an equal basis with others," while Article 4.3 secures a consultative space for those with disabilities to actively shape future legislation and policies.

International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance

Adopted by the UN General Assembly: 20 December 2006

Entered into force: 23 December 2010

Status of ratification (as of April 2026): 78 Parties

The International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED) asserts that no one shall be subjected to enforced disappearance (Article 1.1) and that no exceptional circumstances whatsoever may be invoked as a justification for doing so (Article 1.2).

Article 2 of the ICPPED defines the term 'enforced disappearance' as "the arrest, detention, abduction, or any other form of deprivation of liberty by agents of the State or by persons or groups of persons acting with the authorisation, support or acquiescence of the State, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or by concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person, which place such a person outside the protection of the law."

Article 5 of the convention affirms that the widespread or systematic practice of enforced disappearance constitutes a crime against humanity. In order to bring perpetrators to justice, the convention looks to both criminal law reform and international cooperation. It also affirms the right of families to know the fate of their disappeared relatives and to obtain justice and reparation.

Specific international treaties

International treaties on a range of subjects related to peace, justice and strong institutions help to support SDG 16. Securing greater participation of States with these treaties also serves to advance the rule of law.[105] These treaties, in addition to the aforementioned, include topics such as:

- the prohibition on genocide and crimes against humanity
- international humanitarian law
- peace agreements
- international courts and tribunals
- conventional and nuclear weapon disarmament
- anti-terrorism measures
- criminal law cooperation
- status of refugees, and
- reduction of statelessness

By way of example, the following two treaties in the field of international cooperation in criminal law are directly relevant to SDG 16 targets.

UN Convention against Transnational Organised Crime

Adopted by the UN General Assembly: 15 November 2000

Entered into force: 29 September 2003

Status of ratification (as of April 2026): 194 Parties

The UN Convention against Transnational Organised Crime is the main legal instrument used to combat organised crime at an international level and is supplemented by three Palermo Protocols against human trafficking, smuggling of migrants, and firearms trafficking.[106]

Under the Convention, States agree to take a series of measures to fight transnational organised crime, including the creation of domestic criminal offences against organised criminal groups, money laundering, corruption, and the obstruction of justice. Further commitments are made to adopt frameworks addressing extradition, mutual legal assistance, and law enforcement cooperation.

The Conference of the Parties to the Convention reviews implementation of State responsibilities and helps identify emerging forms of transnational organised crimes such as cybercrime, illicit financial flows; and terrorism.[107]

"If crime crosses all borders, so must law enforcement. If the rule of law is undermined not only in one country, but in many, then those who defend it cannot limit themselves to purely national means." - Kofi Annan (Former UN Secretary General)

UN Convention against Corruption

Adopted by the UN General Assembly: 13 October 2003

Entered into force: 14 December 2005

Status of ratification (as of April 2026): 192 Parties

The UN Convention against Corruption is the only legally binding universal anti-corruption instrument.[108] According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, the Convention's far-reaching approach and the mandatory character of many of its provisions make it a unique tool for developing a comprehensive response to a global problem.

The Convention is comprised of five main areas:

i. preventive measures
ii. criminalisation and law enforcement
iii. international cooperation asset recovery
iv. technical assistance, and
v. information exchange.

The Convention's remit is particularly broad, covering many different forms of corruption, such as bribery, trading in influence, abuse of functions, and various acts of corruption in the private sector. One particular highlight is the inclusion of a specific chapter on asset recovery, aimed at returning assets to their rightful owners, including countries from which they had been taken illicitly.

To implement the Convention, State parties must take measures such as increasing the penalties for corruption offences, introducing the offence of foreign bribery, enhancing the protection of witnesses and victims, and strengthening the capacity of anti-corruption authorities.

Soft laws and declarations

Declaration on the Right to Development

Adopted in 1986 by the UN General Assembly, the Declaration proclaims the right to development to be: "an inalienable human right by virtue of which every human person and all peoples are entitled to participate in, contribute to, and enjoy economic, social, cultural and political development, in which all human rights and fundamental freedoms can be realized."[109] Notwithstanding political and conceptual disagreements, the UN World Conference on Human Rights later recognised the right to development as "a universal and inalienable right and an integral part of fundamental human rights."[110] The right to development thus strengthens the link between civil and political rights and economic, social and cultural rights, and reinforces a human-rights based approach to the development sector.[111]

In 2000, the Declaration on the UN Millennium Development Goals proclaimed: "We are committed to making the right to development a reality for everyone and to freeing the entire human race from want." In 2015, the Declaration on the SDGs acknowledged that it is informed by the Right to Development (paragraph 10). It also builds on a vision of development as a comprehensive economic, social and political process which is grounded in the realisation of the full range of human rights.[112]

Notably, the Declaration on the Right to Development addresses these ambitions in the specific context of SDG 16-related issues. Paragraph 35 states:

"Sustainable development cannot be realized without peace and security; and peace and security will be at risk without sustainable development. The new Agenda recognises the need to build peaceful, just and inclusive societies that provide equal access to justice and that are based on respect for human rights (including the right to development), on effective rule of law and good governance at all levels and on transparent, effective and accountable institutions. Factors which give rise to violence, insecurity and injustice, such as inequality, corruption, poor governance and illicit financial and arms flows, are addressed in the Agenda."

Declaration on the Rule of Law at the National and International Levels

The preamble of this Declaration, adopted in September 2012, presents an ambitious vision for the rule of law, whereby UN members reaffirmed:

"...Our commitment to the rule of law and its fundamental importance for political dialogue and cooperation among all States and for the further development of the three main pillars upon which the United Nations is built: international peace and security, human rights, and development. We agree that our collective response to the challenges and opportunities arising from the many complex political, social and economic transformations before us must be guided by the rule of law, as it is the foundation of friendly and equitable relations between States and the basis on which just and fair societies are built."[113]

The Declaration informed the subsequent elaboration of SDG 16 and continues to be a useful reference point for understanding the rule of law within the scope of this goal.[114]

The Declaration deals with topics including:

- conflict prevention
- democracy
- human rights
- good governance
- judicial systems
- access to justice
- the International Criminal Court
- transitional justice
- stable legal frameworks, and
- transparency.

Paragraph 7 of Declaration expressly relates to the UN SDG agenda, affirming that "the rule of law and development are strongly interrelated and mutually reinforcing. The advancement of the rule of law at the national and international levels is essential for sustained and inclusive economic growth, sustainable development, the eradication of poverty, and hunger and the full realization of all human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the right to development, all of which in turn reinforce the rule of law."

Declaration on Equal Access to Justice for All by 2030

In February 2020, the Taskforce on Justice, an initiative of the multi-stakeholder partnership 'Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies', convened a series of meetings in the Hague. Participants comprised of ministerial representatives from Global North and South countries, as well as international and non-governmental organisations, and together adopted the 'Declaration on Equal Access to Justice for All by 2030.' The Declaration outlines a framework for "moving from justice for the few to justice for all," emphasising the need to:

i. "Put people and their legal needs at the centre of justice systems: Understand what people need and want when they seek justice, which obstacles they face and what kind of justice they receive.

ii. Solve justice problems: Transform justice institutions and services through a broader range of justice providers, to ensure respect for human rights, to respond to unmet legal needs of billions of people, using high-tech as well as low-tech innovative solutions, based on data, evidence and learning, while taking into account the specificities of the context

iii. Improve the quality of justice journeys: Empower people to understand, use and shape the law, while offering them fair informal and formal justice processes that meet their needs in terms of both procedures and outcomes.

iv. Use justice for prevention: Make use of mediation and other methods to prevent disputes from escalating. Address legacies of human rights violations. Invest in justice systems that are trustworthy and legitimate.

v. Provide people with means to access services and opportunities: Break down legal, administrative and practical barriers that people face to obtain documents, access public services, and participate fully in society and the economy, while promoting gender equality." [109]

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

The mission of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is to promote policies that will improve the economic and social well-being of people around the world. Founded in Paris in 1961, the OECD now comprises of 38 member countries. It provides comprehensive data on a wide variety of topics, including trade and investment. The OECD sets international standards and guidelines on a range of social, economic and environmental challenges. These range from improving economic performance and creating jobs to fostering strong education and fighting international tax evasion. The OECD also offers a forum in which governments can work together to seek solutions to common problems.

Of particular relevance to SDG 16, is the Compendium of Legal Instruments that the OECD maintains; a resource providing the text of all legal instruments adopted within the framework of the OECD, including a list of the OECD Members and Non-OECD Members that have adhered to them.[115] Within this, a number of documents merit specific attention, for example: the Convention on Combating Bribery of Foreign Public Officials in International Business Transactions which entered into force in February 1999.[116] More recent documents also make express reference to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, for example, the Development Assistance Committee Recommendation on the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus, adopted in February 2019.[117]

More broadly, the OECD has a number of initiatives to better support the UN in ensuring the success of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.The organisation offers significant knowledge and experience, including a strong track record in policy work with developed and developing countries, in systems for measuring and monitoring performance, and in global partnerships. In addition, the OECD has developed an action plan in support of the SDG Agenda, including numerous insights that may inform the realisation of SDG 16.[118]

The Doha Political Declaration (2025)

The Doha Political Declaration of the Second World Summit for Social Development was adopted in 2025, and aims to accelerate efforts on poverty eradication, social inclusion, and decent work. As part of these aspirations, the Declaration endorses a shared conviction "that social development and social justice are indispensable for the achievement and maintenance of peace and security."[119]

To this end, the Declaration emphasises the importance of human dignity, human rights, equality and democracy, and makes specific calls to action that are directly relevant to SDG 16 targets and ambitions. This includes calls: to eradicate forced labour and trafficking; to create "inclusive societies that enable full, equal and meaningful participation, as well as leadership opportunities, for all"; to reduce inequalities; to leverage digital and emerging technologies for inclusive social development and improved public services; to protect and promote human rights for all persons, and, to address "the spread of misinformation, disinformation, hate speech and content inciting harm in a way that protects democratic values."

Examples of regional legal and policy frameworks

Africa

The Constitutive Act of the African Union (2000)

The main objective of the Constitutive Act of the African Union is the achievement of peace and security among African nations, along with the enhancement of democracy and sustainable growth.[120] Under the Act, any threats to peace and security are to be dealt with as a matter of priority, given the obstructive nature of regional conflicts to the economic development of the continent. Similar provisions are found in the Protocol for the African Union Peace and Security Council (AUPSC). As such, if the Assembly maintains that a member State is responsible for, or is a victim of war crimes, crimes against humanity or genocide, then the African Union has a right to intervene, without awaiting any deliberations from the United Nations.[121]

Articles 3 and 4 of the Act further emphasise the significance of good governance, popular participation, the rule of law and human rights in line with the ambitions of SDG 16.

African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (2007)

The African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG) was adopted in 2007 and entered into force in 2012. Its adoption was based on concerns that unconstitutional changes of country governments were causing insecurity, instability and violent conflict across Africa.

"Democracy and human rights are inseparable. We cannot have the one without the other." - Nelson Mandela

The Charter is seen as a cornerstone to ensuring free, fair and credible elections. It is also key to building democratic institutions and the rule of law, as well as deepening democratic ideals and values across the continent.

As of July 2024, 39 of the 55 Member States of the African Union had ratified the Charter.[122]

Ratifying States undertake commitments relating to good governance, participatory democracy, and the organisation and management of public affairs. They commit to hold regular, credible and transparent elections managed by independent electoral bodies.

In addition, the Charter envisages that States will hold each other accountable to ensure compliance through the application of sanctions provided for in Article 23 of the Constitutive Act of the African Union for any States that fail to comply with the African Union's principles and policies.

Agenda 2063: Strategic framework for the socio-economic transformation of the African continent (2015)

Agenda 2063 is a strategic framework for the socio-economic transformation of Africa over the next five decades. It aims to accelerate the implementation of continental initiatives for growth and sustainable development.

The third and the fourth aspirations of the agenda are directly relevant to SDG 16:

- Aspiration 3: An Africa of good governance, democracy, respect for human rights, justice, and the rule of law. By 2063, Africa will have undergone a deepening of the culture of good governance, democratic values, gender equality, respect for human rights, justice and the rule of law.
- Aspiration 4: A peaceful and secure Africa. By 2063, Africa will emerge as a peaceful and secure continent, a conflict-free continent with harmony and understanding among communities at the grassroots level.

The ten-year implementation plan, which concluded in 2023, contained a series of target benchmarks, many of which reflect on the SDG targets.[123]

The second decade of acceleration now seeks to take this further, outlining seven moonshots for a more prosperous, integrated, democratic, peaceful, cultured, people-driven and influential Africa by 2033.[124]

African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (1981)

The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights was adopted in 1981 to protect and promote fundamental freedoms, civil and political rights, and economic, social and cultural rights across Africa. This includes both individual and collective rights and duties. For example, individual rights extend (*inter alia*) to aspects such as freedom from discrimination (Article 2), equality before the law (Article 3) and right to a fair trial (Article 7); while collective rights (or 'peoples' rights') extend (*inter alia*) to family rights (Article 18), the right to self-determination (Article 20), the right to development (Article 22) and the right to peace and security (Article 23).

The integration of collective rights is reflective of traditional communitarian African values on the principle that the Charter "should reflect the African conception of human rights [and] should take as a pattern the African philosophy of law and meet the needs of Africa."[125]

Implementation of the Charter is overseen by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR), who are tasked with investigating complaints and providing recommendations for compliance, and the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACtHPR), who preside over cases alleging human rights violations against state parties to the Charter.

As SDG 16 encompasses the protection of fundamental freedoms and human rights, including all economic, social and cultural rights, all aspects of the Charter are directly relevant to the targets of this goal.

Europe

European Union

As per Article 2 of the Treaty on the European Union, the rule of law is one of the values upon which the entire European Union (EU) is founded. The European Commission, together with other institutions and Member States, is therefore responsible for guaranteeing that the rule of law is respected within the Union.

In recent years, the EU has been confronted with systemic threats to the freedom of press and the independence of the judiciary in some countries across Central and Eastern Europe. To address these risks, the rule of law framework provides for a multi-stage dialogue between the Commission and concerned Member States.[126] If no solution to prevent or resolve a serious breach of the rule of law is found through dialogue, then a last resort measure contained within Article 7 of the Treaty on the European Union provides for a sanction mechanism that can suspend Member State's voting rights on the Council. In December 2017, the Commission triggered the Article 7 procedure for the first time based on the assessment that judicial reforms in Poland threatened judicial independence and constituted a clear risk of breach of the rule of law.[127]

Other mechanisms that contribute to improving national judicial systems include the EU Justice Scoreboard that provides annual data on the independence, effectiveness, and quality of EU Member States' judicial systems.[128]

"The rule of law is the glue that binds our Union together. It is the foundation of our unity. It is essential for the protection of the values, on which our Union is founded: democracy, freedom, equality and respect for human rights." - Ursula von der Leyen

Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe

During the early 1970s, the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) was created to serve as a multilateral forum for dialogue between East and West. This process led to the negotiation of the Helsinki Final Act, which was signed in 1975.[129] The document contained a number of commitments on politico-military, economic, environmental and human rights issues. It also established ten fundamental principles governing the behaviour of States towards their citizens, as well as towards each other. With the end of the Cold War, the CSCE took on new responsibilities and permanent institutions.

In 1994 the name was changed to the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Today, the OSCE comprises of 57 participating States encompassing more than a billion people across three continents: North America, Europe, and Asia. Many of its activities are relevant to SDG 16, including in the areas of arms control, border management, conflict prevention and resolution, containment of terrorism, reform of the security sector, economic and environmental cooperation, good governance, human rights, elections, media freedom, national minority rights, and rule of law.[130]

European Convention on Human Rights (1953)

The European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) together with its protocols, ensures the protection of a wide range of civil and political rights, including the right to life, the prohibition of torture, the right to liberty and security, the right to a fair trial, the right to family life, freedom of expression, freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and freedom of assembly and association.[131]

Article 14 provides that "the enjoyment of the rights and freedoms set forth in this Convention shall be secured without discrimination on any ground such as sex, race, colour, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth or other status."

Section II of the ECHR establishes the European Court of Human Rights,[132] which rules on individual and State applications alleging violations of the rights set forth in the Convention and its Protocols. To date, the ECHR has developed an impressive body of case law in the field of human rights.

Southeast Asia

ASEAN Charter (2007)

The ASEAN Charter was adopted in 2007 to achieve regional peace, security, stability, and economic prosperity across the region, while promoting human rights and democracy.[133] The Charter has been signed by all 10 ASEAN states.

Of particular relevance to SDG 16 is the Charter's key focus on peace, security, stability and peace-oriented values (Article 1.1) alongside democracy, good governance, rule of law and the protection and promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms (Article 1.6). To this end, the Charter established a responsibility to create an ASEAN human rights body (Article 14) leading to the inauguration of The ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) in 2009.

ASEAN Judicial Integrity Network

The ASEAN Judicial Integrity Network is a collaborative network of more than 1,000 judges and judicial experts from 7 ASEAN countries, working to improve accountability and accessibility of the judiciary and court system. The network is supported by the UNDP and embraces initiatives to promote transparency, integrity, community engagement and open justice.[134]

"The judiciary has a primary responsibility to deliver justice for all and curb corruption, contributing to achieving two fundamentals targets of the Sustainable Development Goal 16" - UNDP

Latin America and the Caribbean

The Escazú Agreement (2018)

The Escazú Agreement is a landmark treaty conferring rights and duties in respect of the environment and environmental decision-making in Latin America and the Caribbean.[135] It is the first treaty of its kind with provisions on the rights of environmental defenders.

The Agreement is premised on the principles of equality, non-discrimination, transparency and accountability (Article 3), reflecting key tenets underpinning SDG 16. It includes provisions guaranteeing public access to information (in support of SDG 16.10), greater public participation in environmental decision-making (in support of SDG 16.7) and greater access to justice in environmental matters (in support of SDG 16.3). While the Agreement is a landmark treaty for environmental democracy, it is also a significant step forward in creating more transparent and accountable public institutions on issues of global concern.

Examples of relevant national legislation

Given the multi-dimensional nature of SDG 16, a wide range of national laws are relevant to advancing its targets. Within any given national jurisdiction, an indicative list may include topics such as equal protection before the law; access to justice; independence of the judiciary; criminal law and procedures; police conduct; prison standards; the fight against organised crime, forced labour, human trafficking, drug trafficking, money laundering, tax avoidance, bribery and corruption; government transparency and accountability; child protection; freedom of information and freedom of the press; birth, marriage and death registration; national identity; and, national human rights institutions.

The following examples highlight some of these topics in a selection of jurisdictions.

Argentina – Human Trafficking

Law No. 26.842 on the Prevention and Sanctioning of Human Trafficking and Assistance to Victims (2012)

Argentina has been recognised as a source, transit, and destination country for men, women, and children subjected to sex trafficking and forced labour in recent years.[136]

The main trafficking legislation in Argentina, the Law No. 26.364 from 2008, was amended by Law No. 26.842 in 2012. Under this legislation, human trafficking is defined as the "offering, recruitment, transportation, transfer or reception of persons for the purpose of exploitation", namely slavery or servitude, labour services, sexual exploitation, child pornography, forced marriage or organ trafficking (Article 2). In contrast to the UN Human Trafficking Protocol, 'coercive means' here, are not a requirement for trafficking, but serve as aggravating circumstances (Article 145 of the Criminal Code).[137]

Under Argentinian law, victims of human trafficking or exploitation have a right to information, a right to receive free psychological and medical assistance, appropriate accommodation, job training, comprehensive legal advice, and effective protection from their traffickers, as well as right to stay in the country (Article 6). The Public Registry of Employers with Labour Sanctions contains the names of employers that have received sanctions for violating the Anti-Trafficking Law.[138] Any employers on this list are subsequently banned from entering into agreements and contracts with the Federal State or from receiving any benefits from public financial entities. At the same time, any goods, including real estate, used to commit a human trafficking offence can be seized and assigned to the victims' assistance programme.

The most recent law on the prevention of trafficking, No. 27.406 from 2015, establishes the obligation to display signs in public places such as airports, public transport, public tourism offices, and border crossings, which read, "The sexual exploitation of children and adolescents and human

trafficking in Argentina is a severely punished crime. Report it." The signs display a free telephone number for receiving complaints about sexual exploitation and trafficking.[139]

In 2018, since the adoption of these laws, Argentina reported the highest numbers of prosecution and convictions for trafficking in South America.[140]

However, according to the latest 2025 Trafficking Report of the US Department of State, the number of investigations and convictions in Argentina recently declined and official complicity in trafficking crimes has been identified as one of the main obstacles to prosecuting offences.[141]

Indonesia – Equal access to justice

Law No. 16 on Legal Aid (2011)

According to the third amendment of the Indonesian constitution, Indonesia is a State governed by the rule of law. Article 28D (1) of the constitution guarantees that each person has the right for legal certainty and equal treatment before the law.[142]

In line with this principle, Law No. 16 of 2011 on Legal Aid, states that legal aid must be provided for free to all poor people for criminal, civil and administrative matters. Here, legal aid services play a key role in helping people, especially from poor and vulnerable groups, to obtain their constitutional rights. Unlike other countries, where a single government-funded body coordinates and provides legal aid, the Indonesian government accredits existing civil society legal aid organisations and then reimburses them for any free legal assistance provided.[143]

However, there is a huge gap between the level of legal need and the level of resources available. For the period 2019 to 2021, Rp 53 billion (almost £3 million) was allocated to 524 accredited legal aid organisations. With these funds, an average of only six annual cases per organisation could be reimbursed, while the Jakarta Legal Aid Institute receives more than 1,000 per year. This situation is aggravated by a lack of pro bono work within the country.[144]

In 2019, Indonesia scored 69.6 out of 100 in the access to justice index.[145] Although access to justice is guaranteed by the constitution, insufficient funding of the national legal aid system, unequal distribution of legal aid organisations, poor quality of legal aid services and a lack of awareness of the community, has prevented effective access to equal justice for all.

For this reason, the Indonesian government is now committed to strengthening sustainable legal aid across the country through alternative funding schemes and capacity building initiatives for better coverage and service provision. These commitments are outlined in the country's 8th National Action Plan (2026-2027) and reflected in draft proposals to revise the country's Legal Aid Law.[146]

Italy – Illicit financial flows and cryptocurrencies

Legislative Decree No. 90/2017

As the use of blockchain technology and cryptocurrency in the global financial system increases, financial authorities are making attempts to regulate virtual currency exchanges.

In Italy, a 2017 Legislative Decree transposed the 4th EU Directive on Anti-Money Laundering (May 2015) into national law, ensuring that regulations pertaining to traditional exchange operators would also extend to cryptocurrency service providers. Accordingly, cryptocurrency exchanges are now subject to anti-money laundering regulations.

The decree requires cryptocurrency service providers to have 'know-your-customer' procedures in place so that they may adequately monitor and report suspicious transactions and conduct proper due diligence.[147]

Although more comprehensive regulations have since been developed in the country relating to cryptocurrencies, this decree is notable for recognising the initial risk that cryptocurrencies pose within money laundering and proactively building a legislative framework to address them.

In October 2019, Legislative Decree No. 125 transposed the 5th EU Anti-Money Laundering Directive (Directive 2018/843) into Italian law.[148] Among other changes, this Legislative Decree (i) broadened the scope of service providers that are subject to the regulations; (ii) facilitated exchanges of information between national authorities, and (iii) improved safeguards on transactions involving high-risk third countries.

Rwanda – Anti-Corruption

Law N. 54/2018 on Fighting Against Corruption

Throughout the last decade, Rwanda has made huge progress in its fight against corruption, enacting laws covering anti-corruption, whistle-blower protection, asset recovery, money laundering and terrorism financing. Within 10 years, Rwanda has managed to gradually improve its ranking in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, albeit it remains among the top five high-scoring countries in Sub-Saharan Africa.[149]

The most recent Rwandan Anti-Corruption Law is N. 54/2018 on Fighting Against Corruption, which expanded the definition of 'corruption' to include bribery, sexual corruption, embezzlement, making decisions based on favouritism, friendship or hatred, influence peddling, illicit enrichment, use of public property for unintended purposes, abuse of power, and demanding or receiving undue or excessive money (Article 2 (2)).[150] The law also toughens the applicable criminal sanctions available for corruption.[151]

As such, the lowest sanction now available is 5 to 7 years imprisonment together with a fine of 3 to 5 times the value of the illegal benefit. The highest sanction is 10 to 12 years

imprisonment accompanied by a fine. Certain types of corruption, for example soliciting or offering sexual favours or using public property for unintended purposes, have fixed fines ranging between one million and five million Rwandan francs ($1,000 to $5,000).

The law includes a provision to encourage reporting, exempting any person who gives or receives an illegal benefit from criminal liability if they inform law enforcement bodies before the occurrence of the act (Article 19).

Another highlight is Article 21, stating that corruption offenses in Rwanda are "imprescriptible", meaning that they are not subject to any statute of limitations and no amount of time can erase a case of corruption.

Public and private institutions, civil society members, and international organisations operating in Rwanda are required to implement mechanisms for the prevention of corruption (Article 3). Here, the Office of the Ombudsman has the power to request administrative sanctions against any leader of an organisation that fails to comply with Rwanda's corruption prevention measures. Additionally, to reduce the possibility of bribing government employees, Rwanda has developed government services online; an initiative that is thought to have considerably helped in reducing corruption within the country.[152]

Kenya – Participative decision-making

Public Participation Act (2018)

In 2010, Kenya enacted a new constitution, transforming the central government to a devolved one at the national and county levels. With this change, Article 10 (2)(a) of the Constitution now declares "democracy and participation of the people" as one of the national values and principles of governance.[153]

Throughout the constitution, public participation is therefore encouraged and facilitated.[154] Subsequent legislation, like the County Governments Act, the Public Finance Management Act, the Transition to Devolved Government Act, and the Urban Areas and Cities Act are all guided by principles of transparency, accountability and participation.[155] Other laws have also been declared invalid by the Constitutional Court for their lack of public participation, showing how critical this principle is for the country.[156]

To support public participation, The Public Participation Act was passed in 2018, designed to "enhance, promote and facilitate public participation in governance processes" (Article 3). Under the Act, Article 4 lists the principles for public participation, including the need to consult the public, communities and organisations that may be affected by a decision and involve them in the decision-making process; and the need for public views to be taken into consideration in general decision making.

State entities, like the Parliament, the Judiciary, or Government ministries, are also mandated to issue general guidelines for public participation (Article 5) to ensure its ongoing effectiveness. Finally, every authority is required to prepare an annual report that includes a description of the activities and outcomes of public participation and of any

complaints made in respect of public participation processes (Article 8).[157]

A 2018 case study of public participation in Kisumu, conducted the year of the Act passing, found that decentralisation had improved public participation, and that ward administrators play an important role in linking citizens to various county activities. Citizens were invited to forums through the county notice boards, newspapers, word of mouth, radio and website, as well as through formal invitations.[158]

Mexico: Access to information

General Law on Transparency and Access to Public Information (2025)

Mexico has a long-established commitment to ensuring access to public information. This principle is affirmed by the country's Constitution (Article 6) in which "the State shall guarantee the right to information... [such that] every person shall be entitled to free access to plural and timely information."[159]

The General Law on Transparency and Access to Public Information passed in 2025, further cemented these rights introducing wholesale reforms on how public information is governed. The new law establishes a commitment to the principle of maximum transparency, whereby all public information (unless legally classified) should be publicly accessible, including data held by all branches of government, constitutionally autonomous bodies, political parties, public trusts and funds, and all private parties handling public resources (Article 6).[160]

Further provisions include new open data requirements for public information to be freely accessible and usable online; a public interest override whereby any "information related to serious human rights violations or crimes against humanity… may not be classed as confidential" (Article 5); procedural reforms to ensure that access is timely and impartial; and an affirmation that the right to public information is not only constitutional, but a human right.

In the same year, parallel reforms were passed on data handling and access to information, including the General Law for the Protection of Personal Data in the Possession of Obligated Parties (2025) and the Federal Law for the Protection of Personal Data in Possession of Private Parties (2025).

However, Mexico's new data protection framework has been criticised for increasing ambiguity, making it possible for information to be kept classified in the interests of vague terms such as "Social Peace"; and undermining enforcement by replacing independent oversight with a new centralised body (the Ministry for Anti-Corruption and Good Governance).[161]

Nonetheless, Mexico continues to rate highly in the Global Right to Information (RTI) Ranking, coming second only to Afghanistan;[162] although please note earlier scepticism around these rankings (highlighted under SDG 16.10 above).

Insights for the Legal Profession

a) Examples of Relevant Cases and Legal Proceedings

United Kingdom: Human Trafficking

Equality and Human Rights Commission Intervening in R v L, HVN, THN and T [2013] EWCA Crim 991

Within the United Kingdom, the Equality and Human Rights Commission is the national equality body for Great Britain. This case concerned an intervention on behalf of the Commission in a 2013 appeal decision against the conviction of T, a 14-year-old Vietnamese boy, who was forced to work in a cannabis factory after being trafficked to England in the back of a refrigerated lorry.[163]

T had been sentenced to two years detention for the offence of cultivating cannabis.[164] In response, the Commission submitted that Article 4 ECHR and various international treaties required that child victims of trafficking should be given support, assistance and protection, and not be further victimised through prosecution.

The Court of Appeal scrubbed T's conviction and those of three other trafficking victims, whose cases were heard together. The Court accepted the Commission's submission that there is a heavy onus on the authorities to thoroughly investigate trafficking allegations so that unnecessary prosecutions do not occur.

Its judgment further reflected the Commission's arguments that the court has the power to stay prosecution proceedings where it had not been presented with enough evidence about the age of the defendant and whether they had been a victim of trafficking.

India: Anti-Corruption

Central Bureau of Investigation v. Gelli (23 February 2016), India Supreme Court

This case concerned a merger between the private sector bank, Global Trust Bank (GTB) and public sector bank, Oriental Bank of Commerce. Following the merger, the Central Bureau of Investigation initiated an investigation into two executives of GTB who were accused of share price manipulation. Subsequently the GTB executives were charged with criminal misconduct as public servants under India's Prevention of Corruption Act (POCA) 1988.[165]

Under the POCA, any public servant is considered to have committed criminal misconduct if they obtain any valuable thing or monetary advantage by corrupt or illegal means or by abusing their position as a public servant. The Act defines a 'public servant' as any person who holds an office by virtue of which he is authorised or required to perform any public duty. 'Public duty' in turn, is defined as a duty in the discharge of which the State, the public or the community at large has an interest.

The lower courts initially dismissed the charges on the grounds that the POCA only applied to public employees, with the accused having acted in their capacity as private bank employees. However, the Supreme Court of India reversed the judgment on a proper reading of the Act, finding that a private banking company would still fall under the definition of a 'public servant'.[166]

The landmark judgment confirmed that employees of private banks, as 'public servants', can be prosecuted for bribery and corruption under the POCA; a significant change, as up until this case, the Act had only been used to prosecute government officials engaging in corruption.[167]

As a result of the case findings, companies doing business in India's financial sector, as employees of both domestic and foreign private banks, can be deemed to be public servants and are therefore subject to India's anti-corruption policies. In the absence of commercial bribery as a substantive offence, this landmark judgment is significant as it opens up new avenues for the prosecution of corruption in the context of private banking.

Dominican Republic: Right to legal identity

Inter-American Court of Human Rights Case of The Yean and Bosico Children v. The Dominican Republic (September 8, 2005)

This 2003 case concerned a complaint brought by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights against the Dominican Republic for failing to issue birth certificates to Dilcia Yean and Violeta Bosico. The two girls were of Haitian descent, with Dominican nationals as their mothers, and Haitian migrant workers as their fathers.

Despite national laws that grant citizenship for individuals born within the territory, the two girls were denied their documents on the basis that they did not provide sufficient documentation for late registration. With no mechanism for the applicants to make appeals, the girls were left stateless and without options.

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights argued that the registry office authorities of the Dominican Republic perpetrated discrimination by refusing to issue birth certificates.[168] As a result of this lack of national identity, the children were unable to access public services, such as education, and were vulnerable to the threat of deportation.

The Court found that denying documentation to these children violated their right to protection, to equality and to non-discrimination, as well as their right to be part of the political community. Along with its decision, it further requested that the Dominican State should grant free elementary education to all children regardless of documentation or citizenship. The Court also ruled that the Dominican State had to adopt a simple, accessible and reasonable procedure to acquire nationality, and were required to provide reparations to the children as well as issue public apologies.[169]

The case had significant social implications in the Dominican Republic, as approximately 2.5% of the population were people of Haitian descent, making them the largest ethnic minority in the country. In addition, the country had seen a long history of discrimination and marginalisation against these communities since the Dominican Republic gained its independence from Haiti in 1844. Differences in language, culture, and political history had even led to violent clashes, including a massacre in 1937 which resulted in the killing of 10,000 to 25,000 Haitians in border areas.[170]

To this day, the Dominican Republic continues to present issues of discrimination against Dominicans of Haitian descent. Haitians finding seasonal employment as migrant workers have also become subjected to discrimination and hatred. This case is often referenced in present claims as a precedent and foundation for the right to identity.

However, the status of Dominicans of Haitian descent within the country remains a contentious one. In 2008, for example, a court case was filed by a Dominican of Haitian descent because the civil registry refused to issue her national ID Card. The case ultimately reached the Constitutional Court, which ruled in 2013 that the woman should have never been a citizen in the first place because her parents did not have enough documentation to prove legal residency.[171]

The Court decided that immigrants with irregular migration status should not have been able to document their children, even though they were born in the country. The judgement applied retroactively to anyone born between 1929 and 2007, and thus stripped tens of thousands of people, especially Dominicans of Haitian descent, of their citizen rights, rendering them Stateless.

However, in 2014 the Dominican authorities decided that those whose documents were suspended should be restored, and those who had never been registered but had that right under the Constitution when they were born, should be allowed to register as foreigners and could opt to naturalise as citizens after two years. Despite these changes, the right to a legal identity still remains precarious for many Dominicans of Haitian Descent, as shifts in the country's policies, retrospective enforcement and refusal to acknowledge their citizenship continues.[172]

Hungary: Access to information

European Court of Human Rights, Magyar Helsinki Bizottság v. Hungary (8 November 2016)

This case involved Hungarian NGO, Magyar Helsinki Bizottság, and its efforts to actively monitor implementation of international human rights instruments in Hungary. The NGO had requested the names of public defenders from several police departments, including the number of cases that had been assigned to each. The request was based on Hungary's 1992 Data Act, which contained a provision on access to information, and was requested as part of the NGO's investigation into the quality of defence work conducted by public defenders. However, when two of the police stations refused to provide the information, the NGO brought the matter before the Hungarian Courts.

The case progressed from the lower courts to the Supreme Court of Hungary, where the NGO's appeal was rejected on the basis that the activities of public defenders were considered 'private.' As a result, it was held that their names and cases were not subject to disclosure under the Data Act.[173]

The NGO thus brought the matter to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) claiming that the court's refusal to order the disclosure of information amounted to a breach of its right to access information under Article 10 ECHR. This was the first time that the ECHR was requested to consider whether Article 10 comprised a self-standing right to access information. Despite hopes that the ECHR would follow the Inter-American Court and the UN Human Rights Committee, the Grand Chamber found that there was no full-fledged right to access information under the article.

This decision was based on the wording of Article 10 itself, which includes no explicit reference to the freedom to "seek" information. The Court also relied on previous case law, in which Article 10 could only be relied on in cases where the State prevented an individual from accessing information that another person was willing or required to disclose. The Court therefore concluded that Article 10 did not confer a positive obligation on States to collect and disseminate information of its own motion.[174]

However, the Grand Chamber decided that the right to access information held by a public authority would arise under Article 10, in two cases: 1). When disclosure of the information has been imposed by an enforceable judicial order, and 2). In circumstances where access to the information is instrumental for the individual's exercise of their right to freedom of expression, in particular "the freedom to receive and impart information," and where its denial constitutes an interference with that right.[175]

The Court also described four principles to decide whether, and to what extent, the denial of access to information constitutes an interference with an applicant's freedom of expression rights. These were: 1). The purpose of the information request has to be sought for the exercise of the right to freedom of expression; 2). The nature of the information sought must be of public interest; 3). The role of the applicant has to be that of a 'public watchdog' by seeking the information to inform the public; and 4). The information sought has to be ready and available.[176]

In the present case, the Court found that these four principles had been met as: 1). The information sought by the NGO from the police departments was necessary for the completion of the survey on the functioning of the public defenders' scheme, and 2). the survey was being conducted it in its capacity as a non-governmental human rights organisation in order to contribute to discussion on an issue of obvious public interest. By denying the NGO access to the requested information, which was ready and available, the domestic authorities were found to have impaired the NGO's exercise of its freedom to receive and impart information under Article 10.

Although this decision did not go as far as other regional and international bodies, it highlighted the importance of access to information to wider human rights and fundamental freedoms.

b) Legal context and challenges

Out of all the SDGs, SDG 16 is most closely linked with the law and legal profession; reliant on the adoption and strengthening of legal frameworks, and the importance of legal and judicial practice. It is clear that to achieve SDG 16, effective and accountable institutions must include: solid legal frameworks, in accordance with national and international standards; representative parliaments, with a robust capacity for oversight; competent, independent, and impartial judiciaries; efficient public services; thriving civil societies; and a free and independent media.

These institutions are therefore key to understanding how power is and should be managed and used within the State, and the relationship between the State and society.[177]

However, managing effective separations of power within a state framework can be challenging in practice, particularly in the wake of crisis situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the global food crisis, the climate crisis, economic recessions and geopolitical conflicts: all of which continue to test the bounds of these institutions, and in many situations have acted to destabilise the balance of powers. With this in mind, this section offers insights into the relevance of SDG 16 ambitions to the wider development sector, as well as some of the specific challenges associated with these inherent tensions.

Role of SDG 16 in the achievement of all Goals

It is increasingly clear that SDG 16 has a wider relevance to all the SDGs, grounded in the conviction that peace, justice, and inclusion are essential to development and must be integrated throughout the 2030 Agenda. This creates both challenges and opportunities for the legal profession, with the following two organisations providing clarity on potential approaches.

The Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies is a collaborative initiative between UN member countries, international organisations and members of the civil and private sectors, that has developed a roadmap for delivering on SDG 16 commitments. The roadmap proposes three cross-cutting strategies for stakeholder involvement:

1). Prevent: Investing in prevention so that all societies and people reach their full potential.

2). Renew: Transforming institutions so that they can meet aspirations for a more prosperous, inclusive and sustainable future.

3). Involve: Including and empowering people so that they can fulfil their potential to work for a better future.[178]

The roadmap also sets out nine actions in the following areas: violence against women, children and vulnerable groups; building safer cities; prevention for the most vulnerable countries; access to justice; legal identity; tackling corruption and illicit flows; open government; empowering people as agents of change; respecting rights; and promoting gender equality.

Reinforcing this approach, the Global Alliance for Reporting Progress on Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies has focused on progress towards SDG 16 as a way to ensure that

progress is also made towards every other goal in the SDG Agenda.[179] The Global Alliance highlights interconnections between issues related to peace, justice, and inclusion and the numerous other targets under the Agenda. In doing so, it has demonstrated linkages between SDG 16 and 36 targets under 8 separate SDGs.

Obstacles to the rule of law

In 2023 – the midpoint of the SDG Agenda – the UNDP Progress Report on SDG 16 noted that progress towards rule of law "is worryingly slow [and] in some cases, it is even moving in the wrong direction…[as] trust in institutions is waning [and] unconstitutional transitions of power [take place]."[180]

This finding remains true in today's landscape, echoed by the World Justice Project's 2025 in-depth country-by-country Rule of Law Index. The latest index shows that for the eighth year in a row, rule of law has declined in most countries around the world, presenting a worrying case for civil society, the general public and the legal profession globally.[181]

In seeking to reinstate a culture of rule of law around the world, legal and judicial professionals should be aware that advocacy for the rule of law can be controversial, as it seeks to re-examine and often renegotiate power dynamics within societies. Indeed, reference to the rule of law within the development agenda had initially provoked debate among UN Member States. It was only until a range of groups, such as the International Development Law Organisation (IDLO), Namati, and the Africa Justice Foundation, argued for the legal and practical importance of its inclusion that it became a core principle under the global development agenda.[182]

These difficulties are further intensified by the evolving nature of public institutions, their roles within society and the powers delegated to them to fulfil their duties. For example, the rise of technological developments has expanded the surveillance abilities of States and, in some instances, infringed on the right to privacy. Following the COVID-19 outbreak, measures taken by governments around the world to limit the expansion of the pandemic, also had significant consequences for the functioning of States, including the operation of courts and parliaments, and impacts for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Similarly, one major obstacle to enforcing the rule of law under SDG 16, is the breakdown of transparency and accountability within the allocation of public resources; as the rule of law looks to directly combat problems such as the corrosive impact of corruption. As highlighted by the UN Development Programme:

"Thirty years ago, corruption was not even discussed in international settings. Today, there is unanimous agreement that corruption undermines the rule of law, posing a threat to governance systems and to sustainable development."[183]

To help overcome these challenges and embed rule of law considerations into national development policies, a number of resources are now available. For example, the UN Rule of Law Document Repository provides comprehensive access to official UN documents, guidance notes, and policy materials to help promote and strengthen rule of law worldwide.[184] In addition, networks such as the World Justice Project[185] and Global Judicial Integrity Network[186] provide targeted resources for rule of law practitioners and legal experts to draw upon in understanding and responding to current and evolving challenges.

Similarly, A4ID's SDG Legal Initiative offers a space for the global legal profession to engage in thought leadership, capacity building and practical pro bono focused on the linkages between SDG 16 and the development agenda. This includes the importance of rule of law to a properly functioning legal profession and international order.[187]

Traditional justice systems

A common misconception in the legal community, especially in the Global North, is to reduce justice systems to formal processes, procedures and institutions. However, it is crucial to recognise that in many jurisdictions, informal justice systems often exist in parallel to statutory legal systems, providing justice and dispute resolution where formal options are insufficient or unavailable.

Recognising the benefits of informal justice systems to SDG 16 is therefore important, as is remaining cognisant of their weaknesses. For example, informal justice systems can often raise important concerns relating to procedural safeguards around evidence gathering, due process and a lack of appeal. Moreover, the norms they enforce may be arbitrarily or discriminatorily applied, especially against women or marginalised communities. However, these institutions are also often more affordable, more geographically accessible and more culturally accepted, with informal justice systems remaining common in low-income, fragile and conflict-stricken countries.[188] In these jurisdictions, up to 80 percent of disputes are dealt with through alternative justice systems as opposed to formal ones.[189]

Most cases heard in traditional justice systems relate to family matters. However, depending on the country, traditional courts can extend their jurisdiction to inheritance rights, land rights, taxation, as well as employment, trade and exchange of goods.[190] Formal and informal justice systems should not, therefore, be regarded as two separate entities. Rather, they are interlinked processes where justice providers and pathways to justice often overlap.[191] Effective contribution to the strengthening of the rule of law in any country thus requires knowledge and awareness of the complex judicial contexts that exist, and the variety of institutions in place to effect legal decision-making.

Conflict and violence

As the 2025 UN Report on SDG 16 notes: "Peace is the quintessential prerequisite for progress. Development cannot be sustained when people are living in fear, when resources are diverted to conflict, and when infrastructure is destroyed. A large number of armed conflicts around the world means that peace remains elusive for many, and with it, the fulfilment of basic human rights." [192]

Today geopolitical conflicts pose multiple threats to peace and security and remain an obstacle to strengthening rule of law and sustainable development. By the same vein however, it is in weak rule of law, lack of good governance and declining institutional capacities that recent years have witnessed a surge in violent conflict. The relationship between SDG 16's aspirations and the rise in conflict and violence is therefore complex and interdependent making it difficult to map cause and effect, particularly as SDG 16 has long faced challenges with gaps in data reporting.

That said, some sources, such as the Global Peace Index[193] and the Global Terrorism Index,[194] can be helpful in providing a geographical snapshot of high-risk areas, while presenting quantitative insights on general trends.

In addition, Saferworld, an independent international organisation that works to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives, provides regular news and analysis on SDG 16.[195]

Digital Governance

Digital transformations hold the potential to improve transparency, accountability and efficiency within public institutions. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many jurisdictions witnessed rapid digitisation of public services, from education and healthcare to security and justice. These transformations saw huge gains, enabling ongoing service delivery despite unprecedented limitations (such as national lockdowns); enabling remote working capabilities with the potential to create more inclusive workplaces; improving technical transparency and data accuracy within supply chains and public recordkeeping; and, increasing productivity while reducing public expenditure.[196]

However, digital transformations also came with unique challenges that, in the absence of sufficient legal and regulatory safeguards, have witnessed: existing inequalities exacerbated through digital divides; new vulnerabilities embedded within public infrastructure; new risks concerning data privacy and surveillance; and, in many cases, weakened oversight and accountability due to gaps in digital governance frameworks.[197]

At the same time, new digital harms have emerged as people begin to live more and more of their lives online, with a growing dependence on digital forms of communication for social interaction and access to information. This includes, for example: the rise in misinformation, disinformation and deepfakes (aggravated by rapid uptake of social media and artificial intelligence); the role of unchecked algorithms and online bias in magnifying social polarisation and civil unrest; digitally enabled conflict through the dissemination of harmful, hateful and extremist content,[198] and new forms of violence such as digital sexual exploitation, doxing and image-based abuse.[199]

For the legal profession, weak digital governance and the rise in digital harms offers both a challenge and opportunity, as existing legal and regulatory frameworks are in desperate need of reform and upgrading. As the 2025 report, *SDG 16: Through a Digital Lens,* by the UN Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute, emphasises: "This means accounting for the different ways in which power is exercised in society, including online, and how such power is mediated between all actors, including powerful technology companies and the entities that [can] check their power when used for unfair or harmful purposes."[200]

The report offers a useful starting point in understanding more about the challenges and opportunities of securing peace, justice and strong institutions online, and points to numerous global initiatives, such as the Tax Justice Network and the Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative, that may be of interest.In addition, UNESCO offers a wide range of resources on artificial intelligence (AI), including digital frameworks for public sector professionals,[201] new guidelines on AI use in the courtroom,[202] and technical assistance and training for judiciaries worldwide through its Global Network of Experts on AI and the Rule of Law.[203]

c) So, what can lawyers do?

Lawyers in all sectors of the legal profession, whether corporate counsel, private practice, government advisors, parliamentarians, international agencies, civil society, or academia, are well-positioned to help implement the UN Sustainable Development Agenda. While the challenges of SDG 16 are complex and can be politically sensitive, its core ambitions, grounded in principles of justice, are of particular relevance to the profession.

Likewise, the solutions at the local, national, regional, and international levels will require the support of all parts of the profession to effectively implement, alongside partnership working and cross-border collaboration. The following examples indicate how lawyers might apply their expertise to the ambitious task of transforming our world so that it may become more just, peaceful and inclusive.

Learn and Educate

The challenges and opportunities surrounding rule of law, human rights, access to justice, corruption and many of the core themes underpinning SDG 16 are increasingly changing, influenced by factors including the rise of technology, changes to the geopolitical landscape, industry transformations, civil unrest and limited economic resources. To stay abreast of these changes, legal professionals can take steps to enhance their understanding of SDG 16, its interplay with these wider factors, and the policy and programmatic efforts to advance its targets. There is substantial research and analysis available on this, including the key role of the law and the legal profession in fostering peace, justice, and strong institutions.

The following list includes sources that are useful starting points for lawyers and legal professionals interested in the SDGs, with particular emphasis on SDG 16:

- The SDG 16 Hub is a practitioners' platform, launched to provide structured, centralised information on SDG 16. It offers a growing collection of resources on SDG 16 in a searchable online database.[204]

- In the UN ecosystem, the main custodian agencies for SDG 16 are the UN Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC)[205] and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).[206] Both these UN departments are responsible for the monitoring of SDG 16 targets and regularly publish data on progress achieved so far. In 2023, a joint report between the UNODC, OHCHR and UNDP was published on the global progress towards SDG 16 indicators: the first comprehensive overview of SDG 16 targets, grounded in data findings and evidence.[207] A follow up report was subsequently published in 2025.[208]

- Human rights bodies publish reports that are relevant to topics covered by SDG 16. Among many examples, the Working Group on Business and Human Rights presented a report in 2020 examining how the business and human rights agenda and anti-corruption efforts (target 16.5) are interconnected.[209]

- The High-level Political Forum on sustainable development (HLPF) is the core United Nations platform for follow-up and

review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Each year, the HLPF carries out a review of a set of SDGs. The 2024 edition last focused on SDG 16.[210]

- Global partnerships, involving international organisations, States, the private sector, and civil society organisations, have been created with the mission of achieving SDG 16. Among the most prominent ones are: Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies,[211] the Global Alliance for Reporting Progress on Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies,[212] the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict,[213] and the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children.[214]

- Specialised research centres and think tanks also regularly publish articles relevant to SDG 16, such as the Overseas Development Institute,[215] the Bingham Centre on the Rule of Law,[216] and the International Development Law Organisation.[217]

- Several civil society groups and NGOs are active in the fields of legal empowerment, access to justice, peace building, and rule of law strengthening. These include Namati[218] and Cordaid,[219] both of which provide case studies of interest for legal professionals willing to better understand how SDG 16 is being implemented.

- Finally, law firms and individual lawyers can also get involved in activities to raise awareness of SDG 16 within the legal community, such as publishing research papers or organising events (legal clinics, seminars, panel presentations, or roundtables) on relevant legal topics. At a firm level, managing and senior partners responsible for strategic decisions should review and familiarise themselves with SDG 16 targets and identify opportunities to positively contribute towards them.

Integrate

Facilitate SDG engagement within the private sector

A global effort is currently underway to engage businesses and financial institutions in supporting the achievement of the Sustainable Development Agenda. Corporate counsel, as well as lawyers who advise private sector clients, can play a key role in facilitating awareness and action.

The UN Global Compact, established in 2000, is one of the world's leading corporate responsibility initiatives.[220] The Compact seeks to encourage companies to support a core set of values in the areas of human rights, labour rights, environment, and anti-corruption. Sustainable development is now also a key area of focus, and the Global Compact has compiled an extensive collection of resources and toolkits to facilitate business engagement with the SDGs. In addition, it has developed a Business for the Rule of Law Framework[221] and published a Guide for General Counsel on Corporate Sustainability.[222] To help advance SDG 16, the Global Compact has also launched an Action Platform on Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions.[223]

The SDGs provide a further opportunity to uphold the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs) adopted in 2011.[224] The UNGPs aim to provide an authoritative global standard for preventing and addressing

the risk of adverse human rights impacts linked to business activity. They are based on a governance framework that reinforces the duty of States to protect human rights ('Protect'), the responsibility of companies to respect human rights ('Respect'), and the need to provide adequate judicial and non-judicial remedies where human rights abuses have occurred ('Remedy'). The UNGPs are referenced in paragraph 67 of the Agenda 2030 Resolution. The UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights has issued recommendations on embedding 'protect, respect, remedy' into the implementation of the SDG framework, noting that the increased role of business in development must be coupled with accountability. In particular, "State implementation of SDG 16 must include measures for improving access to remedy for victims of business-related human rights abuses."[225]

Finally, Financing for Development has also formed an important workstream to encourage collaboration around the SDGs, including through the Addis Ababa Action Agenda.[226] This is now an integral part of the SDGs, drawing on many public and private actors across the financial and investment sectors. Anti-corruption and integrity measures, of relevance to SDG 16, are part of this process.

Advance SDG 16 issues within professional associations

As arbiters for justice, and professionals trained in understanding the complexities of rule of law and human rights, legal professionals are themselves a unique resource for the wider international and development communities to draw upon in leading the way on SDG 16. Legal organisations and bar associations around the world can therefore help advance the SDGs through various contributions to public legal education, professional education, training, research and publications, and policy advocacy.

Lawyers can seek to contribute to existing SDG-related projects or take the lead in initiating them. For example, within the American Bar Association, the Rule of Law Initiative undertakes a range of programmes related to governance, judicial systems, anti-corruption, conflict-related migration, and human rights protection, supporting inclusive and sustainable development. The International Bar Association is also very active in every field of legal practice of relevance to SDG 16, including anti-money laundering, media law and freedom of expression, environmental protection, international criminal law and international human rights. Organisations such as these offer both professional and pro bono opportunities to advance SDG 16, as do platforms such as A4ID's SDG Legal Initiative[227] and pro bono networks.[228]

Act

Many law firms are working to make their pro bono work more strategic, collaborative and sustainable. By aligning their work with the SDGs, lawyers can be confident that they are taking practical steps towards a comprehensive and inclusive roadmap for sustainable development.

In the case of SDG 16, pro bono work, advocacy initiatives and community involvement offer a multitude of avenues for law firms around the world to actively contribute to ensuring access to justice and upholding the rule of law.

Reinforce the global legal order

SDG 16 presents a far-reaching opportunity for the legal profession to reinforce the global legal order. This includes support for the treaty-making process, including preparatory work, negotiation, ratification and implementation, as well the enforcement of treaties through legal interpretation, litigation and expert advice. As has been demonstrated throughout this Legal Guidebook, treaties, conventions, and other international agreements form a foundation for legal advocacy and action in furthering the SDG Agenda.

This role was made explicit as early as the UN Millennium Development Goals, when the UN Secretary-General noted that "Support for the rule of law would be enhanced if countries signed and ratified international treaties and conventions."[229]

At the time, many countries were unable to participate fully in the international treaty framework due to a lack of expertise and resources, especially when national legislation was needed to give force to international instruments. The Secretary-General therefore called upon "all relevant United Nations entities to provide the necessary technical assistance that will make it possible for every willing State to participate fully in the emerging global legal order."[230] These contributions are still very much needed, particularly in the wake of today's polycrisis which has further limited access to resources and seen direct threats posed to the international legal order.

In complex multilateral law and policy making processes, pro bono providers (law firms, barrister chambers, universities) can provide free legal support to under-resourced developing countries or civil society observer organisations in order to create a level playing field between international negotiators.

Strengthen access to justice

The legal and judicial professions are at the heart of justice reform and service delivery. Many tirelessly work to strengthen access to justice in areas such as empowering the poor and marginalised. The SDG Agenda can provide an additional impetus to seek response and remedies for injustice and for improving legal protection, legal awareness, and legal aid.

The legal profession well understands that a major obstacle in accessing justice is the cost of legal advice and representation. Legal aid programmes therefore play a key role in efforts to enhance justice accessibility and outcomes. Again, the UN can be a source of support for relevant action. For example, in 2012 the UN Principles and Guidelines on Access to Legal Aid in Criminal Justice Systems was adopted, and a comprehensive *Global Study on Legal Aid* was conducted with relevant insights.[231]

Similarly in 2019, The Task force on Justice, an initiative of the multi-stakeholder partnership, Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies, published the report '*Justice for All.*'[232] The report quantified the justice gap at 5.1 billion people – meaning two-thirds of the world's population lacked meaningful access to justice. Women and children, poor people, people with disabilities, and people from minority ethnic communities were found to have the most difficulties in this respect. Additionally, an economic cost to injustice was noted – for example, in low-income countries, everyday justice problems were found to cost more than 2% GDP. By contrast, access to justice provided positive flow-on effects to the economy. The report therefore contains a number of recommendations for policymakers to improve access to justice at the national and international levels.

At the Ministerial Meeting on Building Peaceful and Inclusive Societies through Justice for All, held on 14 April 2021, 16 countries further endorsed a letter to United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres calling to put people at the centre of justice. The letter stated: "By embracing people-centred justice, we can reduce inequality and exclusion, reduce all forms of violence, revive the social contract and rebuild trust. This will enable us to more effectively uphold human rights, combat racism, discrimination and other forms of structural injustice and to better meet demands from the next generation, most notably for climate justice."[233]

Furthermore, signatories called for the UN to develop a more unified voice and approach on rule of law, and to work more closely with international financial institutions, regional organisations, and civil society. The United Nations was also encouraged to embrace the five principles expressed in the Declaration on Equal Access to Justice for All by 2030.

In recent years, access to justice challenges have become more prominent, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdown measures. In tackling court backlogs, long wait times and barriers of access, lawyers must pursue innovative avenues to strengthen access to justice, including through the use of technology. Many legal organisations and bar associations are now involved in such efforts within their respective jurisdictions, evaluating procedural, substantive, and ethical questions.

There are also numerous global initiatives which aim to bring legal information and guidance to the billions of people around the globe without access to the law. The following examples offer insights on various forms of engagement opportunities:

- The Global Access to Justice Project is led by a network of

leading experts worldwide and seeks to research and identify practical solutions to the access to justice gap globally. The project has launched a new global survey investigating the legal, economic, social, cultural and psychological barriers that prevent people from accessing the justice system.[234]

- The Hague Institute for the Innovation of Law supports justice accelerator projects and hosts an annual Innovating Justice Forum.[235]

- The World Justice Project organises a World Justice Forum every two years, attracting hundreds of participants from various sectors and showcasing the World Justice Challenge.[236]

At all levels, from the international to the grassroots, the implementation of SDG 16 is also being accelerated through global action at the intersection of law and technology.

Assist civil society organisations and justice defenders

Civic space is a cornerstone to well-functioning democracies as it invites public scrutiny and participation from non-governmental actors in public decision-making.[237] Unfortunately, rising authoritarianism, restricted media freedom; barriers to accessing information; and widespread attacks against human rights defenders, journalists and trade unionists, have all shrunk civic spaces. These changes arise in contravention of fundamental rights to association, peaceful assembly, and expression, and have prevented civil society actors from meaningfully engaging in SDG 16 ambitions and the wider development agenda.

Alongside restrictive laws and enforcement practices, widescale cuts to available funding for non-governmental organisations, civil society organisations, and foreign aid, have further hampered efforts in human rights, humanitarian aid and the global development agenda. In the absence of these vital resources, law firms, corporate legal departments, and individual lawyers can contribute to the implementation of SDG 16 by providing pro bono legal services and other forms of support to a range of civil society organisations, ranging from well-established global development charities to local grass-roots partnerships. This may include providing pro bono advice and assistance for continued business operations, advocating against restrictive practices that limit fundamental freedoms, or contributing legal expertise and research to support with various initiatives.

Crucially, given the legal profession's own role as an important source of accountability on the use of state power, lawyers should also consider what more they can be doing as part of wider efforts to defend justice and hold public institutions to account.

"[T]he law is not simply a system, it is a safeguard. It underpins accountability, enables justice, and protects the space in which civil society operates. But the law is only as strong as the people and partnerships that sustain it... Pro bono, in this context, is not a gesture of goodwill. It is a strategic tool. It is how we ensure that those on the frontlines of defending human rights, environmental protections, and democratic values have the support they need, not just to survive, but to be effective." – Yasmin Batliwala

Strengthen the Rule of Law

In every country, the legal profession has a pivotal role in safeguarding well-functioning, accountable, and transparent government and justice institutions where legal standards and citizens' experience of the law and legal services are improved.

Working with the development community, legal professionals can directly contribute to strengthening the rule of law by providing pro bono legal assistance. This support can take many forms, from enhancing civil society and parliamentary oversight, to addressing challenges in the justice sector such as police brutality, inhumane prison conditions, lengthy pre-trial detention, and strengthening linkages between formal and informal justice systems.[238]

A4ID's ROLE UK programme works to strengthen the rule of law in developing countries by supporting partnerships to provide high-quality pro bono legal and judicial expertise and welcomes all members of the legal community and legal stakeholders to get involved.[239]

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