

Beyond Rhetoric: Securing SDG 16+ for Peaceful, Just, and Inclusive Societies

2024 Rome Civil Society Declaration on SDG 16+¹

“This is no time to panic or lose hope. Instead, it is time to act collectively with a long-term vision and focus.”²

Context

The inclusion of building more peaceful, just and inclusive societies and responsive institutions was a notable achievement for the conflict prevention and peacebuilding sector. Since 2014, peacebuilding and conflict prevention have gained traction and there are significant donor and policymaker champions, including the UN Secretary General, that call for increased programs, resources and reforming policy decision-making. However, with only six years left until 2030, the urgency to scale-up transformative commitments towards realising the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is paramount. As we assess the advancement of the SDGs and especially SDG 16+, it is alarming to see how far off track we are from achieving our goals by 2030.

Both 2024 and 2025 present high-level opportunities for governments to advance policies and decisions that could have a significant multiplier effect in achieving SDG 16+, and building more peaceful, just and inclusive societies and responsive institutions. The 2024 SDG 16 Conference gains significance with the thematic review of SDG 16 in July and the Summit of the Future in September, offering a chance to put SDG 16+ at the forefront of global discussions and urge genuine commitments from member states. Immediate action is imperative to overhaul critical strategies. The lack of progress over the last several years serves as a clear warning that without swift and transformative change, we risk undermining any progress achieved, making us less resilient to address future crises and solidifying unsustainable development trajectories.

This year stands as a crucial moment to reassess and reinvigorate our commitments to SDG 16 and its pivotal role in fostering peaceful, just, and inclusive societies globally because the global landscape remains fraught with challenging crises. The aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, compounded by the climate crisis and escalating food insecurity, alongside rising geopolitical tensions, is placing unprecedented pressure on international security and multilateral cooperation. Protracted and new conflicts, rise in coups d'états and tensions around the world, from Armenia-Azerbaijan, China-US, Ethiopia, Haiti, Myanmar, Israel-Palestine, Sudan, The Sahel, Russia-Ukraine, a potential wider Middle East war,³ and backsliding democracy in western countries, amongst others, underscore the pressing need for transformative action. These conflicts not only endanger the lives and livelihoods of millions, particularly children, and hold the potential for global conflict spillovers, but also pose significant obstacles to achieving SDG 16+ and its targets.

The ongoing crisis on the EU's eastern flank, particularly the conflict in Ukraine, continues unabated. Despite efforts to resolve the conflict, no end is yet to be seen, posing a considerable threat not only to regional stability in Europe but also to global peace and security. The reverberations of the Ukrainian war have pushed the most affected demographics, including Africa, toward food scarcity. Similarly, the conflict in Gaza and escalating tensions in the Middle East, highlight the urgency of addressing conflicts that undermine human rights and civilian protection, impacting not only human lives but also the economic and global stability of the broader Middle East and North African region.

¹ This 2024 declaration on SDG16+ builds on previous iterations of this declaration that are referenced in the current text's footnotes.

² Li Junhua, Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs. United Nations. (2023). Global sustainable development report 2023. Link [here](#)

³ Crisiswatch (2024). Link [here](#)

The death toll on humanitarian workers has been unparalleled, with for example over 196 casualties in the Occupied Palestinian Territories since October 2023⁴, accompanied by a civilian mortality rate of 61%, exceeding even the Second World War in terms of civilian losses⁵. In fact, more children have been killed in Gaza in the last six months than all global conflicts combined in the last 4 years⁶.

The need for a comprehensive approach in achieving SDG 16

In the light of reconciliation processes at the community and national levels in post-conflict contexts, accountability for past abuses is paramount. Holding perpetrators of human rights abuses accountable is fundamental to the principles of justice and the rule of law underpinning SDG 16.

Furthermore, the proliferation of (small arms and light) weapons worldwide, coupled with continual technological advancements in arsenals, has heightened the gravity of injuries in conflicts and criminal activities and constitutes a threat to peace and security. The current crisis in Haiti highlights the urgent problem of illicit arms trade and the ineffectiveness of current arms embargoes. The failure to implement arms control regulations hinders law enforcement efforts and bolsters gang control. The ramifications and scale of arms trafficking extend beyond combatants, affecting innocent civilians during violence, and further hamper our efforts to reach SDGs 16.1 and 16.2.

The conflict in Ukraine and the Israel-Palestinian conflict underscore the uneven focus of the international community when compared to other conflicts. It demonstrates an evident violation of internationally agreed humanitarian principles, where resources should be allocated based on needs rather than geopolitical proximity. Achieving the objectives of the 2030 Agenda requires equal attention to all conflicts, ensuring comprehensive coverage and assistance where it is most urgently needed.

It is evident that SDG 16 is intrinsically linked to other SDGs. When conflict disrupts stability, it jeopardises progress across all development goals. Conflict and fragility hinders economic growth, exacerbates poverty, and undermines social well-being across national borders. Additionally, health, climate and other development sectors can increase conflict dynamics that drive instability and fragility. Therefore, addressing conflicts comprehensively and ensuring conflict prevention and peacebuilding are integrated across the SDGs, is essential for achieving the 2030 Agenda.

Moreover, because civil society acts as a bridge between right-holders and duty-bearers, and is a key indicator to measure healthy and resilient societies, creating an enabling environment for civil society to achieve SDG 16+ is not merely a strategic necessity but a fundamental prerequisite to realising the 2030 Agenda. Tackling restrictive environments, whether legal, political, or economic, and safeguarding civil society's operational space, especially for grassroots organisations, community-based organisations, human rights defenders, and media, are indispensable steps to achieve all SDGs. Furthermore, the role of civil society extends beyond its place as the intermediary between society and the government. Civil society serves as a source for measuring SDG progress and an instrument for holding governments accountable for their commitments to the SDGs.

However, when needed the most, the space for civil society is shrinking due to restrictive laws, harassment, and limited funding. Upholding media freedom is equally critical, as journalists are confronted with violence, censorship, cyber threats and digital surveillance. Addressing disinformation and polarising narratives in

⁴ The New Humanitarian. Salzenstein, L. (2024, April 2). *Behind the numbers: Gaza's unprecedented aid worker death toll*. Link [here](#)

⁵ Guardian News and Media. (2023, December 9). *Civilians make up 61% of Gaza deaths from airstrikes, Israeli study finds*. The Guardian. Link [here](#)

⁶ [Gaza: Number of children killed higher than from four years of world conflict | United Nations in Türkiye](#)

consistency with international standards on freedom of expression is imperative for fostering transparency and social cohesion. Additionally, there is an urgent need to remedy the lack of children and youth, local actors, and women's representation and include them in the decision-making processes, as well as ensure their access to justice. Recognition of a dedicated and true partnership between civil society, government, and other stakeholders to take action, as expressed in the earlier Rome Civil Society Declaration on SDG 16+, in 2019⁷, 2021⁸, 2022⁹, and 2023¹⁰ is key and urgently required.

In recent years, there has been a notable regression in democracy, accompanied by a rise in authoritarianism and increasing violence. These trends, even in so-called stable western democracies have profound implications for civil societies worldwide, particularly as many rely on government support. At the same time, in countries experiencing increasing fragility and backsliding democracy, insufficient action to address the root causes of conflict is manifested which hampers efforts to rebuild social cohesion.

Additionally, global conflicts have had far-reaching impacts on financing the SDGs. Regrettably, funds designated for humanitarian aid and development assistance have often been redirected towards military expenditures. This misallocation not only undermines peacebuilding efforts and investment in sustainable development in developing countries, but it also exacerbates global insecurity, whereby the expansion of the military industry has shown a negative impact on the realisation of the SDGs. By the end of 2020, state-based armed conflicts had reached their highest levels since 1945, with nearly two billion people living in conflict zones. In 2021 alone, a record of 89 million people were displaced, coinciding with global military expenditure exceeding \$2 trillion for the first time.¹¹ It is imperative to recalibrate these priorities, emphasising investments in sustainable peace over militarisation.

The current global financial architecture faces obstacles hindering progress towards the 2030 Agenda, notably the global debt crisis disproportionately affecting developing nations. To address this, comprehensive restructuring is essential. Key measures should include implementing debt relief mechanisms, ensuring equitable and progressive resource allocation, and fostering inclusive decision-making processes within international financial institutions.

Furthermore, there is a pressing need to address underinvestment in justice systems, particularly those aligned with SDG 16+ targets. The current shortfall in achieving justice for all by 2030 beckons a transformative shift in justice support through an expanded engagement of and support for customary and informal justice systems. These systems must be integrated in ways that are contextually appropriate, uphold the rule of law and promote human rights. Specific attention here needs to be given to the most vulnerable and marginalised groups.

The world has grappled with a series of crises in an increasingly complex socio-economic landscape. Record-breaking temperatures in 2023 triggered extreme weather events, exacerbating existing inequalities alongside the COVID-19 pandemic's revelations of social protection weaknesses. These challenges, coupled with weakened democratic governance, demand urgent action.

⁷ 2019 Rome Civil Society Declaration on SDG16+ "Amplified Commitments and Partnerships for Accelerated Action: Rome Civil Society Declaration on SDG16+", available [here](#).

⁸ 2021 Rome Civil Society Declaration, "A Renewed Call for Strengthening Commitments, Partnerships, and Accelerated Action for SDG16+," is available [here](#).

⁹ 2022 Rome Civil Society Declaration. "SDG16+ in Peril: An urgent call-to-action for safeguarding commitments to Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies", available [here](#).

¹⁰ 2023 Rome Civil Society Declaration, "If not now, then when? An urgent call for transformative SDG16+ commitments at the midpoint of the 2030 agenda", available [here](#).

¹¹ United Nations. (2023). Global sustainable development report 2023. United Nations. Link [here](#)

2024 and Beyond: New Times for Commitment

As we gather to discuss SDG 16 and its implications for peaceful, just, and inclusive societies, we must emphasise the importance of systemic approaches to strengthen justice. This entails integrating and recognising customary and informal justice systems, prioritising an enabling environment for civil society, including media, and promoting accountability for past abuses, which are essential steps towards advancing SDG 16 and building resilient societies. With a focus on the High level Political Forum 2024, as well as with an eye to the Summit of the Future in September 2024, the World Social Summit in 2025, and the fourth International Conference on Financing for Development in 2025, this year's SDG 16 Conference will serve as a pivotal rallying cry for renewed dedication and decisive action. Let us reaffirm our dedication to SDG 16 and collectively act to shape a world that is fair, peaceful, and inclusive for all. Investing in SDG 16+ is essential for accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and fostering trust among individuals, governments, and the multilateral system.

The United Nations Secretary-General has sounded the alarm regarding the pace of achieving our goals. "Unless we act now," he emphasises, "the 2030 Agenda will become an epitaph for a world that might have been."¹² Civil society echoes this call and urges Member States and other stakeholders to move beyond rhetoric and good intentions and boldly embrace and implement concrete and genuine commitments.

2024 Recommendations for Revitalised Action on SDG 16+

I. Recognising and utilising SDG 16+ as an enabler for achieving the 2030 Agenda, responding to current global crises and strengthening resilience from future crises

Besides being a crucial goal in its own right, SDG 16's interlinkages with the other goals in the 2030 agenda, as expressed in "SDG 16+," provide a framework for addressing the root causes of many of the world's challenges. Pressing challenges in governance and corruption, shrinking civic space, climate change, gender inequality, human rights, including child rights abuses, weak social protection systems, and poverty, contribute to heightened instability and violence. Solutions to these challenges can be found by actualising SDG 16. Promoting inclusion and reducing inequalities is crucial for lasting peace, and a strengthened public sector with adequate civic space can create conditions for people to thrive.

Recommendations:

1. We call on Member States to recognize that SDG 16 occupies a fundamental position among the other goals of the 2030 Agenda. Providing the means to live in security and peace requires the presence of strong institutions based on respect for human rights and the rule of law, and benefiting from transparency and good governance. Because without peace and security, there is no development. SDG 16 provides practical tools to realise people's needs and aspirations, remedy and address abuse, rebuild trust and transparency in institutions, and catalyse progress across the SDGs.
2. To this end, we urge Member States to collaborate across governments and civil society, next to donors to advance people-centred approaches and policies. This includes equitable, universal, and affordable access to justice through legal empowerment and support for customary and informal justice (CIJ) systems. Such efforts can help address gender and age-related barriers, tackle environmental injustices, and empower communities to retain control over their land and natural resources, among other interconnected issues.

¹² United Nations. (2023, April). *Press release: UN chief calls for fundamental shift to put world back on track to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals - United Nations Sustainable Development*. United Nations. Link [here](#)

3. Building upon the Secretary General’s report on a New Agenda for Peace, we call on Member States to commit to producing National Prevention Strategies, with a particular emphasis on the need to consult with local communities, civil society and local institutions in the creation of National Prevention Strategies and relevant peacebuilding processes, namely in the lead up to the 2025 Peacebuilding Architecture Review.
4. We highlight the need for Member States to mainstream conflict-sensitivity across humanitarian assistance, development, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding, ensuring that all actions take into account conflict dynamics and the principle of do no harm. This requires policy coherence, recognising the interlinkages between SDG 16 and, including but not limited to: poverty (SDG 1), education (SDG 4), gender equality (SDG 5), inequality (SDG 10), and climate (SDG 13).

II. Delivering catalytic financing for SDG 16+ and fixing a broken global financial system

2025 will present a pivotal year for reforming the international financial architecture with the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development. A lack of financing and investments for SDG 16+ to date has impeded governments’ ability to deliver progress on SDG 16 and the wider 2030 Agenda. Reforms to financing institutions thus far, have failed to address root causes of inequality within and among countries, leaving societies vulnerable and lacking resilience to withstand current and future crises.

Recommendations

1. We call on Member States to reduce military expenditure and reallocate resources towards humanitarian aid and development funding. Across the funding landscape, donors must recognise the importance of investing in conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and disarmament efforts to address the root causes of conflicts and promote sustainable peace. To this end, we also call on Member States to earmark at least ten percent of all funding in development sectors operating in conflict affected and fragile states robustly integrates conflict sensitivity and peacebuilding approaches so that programs don’t do harm, exacerbate conflict and prevent and reduce conflict by ensuring issues including health and climate don’t further drive conflict and fragility.
2. We call on Member States to establish a debt workout mechanism– a transparent, binding and multilateral framework for debt crisis resolution, under UN auspices, that addresses unsustainable and illegitimate debt and provides systematic, timely and fair restructuring of sovereign debt, including debt cancellation in a process convening all creditors.
3. We reiterate our call from the 2023 Rome Declaration¹³ for donors to develop and invest in a comprehensive donor-collaborative “Global SDG 16+ Fund”. This will provide an opportunity for governments, donors, and the private sector, to showcase themselves as “champions” that literally and figuratively support SDG 16+, while providing critical resources for civil society and grassroots groups to advance SDG 16+ at the local and national levels that are so urgently needed. The development of such a fund will be critical to turning the tide of SDG 16+ towards a more positive outlook towards 2030.
4. Recognising peacebuilding as an important, cost-effective, and impactful approach to prevent and deal with conflict, we call on governments for increased support and investment in this regard. This would include an increase of direct funding, as well as maintaining and scaling-up contributions to various funds dedicated to specific SDG 16+ concerns, such as the UN Peacebuilding Fund, the Legal Empowerment Fund, and the UN Democracy Fund. Governments must ensure that these funds allocate increased core funding, longer-term funding, and flexible resources to grassroots organisations and in support of locally-led initiatives situated within communities.

¹³ 2023 Rome Civil Society Declaration, “If not now, then when? An urgent call for transformative SDG 16+ commitments at the midpoint of the 2030 agenda”, available [here](#).

5. We reiterate that Member States must establish robust monitoring and accountability mechanisms to track financial flows, measure progress, and ensure transparency and accountability in the allocation and utilisation of resources for SDG 16+. We also call for enhanced data collection, reporting mechanisms, and stakeholder engagement to monitor financing for peace and justice initiatives effectively. By prioritising these SDG 16+ priorities at the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development, stakeholders can mobilise resources, foster partnerships, and catalyse action towards building peaceful, just, and inclusive societies for sustainable development.

III. Recognising the indispensable role of civil society for SDG 16+ and the 2030 Agenda, and expanding civic space

Civil society serves a crucial role in actualising the 2030 Agenda, and SDG 16+ due to its role as an intermediary between society and a government. A strong, robust, and *funded* civil society can also uphold the legitimacy and accountability of governments and institutions, and greater inclusion of civil society in decision-making spaces, is central to restoring trust in multilateral institutions. Engaging with civil society is a prerequisite for governments to fulfil their commitments set out in SDG 16+. Doing so, will enable governments to leave no one behind in implementation and governance alike. Building on the language contained in SDG 16, citizens and civil society representatives possess the right to participate in public affairs as enshrined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 25).

Recommendations

1. We call on Member States to develop, strengthen and implement legal frameworks that guarantee an enabling environment for critical civic voices and protect human rights defenders, activists, journalists, and other individuals who face risks due to their work.
2. Upholding commitments to human rights, we call on Member States to establish robust monitoring and documentation mechanisms to track violations of civic freedoms and human rights online and offline, including attacks against civil society actors and media organisations, illegitimate restrictions on freedom of expression and access to information, assembly and association, and other forms of repression. Utilise evidence-based research and advocacy to raise awareness, mobilise support, and push for policy reforms to protect and expand civic space globally.
3. We call upon Member States and the United Nations to foster the participation of marginalised and underrepresented groups, including women, children and youth, older persons, indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, LGBTQ+ individuals, and ethnic and religious minorities, in decision-making processes at all levels of governance through an intersectional approach, recognising the diversity of and within civil society.
4. Highlighting that inclusion of civil society must not be limited to international and global non-governmental organisations, we call on Member States to include regional, local and grassroots organisations working at national and sub-national levels in an effort to 'shift power' towards more locally-led development and global discussions around how to decolonise the sector.
5. We also call on Member States to promote the establishment of structured dialogue and consultation mechanisms between governments and civil society at all levels of governance, ensuring that CSOs have meaningful opportunities to contribute to policy development, implementation, and monitoring processes related to SDG 16+. Encourage governments to proactively engage with diverse civil society actors, including marginalised and underrepresented groups.

IV. Strengthening data, monitoring, and accountability for SDG 16+

It is clear that commitments by governments and the international community to accountability for SDG 16+ and the 2030 Agenda are lagging as we pass the half-way point to 2030. Challenges and threats to democracies and civic space worldwide restrict the role of civil society as a source for measuring SDG progress and holding governments accountable to their commitments across the SDGs. These heightened challenges must be met with concrete political action, bolstering accountability for the 2030 Agenda at large and in strengthening institutions to protect civic space and curb rampant misinformation, disinformation, and hate-speech within societies.

Recommendations:

1. We reiterate our call for SDG 16+ to be reviewed annually at the HLPF, for inclusion of SDG 16 in Voluntary National Review (VNR) reporting each year, and for providing space annually for a discussion on the interlinkages with other goals under review. This reaffirms that SDG 16 strongly links with all other goals, in line with the integrated and indivisible nature of the 2030 Agenda. A thematic review of SDG 16 at each forthcoming HLPF will also help realise the Agenda's universal vision with scale and ambition, balancing all dimensions of sustainable development and upholding the pledge to leave no one behind.
2. We call on governments to ensure that civil society, in all its diversity, is included in the Voluntary National Review (VNR) processes at all stages, including in follow-up to the VNRs, and through the expanded use of civil society, citizen-generated data and all other "non-official" data sources. This includes not only entry points for this data to be included into official statistical systems and in Voluntary National Review processes, but also includes additional funding to support civil society to produce and generate data within their own communities.
3. In partnership with civil society, we call on Member States to use VNR consultations and spaces as strategic entry points for continuous dialogue and coordination around next steps, particularly at the national level through National Development Plans, strategies, policies, programming and budgeting mechanisms.
4. We call on Member States to hold and encourage post-VNR spaces to continue the engagement and follow-up for SDG processes, including public awareness-raising mechanisms. This includes ensuring transparency over the overall SDG reviewing processes.
5. In partnership with National Statistical Commissions and civil society, we call on Member States to complete comprehensive data collection efforts that capture disaggregated information on various dimensions of SDG 16+, with a particular focus on marginalised and vulnerable groups such as women, children, indigenous communities, and LGBTQ+ individuals.
6. We urge the promotion of non-official data sources, such as those generated by civil society organisations (CSOs), research institutions, academia, and citizens themselves, as they play a vital role in complementing official data. These sources can provide a more nuanced understanding of progress at all levels and help fill gaps in official reporting. CSOs can advocate for the integration of non-official data into national statistical systems to enhance the credibility and inclusivity of SDG monitoring.

V. Mobilising commitments to SDG 16+ at the 2024 Summit of the Future, 2025 International Conference on Financing for Development and the 2025 World Social Summit

Building upon the commitments and assessment of the current lack of progress on the Sustainable Development Agenda undertaken at the 2023 SDG Summit, the 2024 Summit of the Future and forthcoming Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development and World Social Summit present an opportunity for governments to advance urgently needed financial and political commitments. Recognising

downward trends where current peacebuilding funding is at a 15-year low¹⁴, that is in sharp contrast to the military investments, the urgency of increased financing is clear. Further, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for more diverse and equitable mechanisms for civil society engagement in decision-making spaces, and the resulting needs for digital safety and accessibility, such as through the Global Digital Compact. It is with this in mind that we present transformative and actionable recommendations for the aforementioned series of High-level meetings.

Recommendations:

1. We call on governments and other donors to increase funding commitments for SDG 16+, including funding for conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and post-conflict reconstruction efforts. Financial institutions and donors must acknowledge the importance of investing in sustainable peace processes, mediation, and reconciliation initiatives to address the root causes of conflict and build resilient societies, empower local communities, strengthen social cohesion, and enhance resilience to shocks and crises, including climate-related disasters and pandemics.
2. Ahead of the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development in 2025, we call on donors, Member States and the private sector to come with concrete political commitments for comprehensive reforms of the international financial architecture to establish a more equitable system that addresses the current debt crisis experienced by many countries, promotes better and more affordable public finance and to promote fair taxation and combat illicit financial flows.
3. We call on governments to increase political commitments through the 2024 Pact for the Future and Summit of the Future. In an effort to restore trust in institutions, Member States must highlight the importance of transparent, accountable, and effective governance structures at local, national, and international levels to ensure inclusive decision-making processes and promote good governance practices; this requires the inclusion of civil society actors at all levels of decision-making.
4. As outlined in section 3 of this declaration, we call on governments to meaningfully include civil society as partners at all stages of commitment-making processes, to ensure that any commitments made are people-centred and responsive to the needs of citizens themselves.
5. We call on the UN and Member States to ensure that participation modalities at the 2024 Summit of the Future, 2025 Financing for Development Conference and World Social Summit are as inclusive as possible, and that efforts are made to ensure inclusion of voices from developing countries, as well as marginalised and vulnerable groups and people living in fragile and conflict-affected settings or states.

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¹⁴ <https://www.oecd.org/dac/peace-official-development-assistance.pdf>