

Key Messages from the SDG 16 High-Level Conference
“Advancing Peace, Justice and Institutions for Sustainable Development”
12 May 2025

The SDG 16 Conference 2025, co-organized by the Permanent Mission of Italy to the United Nations, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), and the International Development Law Organization (IDLO), explored trends, challenges, and opportunities to accelerate action on Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 and highlighted its role as an enabler of all the SDGs. The outputs of the Conference will inform several intergovernmental processes, including the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development and the World Summit for Social Development. The following key messages arose from the discussions involving representatives from governments, judiciary institutions, international organizations, civil society, academia, local communities, and practitioners.

1. SDG 16 is the backbone of the entire 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda), but progress remains slow and uneven. Amid conflict, eroding rule of law, and weakening institutions, the foundations of sustainable development are under threat. With less than five years left, SDG 16 must urgently move to the center of global action. Together with SDG 17, it powers the entire agenda—without them, the promise of a peaceful, just, and sustainable future cannot be realized. Far from being an abstract principle, SDG 16 – encompassing justice, accountability, and the rule of law – offers concrete solutions for accelerating progress across the 2030 Agenda, including in terms of structural reforms, empowerment of people and communities, and multi-stakeholder partnerships. Leveraging SDG 16 at the international level can also enable progress on shared global priorities, as reflected in the Pact for the Future and other multilateral agreements.
2. The rule of law is the bedrock of robust institutions, human rights, inclusive development, and sustainable peace. Justice systems must adapt and strengthen their resilience in response to the growing challenges to their independence, impartiality and integrity. Countries must invest in independent, accountable, and well-resourced justice institutions to guarantee fairness and ensure equal access to justice for all. Innovations, like virtual courts, improve transparency and accessibility — but these advances must be inclusive, rights-based, and designed to narrow justice gaps.
3. Peace is a political choice – and it must be built around dialogue, reconciliation, and institutional integrity. Sustaining peace demands national leadership, supported by international solidarity and responsive institutions that reflect and serve their people. The global cost of violence is staggering, underscoring the urgent need to invest in conflict prevention, justice, and institutional resilience. Spending on peace, justice, and institutions is not a cost — it is a high-return investment. This includes investing in measures to address inequalities, impunity, and breakdowns in the rule of law, which are the most common drivers of conflict.
4. Participatory governance strengthens trust, equality, and institutional legitimacy. Ensuring equal rights and equality of opportunity for women is not just a matter of fairness – it is a strategic necessity. When women have the opportunity to participate fully in public life, societies and economies thrive. Around the world, youth and women are leading transformative efforts for peace and justice, but their contributions are often underfunded and excluded from decision-making. As civic space shrinks and authoritarianism rises,

to rebuild the social contract, institutions must create genuine opportunities for co-governance with a wide range of stakeholders. Strategic investment in youth- and women-led initiatives not only advances equity but also yields broader development gains.

5. Effective, accountable and transparent institutions, supported by sufficient financing, are at the heart of the 2030 Agenda and are the foundation of trust between people and their governments in all countries. Corruption, opacity, and inefficiency erode public confidence. Access to information frameworks, transparent budgeting, anti-corruption mechanisms, and open government practices are key to restoring legitimacy and ensuring that public resources benefit everyone. Institutions must be reoriented to deliver services with integrity, responsiveness, and fairness.
6. Technology must be inclusive, rights-based, and designed to serve — not replace — human governance. From digital justice platforms to youth-led campaigns using mobile applications for civic engagement, technology offers transformative potential. However, digital tools can also exacerbate inequality, surveillance, and exclusion. Clear, inclusive and enforceable governance frameworks that prioritize digital rights, privacy, data protection, and equal access are essential. Digital innovation must be harnessed as a force for justice, not division.
7. SDG 16 must be implemented from the ground up—anchored in communities and national contexts. Examples of participatory development and public service involving volunteers show how localized action fosters ownership, resilience, and sustainability. National and subnational governments must be supported to tailor SDG 16 to their unique political, legal, and cultural landscapes. Localization turns global goals into lived realities.
8. Policy decisions should be informed by robust evidence. Timely, disaggregated, and accessible data are critical to track progress, target reforms, and ensure accountability. Tools such as rule of law indices and the integration of National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) into monitoring systems offer critical, actionable insights. Without reliable data, justice gaps remain hidden and unresolved.
9. Global commitments must be matched with political will and financial investment. Many countries, especially those in crisis or debt distress, lack the resources to strengthen legal and policy frameworks and public institutions. The upcoming Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development and the World Summit for Social Development are opportunities to mobilize greater political and financial support for SDG 16, including in global financing frameworks. Flexible, sustained funding must target peacebuilding, justice reform, and capacity building —especially in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.