SDG 16 High-level Conference 2025

United Nations Headquarters - 12 May 2025

Session: Leveraging SDG 16 to accelerate progress on shared priorities in line with the Pact for the Future and other multilateral agreements and processes

Statement by Luísa Franco Machado - Founder & Executive Director, EquiLabs:

Dear colleagues, excellencies,
Let's begin with an uncomfortable truth: SDG 16 doesn't get headlines.
It doesn't mobilize energy like SDG 5 on gender or urgency like SDG 1 on poverty. It's framed as procedural, technical. Important but uninspiring.

But if governance fails, everything else does.
AI regulation, civic space protection, disinformation policy, climate justice, none of it survives in fragile institutions. But instead of confronting that fragility, we continue trying to govern 21st-century crises with 20th-century tools, shaped by 19th-century logics of control and exclusion.

The world has changed.
We're no longer navigating analog threats. We're navigating a digital order where platforms determine what we see, data brokers influence what we access, and AI systems operationalize historical inequalities at scale.

The 21st-century power grab no longer needs street barricades; it needs only an opaque algorithm, billionaire-friendly content policies, and a Terms-of-Service we never read. If the Sustainable Development Goals cannot govern that reality, they cannot govern at all.

In Latin America, these threats are not theoretical.

In 2024:

Deepfake disinformation campaigns undermined women political leaders in Mexico.

In Brazil, automated credit scoring flagged single mothers in informal jobs as too risky to serve.

In Argentina, predictive policing systems criminalized trans people under the language of "public safety."

And still, international governance processes remain slow to recognize these patterns as governance failures and name the connection between institutional failure and systemic oppression, sexism, homophobia, racism. These harms are predictable and they are preventable.

That's why I founded EquiLabs, a youth-led digital rights lab challenging how data and AI governance is designed, funded, and decided. Last year, we convened over 300 young leaders, technologists, and organizers to co-write a Youth Manifesto for AI Justice. It sets out what we are no longer willing to compromise on: audits grounded in lived experience, enforceable rights over our data, and governance that redistributes power. I invite you all to read it and to take it as a blueprint for what structural accountability can look like.

In an age of generative AI, we need generative accountability. That means moving beyond audits after the harm is done. It means governance that anticipates, redistributes, and restores by design. Youth-led and feminist movements have been doing this work.
But participation alone is not power.

Co-governance means:

Real community veto power over technologies that affect our lives.

Binding obligations for platforms, not just voluntary principles.

Feminist, intersectional frameworks guiding how impact is defined, not just how it's mitigated.

It also means investing in the governance ecosystems already building alternatives.
Grassroots collectives. Data justice labs. Queer and Indigenous tech movements. These are the new civic infrastructures, and they're doing more for SDG 16 than any policy declaration. We do not suffer from a deficit of declarations; we suffer from a surplus of gate-keepers.

We see this failure play out clearly in upcoming international fora like Financing for Development or the World Summit on Social Development, where I can count on one hand the number of young people who can actually afford to fly to Sevilla or Doha. The system isn't built to let us in. There's no funding, no structural access, and no serious commitment to co-governance. These are the spaces where the rules of redistribution are shaped, yet the very generation expected to inherit them is structurally excluded. That's not a gap. It's the governance model working exactly as designed.

So here's my call to the institutions in the room:

If you want to stay relevant, you must share power with those already building what's next. Young people are redesigning governance from the ground up with new values, new tools, and new rules. We're not waiting for permission. We're already doing the work. The question is: will institutions catch up or be left behind?

Thank you.

Closing remarks:

There's this persistent perception that young people are always complaining, pointing out what's broken without offering solutions. But most of the young activists I know are working two jobs just to pay rent *and* running advocacy campaigns in their so-called spare time. They show up to global negotiations unpaid, unfunded, and often unacknowledged doing the work that keeps institutions honest, while being told they haven't "earned" a seat at the table. I have friends who slept in tents in -30ºC to be in Davos, and others who crammed into a 30-person hostel room just to attend COP in Dubai.

And still, we lead.

As a UN Young Leader for the SDGs, I founded EquiLabs, a youth-led initiative working on rights-based digital governance. We're partnering with IOs, governments, and NGOs, helping shape global conversations on data, tech, and accountability.

So when institutions say "youth need to do more than complain," I hear that as deflection, from a discomfort with sharing power. The real question is whether institutions are ready to share the mandate, not just the mic.