SDG 16 CONFERENCE
Peace, Justice & Inclusive Societies

16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS

Advancing Peace, Justice and Institutions for Sustainable Development

Report of the SDG 16 Conference 2025

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Co-organized by:

United Nations | Department of Economic and Social Affairs

Permanent Mission of Italy
UN - New York

IDLO
International Development Law Organization

Co-organized by:

United Nations | Department of Economic and Social Affairs

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The Conference

Amid multiple, interconnected crises — including rising inequalities, poverty, hunger, climate change, and conflicts — that hinder progress toward the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda), the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 Conference 2025 focused on the theme "Advancing peace, justice and institutions for sustainable development". The Conference served as a multi-stakeholder platform to mobilise action and partnerships, while reflecting on how SDG 16 can accelerate progress on the 2030 Agenda and contribute to the implementation of the Pact for the Future — a global commitment adopted at the 2024 Summit of the Future, aimed at delivering transformative outcomes for people and the planet. The Pact highlights the importance of strengthening efforts to build peaceful, just, and inclusive societies for sustainable development, ensuring access to justice for all, and building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. These priorities are upheld alongside human rights and fundamental freedoms, as outlined in Action Seven.

Held at the United Nations Headquarters in New York on 12 May 2025, and co-organized by the Permanent Mission of Italy to the United Nations, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) and the International Development Law Organization (IDLO), the Conference brought together a range of panellists and participants, including ministers and senior government officials, United Nations system entities and other international organisations and representatives of civil society, youth, and academia to address three themes:

• Stocktaking of progress on SDG 16: Assessing achievements and challenges;

• The business case for investment in peaceful, just and inclusive societies;

• The way forward: Leveraging SDG 16 to accelerate progress on shared priorities in line with the Pact for the Future and other multilateral agreements and processes.

Building on the previous five editions held in 2019, 2021, 2022, 2023 and 2024, the 2025 Conference served as a platform for experience-sharing, advocacy, and the identification of priorities for action aimed at accelerating the implementation of SDG 16 in the final five years leading up to 2030. The outputs of the Conference will inform several intergovernmental processes, including the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development and the World Summit for Social Development.

Setting the scene for the Conference deliberations, the opening session featured interventions by the Undersecretary of State of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Italy, the Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations, the President of the General Assembly and the President of the Economic and Social Council, as well as remarks by the Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs of UN DESA and the Director-General of IDLO.

The Conference was structured around three panel sessions and included a dedicated civil society track, which resulted in the 2025 Rome Civil Society Declaration on SDG16+.

The Conference featured 33 speakers and resource persons, attracted over 150 in-person participants and was webcast on UN Web TV. Twenty-four countries, primarily represented at the level of Permanent Representatives or Deputy Permanent Representatives, delivered statements, including on behalf of the Group of Friends of the Rule of Law, the Group of Friends of Security Sector Reform and the Justice Action Coalition.

Key messages

Across the three themes addressed by the Conference, speakers and participants highlighted key insights on SDG 16's catalytic effect in addressing some of the most significant crises facing the world today, accelerating progress toward the 2030 Agenda and contributing to the implementation of the Pact for the Future.

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 centre 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 realised. 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 prioritise 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 localised 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. Localisation 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 mobilise 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.

Opening and closing segments

H.E. Mr. Maurizio Massari, Permanent Representative of Italy to the United Nations, moderated the high-level opening session. He recalled the Conference's origins in Italy in 2019, which were founded on the conviction that peace, justice, and strong institutions are essential to achieving the 2030 Agenda. He underlined that the 2025 edition took place in the context of the 80th anniversary of the United Nations and following the adoption of the Pact for the Future. He emphasised the importance of maintaining momentum toward renewed multilateralism and accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, grounded in inclusivity and the protection of present and future generations.

H.E. Ms. Amina Mohammed, Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations, emphasised the urgent need to strengthen global partnerships to promote peace, justice, and sustainable development. She highlighted the importance of the rule of law, strong institutions, adequate financing and bold decision-making to address the alarming setbacks in SDG 16, where corruption and limited access to justice remain major challenges. She noted that the erosion of peace is often tied to the deterioration of institutions and the breakdown of the rule of law. She underscored that the Pact for the Future offers a roadmap for revitalising multilateralism and ensuring that institutions are transparent, accountable and inclusive, reaffirming the need to place these principles — and rule-based systems — at the heart of sustainable development efforts.

H.E. Mr. Giorgio Silli, Undersecretary of State at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Italy, reaffirmed Italy's commitment to advancing SDG 16 and stressed the importance of peace, justice and inclusion as essential pillars of sustainable development, in line with the goals of the 2030 Agenda. He emphasised that SDG 16 serves as a critical foundation for achieving broader development objectives, particularly through the establishment of fair legal systems, strong institutions and the protection of human rights. H.E. Mr. Silli highlighted the urgency of addressing global challenges such as climate change and conflict, while maintaining a focus on inclusivity, civic space, and political participation.

H.E. Mr. Philémon Yang, President of the General Assembly, also emphasised the centrality of SDG 16 to the success of the 2030 Agenda. Noting that one-quarter of the world's population lives in conflict-affected areas, he underscored the urgency of accelerating efforts to realise the SDGs. He highlighted the critical role of the General Assembly in advancing SDG 16, particularly through small arms control as a means to prevent violence and foster development. H.E. Mr. Yang called for coordinated global action to strengthen judicial systems and uphold human rights, the rule of law, and transparency. He further noted that the upcoming 80th anniversary of the United Nations offers a vital opportunity to reaffirm these principles and promote the development of sustainable, resilient societies.

H.E. Mr. Robert Rae, President of the United Nations Economic and Social Council, emphasised the importance of the rule of law and strong institutions, underscoring their enduring value. He pointed to the current global crises — including conflicts, governance breakdowns, displacement, and erosion of trust in institutions — as evidence of the consequences of undermining the rule of law. H.E. Mr. Rae cautioned against unilateralism and disregard for international agreements, calling for a renewed commitment to SDG 16. He stressed the need to invest in inclusive institutions that serve all people, especially those who have been uprooted, marginalised, or left behind. Urging a reinvigorated, inclusive, and collaborative approach, he underscored that meaningful dialogue and engagement must guide both policy and practice.

In his opening and closing remarks, Mr. Li Junhua, Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs at UN DESA, highlighted the erosion of trust in institutions and the increasing challenges to justice, accountability, and human rights. He underscored the critical importance of investing in peace, justice and strong, inclusive institutions, calling for public institutions that are transparent, accountable and responsive — equipped with the capacity to conduct anticipatory planning, evidence-based policymaking and to lead the implementation of equitable policies. He called for inclusive decision-making and the adoption of gender-responsive, non-discriminatory policies that empower marginalised and underrepresented groups. He also stressed the need for a rights-based approach to digital transformation and the reinforcement of the rule of law. Mr. Li concluded by calling for unified global efforts and bold, inclusive action to fulfill the promise of SDG 16 and accelerate progress toward sustainable development.

Ms. Jan Beagle, Director-General of IDLO, emphasised that SDG 16 — far from being an abstract principle — offers practical solutions to tackle complex challenges and accelerate progress across the 2030 Agenda. She highlighted how investing in the rule of law and SDG 16 can generate tangible dividends for peace, justice, and good governance, and pointed to people-centred justice systems as essential to restoring the social contract. Noting that SDG 16 can catalyse progress on issues from poverty to transnational organised crime, she urged cross-sectoral engagement — including with the private sector, civil society, women and youth. She welcomed the renewed Rome Civil Society Declaration as a vital call to move from promises to progress and from rhetoric to results. Looking ahead to key global forums, she emphasised the importance of mobilising greater political and financial support for SDG 16 and urged continued collaboration, learning and shared action across sectors and borders.

Quotes from the moderator and panellists

"We cannot achieve the 2030 Agenda without SDG 16. Let us leave this Conference with renewed determination to put justice, peace, and strong institutions at the centre of our efforts."

H.E. Ms. Amina J. Mohammed,
Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations

"Peace, justice and strong institutions embodied in SDG 16 are crucial enablers of progress across the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development."

H.E. Mr. Maurizio Massari,
Permanent Representative of Italy
to the United Nations

"Our broader vision must remain clear: we aim to make our societies more inclusive and just by expanding civic and political space, ensuring institutions at all levels are more representative, and renewing the social contract between people and their institutions."

H.E. Mr. Giorgio Silli, Undersecretary of State,
Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International
Cooperation of Italy

"Let us explore how SDG 16 can be a powerful lever to accelerate progress on our shared priorities, in alignment with the Pact for the Future and other multilateral commitments."

Mr. Li Junhua,
Under-Secretary-General
for Economic and Social Affairs, UN DESA

"Peaceful, just and inclusive societies, as envisioned in SDG 16, are the bedrock of our international community."

H.E. Mr. Philémon Yang,
President of the General Assembly

"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."

Ms. Jan Beagle,
Director-General,
International Development Law Organization (IDLO)

"We need a reinvigorated commitment to invest in inclusive institutions that deliver for all people, especially those who have been uprooted, who have been marginalised or left behind."

H.E. Mr. Robert Rae, President of the United Nations
Economic and Social Council

Panel 1: Stocktaking of progress on SDG 16: Assessing achievements and challenges

Although reliable and disaggregated data for SDG 16 remains limited, available evidence suggests that global progress on this Goal is significantly off track. According to the World Justice Project Rule of Law Index 2024, the rule of law has weakened in 57 percent of the 142 countries and jurisdictions surveyed, marking the seventh consecutive year of global decline. This deterioration is undermining development gains and increasing social instability. Key challenges include rising authoritarianism with weakening checks and balances, the erosion of fundamental rights, declining access to justice and lack of trust in institutions. With just five years remaining to 2030, critical gaps in the implementation of SDG 16 must be addressed through people-centred approaches grounded in the rule of law, human rights, and the principles of equality and non-discrimination.

Countries affected by conflict have emphasised the importance of national ownership, reconciliation, and inclusive dialogue as foundational elements of sustainable peace. These efforts need to be supported by frameworks that promote country-led solutions and encourage flexible, long-term support from the international community. Reconciliation is viewed not as symbolic, but as a practical process involving truth-telling, forgiveness and inclusive engagement. To ensure its sustainability, peace must also be anchored in functioning state institutions, underscoring the need for effective governance structures that can support and sustain peacebuilding efforts. Youth are contributing to peacebuilding and justice through grassroots activities, including young women-led initiatives, education, and civic engagement, often leveraging digital platforms

and social media as powerful tools for advocacy and participation. These digital tools enable new forms of engagement in peace processes, but also risk reinforcing existing inequalities.

To accelerate progress on SDG 16, it is imperative to build on the momentum of positive change seen in various regions and scale up these efforts to make SDG 16 a reality on a global scale. In Kenya, judicial reforms have expanded access to justice through the establishment of specialised courts — such as child and gender justice, as well as Small Claims courts — the promotion of alternative dispute resolution mechanisms and the integration of digital technologies. Brazil has enacted major legal reforms, criminalised various forms of violence and discrimination and prioritised institutional capacity-building to combat corruption and strengthen oversight mechanisms.

Technology is playing a transformative role in enhancing the transparency, efficiency, and reach of justice systems. Digital courts, case tracking systems and online filing mechanisms are increasing access to legal services, particularly in remote and underserved areas.

Technological innovations also contribute to greater accountability and improved public trust in institutions.

Measurement challenges and underinvestment in data systems hinder progress monitoring and evidence-based policymaking. Robust, timely, and disaggregated data is essential to track progress, identify persistent gaps, and respond effectively to emerging challenges. Increased political will and investment in data infrastructure are needed to close these gaps and support more effective interventions.

As global challenges intensify and resources become scarcer, it is necessary to draw on the expertise and resources of a wide range of stakeholders. Empowering communities, promoting reconciliation, investing in justice systems and supporting youth and marginalised voices are all essential to building a more peaceful, just and equitable future. Global forums scheduled in 2025 offer opportunities to drive progress on SDG 16. Prioritising justice and institutional strengthening in development finance discussions and multilateral agreements could catalyse meaningful change.

Quotes from the moderator and panellists

"As we approach 2030, critical gaps in the implementation of SDG 16 must be addressed through people-centred approaches grounded in the rule of law, human rights, and the principles of equality and non-discrimination."

Ms. Jan Beagle, Director-General, IDLO

"We must actively include and mainstream judiciaries within conversations on sustainable development. Their absence diminishes our progress towards the realisation of SDG 16."

Hon. Lady Justice Philomena Mbete Mwilu, Deputy Chief Justice and Vice-President, Supreme Court of Kenya

"We are at a juncture in which democracy is facing unprecedented challenges (...) Strengthening our institutions and guaranteeing social participation are essential measures to combat hatred, intolerance and inequality."

H.E. Mr. Jorge Rodrigo Araújo Messias,
Attorney General of the Union, Brazil

"For the seventh consecutive year, a majority of countries have experienced decline, with at least 6.3 billion people living in countries where the rule of law is weaker today than it was in 2015."

Ms. Daniela Barba, Director of Research
on Access to Justice, World Justice Project

"We will need all actors, including civil society, the private sector, parliamentarians and academia, to translate global commitments into national action."

Ms. Ghada Fathi Waly,
Executive Director, UNODC

"Young people are shaping peace not only within political institutions but also in everyday, relational spaces, both online and offline. Their creativity, resilience, and ability to turn political issues into personal narratives are key to building sustainable and inclusive peace."

Ms. Lynrose Jane D. Genon,
Executive Council Member
of Young Women+ Leaders for Peace
in The Philippines

"Both war and peace are political choices. Conflict often arises from external interference, exclusion, and injustice—but peace can only take root when national actors choose dialogue over division."

Mr. Helder Da Costa, General Secretary,
g7+ Secretariat

Panel 2: The business case for investment in peaceful, just and inclusive societies

Despite challenges such as declining public trust and reduced aid budgets, investing in peace, justice, inclusion and effective institutions is not only essential for resilience but also yields tangible economic and social returns. The economic costs of failing to address justice and peace are high both financially and in human terms — according to some estimates, daily justice problems cost countries up to 3 per cent of GDP, and interpersonal violence led to a global economic loss of US$2.6 trillion in 2022. Conversely, even modest investments in people-centred justice and conflict prevention yield substantial returns and close critical gaps, such as disparities between men and women, with potential economic gains reaching trillions of dollars globally.

Voluntary national reviews confirm that SDG 16 underpins all other SDGs by enabling inclusive development. Strengthened public administration, anti-corruption efforts, justice reforms and inclusion have proven benefits for national stability and global economic resilience, especially during crises. Countries like Senegal, The Gambia, and Côte d'Ivoire illustrated diverse approaches to strengthening public sector accountability, the rule of law and social inclusion, often through transparency measures, legislative reforms and gender mainstreaming. These reforms include the vetting of public officials, enhanced access to justice, constitutional reforms that promote political stability and the removal of impediments to women's representation and leadership.

The urgency to invest in SDG 16 is further underscored by recent data collected by UNODC, UNCHR and UNDP showing stagnation across all targets. Evidence that

anti-corruption measures, youth inclusion, and conflict prevention foster peace and trust but also generate high financial and societal returns highlights the importance of reframing SDG 16 both as a multilateral obligation and a strategic economic investment. According to UNDP, three areas are crucial to unlocking the potential of SDG 16: strengthening justice systems, including through innovations such as digital justice platforms, digital grievance systems and restorative justice models; promoting civic engagement, supported by freedom of information laws and youth participation platforms; and digital technologies and data-driven governance that help rebuild trust in public institutions by making them more responsive, people-centred and aligned with public expectations.

Gender equality in public institutions is crucial to achieving SDG 16. Promoting gender parity signals societal commitment to equality, enhances government performance and improves public trust. While progress has been made in overall employment parity, women remain underrepresented in leadership and crisis response roles. The use of disaggregated data helps guide reforms to promote gender equality in public administration in countries like Bhutan and Senegal. Successful reforms that integrate gender equality into government strategies, address cultural barriers and implement accountability measures show that achieving gender equality is not secondary but foundational to building inclusive, effective public institutions and ensuring transformative, sustainable development.

Civil society organisations play a key role in localising SDG 16 through providing legal aid, access to justice, and community engagement. Investments in legal aid not only support conflict prevention but also empower communities economically and socially. Alternative dispute resolution, mediation and grassroots advocacy strengthen local justice systems and reduce pressure on formal courts. Initiatives like mobile courts and legal awareness programmes build trust and encourage the reporting of violations. Legal aid's impact extends beyond justice, contributing to poverty reduction, gender equality, economic growth and overall social transformation, underscoring its critical role in achieving the 2030 Agenda.

Quotes from the moderator and panellists

"All state officials must uphold the principles of transparency and integrity in fulfilling their mission."

H.E. Mr. Olivier Boucal,
Minister of Public Service and Public Service Reform,
Senegal

"This is not the time to dive into our notes — but rather the time to act, to invest, and to thoughtfully but aggressively meet the moment that we are in."

Ms. Margaret Williams,
Associate Director, SDG16+ Pathfinders
for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies

"It is important that we promote term limits (…) to ensure stability in the country."

Hon. Hussein Thomasi,
Solicitor General and Legal Secretary,
Ministry of Justice, The Gambia

"I urge you to see your commitments to gender equality through SDG 16, not as secondary to all other crises your governments face, but as critical foundations for driving transformative change we desperately need if we are to address future challenges."

Ms. Müge Finkel,
Associate Professor,
School of Public and International Affairs,
University of Pittsburgh

"The pursuit of peace, justice, and inclusion is not a choice—it is a necessity to ensure a prosperous and sustainable future for all (…) women and men."

H.E. Ms. Ann Désirée Ouloto,
Minister of Civil Service and Modernization
of the Administration, Côte d'Ivoire

"Legal aid does have a real return on investment. It has had a social impact in the communities that we work in (…) and it has also reduced dependence."

Ms. Liliane Adriko,
Chief Executive Officer,
Uganda Association of Women Lawyers

"Inclusive and accountable institutions are not only enablers of peace and justice but also smart economics."

Mr. Haoliang Xu, Under-Secretary-General
and Associate Administrator, UNDP

Panel 3: The way forward: Leveraging SDG 16 to accelerate progress on shared priorities in line with the Pact for the Future and other multilateral agreements and processes

SDG 16 is often overlooked, perceived as technical and less urgent than goals such as poverty eradication or gender equality. Recent reports warn of troubling trends, including unmet human rights commitments, rising violence and deepening inequality, underscoring the urgent need to accelerate inclusive, rights-based action to avoid jeopardising global progress. Yet, SDG 16 is a critical foundation for global development, underpinning the entire SDG framework. Together with SDG 17, it drives progress across all goals by promoting the governance structures necessary to deliver sustainable outcomes.

As we approach key multilateral processes in 2025, including the HLPF, the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development and the World Summit for Social Development, it is crucial to focus on the role of SDG 16 in creating the structural conditions needed for sustainable development.

Examples from Bhutan and Honduras illustrate how SDG 16 can be implemented effectively at national and subnational levels, offering practical options for addressing challenges and advancing inclusive governance. Bhutan integrates SDG 16 through its Gross National Happiness model, focusing on improving public

service delivery, women's leadership in public institutions and training volunteers in disaster response and civic responsibility. Youth-focused programmes help reduce crime and foster self-reliance. These initiatives contribute to peacebuilding, anticorruption and enhanced access to justice. However, small countries like Bhutan face capacity challenges and require external support to sustain progress. In Honduras, community-driven planning, participatory governance, transparency and inclusive dialogues involving civil society, women, youth and farmers are organised through thematic working groups. This approach, combined with accountability mechanisms and public observatories, strengthens local governance and builds trust, demonstrating the value of SDG localisation and cross-sectoral knowledge sharing.

Legal and institutional reforms to dismantle barriers faced by marginalised groups — including women, children, persons with disabilities and older persons — are especially critical in conflict-affected settings, where systemic neglect often exacerbates inequality and makes justice largely inaccessible to the most vulnerable. Addressing this neglect requires a combination of rights-based reforms, national dialogue, transitional justice

mechanisms and human rights education, with strong support from National Human Rights Institutions. A dual approach that ensures both accountability and transparency, underpinned by robust data collection, is essential. To this end, SDG 16 needs to centre on marginalised voices and promote participatory, inclusive governance.

A key perspective that emerged during the discussion is that outdated governance systems are ill-equipped to manage digital-era challenges such as artificial intelligence (AI), platform control, algorithmic bias, disinformation and surveillance. A panellist highlighted youth-led innovation as a powerful force and called for audits grounded in lived experience, enforceable data rights and power-sharing governance. The concept of "generative accountability", shaped by youth and feminist movements, was emphasised. The tokenistic inclusion of youth was also criticised, urging institutions to go beyond sharing platforms and meaningfully share power. Youth leadership and innovation were seen as essential to building the new civic infrastructure necessary for rights-based, inclusive governance in the future.

Quotes from the moderator and panellists

"SDG 16 is the engine of implementation of the SDGs — and we need to propel it at a faster pace if we want to accelerate the 2030 Agenda."

Mr. Navid Hanif,
Assistant Secretary-General
for Economic Development, UN DESA

"Deliberate actions related to governance, peace and institutions can underpin efforts to mobilise resources for sustainable development and strengthen social contracts, fostering inclusive and resilient societies."

Ms. Tashi Pem, Chairperson,
Royal Civil Service Commission, Bhutan

"As a local government, we have one fundamental aspect—and that is incorporating the perspectives of all members. This strengthens our citizen participation, empowers people, and raises awareness on responsibilities required in each one of the various groups and institutions, without leaving anyone behind."

Ms. Cristel Urquía Dubón,
Deputy Mayor of Intibucá, Honduras

"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."

Ms. Luisa Franco Machado,
Founder and Executive Director,
EquiLabs and Young Leader for the SDGs

"Without legal recognition and protection, the principle of 'leaving no one behind' becomes an empty promise."

Ms. Rigbe Gebrehawaria,
Commissioner for Women, Children,
Older Persons, and Disability Rights,
Ethiopian Human Rights Commission

Priorities expressed by Member States

Member States intervened across all panel sessions of the Conference, reiterating that SDG 16 is not a standalone goal but a catalyst and enabler of the entire 2030 Agenda (Albania, Colombia, Croatia, Mauritius, Mozambique, Panama, Poland and Timor-Leste). SDG 16 was frequently referred to as a "cornerstone" or "foundational" to sustainable development, democratic resilience, and post-conflict recovery. Emphasis was placed on interlinkages between justice, peace, trust, service delivery, and broader development goals. However, shrinking civic space, rising violence, weak financing, and persistent governance challenges underscore the urgent need for renewed political will, stronger multilateralism and inclusive, transparent institutions.

The Philippines, on behalf of the Group of Friends of the Rule of Law, highlighted that rising levels of violence and conflict continue to undermine peacebuilding efforts. Myanmar and Mozambique pointed out that the direct impact of conflict on citizens and institutions underscores the importance of ending authoritarian practices and strengthening safeguards for vulnerable populations. Slovakia, on behalf of the Group of Friends of the Security Sector Reform, stressed that security sector reform is essential for restoring legitimacy and rebuilding trust in institutions, particularly in post-conflict settings.

Preventive strategies — such as international crime prevention and curbing illicit arms flows — are increasingly recognised as cost-effective measures to reduce instability and support long-term peace (Mexico, Spain and Switzerland). The Netherlands on behalf of the Justice Action Coalition, stressed that a key element of crisis prevention and recovery is strengthening justice systems.

Emphasis was placed on people-centred justice approaches that prioritise accessibility and responsiveness to citizens' needs. Judicial reforms — such as the

establishment of new courts, independent oversight mechanisms, and civic education initiatives (Mauritius, Romania, and Panama). Anti-corruption measures and enhanced judicial oversight are also critical tools in reinforcing the integrity and effectiveness of institutions (Algeria, Indonesia and the Russian Federation).

The importance of inclusive governance — particularly through localisation and community engagement — along with fostering youth participation in politics and parliaments, enhancing the voice of women and their equal participation in governance, safeguarding civic space and protecting journalists, was emphasised (Albania, Czechia, Croatia, the European Union, Malta, Mozambique, Philippines, Spain and Tunisia). Malta and Poland drew attention to violence against children and women, respectively, as core SDG 16 priorities.

Many countries emphasised the importance of independent oversight bodies and freedom of information laws as key components of broader accountability reforms aimed at enhancing transparency and accountability in public service delivery. (Albania, Algeria, Georgia, Indonesia, Mauritius, Philippines, Romania, Timor-Leste and Tunisia). Several countries also drew a direct link between anti-corruption efforts and institutional trust, economic resilience and investment climates (Albania, Indonesia, Panama, Poland and Spain).

The need for sustainable financing and resource mobilization for SDG 16 was emphasised, along with the Goal's relevance in the lead-up to the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development (Morocco, Mozambique, Slovakia and Switzerland). Countries also underscored the importance of supporting global and multilateral cooperation, particularly through inclusive, bottom-up partnerships and coalitions (the European Union and Spain).

Member States recognised digital transformation as a powerful enabler of good governance and institutional effectiveness. Innovations in digital governance, mobile services, and e-government are enhancing transparency and accountability, expanding access to public services — particularly for remote, rural, and marginalised communities — and improving the efficiency and responsiveness of judicial systems (Algeria, Albania, Georgia, Indonesia and Mauritius). As digital tools continue to evolve, the question arises of how technology can be strategically leveraged to accelerate the implementation of SDG 16 (Albania).

Emerging recommendations and calls to action included mainstreaming SDG 16 in national development planning and integrating its indicators across sectors and prioritising data systems for monitoring governance, inclusion, and justice, especially in low-income and post-conflict countries (Timor-Leste).

Recommendations also included investing in prevention and post-crisis justice systems to help rebuild institutional legitimacy (Netherlands and Switzerland), institutionalising digital access to public services while safeguarding against cyber threats and misinformation (Albania and Algeria), and leveraging the Pact for the Future to accelerate the implementation of SDG 16 through shared global commitments (Myanmar).

Rome Civil Society Declaration on SDG16+

Since the inception of the Conference in 2019, civil society has been an indispensable partner, offering invaluable contributions that have enriched the discussions. During this session, representatives from civil society presented the 2025 Rome Civil Society Declaration on SDG16+, developed through a broad consultation process and endorsed by 366 civil society organisations from around the world. The declaration, intended to serve as a "compass" for navigating today's complex global challenges, combines detailed analysis with concrete recommendations to reinvigorate efforts toward peace, justice and strong institutions. Its development reflects the growing urgency driven by multiple global crises that continue to undermine progress on SDG16+, including reduced funding for peacebuilding and the shrinking of civic space.

Panellists highlighted a widening gap between the international community's commitments and declining investments in peace, noting challenges such as increased militarisation, population displacement and community disempowerment. The declaration calls for a shift in financial priorities, including redirecting military expenditures toward justice systems and conflict prevention, alongside measures like establishing a debt convention and curbing illicit financial flows.

Panellists emphasised that local communities, with their deep understanding of their contexts, must be central to peacebuilding efforts to achieve meaningful change. Communities, particularly those affected by conflict, require sustained, effective funding that reaches grassroots organisations leading peace and justice work on the ground. To support this shift, the financing structure for peace must be reformed to prioritise community-led initiatives and enable better cooperation between states and civil society.

Civil society is essential — not optional — in monitoring government actions, delivering services, and ensuring

accountability. However, frontline activists face surveillance, intimidation, and shrinking support. To counter current deteriorating trends, the declaration urges governments to proactively protect civic space, fulfil international human rights commitments and use diplomatic and economic tools against regimes that suppress civil society, while strengthening protections for at-risk activists and organisations. Furthermore, governments are called upon to enact laws that encourage participatory governance involving all sectors of the population, particularly women, youth, Indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities and marginalised groups.

The declaration calls for safeguarding and expanding justice by adopting a people-centred policy lens that addresses systemic inequalities and builds trust in institutions. This includes prioritising all forms of justice — social, economic, racial, environmental, and more — while scaling up funding for accessible, affordable grassroots and community-based justice initiatives. It also emphasises the need for strong support for international justice mechanisms.

The panel moderator reaffirmed civil society's full commitment to advancing SDG16+ despite mounting challenges, using the Rome Declaration as a roadmap for collective action and urging Member States, international organisations and donors to prioritise peace, justice, and inclusion in both policy and practice. He encouraged deeper engagement with the declaration to continue building partnerships and momentum for meaningful change. As civil society presses forward, he expressed hope that this work will inspire a stronger, more inclusive approach to sustainable development and global governance.

SDG 16 CONFERENCE
Peace, Justice & Inclusive Societies

Advancing Peace, Justice and Institutions for Sustainable Development
Report of the SDG 16 Conference 2025

ECOSOC Chamber, United Nations Headquarters, New York
Monday, 12 May 2025

Co-organized by:

United Nations | Department of Economic and Social Affairs

Permanent Mission of Italy
UN - New York

IDLO
International Development Law Organization

AGENDA	
12 May 2025	
9:00 - 10:00	**Registration**
10:00 - 10:30	**High-Level Opening** • H.E. Ms. Amina J. Mohammed, Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations (video message) • H.E. Mr. Giorgio Silli, Undersecretary of State, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Italy (video message) • H. E. Mr. Philémon Yang, President of the General Assembly • H.E. Mr. Robert Rae, President of the Economic and Social Council • Mr. Li Junhua, Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) • Ms. Jan Beagle, Director-General, International Development Law Organization (IDLO) **Moderator:** H.E. Mr. Maurizio Massari, Permanent Representative of Italy to the United Nations
10:30 - 12:30	**Panel 1: Stocktaking of progress on SDG 16: Assessing achievements and challenges** **Speakers:** • Hon. Lady Justice Philomena Mwilu, Deputy Chief Justice and Vice President, Supreme Court of Kenya • H.E. Mr. Jorge Rodrigo Araújo Messias, Attorney General of the Union, Brazil • Mr. Helder Da Costa, General Secretary, g7+ Secretariat • Ms. Daniela Barba, Director of Research on Access to Justice, World Justice Project • Ms. Lynrose Jane D. Genon, Executive Council Member, Young Women+ Leaders for Peace – The Philippines (YW+PL-PH) • Ms. Ghada Fathi Waly, Executive Director, UNODC (video message) **Interactive dialogue with Member States and Q&A** **Moderator:** Ms. Jan Beagle, Director-General, International Development Law Organization (IDLO)

12:30- 13:00	**Presentation of the 2025 Rome Civil Society Declaration on SDG16+** **Speakers:** • Mr. Peter van Sluijs, Peacebuilding and Conflict Prevention Expert and Coordinator, CSPPS • Ms. Manal Benani, Youth and Cultural Manager, Sustainable Cooperation for Peace & Security (SCPS) / Africa Europe Foundation • Ms. Natalia Peláez Pérez, Founder and Director, Fundación LATIR • Mr. Musa Ansumana Soko, Youth Partnership for Peace and Development / WASH-Net • Mr. Andrews Kananga, Executive Director, Legal Aid Forum Rwanda • Ms. Mojisola Akinsanya, Executive Director, Women for Peace & Gender Equality Initiative (WOPEGEE) **Moderator:** Mr. John Romano, Director, TAP Network
13:00 – 15:00	Lunch break
15:00 - 16:15	**Panel 2: The business case for investment in peaceful, just and inclusive societies** **Speakers:** • H.E. Mr. Olivier Boucal, Minister of Public Service and Public Service Reform, Ministry of Public Service, Senegal • Hon. Hussein Thomasi, Solicitor General and Legal Secretary, Ministry of Justice, The Gambia • H.E. Ms. Anne Désirée Ouloto, Minister of Civil Service and Modernization of the Administration of the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire • Mr. Haoliang Xu, Associate Administrator, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) • Ms. Müge Finkel, Associate Professor of International Development, Director of Ford Institute for Human Security, & Co-Director of Gender Inequality Research Lab (GIRL), School of Public and International Affairs (SPIA), University of Pittsburgh • Ms. Liliane Adriko, Chief Executive Officer, Uganda Association of Women Lawyers (FIDA-Uganda) **Interactive dialogue with Member States and Q&A** **Moderator:** Ms. Margaret Williams, Associate Director, SDG16+ Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies

16:15 - 17:30	**Panel 3: The way forward: Leveraging SDG 16 to accelerate progress on shared priorities in line with the Pact for the Future and other multilateral agreements and processes** **Speakers:** • Ms. Tashi Pem, Chairperson, Royal Civil Service Commission, Bhutan • Ms. Cristel Urquía Dubón, Deputy Mayor of Intibucá, Honduras • Ms. Rigbe Gebrehawaria, Commissioner for Women, Children, Older Persons, and Disability Rights at the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission • Ms. Luisa Franco Machado, Founder and Executive Director, EquiLabs and Young Leader for the SDGs (Brazil) **Interactive dialogue with Member States and Q&A** **Moderator:** Mr. Navid Hanif, Assistant Secretary-General for Economic Development, UN DESA
17:30 - 18:00	**Closing of the conference** **Speakers:** • Mr. Li Junhua, Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, UN DESA • Ms. Jan Beagle, Director-General, IDLO **Moderator:** H. E. Mr. Gianluca Greco, Deputy Permanent Representative of Italy to the United Nations

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16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS

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