



# SDG 16 CONFERENCE

## Peace, Justice & Inclusive Societies



# People-centred governance in a post-pandemic world

Co-organized by  
UN DESA, IDLO and the  
Government of Italy

Rome, Italy | 21–22 April 2022

Conference report



**United Nations**

Department of  
Economic and  
Social Affairs



Ministry of Foreign Affairs  
and International Cooperation



International Development  
Law Organization



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# The Conference

**The SDG 16 Conference 2022 addressed how a people-centred approach to governance can help rebuild trust, accelerate progress towards sustainable development and tackle the challenges facing a post-COVID world.**

Hosted in Rome by the Government of Italy on 21 and 22 April 2022, co-organized with the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) and the International Development Law Organization (IDLO), the SDG 16 Conference brought together a range of experts from governments, the United Nations system, civil society, academia and other stakeholders through a hybrid format to address the following themes:

- Preventing conflict and sustaining peace in an increasingly fragile world.
- Building institutional resilience and enhancing the effectiveness, accountability and responsiveness of institutions.
- A new vision for the rule of law to address global challenges.
- Leaving no one behind: ensuring inclusion, protection and participation.

In addition, the Conference included a dedicated civil society track, which resulted in the elaboration of the [2022 Rome Civil Society Declaration on SDG16+](#).

Conference deliberations aim to inform the 2022 United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), the theme of which is “Building back better from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”. Although not specifically under review this year, SDG 16 directly relates to the theme of HLPF 2022, with significant linkages to the SDGs under review, including SDG 4 on quality education, SDG 5 on gender equality, and SDG 17 on partnerships.

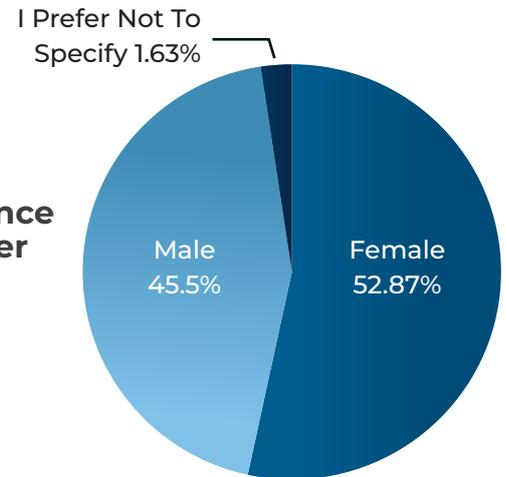
## Participation

The Conference featured a range of high-level speakers and benefited from the online participation of approximately 1,000 participants. Participants came from 137 different countries, covering all regions.

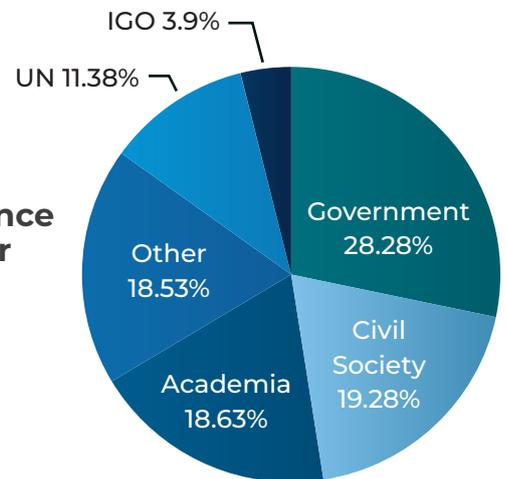
Evaluations collected after the event indicated a high satisfaction rate with the Conference:

- 91 percent of respondents were satisfied with the level and relevance of speakers.
- 88 percent of respondents were satisfied with the quality of interventions from speakers.
- 95 percent of respondents rated the Conference as useful for their work.
- 90 percent of respondents said the Conference raised their awareness on the topics.

**Attendance by gender**



**Attendance by sector**





# Key messages

Costing millions of lives, pushing millions more into poverty and causing severe stress on institutions, two years of the COVID-19 pandemic have unequivocally demonstrated the importance of SDG 16 and its pillars of peaceful, inclusive societies, access to justice and effective, accountable institutions. The rise in global violence, the climate crisis, deepening inequalities, democratic backsliding, shrinking civic space and a rapidly fraying global order make the need for institutional resilience, trust between people and governments and renewed social contracts anchored in human rights all the more evident. As noted at the opening of the Conference, “rarely has the need to promote peace, justice and inclusive societies been more apparent. Without them, we cannot achieve any of our Sustainable Development Goals”.

More than ever, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its promise to leave no one behind must guide our path forward. Success will require nothing short of a transformation of governance by putting people at the centre.

Across the four themes addressed by the Conference, participants offered the following insights in supporting people-centred governance and an SDG 16+ approach to building back better:

- **Invest in prevention and peacebuilding in both process and long-term outcomes.** Amidst increasing and often new forms of insecurity and polarization, including hate speech and the proliferation of misinformation off and online, a renewed focus on social cohesion and protection of vulnerable groups is critical. Leverage national dialogues to foster an inclusive process, bringing in local, national and regional actors and frameworks to address root causes. Prevention saves lives and must be funded accordingly.
- **Elevate the visibility of women in all stages of decision-making, including as related to prevention, peacebuilding and justice.** Increase their roles in positions of leadership and support gender-responsive laws and institutions as key to gender-responsive policies. Often the first to respond to conflict and COVID-19 despite being disproportionately impacted, amplifying the voices of women and girls in sustaining peace and building back better is both smart and necessary policy.
- **Strengthen the role of young people as agents of change in peacebuilding and decision-making processes.** Sustainable peace requires engaging all sectors of society, building a sense of ownership, thereby increasing public trust in government. Efforts should focus on providing youth with the space to exercise their agency and empower them to participate in development processes, formally and informally.

- **Prioritize coherent policymaking across government and public administrations and invest in participation and co-creation.** There is a need for adaptive, responsive, communicative and learning-focused institutions to realize participatory forms of government and renew trust in government. This requires capacity-building of public servants and investing in the public sector, ensuring access to information, empowering citizens and communities to exercise their rights, and supporting grassroots and local leadership, and equitable partnerships with international and national actors. Securing access to information is a key building block of enhanced participation. Participation needs to be better measured.
- **Harness digital government while protecting human rights.** Digitalization and increased reliance on technology brings irrefutable advantages, as well as risks. Digital government and digital technologies support improved internal systems in public administration and the creation of new services. Emerging technology such as artificial intelligence can play an important role. However, transforming public institutions requires more than digitizing existing processes. Governments should ensure that digital government does not infringe on basic freedoms and agency. The new vision must address the digital divides across and within countries.
- **Prioritize those left behind.** Halfway through the 2030 Agenda, leaving no one behind remains aspirational. Emergency investment made by governments to support social protection should be sustained in the long term as essential to effectively combatting inequalities, protecting human rights and addressing poverty in a systemic way. People-centred governance as buttressed by the rule of law and grounded in human rights is key to institutionalizing social protection and delivering upon a renewed social contract. Policies that uphold the rule of law can protect the rights of all social groups and those in vulnerable situations, including persons affected by conflict, refugees and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) people.
- **Strengthen accountability and transparency, which are critical both during and after emergencies.** There needs to be accountability for success and failure of COVID-19 measures, with a clear way of measuring outcomes. Governments should show consistent commitment to fiscal standards, even in times of emergency. Civil society has played a key role in this regard during the pandemic, monitoring budget execution, advocating for fair fiscal responses and public services, and raising public awareness. Using transparency mechanisms effectively requires dialogue between governments, citizens and communities.
- **Step up the fight against corruption.** It is important to implement and build upon instruments such as the United Nations Convention Against Corruption and the United Nations Convention on Transnational Organized Crime, while leveraging existing tools and opportunities at national and international levels, including for better transparency and oversight of public spending. Fighting corruption and promoting integrity within the justice sector is key. Harnessing the “missing funds” stemming from illicit financial flows will be critical for implementing the SDGs.

- **Approach the rule of law and access to justice through a holistic and people-centred lens** to support equal access to public resources and services, such as employment, healthcare, housing and education, and help address global challenges such as food insecurity, climate change, biodiversity and organized crime. *Our Common Agenda* puts forward the possibility of a new vision for the rule of law to support states, communities and people in rebuilding the social contract in support of lasting peace. With exacerbated justice gaps worsening the disconnect between people and institutions, it is urgent to bring justice closer to people.
- **Advance evidence-based planning through long-term national development plans and more effective data mobilization.** Draw out interlinkages between security and development through national development plans with clear policies, metrics and accountability mechanisms, and establish a culture of reporting at the national level. Increase data literacy, build out transparency in data collection and combine official and non-official data in monitoring the 2030 Agenda. Data analytics and information technologies can help identify and mitigate corruption, for example in procurement, while playing a critical role to support planning, decision-making and policymaking across SDG 16. Paying more attention to the narrative with which the data is delivered may be just as important as the data itself.
- **Use the rule of law to promote multilateralism, international cooperation and strengthen faith in a fair and equitable global order.** The war in Ukraine has brought into stark relief the fragility of the global order, the need to uphold the UN Charter and international law, and the necessity to meaningfully address many other conflicts and humanitarian situations globally. Long-term peace and sustainable development cannot be reached without access to justice and the rule of law. Increased political support and investment in both is crucial.



## The key role of SDG 16

The four dimensions of SDG 16 that the Conference examined – peace, the rule of law, robust institutions and leaving no one behind – are interdependent. Challenges in any one can quickly spill over to the three others, with significant implications for the entire 2030 Agenda. Hence, while promising avenues have to be pursued in each of these areas, a holistic approach based on the principles of good governance is needed at all times to ensure that the other areas are kept in sight. This, in itself, is a formidable challenge for international and national institutions.

Much has been learned during the past two years, and many successful governance and institutional innovations have the potential to inform the next normal. Sharing the lessons from the pandemic, including through peer learning among governments, civil society, academia and others, and mobilizing multistakeholder coalitions will be critical to capitalize on these experiences and promote a more sustainable, inclusive and resilient recovery.

SDG 16 offers critical and necessary tools for accountability, participation, justice and peace. As highlighted during the Conference, now is the time for more solidarity, less fear. “The pressure to act is more urgent than ever. There is a strong need for transforming justice systems to renew the social contract, deepen democracy and advance the implementation of the SDGs.”

*“The critical importance of SDG 16 to a successful recovery from the pandemic and for building resilience to future crises, cannot be emphasized enough. The world has less than nine years to implement the ambitious 2030 Agenda. Advancing SDG 16 will help us not only to build back better, but also accelerate progress on all the SDGs.”*

**Marina Sereni, Vice Minister, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Italy**

*“...Effective public institutions are more needed than ever – they are the cornerstone of national responses to emergencies. They are responsible for mitigating crises and continuing to deliver public services. They are expected to respond effectively to the need of citizens, especially in times of crisis.”*

**Liu Zhenmin, Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations**

*“To achieve the peaceful, just and inclusive societies envisaged by SDG 16, we must act now – together – to invest in people-centred approaches to governance and the rule of law.”*

**Jan Beagle, Director-General, International Development Law Organization**

## View or read more:

 [Conference website](#)

 [Video recordings](#)

 [Pictures from the Conference](#)

# Theme 1:

## Preventing conflict and sustaining peace in an increasingly fragile world

### **Proliferation of new and interlinked risks, as well as traditional risks**

*“Remaking and rebuilding a world after the violence suggests that violence has neat endings or that the act of remaking happens only after such endings are declared, which is not the case. The effects of conflict and violence are felt across time. Their impact is holistic and the response also needs to be more holistic.”*

**Lynrose Jane D. Genon, Faculty,  
Mindanao State University-Iligan  
Institute of Technology**

Amidst growing and often new forms of insecurity and polarization, including hate speech and the proliferation of misinformation off and online, a renewed focus on social cohesion and protection of vulnerable groups, including indigenous groups, is increasingly important. COVID-19 has exposed fragilities and inequalities across societies, with climate disasters resulting in further displacement and insecurity in many parts of the world. Addressing grievances and root causes, including as related to pervasive impunity, corruption, exclusion, discrimination, unequal access to justice

and violence and human rights violations requires equitable access to justice and the rule of law.

Global instability and the war in Ukraine have further exacerbated insecurity, including food and energy insecurity, compounding already growing risks of violence and conflict. Food insecurity undermines development, educational outcomes and political stability, with the potential to lead to mass migration and conflict. Spikes in food prices can also influence and negatively impact national budgets and the ability to fund social protection schemes as resources are diverted elsewhere.

*“The rule of law and access to justice are inextricably linked to food security, and, in turn, food security is fundamental for peacebuilding.”*

**Cindy McCain, Permanent  
Representative of the United States to  
the United Nations Agencies in Rome**

## **Inclusion of women, youth and civil society in peacebuilding and decision-making processes**

*“Peace is not just the absence of war but creating conditions that dignify the lives of people.”*

**Leymah Gbowee, 2011 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace**

Inclusion is essential for peace and security and is central to the 2030 Agenda. It provides a sense of ownership and agency, rendering decision-making processes and outcomes more solid and sustainable. It also increases public trust in governments, which is critical in fragile and conflict-affected countries, thereby contributing to recovery. On the other hand, exclusion, marginalization and inequality can exacerbate the risk of violent conflict.

In fragile and conflict-affected countries around the world, women and girls are disproportionately impacted, with violence experienced during peace worsened during war. Compounded vulnerabilities include vulnerability to natural disasters, abuse, sexual exploitation and violence, impacts on access to employment and education, as well as to basic needs such as food and shelter, further limiting potential to engage in public life.

It is urgent to include women’s voices and increase women’s visibility in conflict resolution processes, from design to negotiation to implementation. Research over the past two decades has shown that the inclusion of women in peace processes

and the negotiation of peace agreements leads to better outcomes. It also facilitates community buy-in, ensuring momentum and the effective implementation of peace agreements after they are signed, including as related to reintegration, rehabilitation and reconstruction.

A gender lens must be brought to conflict analysis and policymaking, including specific gender provisions in peace agreements, and increased and sustained funding to women peacebuilders at local and community levels.

Once peace agreements are signed, people tend to believe that the work is done and efforts and momentum decrease. To support sustainability, implementation should be broken down into specific phases with benchmarks, timeframes and metrics and in consultation with civil society, including those representing women and vulnerable groups. To this end, donors should provide funding which requires that capital city organizations be paired with local community groups to obtain funding.

## **Empower youth and support youth-led and informed processes**

The 2030 Agenda’s recognition of youth as key actors should translate into concrete actions and policies, particularly focusing on those most likely to face exclusion and discrimination. Youth inclusion in peace processes and governance, including in leadership positions, is critical to rebuilding trust in democratic governance and ensuring the sustainability of peace and development outcomes. Inclusion means

trusting young people's capacity, reaching beyond just young individuals who are included in UN processes.

Efforts should focus on investing in and supporting youth agency, voice, capacity and leadership, empowering them to participate in development processes, both formally and informally. Development agendas should be co-created with young people to enable ownership.

Youth are rarely included in peace processes. Locally led and youth-led peacebuilding efforts are key to the operationalization of political promises and government commitments. Youth engagement during all phases of peace processes would support their sustainability, including by ensuring youth are involved in defining, widely disseminating and protecting and upholding such agreements and their provisions.

### **Bridge peace and security and development through SDG 16**

The breadth of the SDG 16 framework allows for action to strengthen the rule of law, rebuild the social contract, and prevent instability and violence through local, as well as nationally and regionally owned processes. We need renewed social contracts to avoid systems governed through violence, as well as better coordination between groups within society and between citizens and state, to prevent the instrumentalization of the rule of law.

This requires political will, improved governance and institutional capacity,

citizen engagement, awareness raising and partnerships. The links between security and development need to be addressed through nationally and regionally owned peace and development processes.

### **Link local to national processes and deliver on existent architecture**

Grassroots initiatives are critical to building peace at national levels. Using low-cost initiatives to promote reconciliation and dialogue at the local and sub-national levels supports peace processes at the national and international levels, including through ensuring literacy and sensitization to peace agreements.

National dialogues, frameworks and long-term strategies offer tangible opportunities for sustaining peace, with the rule of law in certain instances acting as an enabler. National development plans may be built on the premise that access to justice and the rule of law is critical to long-term peace and sustainable development, as is the case, for example, in Somalia's [National Development Plan 2020 to 2024 \(NDP 9\)](#).

Additional architecture for peace and development should be leveraged, such as the 2030 Agenda, the African Union Agenda 2063, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Vision 2025, and the 2007 African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance. Countries must not only ratify regional and international instruments adopted to advance democracy, governance and human rights, but also fulfil

the relevant treaty obligations by adopting the necessary measures, including the legislative, executive and administrative measures to ensure their implementation.

Civil society should be included in all stages of decision-making and implementation, from design evaluation, receiving adequate funding and support to accountability.

### **Justice, reconciliation and prevention**

A functioning, accessible and independent judiciary and justice sector is critical to reconciliation, conflict prevention and to rebuilding people's trust in a justice system that is effective, accountable and accessible, able to uphold the rule of law and due process.

Three aspects are crucial to prevent violence and conflict and promote peacebuilding: legitimacy of public institutions, including the judiciary; access to justice for all, especially women and vulnerable groups who are at a greater risk of violence; and tackling threats against humankind, such as unemployment, poverty, corruption and crime. The rule of law, due process, and international human rights standards that have been established in treaties provide the basic guarantees (including judicial independence) to ensure that individual rights are protected and access to adequate public resources is secured.

### **Institutions, regulatory frameworks and creating conditions for peace**

Legitimate and independent institutions, including electoral institutions, play a critical role in maintaining peace and stability and in preventing an erosion of trust in government. This can be particularly true in supporting peaceful transitions of power, as was demonstrated in the 2022 presidential elections in Timor-Leste.

Balanced public information and government communication at all levels is also critical. People's trust in public institutions is strengthened when information is transparently provided and equitably managed. Investment in national institutions and regulatory frameworks, supported by the rule of law, are needed for civic protection, equitable land governance, climate change mitigation and disaster management.

Civil society inclusion and involvement in supporting the legitimacy of such institutions and in defining and implementing national human rights and development plans and policies, including through sensitization and public awareness campaigns, is also critical. To do so, civil society should be more adequately supported and funded, especially for those operating in challenging environments. For example, civil society in the Sahel is quite active and vibrant, but often operates in silos, due to a lack of support, among other factors.

## **Prevention saves lives and is cost effective**

War and conflict, including humanitarian response and refugee protection, is expensive. Prevention saves lives and money, with US\$1 in prevention saving US\$16 in conflict. However, less funding is spent on prevention and peacebuilding than other humanitarian responses.

More adequate, predictable, and sustained funding is needed, combined with commitments by Member States on funding for inclusivity, dedicated to local actors, civil society, youth and women, to empower their participation in peacebuilding. The United Nations' Peacebuilding Fund is one example of an innovative and catalyzing funding mechanism accessible by civil society and local actors, but much more is needed.

*“Looking at challenges we are facing today such as wars, climate change and COVID-19, international diplomacy has to be repositioned on peace and well-being of humans as a “common good” rather than on pursuing nationally vested interests. This is our strongest appeal to the world’s biggest powers. We all agree that wars have no winner...”*

**Helder da Costa, General Secretary,  
g7+ Secretariat**



## Theme 2:

# Building institutional resilience and enhancing the effectiveness, accountability and responsiveness of institutions

### **Importance of public administration and public institutions**

The pandemic has highlighted the importance of effective and efficient public administration, sound and responsive public institutions and competent public servants. COVID-19 caught governments ill-equipped, even in the most developed countries. But it has also shown the capacity of governments and the public sector to innovate, even in contexts of very limited fiscal space.

Overall, there is a need to strengthen public institutions, including their physical, technical and social infrastructure. We need agile, learning institutions and capable public servants.

Digital government and digital technologies, including artificial intelligence, can support improved internal digital systems in public administration and the delivery of new e-services. Yet, technology by itself is not sufficient. Transforming public institutions requires more than digitizing existing processes. Such transformations require political will and leadership, changes in mindsets, adherence to good governance

principles and sound management of public resources. There is a need to support the weakest countries in this regard.

### **Centrality of principles of public governance**

The achievement of SDG 16 is not optional, as many of its dimensions are already included in national constitutions and international instruments ratified by countries.

The pandemic has highlighted the importance of principles of effective governance, including the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) principles of effective governance for sustainable development such as sound policymaking, intergenerational equity, leaving no one behind, fiscal and budget transparency, and participation. It has provided a new opportunity to discuss governance principles, with more openness and recognition of their importance, and more demand from countries. Some speakers underlined that countries that apply sound governance principles were able to deal with the pandemic more effectively.

## **Coherence and collaboration**

Coherent policymaking and collaboration across government have been key during the pandemic, as COVID-19 is an essentially “wicked problem”, dynamic in nature, with no ready-made policy response.

Lack of coordination at the centre of government and between ministries has been a key factor in the loss of trust in government. Opportunities to improve collaboration across sectors and government levels, from national to sub-national to local, down to the community level and traditional authorities, should be seized. Conditions for effective collaboration for public service delivery include leadership, transparency, accountability and effective, two-way communication.

## **Critical role of participation and engagement**

The role of participation and engagement in pandemic responses was mentioned by nearly all the speakers. There are many examples of civil society stepping up and engaging in planning, foresight, policymaking and budgeting, transparency and accountability initiatives, all of which contribute to increasing the resilience of public institutions. It was suggested that action on SDG 16 should start from a localization perspective: civil society needs to be included at the grass-roots level. Inclusiveness is a central aspect of COVID-19 responses. But without trust, inclusiveness becomes an empty word.

## **Transparency and accountability**

Transparency and accountability are critical, particularly during emergencies. There needs to be accountability for success and failure, with a clear way of measuring outcomes. It was recommended that governments show consistent commitment to fiscal standards and accountability for service delivery even in times of emergency and make better use of digitalization to enhance effectiveness and resilience.

Civil society has played a key role in increasing transparency and demanding public accountability during the pandemic. Civil society organizations have monitored budget execution, advocated for fair fiscal responses and public services and raised public awareness of corruption. Examples mentioned included citizens’ budget trackers and real-time audits supported by civil society. Using transparency mechanisms effectively requires dialogue between governments and citizens. Transparency and accountability can also benefit from greater public-private coordination.

## **Anti-corruption**

National responses to COVID-19 have implied increased public investment, as well as accelerated or derogatory processes to disburse public funds. This has increased risks of misappropriation of public funds, and risks of low effectiveness and efficiency of public spending. Simplified procedures and processes put in place to accommodate the need to spend quickly need to be balanced with increased transparency and better oversight of public spending. Public procurement has required major attention during the pandemic.

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**Theme 2: Building institutional resilience and enhancing the effectiveness, accountability and responsiveness of institutions**

Illicit financial flows are enormous and dwarf other international financial flows in many countries. Harnessing these “missing funds” will be critical for implementing the SDGs.

The United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC) provides the basis to fight corruption based on the rule of law. There is a need to build the capacity of countries to implement the Convention. The pandemic has taught us that anti-corruption prevention and preparedness can save lives. It has shown the importance of investing in anti-corruption education and training.

### **Inclusion and leaving no one behind**

The pandemic focused attention on leaving no one behind and reaching the most vulnerable and marginalized groups. For instance, in education, the pandemic has been a wake-up call. It was mentioned that gender has been the big casualty of the pandemic and that policies need a systematic gender lens. COVID-19 has also evidenced persistent gender gaps in institutions tasked with the pandemic response. There is a need to support institutions to become more people-centred, for instance in peacebuilding processes. Public institutions also need to be more gender-equal, communicate effectively with, and better engage, people and civil society.

### **Data**

Progressing on governance-related data is important. Significant conceptual and practical advances have been made during the past 15 years for measuring different dimensions of SDG 16, which should be

leveraged. It is vital to establish a culture of reporting at the national level and expand data sources.

More attention should be paid to the question of how to communicate data on SDG 16, as the associated narratives may be as or more important than the data itself.

There were strong calls to share the lessons from the pandemic, including through peer learning among governments. This is critical to capitalize on successful innovations.

### **Financing and capacity-building**

Action on SDG 16 needs more reliable, long-term, and less siloed finance, adapted to different types of countries. Funding is especially needed to support civil society organizations at the grassroots level, which have played a key role in pandemic response and recovery, but continue to experience difficulties in accessing funding. Civil society organizations suggested to create a SDG16+ fund to address these issues in their [2022 Rome Declaration on SDG16+](#).

Speakers called for increased efforts to build the capacity of professional staff in public administration, for instance on the right to information, participation, transparency and accountability, but also the capacity of civil society organizations in the same areas. Finding ways to mobilize existing competencies in public administration and putting them at the disposal of other parts of public administration and enhancing peer learning exchanges were mentioned as important for building lasting results for people.

**Theme 2:** Building institutional resilience and enhancing the effectiveness, accountability and responsiveness of institutions

*“The principles of public administration have been put to the test (...) countries with greater application [of good governance practices], have dealt with the pandemic better.”*

**Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi, Chancellor, Nelson Mandela University and Chair, United Nations Committee of Experts on Public Administration**

*“Policies need to be out in the open and clear.”*

**Lawrence O. Gostin, Faculty Director, O’Neill Institute for National and Global Health Law, Georgetown University**

*“The COVID pandemic has opened the opportunity to have conversations in a new way. We see a demand for detailed and significant conversations about government services delivery.”*

**Sarah Lister, Head of Governance, Bureau for Policy and Programme Support, United Nations Development Programme**

*“Effective anti-corruption measures save lives in crisis situations.”*

**Thomas Stelzer, Dean, International Anti-Corruption Academy**

*“Transparency that is not used is useless.”*

**Juan Pablo Guerrero, Network Director, Global Initiative for Fiscal Transparency**

## Theme 3:

# A new vision for the rule of law to address global challenges

### People-centred justice and a new vision for the rule of law

Core to the rule of law is the concept of justice and the elements of due process, equality, good governance and respect for human rights. Anchored in SDG 16.3, the new vision for the rule of law, as noted in [Our Common Agenda](#), puts people at the centre of justice systems and examines how rule of law assistance can support states, communities and people in delivering a renewed social contract, while addressing the cross-cutting benefit of rule of law for the 2030 Agenda and its centrality to international cooperation.

Through innovation, data and institutions that deliver to solve people's problems and resolve their legal disputes, a people-centred approach to the rule of law will help advance *Our Common Agenda* in three ways:

- Rebuilding trust and legitimacy of institutions and helping to renew the social contract.
- Preserving and advancing progress on the achievement of various SDGs and the 2030 Agenda at the national level.
- Contributing to address transnational challenges from COVID-19 to climate change.

Further, putting people at the centre of justice systems would decrease costs

associated with people's inability to claim their rights. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Framework on [Good Practice Principles for People-Centred Justice](#) offers specific recommendations for a people-centred approach to justice across four pillars: designing and delivering people-centred services, governance enablers and infrastructure, people empowerment and planning, monitoring and accountability.

*"Justice is an essential dimension of the social contract. Weak security and justice institutions weaken the social contract."*

**Eihab Omaish, Head, Rule of Law Unit, Executive Office of the Secretary-General**

### Addressing justice gaps and rule of law interlinkages across the SDGs

Access to justice gaps have been exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, with many countries experiencing a decline in the rule of law and a growing disconnect between people and institutions, resulting in decreased public trust. Yet justice systems continue to face constraints due to the need to comply with public health measures, despite ever-growing legal needs regarding

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education, housing, employment and life free of violence, often disproportionately affecting women and vulnerable groups.

Access to justice and the rule of law are critical in protecting rights or accessing services central to the other SDGs. Significant costs are also associated with the inability of people to claim their rights, with some asserting that the cost associated with health, employment and loss of impact can be between 0.5 and 3 percent of gross domestic product around the world, further hindering country capacity to achieve the 2030 Agenda. The international community should take a more holistic approach to the rule of law, looking at the nexus of the rule of law and the broader spectrum of peace and development.

#### Gender justice

*“The persistent gender justice gap has far-reaching impacts. Every 11 minutes, a woman or girl somewhere in the world is killed by someone in her own family.”*

**Ghada Fathi Waly, Executive Director,  
United Nations Office on Drugs and  
Crime**

Women and girls worldwide pay an extraordinarily high price for gender-based violence and domestic violence, with the challenges they face including widespread impunity for crimes committed against them, discriminatory practices by rule of law institutions and insufficient capacity and knowledge of a human rights approach to justice and gender mainstreaming within the justice sector.

The lack of access to timely, integrated and accessible legal and justice support significantly undermines the ability of women and girls to escape from situations of violence and reach support. COVID-19 lockdowns have increased instances of gender-based violence, with the shift to e-justice further widening the justice gap for women as compared to men.

New statistical frameworks and partnerships, including those designed to measure femicide such as that launched by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and UN Women, help to ensure that victims are counted, that justice is served, and that prevention efforts can be more effective. While it is encouraging that more countries are focusing on the rights of women and girls, and several have adopted a feminist foreign policy, much greater attention needs to be placed on women’s empowerment and delivering gender justice, including through informal and formal systems.

#### Climate justice

Climate change is both a matter of social and economic justice and national and global security, as highlighted by recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) [reports](#). Priorities related to adaptation and how to tackle loss and damage, and the related financial commitments, induced by climate change need to be examined. Transparency and accountability tools to be leveraged at international and national levels exist, for example, the upcoming United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) global stock take. However, a more coordinated legal response to climate change is needed, which requires capacity-building, including

### Theme 3: A new vision for the rule of law to address global challenges

of judges and parliamentarians, leveraging institutions such as universities and research institutes, more effective communication and involvement of the media.

Both hard and soft laws can facilitate inclusive and sustainable economic development, for example in securing food supply chains and financial inclusion. Investment treaty law can have a catalytic effect, but guarantees are needed for both investors and the beneficiaries of investment. It is also important to establish compliance and enforcement mechanisms including the use of litigation tools as well as protective tools and safeguards, such as the Escazú agreement or related laws on the rights of nature in South America, for example. Inclusion of various stakeholders at all levels is essential, as is the protection of civil society and human rights and environmental rights defenders, whose space and security are increasingly under threat. Those who have contributed the least to these crises, including indigenous communities and the most vulnerable, face the greatest impact.

*“We need to have the mechanisms – regulatory, legislative, governance, financial – in place to address multiple issues [including climate change] at once.”*

**Yamide Dagnet, Director, Climate Justice, Open Society Foundations**

#### Rule of law and democratic backsliding

COVID-19 restrictions have hampered access to justice, with principles of the rule of law often disregarded by those in power. Through the use of emergency laws,

restrictions on a range of freedoms have increased, impacting on personal freedoms, often disproportionately impacting women and youth. According to [V-Dem’s 2022 Democracy Report](#), 70 percent of the world’s population lives in autocracies.

The separation of powers is essential for democratic development, with full adherence to the rule of law, not rule by law. States have to promote an enabling environment for civil society and a free and independent media. Examples of governments advancing democracy through policy include [Sweden’s Drive for Democracy](#), which reaffirms the country’s commitment to stand up for democratic principles in all contexts, working to help strengthen democracy, while voicing criticism of democratic deficits or risks of backsliding. Like Sweden’s [Feminist Foreign Policy](#), the Drive for Democracy reflects overarching foreign policy priorities and action.

*“The rule of law can only be fully protected if a comprehensive approach to justice, an approach that actively defends human rights and the principles of democracy, is promoted. Reversing the global democratic backsliding is, therefore, crucial.”*

**Cecilia Ruthström-Ruin, Ambassador for Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sweden**

#### Anti-corruption and legitimacy

Justice systems and the rule of law have a key role to play in rebuilding trust and legitimacy in governance and public institutions and tackling corruption. Focus

### Theme 3: A new vision for the rule of law to address global challenges

must be on service delivery, inclusivity, human rights and the protection of human rights defenders, and for governments to take a humbler approach.

On corruption, relevant frameworks, bodies and conventions such as United Nations Convention Against Corruption and the United Nations Convention on Transnational Organized Crime should be implemented, with legislative and technical assistance strengthened at the national level, as well as compliance and enforcement mechanisms. A new perspective of the rule of law affirmed in multilateral fora, such as the G20, is required and will better support sustainable development.

#### Participatory governance and co-creation

Establishing direct, accessible, inclusive and consultative mechanisms by which citizens can be involved in identifying and helping to resolve problems with governments at various levels is an important model of participatory governance. This requires communication and collaboration, agreement on common, overarching goals, and reliable feedback loops. It also entails financial support for civil society to effectively, meaningfully and sustainably engage. Devolution may also be prioritized.

The Open Government Partnership has set up such co-creation mechanisms through National Action Plans to “open up” governments, establish equal partnerships between government and civil society, and make government more transparent, inclusive and accountable to its citizens. Other approaches to participatory governance include citizen monitoring

of public funds and spending, including by vulnerable groups, ideally with some degree of power, and establishing complaint mechanisms through local governance structures.

*“To make governments really work with partners, respect the rule of law and include more participatory governments, they really ought to become more humble. But humility is not timidity.”*

**Aidan Eyakuze, Executive Director,  
Twaweza East Africa and Civil Society  
Co-Chair of the Open Government  
Partnership**

#### Technology and digitalization

Technology, including emerging technology such as artificial intelligence, can play an important role. For example, artificial intelligence can identify patterns of child abuse through facial recognition software that can process thousands of images and block out harmful images, enabling perpetrators to be identified and victims to be protected. Data analytics and technologies can also identify and mitigate corruption in procurement.

However, technology is a tool to be used in accordance with the rule of law and transparency principles, with human beings remaining the decision makers. Further, reliance on digitalization can be expensive or challenging for law enforcement to access or purchase expensive digital programmes. Developing countries should have equal access to technology. Low-cost, open-source software should be made available, along with training and capacity-building

exercises. Digital governance can be very efficient but also has inherent risks such as digital surveillance and other forms of control. With 2.9 billion people still offline, the digital divide should be considered, as well as distinguishing between digital technology and digital democracy.

## Data

Data plays a critical role to support planning, decision-making and policymaking. Official and unofficial data sources can be used to bridge the gap between governments and people, improve communication, generate evidence-based solutions grounded in a clear understanding of people's legal needs, and help combat the narrative, perceived or otherwise, that justice is for the privileged few.

Further, the combination of official and non-official data can contribute to the challenging task of monitoring progress on the 2030 Agenda, particularly in non-democratic contexts where government data is less transparent and more likely to be biased. However, a line is to be drawn between evidence-based research and policy-based research and the importance of guaranteeing robustness of the analysis, with greater focus and support on research emanating from the global south, as well as through regional conversations.

## Rule of law, multilateralism and international cooperation

We need to explore how the rule of law can promote multilateralism and international cooperation with greater political will, action and determination. Coalitions, such as the Justice Action Coalition, are trying to mobilize support for the rule of law and SDG 16 at national and international levels.

Going forward, we need to seize opportunities for collective action, for example through the 2023 SDG Summit, and increase inclusion of young people and indigenous communities, civil society, academia from both the global north and south, and media, with increased financial commitments for justice and the rule of law. Justice systems need to be transformed to renew the social contract, deepen democracy and accelerate implementation and deliver on the 2030 Agenda. Youth are the key to building inclusive societies with high levels of trust and respect for the rule of law and democracy.

## Theme 4:

# Leaving no one behind: ensuring inclusion, protection and participation

There have been impressive efforts by governments in all regions to cushion the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis for the most vulnerable, even in difficult fiscal contexts. The range of measures adopted has been broad. However, in many cases these were short-term, ad hoc responses, leaving behind some vulnerable groups, for example, informal workers. People living in poverty were often forgotten by social protection responses, in particular, because of a lack of ability to overcome bureaucratic obstacles of various natures.

In many countries, social registries were not up to date. Social protection systems were not as developed as needed and many countries were taken off-guard. More work is needed to address the root causes of poverty. It is important to accelerate the coverage of social protection systems and the development of social protection floors. The financing gap remains formidable. Expenditures in social protection should not be seen as a cost for governments, but rather as an investment.

Universal social protection remains a distant objective. Today, there is a great risk of curtailment of those systems, as the majority of countries are adopting austerity policies. This includes re-targeting social protection

measures, cutting the number and wages of civil servants, cuts in pensions for the elderly, cuts in subsidies and labor flexibilization reforms. This goes against the spirit of the SDGs, which would call for more investment in these areas.

There are, however, alternatives to these cuts, which governments can adopt. These include expanding progressive tax revenue, fighting illicit financial flows, increasing the formalization of informal workers, restructuring debt, reallocating public expenditures, and others.

Decision-making on these issues needs to be much more open; they should be decided through national dialogue and debates.

### **Gender equality and women's empowerment**

Accelerating gender equality is a critical element of building back better after the pandemic.

To date, most policy responses to COVID-19 have not been gender-informed. There is a need to take a gender element in all policies. Currently, gender trackers show that women are underrepresented in COVID-19 task forces.

We need gender-responsive laws and institutions. Women are still missing in decision-making. Member States and local authorities should implement ambitious temporary special measures, for example, gender quotas, to increase women's representation in institutions such as parliaments. However, the lack of access to justice for women and the deterioration of human rights are basic obstacles to the success of such measures.

The need to repeal gender discriminatory laws is more urgent than ever. It is also critical to promote, enforce and monitor equality and non-discrimination. Laws on domestic violence and sexual violence in the workplace need to be better enforced. Negative gender norms need to be addressed by working with and through institutions, including through justice sector reforms. Lastly, women need a place at the table in peace-building processes.

## Refugees

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown the importance of inclusive, collective, and concrete measures to address the plight of refugees. The picture in terms of the rights of vulnerable people during the pandemic has been mixed, with some innovations, but also regressions owing to the rise in human trafficking and gender-based violence, among others. Fundamental refugee rights have been drastically restricted during the pandemic, including the right to claim asylum. Civic registration has been an obstacle. Yet, many countries have been willing to take innovative approaches to using technologies and giving resident permits to refugees during the pandemic.

The pandemic has exposed inequitable access to justice and to protection. Access to justice for the most vulnerable is key, as are rights of access to health care. During the pandemic, many refugees had access to COVID-19 testing and treatment. But overall, there remain barriers for refugees seeking healthcare also linked to lack of proof of identity.

## LGBTQ+

The pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on LGBTQ+ people.

The invisibility of LGBTQ+ community has been an obstacle. It is important to build the capacity of countries to better assess the relevant issues and to step up data collection. There is a need to foster more dialogue between the global North and global South on LGBTQ+ issues.

Civil society working on LGBTQ+ issues needs to be empowered, including by using existing groups and mechanisms. The private sector should also be involved, for instance through national plans on business and human rights, which are rapidly expanding.

## Critical role of participation and youth engagement

Participation in its different dimensions as mentioned in the targets of SDG 16 is fundamental. Yet, the current conditions are challenging. For instance, freedom of expression remains highly contested, which hinders the capacity of people to express dissent and speak truth to power. This also creates an obstacle to partnerships with civil

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**Theme 4:** Leaving no one behind: ensuring inclusion, protection and participation

society. Much work remains to be done to better measure participation in decision-making.

It is important to promote full participation and agency of youth in local, national and international processes. The follow-up and review of the SDGs is one example. Youth have participated in national preparations

of voluntary national reviews conducted by governments, sometimes through specific youth reports. In general, emerging innovations on technology or healthcare, emanating from young people need to be fostered and supported.

*“We must change social norms, build political will behind the effort to achieve gender balance in political and public life, including adopting zero-tolerance policies and passing anti-discriminatory laws.”*

**Sarah Hendriks, Director, Policy, Programme and Intergovernmental Division, UN Women**

*“Governments should put as much effort in ensuring that people claim their rights as they put in promoting vaccination.”*

**Olivier de Schutter, United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights**

*“This is a world full of money, it’s just badly distributed. We need to think about formulas in which public administration can function and implement human rights.”*

**Isabel Ortiz, Director, Global Social Justice Program, Initiative for Policy Dialogue, Columbia University**

*“We need to respond to young people’s needs, increase intervention in creating opportunities for young people and increase education for young people.”*

**Emmanuel Ametepey, Founder and Executive Director, Youth Advocates Ghana**

*“For LGBTQ rights, dialogue between the global North and South is paramount.”*

**Fabrizio Petri, Special Envoy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation for the Human Rights of LGBTIQ+ people, Italy**



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# Civil society's call-to-action for safeguarding commitments to peaceful, just, and inclusive societies

*"The SDGs are voluntary, but SDG 16 is not optional, as many of its dimensions are already included in national constitutions and international instruments ratified by countries."*

**John Romano, Coordinator,  
Transparency, Accountability and  
Participation Network**

Emerging and worsening crises pose alarming risks to the attainment of SDG 16+. Progress on SDG 16+ is falling behind even in countries that have traditionally been champions in upholding the role of civil society. Civil society organizations continuously engage with stakeholders, driving accountability at the local level and demonstrating their commitment to strengthening individual and collective efforts to implement SDG 16 and the 2030 Agenda as a whole. However, more

meaningful engagement and partnership with civil society is earnestly needed.

The [2022 Rome Declaration](#): "SDG 16+ in Peril: An urgent call-to-action for safeguarding commitments to Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies", is a call by civil society organizations for amplified actions to safeguard commitments and promote accountability for SDG 16+ in 2022 and beyond. Crucial areas of action include:

- Protection of civil society, expansion of civic space, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and interlinkages between SDG 16+ with Our Common Agenda.
- Provision of capacity support to propel greater action on implementing SDG 16+ via local support to advance peace, justice and inclusion.

- Overcoming challenges and threats to multilateralism in promoting and preserving peace and security.
- Integrated approaches – SDG 16+ interlinkages with other SDGs – and a human rights-based approach to recovery and resilience from the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Strengthening data, monitoring and accountability for SDG 16+.
- Mobilizing and scaling up commitments and investments around 2023 moments – SDGs Summit and Summit for the Future.

### **Key recommendations:**

- Establish a Global SDG 16+ Fund to allow grassroots organizations and groups to access funding.
- Hold an annual Thematic Review of SDG 16 at the HLPF in recognition of the role of the Goal as an enabler of the 2030 Agenda.

Civil society organizations also call upon governments to come to the 2023 SDG Summit with concrete and ambitious commitments to advancing SDG 16+.



# Annex: SDG 16 Conference Agenda

## Day 1 - 21 April 2022

**10:00 – 12:30**

**Civil society consultation (closed meeting)**

Stakeholder meeting on the Rome civil society Declaration on SDG16+

**14:00 – 14:30**

**Opening of the Conference**

Welcome and introductions:

- Ms. Marina Sereni, Vice Minister, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Italy

Opening remarks:

- Message from H.E. Mr. Abdulla Shahid, President of the United Nations General Assembly
- Message from H.E. Mr. Collen Vixen Kelapile, President of the United Nations Economic and Social Council
- Message from Ms. Amina J. Mohammed, Deputy-Secretary-General, United Nations
- Mr. Liu Zhenmin, Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations
- Ms. Jan Beagle, Director-General, IDLO

**14:30 – 16:00**

**Session 1: Preventing conflict and sustaining peace in an increasingly fragile world**

Speakers:

- H.E. Mr. Gamal Mohamed Hassan, Minister of Planning, Investment and Economic Development, Somalia (online)
- H.E. Ms. Cindy McCain, Permanent Representative of the United States to the UN Agencies in Rome, Vice-President of the Assembly of Parties of IDLO
- Ms. Elizabeth Spehar, Assistant Secretary-General for Peacebuilding Support, UN DPPA (online)
- Ms. Emanuela Claudia Del Re, European Union Special Representative for the Sahel
- Mr. Diego García-Sayán, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers (online)
- Mr. Helder da Costa, General Secretary, g7+ Secretariat
- Ms. Leymah Gbowee, 2011 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace
- Ms. Lynrose Jane D. Genon, Faculty, Mindanao State University-Iligan Institute of Technology

Moderator: Ms. Ilaria Bottiglieri, Director, Policy, Research and Learning, IDLO

**16:15 – 17:30**

**Session 2: Building institutional resilience and enhancing the effectiveness, accountability and responsiveness of institutions**

Speakers:

- Mr. Giuseppe Busia, President, National Anti-Corruption Authority, Italy
- Ms. Lily Fati Soale, Director, Finance and Administration, Ministry of Chieftaincy and Religious Affairs, Ghana
- Ms. Gabriela Ramos, Assistant Director-General for Social and Human Sciences, UNESCO (online)
- Ms. Sarah Lister, Head of Governance, Bureau for Policy and Programme Support, UNDP (online)
- Ms. Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi, Chair, United Nations Committee of Experts on Public Administration; Chancellor, Nelson Mandela University (online)
- Mr. Thomas Stelzer, Dean, International Anti-Corruption Academy
- Mr. Juan Pablo Guerrero, Network Director, Global Initiative for Fiscal Transparency (online)
- Mr. John Romano, Coordinator, Transparency, Accountability and Participation Network
- Mr. Lawrence O. Gostin, Faculty Director, O'Neill Institute for National and Global Health Law, Georgetown University (online)

Moderator: Ms. Maria-Francesca Spatolisano, Assistant Secretary-General for Policy Coordination and Inter-Agency Affairs, UNDESA

**17:30 – 17:45**

**Presentation of the Rome civil society Declaration on SDG16 +**

## Day 2 - 22 April 2022

10:00 – 12:30

### Morning Programme

Visit to “Collezione Farnesina”

14:00 – 15:30

### Session 3: A new vision for the rule of law to address global challenges

Opening remarks

- Ms. Ghada Fathi Waly, Executive Director, UNODC (online)

Speakers:

- Ms. Cecilia Ruthström-Ruin, Ambassador for Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sweden (online)
- Mr. Giovanni Tartaglia Polcini, Magistrate, Legal Advisor, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Italy
- Ms. Maria Chiara Malaguti, President, International Institute for the Unification of Private Law (UNIDROIT)
- Ms. Antonia Marie De Meo, Director, United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) (online)
- Mr. Massimo Tommasoli, Director, Global Programmes and Permanent Observer for International IDEA to the United Nations
- Mr. Eihab Omaish, Head, Rule of Law Unit, Executive Office of the Secretary-General (online)
- Ms. Tatyana Teplova, Head of Division, Policy Coherence for SDGs, and Senior Justice Counsellor, OECD
- Mr. Aidan Eyakuze, Executive Director, Twaweza East Africa and Civil Society Co-Chair of the Open Government Partnership
- Ms. Yamide Dagnet, Director, Climate Justice, Open Society Foundations

Moderator: Mr. Fabricio Guariglia, Director, The Hague Office, IDLO

**15:45 – 17:15**

**Session 4: Leaving no one behind: Ensuring inclusion, protection and participation**

Speakers:

- Mr. Fabrizio Petri, Special Envoy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation for the Human Rights of LGBTIQ+ people, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Italy
- Ms. Gillian Triggs, Assistant High Commissioner for Protection, UNHCR (online)
- Mr. Olivier De Schutter, United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights (online)
- Ms. Sarah Hendriks, Director, Policy, Programme and Intergovernmental Division, UN Women (online)
- Mr. Emmanuel Ametepey, Founder and Executive Director, Youth Advocates Ghana
- Mr. Mandeep Tiwana, Chief Programmes Officer, Head of the New York office, CIVICUS (online)
- Ms. Isabel Ortiz, Director, Global Social Justice Program, Initiative for Policy Dialogue, Columbia University (online)

Moderator: Mr. Luca Maestriperi, Director, Italian Agency for Development Cooperation

**17:15 – 17:45**

**Reporting back by session moderators**

Moderator: Mr. Leonardo Bencini, Head of the Unit for strategies and multilateral global processes for development cooperation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Italy

**17:45 – 18:15**

**Closing of the Conference**

Closing remarks:

- Mr. Fabio Cassese, Director-General for Development Cooperation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Italy
- Ms. Maria-Francesca Spatolisano, Assistant Secretary-General for Policy Coordination and Inter-Agency Affairs, UNDESA
- Ms. Jan Beagle, Director-General, IDLO





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# SDG 16 CONFERENCE

**Peace, Justice & Inclusive Societies**



**United Nations**

Department of Economic and Social Affairs



Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation

