

A Compass for Navigating through the Geopolitical Storm

2025 Rome Civil Society Declaration on SDG16+¹

Introduction

As we approach 2030, it is imperative to assess the widening gap between rhetoric and reality. The world faces an unprecedented geopolitical storm that further hinders progress towards SDG16. In this challenging context, civil society is on the frontline of the pursuit of more peaceful, just and inclusive societies. Because it demands deep, systemic, and transformative change, SDG16 can only be achieved through a renewed and genuine commitment to its full realization in all its dimensions.

The 2025 Rome Civil Society Declaration on SDG16+ is launched at a moment in time where we see civil society organizations being stripped of their resources, many of which are being redirected towards military spending at the expense of peacebuilding and conflict prevention. This trend accentuates their exposure to threats, as their capabilities are undermined by a lack of financing that puts them at risk. At the same time, civic space continues to shrink, access to justice is severely eroded, and the vision of peaceful societies — especially in fragile and conflict-affected settings — risks slipping further out of reach. In this context, civil society organizations have come together to draft this Declaration to advocate for the international community to maintain a steadfast commitment to upholding the values and principles that foster peaceful global governance.

Strengthening global governance has been recognized as a key action for strengthening multilateralism. However, multilateralism is faltering and caught in a grip of overlapping existential crises that leaves it ill-equipped to pursue and achieve sustainable development that leaves no one behind. Furthermore, the observed regression of SDG16 is particularly concerning for all SDGs, as all SDGs depend on establishing lasting peace and preventing violent conflicts.

In the following, first section, we describe the impact of current global trends and how we see these impacting the attainment of goals and targets as enshrined in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This background section is followed by our 2025 Recommendation for Revitalised Action on SDG16+, through which we hope the international community can forge ahead and resume its course towards 2030.

The Rome Declaration will provide recommendations in the following four thematic areas:

1. From Conflict to Cooperation: Redirecting Global Priorities Toward Peace, Justice, and Development
2. Delivering catalytic financing for SDG16+ and fixing a broken global financial system
3. Strengthening and Expanding Civic Space and Fundamental Freedoms
4. Safeguarding and Expanding Justice in all its Forms

¹ This 2025 Rome Civil Society Declaration on SDG16+ builds on previous iterations of this declaration that are linked here : [2024](#), [2023](#), [2022](#), [2021](#) & [2019](#).

Background: Enduring and emerging crises to address amid global fragmentation

The world is currently experiencing an alarming escalation in violent conflicts, driven by both the eruption of new crises and the deepening of existing ones. Today, the number of armed conflicts globally is at its highest since the end of the Cold War. While the dominant form remains local confrontations, the increasing internationalisation of conflicts threatens global stability. Persistent political instability and weak governance fuel insecurity in regions affected by protracted or emerging conflicts. Borders often become increasingly porous, facilitating the incursion of non-state actors and neighboring forces, and further exacerbating displacement crises. Exposure to violence is further aggravated by the proliferation of armed groups which exploit power vacuums in fragile contexts. The unchecked spread of small arms and light weapons continues to pose a significant threat to already-vulnerable populations, while ongoing political and social tensions serve to intensify these fragile conditions. The consequence of this violence is felt on civilian populations, women², young people, children³ and other marginalized groups in particular, who bear the brunt. The number of civilian fatalities from violent events rose again by 37% in 2024 compared to the previous year⁴. As 24 out of 61 contexts of fragility identified by the OECD are currently facing active armed conflicts,⁵ fragile contexts are disproportionately affected by conflicts, and pay the human cost of these conflicts. This convergence of fragility, internationalisation, and intensifying violence presents an urgent call for a strengthened, coordinated and rights-based international response to make the case for more peaceful, just and inclusive societies and accountability for international crimes.

Amidst this turmoil, the climate crisis emerges as a powerful threat multiplier, exacerbating existing vulnerabilities. The year 2024 was the warmest on record, with global temperatures reaching levels unseen in centuries. This shift is not only a warning signal - it is already triggering cascading impacts on food security, water access, livelihoods, human mobility, gender equality, and economic opportunity. Yet, the global response remains dangerously insufficient. This inertia must end, and international commitments to climate action must be renewed, especially in the framework of the SDGs.

As efforts to broker ceasefires or coordinated peace strategies have stalled, there is a growing sense of unwillingness and inability among key powers to compromise. Beyond hindering prospects for de-escalation, this trend also contributes to a broader shift toward national retreat. Today's volatile context, coupled with a growing competition between powers, and sometimes domestic pressures, has generated a pervasive sense of insecurity, causing governments to turn inward. This global shift towards power politics is particularly visible in Western countries. Other regions are also increasingly getting militarized, raising concerns about arms proliferation, as well as reduced space for civilian peace efforts and the normalization of war as policy. More importantly, this shift is consequential for peacebuilding and conflict prevention, with INGOs, NGOs, as well as civil society organizations facing budget cuts or being entirely amputated from a significant amount of foreign essential aid. The elimination of vital development assistance represents a serious threat to the promotion of peaceful, just and inclusive societies, as the complementarity between different types of

² See for more information on how women and girls are disproportionately affected in fragile and conflict-affected settings in the [OECD States of Fragility Report 2025](#), p.67

³ See para 4 of the 2024 [SRS-CAAC's report](#) highlighting a 21% increase in grave violations against children in armed conflict in 2023 compared to 2022.

⁴ See [2024 Armed Conflict Survey](#) conducted by the International Institute for Strategic Studies. Reporting period : 1 July 2023 - 30 June 2024

⁵ [OECD States of Fragility Report 2025](#), p.6.

engagement and funding to reduce threats is not well understood. Containing this instability requires a shift in perspective: what is now perceived as urgent threats not only require direct and short-sighted responses, but demand a broader commitment to lasting peace and stability. For this, particular support needs to be directed to local actors at the forefront of responding to and resolving conflicts. Consequently, SDG16 is today more relevant than ever, making it imperative to focus our efforts on promoting peaceful, just and inclusive societies where institutions function effectively.

A storm without anchors? The backsliding of legal and democratic protections

The resurgence of global conflict and fragmentation is also the result of a certain shift in the balance of powers. Large majorities of people worldwide continue to believe in the ideal of democracy. Yet, many countries across the world are experiencing a consolidation of authoritarian rule as the legitimacy and appeal of liberal democratic models are increasingly contested by authoritarian governments and populist leaders. In parallel, disinformation, repression and polarization are contributing to democratic backsliding and exacerbating conflicts. These crises are further amplified by perceptions of double standards, growing inequality and the failure of States to deliver on pressing global challenges such as conflict prevention, climate change, economic and social justice, and, with that, deliver on the promises of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Governments need to find ways to address the fears of people, which are usually triggered by long-term transformative processes. At the same time, the space for civil society to operate freely and safely is shrinking at an alarming rate. As this dynamic unfolds, CSOs are not only on the frontlines—they are also under attack, facing barriers that hinder their crucial role in driving progress toward the SDGs. In fragile and conflict-affected settings, this repression often intensifies in the name of national security or counterterrorism, leaving little room for participatory governance, inclusive dialogue, or community-led peacebuilding efforts.

The systematic weakening of civic space undermines not only democracy but also the essential work of those striving for justice, accountability, and peace on the ground. On the international scene, the same trend can be observed, as multilateral institutions are also struggling to respond to the current crisis outbreak. In this time of challenges, we are also noticing a growing disregard for international humanitarian law. The Geneva Conventions and their core principles - civilian protection, proportionality, and distinction - are being violated too often at the expense of human security, particularly of women and girls in all their diversity. As the erosion of international humanitarian law is becoming a defining feature of the international landscape, it is also triggered by a widespread climate of impunity and indifference. As SDG16+ acts as a blueprint for addressing these challenges, it is more than ever relevant to use it as a steadfast compass to navigate through the current geopolitical storm.

2025 Recommendations for Revitalised Action on SDG 16+

I. From Conflict to Cooperation: Redirecting Global Priorities Toward Peace, Justice, and Development

The world is currently experiencing an alarming escalation in violent conflicts, driven by both the eruption of new crises and the deepening of existing ones. Today, the number of armed conflicts globally is at its highest since the end of the Cold War, and in 2024, global

military expenditure increased to \$2718 billion; the 10th year of consecutive rises.⁶ Given an increasingly unstable global political landscape, government concerns for national security have taken center stage in recent months. At the same time, latest (2023) OECD figures show that funding for peacebuilding is at a 15 year low⁷, prior to massive cuts to ODA, including peacebuilding funding in traditional donor countries. This narrow focus on defense and economic competitiveness at the expense of peacebuilding, conflict-prevention, and holistic sustainable development will prioritize band-aid solutions that fail to address root causes of conflict.

Further, it is well-documented that excessive military spending undermines human rights and development, as well as threatens international peace and security. This shift not only undermines peacebuilding efforts and investment in sustainable development in developing countries, but it also exacerbates global insecurity, where the expansion of the military industry has shown a negative impact on the realisation of the SDGs. Furthermore, the widespread proliferation of small arms and light weapons has not only further fueled conflict but also increased levels of violence within communities and cities, undermining SDG16's target 16.1 on violence reduction and jeopardizing the entirety of the 2030 Agenda. In the past five years, conflict levels have almost doubled. For 2020, ACLED⁸ recorded 104,371 conflict events; in 2024, for the same period, nearly 200,000. In the first half of 2024, UNHCR estimates that 122.6 million people remained forcibly displaced worldwide due to war, persecution, violence and human rights violations⁹, coinciding with global military spending reaching \$2718 billion in 2024¹⁰. It is imperative to recalibrate these priorities, emphasizing investments in sustainable, locally-led peace over militarization.

Recommendations:

1. **Prioritize and reverse funding cuts to peacebuilding, humanitarian aid, and development, and dramatically reduce global military expenditures:** We call on Member States to reduce military expenditure, and reallocate resources towards humanitarian aid, climate adaptation, and development funding, including through aligning support across the individual pillars of the humanitarian-development-peace nexus. Donors must recognize the importance of and adequately invest in conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and disarmament efforts to address the root causes of conflicts and promote sustainable peace. To this end, we also call attention to the forthcoming UN Secretary-General's analysis on the impact of the global increase in military expenditure on the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, as was agreed upon in the Pact for the Future adopted by the UN General Assembly.
2. **Invest in Local and Community-Led Peacebuilding and Conflict Prevention:** We urge Member States to collaborate across governments and civil society in the creation of national prevention strategies and infrastructure for peace and justice. This includes prioritizing funding for grassroots mediators, traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, and community and/or civil society-led early warning, and early action systems that prevent violence before it escalates. Civil society, especially women and youth-led and grassroots movements, must be recognized and resourced as frontline responders and peacebuilders in line with the Women, Peace and Security and Youth,

⁶ [Unprecedented rise in global military expenditure as European and Middle East spending surges](#), SIPRI (28 April 2025)

⁷ [Peace And Official Development Assistance](#), OECD (2023)

⁸ [ACLED Conflict Index](#), ACLED (December 2024)

⁹ [2024 Mid-Year Trends report](#), UNHCR (October 2024)

¹⁰ See note [8]

Peace, and Security Agendas. This further requires governments to stop criminalizing civic action, and instead champion education, independent media, and public discourse that counter hate, misinformation, and polarization. Donors must also ensure that peacebuilding resources are accessible, flexible, and long-term, with simplified application and reporting mechanisms to enable smaller, grassroots organizations to access funding directly without intermediary constraints.

3. **Guarantee Inclusive and Equitable Peace Processes:** We call upon the international community to ensure that peacebuilding efforts mandate the full, equal, and meaningful participation of women, as required by the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda, young people, as required by the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda, as well as other vulnerable and marginalized groups, namely children, persons with disabilities, older persons, Indigenous peoples, and LGBTQI+ populations. Peacebuilding and conflict prevention require a whole-of-society approach, and no peace process should move forward without their meaningful engagement and leadership at the table.

4. **Demand Accountability to the Rule of Law:** Governments and international actors must dramatically scale up their demands for universal accountability to international humanitarian and human rights laws, norms, and standards, including through universal acceptance of the compulsory jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice. It is imperative that Governments uphold their international legal commitments and cooperate with international judicial institutions to achieve pacific resolution of disputes through law rather than conflict. In addition, there should be increased investment in conflict prevention and transitional justice. Arms transfers to conflict zones must be halted immediately where there is a real risk the arms would be used in violations of international laws, and mechanisms for prosecuting war crimes and other international crimes must be enforced without exception.

II. Delivering catalytic financing for SDG16+ and fixing a broken global financial system

Amid alarming downward trends in Official Development Assistance (ODA) and the dismantling of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), it is clear that funding levels for sustainable development remain insufficient, while the international financial architecture is ill-equipped to deliver transformative change for people and planet. OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) has reported that in 2024, ODA decreased by 7.1% in real terms compared to 2023, being the first drop after five years of consecutive growth.¹¹ Further, while the Sustainable Development Goal 17.22 target commits to ODA contributions of 0.7% of donors' gross national income, in 2023, aid provided by OECD-DAC members reached 0.37%.

2025 will see the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development (FfD4), a critical opportunity to redesign global financing systems that are adequate, predictable and sustainable. However, any effort to finance development must ensure that the civic actors essential to that development are not excluded or under threat. Civil society helps drive transparency, monitor public funds, uphold human rights, and empower communities—all essential to SDG16 and any just and accountable financing framework. Additionally, funding for the 2030 Agenda, overall, is woefully insufficient and on the decline, with austerity measures and re-directing of budgets towards military, seen as a disturbing negative trend in recent years.

¹¹ [International aid falls in 2024 for first time in six years, says OECD](#), OECD, 16 April 2025

Recommendations:

- 1. Prioritize Flexible, Predictable Funding that Reaches Local Organizations and Communities:** Civil society inclusion in building peaceful and just societies is not optional—it is essential. We call on current funding mechanisms and donors to improve and address their prefixed and rigid mindsets. All donors must urgently reconsider and mitigate the adverse consequences of funding cuts. Donors must stop short-term, project-based approaches, and ensure core, unrestricted, localized, and multi-year financing for CSOs, especially for children, and young people, women, and Indigenous-led groups. Inflexibility of donors in their project funding and in calls for proposals constrains the work of civil society. Greater flexibility, including possibilities for civil society, donors, and the government to collaborate, will lead to more effective interventions. While predictable funding is key, flexibility is required to be able to adapt to rapidly shifting circumstances on the ground in contexts affected by violent conflict.
- 2. Ensure Transparency, Accountability, and Civic Participation in Financing at all levels:** We reiterate that Member States must establish robust monitoring and accountability mechanisms to track financial flows, measure progress, and ensure transparency and accountability, in the allocation and utilization of resources for sustainable development. Transparent public budgeting and capacity development in strengthening trust between governments and the people who benefit from public goods and social services remains essential to financial management. Further, enabling civil society, academia and journalists to safeguard human rights and public services - while ensuring their ability to operate without repression or interference, in accordance with international human rights standards - will ensure people-centered policymaking and resource allocation. As a note, efforts to achieve financial transparency must not undermine work to provide more ODA to local organizations, as well as to decrease risk aversion in donors and financial institutions, who are currently less willing to provide funding to local organizations.
- 3. Deliver Transformative and Just Policy Reforms to the International Financial Architecture at FfD4:** We call on governments to advance essential measures such as: tackling illicit financial flows, taxing the ultra wealthy, and ensuring tax revenue is returned to jurisdictions where wealth is generated, establishing a debt convention and sovereign debt workout mechanism. We urge Member States and donors to guarantee transparency, accountability, and inclusive civic participation in financing by implementing strong monitoring systems, ensuring open public budgeting, and empowering local civil society and media—while increasing direct funding to local organizations and challenging donor risk aversion, to advance equitable and people-centered development.
- 4. Leverage the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus, while maintaining the integrity of funding for each individual pillar:** While the humanitarian-development-peacebuilding (HDP) nexus offers an opportunity to align funding, it cannot be a replacement for funding each of these pillars fully and separately. Peacebuilding is woefully underfunded compared to the humanitarian and development sectors. As global levels of fragility, conflict and violence, continue to break records year over year, the international community must, urgently, commit to robust investments in peacebuilding and conflict prevention. The HDP nexus is necessary for bringing these elements together for optimal coordination and alignment. In order to truly address the root causes and complex drivers of conflict and instability in developing contexts, it is essential that peacebuilding and conflict prevention funding is significantly increased and integrated across all forms and sectors of ODA. These commitments across the HDP

Nexus must also take place in tandem with scaling up funding and financing for SDG16+ initiatives, which will in turn improve the effectiveness and efficient delivery of limited existing funding.

III. Strengthening and Expanding Civic Space and Fundamental Freedoms

We are alarmed at the unacceptable and escalating levels of civil society repression in all of its forms, including most recently in countries that had long been considered to be bastions of democracy and fundamental freedoms. Civil society organizations are not ancillary – they are essential watchdogs, service providers, and drivers of innovation and social accountability. Yet, civil society and citizens today are increasingly targeted by increased surveillance, criminalization of activism, and further legal restrictions against dissent that undermine government accountability, undermine trust and faith in public institutions, and damage social cohesion. Without immediate action to protect and expand the enabling environment for civil society, the foundations of democracy, human rights, and social justice are at grave risk. Marginalized groups are often the most affected by this repression, and we have seen a disturbing level of escalation in governments targeting, victimizing and scapegoating marginalized communities, to justify or rationalize their repressive tactics.

Recommendations:

1. **Protect and expand the enabling environment for civil society at all levels:** We call on Member States to take bold and proactive steps to safeguard fundamental freedoms, aligning with their existing commitments to Target 16.10, including by fostering genuine participation of civil society actors in decision-making processes. Additionally, we call on all Member States that are champions of democracy and fundamental freedoms to use all policy, diplomatic and economic tools to pressure, discredit and isolate regimes and countries that utilize repressive authoritarian tactics to oppress civil society. This includes establishing and reinforcing existing mechanisms for protecting at-risk activists and organizations in repressed civic space environments.
2. **Guarantee meaningful participation for all:** Governments must act urgently, to establish legal and political frameworks that guarantee meaningful participation for all, particularly for historically-excluded groups such as women, children, young people, indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, migrants, and other minority communities. Inclusive participation must be embedded at every level of governance, as a critical means of crafting people-centered policies, and not be treated as an afterthought or a box-ticking exercise. Without immediate reforms to ensure equitable access to power, we risk deepening inequalities, fueling conflicts within and between countries, and weakening the foundations of democracy itself.
3. **Strengthen accountability mechanisms at all levels of governance:** We call on governments to resource, protect, strengthen and expand the mandate of all forms of accountability mechanisms within national systems of governance, such as national human rights institutions and ombuds offices. This also includes expanding media and press freedoms, and pushing back against the rise of misinformation and disinformation across societies, while ensuring that any effort to do so, respects freedom of expression and other fundamental human rights. To support transparency and accountability, we call on all governments to adopt and further strengthen comprehensive freedom of information laws. These institutions serve as the backbone of democratic resilience, protecting fundamental rights and exposing injustice. We also call on Member States to support existing, and to create new relevant instruments at the international level, to adequately hold governments and other actors accountable for human rights abuses,

atrocities and violations of international law, in particular to support the International Criminal Court and International Court of Justice.

4. **Strengthen representation and participation of civil society at the global level:**

We call on governments to partner with civil society, in developing and implementing institutional changes that aim at improving representation, participation and deliberation at the global level, by including and empowering people, civil society, citizen-elected representatives, and other stakeholders. Such modalities could be modeled around best practices for civil society engagement in key SDG moments, or including various proposed initiatives of the UNMute Civil Society Campaign or the We The Peoples Campaign.

IV. Safeguarding and Expanding Justice in all its Forms

We are concerned and deeply troubled by the immense strains being felt by justice systems in countries around the world, with growing gaps in access to justice, rising politicization of the judicial system, and systemic discrimination, leaving over 5 billion people – over two-thirds of the world’s population – without meaningful recourse or access to justice. We know that the erosion of justice systems fuels inequality, erodes trust in institutions, and heightens the risk of conflict and instability – yet governments chronically under-support and under-fund justice systems to their own peril. Globally, countries invest an average of only 1.5% of their national budgets on justice systems, and less than 1% of official development aid is allocated to justice initiatives. This chronic underinvestment has left courts under-resourced, legal aid systems overstretched, and innovative, community-based justice programs, unable to scale. Additionally, governments must prioritize people-centered policy-making that ensures justice on many other fronts – including economic justice, social justice, climate justice, gender and racial justice, environmental justice, and much more. Ensuring that policy-making is viewed through a “justice” lens is essential to ensure that decisions actively dismantle inequalities, protect human rights, and create fair outcomes for all.

Recommendations:

1. **Scale up funding for grassroots justice initiatives:** We call on governments to direct more international and domestic financing toward local justice actors on all fronts to scale up their work to address growing justice gaps within communities and societies. Around the world, grassroots justice actors are on the frontlines of ensuring equitable access to justice for local communities, but are chronically underfunded and overlooked in national budgets and international aid flows. These local actors understand community needs, build trust and reach communities and marginalized groups that traditionally cannot be reached by formal or national government institutions, and are often the first responders in times of crisis or conflict. Governments and donors must prioritize direct, flexible, and sustained investments in local grassroots justice organizations, ensuring that resources reach those with the knowledge, legitimacy, and solutions to close the justice gap.

2. **Promote and support community-based, and informal justice mechanisms:** We call on governments to scale up support for rights-respecting informal or customary justice mechanisms in all their forms, in an effort to close the justice gap, and ensure people-centered justice delivery both in routine legal matters and through transitional justice mechanisms. This includes further investments in justice mediation, paralegal programs, and legal empowerment at the local level, especially where formal systems are under-resourced, as well as investment in innovative justice offerings, such as mobile courts. Further investments are needed in alternative dispute resolution mechanisms,

such as community based mediation, conciliation and negotiation, as well as support for paralegals and legal aid at all levels. We also call on governments to prioritize restorative and reconciliatory measures around community justice, particularly as it relates to healing, forgiveness, and reintegration, including by considering options for reparations when relevant, in particular as it relates to Transitional Justice mechanisms to foster lasting peace and national reconciliation.

3. **Ensure people-centered outcomes by centering policy-making around all forms of justice:** We call on all governments to prioritize people-centered outcomes, by ensuring that policies and decisions are taken with a “justice” lens on all fronts. This means anchoring all decisions around the pursuit of justice in all its forms: economic, social, environmental, age, racial, gender, migratory status and beyond. By viewing policy-making through this justice lens, governments will be able to confront the deep-rooted inequalities and systemic barriers that continue to deny billions, their basic rights, and will ensure that policies are centered around those most in need. Ensuring a justice-based approach to decision-making will have other positive effects by strengthening social cohesion and building trust in public institutions, and will help address many of the root causes of instability and conflict.

4. **Promote the universality and effectiveness of international justice mechanisms.** States, international organizations, and individuals have duties to abide by international law. States further have obligations to uphold international judicial institutions, including supporting their independence and autonomy, as well as decrying attacks upon them. Effective global governance necessarily entails the expectation of accountability for violations of the rule of law and human rights. The realization of the SDG16 is predicated on the adherence and full cooperation of all States with international judicial institutions, as well as support for other mechanisms for regional, transitional, and hybrid justice.