



SDG 16: THE SILENT PILLAR AND BACKBONE OF 2030 AGENDA

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Abstract

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted as part of the 2030 Agenda, represent a universal blueprint for a more equitable, peaceful and sustainable future. Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16) is pivotal in the 2030 Agenda, focusing on promoting peace, justice and strong institutions. It serves as a foundational element that enables the achievement of other Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by fostering democratic principles, human rights and the rule of law. Yet, SDG 16 serves as the silent pillar and invisible scaffolding upon which the entire development framework rests. This paper critically examines SDG 16's foundational role, arguing that its full realisation is indispensable to the success of all other goals. Through an interdisciplinary view, the study aims to bridge the interplay between institutional integrity, rule of law, civic trust and sustainable development. It also highlights emerging innovations in governance, citizen participation and legal empowerment that offer scalable models for embedding SDG 16 across global and local contexts. This paper presents SDG 16, not just as one goal among many, but as a central part of the entire 2030 Agenda—like its nervous system. It encourages leaders, researchers and practitioners to do their work in a collective and cooperative way to support all areas of development. Ultimately, the paper urges greater attention and investment in SDG 16—not just to contribute to academic thought, but because it plays a crucial role in achieving sustainable development as a whole.

Keywords: SDG 16, Agenda 2030, Peace and Justice, Governance

Introduction

Background of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

The year 2025 marks a decade since the United Nations pledged to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) under Agenda 30. Ten years ago in 2015, world leaders from different parts of the world gathered at the United Nations and addressed the world's most pressing social, economic and environmental challenges (UN SDG Report, 2025, p 2). The SDGs aimed to leave no one behind and to transform our world by 2030. The SDGs show how different development goals are connected and depend on each other. They guide us to use new ideas and adapt to change. Achieving the SDGs is not just a final goal but a plan to promote fair growth, reduce inequality, and create a sustainable future for everyone.

Out of the 17 goals, SDG 16 is very important but often not given enough attention. It seems sometimes as a crucial but underappreciated pillar of sustainability. It aims to provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. It emphasises on root cause of conflict, corruption and weak governance. By focusing on rule of law, reducing violence and strengthening institutions, SDG 16 provides a foundation for other SDG to flourish and achieve the targeted progress.

SDG 16 focuses on promoting peaceful and inclusive societies to support sustainability in the all parts of the world (United Nations, 2015). It provides access to justice for all. Furthermore, it builds effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. SDG 16 addresses the root causes of development. It effects the progress of the other goals too. It fosters building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. It creates the foundation which is necessary for sustainable development.

This paper explores SDG 16 as the silent pillar. It highlights the SDG 16 as a backbone of the 2030 Agenda. It is often overshadowed by those goals with more visible outcomes, such as poverty eradication, climate action and decent work availability. SDG 16 plays a fundamental role in achieving the targets of the other different goals. The paper emphasises on the significance of SDG16 in Agenda 30. Additionally, through an in-depth analysis, this study highlights the significance of peace, justice and strong institutions in advancing sustainable development. It also argues for more attention towards the critical areas that need more focus and investment.

Understanding SDG 16

Objectives and Targets of SDG 16

According to United Nations (2015), SDG 16 aims to “promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.”SDG16 includes 12 targets (United Nations, 2015) that address the challenges of the development of sustainability. These include reducing all forms of violence (Target 16.1), ending abuse, exploitation and trafficking (Target 16.2), promoting the rule of law and ensuring equal access to justice (Target 16.3)and substantially reducing corruption and bribery (Target 16.5). And further, other targets emphasise the development of transparent institutions (Target 16.6), inclusive decision-making (Target 16.7), Broaden and strengthen the participation of developing countries (Target 16.8), By 2030, provide legal identity for all (Target 16.9), Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedom (Target 16.10), the protection of fundamental freedoms (Target 16.A) and Promote and enforce non-discriminatory laws and policies (Target 16.B) among others. All in all, the objective of the SDG 16 is to build a society where peace, trust and justice are accessible to all.

Key Indicators

Progress towards sustaining the world through SDG 16 is measured by a range of indicators which are designed to understand the systemic and experiential aspects of peace, justice and governance. Some major indicators are as following:

Peaceful society: Measured through rates of reduce all forms of violence and by ending abuse, exploitation, trafficking as well as torture of children.

Reduction in violence: Measured through rates of intentional homicide, conflict-related deaths and incidents of violence.

Access to justice: Evaluated by the proportion of the population who have experienced a dispute and accessed a formal or informal resolution mechanism.

Transparency and accountability: This is checked by seeing if a country has independent human rights institutions, how much corruption people think exists, and how easily the public can get information.

Institutional capacity: This is measured by how much of the government’s budget comes from local taxes and whether decision-making includes everyone.

These indicators collectively provide insights into how well countries are progressing towards safer, fairer and more just societies.

Inter linkages with Other SDGs

SDG 16 is deeply interconnected with numerous other goals, serving as a core component for broader sustainable development. Its inter linkages include (Cram, S., 2024 p. 10,14):

- SDG 1 (No Poverty): Conflict and bad leadership make poverty worse. Peaceful and fair governments help the economy grow and support people, which reduces poverty.
- SDG 4 (Quality Education): In areas with conflict, many children can't go to school. Education teaches tolerance, good citizenship, and respect for laws, which connects to SDG 16.
- SDG 5 (Gender Equality): SDG 16 also focuses on stopping violence and unfair treatment against women. Fair justice systems that protect women's rights help achieve gender equality (Goetz & Jenkins, 2016).
- SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth): When institutions are honest and transparent, they attract investments, support business growth, and create good job opportunities.
- SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities): Equal access to justice and fair governance help reduce unfair differences between people based on income, gender, or background.
- SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals): Strong institutions help countries work together, make better policies, and share resources to support development.

These connections show that SDG 16 plays a key role in achieving all the 2030 goals. Without peace, justice, and strong institutions, progress on other goals will not be lasting or fair.

The Silent Role: Why SDG 16 is often overlooked

Political Sensitivity and Measurement Challenges

SDG 16 is often side lined in global development discussion. One of the primary reasons is, its inherently political and sensitive nature. Unlike other goals, SDG 16 deals with issues such as human rights, corruption, violence and institutional accountability (UNDP, UNHCR & UNODC, 2024). These areas directly challenge the authority and legitimacy of state actors. As a result, the commitment and transparency of progress become an issue. Furthermore, measuring SDG 16 presents unique challenges and these challenges are not easy to tackle. Concepts such as justice, peace, and institutional integrity are complicated.

They are also multi-dimensional and context-specific in nature. These sound different things in different places. As a result, presenting and analysing data on these concepts is difficult. The process itself poses significant challenges.

Complexity of Governance and Institutional Reform

Unlike sector-specific goals, SDG 16 deals with legal systems, political participation, administrative norms and political cultures among other civic engagement mechanisms. Reforming institutions requires more than introducing policies. It needs to involve shifting deep-rooted practices, power decentralisation and cultural attitudes (Niti Aayog, 2024, p 26, UN SDG Report, 2025, p 7). Additionally, institutional reform requires continuous efforts with long-term engagement and grassroots participation. These all the needs are complex to maintain and sustain in long way. Most of time SDG 16 refers as slow-moving target, along with this reference; the responsibility of to be sustainable reflects simultaneously.

SDG 16 as the Backbone of the 2030 Agenda

Role in Enabling Economic, Social and Environmental Goals

SDG 16 stands at the core of the 2030 Agenda, shaping progress across economic, social, and environmental dimensions. Peace, justice, and strong institutions provide the stability and trust needed for sustainable development to flourish. Without transparent governance and rule of law, even well-crafted policies risk being weakened by corruption, inefficiency, or social unrest.

Economic Goals: Stable and transparent governance attracts investment and nurtures fair, competitive markets. Peaceful conditions encourage entrepreneurship and trade, ensuring that growth under SDG 8 is both inclusive and resilient.

Social Goals: When justice systems are accessible and governance is participatory, marginalized communities gain a stronger voice (Gollagher & Hartz -Karp, 2013). This supports gender equality (SDG 5), improves education delivery (SDG 4), and helps reduce poverty and inequality (SDGs 1 and 10).

Environmental Goals: Strong institutions are essential for enforcing environmental laws and promoting sustainable resource management. Public involvement in environmental decisions strengthens accountability and advances goals such as clean water (SDG 6), climate action (SDG 13), and ecosystem protection (SDGs 14 and 15).

Ultimately, SDG 16 is not merely one target among many. It is a catalyst. By upholding justice, peace, and integrity in governance, it amplifies the impact and sustainability of every other development goal (Gollagher & Hartz-Karp, 2013).

Peace and Justice as Preconditions for Sustainable Development

Sustainable development cannot take root in societies marked by conflict, injustice, or weak governance. In regions affected by violence, progress on education, health, and economic growth is often stalled or reversed. Schools close, hospitals are destroyed, and livelihoods disappear as institutions break down and insecurity spreads.

Peace and justice go beyond ethical ideals. They are essential for stability and progress. When societies uphold the rule of law and protect human rights, they create an environment where inequalities can be addressed and crises managed effectively (Dursun-Ozkanca, 2021, p 21). Fair legal systems and accountable governance strengthen resilience and public trust.

The United Nations rightly asserts that sustainable development and peace are inseparable. Each depends on the other to endure. SDG 16 reflects this interdependence by placing peace, justice, and strong institutions at the heart of the global development agenda—making them prerequisites, not afterthoughts, for lasting progress.

Institutional Strength and Long-term Resilience

Institutions form the backbone of every society. They manage resources, uphold laws, mediate conflicts, and deliver vital public services. SDG 16 highlights that it is not enough for institutions to exist; they must also be transparent, inclusive, effective, and resilient.

Strong institutions act as shock absorbers in times of crisis (Niti Aayog, 2024, p. 28). Whether facing a pandemic, a natural disaster, or an economic slowdown, societies with accountable governance and capable systems recover more quickly. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed this starkly: nations with well-functioning health and administrative institutions managed the crisis more effectively, while weaker systems struggled with deeper disruptions (Cram, S. 2024, p. 8).

Building resilient institutions is a long-term process, not a short-term policy goal. It requires consistent investment, leadership, and civic participation. When institutions are rooted in transparency and adaptability, progress endures beyond political transitions or shifts in donor priorities. In this way, strong institutions become the foundation for sustainable and inclusive development.

For India and other large democracies, the path to sustainable progress depends on the strength and credibility of their institutions. Strengthening institutional integrity through judicial reform, anti-corruption measures, and digital governance is essential for lasting stability. Encouraging greater citizen participation can further enhance transparency and accountability. Together, these efforts build national resilience and create a solid foundation for achieving progress across all Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Challenges and Gaps in Implementation

Weak Data Collection and Accountability

One of the biggest challenges in implementing SDG 16 is the lack of reliable and timely data. Many targets under SDG 16 are hard to measure. These include issues like corruption levels, access to justice, and the

effectiveness of public institutions. Data on these topics is often limited, delayed, or not broken down by groups.

Official records may list crime rates or human rights violations, but the truth is often hidden. Many cases go unreported or are deliberately misrepresented. In some countries, people stay silent out of fear of retaliation for exposing corruption or abuse. This silence deepens the gaps in available data. When data lacks accuracy and transparency, progress becomes difficult to measure (Dursun-Ozkanca, 2021, p 22). Policymakers cannot target those most in need, and institutions escape accountability. As a result, both national strategies and global monitoring lose effectiveness, creating a major blind spot in tracking sustainable development (Cram, S. 2024, p. 27).

Political Will and International Cooperation

Fulfilling the vision of SDG 16 demands more than formal commitments. It requires consistent political courage and follow-through. Yet in many authoritarian or unstable states, leaders often hesitate to embrace transparency or strengthen democratic systems. Efforts to promote accountability can unsettle existing power hierarchies, leading to resistance, delay, or token reforms. Even in established democracies, the strength of political will fluctuates. In India, for instance, the Right to Information Act once symbolized a breakthrough in governance reform. However, growing restrictions on civic participation and media freedom now raise doubts about the endurance of that early momentum.

Globally, cooperation around SDG 16 remains weak. Unlike sectors such as health or education, governance and justice initiatives rarely receive sustained donor investment. International mechanisms to coordinate these efforts are limited and lack influence. As a result, global engagement in peace building, rule of law, and institutional reform tends to be fragmented—more reactive to crises than guided by long-term vision.

Conflict Zones and Fragile Institutions

In conflict-affected and vulnerable states, implementing SDG 16 is extremely difficult. Most of the time, ongoing violence and displacement create major obstacles (UNDP). The collapse of governance structures disrupts development efforts. Such a situation pushes the progress of the states back by several decades. In many cases, peace and justice can seem impossible to achieve. Countries like Syria, Yemen, and the Central African Republic face these challenges. State institutions are often weak, absent or highly politicised. Judicial systems in these places may not function at all. As a result, access to justice and public services is very limited. Participatory governance is often missing entirely.

This process is complicated and requires time, resources, and ongoing commitment. Both the stakeholders; domestic actors and the international community must stay engaged. After conflict, reconstruction efforts often focus on short-term stability. This can delay important governance reforms. Sometimes conflicts and non-cooperation slows down the efforts needed for sustainable progress. It results in delay in important governance reforms. As a result, peace may appear stable but remain fragile. If root causes of conflict are not addressed, instability can return. Without strong and inclusive institutions, societies remain at risk of renewed violence.

Path Forward: Strengthening the Pillar

Policy Recommendations

To stabilise the SDG 16 as the backbone of the 2030 Agenda, the national government and world organisations must include peace, justice and institutional reform at the core of their development agendas (Cram, S. 2024, p.27). Some policy actions can be included as follows:

Governments should prioritise comprehensive judicial and legal reforms. It helps to build a fair and efficient justice system. Modernising court infrastructure can make justice delivery faster and more transparent. It will result in reducing case backlogs that will strengthen public trust and efficiency. Ensuring judicial independence is essential to uphold fairness and accountability. Expanding legal aid will empower marginalised communities to access justice and claim their rights.

Governments must take decisive action to combat corruption and strengthen transparency. These are the pillar to ensure good governance. Independent oversight institutions play a vital role in promoting accountability and integrity. Establishing transparent public procurement systems further helps prevent fraud and encourage fair competition. Collectively, these measures are essential for rebuilding citizens' trust in governance and public institutions.

Strengthening decentralized and inclusive governance is a key factor for achieving balanced national development. Empowering local governments allows them to respond effectively to community needs (Dasandi, Hudson & Pegram 2015, p 65). Inclusive decision-making fosters transparency, accountability, and shared ownership among stakeholders. Collectively, this approach helps reduce regional inequalities and strengthens grassroots democracy.

To create a lively and participatory democracy, it is essential to safeguard civil liberties

and fundamental freedoms. Protecting freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly encourages active civic engagement and open dialogue. Governments must uphold media freedom and allow space for constructive dissent to ensure accountability. In the Indian context, strengthening institutions like the Lok pal can enhance transparency and curb corruption, while ensuring greater judicial independence reinforces public confidence in the rule of law. Revitalising mechanisms such as the Right to Information (RTI) Act further empowers citizens to demand openness, integrity, and good governance.

Role of Civil Society, Youth and Media

Non-state actors such as civil society, youth, and the media play an important role in achieving SDG 16. Civil society organizations (CSOs) help improve governance by checking how public institutions work (Niti Aayog, 2024, p. 27). They promote transparency, offer legal help, and support marginalised groups. CSOs also fill gaps where the government is weak or absent. Young people make a big difference by demanding accountability and justice. They care about issues like social justice, climate change, and inclusion. Their ideas and energy can be used in policymaking, peace building, and civic education. The media is also very important. It acts as a watchdog by exposing corruption and wrongdoing. The media gives people a voice and helps citizens stay informed and involved in public life.

Innovations in Justice and Governance (e.g., digital justice, open data platforms)

The future of SDG 16 lies in embracing innovation to make justice and governance more efficient, accessible and participatory. Digital technologies are transforming governance and justice delivery in many ways. Digital Justice Systems such as virtual courts, AI-assisted case management, and online legal aid portals make justice faster and more accessible, particularly for people in rural or remote areas. India's e-Courts project is a strong example of how technology can modernise the judiciary and reduce delays.

Open Data Platforms further strengthen transparency by providing real-time information on budgets, public spending, and institutional performance. Initiatives like India's Open Government Data (OGD) Portal allow citizens, researchers, and the media to access key information, promoting accountability.

Conclusion

This paper focused on SDG 16 – Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions, explaining its importance as a key but often overlooked part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It discussed SDG 16's goals, indicators, and its strong links with other SDGs such as poverty reduction, education, gender equality, and economic growth. Using India's progress as an example, the paper highlighted both achievements and challenges in implementation. It also emphasised that success in SDG 16 depends on reliable data, political will, active civil society participation and innovation in governance systems.

Although SDG 16 is less visible than goals like ending poverty or tackling climate change, it is the foundation that supports all sustainable development efforts. Without peace, justice and strong institutions, progress on other goals cannot be sustained. The world must therefore give greater attention

to SDG 16 by promoting judicial and governance reforms, protecting freedoms, fighting corruption, and encouraging participation in decision-making. Donors, civil society, youth, and media all play key roles in holding leaders accountable. In a world facing conflicts, climate threats, and rising authoritarianism, strengthening the principles of SDG 16 is more urgent than ever. Sustainable development cannot exist without justice, peace, and strong, inclusive institutions.

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