

A decorative vertical bar on the left side of the cover, composed of a series of horizontal rectangular blocks in various colors including red, yellow, green, orange, pink, and blue.

# Transitioning to **PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS**

**Rajendra Baikady (Ed.)**

Transitioning to  
**Peace, Justice and Strong  
Institutions**

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Rajendra Baikady (Ed.)

# Transitioning to Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions

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# Abstracts

## **“Peaceful,” “Just,” and “Inclusive”? The Pitfalls and Promise of Measuring SDG 16**

by Keith Krause

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) built on and expanded a rich body of experience with targets and indicators associated with their predecessors, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Yet in several respects, and in particular in Goal 16, the SDGs moved into uncharted territory, where agreement on the goal itself, and on the relevant targets and indicators, was difficult to achieve, and where the data itself was either very weak or non-existent. Goal 16 promised 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. While a laudable ambition, it is extremely difficult to imagine what this means in practice, and how it could be measured either comparatively or longitudinally, as a guide to policy and programming. This chapter explores the broader challenge of monitoring and measuring the SDGs through the lens of SDG 16, beginning with a quick overview of the genesis of the goal itself, the selection of targets and indicators, and some of the debates around particular indicators. It highlights the exclusions and omissions in the data, and what can (and cannot) be reliably measured, or even taken as a proxy for the goal. Finally, it reflects more broadly on the politics of measuring such things as the quality of governance, the level of violence, and abstract notions such as inclusivity or access to justice.

## **Synergies and Links: Exploring the Role of Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions (SDG 16) within the Sustainable Development Goals Framework**

by Adrian Daniel Gencia, Ioana Mihaela Balan, Nicoleta Mateoc-Sirb, and Remus Gherman

This study explores the essential role of SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions within the broader framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It examines how SDG 16 serves as a foundation for achieving all development goals by promoting peace, stability, fair governance and the rule of law. Using an

extensive literature review and gray literature, Section 3 investigates the complex connections between SDG 16 and all SDGs, identifying both direct and indirect links. The results show that peace, strong institutions and effective governance are essential prerequisites for reducing poverty, ensuring access to education, promoting economic growth and reducing inequality. However, challenges such as corruption, political instability, emerging conflicts and limited resources often hinder progress. The study emphasizes the need for a holistic and integrated approach to development, highlighting that cooperation and coordinated actions at national and international levels are crucial for success. It finally concludes by advocating a sustained commitment to strengthening institutions and promoting justice and peace as a foundation for achieving sustainable and equitable development for all parties involved.

## **Justice Contexts: Sustainable Development Goal 16 and Transitional Justice**

**by Briony Jones and Roger Duthie**

This chapter explores the connections between SDG 16 and transitional justice, and, in particular, the ramifications of the approach to justice contained within the SDG indicators and targets. In order to do so, we focus on transitional justice contexts where access to justice issues is particularly severe and challenging, following large-scale violations of human rights. We first address the policy landscape for both transitional justice and SDG 16, before reflecting on a series of intellectual ramifications: (1) going beyond the law, (2) moving from institutions to legitimacy, (3) remaining attentive to context, and (4) enhancing focus on prevention and sustainable development. We then conclude by reflecting on what transitional justice debates teach us about the key questions for seeing a people-centred justice for the SDGs.

## **SDG 16—The Role of the OSCE**

**by Thomas Greminger**

The Organization for Security Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) plays an important role in helping its 57 participating States implement almost all of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals with its toolbox, expertise, and knowledge on

the ground. There is growing momentum to better recognize and consider how its activities fit into the global framework. The increasing number of SDG references in political statements suggests that the 2030 Agenda carries an increasing weight within the OSCE, and with the universal application of the 2030 Agenda, this trend will likely continue in the coming years. While in today's challenging multilateral climate, this does not come without certain reservations, in the case of SDG 16, the OSCE's supporting role is particularly pronounced as it can be seen as directly relevant to the core activities of the organization, namely, conflict prevention and building lasting peace and security. This article outlines the role of the OSCE in supporting the implementation of SDG 16, considering the particular challenges relating to this goal. It will also discuss the lessons learned concerning the OSCE's role as a regional arrangement of the United Nations (UN) in the implementation of the SDGs.

## **Relevant Nuclear Arms Control Issues and Recommendations**

**by Heinz Gärtner**

Six developments in the last five years are decisive for the future of nuclear weapons. The first is the US president's decision in February 2019 to withdraw from the INF Treaty (Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty) of 1987, which eliminated a whole class of nuclear weapons. Second, the American president abandoned the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran. This was the best-negotiated arms control agreement ever, with a comprehensive verification system. This move increases the danger of military confrontation in the Middle East. A long-term recommendation is the creation of an extended nuclear-weapon-free zone in the Middle East, which includes zones in Central Asia and North Africa. Third, not much progress has happened in the denuclearization of North Korea. North Korea's nuclear disarmament will only be possible if its independence from external powers is guaranteed. This article proposes neutrality as one path to unification of the peninsula. Fourth, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) entered into force in 2021. However, it has basically been ignored by nuclear weapon states. At least, nuclear weapon states should be committed to legally binding NSAs and ratify the protocols of the Treaties on Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones. The fifth development is the suspension of the New START agreement by Russia in March 2023. The sixth is the danger that nuclear weapons might be used during the war in Ukraine that started in February 2022. Russian President Vladimir Putin has alluded to this option several times. More

nuclear-capable weapons are being deployed in Eastern European states. Models for post-war Europe could be the Congress of Vienna of 1815 or the Summit of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Helsinki of 1975.

## **Justice on the Plate: How Food Security Shapes a Path to Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions**

**by Teodor Ioan Trasca, Ioana Mihaela Balan, Raul Pascalau, Nastasia Belc, Gabriel Mustatea, Camelia Tulcan and Anisoara Aurelia Ienciu**

This chapter examines the complex interdependencies between food security, peace, justice, and strong institutions through an integrated analysis that combines theory with real-world case studies. It argues that while food security can enhance economic stability, social cohesion, and the protection of human rights, its absence amplifies social tensions, fuels conflict, and erodes justice. At the same time, the analysis shows that strong institutions may act as both protectors and potential saboteurs of food security: when transparent and accountable, they enable equitable resource distribution and crisis response; when captured by authoritarian or conflict-driven agendas, they may manipulate food systems, politicize aid, and weaponize hunger. Case studies illustrate how equitable food governance reduces corruption and supports long-term stability, while failures or abuses of institutional power can deepen inequality and prolong conflict. The findings highlight that understanding these bidirectional relationships is crucial for designing policies that not only ensure access to food but also safeguard justice and peace. Finally, the chapter calls for governance frameworks that integrate food security into broader strategies for sustainable development, equity, and resilience.

## **Optimizing Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions in Trinidad and Tobago Through Artificial Intelligence (AI)-Based Technologies**

**by Roshnie A. Doon**

One of the most pressing national challenges that Trinidad and Tobago, as well as the greater Caribbean region, experience is building a peaceful and inclusive society for its citizens, where there is justice for all. Socioeconomic tensions produced by the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, together with the influx of Venezuelan migrants and refugees since 2015, have triggered a severe and unprecedented crisis

within Trinidad and Tobago, creating heightened growth in all forms of violence and crime, exploitation and human trafficking, and corruption and persistent erosion of governance. Given that the success of accomplishing the targets of SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions), is essential to achieving the other SDGs, amid Industry 4.0, the growth of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies can be used to stimulate and transform how the targets of SDG 16 are being addressed by Trinidad and Tobago. In this regard, using a secondary research methodology, this chapter will discuss conceptually how optimizing peace, justice, and strong institutions in Trinidad and Tobago can be realized through artificial intelligence (AI) technologies. The latter is important as it may facilitate a more efficient decision-making process which reduces bureaucracy and corruption, while developing new and innovative strategies to achieve peace, justice, and strong institutions in Trinidad and Tobago.





# “Peaceful,” “Just,” and “Inclusive”? The Pitfalls and Promise of Measuring SDG 16

Keith Krause

## 1. Introduction

*“If you torture the data long enough, it will tell you anything.”—John W. Tukey*

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were built upon and expanded on a rich body of experience with targets and indicators associated with their predecessors, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Yet in several respects, and particularly in Goal 16, the SDGs moved into uncharted territory, where agreement on the goal itself, and on the relevant targets and indicators, was difficult to achieve, and where the data itself was either very weak or non-existent. Goal 16 promised 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” (UNDESA 2015). While a laudable ambition, it is extremely difficult to determine what this means in practice, and how it could be measured either comparatively or longitudinally, as a guide to policy and programming. Perhaps more importantly, there are some critical blind spots and potential negative aspects to the measuring and monitoring of Goal 16, especially given the fundamentally political nature of the different dimensions of the goal.

This chapter unpacks the broader challenge of monitoring and measuring the SDGs through the specific lens of SDG 16. It begins with a quick overview of the genesis of the goal itself, the selection of targets and indicators, and some of the debates around particular indicators. The second section highlights the exclusions and occlusions in the data, and what can (and cannot) be reliably measured, or even taken as a proxy for the goal. Finally, I reflect more broadly on the politics of measuring such things as the quality of governance, the level of violence (and what kinds of violence ‘count’), and abstract notions such as inclusivity or access to justice. I am thus following the lead of scholars such as Judith Kelley, Sally Engle Merry, Lorenzo Fioramonti, and André Broome, all of whom have highlighted the way in which measurement and indicators—generally presented as ‘data’ in all its forms—operate as a technology of global governance, and a technocratic screen behind which power and politics remain omnipresent out in various domains,

ranging from credit ratings to aid distribution (Kelley and Simmons 2015; Davis et al. 2012; Broome et al. 2018; Fioramonti 2014).

Overall, I argue that such measurement exercises do not automatically or even necessarily translate into specific politics and practices. When they do, it can often be with unanticipated or even potentially perverse outcomes. While Goal 16 represents progress in its recognition of the important development impacts of insecurity, violence, fragility, and poor governance, the limitations in measuring and monitoring through various forms of data collection serve to remind us that not all important aspects of governance and development can be captured through data (understood both qualitatively and quantitatively) or even compared across very different contexts. As Albert Einstein reportedly said, “not everything that counts can be counted. And not everything that can be counted counts” (Fioramonti 2014, p. 144).

## **2. The Genesis of SDG 16**

The 2000 UN Millennium Declaration was intended to galvanize international action to promote peace, security and disarmament; development and poverty eradication; environmental protection; and human rights, democracy and good governance. The subsequent eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)—the first systematic attempt to measure and monitor development outcomes—focused on traditional development goals such as eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, improving educational achievement, improving maternal health care, and reducing child mortality (United Nations 2000). No goals focused on two of the pillars of the Millennium Declaration: peace, security, and disarmament; human rights, democracy, and good governance. There were many reasons why this slippage between lofty declarations and practical policies occurred, but it was also emblematic of the gulf between the twin discourses of ‘security’ and ‘development.’

But starting in the late 1990s, a concern with the negative impact of violence and insecurity on development prospects emerged in various circles, most prominently within the discourse of human security, in particular, the dimension of “freedom from fear” (Martin and Owen 2015; Krause 2008). For perhaps the first time in some policy circles (notably activist states such as Canada, Norway, and Switzerland), security was focused on issues of individual well-being and safety. Human security became embedded in United Nations and multilateral policy frameworks on issues such as security sector governance, armed violence prevention and reduction, and initiatives against things such as child soldiers or conflict goods. One outgrowth of these efforts, the 2006 *Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development* (ultimately adopted by more than 100 states), took as its main goal to achieve “measurable reductions in

the global burden of armed violence and tangible improvements in human security worldwide" (The Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development 2006). And the link between security and development was underlined by the World Bank's 2011 *World Development Report*, which concluded that no low-income fragile or conflict-affected country had achieved a single Millennium Development Goal (The World Bank 2011; Collier 1999).

Most of these initiatives also broadened the focus beyond conflict-related violence to include the much larger (in terms of annual deaths) burden of armed violence from criminal, interpersonal, and large-scale violence that was not directly 'conflict-related,' captured usually by the umbrella concept of 'fragile contexts.' This message was echoed by studies that focused on crime and other forms of violence (Skaperdas 2011; UNODC 2005). The implication was that insecurity, conflict, crime, and violence are all development disablers and must be brought into development frameworks.

But going from this recognition to SDG 16 was not exactly straightforward. Critics of the security and development linkage feared the broader "securitization of development" that followed, especially the events of 9/11, and the tilting of development programmes towards conflict zones where major powers had geostrategic interests (Brown and Grävingholt 2016). Many development practitioners who embraced the security–development linkage also argued that economic development would progressively reduce the incidence of conflict and violence within, and potentially even between, states, thus obviating the need for a specific focus on security-related issues. And major Southern states (and the BRICS) feared that the merging of the two agendas at the global level would result in increased possibilities for intervention in their internal affairs, or in a merger of development issues with the interests/actions of the Security Council and its "peace and security" mandate within the UN system (Goetz and Jenkins 2016).

The result was that SDG 16 was a compromise goal, resulting from the merger of a broad goal on governance and the rule of law with one on "peaceful and inclusive societies free of violence." It was also the last one to be agreed upon in what were often difficult negotiations, and its specific language turned away from hard language of 'security' towards 'peace,' and from the 'rule of law' towards effective governance (Goetz and Jenkins 2016). But the residue of the earlier orientation remained in the targets and indicators that were subsequently developed, particularly around violence and insecurity.

### 3. Measuring and Monitoring of What?

The lofty ambition of Goal 16 required an equally broad set of targets and indicators to measure and monitor progress, and it is here that the operation of the “technologies of governance” noted by Kingsbury and Engle Merry starts to operate. Goal 16 has 12 targets and 23 indicators, which can be roughly grouped into three categories. The first category captures the strong emphasis on human security and violence, with a headline target to reduce all forms of violence everywhere, and a separate target and indicators emphasizing violence against children and sexual violence (Targets 1 and 2). It is echoed in another target dealing with strengthening institutions to prevent violence and reduce crime (Target A). The second basket deals with issues associated with the rule of law and corruption and governance, and includes four targets (access to justice, reducing corruption and bribery, illicit flows, institutional transparency, and freedom of information and human rights; Targets 3, 4, 5, 6, and 10), perhaps highlighting the central areas of consensus within the SDG 16 debate. The third basket focuses on political inclusion, with three targets focusing on political representation, decision-making, non-discriminatory laws and policies, legal identity for all persons, and participation in global governance (Targets 7, 8, 9, and B).

From an aspirational perspective, SDG 16 is ambitious, path-breaking, and politically highly relevant (and sensitive). Progress on any or all of these areas would doubtlessly improve development prospects and overall well-being. But how will we know? Many of these targets have only weak connections to the relevant indicators and/or have no reliable data to back them up or to monitor progress. And the track record of data collection and production for development in large parts of the world is, to say the least, very poor. As Morten Jerven put it with respect to Africa, “the arbitrariness of the quantification process produces observations with very large errors and levels of uncertainty. This numbers game has taken on a dangerously misleading air of accuracy and (...) international development actors are making judgments based on erroneous statistics” (Jerven 2013).

Broadly speaking, indicators have to meet at least four criteria to be reliable and useful:

- They have to capture and track changes over time in the underlying phenomenon they are addressing;
- They have to be inclusive in the sense that they do not omit important aspects of the phenomenon in question;
- They have to be immune to easy manipulation or subversion by national (or local) governments;

- They should be organically linked to policies or programmes that can address the overall goal and targets, in order to facilitate progress (UNDESA 2013; Satterthwaite and Dhital 2019; Jerven 2014).<sup>1</sup>

The first and last criteria represent technical, definitional, data collection, and operational challenges. The second and third criteria are more politically sensitive and conceptual in nature and will be dealt with in the next section. By these four criteria, however, the measuring and monitoring of Goal 16 falls far short and will not necessarily lead to progress in achieving it. I will highlight here the difficulties even in meeting criterion one, the weak or flawed relationship between many of the targets and their indicators, and the overarching programmatic goal, via a quick overview of the 12 targets and indicators (United Nations 2015, 2019).

There exist five major—and straightforward—shortcomings that can be pinpointed for the indicators' ability to track and capture the underlying phenomenon. First, several of them have no or very limited and non-generalizable data. Three of the eight targets have no agreed-upon or currently reliable measurable indicators (organized crime and illicit financial and arms flows; responsive, inclusive, and representative decision-making; promotion of non-discriminatory laws and policies).<sup>2</sup> In addition, at least two of the eight targets have very limited or unreliable data (reduce corruption and bribery; provide effective, accountable, and transparent institutions). Second, many indicators do not exist in 'point form' (at a specific point in time, or covering a relatively narrow time period), and thus, it is very difficult to see how progress in implementation could be measured. For example, available data on sexual violence against young men and women (aged 18–29) measures lifetime prevalence, that is, experiencing any form of sexual violence before age 18. Lifetime prevalence data (common in reports of inter-personal or sexual and gender-based violence) does not change much over time, or only very slowly, and will not be able to track progress easily.

Third, at least four of the targets have indicators that can only loosely be associated as proxies with the overall goal (or target). For example, the idea that

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<sup>1</sup> Note that these are not the same as the specific criteria that various UN reports advocated for, which suggested, in general, that indicators needed to be “clear, concise and objectively measurable (...)” with an “easy to understand numerical scale (...) and capable of aggregation to represent global and regional trends.” The technical debate over indicators is summarized in Satterthwaite and Dhital's (2019) article. I have omitted any discussion of the cost of data collection, but skeptical voices note that it would represent a significant additional burden on less developed states (Jerven 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Note that this refers to “agreed-upon” indicators—many different measures of these phenomena do exist, but not within the measurement framework of SDG 16.

the alignment of government expenditures with budgets represents an indicator of effectiveness is rather odd—especially in light of recent stimulus packages in response to the COVID-19 epidemic or other economic crises. Likewise, access to information and protection of fundamental freedoms are not well captured by the number of killings of journalists or human rights advocates only, since there are more subtle ways of limiting access to information or fundamental freedoms, as the case of media suppression in China or elsewhere illustrates well. A focus on, for example, the freedom of national NGOs to hold the government accountable for human rights issues, diversity of the press and censorship, or the work of ombudspersons would be more directly useful. Strengthening national institutions to prevent violence and combat crime and terrorism (Target 16A) is definitely not captured by the mere existence (or not) of national human rights institutions, although these can play a role in the broader promotion of inclusion and freedoms—suggesting a mismatch between the target and the indicators. The existence of functioning institutions to promote human rights (or, for example, national action plans) is a starting point for greater in-depth analysis.

Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, the overarching idea of promoting the ‘rule of law,’ a key pillar of SDG 16, has been reduced to victim reporting of criminal victimization and the scope of pre-trial detention. This excludes the most important elements of the rule of law—the idea that the exercise of legal power should not be arbitrary, and that no one, including rulers, is above the law—and hardly reflects the way in which the ‘rule of law’ is itself is a deeply contested and historically embedded concept in Western political thought and practice (Tamanaha 2004; Carothers 1998, p. 95). To think advances in the rule of law are captured by such things as the “proportion of victims of violence in the previous 12 months who reported their victimization to competent authorities” (SDG Indicator 16.3.1) is simplistic and possibly cynical, given that much thought and debate went into these indicators (UNDESA 2015). Together, many of these points suggest that framers of SDG 16 (and its targets and indicators) were well aware of the political implications of the goal and often sought to minimize these or in some way deflect from them.

Finally, there are programmatic implications associated with specific indicators, and the way in which policy choices are determined by a desire to achieve specific targets. If, for example, the realization of Goal 16A (“strengthen national institutions to prevent violence and combat crime and terrorism”) is associated solely with its indicator—the existence of independent national human rights institutions—then progress will be measured by the mere establishment of such

bodies (UNDESA 2015).<sup>3</sup> A whole host of other potentially complex, important institutional developments (concerning reform and capacity building in the broader criminal justice as well as the security sector, public health institutions dedicated to violence prevention, and so forth) are left untouched by this. Likewise, reducing the number of unsentenced (pre-trial) detainees may be relatively easy to achieve, and yet it has little impact on the rule of law in a country (one could, for example, simply release these detainees without further ado). These may be trivial examples, but they reinforce the conclusion above regarding the politicized nature of the targets and indicators. The problem also goes far deeper and is captured well by Andrew Natsios' (former Administrator of USAID) observation that according to "a central principle of development theory (...) those development programs that are most precisely and easily measured are the least transformational, and those programs that are most transformational are the least measurable" (Natsios 2011). Since SDG 16, by definition, deals with complex socio-political processes and institutional developments associated with good governance, it is hard to imagine how technically oriented programming will achieve the desired results.

#### **4. The Politics of Data on Violence and Insecurity**

The second-order challenges with measuring and monitoring SDG 16 are more complex, and I will approach these through a discussion of issues around Target 1 ("significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere") and its four related indicators associated with the overarching goal of 'peaceful' societies (UNDESA 2015). The scope and variation in levels of violence and insecurity in societies are enormous, and designing inclusive indicators that do not omit or occlude important aspects of the phenomenon, or are not easily manipulated by state officials, is a huge challenge. There are several serious issues with the way in which this target is conceptualized and measured, issues that can be reproduced in a similar form throughout SDG 16, and which serve as a salutary reminder that data and indicators do not, by themselves, 'speak' for complex socio-economic and socio-political realities.

At the conceptual level, one might reasonably ask how such things as 'violence' or 'peaceful societies' are conceived. The four indicators for SDG 16 provide some clues, as they focus on such phenomena as intentional homicide; conflict-related

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<sup>3</sup> It is slightly more complicated, since such bodies have to be accredited as independent, but the point about the narrowness of the indicator stands.



deaths; physical, psychological, and sexual violence; and safety from criminal acts. With one exception (psychological violence—for which no data is available), these all rest on a somatic understanding revolving around the World Health Organization's (WHO) definition of violence as "the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation" (Krug et al. 2002, p. 5). Scholarship on violence generally conceives of it much more broadly, however, including not just psychological violence, but also violence by deprivation, neglect, or omission, and such things as systemic, structural, or symbolic violence. These broadenings are, however, almost never linked to the somatic or physical harm conception, yet some of them can have consequences that outweigh those of physical harm (e.g., sexual and gender-based violence or post-traumatic stress syndrome; Jacoby 2008, pp. 34–50; Heitmeyer and Hagan 2003).

The obverse of the coin is the truncated understanding of 'peaceful societies' as those in which levels of overt physical violence are low. While all can agree that eliminating overt violence from social, political, and economic life is a precondition for sustainable human and economic development, there are more subtle forms of violence that hinder life chances and harm development prospects. Tunisia in 2010, for example, had low levels of recorded homicide and other forms of violence. Yet, to illustrate with only one case, the repeated humiliation and harassment that Mohamed Bouazizi suffered from local officials—and his public suicide—served as a catalyst for a wave of protests against various forms of oppression, and what Johan Galtung has called structural violence (Galtung 1969; Dilts et al. 2012). In post-conflict settings, a similar observation can be made with respect to what have been called 'everyday peace indicators,' and their relationship to SDG 16. As Pamina Firchow has pointed out, local actors' understandings of what represents peace and a 'peaceful society' are not necessarily synchronous with those of externally led intervenors and are certainly imperfectly captured by SDG 16 indicators (Firchow 2018, pp. 42–48). There is, of course, some overlap, with people in post-conflict settings stressing the importance of things such as safety at night, access to the criminal justice system, and the presence of security forces. But other things—such as transitional justice and reconciliation, freedom of expression, and community cohesion—are not really captured, but they might be more important for sustainable development outcomes.

Linked to this is the complete omission of the manifold manifestations of state violence, violence that has been made legal, ranging from excessive use of force by agents of the state (police, gendarmes, paramilitaries, and others) up to and including

torture, disappearances, and extrajudicial killings. For example, the “police in Nigeria commit extrajudicial killings, torture, rape, and extortion with relative impunity (...) routinely carry out summary executions of persons accused or suspected of crime; rely on torture as a principal means of investigation; commit rape of both sexes (...) and engage in extortion at nearly every opportunity” (OSI 2010; Amnesty International 2009; Acebes 2020). Hundreds of Brazilians are killed each year by the police, and in Venezuela, the Dominican Republic, Nairobi, and other such places, police and other extrajudicial executions are commonplace, at some points representing between 13 and 43 percent of all violent deaths (Foglesong and Stone 2007; Ávila 2020). Deaths in violent political unrest, such as in Egypt during the 2011 uprisings or the 2013 removal of President Mohamed Morsi from power, also fall in this category, since they are seldom, if ever, prosecuted (Amnesty International 2011).

Beyond the use of physical force, these legal forms of violence represent what Vittorio Bufacchi has termed “violence as violation”: forms of violence that implicate the state, but which do not involve brute physical force to wreak harm. This form of violence includes the entire apparatus of repression, and the range of “personal integrity rights (...) concerned with individual survival and security, such as freedom from torture, ‘disappearance,’ imprisonment, extrajudicial execution, and mass killing” (Davenport 2007; Bufacchi 2005; Jackman 2002). Such large-scale ‘legal violence’ remains invisible to SDG 16 and its indicators. This is hardly surprising given that states negotiated the SDGs, but state violence clearly has powerful negative social and political impacts that take one far from a peaceful, just, and inclusive society, and can coexist easily with ‘reasonably good’ scores on other indicators for SDG 16, which are not likely to be directly correlated with state violence as such.

At the practical level, data on violence is easily subject to manipulation by authorities in order to understate or mask the scale of the problem. The simplest solution—adopted in various recent times by states such as Mexico and Venezuela—is to stop publishing any official systematic data on homicides (*The Economist* 2018). A more subtle approach is to reclassify data: homicides become disappearances or lesser charges (manslaughter or the legal equivalent). Or one can, as has been achieved in El Salvador in 2012 and apparently again in 2020, negotiate with the main perpetrators (usually gangs), in order to provide some benefits or inducements for the killing to stop, although these policies appear to only have short-term benefits (often for the government of the day as well; Dudley 2020; Seelke 2016).

There are also, in some cases, ethical, in addition to conceptual and measurement, problems that should be highlighted. These can be seen clearly through the lens of violence against women, or sexual and gender-based violence broadly (SGBV).

This issue cuts across at least two SDGs and is partly captured by indicator 16.2.3, and more completely within SDG-5 on gender equality (Target 5.2, “eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation”). As is widely recognized, official data on SGBV is woefully inadequate and massively underreported, definitions of ‘sexual violence’ vary widely, and legal redress or access to appropriate services for victims and survivors is hardly present in many parts of the world (WHO 2013; Abrahams et al. 2014). But just focusing on the issue of measurement already provides a sobering insight into the issue. Sally Engle Merry’s detailed analysis of the process by which the UN Statistical Commission arrived at a common definition of “violence against women” highlighted how the categories used to construct a common standard in some sense are constitutive of the phenomenon and flatten out important socio-cultural differences and experiences (Engle Merry 2016).<sup>4</sup>

The ethical dimension is perhaps more troubling. In short, the SDGs are premised on the systematic collection of data by state agencies, usually national statistical institutes or their equivalent, and usually based on administrative data that is—or could be—regularly collected. This would include such things as birth and death registration data, criminal justice statistics, and other survey data for things such as corruption. Yet within the community of practice on SGBV, there are serious concerns with most of these methods, and, in particular, with massive underreporting in administrative (criminal justice) data, and with risks associated with survey interviews.<sup>5</sup> The ethics of ‘do no harm’ mean that any data on SGBV needs to avoid re-victimizing survivors and should, as a matter of principle, be coupled with efforts to provide follow-up support, or at least to use the data to increase public awareness and press for positive legal and policy changes or targeted programmes (Jewkes et al. 2000). This is a tall order, and it is difficult to meet with flawed or insufficient data.

## 5. Concluding Thoughts

This chapter concentrated on the practical and political obstacles to the realization of the lofty goal of achieving a more peaceful and just world via SDG 16. Although

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<sup>4</sup> Survivor testimonies also highlight that women often have very different understandings of what could constitute culturally inflected “violence”.

<sup>5</sup> It is generally bad practice to include SGBV questions in standard household surveys, given that perpetrators may be present and interviewers may be insufficiently trained or inappropriate; dedicated SGBV surveys face the challenge of transparency of purpose and the same jeopardy.

SDG 16 is, in some sense, uniquely challenging and politically complex, stepping back, one can see a number of broader forces at work behind all of the SDGs, which represent but one example of a multitude of schemes to improve the human condition (Scott 1998). Behind the ambitions of SDG 16, and the various attempts to measure and monitor progress towards peaceful and inclusive societies, lies an abiding belief in governability by numbers: in the ability of quantification to accurately capture complex phenomena and perceptions, to simplify them to an easily comprehensible form and—most importantly—to effect positive change through rational design and intervention (Desrosières 2002). The theory of change behind this is often both seldom articulated and unconsciously held by Western policy-making elites and has therefore become normalized as part of everyday discourse in the media and elsewhere.

This rests on the fairly simplistic belief that highlighting the severity of a social (or economic) problem is a strong catalyst for action. In some areas, such as reducing child mortality or improving literacy, this may have been the case. Yet, to take one example, decades of attempts to highlight the high and widespread prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence and its social and economic costs has not, however, done much to increase the resources devoted to tackling the problem or the development of scalable and effective solutions, suggesting that data does not automatically drive change. As Thomas Carothers has pointed out with regard to efforts to enhance respect for the rule of law, “The primary obstacles to such reform are not technical or financial, but political and human. Rule-of-law reform will succeed only if it gets at the fundamental problem of leaders who refuse to be ruled by the law (. . .) Western nations and private donors have poured hundreds of millions of dollars into rule-of-law reform, but outside aid is no substitute for the will to reform, which must come from within” (Carothers 1998, p. 96).

To end on a more positive note, the entire SDG process has led to a broader reflection on what it means to ‘measure and monitor’ social phenomena, and there are efforts at more contextual or sensitive (even if not generalizable) indicators and measurement models. Most of these efforts take place in parallel to the official SDG monitoring and have an explicit goal of influencing policies and practices. At the macro level, efforts such as the Global Peace Index of the Institute for Economics and Peace (and some national-level reports) provide a more nuanced approach to peacefulness and contrasts with the negative orientation of efforts like the Fragile States Index (Institute for Economics and Peace 2020; The Fund for Peace 2020).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Like all indexes, the GPI is not without its limitations.

More concretely, there have been a number of attempts to capture such things as inclusivity or democracy, beyond the fairly crude SDG indicators (Othering and Belonging Institute 2019; Varieties of Democracy 2023). At the more local level, systems of peer review on ‘governance’ that have been established in the African context (or on human rights via the Universal Periodic Review) can be adapted to many of the SDG 16 targets (Cling et al. 2016; Bolaji-Adio 2015). And at the micro level, everyday peace indicator assessments are being rolled out in several post-conflict countries in Africa and Asia (Everyday Peace Indicators n.d.).<sup>7</sup> These are positive signs, but they need to be linked to policies and programmes in a more direct way. The SDGs, given their genesis and negotiating history, were always going to be a relatively simple way to think about complex issues associated with sustainable human development in general, and peaceful, just, and inclusive societies in particular, making implementation an especially complex challenge. It is, of course, easier to critique than to present positive solutions, and the jury is out—especially given the geo-political context of the 2020s—on whether or not they can serve to catalyze real change and anchor efforts to promote international solidarity. But there are efforts, and ways, to shape policies towards peaceful, just, and inclusive societies that do not depend on global frameworks or crude indicators.

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<sup>7</sup> Pilots were conducted in Colombia, Uganda, South Africa, and Zimbabwe; work has been carried out in Afghanistan and Sri Lanka; and research on Myanmar is forthcoming.

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# Synergies and Links: Exploring the Role of Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions (SDG 16) Within the Sustainable Development Goals Framework

Adrian Daniel Gencia, Ioana Mihaela Balan, Nicoleta Mateoc-Sirb  
and Remus Gherman

## 1. Introduction: SDG 16 and Its Importance in the Context of the Sustainable Development Goals

In a world dominated by conflict, inequality and poor governance, the need to build peaceful, just societies and robust institutions is more urgent than ever. Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16) addresses these critical issues, focusing on promoting peace and justice by effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. Adopted in 2015 by the United Nations General Assembly, SDG 16 is part of the 2030 Agenda, an ambitious global plan consisting of 17 interconnected goals aimed at solving international challenges and improving the overall quality of life (The Global Goals n.d.; UN n.d.; International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance 2024).

The central role of SDG 16 within the Sustainable Development Goals cannot be underestimated. Without peace, justice and strong institutions, progress in achieving all the other goals, such as eradicating poverty (SDG 1), ending hunger (SDG 2), ensuring health and well-being (SDG 3), providing quality education (SDG 4), promoting gender equality (SDG 5), ensuring access to clean water and sanitation (SDG 6), guaranteeing access to clean and affordable energy (SDG 7), promoting decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), developing infrastructure and industrial innovation (SDG 9), reducing inequalities (SDG 10), developing sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11), ensuring responsible consumption and production (SDG 12), combating climate change (SDG 13), protecting underwater life (SDG 14), preserving life on land (SDG 15) and strengthening global partnerships (SDG 17), becomes extremely difficult. Stability and peace are fundamental to economic and social development, while strong and accountable institutions ensure the enforcement of appropriate laws, the protection of rights and the provision of essential services

(The Global Goals n.d.; UN n.d.; International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance 2024).

The interconnection of SDG 16 with all other SDGs contributes to an integrated approach to sustainable development (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance 2024; UN n.d.). For example, reducing violence and promoting justice are crucial to eradicating poverty and hunger, as conflict and political instability exacerbate food and economic insecurity. Gender equality (SDG 5) and universal access to justice are also interrelated, for example, as gender-based discrimination and violence undermine peace and stability.

First, peace and justice are essential for a functional society. Without them, sustainable development initiatives are doomed to fail. In a society plagued by conflict and injustice, resources are diverted to war and security efforts at the expense of domestic economic development, education and health (The Global Goals n.d.; UN n.d.; International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance 2024). Thus, SDG 16 not only bears a direct impact on political and social stability but also influences all other aspects of sustainable development.

Secondly, strong institutions play a critical role in enforcing laws and protecting the rights of all citizens. They ensure that all people have access to justice and that no one is left behind. In education (SDG 4), responsible institutions can ensure that all public schools provide quality education and that all children, regardless of gender, race, or socio-economic background, have access to education (UN n.d.). Furthermore, regarding healthy living (SDG 3), strong institutions can implement public health policies that ensure universal access to essential services.

All in all, achieving SDG 16 requires a coordinated effort at all levels: global, national and local. Therefore, governments, the private sector, civil society and the international community must work together to build resilient institutions, promote the rule of law and ensure the participation of all social groups in the decision-making processes. Fighting corruption and strengthening transparency are crucial to creating an environment conducive to sustainable development. Global partnerships (SDG 17) are also essential to achieving these goals, thus facilitating the exchange of know-how and resources needed to build a more peaceful and equitable collective society (The Global Goals n.d.; UN n.d.; International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance 2024).

This study will explore the complex links between SDG 16 and the other Sustainable Development Goals, highlighting direct and indirect connections. Through a detailed analysis of interdependencies, the chapter will offer a comprehensive view on how

promoting peace, justice and strong institutions contribute to a more equitable, sustainable and prosperous world for all.

### 1.1. Conceptual Clarifications

To substantiate the analysis of the interconnections between SDG 16 and the other Sustainable Development Goals, this section offers a clarification of the main terms and concepts used within the study. Although the terms within the 2030 Agenda are frequently encountered in political and institutional discourse, their meaning may vary depending on the cultural, geographical, or ideological context. In this chapter, the terms are interpreted in an operational key, based on official sources and the relevant academic literature.

*Peace* is defined not only as the absence of armed conflict, but also as the active presence of conditions that allow for harmonious coexistence, social inclusion, human rights and equity. Following the distinction proposed by Johan Galtung, there is a fundamental difference between negative peace (the absence of direct violence) and positive peace (the absence of structural and cultural violence, i.e., systemic inequalities and exclusion) (Galtung 1969).

In the context of the present chapter, *justice* has both a legal and a social dimension. Legal justice implies equal access to the legal system, and social justice implies the equitable distribution of resources, opportunities and rights (Rawls 1971; Sen 2009). This refers to procedural fairness and outcome fairness, as well.

*Public accountability* refers to the mechanisms through which governments, institutions and power actors can be held accountable by citizens and civil society for their decisions and actions. Although SDG 16 refers to “effective, responsive and transparent institutions”, in this study accountability is seen as being focused primarily towards citizens, and not exclusively towards international structures (OECD 2021).

*Effective and robust institutions* are those institutions that have the capacity to respond to citizens’ needs, implement coherent policies, prevent corruption and maintain social stability. “Robustness” refers to institutional resilience in the face of crises, while “efficiency” is related to the capacity to deliver essential public services (UNDP 2022).

*Effective governance* is defined as the exercising of political authority in a manner that promotes transparency, participation, respect for the law and administrative efficiency. Effective governance also includes the capacity of the state to plan and implement policies in a coherent, inclusive and respectful manner for fundamental rights (Kaufmann et al. 2009).

*Corruption* is defined as the use of public power for private purposes. In the context of the 2030 Agenda, reducing corruption is a fundamental condition for the functioning of the rule of law and public trust in institutions. It refers to both administrative corruption and systemic, or political, corruption (Transparency International 2023).

An *equitable education system* is one that provides equal access to quality education, without discrimination and with increased attention to vulnerable groups. Equity in education does not mean uniformity, but adaptability to diverse needs, to ensure a fair start in life for all children (UNESCO 2021).

*Transparency* is the capacity of public institutions to provide clear, accessible and relevant information about the decisions made, the resources managed and the policies implemented. It is an essential pillar of accountability and the prevention of abuse of power (United Nations 2019).

*Equity* is approached as a corrective principle, distinct from equality. Equity implies differential treatment, when necessary, to ensure comparable outcomes between individuals or groups in unequal positions. It is a fundamental concept in understanding inclusive development (Sen 1999). *Gender equality*, for all intents and purposes, is interpreted as not only a universal value, but also an objective that requires contextual adaptation. It is recognized that perceptions of gender and social roles are culturally influenced, but gender equality entails, in all contexts, the recognition, respect and promotion of equal rights for women, men and non-binary people (UN Women 2022).

All in all, *corruption* (or better yet, the fight against corruption through legal means), *effective governance* and *legal accountability* distinguish themselves as building blocks of SDG 16. At the same time, they represent key bond terms, without which synergies with other SDGs would not be possible—be those strong direct links, or indirect links of lesser strength, positive or negative. Therefore, for each individual sub-section in Section 3, which outlines the connections between SDG 16 and the remaining SDGs, the structure revolves around these terms. Properly outlining the SDGs in successive paragraphs, in the same order, aims at offering a consistent structure and concise comparative analysis of each individual case.

### *1.2. Legitimacy and Localization of the SDGs: Between Global Consensus and Contextual Adaptation*

The Sustainable Development Goals are not imposed by a supranational entity, but were consensually adopted by all 193 Member States of the United Nations at the 2015 Summit. Their legitimacy derives from the collective will to build a common agenda for global transformation, based on cooperation, equity and

respect for national sovereignty (UN General Assembly 2015). At the same time, the 2030 Agenda explicitly recognizes the need for local adaptation of the goals. This localization process (SDG localization) involves contextualizing global targets and translating them into public policies, strategies and measures that reflect the specificities of each country or region (UNDP n.d.; UCLG 2019). Thus, the SDGs do not represent a “one-size-fits-all” approach, but a flexible framework, intended to inspire and guide, not impose. Even in the case of SDG 16, the implementation of which depends largely on the level of political stability, legal traditions, trust in institutions or the conflict history of a state, the UN does not provide standardized recipes, but rather technical support, dialogue platforms and monitoring tools (UN DESA 2021).

Therefore, the implementation of the SDGs cannot be assimilated to a form of global neo-colonialism, but reflects a voluntary international commitment, based on partnership and the principle of common but differentiated responsibility (Sachs et al. 2024).

## **2. Materials and Methods**

The analysis presented in this study is based on a rigorous and systematic approach of all available sources, both peer-reviewed and gray literature. This methodology ensures an all-encompassing and objective assessment of the links between SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions and the other Sustainable Development Goals.

### *2.1. Data Sources*

A vast collection of relevant publications is identified, sourced from internationally recognized databases such as the Institute of Scientific Information (ISI), Web of Science’s Scientific Citation Index (SCI), Scopus and Google Scholar. These platforms were selected due to their wide accessibility and the high quality of the studies they host. In total, 43 references have been assessed, including both peer-reviewed scientific journal articles and gray literature reports. Out of the above-mentioned studies, four publications are written by the authors of this study, which further enhances the level of direct expertise on the present subject.

### *2.2. Keywords and Selection Criteria*

To ensure exhaustive coverage, the employed search process uses several relevant keywords such as “SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions”, “Sustainable Development Goals”, “governance and justice policies” and “challenges in implementing SDGs”. Selection criteria include relevance to SDG 16, addressing

inter-SDG connections and methodological quality of the studies. No specific time limit is imposed, which allows the inclusion of the most recent research on the matter, as well as fundamental research from previous years.

### *2.3. The Analysis Process*

The analysis is carried out in several stages. First, a preliminary review is performed, to exclude articles that do not meet the selection criteria. Subsequently, a detailed analysis of the content of each study is carried out, focusing on the identification of direct and indirect links between SDG 16 and the other SDGs. This involves examining the objectives, methodologies and findings of each study, to further identify relevant synergies and interdependencies.

### *2.4. Identification of Direct and Indirect Links*

Direct links are identified through the explicit analysis of the relationships mentioned in the texts studied. For example, where SDG 16 is directly linked to issues of justice, peace or strong institutions in relation to other SDGs, these connections are marked as direct. Indirect links, on the other hand, are inferred by analyzing synergies and common goals. Aspects such as sustainability, equity and access to resources serve as indicators for these connections.

### *2.5. Synthesis Methodology*

Once the direct and indirect links are identified, a synthesis methodology is applied to integrate the information into a coherent framework. This involves categorizing and structuring data according to its relevance and importance to SDG 16 and other SDGs. Through this approach, it is possible to highlight the central themes and points of intersection between the objectives, providing a clear picture of how SDG 16 contributes to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda as a whole.

### *2.6. Limitations and Methodological Considerations*

Despite our solid efforts for exhaustive coverage, there is a possibility that some relevant studies may have been left out, due to access limitations or selection criteria. Furthermore, the complexity of the synergies and interdependence analysis between the SDGs, which to a certain extent deal with and may vary according to the regional and national context, could influence our conclusions, which are meant to explain the phenomena in general, rather than being applied to isolated case studies.

However, through the above-mentioned detailed and rigorous methodology, this study provides an in-depth perspective on the links between SDG 16: Peace,

Justice and Strong Institutions and the other Sustainable Development Goals, highlighting their crucial role in achieving appropriate and equitable development on an international level.

### **3. Synergies and Links Between SDG 16 and Other SDGs**

Although the interdependencies between SDG 16 and the other goals of the 2030 Agenda reflect a holistic vision of sustainable development, in practice, the application of these interconnections can be challenging. In particular situations, prioritizing certain goals can be perceived as an external imposition, especially where participatory decision-making processes are weak or where public policies are directly influenced by international conditionalities. Thus, there is a risk that the 2030 Agenda will be perceived not only as a supporting framework but as a set of imposed norms, at the expense of local autonomy (Escobar 1995; Bexell and Jönsson 2017). This perception can lead to resistance, institutional distrust, or even the withdrawal of community support.

#### *3.1. Synergies and Links Between SDG 16 and SDG 1: No Poverty*

As poverty is often a root cause of instability and violence, the link between SDG 16 and SDG 1 deserves special attention. Strong institutions and effective governance can reduce poverty by promoting social justice and equitable access to resources (Franco and Derbyshire 2020; Küfeoğlu 2022; O'Reilly 2023). In the absence of robust institutions and a sound legal framework, vulnerable individuals and communities are more likely to be exploited and deprived of their fundamental rights.

Effective institutions play a crucial role in ensuring equity and equal access to resources and opportunities. These institutions must implement policies that protect property rights, provide legal aid and ensure access to basic services such as education and health (UN n.d.; International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance 2024). For example, protecting property rights may prevent the exploitation of poor people, ensuring a stable livelihood and reducing the risk of falling into extreme absolute poverty.

Corruption disproportionately affects the poor, diverting resources from public services and essential infrastructure. By fighting corruption and promoting transparency, strong institutions ensure that resources are distributed fairly and used effectively to reduce poverty (UN n.d.; International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance 2024). Effective governance also has the potential of enabling an environment for investment and economic development, providing job opportunities and economic growth for the people in need.



Access to justice also plays a central role in protecting the rights of poor people and ensuring social equity (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs Sustainable Development n.d.; UNICEF n.d.; UN n.d.). Strong judicial institutions should provide dispute resolution mechanisms and legal protection against abuse and exploitation. This includes free or affordable legal aid for people who cannot afford such costs, thus ensuring equal access to justice for all citizens.

In addition, strong institutions and effective governance can facilitate the implementation of social protection programs and other interventions aimed at reducing poverty. These may include cash transfers, food subsidies, vocational training programs and other measures that aim to support poor people in improving their living conditions and escaping poverty (Figure 1).

Therefore, the link between SDG 16 and SDG 1 is direct and decisive for achieving sustainable and equitable development. Strong institutions and effective governance not only promote stability and peace, but also contribute directly to poverty reduction by ensuring equity, protecting rights and facilitating access to resources and opportunities (Box 1).

**Box 1.** Enhancing institutional support for poverty alleviation.

- Kenya

The Kenyan government has implemented the Free Legal Aid Program to ensure access to justice for poor people. This program provides free legal services to individuals who cannot afford an attorney. The program has had a significant impact in protecting property rights and preventing the exploitation of vulnerable people. For example, in cases of land disputes, the program has helped poor farmers retain their properties and avoid illegal forced evictions. Through this program, judicial institutions have become more accessible and more correct, directly contributing to poverty reduction by protecting citizens' sources of income (State Law Office Kenya n.d.).

- Ghana

The Natural Resource Management Transparency Initiative (EITI) was introduced in Ghana to improve governance and ensure that natural resource revenues are used equitably and responsibly. This initiative promotes transparency in the collection and management of oil and mineral revenues, ensuring that funds are distributed fairly and benefit the entire population, including the poor. By reducing corruption and embezzlement, EITI has allowed more resources to be allocated to social development programs such as building schools and hospitals in rural communities. This has helped to improve living conditions and reduce poverty by providing essential services (Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative Ghana EITI n.d.).



**Figure 1.** Synergy between SDG 16 and SDG 1. Source: Figure by authors.

### 3.2. Synergies and Links Between SDG 16 and SDG 2: Zero Hunger

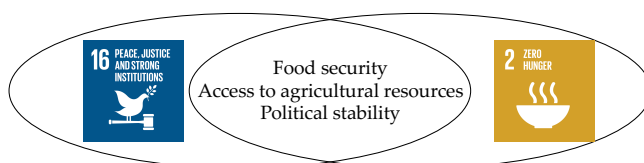
The link between SDG 16 and SDG 2 is essential to ensuring global food security. Stability and peace are crucial to food security, as conflict and poor governance can lead to hunger and malnutrition by disrupting supply chains and destroying agricultural infrastructure (UN n.d.; International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance 2024). This is even more obvious for conflict zones, where agriculture is often disrupted and farmers are unable to plant or harvest crops, leading to severe food shortages.

Strong institutions play a vital role in ensuring equitable access to food and the resources needed for food production (The Global Goals n.d.; UNDP n.d.). By promoting social justice and equity, these institutions can implement policies that support farmers and rural communities by ensuring their access to land, water and other essential resources. For example, policies that protect farmers' property rights can prevent forced expropriations and provide the stability needed for investment in agriculture.

As in the previous case, the common denominator between SDG 16 and SDG 2 is the fight against corruption. Corruption in the agricultural sector often leads to the diversion of resources intended for food security programs and inefficiencies in the distribution of food aid. By promoting transparency and accountability, strong institutions can ensure that resources are distributed fairly and reach those who need them most (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs Sustainable Development n.d.; Balan et al. 2024; UN n.d.).

In order to protect farmers' rights and ensure a fair business environment against unlawful practices in the agricultural sector, legal accountability is paramount. Strong judicial institutions can provide mechanisms for resolving land and water disputes, preventing conflict and ensuring the stability needed for food production (The Global Goals n.d.; UN n.d.). Legal aid for farmers facing illegal expropriation or other abuse is crucial to maintaining food security.

Effective governance can facilitate the implementation of food assistance programs and other interventions to combat hunger. These may include food subsidies, child nutrition programs and other measures to support vulnerable communities in securing the necessary food (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Synergy between SDG 16 and SDG 2. Source: Figure by authors.

Based on the above considerations, it is concluded that the link between SDG 16 and SDG 2 is direct and crucial to achieving global food security. Strong institutions and effective governance directly contribute to reducing hunger by ensuring equity, protecting rights and facilitating access to resources and opportunities in the agricultural sector (Box 2).

**Box 2.** Governance and food security: Ensuring access and stability.

- Sudan

In Sudan, the farmer assistance programs were implemented to support farmers affected by conflict and political instability. This program provides financial and technical assistance to restore agricultural infrastructure and improve access to markets. The program also includes measures to protect farmers' property rights, preventing illegal expropriations and ensuring the stability needed for food production (FAO The Sudan 2024; WFP Sudan 2024).

- Colombia

In Colombia, The Partners for Transparency was launched to ensure that resources allocated including to the agricultural sector are used efficiently and fairly. This initiative promotes transparency in the distribution of agricultural subsidies and the implementation of food assistance programs. By reducing corruption, the initiative allowed more resources to reach small farmers and vulnerable communities, helping to improve food security and reduce hunger (USAID 2020).

### 3.3. Synergies and Links Between SDG 16 and SDG 3: Good Health and Well-Being

For any social setting to benefit from an effective and equitable public health system, peace, justice and strong institutions are key factors. This statement is especially valid, as conflict and corruption can severely affect health systems, preventing access to health services and medicine (The Global Goals n.d.; UN n.d.).

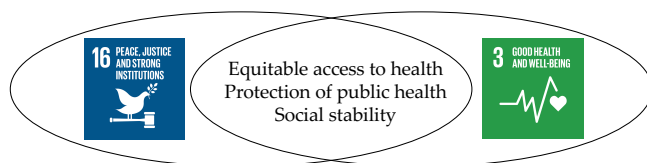
As far as conflict zones are concerned, health infrastructure is often destroyed or requisitioned, while medical personnel may be forced to depart or join the combatant forces, leaving communities without access to essential medical care.

Unassailable institutions play a crucial role in developing and maintaining resilient health systems (UN n.d.; International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance 2024). By promoting justice and responsible governance, these institutions can ensure that resources are distributed equitably and that all citizens have access to quality health care. Obviously, policies that ensure universal access to health care and protect patients' rights can significantly improve public health.

The potential damage of corruption for this SDG linkage, again cannot be ignored, as corruption in the health sector can easily lead to misappropriation of funds intended for medical services and inefficiencies in the provision of medicine and equipment. Only through transparency and accountability, can strong institutions ensure that health funds are used correctly and that health services reach all who need them.

Access to justice is also a recurring theme, essential for protecting patients' rights and ensuring a fair healthcare system. Strong judicial institutions need to provide mechanisms to resolve malpractice disputes and access to health care, ensuring that patients receive the right treatment and that their rights are protected. Legal aid for people experiencing abuse in the health care system is crucial to maintaining public confidence in the health care system (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance 2024; UN n.d.).

Finally, effective governance can facilitate the implementation of public health programs and other interventions designed to improve health and well-being. These may include vaccination campaigns, disease prevention programs and other measures to support vulnerable communities in accessing needed health care (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Synergy between SDG 16 and SDG 3. Source: Figure by authors.

The link between SDG 16 and SDG 3 is another good example of a direct and crucial association meant to achieve an effective and equitable public health system. Strong institutions and effective governance contribute directly to improving health and well-being by ensuring equity, protecting rights and facilitating access to health resources and services (Box 3).

**Box 3. Institutional strengthening for public health and well-being.**

- Sierra Leone

In Sierra Leone, the Health System Strengthening Program was implemented to improve health infrastructure and ensure access to quality health services. This program provides financial and technical assistance to rebuild conflict-affected hospitals and clinics, and to train medical personnel. The program also promotes transparency and accountability in the management of health funds, ensuring that resources are used efficiently and that medical services reach those who need them most (Solthis 2019).

- Honduras

The public health and social justice initiative was launched in Honduras to ensure that all citizens have access to quality health care. This initiative promotes transparency in the distribution of health resources and the implementation of public health programs. By reducing corruption and promoting equity, the initiative has enabled improved access to medical services for vulnerable communities, contributing to the improvement of the general health and well-being of the population (Johnson 2010; Reifsnider et al. 2021).

*3.4. Synergies and Links Between SDG 16 and SDG 4: Quality Education*

Education is a fundamental right that is promoted through effective justice and institutions. Peaceful and stable societies enable the development of strong education systems that ensure access to quality education for all children (UN n.d.; International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance 2024). In the absence of peace and robust institutions, education systems are often negatively affected, leading to inequality and exclusion.

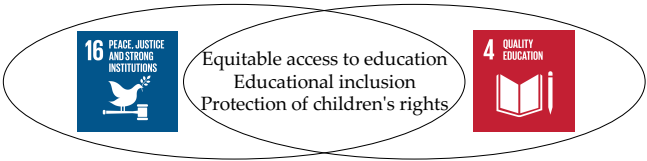
Responsible institutions play a vital role in supporting inclusion and reducing inequalities in education. Such institutions implement policies that ensure equal access to education for all children, regardless of gender, race, socio-economic status or geographic location (The Global Goals n.d.; UN n.d.; International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance 2024). For example, policies that support education for girls and minorities can significantly contribute to reducing inequalities and promoting equity in education.

It has already been established that corruption leads to the inequitable allocation of resources in general, with the public educational system being no exception to this corollary (UN n.d.). In this sector, corruption leads to the low quality of educational infrastructure and the inequitable distribution of educational opportunities. By promoting transparency and accountability, strong institutions can ensure that education funds are used correctly and that resources reach all pupils and students.

Furthermore, a fair educational system is also dependent on unhindered access to justice. Strong judicial institutions aid the resolve of disputes related

to discrimination and access to education, ensuring that all children have access to quality education. Legal aid for people experiencing abuse or discrimination in the education system is crucial to maintaining equity and inclusion (UNICEF n.d.; Salmon et al. 2024).

An effective administration can facilitate better educational programs and other interventions aimed at improving access and the quality of education. These acts may include, and are not limited to teacher training programs, development of school infrastructure and other measures to support vulnerable communities in accessing quality education, etc. (UNICEF n.d.; Salmon et al. 2024) (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** Synergy between SDG 16 and SDG 4. Source: Figure by authors.

Taking the above factors into consideration, the link between SDG 16 and SDG 4 is direct and crucial for achieving an equitable and effective education system. Strong institutions and effective governance contribute directly to improving education and ensuring equal access to educational opportunities for all children (Box 4).

**Box 4.** Building robust education systems through strong governance.

- Nigeria

In Nigeria, the National Program for Girls’ Education was implemented to ensure access to education for girls in the rural and poor communities. This program provides scholarships, educational resources and logistical support to encourage girls’ enrollment and retention in school. The program also promotes policies of inclusion and equity in education, ensuring that girls benefit from the same educational opportunities as boys (UNICEF 2022).
- Peru

A transparency and equity in education initiative was launched in Peru to fight corruption and ensure the efficient use of education funds. This initiative promotes transparency in the allocation of educational resources and the implementation of school programs. By reducing corruption and promoting accountability, the initiative has improved access to quality education for all children, especially those from disadvantaged communities (Felicio and John-Abraham 2004; Saavedra and Gutierrez 2020).

3.5. Synergies and Links Between SDG 16 and SDG 5: Gender Equality

The link between SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions and SDG 5: Gender Equality is crucial for promoting the rights of women and girls and ensuring a just society. While in this case a direct link is not easily established, stability and strong institutions play a critical role in eliminating gender-based discrimination and violence. Responsible institutions can enact laws and policies that protect women’s rights and ensure their full and effective participation in all aspects of social, economic and political life (The Global Goals n.d.; UN n.d.; International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance 2024).

Stability and peace contribute to the creation of an enabling environment for the promotion of gender equality. Conflict and political instability further the gap in gender inequalities, where women and girls are often affected the most. Strong institutions and social justice can help reduce these inequalities by ensuring legal protection and equal access to resources and opportunities (UN n.d.; UNDP n.d.). For example, laws that protect women’s property rights and their access to education and healthcare plans can have a significant impact on gender equality.

An important aspect of the link between SDG 16 and SDG 5 is combating violence against women. Impartial judicial institutions can ensure that cases of gender-based violence are properly investigated and tried, and that victims receive support and protection (UNICEF n.d.; International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance 2024; UN n.d.). These institutions can also implement violence prevention programs and promote changes in attitude at a social level, to combat gender stereotypes and discrimination.

Mixing corruption with a one-sided, patriarchal society, can lead to the inequitable allocation of resources and the exclusion of women from decision-making processes. By promoting transparency and accountability, strong institutions can ensure that resources and opportunities are distributed fairly and that women and girls enjoy the same rights and opportunities as men (Figure 5).

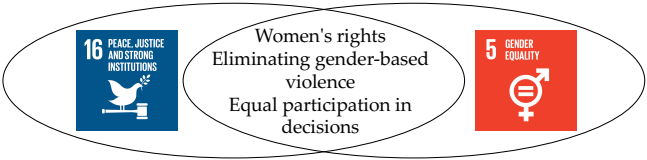


Figure 5. Synergy between SDG 16 and SDG 5. Source: Figure by authors.

Finally, the link between SDG 16 and SDG 5 remains an indirect one, but essential nonetheless for achieving a fair and inclusive society. Strong institutions and effective governance indirectly contribute to the promotion of gender equality by ensuring legal protection, combating violence and ensuring equal access to resources and opportunities (Box 5).

**Box 5.** Gender equality through justice and institutional support.

- Rwanda

In Rwanda, the National Gender Equality Program was implemented to promote women's rights and ensure their participation in all aspects of public and private life. This program includes legislative and policy measures that protect women's rights to property, education and health, as well as initiatives to prevent and combat gender-based violence. The program also promotes women's participation in decision-making processes, ensuring their equal access to resources and opportunities (UNDP 2023).

- India

The Justice and Gender Equality Initiative was launched in India to combat violence against women and promote their rights. This initiative promotes transparency and accountability in the judicial system, ensuring that cases of gender-based violence are properly investigated and tried. The initiative also includes public awareness and education programs to change discriminatory attitudes and behaviors towards women and girls (Ministry of Women and Child Development India 2023).

*3.6. Synergies and Links Between SDG 16 and SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation*

The link between peace, justice and strong institutions and the capability of maintaining a suitable management of water resources and the provision of adequate sanitation services is evident. Although this link is rather indirect, the influence of strong institutions and effective governance on equitable access to clean water and sanitation is significant. Corruption and poor management can lead to inequalities in access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation systems, which underlines the importance of transparency and accountability promoted by SDG 16 (The Global Goals n.d.; UN n.d.; International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance 2024).

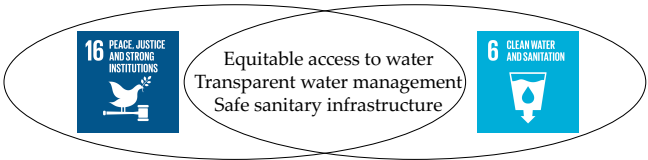
Without question, corruption can affect the distribution of water and sanitation resources, leading to the inequitable allocation and exclusion of vulnerable communities. Therefore, SDG 16 supports equitable access to clean water and sanitation for all. Responsible institutions play a crucial role in ensuring that funds for the development of water and sanitation infrastructure are used effectively and that resources reach those who need them most (The Global Goals n.d.; International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance 2024; UN n.d.).



For example, implementing strict monitoring and auditing policies can reduce the risk of misappropriation of funds and ensure an equitable distribution of resources.

The fight against corruption is futile in the absence of proper access to justice and strong judicial institutions, in as far as protecting citizens’ rights to access to clean water and sanitation. Strong judicial institutions can provide mechanisms to resolve disputes over access to water resources and the provision of sanitation services, ensuring that all citizens have access to these essential resources (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance 2024; UN n.d.). Legal aid for communities facing exclusion from access to safe drinking water and sanitation is crucial to maintaining equity and inclusion.

Overall, effective governance can facilitate the implementation of water and sanitation infrastructure development programs and other interventions aimed at improving access and quality of these services. These may include investment programs in water infrastructure, training of water resource management personnel and other measures to support vulnerable communities in accessing clean water and adequate sanitation (Figure 6).



**Figure 6.** Synergy between SDG 16 and SDG 6. Source: Figure by authors.

In the end, the link between SDG 16 and SDG 6 is indirect but essential to achieving equitable access to clean water and sanitation for all. Strong institutions and effective governance indirectly contribute to improving access to water and sanitation by ensuring equity, protecting rights and facilitating access to essential resources and services (Box 6).

**Box 6.** Governance for equitable access to water and sanitation.

- Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, the Sustainable Water Resource Management Program was implemented to ensure access to clean water and sanitation for rural communities. This program promotes transparency and accountability in the management of water resources, ensuring that funds are used efficiently and that water and sanitation services are accessible to all. The program also includes measures to train water resource management and water quality monitoring personnel to prevent contamination (Ministry of Water Resources, Government of Bangladesh 1999).

- Uganda

The Transparency and Equitable Access to Water Initiative was launched in Uganda to fight corruption and ensure the equitable distribution of water resources. This initiative promotes transparency in the allocation of funds for water and sanitation infrastructure and the implementation of infrastructure development programs. By reducing corruption and promoting accountability, the initiative has improved access to clean water and sanitation for vulnerable communities, helping to improve public health and quality of life (IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre 2024).

*3.7. Synergies and Links Between SDG 16 and SDG 7: Clean and Affordable Energy*

Like the case of clean water and sanitation, SDG 16 is closely related to and of high importance for providing clean and affordable energy. Access to clean and affordable energy is essential for sustainable development, and strong institutions and effective governance play an important role in supporting the development and implementation of sustainable energy policies, even if the link between the two is rather indirect. Fighting corruption and promoting transparency in the energy sector are paramount to ensuring fair access to energy resources (The Global Goals n.d.; UN n.d.).

Corruption in the energy sector most often leads to the inequitable allocation of resources and increased costs for consumers. Strong institutions can promote transparency and accountability, ensuring that energy resources are managed efficiently and fairly. By fairly this means the adoption of strategies that encourage investment in renewable energy sources and the equitable distribution of energy to vulnerable communities or governance models that promote effectiveness in reducing inequality. Furthermore, effective institutions have the capacity to ensure that investments in energy infrastructure are made correctly and that resources are used for the benefit of the entire population, and not just a restrictive corporate beneficiary—as often corruption and wealthy private sector entities are closely linked. Lastly, effective governance should not overlook the need for renewable energy

subsidy programs, energy efficiency initiatives and other measures to support the transition to clean and affordable energy sources (Figure 7).



**Figure 7.** Synergy between SDG 16 and SDG 7. Source: Figure by authors.

The protection of consumer rights in the energy sector falls under the responsibility of a judicial system that properly enforces the above-mentioned policies, in as far as resolving disputes related to energy supply or energy prices and ensuring that all consumers have access to clean and affordable energy. Legal aid for communities facing exclusion from access to energy or unfair energy tariffs is also crucial to maintaining equity and inclusion (The Global Goals n.d.; UN n.d.).

All in all, the link between SDG 16 and SDG 7 is indirect, but essential for achieving equitable access to clean and affordable energy. Strong institutions and effective governance indirectly contribute to improving energy access by ensuring equity, protecting rights and facilitating access to sustainable energy resources (Box 7).

**Box 7.** Sustainable energy access supported by strong institutions.

<div><div>- Nepal</div><div>In Nepal, the Rural Energy Development Program was implemented to ensure access to clean and affordable energy in rural communities. This program promotes transparency and accountability in the management of energy resources, ensuring that funds are used efficiently and that renewable energy is accessible to all. The program also includes measures to train staff to manage energy resources and monitor energy quality to prevent corruption and ensure fair distribution (Energypedia 2018).</div></div> <div><div>- Ghana</div><div>The Transparency and Equitable Access to Energy Initiative was launched in Ghana to fight corruption and ensure the equitable distribution of energy resources. This initiative promotes transparency in the allocation of funds for energy infrastructure and the implementation of sustainable energy programs. By reducing corruption and promoting accountability, the initiative has enabled improved access to clean and affordable energy for vulnerable communities, contributing to improved quality of life and sustainable development (Republic of Ghana. Ministry of Energy 2021).</div></div>
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### 3.8. Synergies and Links Between SDG 16 and SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth

Sustainable economic growth represents the cornerstone goal that influences the behavior of all rational people. As many neoclassical and modern economic theories have indicated, achieving this goal is rarely possible without government intervention. To this end the link with SDG16 is direct and essential for sustainable economic and social development, where peace and strong institutions are fundamental to overall growth and the creation of decent jobs. Political stability and effective governance contribute to limiting externalities and building credibility that attracts investment through the development of a favorable business environment. Without a robust legal and institutional framework, the business environment is often defined by instability, with corruption and inefficiency hindering economic growth and the development of fair jobs on the labor market (The Global Goals n.d.; UN n.d.; International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance 2024).

Fighting corruption is probably the aspect of the highest importance in examining the link SDG 16 and SDG 8. Corruption in the economic sector, in the form of unregulated lobby and catering for a small number of interest groups, leads to the inequitable allocation of resources and increasing inequalities (The Global Goals n.d., UN n.d.). While the laissez-faire culture in some countries may be deeply rooted in the social fabric, strong institutions, through transparency and accountability, can aid the invisible hand towards a better resource allocation, in a setup where all companies and employees benefit from a fair and balanced business environment.

Legal accountability is the sole factor that can provide mechanisms to resolve labor disputes, ensuring that employees and employers have access to fair and equitable justice (Franco and Derbyshire 2020; Küfeoğlu 2022; O'Reilly 2023). Legal aid for workers facing exploitation or discrimination in the workplace is crucial to maintaining fairness and inclusion in the labor sector (Figure 8).



**Figure 8.** Synergy between SDG 16 and SDG 8. Source: Figure by authors.

An effective establishment plays a crucial role in promoting labor rights and ensuring social protection for all employees. Fair working conditions, decent wages and protection against exploitation can only be achieved should the delegated institutions act properly upon their authority (International Institute for Democracy

and Electoral Assistance 2024; UN n.d.). For example, laws regulating working hours, price ceilings for wages and safe working conditions are essential to protect workers' rights and promote decent labor. Lastly, effective governance is another key ingredient that aids economic growth through economic development programs and other interventions designed to improve working conditions. These may include, but are not limited to, vocational training programs, initiatives to support entrepreneurship and other measures to support the creation of decent jobs and sustainable economic growth (Box 8).

**Box 8.** Promoting economic growth and decent work through governance.

<p>- Germany</p> <p>In Germany, the National Program for Decent Work was implemented to ensure fair working conditions and promote labor rights. This program includes legislative and policy measures that protect the rights of employees to decent wages, safe working conditions and social protection. The program also promotes transparency and accountability in the labor sector, ensuring that all companies comply with regulations and that employees benefit from fair working conditions (Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development of Germany 2024).</p>
<p>- Ethiopia</p> <p>The Economic Growth and Decent Work Initiative was launched in Ethiopia to support economic development and create quality jobs. This initiative promotes transparency in the management of economic resources and the implementation of economic development programs. By reducing corruption and promoting accountability, the initiative has enabled improved working conditions and economic growth, contributing to the creation of a favorable and fair business environment (International Labor Organization 2021).</p>

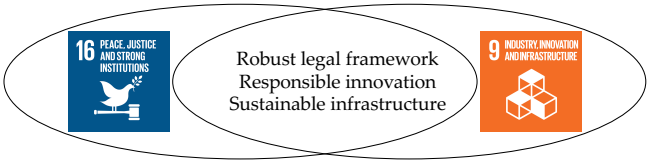
### 3.9. *Synergies and Links Between SDG 16 and SDG 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure*

SDG 9 is somewhat a natural continuation of SDG 8, since industry, innovation and infrastructure are key to ensuring sustainable economic development. In contrast with the previous synergy, SDG 16 bears an indirect link with SDG 9, however. Industrial development and innovation require a robust legal and institutional framework. While it is recognized that effective institutions and responsible governance support the development of infrastructure and technological innovations essential for sustainable economic growth, corruption and political instability can hinder industrial development and infrastructure investment. This further supports the claim that the link remains indirect (The Global Goals n.d.; UN n.d.; International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance 2024).

Granted that responsible institutions can implement policies that encourage investment in technology and infrastructure, ensuring the equitable distribution of benefits to all segments of society, corruption in the industrial and infrastructure sector can lead to the inefficient allocation of resources, increased costs and delays in project implementation (Küfeoğlu 2022; O'Reilly 2023; UN n.d.). Therefore, where strong institutions may directly support economic growth, corruption affecting the industrial sector indirectly slows down progress. This process can be better mitigated by promoting justice and transparency, as strong institutions, corroborated with efficient governance, can help reduce inequalities in access to infrastructure and technology. Further making institutions more effective may also ensure that investments in industrial infrastructure are made correctly and that resources are used for the benefit of the entire population.

The judicial system is essential to protecting not only union and employee interests (as previously shown) but also investors' rights, and to ensuring a fair business environment. Proper judicial institutions can provide mechanisms to resolve disputes related to industrial development and infrastructure investment, ensuring that all participants in the economic process have access to fair and equitable justice (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs Sustainable Development n.d.; McDermott et al. 2019; O'Reilly 2023). Legal assistance for companies facing unfair practices or corruption in the industrial sector is another important issue that reduces inclusion in the economic sector, and that can be overcome only through an impartial court system.

The role of public institutions in meeting the goal of SDG 9 successfully may range from facilitating the adoption of industrial policies, to other interventions aimed at improving infrastructure and promoting innovation. These may include technology grant programs, industrial efficiency initiatives and other measures to support the sustainable development of the industrial sector (Figure 9).



**Figure 9.** Synergy between SDG 16 and SDG 9. Source: Figure by authors.

In the end the link between SDG 16 and SDG 9 remains indirect but equally important for achieving sustainable and equitable industrial development and infrastructure. Strong institutions and effective governance indirectly contribute

to the improvement of the industrial and infrastructure sector by ensuring equity, protecting rights and facilitating access to technological and infrastructure resources (Box 9).

**Box 9.** Innovation and infrastructure development through effective institutions.

- Vietnam

The Vietnam Industry Innovation and Research program was implemented to support the development of the industrial sector and the promotion of technological innovations. This program promotes transparency and accountability in the management of industrial resources, ensuring that funds are used efficiently and that technological innovations are accessible to all. The program also includes measures to train staff and monitor the implementation of industrial projects to prevent corruption and ensure the fair distribution of benefits (Vietnam Industry Innovation Research 2023).

- Kenya

The Transparency and Infrastructure Development initiative was launched in Kenya to fight corruption and ensure equitable distribution of infrastructure resources. This initiative promotes transparency in the allocation of funds for infrastructure projects and the implementation of industrial development programs. By reducing corruption and promoting accountability, the initiative has improved access to modern infrastructure and technological innovations, contributing to the sustainable economic development of the country (Word Bank Group 2014).

*3.10. Synergies and Links Between SDG 16 and SDG 10: Reducing Inequalities*

Shifting from the economic sector to a more generic UN goal, attention is drawn to the direct link between SDG 16 and the SDG aimed at reducing inequalities. This bears a high importance for ensuring sustainable and equitable development—especially on the topics of justice and strong institutions. Discrimination and social inequities are amplified in the absence of a solid legal and institutional framework (The Global Goals n.d.; UN n.d.; International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance 2024). Therefore, policies that promote equity and equal access to resources and opportunities are essential to reducing inequalities and ensuring sustainable development (McDermott et al. 2019; Salmon et al. 2024). For example, policies that ensure equal access to education, health and jobs are the work of strong institutions that are responsible for significantly reducing inequalities and promoting social equity.

Oftentimes the dishonest and fraudulent behavior of those in power can lead to the inequitable allocation of resources and the exclusion of vulnerable groups from the decision-making processes. By promoting transparency and accountability,

legal aid and access to an equitable justice system, strong institutions can ensure that resources and opportunities are distributed fairly and that all social groups enjoy the same rights and opportunities (Figure 10).



**Figure 10.** Synergy between SDG 16 and SDG 10. Source: Figure by authors.

An important aspect of the link between SDG 16 and SDG 10 is the fight against discrimination and social exclusion. Strong judicial institutions can ensure that all cases of discrimination are properly investigated and judged and that victims receive support and protection. It is also within the range of these institutions to implement anti-discrimination programs and promote changes in society's status quo attitude towards opposing stereotypes and inequities (The Global Goals n.d.; UN n.d.; International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance 2024).

Overall, it can be concluded that the link between SDG 16 and SDG 10 is direct and crucial to achieving a fair and inclusive society. Strong institutions and effective governance contribute directly to reducing inequalities by ensuring equity, protecting rights and facilitating access to resources and opportunities for all citizens (Box 10).

**Box 10.** Reducing inequalities with fair and just institutions.

- Brazil

In Brazil, the National Program for Social Inclusion was implemented to reduce inequalities and promote social equity. This program includes legislative and policy measures that protect the rights of minorities and vulnerable groups, ensuring their access to education, health and jobs. The program also promotes transparency and accountability in the allocation of resources, ensuring that all social groups benefit from the same opportunities and rights (Botelho 2018).

- South Africa

The Equity and Social Justice Initiative was launched in South Africa to combat discrimination and social exclusion. This initiative promotes transparency and accountability in the judicial system, ensuring that all cases of discrimination are properly investigated and adjudicated. The initiative also includes public awareness and education programs to change discriminatory attitudes and behaviors towards vulnerable groups and to promote social equity (Social Justice Initiative n.d.).



### *3.11. Synergies and Links Between SDG 16 and SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities*

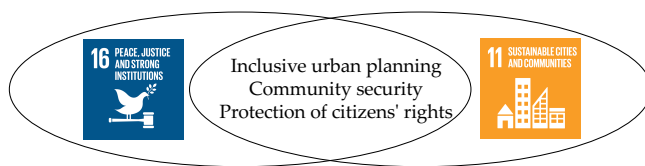
The link between SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions and SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities is crucial to ensuring sustainable urban development but is essentially an indirect one. Sustainable urban development requires effective governance and accountable institutions. Fair and transparent urban planning, as well as policies that support social inclusion and environmental protection, are crucial for the development of sustainable urban environments (The Global Goals n.d.; UN n.d.; O'Reilly 2023).

Fair and transparent urban planning based on policies and regulations that support the development of sustainable infrastructure, affordable housing, and efficient public transportation should be a determining factor for effective governance (The Global Goals n.d.; UN n.d.; UNDP n.d.). For example, policies that protect green spaces and ensure access to basic services for all urban dwellers can significantly contribute to the sustainable development of cities.

Unlawful practices in urban planning and development are a mundane matter of fact that can be limited only through strong institutions. These phenomena can lead to the inequitable allocation of resources, the construction of poor-quality infrastructure and the exclusion of vulnerable groups from the urban development process. Therefore, transparency and accountability, promoted through the proper channels, have a direct link with sustainable and inclusive city development. A strong judicial system, with independent institutions, can further aid the goal of solving urban development disputes, ensuring that all communities have access to fair and equitable justice. Legal aid for people facing illegal expropriation, forced evictions or other abuses is crucial to maintaining equity and inclusion in cities (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance 2024; UNDP n.d.).

The implementation of sustainable urban development programs and other initiatives to enhance the quality of life in cities may stem from the engagement of professional civil servants who are continuously updated on innovations and best practices. This could be further amplified by investment programs in green infrastructure, energy efficiency initiatives, and other measures to support the sustainable development of urban communities (Figure 11).

Therefore, the link between SDG 16 and SDG 11 is indirect but essential to achieving sustainable cities and communities. Strong institutions and effective governance indirectly contribute to sustainable urban development by ensuring equity, protecting rights and facilitating access to essential resources and services (Box 11).



**Figure 11.** Synergy between SDG 16 and SDG 11. Source: Figure by authors.

**Box 11.** Urban sustainability through governance and institutional accountability.

<p>- India</p> <p>In India, the National Sustainable Urban Development Program has been implemented to support the development of sustainable cities. This program promotes transparency and accountability in urban planning, ensuring that funds are used efficiently and that urban infrastructure is accessible to all. The program also includes measures to protect green spaces and improve public transport to support social inclusion and environmental protection (UNEP n.d.).</p> <p>- South Africa</p> <p>The Transparency and Urban Development Initiative was launched in South Africa to fight corruption and ensure the equitable distribution of urban development resources. This initiative promotes transparency in the allocation of funds for urban infrastructure projects and the implementation of urban development programs. By reducing corruption and promoting accountability, the initiative has improved the quality of life in South African cities, contributing to the sustainable and inclusive development of urban communities (South Africa Government 1997).</p>
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### 3.12. Synergies and Links Between SDG 16 and SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production

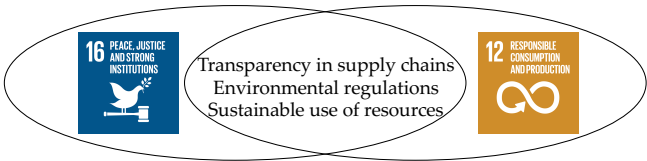
A less obvious, indirect link is the case of peace, justice and strong institutions to responsible consumption and production. While certain limitations on consumption and production could be beneficial for promoting economic and environmental sustainability, the role of responsible governance and strong institutions is limited in as far as regulating consumption and production practices in a free market environment (Balan et al. 2022; Trasca et al. 2024). While the above-mentioned practices have limited direct capabilities, tackling corruption and lack of transparency, which can lead to inefficient and unsustainable use of resources, which in turn undermines the importance of transparency and accountability promoted by SDG 16, may be the first step in the field of regulation (O'Reilly 2023; UN n.d.).

Furthermore, proactive institutions may play a crucial role in implementing and monitoring public policies that promote responsible consumption and production through acts regarding waste management, natural resource use and sustainable

production standards (The Global Goals n.d.; UN n.d.; UNDP n.d.). For example, policies that support recycling, waste reduction and efficient use of resources can significantly contribute to promoting a sustainable and equitable economic model, even if the government’s intervention is not directly aiming for consumption and production limitations.

Strong judicial institutions can provide mechanisms to resolve disputes related to unsustainable business practices and consumer protection, ensuring that all interested parties have access to fair and equitable justice. Once more, legal assistance for individuals and organizations facing unfair or unsustainable business practices, or price or quality discrimination, is crucial to maintaining fairness and sustainability in the economy (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance 2024; UNDP n.d.).

A proper exercise of authority with regard to SDG 12 means a proper education of the public and promotion of responsible consumption and production practices (McDermott et al. 2019; Salmon et al. 2024). Awareness campaigns on the impact of unsustainable consumption, initiatives to promote green products and other measures to support the transition to a sustainable economic model are just a few government actions that may influence and limit irresponsible consumption and production (Figure 12).



**Figure 12.** Synergy between SDG 16 and SDG 12. Source: Figure by authors.

The link between SDG 16 and SDG 12 remains indirect, in our view, but nonetheless essential for achieving responsible consumption and production. Strong institutions and effective governance indirectly contribute to promoting economic sustainability by ensuring equity, protecting rights and facilitating access to sustainable resources and practices (Box 12).

**Box 12.** Ensuring responsible consumption and production via strong governance.

- Sweden

In Sweden, the National Program for Sustainable Consumption and Production has been implemented to promote responsible and sustainable economic practices. This program includes legislative and policy measures that support recycling, waste reduction and efficient use of natural resources. The program also promotes transparency and accountability in supply chains, ensuring that all products and production processes meet sustainability standards (The Swedish Development Forum 2022).

- Chile

The Transparency and Sustainability in Production Initiative was launched in Chile to fight corruption and promote responsible production practices. This initiative promotes transparency in the management of natural resources and production processes, ensuring that funds are used efficiently and that production practices are sustainable. By reducing corruption and promoting accountability, the initiative has improved economic sustainability and quality of life in local communities (OECD/UN 2018; International Climate Initiative 2021).

*3.13. Synergies and Links Between SDG 16 and SDG 13: Climate Actions*

Tackling climate change requires strong institutions and effective governance. Enforcing environmental protection policies and the promotion of climate action are facilitated by political stability and a robust legal framework. Responsible institutions play a crucial role in ensuring compliance with international climate change agreements and implementing the necessary measures to reduce carbon emissions. However, the link between SDG 16 and SDG 13 is indirect, as the success of climate action depends on a wide range of factors, including scientific, economic and technological variables, in addition to the institutional and legal framework. To this end, only strong institutions can ensure that environmental regulations are followed and that carbon reduction measures are effectively implemented. For example, responsible institutions can oversee compliance with industrial emissions regulations and promote the use of renewable energy sources (The Global Goals n.d.; UN n.d.; International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance 2024; UNDP n.d.).

While this may be counter intuitive, an important aspect regarding the link between SDG 16 and SDG 13 is the fight against corruption in the environmental sector. Corruption can undermine efforts to protect the environment and reduce carbon emissions by diverting funds for environmental projects and relaxing environmental regulations. By promoting transparency and accountability, regulatory and overseeing institutions can ensure that resources are used efficiently and that climate policies are implemented correctly.

Government intervention is vital for coordinating national and international efforts to combat climate change. Strong institutions can facilitate cooperation between different levels of government and between different economic sectors, ensuring an integrated and coherent approach to climate policies. They can also support the development of climate change adaptation and risk management strategies. In addition, effective governance can facilitate the implementation of programs to educate the public and promote climate action. These may include awareness campaigns on the impact of climate change, initiatives to promote green energy and other measures to support the transition to a low-carbon economy (Figure 13).



**Figure 13.** Synergy between SDG 16 and SDG 13. Source: Figure by authors.

While SDG 16 and SDG 13 are indirectly linked, the two goals, aligned to one another, are crucial for achieving effective climate action. Strong institutions and effective governance indirectly contribute to combating climate change by ensuring equity, protecting rights, and facilitating access to resources and environmental protection measures (Box 13).

**Box 13.** Climate action supported by robust institutions.

- Norway

In Norway, the National Program for Climate Action has been implemented to support efforts to reduce carbon emissions and promote renewable energy. This program includes legislative and policy measures that support the transition to a green economy and the reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. The program also promotes transparency and accountability in the management of natural resources, ensuring that all environmental protection measures are respected (Norwegian Ministry of Climate and Environment 2021).

- Indonesia

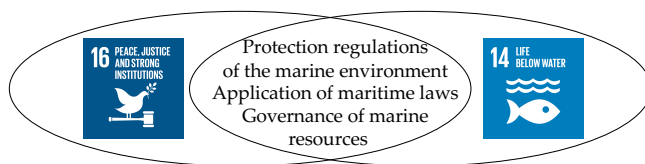
The Transparency and Climate Action Initiative was launched in Indonesia to fight corruption and promote effective measures to combat climate change. This initiative promotes transparency in the allocation of funds for environmental projects and the implementation of climate policies. By reducing corruption and promoting accountability, the initiative has improved sustainability and quality of life in local communities, helping to reduce the impact of climate change (Ministry of Environment and Forestry Indonesia 2023).

### *3.14. Synergies and Links Between SDG 16 and SDG 14: Life Below Water*

SDG 14 is a natural subgenre to the environmental goals, and like SDG 13 it has a direct and essential link to SDG 16, in as far as protecting marine ecosystems and the sustainable use of marine resources. Protecting marine ecosystems requires strong institutions and effective governance that promotes policies and regulations aimed at the conservation of underwater life. Overall, the role of responsible strong institutions is ensuring the enforcement of international laws and agreements on the protection of the marine environment. They can ensure that environmental regulations are upheld and that measures to conserve marine biodiversity are implemented effectively, such as compliance with sustainable fishing regulations and promoting the protection of critical habitats for various marine species (The Global Goals n.d.; UN n.d.; International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance 2024; UNDP n.d.).

Corruption is a phenomenon that can severely undermine efforts to protect the marine environment by diverting funds for environmental projects and relaxing environmental regulations. By promoting transparency and accountability, strong institutions can further ensure that marine resources are used efficiently and sustainably, and that policies to protect underwater life are properly implemented. The accessibility of a strong judicial system is not only of use in the fight against corruption but is also essential for protecting the rights of coastal communities. Strong judicial institutions can provide mechanisms to resolve disputes related to the use of marine resources and the protection of the marine environment, ensuring that all interested parties have access to fair and equitable justice. Legal assistance for individuals and communities facing negative impacts on the marine environment is crucial to maintaining equity and sustainability.

Exercising authority and proper resource management is vital for coordinating national and international efforts to protect marine ecosystems. Strong institutions can facilitate cooperation between different levels of government and between different economic sectors, ensuring an integrated and coherent approach to marine environmental protection policies. They can also support the development of strategies for managing marine resources and adapting to the impact of climate change on the oceans. Effective governance through education, once again, may prove instrumental in raising awareness amongst the public and promoting marine environmental protection practices. These may include awareness campaigns on the impact of unsustainable fishing, initiatives to protect marine habitats and other measures to support the conservation of marine biodiversity (Figure 14).



**Figure 14.** Synergy between SDG 16 and SDG 14. Source: Figure by authors.

The link between SDG 16 and SDG 14 is direct and crucial to achieving the protection of underwater life. Strong institutions and effective governance directly contribute to the conservation of marine ecosystems by ensuring equity, protecting rights and facilitating access to resources and measures to protect the marine environment (Box 14).

**Box 14.** Marine conservation enabled by effective governance.

- Australia

In Australia, the National Marine Conservation Program has been implemented to support efforts to protect marine resources and marine biodiversity. This program includes legislative and policy measures that support the conservation of marine habitats and the reduction in the impact of human activities on the oceans. The program also promotes transparency and accountability in the management of marine resources, ensuring that all measures to protect the marine environment are respected (Australian Government Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water 2023).

- Philippines

The Transparency and Marine Conservation Initiative was launched in the Philippines to fight corruption and promote effective measures to protect underwater life. This initiative promotes transparency in the allocation of funds for environmental projects and the implementation of marine resource protection policies. By reducing corruption and promoting accountability, the initiative has enabled improved sustainability and quality of life in coastal communities, contributing to the conservation of marine biodiversity (Horigue et al. 2014; Oceana Protecting the World's Oceans 2021).

### 3.15. Synergies and Links Between SDG 16 and SDG 15: Life on Land

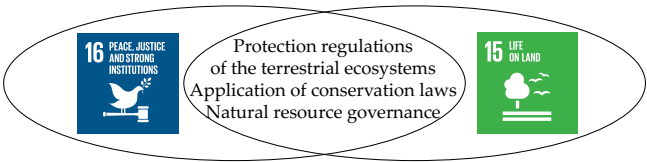
Like SDG 14, SDG 15 is the analog goal for preserving and protecting the natural environment on land. It, too, is directly linked to SDG 16, and is essential for conserving biodiversity and protecting terrestrial ecosystems. Policies that promote environmental protection and sustainable use of natural resources are facilitated by a robust legal and institutional framework. Effective institutions play a vital role in ensuring compliance with laws and regulations that protect life on Earth (The Global

Goals n.d.; UN n.d.; International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance 2024; UNDP n.d.).

Strong institutions are essential for monitoring and implementing policies to conserve terrestrial biodiversity. They can ensure that environmental regulations are followed and that habitat protection measures are effectively in place (UN n.d.; McDermott et al. 2019). For example, responsible institutions can monitor compliance with sustainable forestry rules and promote the protection of critical habitats for various terrestrial species. Strong cooperation between different levels of government and between different economic sectors, ensuring an integrated and coherent approach to terrestrial environmental protection policies can also be achieved through the calibrated activity of various institutions. To this end, their action can support the development of strategies for managing natural resources and adapting to the +impact of climate change on terrestrial ecosystems (UN n.d.; McDermott et al. 2019; Salasan and Balan 2022).

Identical to the case of marine life, corruption can undermine efforts to protect the terrestrial environment by diverting funds for environmental projects and relaxing environmental regulations. Therefore, the same type of action as in SDG 14 towards combating corruption and ensuring that natural resources are used efficiently and sustainably. Access to justice is also essential for protecting the rights of local communities and ensuring an equitable land environment, where strong judicial institutions mitigate disputes related to the use of natural resources and the protection of the terrestrial environment, ensuring that all interested parties are fairly represented (The Global Goals n.d.; UN n.d.; UNDP n.d.).

Educational programs, targeting the public, at large, and promoting terrestrial environmental protection practices may include awareness campaigns on the impact of unsustainable deforestation, initiatives to protect terrestrial habitats and other measures to support the conservation of terrestrial biodiversity (McDermott et al. 2019; Salmon et al. 2024) (Figure 15).



**Figure 15.** Synergy between SDG 16 and SDG 15. Source: Figure by authors.



As shown in Box 15, the examples of strong institutions and effective governance support our claim that the link between SDG 16 and SDG 15 is direct and crucial to achieving the protection of terrestrial life.

**Box 15.** Terrestrial ecosystem protection through institutional strengthening.

- Brazil

In Brazil, the Biodiversity Conservation Program in the Amazon has been implemented to support efforts to protect biodiversity and terrestrial habitats. This program includes legislative and policy measures that support the conservation of forests and the reduction in the impact of human activities on them. The program also promotes transparency and accountability in the management of natural resources, ensuring that all measures to protect the terrestrial environment are respected (USAID Brazil n.d.).

- Kenya

The transparency and terrestrial conservation initiative from Kenya was launched to fight corruption and promote effective measures to protect terrestrial life. This initiative promotes transparency in the allocation of funds for environmental projects and in the implementation of natural resource protection policies. By reducing corruption and promoting accountability, the initiative has enabled the improvement of sustainability and quality of life in local communities, contributing to the conservation of terrestrial biodiversity (WWF 2022).

*3.16. Synergies and Links Between SDG 16 and SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals*

Global partnerships are fundamental to achieving the SDGs. Collaboration between governments, the private sector, civil society and international organizations is essential to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Strong institutions and effective governance facilitate the formation and operation of global partnerships, ensuring the cooperation and coordination needed to achieve the 2030 Agenda (The Global Goals n.d.; UN n.d.; International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance 2024; UNDP n.d.).

First, strong institutions present proper authority and credibility in facilitating international cooperation and ensuring transparency and accountability in global partnerships. These institutions can support the creation of legal and regulatory frameworks that promote effective and equitable collaboration between different actors. For example, responsible institutions can promote transparency in the allocation of international funds and ensure that resources are used effectively to achieve the SDGs.

Secondly, effective governance is vital for coordinating international efforts and providing an enabling framework for global partnerships. This can facilitate dialogue and collaboration between governments, the private sector and civil society, ensuring an integrated and coherent approach to the implementation of the 2030

Agenda. Properly governed public institutions may also support the development of mechanisms to monitor and evaluate progress in achieving the SDGs, ensuring transparency and accountability in all partnerships.

Corruption is an ongoing and ever-present phenomenon to which potential international partnerships are very much exposed. Corruption can undermine global cooperation efforts by misappropriating funds and creating an environment of mistrust between partners. In the absence of a strong court system that applies proper laws, global partnerships cannot operate efficiently and fairly. Failing to provide such preemptive judicial measures also renders futile any further awareness-raising efforts on the importance of international cooperation, initiatives to promote collaboration between different actors and other measures to support the achievement of the 2030 Agenda (Figure 16).

Therefore, the link between SDG 16 and SDG 17 is direct and equally important to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, to all other direct links that have been discussed in the present chapter. Strong institutions and effective governance directly contribute to facilitating global partnerships by ensuring equity, protecting rights and facilitating access to resources and international cooperation mechanisms (Box 16).

**Box 16.** Facilitating global partnerships through strong institutions.

- Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, the International Cooperation and Partnerships program was implemented to support global cooperation and facilitate the achievement of the SDGs. This program includes legislative and policy measures that support effective and equitable collaboration between government, the private sector and civil society. The program also promotes transparency and accountability in the management of international resources, ensuring that all partnerships operate efficiently and equitably (UN Migration n.d.; UNIDO 2021).

- Germany

The Open Government Partnership initiative was launched in Germany to fight corruption and promote international partnerships. This initiative promotes transparency in the allocation of funds for international development projects and in the implementation of global cooperation policies. By reducing corruption and promoting accountability, the initiative has enabled improved efficiency and equity in global partnerships, contributing to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (Open Government Germany 2017; Open Government Partnership Germany 2024).



**Figure 16.** Synergy between SDG 16 and SDG 17. Source: Figure by authors.

#### **4. Discussions on the Effectiveness of SDG 16 in Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals**

SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions is recognized as an essential pillar for achieving sustainable development globally. This objective not only aims to create a framework of peace and justice, but also the development of efficient, accountable and transparent institutions. Without strong institutions and effective governance, all other Sustainable Development Goals risk being undermined by corruption, inefficiency and inequality. In theory, strong institutions should ensure stability, protection of rights and equitable access to resources, thus contributing to the creation of an enabling environment for sustainable development.

In practice, however, the implementation of SDG 16 faces multiple challenges. One of the biggest problems is the lack of institutional capacity and resources in many countries, especially in politically unstable or conflict-affected states. For example, public institutions in post-conflict countries are often weakened and unable to effectively manage governance and law enforcement. In such cases, development efforts are hampered by a lack of political stability and functional government structures.

Corruption is another major barrier to achieving SDG 16. In many parts of the world, endemic corruption undermines the effectiveness and legitimacy of institutions, diverting resources that should be used for development. This not only hinders the achievement of SDG 16, but also affects progress in other areas such as education, health and poverty reduction. Fighting corruption requires concerted efforts and real commitment on behalf of the governments in question, which is often lacking.

Another challenge is the complex interdependence between the SDGs. While SDG 16 is central to achieving other goals, its success in turn depends on progress in other areas. For example, without quality education (SDG 4), it is difficult to develop informed and active citizens who support responsible governance. Similarly, without reducing poverty (SDG 1) and ensuring food security (SDG 2), it is difficult to maintain the social and political stability necessary for strong institutions.

This interdependence suggests the need for an integrated and holistic framework for implementing the SDGs. Governments and international organizations must

approach sustainable development not as a series of separate goals, but as a set of interconnected priorities. This requires coherent policies and coordinated strategies that integrate multiple dimensions of sustainable development (Figure 17).



**Figure 17.** Links between SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions and all other SDGs. Source: Figure by authors.

Critics of SDG 16 often point out that the mere existence of strong institutions is not enough to guarantee progress in all areas of sustainable development. The effectiveness and impact of these institutions depend on many other variables, including political culture, the level of commitment of political leaders, and the ability of civil society to hold governments accountable. In many countries, lack of political will and powerful economic interests can undermine the reforms needed to strengthen institutions and promote social justice.

Another criticized aspect is the universal approach of the SDGs, which does not always consider the local specifics and the diversity of national contexts. Although the principles of SDG 16 are globally valid, their implementation requires adaptations to local realities. In this sense, flexibility and adaptability are crucial to face the diversity of challenges and opportunities in different regions of the world.

To overcome these challenges, it is essential to innovate and adapt the methods of implementing SDG 16. This involves not only strengthening institutional capacities but also promoting the active participation of civil society and local communities. International cooperation initiatives should also be encouraged to support the exchange of best practices and provide technical and financial support to countries in need.

In addition, technology and digitization can play a significant role in strengthening institutions and promoting transparency and accountability. Innovative technological solutions, such as e-government platforms and digital monitoring systems, can

improve administrative efficiency and facilitate citizens' access to public information and services.

To maximize the impact of SDG 16, it is essential to take a more integrated and collaborative approach. This includes not only collaboration between different levels of government, but also partnerships with the private sector, civil society and the international community. Continued and sustained engagement is needed to develop and enact policies that promote peace, justice and strong institutions.

It is important to recognize that the implementation of the 2030 Agenda is not a politically or culturally neutral process. In some cases, the "universalism" of the SDGs can generate a subtle form of symbolic violence by ignoring local knowledge or community priorities (Bourdieu 1991). Thus, instead of facilitating sustainable development in a participatory way, the SDGs risk being perceived as instruments of top-down imposed global governance. To avoid these risks, it is essential that states and international institutions invest in authentic deliberative processes, in the co-creation of public policies and in the contextual adaptation of each goal.

## **5. Conclusions: The Central Role of SDG 16 in Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals**

SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions is undoubtedly a central pillar of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This is not only a recognition of the importance of stable institutions and accountable governance, but also a call to action for all nations to strengthen their commitments to promoting peace and justice. In an increasingly interconnected world, stability and equity are no longer luxuries, but fundamental necessities for global prosperity.

Strong institutions and effective governance are essential for the smooth functioning of a society. They ensure respect for fundamental rights, promote transparency and accountability, and create a framework of stability necessary for economic and social development. Without strong institutions, development efforts are undermined by corruption, inefficiency and inequity, negatively affecting the lives of citizens and the progress of society.

SDG 16 plays an integrative role, directly or indirectly influencing the achievement of the other SDGs. For example, without justice and strong institutions, efforts to eradicate poverty (SDG 1), ensure quality education (SDG 4) or promote decent work (SDG 8) are severely hampered. Strong institutions create and maintain the necessary framework for equitable and sustainable development, facilitating the implementation of effective and equitable public policies.

However, the implementation of SDG 16 faces multiple challenges. Lack of resources, endemic corruption and political instability are just a few of the obstacles that stand in the way of achieving this goal in many countries. These challenges require innovative solutions and firm commitment from all actors involved. Civil society, the private sector and the international community must work together to support governments in strengthening institutions and promoting responsible governance.

International cooperation is critical to the success of SDG 16. Global partnerships facilitate the exchange of best practices, the transfer of knowledge and resources, and provide technical and financial support to countries facing major challenges in implementing this goal. By working closely together, the international community can help create a more stable and just global environment in which every nation has a chance to prosper.

It is essential to maintain a continuous and sustained engagement in promoting peace, justice and strong institutions. This is not only a responsibility of governments, but also of every citizen. Education and public awareness play a crucial role in supporting democratic governance and fighting corruption. Through the active participation of citizens and continuous pressure on governments to respect and promote justice and transparency, the necessary conditions for sustainable development can be created.

SDG 16 is therefore not just one goal among others, but a cornerstone for all sustainable development efforts. It is time for all nations, regardless of their level of development, to renew their commitments to peace, justice and strong institutions. This is a call to action to create a world where every person has access to justice, every community lives in peace, and every nation is governed by accountable and transparent institutions.

Sustainable development cannot be achieved without strong institutions and effective governance. Despite progress in some regions, there are still many areas where institutions are weak, corruption is rampant and access to justice is limited. These issues undermine countries' ability to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and require a more integrated and robust approach.

To ensure the success of SDG 16, it is essential to take concrete action and promote responsible governance at all levels. Strong institutions are not just an end in themselves, but a means to creating a better, more peaceful and prosperous society. In an interconnected world, peace and justice are not just ideals, but fundamental conditions for survival and prosperity. Thus, the global community must step up its efforts to strengthen institutions, promote transparency and ensure access to justice

for all. Only through a collective and sustained commitment can humanity realize the vision of sustainable development for all nations and future generations.

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# Justice Contexts: Sustainable Development Goal 16 and Transitional Justice

Briony Jones and Roger Duthie

## 1. Introduction

The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in September 2015 marked more than a continuation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), focused as they are on seeking to “encapsulate and promote global aspirations across a wide array of topic areas” with a “plurality of objectives” (French and Kotzé 2018, p. 1). Described as a “comprehensive and ambitious vision of development that seeks to eradicate a stunning list of long-standing social ills” (Collins 2018, p. 67), the underpinning narrative of the SDGs dominates and unifies a plurality of actors, from global civil society to business to international organizations (Collins 2018, p. 66). As a complex set of 17 goals, 230 indicators, and 169 targets,<sup>1</sup> the SDGs (at least rhetorically) apply to Global North countries as much as to Global South Countries, earning them the reputation of being ‘Global Goals’. But within this ambition are a series of tensions which raise challenges. Observers have remarked upon the tensions between different narratives; for example, whether the SDGs will supplant the previously dominant human rights paradigm (Collins 2018, p. 67) and whether advances towards achieving some goals may threaten advancement towards others (French and Kotzé 2018, p. 2). The normative agenda of the SDGs belies the complexities, tensions, and challenges facing each of the goals. This is particularly the case when we reflect in detail on the nuances and contexts of particular SDGs. At the 2023 SDG Summit, the UN General Assembly described progress toward the SDGs as too slow and even in regression in some countries as a result of multiple, overlapping crises such as the persistence and intensification of armed conflicts that cause “untold human suffering” and create specific challenges for affected societies (UN General Assembly 2023).

Like the other chapters in this volume, we too focus on SDG 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to

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<sup>1</sup> Available online: <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/230-indicators-approved-sdg-agenda> (accessed on 7 September 2023).

justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. A wide-ranging goal, SDG 16, including reference to ‘peace’, ‘justice’, and ‘inclusion’ has been described as “the tag for the rule of law” (Soininen 2018, p. 250). This renders SDG 16 not only a goal in its own right but a keystone goal, meaning that the achievement of other goals is predicated on it. Arajärvi has written that “The rule of law is key in achieving sustainable development. The rule of law anchors development to peace and security, respect for human rights, and good governance” (Arajärvi 2018, p. 188), while Fiedler et al. contend that without SDG 16 “it is difficult to imagine how the other SDGs should otherwise be achieved” (Fiedler et al. 2015, p. 81). Its inclusion in the SDG 2030 Agenda, however, was not straightforward. Debates took place between UN Member States over whether the rule of law should be included in the same goal as peace, and how to balance domestic and international rule of law concerns (Arajärvi 2018). Indeed, in the end, ‘rule of law’ was replaced by ‘access to justice’ in the name of the goal as a political compromise (Arajärvi 2018, p. 202) and throughout the negotiations over the goal, targets, and indicators, no real consensus was achieved among the member states of the working groups (Arajärvi 2018, p. 204). However, a rule of law emphasis imbues SDG 16, despite only one target (16.3) explicitly focusing on rule of law issues.

SDG 16 targets and indicators focus on crime statistics, sentencing of perpetrators, presence and perception of discrimination, and access to information. This presents “a static picture of a justice network of courts, police, and policies with which the society at large interacts in more or less inclusive and effective ways” (Jones and Jeffrey 2019, blog post). This can explain the focus at the 2019 UN High Level Political Forum on capacity, reform of institutions, and strengthening rule of law for achieving SDG 16.<sup>2</sup> Other critiques focus on the vague and complex nature of how SDG 16 is articulated. Fiedler et al. assert that it is “neither concise nor easy to communicate”, that its targets “show either too much ambition or none at all” and that it tackles issues which are “notoriously difficult—if not impossible—to measure” (Fiedler et al. 2015, pp. 80–82). Critiques of SDG 16 have also called for greater focus on inhibitors and drivers of good governance as well as on external actors and incentives for capacity-building in the areas of peaceful societies and institutions (Arajärvi 2018, pp. 213–14). It is with this context in mind that we focus our discussion on SDG 16 and transitional justice, presenting this set of empirical contexts as particularly

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<sup>2</sup> Available online: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/index.php?page=view&type=13&nr=3060&menu=1634> (accessed on 29 August 2025).

pertinent for exploring the challenges to SDG 16, the possibilities for its success, and the conceptual ramifications for the way the goal has been framed and approached in discourse, policy, and practice. In the chapter that follows, we first address the policy landscape for both transitional justice and SDG 16, before reflecting on a series of intellectual ramifications: (1) going beyond the law, (2) moving from institutions to legitimacy, (3) remaining attentive to context, and (4) enhancing focus on prevention and sustainable development. We then conclude by reflecting on what transitional justice debates teach us about the key questions for seeing a people-centred justice for the SDGs.

## **2. Policy Landscape for SDG 16 and Transitional Justice**

The SDGs do not directly refer to massive human rights violations or efforts to address the legacies of those violations. Nevertheless, transitional justice is relevant to the sustainable development agenda. This is because societies that have experienced gross human rights violations face particular and immense challenges in making progress towards the SDGs. With massive numbers of victims, severely divided communities, weak and untrusted institutions, and depleted resources, these countries cannot approach development in the same way as those that have not suffered such injustice. Despite not mentioning transitional justice, the targets included in SDG 16—including rule of law, access to justice, prevention of violence, inclusive institutions, reduction in corruption, and access to information—as well as SDG 5 on gender equality, SDG 10 on equality, and SDG 4 on education provide a framework for understanding its potential contributions to sustainable development (Working Group on Transitional Justice and SDG 16+ 2019). In addition, connections between the different goals are important for taking advantage of the opportunity provided by the SDGs for those working in transitional justice. Notions such as access to justice, for example, have long been considered within the development field as tools of more traditional development objectives such as poverty reduction, health, and education. Framing transitional justice as relevant to development, therefore, may require doing more than justifying it in terms of SDG 16 alone.

### *2.1. International Policy Discourse*

At the level of international policy discourse, there is evidence of an increasing recognition of transitional justice as an element of sustainable development. In 2022, for example, the UN Human Rights Council stated, “the fight against impunity and the implementation of transitional justice processes, including the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence, can prevent the



recurrence of past atrocities or similar violations and contribute to sustainable peace and development” (UN Human Rights Council 2022b). This builds on previous policy discourse among actors such as the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Task Force on Justice that identifies the specific ways in which transitional justice can make such a contribution, including by increasing agency, empowerment, trust, social cohesion, and inclusion; reducing grievances; and identifying and addressing the drivers of serious violations (UN Human Rights Council 2022a; UN General Assembly 2022; Task Force on Justice 2019; Global Alliance for Reporting Progress on Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies 2019; Working Group on Transitional Justice and SDG 16+ 2019). Looking further back, prior to the adoption of the SDGs, the former Special Rapporteur for the promotion of truth, justice, reparation, and guarantees of nonrecurrence, Pablo de Greiff, observed that previous development frameworks, including the MDGs, had neglected justice considerations overall, arguing that transitional justice could “contribute to mitigating” certain “developmental blockages” “by providing recognition of rights, fostering individual and institutional trust and building positive social capital” (UN General Assembly 2013).

Given the contribution that transitional justice can make to sustainable development, international policy discourse has also called for more practical integration. The Human Rights Council, for example, has called on states to use transitional justice as a “strategic tool” of development and “to design, fund and implement comprehensive transitional justice measures as part of their development efforts” (UN Human Rights Council 2022b). The African Union understands transitional justice as a model for explicitly addressing development challenges, recommending that it be included in “development measures designed to rectify structural inequalities, marginalization and exclusion for achieving social justice and equitable and inclusive development” (African Union 2019). The Working Group on Transitional Justice and SDG 16+ has highlighted practical examples of integration and proposed strategies for mobilizing support and establishing such interventions in practice, such as strengthening collective action among victims’ groups and networks, civil society organizations, and social and political movements; incorporating transitional justice into responses at the local, national, regional, and global levels; and adopting a long-term perspective on monitoring, operationalization, and impact (Working Group on Transitional Justice and SDG 16+ 2023).

## *2.2. National Policy Discourses*

At the national level, transitional justice processes in a number of countries with legacies of massive human rights violations have had a clear development component. In Peru, Chile, and Guatemala, for example, individual reparations combined financial compensation with social measures in the areas of education and healthcare. In countries such as Peru, Morocco, and Colombia, collective reparation programmes have targeted communities affected by violence or exclusion, while in Tunisia, the Truth and Dignity Commission defined marginalized regions of the country as “victim-regions”. Truth commissions also often recommend broad reforms to the institutions and structures that facilitate violence and exclusion, which can be a long-term even generational project. In 2022, for example, Sierra Leone enacted legislation on gender equality and land rights in line with the country’s truth commission’s recommendations from 2004 (Working Group on Transitional Justice and SDG 16+ 2023).

In some countries, attempts to address the past can be incorporated into development and SDG discourse, policies, and reporting, a practice encouraged by the Human Rights Council (UN Human Rights Council 2022b). In Colombia, for example, the National Development Plan 2022–2026 (Government of Colombia 2023) includes compliance with some of the country’s truth commission’s recommendations, although not as much as civil society had advocated. In Uganda, civil society has used the Annual Sustainable Development Goals Conference to discuss strategies for collecting and incorporating transitional justice-related data in the government’s SDG Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), a process through which countries report their progress made in implementing the 2030 Agenda. In a number of countries—including the Central African Republic, The Gambia, Liberia, Colombia, Sierra Leone, Timor Leste, and South Africa—recent VNRs have in fact reported on transitional justice elements such as accountability, reparation, memorialization, and truth commissions and the implementation of their recommendations (Working Group on Transitional Justice and SDG 16+ 2023).

## **3. Intellectual Ramifications**

### *3.1. Beyond the Law*

Amongst transitional justice scholars there is a lively debate concerning the role of the law in transitional justice processes and the dominance of legalism in shaping how injustice is understood, identified, and addressed. McEvoy’s work exemplifies this body of thought, arguing for a ‘thicker’ understanding of

transitional justice (McEvoy 2007). For McEvoy, the dominance of legalism—by which he means that “a strongly positivistic trend of scholarship and practice persists in the legal understanding of transitional justice” (ibid, p. 415)—has significant effects on the conceptualisation and practice of transitional justice. He argues for a ‘thicker’ understanding which includes politics within it, situates transitional justice interventions in context, and makes room for other, non-legal forms of knowledge.

What we see with SDG 16 is that a rather narrow approach to what counts as justice is foregrounded, with a focus on legal justice and legal capacities as well as strengthening of the rule of law. Much of the attention to SDG 16 still goes to target 16.3 on rule of law and access to justice. In the Task Force on Justice report *Justice for All* (Task Force on Justice 2019), the ‘justice gap’ is identified as being the fact that 4.5 billion people are excluded from the social, economic, and political opportunities that the law provides; 1.5 billion have a criminal, civil, or administrative justice problem they cannot solve; and 253 million live in extreme conditions of injustice without any meaningful legal protections. When we think about this justice gap in the context of reckoning with large-scale violations of human rights, not only is this justice gap more entrenched—often legal institutions and/or the state are the perpetrators of, or complicit in, the violations and only 3% of development assistance goes to justice in conflict-affected countries (Duthie 2019—but it would be remiss to focus only on the legal aspects of justice in order to contribute to peace and trust in institutions. Speaking to a more ‘transformative’ agenda in transitional justice, McAuliffe writes that “The justifications for including issues of structural violence and inequality as integral components of transitional justice are pragmatic (peace can only be sustainable with attention to root causes), philosophical (an ethical preference for distributive justice and equity) and sociological (polls of survivor populations overwhelmingly demonstrate that socio-economic concerns trump the desire for criminal justice or truth in transitions)” (McAuliffe 2017, p. 2).

Such issues to which McAuliffe speaks do require attention to rule of law reforms but that is not the whole picture. In order to address the justice gap in transitional justice contexts, legalism will need to be complemented by, or even play second fiddle to, other forms of justice. This could include symbolic justice (memorials, apologies) or distributive justice (reparations which address long-standing inequalities and marginalization at the root of the causes and varied experiences of violence). In work on the impact of transitional justice on human rights and democracy, Olsen et al. (2010) find that the most effective combination of mechanisms includes, but goes beyond, retributive justice in the form of trials. In addition to legal processes, amnesties and truth commissions will have a more

positive effect on human rights and democracy when applied in conjunction with trials. More recent work by transformative justice scholars takes a different approach to the question of the role of the law and focuses on socio-economic (in)justice, root causes of conflict, and distributive justice as more effective in offering redress for harm and building sustainable peace. Examples offered by work in this area include attention to structural violence in post-apartheid South Africa (Evans 2015) and popular activism around socio-economic justice in Bosnia-Herzegovina (Lai 2020). Transformative justice is a growing field of study and there is thus far limited evidence of what a transformative justice approach concretely offers in terms of positive justice effects. However, the work which exists makes a strong case for thinking of transitional justice contexts as offering an opportunity to re-think a dominant legal conceptualisation of justice through empirical examples of where particularly challenging justice gaps have been approached through non-legal justice interventions.

This is where links between transitional justice and development goals other than SDG 16 can be important. In its 2019 VNR, for example, South Africa discussed its development progress, in part, in terms of its efforts to address its past, even 25 years after the end of apartheid. With regard to SDG 10 on inequality, the government reported that the “legacy of apartheid, particularly the economic isolation of black townships and unequal distribution of land, continues to weigh on incomes in poor communities”. South Africa is one of most unequal countries in the world “due to its historically deep-rooted economic, social and political exclusion of the apartheid regime, which has created structural bottlenecks in addressing poverty, inequality and unemployment”. The government has therefore “aimed to address the legacy of our apartheid past. . .through the provision of a social safety net, which have had a major impact on poverty and reducing the hunger” (Government of South Africa 2019, pp. 82, 116).

### *3.2. From Institutions to Legitimacy*

SDG 16 targets and indicators include a focus on crime statistics, sentencing of perpetrators, presence and perception of discrimination, and access to information. Calls for a people-centred justice and for people-centred data to form the evidence base for action on SDG 16 (Task Force on Justice 2019) are potentially in tension with a goal which nonetheless still has a significant focus on institutions of government, governance, and justice systems. This is not to suggest that such institutions are not key in reducing the justice gap, but transitional justice contexts again lead us

to think further beyond the institutions and to understand what a people-centred justice could or should look like.

Debates in transitional justice scholarship have seen a shift from institutional reform to ‘justice from below’ (McEvoy and McGregor 2008) and ‘localized justice’ (Shaw et al. 2010), partly as a response to critiques of transitional justice research and practice as being in danger of losing their credibility. The legitimacy crisis relates to interventions which stand accused of not reflecting the expressed needs or expectations of the population (Robins 2017); of being too expensive, with limited evidence of positive impact (Thoms et al. 2010); and of emerging from Western Enlightenment ways of thinking before being co-opted by a neoliberal agenda (Bowsher 2018). These reflections remind us that a people-centred justice will not necessarily be exempt from the politics of intervention: who are ‘the people’? Who can speak on behalf of ‘the people’? What if the people do not want the justice which is on offer as part of SDG 16? There is more to be done in connecting experiences of justice, perceptions of the legitimacy of justice institutions, and specific interventions and actions. Sierra Leone, in its 2019 VNR, included in its reporting on socioeconomic participation and inclusion the work of the organization Fambul Tok to develop an “inclusive planning and local governance model”, piloted in 547 villages in 2016–2017, an initiative informed by its experience “implementing post-war, grassroots-based, peace and reconciliation interventions in Sierra Leone”. This local development model has, the government stated, demonstrated its “strength for healing grievances and promoting and enhancing local peace and coexistence” (Government of Sierra Leone 2019, p. 18).

In the Justice for All report, people-centred data is seen as key to arriving at a people-centred justice: “statistics tell us little about people’s experience of justice” (Task Force on Justice 2019, p. 30). Going directly to the population, rather than taking institution-level data alone, is thought to offer the possibility of addressing challenges such as lack of reporting and barriers to justice by asking the population about their opinion of justice. This could include in-depth interviews, ethnographic observations, and the use of narratives to produce analytically rather than statistically generalizable insights. This is not to say that institution-level data in larger studies is not important, but that it must be complemented by data which is better able to capture individual, qualitative, and lived experiences of justice. This sentiment is echoed in the 2019 report of the Working Group on Transitional Justice and SDG 16+, which states that positive impacts are seen to depend on the perceived legitimacy of the justice process (Working Group on Transitional Justice and SDG 16+ 2019, p. 7). However, arriving at an understanding of varied perceptions of legitimacy

goes beyond the population being asked what they want. Perceptions of legitimacy will not be static over time and will depend on myriad factors which are not yet well enough known, certainly in transitional justice contexts. The SDG 16 indicators could include more intangible notions, such as trust and confidence in institutions, or refer directly to transitional justice processes which have the potential to work beyond the institution through grassroots reconciliation programmes, education reform, or public outreach. This would stimulate momentum around gathering a broader evidence base: asking people their opinions but also undertaking primary research on what factors shape perceptions of legitimacy over time.

### *3.3. Context as Key*

Context provides one of the key reasons for considering the contribution of transitional justice to the SDGs. This is because societies that have experienced massive human rights violations face particular challenges in making progress towards sustainable development. Not only do these countries face the structural problems that may have facilitated violence and repression, such as weak institutions and inequality, they must also address the legacies of massive violations, which include social divisions, grievances, and the absence of trust. One of the tensions within the SDG agenda is that while the goals are supposed to be universal, countries that have suffered massive rights violations cannot approach development in the same way as those that have not suffered such injustice. As suggested above, thicker understandings of transitional justice should take into account these variations in context but may be in tension with a narrow approach to justice within SDG 16.

In addition, however, even among countries that have experienced large-scale abuses, variations in context makes a significant difference to the challenges faced. In countries that have undergone some kind of transition, for example, such as Colombia, Kenya, and Tunisia, attempts to address the past, while they face political and other challenges, have seen traction. However, in countries where violent conflict and repression are still ongoing, such as Afghanistan, the Central African Republic, Iraq, Libya, and South Sudan, the lack of institutions and trust and the prevalence of instability and fear present even more fundamental obstacles to progress (Duthie 2019). The Central African Republic's 2019 VNR, for example, "highlights the need for extensive reform to make justice independent and impartial as well as the deep gender inequalities and extensive corruption in most sectors of the country" (Picco and Duthie 2019).

### *3.4. Prevention and Sustainable Development*

As indicated above, groups such as the Task Force on Justice, the Global Alliance for Reporting Progress on Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies, and the Working Group on Transitional Justice and SDG 16+ have articulated the contribution of transitional justice to sustainable development, specifically in terms of its ability to help prevent the recurrence of rights violations, violence, and violent conflict. SDG 16 includes the target of reducing all forms violence, and while transitional justice may in some cases play a direct role in preventing the recurrence of violence by prosecuting perpetrators of abuses, research has found that its most significant effect on prevention is likely to be more indirect and long term by, for example, addressing grievance and fostering inclusion of victims and marginalized groups, identifying root causes of conflict and abuse, and reforming and building institutions (International Center for Transitional Justice 2021). And while the notion of guarantees of nonrecurrence have always encapsulated the aim of transitional justice processes to prevent the recurrence of massive rights violations, there is evidence that they can also help to break cycles of violence and conflict more broadly. Research conducted by the International Center for Transitional Justice in Colombia, Morocco, Peru, The Philippines, and Sierra Leone demonstrates that transitional justice can in fact play such a role in prevention, although its impact may be limited by a lack of participatory processes, limited implementation, and a range of contextual factors (International Center for Transitional Justice 2021). Quantitative evidence provides some support for the claim that transitional justice can contribute to prevention. Studies have found correlations, for example, between certain transitional justice processes and the reduction in repression, atrocities, and the recurrence of violent conflict, depending on the nature and combination of those processes as well as other contextual factors (Kim and Sikkink 2010; Auschwitz Institute for the Prevention of Genocide and Mass Atrocities 2020; Payne et al. 2017; Salehi and Williams 2016; Lie et al. 2007).

The current global policy agenda that prioritizes prevention points to the preventive function of transitional justice, including in resolutions of the UN General Assembly, Security Council, and Human Rights Council, and a major 2018 study by the World Bank and UN (UN General Assembly 2016; UN Security Council 2016; UN Human Rights Council 2016; World Bank-United Nations 2018). A joint study of the Special Rapporteur and the Special Advisor to the UN Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide suggests that “while transitional justice should not be conceived primarily as a ‘peace-making’ instrument, numerous indicators demonstrate that it can contribute to sustainable peace and security by helping to

break cycles of violence and atrocities, delivering a sense of justice to victims, and prompting examinations of deficiencies in State institutions that may have enabled, if not promoted, those cycles” (UN Human Rights Council 2018).

The former Special Rapporteur on transitional justice developed a “framework approach” to prevention that includes state interventions but goes beyond institutions to cover activities and actors in civil society and the cultural and individual spheres. Civil society’s role in aggregating and magnifying voices, he argues, can be supported by repealing laws limiting civic space, establishing platforms, coalitions, networks, and forums, and fostering an enabling environment, while the cultural and individual spheres include education, arts, archives and documentation, and religion (UN General Assembly 2017). As discussed above, this represents an important step in moving transitional justice beyond state institutions to more people-centred legitimacy.

#### **4. Conclusions: A People-Centred Justice**

How we define and pursue justice is not only a technical question of institutional reform, crime statistics, and procedural innovations. It is also a question of the story which we tell about ourselves—of who counts, of who should be protected, and of who should be held to account for breaking the norms. This is particularly relevant in the context of transitional justice, where large-scale violations of human rights have broken social bonds, reduced trust in institutions, and questioned the moral basis of collective life. Justice interventions, in these contexts, provide a link to a larger story of redistribution, democracy, and agency which encourages us to ask more of SDG 16. In order to do so we need to acknowledge the plurality of voices, and therefore interlocutors, of justice. This is the reality of SDG 16, which demands a people-centred justice.

A people-centred justice implicitly seeks to put the victim at the heart of justice-seeking. In work on citizen-victims, not directly connected to transitional justice, Holder writes, “Most people display a disengaged cynicism about the law and its institutions whether in Australia, Britain or elsewhere. But for those who become victims of violence this quickly becomes insupportable when they enter the criminal justice system. ... Victims are informed both by the practical and the objective context in which they find themselves, as well as by their own moral and social intuitions. They become everyday philosophers of their situation” (Holder 2018, p. 7). In order to put this front and centre of attempts to realize SDG 16, we must appreciate the plurality of the victim voice. Transitional justice literature has grappled with the way in which justice interventions can frame hierarchies of ‘worthy’ and ‘underserving’



victims (McEvoy and McConnachie 2013) as well as the marginalization of victim needs which do not fit with the justice intervention's offerings (Robins 2011). The tricky balance between justice norms/legal requirements and the needs/desires of victims, which is so pertinent to transitional justice debates, teaches us that there is no straight forward way to bring people to the centre of justice.

This is not to say that SDG 16 should not take a people-centred justice approach. Insights from transitional justice make clear the complexities, but also the vital importance of doing so. Moreover, as we have illustrated in the overview provided in this chapter, there are cases where transitional justice interventions have been able to combine justice and development, contributing to prevention of future violence and securing a more stable peace on which development can occur. This is, ultimately, at least part of the puzzle of achieving an inclusive justice, even for those in situations of the most extreme deprivation of their access to justice.

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# SDG 16—The Role of the OSCE

Thomas Greminger

## 1. Introduction

The implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is necessary for our survival. That is what Heads of State and Government of all 193 member states of the United Nations declared at the 75th anniversary of the United Nations on 21 September 2020. Therefore, it is in the interest of all peoples and states to implement those seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the year 2030.<sup>1</sup> While the main responsibility lies with states, regional organizations can be supportive. The OSCE, with its comprehensive approach to security, can particularly help in relation to Goal 16, which is designed to promote peaceful and inclusive societies, access to justice for all, and to build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels. The OSCE has been doing this in the region from Vancouver to Vladivostok since the early 1990s, so it is well-positioned and well-equipped to help its participating States reach many of the targets that are part of this goal. Indeed, as a regional arrangement of the United Nations under Chapter VIII, it makes perfect sense that the OSCE should take action within its region to contribute to the maintenance of international peace and security. Building effective institutions and inclusive societies is one of the best forms of conflict prevention—a key activity of the OSCE. Therefore, the SDGs help position the OSCE's work in a more global framework, while the OSCE's operational activities help states reach targets and demonstrate good practices that could be transferred to other parts of the world.

This article will outline the role of the OSCE in supporting the implementation of SDG 16, considering the particular challenges relating to this goal. It will also discuss the lessons learned concerning the OSCE's role as a regional arrangement of the UN in the implementation of the SDGs.

## 2. The OSCE: Ahead of Its Time

Since the Helsinki Final Act of 1975,<sup>2</sup> a comprehensive approach to security based on peace, justice, and development has been part of the DNA of the OSCE.

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<sup>1</sup> A/RES/70/1, Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

<sup>2</sup> Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, Helsinki 1975.

Since the beginning of the OSCE (when it was known as the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe), the organization has focused on the following “three complementary dimensions (initially “three baskets”)” of security, all of which are viewed as being of equal importance: the politico-military, the economic and environmental, and the human dimension.

More concretely, work in the three dimensions includes the OSCE supporting its participating States in the following:

1. Military matters by managing a regime of arms control and confidence-building measures and by combating transnational threats (terrorism, violent extremism, cyber, human trafficking, etc.);
2. Economic and environmental issues by promoting good governance, preventing and combating corruption, strengthening co-operation in addressing environmental and security challenges, and promoting sustainable energy and strengthening energy security;
3. The human dimension by helping build democratic institutions, hold genuine and transparent elections, and ensure respect for human rights.

This is carried out through field operations, specialized units within the OSCE Secretariat, and the following three institutions: the Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM), and the Representative on the Freedom of the Media (RfOM).

The merits of a comprehensive approach to security have been recognized in the New Agenda for Peace that warns that responses to violence that rely solely on securitized or militarized responses have limited effectiveness.<sup>3</sup>

This comprehensive approach to security is complemented by a co-operative approach to security, considering security as indivisible; co-operation is beneficial to all participating States, while the insecurity in and/or of one State can affect all of them. Hence, “no participating State should” boost its own “security at the expense of the security” of others.

The interconnected and interdependent concepts of comprehensive, multidimensional, and co-operative security, having been reaffirmed in major documents and decisions taken since the Helsinki Final Act, were certainly revolutionary at the time and remain highly relevant today. The idea of comprehensive security bears a close resemblance to the concept of “human security”

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<sup>3</sup> Agenda for Peace, July 2023, p. 13.

that emerged decades later within the international development context,<sup>4</sup> as well as the recognition of the interrelated nature of security, development, and justice.<sup>5</sup>

While prevention is now a buzzword in the United Nations, the OSCE has been practicing it since the early 1990s, particularly through the work of its High Commissioner on National Minorities, whose mandate is to provide early action and early warning on inter-ethnic tensions that could lead to conflict; a Conflict Prevention Centre; a well-stocked toolbox of risk reduction and confidence-building measures; and structural prevention through supporting democratic institutions and human rights.

These approaches and tools were developed in the context of promoting security and preventing conflict, but they also relate to sustainable development. This is evident by the explicit and implicit references to sustainable development in a number of key documents. The 1975 Helsinki Final Act, the organization's founding document, contained references to the linkages between economic development and environmental and social issues and their interactions with security and stability.<sup>6</sup> The OSCE Strategy Document for the Economic and Environmental Dimension, which was adopted by the OSCE Ministerial Council in Maastricht in 2003 and is seen as a milestone document in shaping the OSCE's Second Dimension, has a dedicated section on "sustainable development" and defines specific actions and co-operation areas for the organization.<sup>7</sup> Another important document is Ministerial Council Decision No. 3/11 on Elements of the Conflict Cycle,<sup>8</sup> which states that "impediments to economic welfare and social development as well as threats to environmental security, including environmental degradation, natural and man-made disasters and their possible impact on migratory pressures, could be

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<sup>4</sup> A/RES/66/290: "human security is an approach to assist Member States in identifying and addressing widespread and cross-cutting challenges to the survival, livelihood and dignity of their people." It calls for "people-centered, comprehensive, context-specific and prevention-oriented responses that strengthen the protection and empowerment of all people". I have also written extensively on the link between the human security concept and the OSCE in (?).

<sup>5</sup> Whereas the latter was clearly recognized for instance in the World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security, and Development.

<sup>6</sup> In addition, the linkage between security and development has been reaffirmed at least in the following political commitments, endorsed at OSCE Summits and Ministerial Councils: 1994 CSCE Budapest Document, 2002 Porto Ministerial Declaration on Responding to Change, and the 2002 Porto Ministerial Decision No. 5, Enhancing the Role of the OSCE Economic and Environmental Dimension.

<sup>7</sup> MC(11).JOUR/2, OSCE Strategy Document for the Economic and Environmental Dimension, 2 December 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Decision No. 3/11 on elements of the conflict cycle, related to enhancing the OSCE's capabilities in early warning, early action, dialogue facilitation and mediation support, and post-conflict rehabilitation.



potential contributors to conflict”. It goes on to mention that “conflict prevention, conflict resolution, post-conflict rehabilitation and peace-building must involve efforts to address violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as intolerance and discrimination, and the absence of strong democratic institutions and the rule of law”. So, the OSCE was ahead of its time. Following the adoption of the 2030 Agenda in 2015, several OSCE decisions and declarations have made an explicit reference to the SDGs.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. The OSCE as a Regional Arrangement

The OSCE is considered a regional arrangement of the United Nations (UN) Security Council under Chapter VIII of the UN Charter. Indeed, with its 57 participating States, the OSCE is the world’s largest regional security arrangement. The concept of regional arrangements in the UN Charter recognizes the role of regional organizations in the “Maintenance of international peace and security, provided their activities are consistent with the purposes and principles of the UN”.<sup>10</sup> The relationship was formalized within the Framework for Co-operation and Co-ordination between the two institutions in 1993.<sup>11</sup>

The New Agenda for Peace calls for robust regional frameworks and organizations to promote trust-building, transparency, and détente.<sup>12</sup> This concerns a wide range of issues, including the implementation of the SDGs.

The role of regional organizations or bodies is a critical aspect of the SDG implementation process as they are positioned between the global and national levels. A trend of increased UN focus on the role of regional organizations began at the 2005 World Summit, where the UN was requested to expand consultation

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<sup>9</sup> At least in 2016 Ministerial Council Decision No. 4/16 Strengthening Good Governance and Promoting Connectivity, 2016 Ministerial Declaration on OSCE Assistance Projects in the Field of Small Arms and Light Weapons and Stockpiles of conventional ammunition, 2017 Ministerial Council Decision 8/17 on promoting economic participation in the OSCE Area, Ministerial Council Decision No. 6/17 Strengthening Efforts to Prevent Trafficking in Human Beings, 2018 Ministerial Council Declaration on the Digital Economy as a Driver for Promoting Co-operation, Security and Growth, 2018 Ministerial Council Declaration on OSCE Efforts in the Field of Norms and Best Practices on Small Arms And Light Weapons and Stockpiles of Conventional Ammunition, Ministerial Council Decision No. 3/18 Safety of Journalists, 2018 Ministerial Council Decision No. 4/18 Preventing and Combating Violence against Women, and 2018 Ministerial Council Decision No. 5/18 Human Capital Development in the Digital Era.

<sup>10</sup> Art. 52, UN Charter.

<sup>11</sup> 1993 Framework for Co-operation and Co-ordination between the United Nations Secretariat and the CSCE. The reinforced document was endorsed on 10 December 2019.

<sup>12</sup> New Agenda for Peace, July 2023, p. 12.

and co-operation with regional organizations.<sup>13</sup> This was then followed by a UN Security Council resolution, which further enhanced co-operation between regional organizations and the Security Council.<sup>14</sup>

While the importance of regional co-operation and the role of regional organizations in sustainable development were recognized as early as 1992 through the adoption of the Agenda 21 at the Rio Summit,<sup>15</sup> their role in coordinating the implementation, follow-up, and review process was reaffirmed, for instance, in the outcome document of the Rio+20 summit.<sup>16</sup> This emphasized that “regional and sub-regional organizations, including UN regional commissions and their sub-regional offices, have a significant role to play in promoting balanced integration of the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development”.

The 2030 Agenda takes a step further by acknowledging “the importance of the regional and subregional dimensions”. It emphasizes that “regional and subregional frameworks can facilitate the effective translation of sustainable development policies into concrete action at the national level”. In addition, it underlines the benefits of “regional level” follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda implementation. In this context, while recognizing that governments have the primary responsibility for follow-up and review of the SDGs’ implementation, the 2030 Agenda encourages “all member states to identify the most suitable regional forum in which to engage” to ensure an inclusive regional follow-up and review process.

After all, several of the challenges addressed by the SDGs transcend borders. Regional co-operation can have a multiplier effect to help countries, both individually and collectively, move closer to reaching the goals and targets that they have set for themselves. Regional organizations, such as the OSCE, can therefore act as a valuable catalyst to promote co-operation.

Also relevant in this respect is SDG 17, in which states committed themselves to “strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development”. SDG 17 calls for increased international co-operation to achieve each of the 16 previous SDG with Target 17.9 specifically requesting “enhance[d] international support for implementing effective and targeted

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<sup>13</sup> A/RES/60/1, 2005 World Summit Outcome.

<sup>14</sup> S/RES/1631 (2005) UN cooperation with regional organizations in maintaining international peace and security.

<sup>15</sup> AGENDA 21, United Nations Conference on Environment & Development, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 3–14 June 1992.

<sup>16</sup> A/RES/66/288, The Future We Want.

capacity-building in developing countries to support national plans to implement all the sustainable development goals”.

#### **4. The OSCE and 2030 Agenda**

The OSCE’s work relates not only to all 17 SDGs and to many of their individual targets, but notably also to the five major themes that group some of the goals—people, planet, prosperity, peace, and partnerships.

Of these five themes, “peace” is of particular importance for the OSCE. Within the current polarized security environment in the European context, the OSCE remains the only platform for inclusive East–West dialogue and co-operation on multiple hard and soft security issues. Many aspects of the OSCE’s work contribute to peace, primarily through conflict prevention and resolution, crisis management, as well as post-conflict rehabilitation and peacebuilding. In terms of “people”, the Helsinki Final Act was not only centered on interstate relations but also on people. This is evident through the OSCE’s “human dimension” and in its efforts to focus on the lives of people affected by conflict. For example, OSCE field operations often implement confidence-building measures designed to help the lives of people affected by violent conflict. In eastern Ukraine, for example, between 2014 and 2021, the OSCE’s Special Monitoring Mission regularly brokered so-called “windows of silence” to facilitate the repair of critical civilian infrastructure such as water, electricity, and gas distribution systems disrupted by the fighting. “Prosperity” is strongly linked to the OSCE’s Second Dimension of security that seeks to enhance good governance and fight corruption. In relation to the “planet”, the OSCE helps states address environmental challenges that are threatening livelihoods and affecting security worldwide. The last major high-level OSCE decision taken by consensus—at the Ministerial meeting in Stockholm in December 2021—was on strengthening co-operation to address the challenges of climate change. Moving forward, this could be a rare island of co-operation on which participating States may be able to find some common ground on which to work together. If the OSCE could develop more capacity in this field, it could help participating States reduce the impact of climate change on security and contribute to global efforts to strengthen capacity and knowledge-sharing, for example, through regional hubs on climate, peace, and security, as recommended in the New Agenda for Peace.<sup>17</sup> Finally, “partnerships” is covered by the OSCE’s work with the UN and many other

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<sup>17</sup> A New Agenda for Peace, July 2023, p. 21

partner organizations—like the European Union and the Council of Europe—to forge effective responses to traditional and emerging challenges.

As a regional organization supporting its participating States in the implementation of the SDGs, the OSCE has been contributing to the annual UNECE Regional Fora on Sustainable Development in Geneva and to the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) that meets in New York each year to review the implementation of the SDGs.

Regular OSCE meetings have also discussed various aspects of the SDGs. The Economic and Environmental Committee on 12 June 2019 held a thematic meeting on “promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development” that featured a high-level official of the UN Secretariat’s Department of Economic and Social Affairs that supports the HLPF process. The OSCE’s role in supporting the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the primacy to SDG 16 was also discussed and supported at a Security Days event in Vienna on 4 June 2019. The event generated a number of recommendations, particularly highlighting the OSCE’s role as a catalyst supporting the work of its participating States in “assessing and addressing the repercussions of climate change on security” and as a facilitator and platform to bridge global and national implementation to enhance regional co-operation in the implementation of the SDGs.<sup>18</sup>

#### *4.1. The OSCE and SDG 16*

While the OSCE’s activities are directly or indirectly linked to all 17 SDGs, as a security organization, practically all of its work is of immediate relevance to SDG 16. With this close link between SDG 16 (today better addressed as SDG 16+ because it is considered an enabler or catalyst for the successful implementation of all the other goals) and its core activities, notably prevention,<sup>19</sup> SDG 16 goes to the heart of the OSCE’s *raison d’être*. All the different parts of the OSCE—field operations, institutions, and the programmatic departments at the Secretariat—contribute through their activities to the implementation of SDG 16 in a complementary manner. This is done, for instance, by the promotion of peaceful, inclusive, and resilient

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<sup>18</sup> Summary Report: The OSCE and the Sustainable Development Goals, Vienna, 4 June 2019.

<sup>19</sup> It has to be borne in mind while the SDG 16+ concept is not an UN-sanctioned label, it does support the argument of the universality of SDG 16. Indeed, from the OSCE’s perspective, SDG 16+ overlooks at least two other SDGs, which are closely linked to security, namely SDG 6 on clean water and sanitation, and SDG 13 on climate action. Hence, for the OSCE, there are at least nine (instead of seven) other SDGs which are directly linked to security.

societies; equal access to justice for all; and building effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels.

Broadly speaking, the OSCE promotes prevention at the following three levels:

1. Operational prevention (e.g., through early warning and early action, confidence-building, preventive diplomacy, or dialogue facilitation and mediation);
2. Structural prevention (e.g., rule of law and good governance support, tackling organized crime and corruption, and promoting political inclusion);
3. Systemic prevention (e.g., promoting normative frameworks, dialogue, and partnerships).

To illustrate this more concretely, the OSCE's role in helping participating States reach specific targets under Goal 16 will be highlighted. The list is illustrative, not comprehensive.

#### *4.2. Significantly Reduce All Forms of Violence and Related Death Rates Everywhere*

Target 16.1 calls for significantly reducing all forms of violence and the related death rates everywhere. To this end, the OSCE works across the "conflict cycle" to prevent conflicts from arising, to engage in crisis management when needed, and to facilitate lasting political settlements of existing conflicts. It also promotes post-conflict rehabilitation and long-term peacebuilding. OSCE participating States engage in regular political negotiations on security issues. They develop and implement confidence-building measures, mandate OSCE involvement in mediation processes, and establish field operations with mandates involving specific conflict cycle-related tasks. In times of growing political or socio-economic tensions, the OSCE's field operations can take on an important role in efforts to promote dialogue and defuse tensions.

The work of field operations is supported by the Conflict Prevention Centre, established by the 1990 Charter of Paris.<sup>20</sup> It facilitates political dialogue among participating States in the first dimension, assisting with the implementation of confidence- and security-building measures, providing advice on and the analysis of matters related to the conflict cycle, as well as by supporting negotiation, mediation, and dialogue facilitation efforts and processes to prevent and resolve crises and conflicts.

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<sup>20</sup> Charter of Paris for a New Europe, 1990.

The OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities is a unique instrument of conflict prevention. This work is based on the understanding that tensions between different communities, as well as between states, are often based on struggles over identity issues. Divisions and the further escalation of tensions are often triggered by the politicization of issues such as the use of language, education, and other matters closely linked to identity. The High Commissioner is an important prevention tool of the OSCE for this type of conflict, supporting the implementation of policies for the integration of diverse and multi-ethnic societies with sustainable integration and resilience to conflict.

The problem with such quiet preventive diplomacy is that it is hard to measure success, but critics are quick to lay blame. For example, it is possible—but hard to prove—that the OSCE has helped to prevent certain inter-ethnic tensions from boiling over into violent conflicts. But when fighting does break out in the OSCE area, for example, between Armenia and Azerbaijan or between Russia and Ukraine, the OSCE is considered a failure. One lesson learned is the need for “frozen” or protracted conflicts not to be forgotten simply because there are low levels of violence. Mediators need to stay the course, and leaders need to invest political capital at an early stage in a sustained way in order to reduce the risks of tensions erupting into violence. The costs of prevention are considerably lower than the costs of rebuilding lives, infrastructure, communities, and trust after a conflict.

Another concrete example of the OSCE’s role in supporting the implementation of target 16.1 is its work on small arms and light weapons (SALW), which are recognized as a major cause of death and of human rights abuses. Reflecting the OSCE’s concept of comprehensive security and working in co-operation with other international fora, OSCE participating States have developed norms, principles, and measures covering all aspects of SALW control. For example, in the 2012 OSCE Document on Small Arms and Light Weapons,<sup>21</sup> they agreed to regulate the production, transfer, storage, collection, and destruction of such weapons, and to control their exports. Such work is crucial in preventing the spread of weapons into or out of conflict zones, for example, into the hands of insurgents, terrorists, or criminal groups.

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<sup>21</sup> Adopted at the 308th Plenary Meeting of the OSCE Forum for Security Co-operation on 24 November 2000, reissued pursuant to FSC Decision No. 3/12 on the reissuing of the OSCE Document on Small Arms and Light Weapons adopted at the 686th Plenary Meeting of the Forum for Security Co-operation on 20 June 2012.

One of the SDG 16.1 indicators concerns the population feeling safe walking alone around the area they live in. In line with the OSCE's comprehensive view of security, the OSCE focuses on making communities safer, including through "community policing", for example, with many projects in the Western Balkans. Recognizing the responsibility of the police not only to detect crime but also to prevent it, supporting this role contributes to reducing the fear of crime and can improve the quality of life in communities. By establishing police-public partnerships, where the police body, government agencies, and all segments of society are actively co-operating in problem solving, the OSCE aims to achieve a shared commitment to crime prevention among both the police and public.

To address the indicators on violence against young women (both 16.1.3 and 16.2.3), the OSCE led a major survey on the well-being and safety of women, which was implemented in 2018 in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Moldova, and Ukraine.<sup>22</sup> One of the main findings was that 70% of women had experienced some form of sexual harassment, stalking, intimate partner violence, or non-partner violence (including sexual violence) since the age of 15. To address this, the OSCE's field operations carry out activities to help prevent and combat gender-based violence, including technical expertise for legislative reform processes; support for victims' access to justice; training for police officers, medical authorities, judges, prosecutors, and lawyers; and assistance for telephone hotlines and women's resource centers that provide legal and psychosocial support to victims.

#### *4.3. End Abuse, Exploitation, Trafficking, and All Forms of Violence Against and Torture of Children*

The OSCE has been active in preventing and combatting the trafficking of human beings since the mid-1990s. To help states reach target 16.2, the OSCE works through its field operations, the Office of the Special Representative and Co-ordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings and international partner organizations, to provide specialized training and expert advice to law enforcement agencies (often applying the community policing approach outlined in the section above) and NGOs, whose co-operation is considered to be crucial in combating human trafficking. The approach is victim-oriented and very much focused on children sexually abused on the internet.

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<sup>22</sup> Report available on <https://www.osce.org/secretariat/413237> (accessed on 10 March 2019).

On the topic of trafficking, the OSCE is also closely working with the UN. It co-chairs, together with UN Women, the Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons (ICAT), which is a policy forum mandated by the UN General Assembly to improve coordination among UN agencies and other relevant international organizations to facilitate a holistic and comprehensive approach to preventing and combating human trafficking.

#### *4.4. Promote the Rule of Law at the National and International Levels and Ensure Equal Access to Justice for All*

The rule of law has been a cornerstone of the OSCE since the Helsinki Final Act. Indeed, that document's ten principles provide the basis for peaceful relations between states. History has shown the dire consequences of what happens when those principles are violated.

One of the novelties of the Helsinki Final Act is that respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms (principle VII) is recognized as a guiding principle for security and co-operation within and between states. The OSCE even created an institution with a mandate to promote democratic institutions and human rights—the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR).

To ensure the quality and effectiveness of laws related to the human dimension, ODIHR supports participating States by reviewing their law-making systems and relevant legislation. It supports judicial and legislative reforms to ensure that judiciaries operate free from undue influence and promotes institutional reforms to enable key actors in the criminal justice chain to perform their duties transparently and in compliance with human rights obligations.

Another focus of the ODIHR is to provide civil society with the skills and methodology to observe trials and analyze their findings, which is done, in part, through the yearly Human Dimension Implementation Meetings (HDIM). It also observes more closely the gender aspects of fair trials and processes for the selection, evaluation, and promotion of judges, and it assists participating States in meeting OSCE commitments relating to the independence and accountability of judges. This is a good example of how regional organizations can collect and share good practices and help states put their commitments into action.



#### *4.5. By 2030, Significantly Reduce Illicit Financial and Arms Flows, Strengthen the Recovery and Return of Stolen Assets and Combat All Forms of Organized Crime*

Transnational organized crime poses a serious threat to security in the OSCE area. Therefore, there is much work to be done in reducing illicit financial and arms flows and combatting all forms of organized crime.

For example, part of the OSCE's work on Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) includes providing assistance for controlling the cross-border trafficking of SALW; the destruction of surplus SALW and stockpiles of conventional ammunition, physical security and stockpile management; and SALW collection programs.

With regard to the indicator on illicit financial flows, the OSCE supports participating States in anti-money laundering and countering the financing of terrorism, for example, by exchanging information to more effectively identify, trace, and suppress money laundering and the financing of terrorism, to promoting stolen asset recovery initiatives, strengthening international co-operation and financial investigation techniques, conducting national risk assessments, and supporting the implementation of relevant international standards.

The OSCE has done pioneering work in South-Eastern Europe on asset seizure, confiscation, and management, as well as the social re-use of assets.

#### *4.6. Substantially Reduce Corruption and Bribery in All Their Forms*

Corruption is a threat in itself, not least to governance and the effective use of public resources, as well as by diverting badly needed resources away from public services into private pockets. To combat this threat, the organization—particularly through the Office of the Coordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities—provides advice on preventing corruption and conflicts of interest, improving national anti-corruption regulatory frameworks and introducing fair and transparent public procurement procedures. The OSCE works closely with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) to promote the ratification and full implementation of the relevant international instruments to combat corruption, in particular, the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) and the Recommendations of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF).

In addition, through its field operations, the OSCE facilitates the exchange of good practices and organizes regional training activities for representatives of governments, the private sector, and civil society.

#### *4.7. Develop Effective, Accountable, and Transparent Institutions at All Levels*

Strengthening both the effectiveness and accountability (and with this the legitimacy) of national institutions is a key contribution of the OSCE in conflict prevention and peacebuilding. The ODIHR plays an important role in this regard with its good governance support in security sector institutions by engaging them and their oversight mechanisms, such as National Human Rights Institutions, Ombuds institutions, and civil society organizations. The ODIHR also supports the integration of a gender perspective into security policy making and in the implementation of the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda.

The OSCE's work on Security Sector Governance and Reform further helps states to implement Target 16.6. Profound and systematic reforms in the security sector can ensure that institutions are equipped with sufficient expertise, resources, and tools to carry out their mandate and are capable of responding to the security needs of local populations. Importantly, such reforms should also strive to strengthen transparency, accountability, and corruption prevention efforts, including through independent oversight mechanisms, participation, and consultative processes.

The OSCE has also been involved in trial monitoring, for example, for cases involving serious corruption and organized crime in the Western Balkans.

Many of the OSCE field activities offer cross-dimensional and long-term support for good and democratic governance and effective and accountable institutions, for example, by fostering sound transparency and integrity measures, effective safeguards for judicial independence, and human rights compliance, as well as by introducing e-governance solutions. This is a good example of structural prevention, very much in the spirit of SDG 16.

#### *4.8. Ensure Responsive, Inclusive, Participatory, and Representative Decision-Making at All Levels*

While the OSCE is an inter-state body, since the 1970s its principles and commitments have been an inspiration and rallying point for civil society. In the 1970s, civil society organizations in communist countries cited the commitments made in the Helsinki Final Act to hold their autocratic leaders accountable to the promises that they had made to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms. This also continued in the process of post-communist transition.

Through the work of its institutions and field activities, the OSCE works to promote responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making at all levels. This includes underscoring the importance of involving women and youth in decision-making, as well as specific recommendations on the Effective Participation of National Minorities in Public Life, also known as the Lund Recommendations.<sup>23</sup>

The Helsinki Document of 1992<sup>24</sup> called for increased openness in OSCE activities and for expanding the role of NGOs. In particular, in paragraph 15 of Chapter IV, the participating States agreed to facilitate informal discussions between representatives of governments and NGOs during OSCE meetings. Unfortunately, the space for civil society in the OSCE—like elsewhere—is shrinking. There have been crackdowns on NGOs in OSCE states (including through the use of digital tools, lawfare, and threats), and it is being made increasingly difficult for some NGOs to take part in some OSCE meetings, such as the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting. Such backsliding is dangerous in itself, but it also hampers the ability of civil society to assist in the implementation of the SDGs.

#### *4.9. Ensure Public Access to Information and Protect Fundamental Freedoms, in Accordance with National Legislation and International Agreements*

Although the support to this target may be hard to measure and quantify, the work of the OSCE on human rights and the safety of journalists clearly contributes to reaching this target. The ODIHR, working closely with OSCE field operations, provides participating States with advice and assistance, and it supports individuals and civil society with targeted training and education. It covers a broad spectrum of issues, ranging from the fundamental freedoms of religion or belief, movement, assembly, and association to reporting on the use of the death penalty, monitoring trials, and preventing torture and other forms of ill-treatment.

In addition, the Representative on Freedom of the Media has an early warning function and provides rapid response to serious non-compliance with OSCE commitments on free media and the freedom of expression. The Representative monitors the safety of journalists, particularly in cases of physical attacks, incarceration, and harassment, and responds quickly and directly with the state in question through diplomatic channels and public statements.

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<sup>23</sup> The Lund Recommendations on the Effective Participation of National Minorities in Public Life, OSCE. 1 September 1999.

<sup>24</sup> CSCE Helsinki Document, 1992.

Furthermore, the OSCE has been supporting the implementation of the Aarhus Convention<sup>25</sup> since its adoption in 1998 and has supported the establishment of a wide network of Aarhus Centres in 15 countries. These centers raise public awareness on environmental issues, facilitate citizens' access to environmental information, and promote transparency and public participation in decision-making and access to justice in environmental matters. The OSCE continues to support the activities and networking of the Aarhus Centres and strengthens their capacities in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda at local level.

*4.10. Strengthen Relevant National Institutions, Including Through International Cooperation, for Building Capacity at All Levels, in Particular in Developing Countries, to Prevent Violence and Combat Terrorism and Crime<sup>26</sup>*

In recent years, as the security environment has evolved, participating States have established mandates for the OSCE to work on security challenges that are "cross-dimensional" and transnational, such as preventing and countering violent extremism and radicalization that leads to terrorism, organized crime, trafficking in human beings, and cyber/ICT security. This work directly relates to target 16.A, which has direct relevance for the OSCE as a regional organization.

The OSCE supports "International efforts against terrorism" led by the UN, "addressing the manifestations of terrorism, as well as the various social, economic, political and other factors, which might engender conditions in which terrorist organizations could engage in recruitment and win support". It "promotes a co-operative and coordinated approach to countering terrorism at all levels, including co-ordination among national authorities, co-operation among states, co-operation with relevant international and regional organizations and, where appropriate, establishment of public-private partnerships between state authorities, the private sector, civil society and the media".

An increasingly important part of this work is its efforts to prevent violent extremism and radicalization that lead to terrorism. The OSCE "works with government officials, counter-terrorism practitioners, researchers and civil society to build up strategies, policies and good practices to prevent and counter terrorist radicalization, while upholding human rights and the rule of law".

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<sup>25</sup> Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters, adopted on 25 June 1998 in Aarhus.

<sup>26</sup> Considering the OSCE's extensive contribution within this field, one "Means of Implementation" target has been included in this list.

At the Ministerial Council in 2020, under Albania's Chairmanship, a declaration was agreed by consensus on Strengthening Cooperation in Countering Organized Crime.<sup>27</sup> It has been hard to find traction on this issue within the OSCE because of a fundamental lack of trust between Russia and the West as a result of Russia's aggression against Ukraine. However, the Secretariat and field activities have increased support to participating States, particularly in building capacity to fight cybercrime.

## 5. Conclusions

With less than five years to go until 2030, there is a growing sense of urgency and pressure on all stakeholders to accelerate the implementation of the SDGs. Regional organizations, such as the OSCE, are playing an increasingly important role in supporting their members in the implementation of the SDGs. With its inclusive membership, geographical reach, comprehensive approach to security, convening power and depth of expertise on multiple security issues, and with its institutions, field operations, and programmatic activities, the OSCE has significant capacity and potential to help implement a number of SDGs, particularly Goal 16. The OSCE's contribution is undeniably prominent in the case of SDG 16, where it plays an important role with its strong focus on prevention, co-operation, human rights, and transparent, participatory, and inclusive governance. In addition, it preceded many others in actively breaking down silos and recognizing the interrelated nature of security, development, and justice. It has a proven track record on prevention, not least through supporting the development of effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions.

Having the OSCE help its participating States implement the SDGs contributes to global, regional, and national efforts to important these important goals. This helps the UN, it helps member states, and it could also raise the OSCE's profile as a regional organization. It can also contribute to regional and cross-border co-operation to implement goals that address transboundary threats and challenges such as water management and tackling climate change.

While the implementation of the SDGs is primarily a shared responsibility of all UN Member States, even in the absence of a specific OSCE mandate and recognizing that the organization was created as a security and not a development organization, there are sufficient commitments, including in Ministerial Council decisions, that

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<sup>27</sup> OSCE MC.DOC/1/20, 4 December 2020.

explicitly link the OSCE to the 2030 Agenda. Furthermore, in most cases, the OSCE's work in implementing the SDGs does not require new mandates or resources, it is more a question of highlighting how existing activities contribute to reaching specific SDGs.

It should be emphasized that at a time of deep polarization within the OSCE, the SDGs provide a common unifying agenda that all OSCE states have endorsed at the highest level. Galvanizing joint action around the implementation of some of the SDGs, such as Goal 16, could provide a rare entry point for co-operation among OSCE states in the current difficult political environment which is hampering the organization's work.

In short, while the OSCE is a security rather than a development organization, its comprehensive approach to security and practical efforts to help states in ways that also relate to the implementation of the SDGs make the organization a useful service provider, transborder facilitator, and clearing house of good practices. It should use these advantages to continue supporting structural prevention (particularly through national infrastructures for peace), tackling all forms of violence, and preventing conflicts. The OSCE should also consider how it could explore one of the recommendations of the New Agenda for Peace, namely, developing prevention strategies with cross-regional dimensions to address transboundary threats. While this could be difficult at the pan-OSCE level because of deep divisions between Russia and the West, it could be attempted in sub-regions such as the Western Balkans, South Caucasus, or Central Asia. Pursuant to its new mandate (from 2021) on climate change and security, it could also develop regional co-operation and technical advice on climate, peace, and security, including disaster risk reduction. Dealing with more extreme weather events is something that all OSCE states have a shared interest in working together for.

In conclusion, helping states reach the SDGs is very much at the core of the OSCE's approach to security. The OSCE has positively contributed to helping its members, and its work in this area strengthens its profile as a regional arrangement of the UN. The SDGs provide a relatively uncontroversial and commonly agreed shared set of goals that can provide a forward-looking agenda for the organization as it struggles to foster co-operation at a time of deep divisions in its region.

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# Relevant Nuclear Arms Control Issues and Recommendations

Heinz Gärtner

## 1. Introduction

This text discusses several key aspects related to nuclear arms control and international agreements. The text provides insights into the complex landscape of nuclear arms control, including the history of MAD, the challenges of the INF Treaty, and the significance of the JCPOA in maintaining global security. It highlights the importance of addressing these issues to prevent nuclear proliferation and potential conflicts.

This text further discusses the prospects for denuclearization and security on the Korean Peninsula, the challenges associated with nuclear weapons prohibition, and the need for a new approach to international security. The text explores the challenges and potential solutions related to denuclearization, nuclear weapons prohibition, and international security, emphasizing the need for a fresh approach to address these pressing issues.

In the 1950s, the United States and the Soviet Union developed the concept of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) as a strategy to deter nuclear attacks. MAD relied on the idea that both sides possessed the capability to inflict maximum damage on each other, making a nuclear war unwinnable. It was not an effective war-fighting strategy, as it guaranteed mutual destruction. The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, signed in 1987 by the US and the Soviet Union, banned ground-based missiles with ranges between 500 and 5500 km. In 2019, the US withdrew from the treaty, alleging Russian violations. This withdrawal has raised concerns about the deployment of intermediate-range missiles in Europe and Asia, potentially escalating tensions.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was a 2015 agreement between Iran and major world powers to limit Iran's nuclear program and ensure it remains peaceful. The US withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018, leading to ongoing challenges in preserving the deal. The text highlights the complexity of the JCPOA's terms and verification measures.

The text then discusses the challenges in arms control, including the reluctance of nuclear powers to give up smaller nuclear weapons within their escalation ladder.



It also addresses concerns about China's missile capabilities and the potential for nuclear deployments in Europe and Asia.

The article also provides potential solutions and recommendations. It suggests that the JCPOA would have been the best solution to reduce nuclear proliferation fears, boost Iran's economy, and improve trade with Europe. Since the negotiations entered into a stalemate, the alternatives would be the possibility of regional arms control talks and confidence-building measures.

The text argues that attempts to denuclearize North Korea will fail unless there are political conditions in place to guarantee the country's independence. It questions whether the unification of the two Koreas is a viable solution and suggests that a more realistic path to unification could be through neutrality. The text references the Finnish and Austrian models as potential approaches for achieving a neutral position in the Korean context. "Finlandization" involves changing North Korea's mutual defense treaty with China to resemble the one the Soviet Union had with Finland. This would guarantee North Korea's independence and security without posing a threat to China. Meanwhile, South Korea could aspire to follow an Austrian model of neutrality, which involved military disengagement and a nuclear-weapons-free status.

After the critique of nuclear deterrence, the text suggests the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) as an alternative norm. Nuclear deterrence would promote hostility, encourage conventional wars, and lead to nuclear proliferation. In addition, nuclear deterrence bears inherent risks, such as miscalculations and technical accidents.

The TPNW was adopted by 122 state parties in 2017 and entered into force in 2021. Notably, none of the nuclear-armed states or their allies participated in the vote, except for the Netherlands, which voted against the Treaty. The TPNW expresses concern about the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons and calls for their complete elimination. The Treaty highlights the divergence between nuclear-armed states, which rely on the concept of nuclear deterrence, and non-nuclear-armed states, which seek the prohibition of nuclear weapons. The nuclear-armed states argue that the global elimination of nuclear weapons is not realistic and that deterrence is necessary for their security. They oppose the TPNW. The text concludes by expressing concern about the resurgence of nuclear threats and arms races. It suggests that a new approach to international security is needed, citing the Helsinki Final Act of 1975 and the Congress of Vienna in 1815 as historical examples of successful peace-building efforts. It emphasizes the importance of cooperative

security, humanitarian values, and the involvement of neutral and non-aligned states in shaping future security arrangements.

## **2. Nuclear Arms Control Issues**

### *Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD)*

In the 1950s, the nuclear superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, developed the strategy of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD). It boiled down to the capacity to inflict maximum damage on an adversary. It was meant to deter the nuclear adversary from an attack. Deterrence means “the persuasion of a potential enemy to avoid certain actions in his own interest.” (Schelling 1960, p. 9). Deterrence is linked to the capability to retaliate if attacked or threatened with a nuclear attack. However, the concept of MAD as a war-fighting strategy was ineffective. If one side started a nuclear war and the other responded symmetrically, no side would survive in the end. Mutually assured destruction was guaranteed.

To avoid this dilemma, mutual deterrence had to be organized in a certain sophisticated way. Nuclear weapons became smaller. Several strategies were developed to control a possible escalation. NATO adopted the strategy of “flexible response”: small tactical nukes should be used against a conventional attack by the Warsaw Pact; retaliation could escalate in several steps (for example, through the deployment of intermediate and later of strategic nuclear weapons). The aim was to achieve escalation dominance—not only to be capable of striking first but also striking last. Missiles with multiple warheads (MIRVs—multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles), deeply buried in silos and transportable on tracks and trucks, were expected to survive the first strike. Again, there was no guarantee that one side could ever reach this aim.

## **3. The INF Treaty Is Dead; Small Nuclear Weapons Emerge; the War in Ukraine**

In line with this thinking, the USSR developed ground-based ballistic missiles (SS-20) which were about to be deployed on the territory of Eastern European allies in the seventies. The USA had medium-range ballistic missiles (Pershing II) and cruise missiles available to be deployed in Western Europe. This led to NATO’s “double-track decision” in 1979 to station these missiles and simultaneously begin negotiations on these missiles with the Soviet Union. Soon the Europeans discovered that they could become the war theater of a nuclear exchange between the two superpowers, which, in turn, might come out of such battle unscathed. The intention of the Europeans thus was to prevent any possibility of a limited nuclear war on

their continent, which in turn triggered a massive peace movement against the planned deployment of intermediate-range missiles. These developments led to the conclusion of the INF Treaty in 1987. It was signed by US President Ronald Reagan and Soviet General Secretary Michael Gorbachev and prohibited ground-based missiles with a range between 500 and 5500 km.

In February 2019, US President Trump suspended the Treaty and withdrew from it in August. Russia followed suit. The US and Russia blamed each other of having violated the Treaty. The US claimed that Russia's SSC-8 missiles had a range of 2000 kilometers, which Russia denied. In turn, Russia accused the USA that their missile defense systems deployed in Poland and Romania could easily be loaded with nuclear-capable Tomahawk cruise missiles, which are currently sea-based.

These technological deficiencies could probably have been fixed by enhanced verification mechanisms and some update of the Treaty. The real reasons for leaving the INF Treaty can be found elsewhere. First, nuclear superpowers are not willing to renounce smaller nuclear weapons within their escalation ladder. In its Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) of 2018, the US announced a new generation of low-yield nuclear weapons: "Expanding flexible U.S. nuclear options now, to include low-yield options, is important for the preservation of credible deterrence against regional aggression." (Department of Defense 2018). The NPR argues that this flexible nuclear option would raise the nuclear threshold. This might be true, but at the same time, it makes the use of nuclear weapons more likely. According to the Pentagon, Russia developed a strategy of "escalation to deescalate", which is based on the same idea of using small nuclear weapons until the other side blinks. The second reason for the abandonment of the INF Treaty is China's arsenal of medium-range missiles. China relies heavily on ground-based medium-range missiles, which constitute 80% of its missile program. The US is not the only one who now feels free from constraints to deploy intermediate-range missiles in Asia. Already in 2007 at the Munich Security Conference, Russian President Putin complained about the existence of Chinese medium-range missiles. Russian officials repeated these complaints time and time again.

After the abandonment of the INF Treaty the US and Russia are now free to deploy these types of missiles in Europe and in Asia. Russian missiles can be deployed in the Russian enclave Kaliningrad; they also can be stationed in Russia's Far East. In June 2023, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that Russia would deploy some of its smaller nuclear weapons to Belarus.

The USA can deploy their missiles on the territory of certain NATO allies. Some of them, such as Poland and the Baltic states, have already hinted that they would

be willing to do so. Poland stated in July 2023 that it would participate in nuclear sharing with the US. It might deploy B61 nuclear bombs and the Polish Air Force would operate them. Other nuclear sharing agreements are those between the United States and its NATO partners Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Turkey. If tensions between NATO—with the US in the driving seat—and Russia exacerbate, Europe could be considered once again a theater for a nuclear exchange. So far, no political protest or organized peace movement against this development, as in the 1980s, is visible.

The US already announced in August 2019, immediately after the Treaty officially expired, that it would deploy cruise missiles to Asia. This would also be possible on the territory of Japanese and South Korean allies, from where they could reach China.

For Russia, with the deployment of missiles with a warning time of a couple of minutes, the situation would look like a Cuba crisis of 1962 reversed, when Soviet missiles on Cuba could have reached US territory within minutes. Russia argued that, with its invasion in Ukraine, it wanted to prevent nuclear missiles from being stationed in the country. Ever since, President Putin has made references to Russia's own nuclear weapons.

The US president's idea to negotiate a major new deal with the inclusion not only of the US and Russia but also of China, India, and Iran is no more than window dressing. China cannot negotiate 80% of its missiles. India and Pakistan have refused to negotiate their nuclear weapons since they started testing them in 1998. There still is a UN Security Council Resolution in place (1172) that prohibits all further nuclear weapons activities of the two countries. They ignored the Resolution, and the UN tacitly did not implement the related sanctions. This is in sharp contrast to "the maximum pressure" of the US towards other countries. Israel will not negotiate its nuclear weapons in this large multilateral context. After all, why should the US embrace such a cumbersome multilateral treaty when other international treaties and multilateralism have been largely dispensed?

The rejection of constraining treaties also included the New START Treaty of 2011, which limits the number of intercontinental strategic nuclear warheads to 1550 and their launchers to 700. It was suspended by Russia in 2023. This Treaty would have been a limitation to "escalation dominance". "Escalation dominance" should ensure that the US controls every step of a nuclear escalation until the last strike. Nuclear weapon powers want to reserve themselves not only the first strike capability with small weapons but also the last strike on the strategic level. A limitation of strategic weapons might be an obstacle to control the escalation on the highest level.

#### **4. The Iran Nuclear Deal (JCPOA) Is Being Suffocated; Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones (NWFZs)**

In July 2015, in Vienna, the EU-3 (France, Germany, and the United Kingdom) and three other UN Security Council members (US, China, and Russia) negotiated an agreement with Iran that limited Iran's nuclear program. Besides major restrictions on Iran's uranium enrichment, the agreement includes very intrusive verification provisions. Every full stop and comma have been agreed upon. The lifting of nuclear-related sanctions allowing for a normalization of trade and economic relations with Iran constitutes an essential part of the JCPOA. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action is, with its 164 pages, the best-negotiated arms control agreement in history.

The agreement contains no time limits on Iran's capability to acquire nuclear weapons. The timeframe for some restrictions is limited from ten to thirty years. Critics of the JCPOA, like the Trump administration and Israel, called them "sunset clauses". Other provisions, like those concerning verification in the framework of the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), do not have a time limit. There is a ten-year restriction on new centrifuges, which does not expire until 2025. The twenty-year limit on the monitoring of centrifuges by the IAEA will not expire before 2035. Iran's uranium stockpile is reduced by 98% and must not be exceeded until 2031, and its enrichment must be kept below 3.67% for fifteen years. Research and development must take place only at Natanz until 2024. The underground facility Fordo will be converted into a research center and no enrichment will be permitted there until 2031. The twenty-five-year limit on uranium ore monitoring expires in 2040.

The implementation of the Additional Protocol, which is part of the agreement, would allow for unannounced inspections to be at first provisional and later permanent. As long as Iran remains a party to the NPT, its consent not to proliferate and to allow unrestricted access to its nuclear sites for the IAEA will never expire. Furthermore, in the preamble of the JCPOA, the parties to the Agreement "ensure that Iran's nuclear program will be exclusively peaceful" and "Iran reaffirms that under no circumstances" will it "ever seek, develop or acquire any nuclear weapons". In addition, the JCPOA was endorsed by Resolution 2231 of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), which made it legally binding under international law. Consequently, the unilateral withdrawal of the US from the JCPOA is a violation of international law.

It is not an exaggeration to say that no other existing arms control agreement reaches the level of the JCPOA in the detail and profoundness of its verification

provisions. If the United States had not stepped out of the deal, its importance would have been similar to that of the NPT, concluded in 1968. The JCPOA could also have become a model agreement for other denuclearization cases, such as resolving the situation around the North Korean nuclear program.

US President Trump withdrew the US from the JCPOA in May 2018 and signed a presidential memorandum to re-impose all US sanctions lifted or waived in connection with the Iran deal. This move is in contradiction with the UNSC Resolution 2231, which requests that “the development of normal economic and trade contacts and cooperation with Iran” be promoted and facilitated as an essential part of the JCPOA.

The European efforts to protect the JCPOA from the effects of the US’s withdrawal, with the activation of a European financial mechanism (the Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges or INSTEX) which was designed to counter the impact of US sanctions, failed. European companies, buckling under US pressure, have dragged out INSTEX’s implementation and have reduced its initial scope in hopes of avoiding a punitive response from the Trump administration. Although the European Union does not recognize the extra-territorial application of laws adopted by third countries, such as the United States, it failed to apply this so-called blocking statute.

There were two controversial issues that remained. First, Iran wanted more guarantees if the US unilaterally terminated the agreement again. However, Iran’s demand for watertight guarantees cannot exist. Great powers always have a tendency to break treaties, even international law.

Second, the International Atomic Energy Agency’s (IAEA) clarification of the contaminated particles within the framework of the “safeguards agreements” in connection with the so-called past military activities (PMAs) remained open. In August 2022, the High Representative of the EU submitted a text as a compromise proposal. This conflict, which should have been settled outside of the JCPOA, threatened to become the JCPOA’s stumbling block. However, Iran demanded that the PMA case with the IAEA be closed.

Subsequent reports by the IAEA noted that Iran had stockpiled enough 60 percent-enriched uranium to make a weapon. However, Iran would need to be enriched to ninety percent, something Iran had ruled out. This was not surprising, as Iran had announced since early August 2022 that it would be feeding hexafluoride gas into the new centrifuges. Iran had four tons of enriched uranium in storage at the time. In the 2015 agreement, Iran was only given about three hundred kilograms of uranium with a degree of enrichment of 3.67%.

In June 2023, Director General of the IAEA Raphael Grossi accepted Iran's explanation of one of the contaminated traces as plausible but did not "close" the case. At the Board of Governments Meeting of the IAEA in June 2023, Germany, France, and Great Britain in a joint statement accused Iran of endangering the international nuclear agreement but confirmed that they remained committed to the JCPOA. At this point, the talks threatened to collapse altogether.

## **5. Potential Solutions and Recommendations for Regional Arms Control**

Iran, instead of withdrawing step by step from the agreement, as it started to do in summer 2019, could have offered some proposals for the talks with the US. Iran could suggest regional arms control negotiations that address the missile issue also outside the JCPOA (Gärtner 2019). They could include other regional powers. Other heavy weapons could be included as well. A model could be the 1990 CFE Treaty on conventional forces in Europe. The talks could be accompanied by confidence-building measures, such as exchange of military information and notification of certain military activities. The provisions of the Vienna document could serve as an example. The European signatory states of the JCPOA could make efforts to promote a security dialogue. Already from 1992 to 1994, many Middle Eastern states, including Israel, were engaged in arms control and regional security talks, which failed, however, because of the Egyptian–Israeli conflict over nuclear disarmament (Erästö 2018).

There is no reasonable alternative to the nuclear deal. The deal may be a more effective way of preventing an Iranian nuclear weapon than no deal. The success of the negotiations can significantly reduce fears of nuclear proliferation, significantly improve Iran's economy, normalize trade with Europe, and help ease Europe's energy crisis.

A failure of the Vienna negotiations and their implementation could have far-reaching consequences. Iran would continue to expand its nuclear program without directly building a nuclear weapon. That would be enough for Israel to attack the nuclear facilities and other targets and try to drag the US into the conflict. As the US midterm elections of November 2022 approached, President Biden became increasingly reluctant to even discuss the deal in Congress.

Both the USA and Iran would be responsible for a failure of the agreement. They continued to harden their positions during the negotiations. The US has offered no incentives to Iran and has instead imposed more and more sanctions. Iran, in turn, has demanded an impossible full resolution of obstacles and has

led the modernization of its nuclear program close to nuclear weapons capability (Gärtner 2022).

## **6. Can the Korean Peninsula Be Neutralized and Denuclearized?**

All attempts to denuclearize North Korea will fail as long as international political conditions to guarantee the independence of North Korea are missing. Solving the nuclear issue presupposes its political prerequisites to be addressed. Will this be possible within a divided peninsula, or should the unification of the two countries be aspired for?

When discussing Korean reunification, it is often the German experience of 1989-90 that is cited as a model for the peninsula. Obviously, there are parallels: a people with one language and shared history, divided by decades of separation, with two separate economies, political systems, and opposing ideologies. However, the geopolitical situations between Germany and Korea are very different. The unification of Germany became possible only because the Soviet Union disappeared. The geopolitical context in Northeast Asia, by and large, has stayed the same since the end of the Korean War of 1953. Therefore, the situation of the Koreas today should be compared to the situation in Central Europe in the early days of the Cold War, not its end. A realistic path to unification is the one Germany explicitly rejected, namely through neutrality.

The question is not whether a reunified Korea should be neutral, but how to achieve that. The concepts of “Finlandization” and “Austriazation” are a way for unification if both Koreas took steps toward neutralization separately at the beginning (Lottaz and Gärtner 2023).

First, one can discuss the “Finlandization” of North Korea. What is meant with this is a change in the DPRK–China mutual defense treaty toward a security agreement akin to the one the Soviet Union used to have with Finland, guaranteeing Moscow that Finnish territory would not only be off-limits to its adversaries but that the Finns were contractually, but not universally, bound to the defense of the Soviet Union.

For North Korea, one can reason in analogous terms. Since China is a great power with a nuclear triad and all possible capabilities of self-defense, the only real danger Beijing faces from the Korean peninsula is the stationing of hostile nuclear or conventional assets near its southern border. To China, North Korea’s strategic value is the buffer function it plays.

Secondly, South Korea could aspire to follow an Austrian model to achieve a neutral position of its own. In the immediate aftermath of World War II, Austria



was divided into four major zones and jointly occupied by the United States, Britain, and France in the West and South and the Soviet Union in the East of the country. Therefore, a danger of partition existed, similar to the one in Germany. This development was accepted by the Soviet Union, mainly because Austria did not become a member of NATO.

In terms of military capabilities, some neutral countries—foremost Sweden and Switzerland—experimented with the development of nuclear weapons, reasoning that such capabilities would be necessary to independently defend their territories in case of a hostile (Soviet) intervention. Austria, in contrast, quickly became a model for the concept of a Central European nuclear-weapons-free zone (NWFZ), a concept that gained momentum through the so-called Rapacki Plan (named after a Polish foreign minister), prescribing military disengagement from the blocs and a nuclear-free status of the participating states.

The Korean Peninsula would eventually be a nuclear-weapons-free zone (NWFZ). NWFZs are linked to Negative Security Assurances (NSAs), which are the commitment by nuclear weapons states not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against a nuclear-weapons-free state. NSAs are the opposite of extended deterrence, which is the promise to use nuclear weapons if an ally (e.g., South Korea) is attacked or threatened by attack.

## **7. Can Nuclear Weapons Be Prohibited?**

At a United Nations Conference on 7 July 2017, 122 state parties voted in favor of a Treaty that prohibited nuclear weapons (TPNW). The Treaty entered into force in January 2021. None of the nuclear-armed states, or their allies, participated in the vote (with the exception of the Netherlands, which voted against the Treaty). The Ban Treaty expresses concern about the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of the use of nuclear weapons and calls for their complete elimination. The Treaty calls for the full implementation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), including the disarmament obligations of nuclear-armed states (Article VI). The Treaty should close the gap between the commitment of non-nuclear-armed states and their actions. However, it is very unlikely that the nuclear states will give up their nuclear weapons anytime soon (Gärtner 2018).

Ultimately, the positions of states who want to keep nuclear weapons and those who want to abolish them are not compatible. Even though the catastrophic consequences of the use of nuclear weapons are widely recognized, nuclear-armed states remain convinced by the concept of nuclear deterrence, which they believe protects them from a nuclear or massive conventional attack. Nuclear weapon states

emphasize the importance of deterrence. NATO allies rely on nuclear weapons. NATO's Deterrence and Defence Posture Review of 20 May 2012 states "As long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance." (NATO 2012). This phrase has been reiterated in every NATO Communiqué ever since.

Therefore, nuclear weapon states and all NATO states oppose the Ban Treaty. Their main arguments are that the global elimination of nuclear weapons is not realistic (North Korea is cited as an example), and that the knowledge of nuclear fission and fusion would not disappear—meaning that any country could at any given moment reintroduce nuclear weapons (Kamp 2017). While the Washington Treaty, NATO's founding treaty, contains a mutual defense commitment (Article V), there is no reference to nuclear deterrence. NATO members strongly believe that nuclear deterrence does work, because there was no nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union. In contrast, proponents of the Ban Treaty argue that we do not know if this is true, since the negative, i.e., something that did not happen, cannot be proven. The avoidance of nuclear war between the two Cold War superpowers likely resulted from a combination of political and military factors, including détente, arms control negotiations, confidence-building measures, and cooperative security.

Indeed, mutual deterrence and complete disarmament are opposing concepts. Nuclear-armed states agree that nuclear war should be prevented, but they do not rule out that nuclear weapons should be used in self-defense "only in the most extreme circumstances". (Office of the Secretary of Defense 2018). They argue that with the Ban Treaty in place, the effectiveness of deterrence would be lost (Kamp 2017).

The Ban Treaty expresses concern about the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of the use of nuclear weapons and calls for their complete elimination. Advocates of the Treaty think that nuclear deterrence is only credible if the nuclear-armed adversaries permanently demonstrate that they are serious about using nuclear weapons. This relies on the principle of mutually assured destruction, which, as explained earlier, threatens with self-destruction. Indeed, the lessons of mutual nuclear deterrence, in both theory and practice, demonstrate that deterrence has several problems:

- The announced intention to annihilate large parts of humanity is both unlawful and immoral.
- Nuclear deterrence is only credible if the adversaries permanently demonstrate that they are serious about using nuclear weapons.

- Deterrence does not prevent conventional wars. Nuclear powers were involved in conventional wars in Korea, Vietnam, the Falklands, Israel, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Ukraine did not feel deterred by Russian nuclear threats. Two nuclear powers, India and Pakistan, went to war in 1999. Moreover, possession of nuclear weapons could encourage conventional provocation or backing for terrorist groups. Russia might have felt invincible as a nuclear weapons state when it attacked Ukraine in 2022.
- Nuclear deterrence is not necessary to avoid a nuclear war if there is a nuclear-weapons-free world. No nuclear weapons can prevent a nuclear war better.
- The concept only works with rational actors. It requires adversaries to rely on each other to respect deterrence and adhere to its principles. Furthermore, they have to communicate with each other and understand each other's signals.
- Deterrence promotes hostility and mistrust when adversaries permanently threaten each other.
- Reliance on mutual deterrence causes nuclear proliferation and arms races. This was evident during the Cold War, but it is also true for other regional conflicts, such as India–Pakistan.
- Deterrence can create instability and dangerous situations through miscalculations, miscommunication, and technical accidents.
- The threat of nuclear retaliation is useless against terrorists.
- Mutual deterrence is expensive because it requires continuous modernization and the development and production of new weapons to close real and assumed loopholes in the system.
- If a nuclear war broke out, which deterrence was supposed to prevent, it would be a global disaster.

The argument that the TPNW has flaws is hypercritical. There is no perfect arms control treaty. The Treaty on Strategic Offensive Forces Reduction (SORT) of 2002 contains almost no inspection provisions; the Vienna nuclear agreement with Iran (JCPOA) has a very intrusive verification mechanism and, nevertheless, the US Administration and Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu have expressed serious concerns about it; the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO) operates a far-reaching verification regime, even though the treaty itself is not in force yet; the Chemical Weapons Convention has an elaborate inspection system and yet chemical weapons can be hidden and produced relatively easily. It seems plausible that by focusing on its alleged shortcomings, some critics are seeking to divert attention from the broader goals of the Ban Treaty.

Is there a way forward? It appears that nuclear-armed states will not join the TPNW anytime soon, nor give up their nuclear weapons. Is there room for compromise? What could they offer to non-nuclear weapon states instead? Nuclear states could promise not to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states. These NSAs are enshrined in the documents of the NPT Review conferences and in the US Nuclear Posture Review. This is not asking for too much. NSAs are less of a commitment than non-first-use pledges. An unconditional NSA commitment by nuclear weapon states would remove all non-nuclear weapon states from the target list. In contrast, a true non-first-use doctrine would have to remove conventional, chemical, and biological weapons from the target list and would apply to non-nuclear and nuclear states alike. These NSAs must be legally binding in order to be meaningful. Nuclear weapons states would have to sign and ratify the legally binding protocols of the treaties on nuclear-weapons-free zones (NWFZs), which contain NSAs. These NSAs are the only commitments of nuclear weapons states to these treaties.

## **8. Conclusion: A New Security and Cooperation Final Act, or a New Vienna Congress**

The use of nuclear weapons seems to become a frightening possibility again. International arms control treaties are being discarded. The INF Treaty is dead, new nuclear weapons are being deployed in Europe, the negotiations of JCPOA are locked in stalemate, and the New START Treaty has been suspended. North Korea will not give up its nuclear weapons before appropriate political conditions are fulfilled. Neutrality for Korea might be a long-term solution. The war of Russia against Ukraine is accompanied with nuclear threats. The TPNW is largely ignored by nuclear weapon states. A new peace movement is not visible yet. However, political solutions to reduce tensions would be possible.

Advocates of deterrence strongly believe that nuclear deterrence does work because there was no nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union. But the avoidance of nuclear war between the two Cold War superpowers also necessitated factors such as arms control negotiations, confidence-building measures, and cooperation in the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe and in other regimes and institutions. A world without nuclear weapons, which the TPNW aims to bring about, would be the best guarantee to avoid nuclear war.

The nuclear arms race and increasing tensions in Europe have led to the idea of reversing this tendency. Increasing security by intensifying military capacity would exacerbate the offensive–defensive security dilemma. Instead, security should be

enhanced by reducing the threat level. Once the war in Ukraine is over, new security arrangements will have to be considered. The Helsinki Final Act of 1975 and the subsequent process could provide a guideline for resolving current conflicts without copying them.

The Helsinki Final Act of 1975 contains instruments beyond pure power politics which were successful in the past and still are very timely. It expresses European values best. It does not identify enemies, not even opponents or adversaries, while most security and defense strategies define other states as “opponents”, “adversaries”, and “enemies”. The document requests cooperative security and views security as indivisible. It develops a Decalogue of humanitarian values and supports economic cooperation. It allows for the changing of borders, but only peacefully and with consensus.

The CSCE (Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe) process would not have been possible without the mediation of the neutral and non-aligned (N+N) states of Austria, Finland, Sweden, Switzerland, and Yugoslavia. For such a future conference on security and cooperation, neutral and non-aligned states (also from the Global South) will be indispensable. The location will not be Helsinki anymore, because Finland joined the military alliance NATO, but another neutral place.

Another historical analogy is the Congress of Vienna of 1815. After the Napoleonic Wars, all major European powers designed a European peace order which kept the peace for hundred years, with the interruption of the wars of unification in the middle of the century. The system was based on a mix between a balance of power and common norms.

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# Justice on the Plate: How Food Security Shapes a Path to Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions

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## 1. Introduction

Food security is increasingly recognized as a cornerstone of peaceful, just, and stable societies. Far from being a narrow concern limited to caloric intake, food security encompasses the availability, accessibility, use, and stability of food resources in ways that respect human dignity, support sustainable systems, and promote social equity. Within this broader framework, the interdependencies between food security, peace, justice, and strong institutions emerge as both conceptually and empirically significant (Maxwell 1996; Liebig et al. 2022; Béné and Devereux 2023).

The aim of this chapter is to examine these complex, multidirectional relationships, with particular focus on how food security not only contributes to but is also shaped by the state of peace, justice, and institutional strength. Rather than framing these connections in purely linear or causal terms, the chapter adopts a virtuous cycle perspective: food security can foster greater social stability, equity, and effective governance, while these same conditions in turn create enabling environments for achieving and sustaining food security.

The link between food security and peace is particularly pronounced. Food insecurity can act as a destabilizing force, fueling grievances, exacerbating inequalities, and increasing the risk of conflict—especially in fragile or resource-limited regions. Conversely, food systems that ensure stability and sufficiency can mitigate tensions, build community resilience, and support long-term peacebuilding (Clapp et al. 2022; Kemmerling et al. 2022; Lile et al. 2023).

Justice and equity are not just outcomes of food security; they are also conditions for its achievement. The equitable distribution of food resources, protection of vulnerable populations, and legal recognition of the right to food are essential for any food system that aspires to be just. Failure to meet these criteria leads to systemic marginalization and erodes the social fabric. In contrast, promoting justice within food systems—through inclusive policies and legal frameworks—strengthens societal cohesion and ensures more equitable access to nutrition (Fleetwood 2020; Klassen and Murphy 2020; Nisbett et al. 2022).



Strong and accountable institutions play a double role: they are both drivers and outcomes of food system transformation. Governments, civil society, and international bodies are essential actors in developing policies that ensure sustainability, transparency, and resilience. At the same time, the existence of stable food systems strengthens institutional legitimacy and public trust—crucial elements for social and political stability (Mbow et al. 2020; Barrett 2021; Clapp et al. 2022; Lile et al. 2023).

By exploring these dynamic interconnections, this chapter proposes a deeper understanding of how food security is both a foundation and a reflection of peace, justice, and strong institutions. Recognizing this mutual reinforcement is essential for developing coherent strategies and policies that promote inclusive and sustainable development in a rapidly changing world.

## **2. Materials and Methods for Analyzing the Interdependencies Between Food Security, Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions**

In this chapter, an interdisciplinary methodology has been adopted to investigate the complex relationships between food security, peace, justice, and strong institutions. The methodology used involves a combination of theoretical analysis, case studies, and data collection from credible and relevant sources.

### *2.1. Data Sources*

To gain a comprehensive perspective on the subject, various data sources were used. Therefore, the information presented in this chapter is based on an extensive review of both the peer-reviewed and gray literature.

An in-depth review of the existing literature on food security, peace, justice, and strong institutions was conducted. The sources included academic articles, research reports, books, and publications from international organizations. Databases such as Web of Science, Scopus, Google Scholar, and JSTOR were used to identify and access relevant papers.

Statistical data and reports provided by international organizations such as the United Nations (UN), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the World Food Programme (WFP), the World Bank, and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) were essential for understanding the global context of food security and assessing its impact on peace and justice.

To illustrate the relationships between food security, peace, justice, and strong institutions, case studies from different regions of the world have been selected. These case studies provide concrete examples of how food insecurity has influenced

conflict and social stability, as well as how food security policies have been successfully implemented.

## *2.2. Methods*

A systematic literature review was conducted to identify relevant studies and extract the necessary data. This involved the use of specific keywords (food security, food insecurity, determinants of food insecurity, the link between food security and peace, the link between food security and justice, the link between food security and institutions) and rigorous selection criteria to ensure the quality and relevance of the sources included.

Different theoretical frameworks have been explored to better understand the interdependencies between food security, peace, justice, and strong institutions. This involved reviewing the academic literature to identify the relevant theories and build a sound conceptual framework.

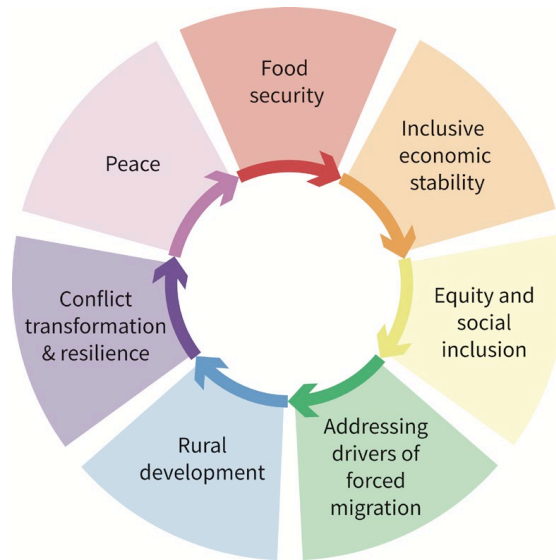
Data collected from various sources were compared to reveal significant patterns and relationships. This approach allowed for the identification of common factors that influence food security and how it in turn influences peace, justice, and institutions. Content analysis was applied to examining and interpreting qualitative data obtained from the literature, reports, and interviews. This method enabled the identification of emerging themes and patterns from the data collected. Case studies were selected and analyzed to concretely illustrate the relationships between food security and peace, justice, and institutions. This method provided detailed and contextual examples that enriched the overall understanding of the subject.

The methodology used in this chapter was designed to provide a comprehensive and rigorous analysis of the complex relationships between food security, peace, justice, and institutions. By combining different data sources and research methods, the aim was to obtain an integrative and well-grounded perspective that contributes to understanding and addressing global food security challenges.

## **3. The Interdependencies Between Food Security and Peace**

The impact of food security on global and regional peace is profound and complex. Food insecurity destabilizes economies, affects social cohesion, and amplifies tensions between groups and communities (Kemmerling et al. 2022; Medina et al. 2024). On the other hand, ensuring sustainable food security contributes to reducing vulnerabilities, promotes social cohesion, and facilitates long-term stability (Balan et al. 2020; Belinga Ewoti 2024). Understanding these interdependencies is essential for designing coherent policies that address structural drivers of conflict

and instability. By framing food security as both a prerequisite and a pathway to peace, new opportunities emerge for integrated responses that promote inclusive development, social equity, and conflict transformation (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** The cycle from food security to peace. Food insecurity is not just a local problem but has significant implications for international stability and relations between states (Kemmerling et al. 2022). The impact of food security on peace can be analyzed from multiple perspectives, including economic and social aspects. Source: Figure by authors.

### *3.1. The Impact of Food Security on Global and Regional Peace*

Food security plays a critical role in maintaining and promoting global and regional peace. Ensuring access to sufficient and nutritious food for all members of society contributes to social and economic stability, reducing the risk of conflict. Food stability helps prevent social and political tensions that can lead to violent conflict (Kemmerling et al. 2022; Medina et al. 2024).

### Box 1. Inclusive economic stability.

#### **- Economic stability in China**

*China provides a notable example of how deliberate investments in food security can contribute to macroeconomic stability. Over the past few decades, the Chinese government has implemented policies aimed at achieving self-sufficiency in staple food production, including substantial investment in irrigation, seed technologies, and rural infrastructure (Niu et al. 2022; Erokhin et al. 2022). These measures have helped stabilize domestic food supplies and mitigate price volatility, which in turn has supported national efforts to control inflation. However, the Chinese model has also faced critiques, particularly regarding its environmental sustainability and the marginalization of smallholder farmers in favor of large-scale industrial agriculture. Although food security has played a role in China's economic stability, it has been achieved within a broader policy framework that prioritizes growth, often at the cost of social and ecological equity (Zeng et al. 2025).*

#### **- The “Zero Hunger” program in Brazil**

*The Brazilian “Zero Hunger” program, launched in 2003, is often cited as a pioneering initiative that linked food security to economic and social development. Through a combination of targeted subsidies for small-scale farmers, school feeding programs, and direct support for low-income families, the program aimed to ensure universal access to adequate nutrition while stimulating local economies (Da Silva et al. 2011). Evaluations indicate that the “Zero Hunger” program contributed to poverty reduction and improvements in public health, which in turn reinforced productivity and economic inclusion. However, the program's long-term impact has been subject to debate, especially in light of political changes and funding cuts that have weakened its institutional sustainability. Furthermore, critics have noted that structural inequalities in land access and market concentration remain major barriers to fully equitable food systems in Brazil (Dyngeland et al. 2020).*

#### **- Agricultural policies in the European Union**

*The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) of the European Union is often highlighted as a key mechanism for ensuring food security and economic stability across Member States. Initially designed to increase agricultural productivity and stabilize food markets, the CAP has played a significant role in reducing rural poverty and promoting regional cohesion through direct subsidies and market interventions (European Commission n.d.; Borghi 2023). However, the CAP has also been widely criticized for disproportionately favoring large-scale agribusinesses, contributing to environmental degradation and failing to sufficiently address the needs of smallholders and sustainable food systems. Furthermore, concerns persist about its effectiveness in promoting resilience to climate change and food system equity (Pe'er et al. 2019; Siekierski 2018; Buckwell et al. 2017). Although the CAP has contributed to the stability of food prices in the EU, a more nuanced analysis reveals that its benefits have not been evenly distributed and that further reforms are needed to align economic stability with environmental and social justice objectives.*

### 3.1.1. Inclusive Economic Stability

Stable and equitable access to food plays a fundamental role in promoting economic stability. By minimizing fluctuations in food availability and prices, food

security reduces inflationary pressures and helps governments avoid economic shocks that can lead to broader social unrest (Trasca et al. 2024; World Food Programme 2024d). Price stability in food markets is essential for preserving household purchasing power, especially among vulnerable populations, and acts as a safeguard against extreme poverty and economic marginalization. Furthermore, food security directly improves public health and labor productivity, laying the foundation for sustainable economic growth and long-term poverty reduction. A well-nourished population is more likely to enjoy better health outcomes, achieve higher levels of education, and actively participate in economic life. These conditions are mutually reinforcing in a virtuous cycle, in which improved nutrition fosters human capital development, which in turn strengthens economic performance and societal resilience (FAO et al. 2023) (Box 1).

### 3.1.2. Equity and Social Inclusion

Food security plays a critical role in fostering social cohesion by reducing disparities in access to basic resources and promoting inclusive development. When communities have reliable access to adequate and culturally appropriate food, tensions between ethnic, religious, or socio-economic groups are less likely to escalate. Equitable food systems also help build trust between citizens and institutions, enhancing the legitimacy of public governance and the social fabric of society (Mbow et al. 2020; Clapp et al. 2022). However, food security initiatives must go beyond addressing caloric needs—they must be designed to promote dignity, inclusion, and shared responsibility, particularly in fragile or post-conflict contexts, where food can serve as both a means of reconciliation and a source of division (Box 2).

### 3.1.3. Addressing Food Insecurity as a Driver of Forced Migration

Food insecurity is increasingly recognized as a key driver of forced displacement, particularly in rural and climate-vulnerable regions. When communities lose access to sufficient, safe, and culturally appropriate food, they may be forced to migrate in search of basic survival conditions, often in hardship and without legal protection (FAO et al. 2023). Strengthening local food systems therefore plays a preventative role in reducing structural pressures that lead to involuntary migration. However, it is essential to distinguish between forced migration and voluntary mobility, the latter of which can serve as an adaptive strategy and a right protected by international law (IOM 2022; Czaika and de Haas 2017; Zetter 2015). Policies aiming to prevent displacement should not restrict freedom of movement but rather address the root causes, such as chronic food insecurity, land degradation, and rural poverty, that

make migration involuntary. In this context, food security should be seen not as a tool to limit populations but as a means to promote agency, dignity, and stability in people's place of origin (Box 3).

**Box 2. Equity and social inclusion.**

**- National Nutrition Program of India**

*India's "Mid-Day Meal Scheme" is one of the largest school feeding programs in the world and has been widely recognized for its contributions to improving both food security and social inclusion (Mid-Day Meal Scheme 2019). By providing free and nutritious lunches to children in public and government-aided schools, the program has increased school enrollment and attendance, particularly among children from disadvantaged castes, religious minorities, and economically marginalized families (Afridi 2010; Bandiera and Imran 2002). Beyond its nutritional value, the program has served as a platform for social integration, encouraging children from diverse backgrounds to share meals in communal spaces. However, challenges to its implementation remain: disparities in the quality of meals across states, caste-based discrimination in serving or seating arrangements, and uneven infrastructure have sometimes undermined its unifying potential (Drèze and Goyal 2003). These tensions reveal the importance of addressing structural inequalities within food security programs that aim to promote social cohesion.*

**- The "Kitchen Gardens" project in Rwanda**

*In post-genocide Rwanda, community-based food security initiatives such as the Kitchen Gardens project have played an important role in rebuilding trust and fostering social cohesion (Friends Peace House Rwanda 2024). Initiated as part of broader efforts at national reconciliation, the project encourages households—often from diverse ethnic backgrounds—to work together to cultivate communal plots, growing vegetables for local consumption. These gardens serve several purposes: they improve nutritional intake, reduce dependence on foreign aid, and create opportunities for intergroup cooperation and dialogue (Shaheen 2024; Uvin 2001). By working side by side in food production, participants develop mutual understanding and rebuild damaged social networks. However, while these initiatives are symbolically powerful, their long-term success depends on sustained community accountability, including governance, and the integration of these practices into broader rural development policies (Wall 2016).*

### 3.1.4. Link with Rural Development

Food security is closely related to rural development. Investments in agriculture, rural infrastructure, and sustainable food production technologies help increase food production and improve rural life. Rural development based on food security reduces urban–rural disparities, promoting equity and national cohesion. In addition, rural development supported by food security contributes to the economic stability of countries by preventing mass migration from rural areas to cities and reducing pressures on urban infrastructure (FAO et al. 2023) (Box 4).

**Box 3. Addressing food insecurity as a driver of forced migration.**

**- The “Feed the Future” initiative in East Africa**

*Launched by the United States government, the “Feed the Future” initiative has contributed to reducing migration pressures in East Africa, particularly in Kenya and Ethiopia, by addressing the main structural drivers of displacement. The program focuses on strengthening food security through sustainable agriculture and climate-resilient practices. By promoting innovative farming techniques, drought-resistant seeds, and improved access to markets, “Feed the Future” has enabled smallholder farmers to increase their productivity and income. These improvements have enhanced the capacity of rural communities to cope with the environmental and economic shocks—often associated with hardship—that migration brings. Importantly, the impact of the initiative has gone beyond food production: it has strengthened local livelihoods, expanded the range of dignified options available to rural populations, and reduced the pressure to migrate under duress. Rather than aiming to prevent migration altogether, the program supports local resilience and development in ways that respect the right of individuals to choose whether to stay or move (USAID n.d.).*

**- Bangladesh Rural Development Programme**

*In Bangladesh, the Rural Development Programme, implemented by the government in partnership with international organizations, has played a key role in expanding rural resilience and enhancing food security, especially in areas vulnerable to seasonal migration. The program included coordinated investments in agricultural infrastructure, improved access to microfinance, and support for crop diversification. These efforts have enabled rural households to strengthen their food systems and economic stability in the face of recurring climate shocks and market vulnerabilities. By strengthening local livelihoods and increasing access to essential resources, the initiative has contributed to reducing forced migration, especially during critical seasonal periods. Importantly, it has expanded people’s ability to remain in their communities with dignity, rather than migrating out of necessity. Rather than aiming to eliminate migration, the program created favorable conditions for choice—empowering individuals and families to freely decide whether to stay or move, based on opportunity rather than survival (Momin 1987; Arif et al. 2024).*

While rural development remains a critical area of intervention, especially in low-income regions, it is increasingly important to recognize that food security is also a pressing challenge in urban contexts. As global conflict patterns and population growth become more urbanized, the right to food must be protected not only in rural communities but also in rapidly expanding cities. Urban food insecurity often results from poverty, inadequate infrastructure, and volatile food prices, exacerbating social inequalities and undermining stability (FAO et al. 2023; United Nations 2024). Therefore, any sustainable strategy for food security should address both rural and urban development, recognizing their interconnectedness and the shifting demographic realities of the 21st century.

#### **Box 4. Link with rural development.**

##### **- The “Farm to Market Alliance” project in Tanzania**

*In Tanzania, the “Farm to Market Alliance” project was initiated to support small farmers in accessing markets and improving agricultural production. By providing quality seeds, agricultural training, and access to markets, farmers have been able to increase their production and income. This has led to increased food security and economic development of rural communities, reducing poverty and promoting stability (Byemaro 2023).*

##### **- The “One Acre Fund” program in Kenya**

*The “One Acre Fund” in Kenya provides rural farmers with access to finance, agricultural inputs, and technical training to improve their agricultural productivity. The program has significantly contributed to increasing farmers’ food security and income, allowing them to invest in education, health, and other essential needs. Rural development supported by this program has led to improved quality of life and the creation of more resilient and prosperous communities (One Acre Fund 2023).*

##### **- The “Green Morocco Plan” project in Morocco**

*The “Green Morocco Plan” (Plan Maroc Vert) is a government initiative launched in 2008 to revitalize the agricultural sector and improve food security in Morocco. By investing in modernizing agricultural infrastructure, promoting sustainable practices, and supporting small farmers, the plan has succeeded in significantly increasing agricultural production and rural incomes. Rural development resulting from this program has contributed to poverty reduction and economic and social stability in Morocco’s rural regions (Inter-Réseaux Développement Rural 2016).*

### **3.2. How Food Insecurity Affects Peace**

Food insecurity is a major destabilizing factor that can generate and amplify conflict, contributing significantly to social and political instability. Lack of access to adequate food exacerbates existing tensions and creates conditions conducive to the outbreak of violent conflicts (Medina et al. 2024; Kemmerling et al. 2022; FAO et al. 2020).

Food insecurity destabilizes economies, affects social cohesion, and heightens tensions between groups and communities, creating an environment conducive to violent conflict. Addressing food insecurity is critical to preventing conflict and promoting sustainable peace (FAO et al. 2023). By understanding the mechanisms according to which food insecurity contributes to instability, effective policies and programs can be developed to ensure access to adequate food for all and build a more peaceful and just society.

#### **3.2.1. Impact on the Economy and Social Discontents**

Food insecurity leads to higher food prices and worsening poverty. The affected populations, already economically marginalized, face additional difficulties



in securing their basic needs. This generates social discontent, which can manifest itself in protests and riots, thus destabilizing nations and regions. Grievances over access to food can be catalysts for violent political change, as seen in numerous recent historical contexts. In addition, food insecurity can cause economic instability, negatively affecting long-term investment and economic growth (Medina et al. 2024; Kemmerling et al. 2022; Doocy et al. 2019) (Box 5).

**Box 5. Impact on the economy and social discontents.**

**- The Arab Spring**

*The Arab Spring, which began in 2010, is a clear example of how food insecurity can trigger social unrest and destabilize economies. Before the outbreak of the uprisings, many countries in the Middle East and North Africa, such as Tunisia and Egypt, were facing steep increases in the prices of basic food. These increases were caused by global factors such as speculation in food markets and climate change affecting agricultural production. In Tunisia, for example, rising food prices exacerbated the poor economic situation and amplified existing social grievances. The ensuing protests led to the fall of the authoritarian regime and triggered a period of political and economic instability. In Egypt, rising food prices were a significant factor in mobilizing the masses against the government, culminating in the revolution that led to major changes in the country's leadership (Soffiatiini 2020; Grinin and Korotayev 2022).*

**- Food crisis in Venezuela**

*Venezuela provides another example of the severe impact of food insecurity on the economy and social discontent. Since the mid-2010s, Venezuela has faced a deep economic crisis, marked by hyperinflation, shortages of food and medicine, and the collapse of domestic production. Lack of access to basic food has led to declining purchasing power and increased extreme poverty. The population, dissatisfied with the lack of food and deteriorating living conditions, took to the streets in massive protests against the government. These protests were often met with violent repression, exacerbating social and political instability. The food crisis has contributed to the exodus of millions of Venezuelans, who have migrated in search of better living conditions, further destabilizing the region (Doocy et al. 2019; United Nations n.d.; United Nations Human Rights 2024).*

### 3.2.2. Social Polarization and Intergroup Conflicts

A lack of food resources can exacerbate existing social divisions. Competition for limited food resources can create or exacerbate tensions between different ethnic, religious, or social groups, leading to internal conflict and intercommunal violence. In food crisis situations, groups may resort to violence to ensure their survival, leading to a spiral of conflict and instability (Medina et al. 2024; Kemmerling et al. 2022). These intergroup conflicts can destabilize entire regions, affecting social cohesion and the effective functioning of the state (Box 6).

#### **Box 6. Social polarization and intergroup conflicts.**

##### **- Conflicts between shepherds and farmers in the Sahel**

*The Sahel region of sub-Saharan Africa is a clear example of social polarization and intergroup conflict exacerbated by food insecurity. In this region, climate change and frequent droughts have significantly reduced access to agricultural and water resources. Nomadic pastoralists and sedentary farmers are often in direct competition for these limited resources. As farmland becomes scarce and less fertile, tensions between these two groups rise, leading to violent conflict. These conflicts are often exacerbated by ethnic and cultural factors, and food insecurity acts as a catalyst, amplifying social divisions and tensions. Violence between herdsman and farmers has led to loss of life, massive displacement, and the destabilization of local communities (Climate Diplomacy n.d.).*

##### **- Ethnic conflict in South Sudan**

*In South Sudan, food insecurity has played a significant role in social polarization and intergroup conflict. After gaining independence in 2011, the country faced serious internal conflicts fueled by ethnic and political divisions. Lack of access to adequate food and resource scarcity have intensified competition between different ethnic groups for control of fertile land and water. In many cases, local leaders have used food insecurity to manipulate and mobilize ethnic supporters against other groups, exacerbating conflict and violence. These inter-ethnic conflicts have led to the destruction of agricultural infrastructure, forced displacement, and a massive humanitarian crisis, with millions suffering from hunger and malnutrition (Chagutah 2023).*

#### **3.2.3. Recruitment by Armed Groups**

In regions affected by food insecurity, armed and extremist groups exploit the situation to increase their ranks. By offering food and other forms of material support, these groups attract recruits from starving and desperate populations, thereby intensifying conflicts and expanding the influence of these groups. Recruitment under such conditions underscores the direct link between food insecurity and the proliferation of organized violence. Armed groups often use food as a strategic weapon to win the loyalty of communities and destabilize legitimate governments (FAO et al. 2022; Kemmerling et al. 2022; Sasson 2012) (Box 7).

### Box 7. Recruitment by armed groups.

#### **- Recruitment by Boko Haram in Nigeria**

*In Nigeria, the terrorist group Boko Haram has exploited food insecurity to swell its ranks. In the northeastern region of the country, where drought and conflict have reduced access to food, Boko Haram has provided food and other basic resources to starving and desperate youth. In exchange for this aid, the group has recruited new members, taking advantage of their vulnerability. Forced recruitment and manipulation of food resources have intensified conflict and instability in the region (Kajjo and Kaina 2020; Riebe 2022).*

#### **- Al-Shabaab in Somalia**

*In Somalia, the militant group Al-Shabaab has used food insecurity as a recruitment tool. In areas controlled by Al-Shabaab, the group has distributed food and essential resources to communities affected by drought and famine. In return for this aid, the group demands loyalty and the recruitment of fighters. This exchange has allowed Al-Shabaab to consolidate its power and continue its violent activities, further destabilizing the region (Prah 2023).*

#### **- Recruitment by armed groups in Kivu province, DR Congo**

*In the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, Kivu province, severe food insecurity has been used by armed groups to expand their ranks. The prolonged conflict in this region has led to the destruction of local agriculture and food shortages, leaving many communities without the means to feed themselves. Armed groups such as the Forces for the Democratic Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) and other local militias have exploited this desperate situation to recruit new members.*

#### **- These groups have provided food, shelter, and other basic resources to young people and families affected by food insecurity.**

*In return, they have demanded loyalty and involvement in their military activities. This practice has allowed armed groups to consolidate their control over the region and continue the conflict. The recruitment of youth in exchange for food has exacerbated instability and perpetuated the cycle of violence in Kivu province, contributing to the continued suffering of the civilian population (Nantulya 2024).*

### 3.2.4. The Vicious Cycle of Food Insecurity and Conflict

Violent conflicts lead to the destruction of agricultural infrastructure, the disruption of supply chains, and the forced migration of populations, thus exacerbating food insecurity. In turn, food insecurity perpetuates instability and social tensions, further fueling conflict. Breaking this vicious cycle requires concerted interventions, including both emergency humanitarian aid and long-term development strategies (FAO et al. 2022; Kemmerling et al. 2022; Sasson 2012). Addressing food insecurity is essential to break this cycle and build sustainable peace (Box 8).

### **Box 8. The vicious cycle of food insecurity and conflict.**

#### **- The crisis in Yemen**

*Yemen is an extreme case of the vicious cycle of food insecurity and conflict. Yemen's civil war, which began in 2015, has led to widespread destruction of agricultural infrastructure and disruption of food supply chains. Blockades and attacks on ports have severely limited food imports, while the ongoing conflict has prevented local food growing and harvesting. These disruptions have caused a severe food crisis, leaving millions of Yemenis hungry and malnourished. Food insecurity, in turn, has fueled social and political tensions, perpetuating conflict and instability. Without access to adequate food, the population becomes more vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups, which exacerbates violence and exacerbates food insecurity, creating a vicious cycle of suffering and conflict (World Bank Group 2023).*

#### **- The conflict in the Central African Republic**

*In the Central African Republic, food insecurity and armed conflict feed each other in a vicious cycle. Inter-ethnic violence and struggles for control of resources have led to massive displacement and the destruction of agricultural infrastructure. This has left many communities without access to agricultural land and without the means to secure their own food. Lack of access to food has exacerbated the suffering of the population and created conditions conducive to recruitment by armed groups, who have exploited the vulnerability of hungry communities to swell their ranks. These groups use violence to control food resources and dominate the affected regions, thus perpetuating the conflict. Conflict-generated food insecurity, in turn, exacerbates instability, creating a cycle that is difficult to break without interventions and sustainable development strategies (Carre and Radosta 2018).*

### **3.2.5. Psychological and Social Effects**

Food insecurity also has devastating psychological and social effects. The constant stress of not having adequate food can lead to mental health problems such as anxiety and depression. These psychological problems contribute to social instability and can fuel violent and antisocial behavior, exacerbating conflict and destabilizing communities. In addition, food insecurity can erode trust in state institutions, contributing to feelings of neglect and abandonment among the population (Medina et al. 2024; FAO et al. 2023) (Box 9).

In addition to the ways in which food insecurity can arise as a consequence of conflict, it is important to recognize that food insecurity can also be actively produced and weaponized in certain conflict contexts. In some contemporary conflicts, food systems are deliberately disrupted by armed actors or state authorities as a means of control, repression, or territorial dominance. Starvation has been used as a method of warfare in regions such as South Sudan, Syria, or Yemen, raising serious ethical and legal concerns under international humanitarian law (De Waal 2017; FAO 2005). This instrumentalization of food insecurity transforms it from a passive outcome of

instability into an active strategy of power, deserving of further critical attention in both academic and policy-oriented debates.

**Box 9.** Psychological and social effects.

**- Food insecurity in Syria**

*Syria's civil war, which began in 2011, has led to a severe food crisis in many parts of the country. Lack of access to adequate and consistent food has had devastating effects on the mental health of the population. The chronic stress from food insecurity, combined with the trauma of war, has led to increased incidences of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These mental health problems affect individuals' ability to function daily and actively participate in their communities, which contributes to social and economic destabilization (Theofanidis et al. 2022).*

**- Food insecurity in Venezuela**

*The economic and political crisis in Venezuela has generated profound food insecurity with significant psychological and social impacts. Many Venezuelans face hunger and lack of access to basic food. The constant stress of finding adequate food has led to increased mental health problems such as depression and anxiety. These psychological effects have been exacerbated by feelings of helplessness and hopelessness for the future, contributing to a climate of despair and social instability. The negative psychological effects of food insecurity have also led to the deterioration of family and social relationships, exacerbating isolation and interpersonal conflict (Human Rights Watch 2016).*

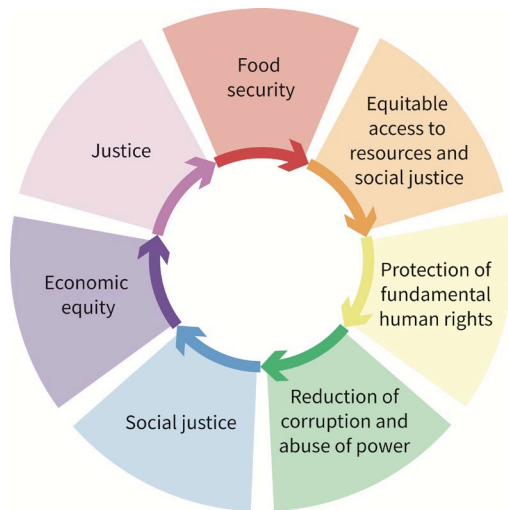
**- Food insecurity in South Africa**

*In South Africa, food insecurity affects many vulnerable communities, particularly in poor rural and urban areas. Lack of access to adequate and consistent food has led to increased stress and anxiety among the affected population. Chronic stress associated with food insecurity negatively affects the mental and physical health of individuals, reducing their ability to work and actively participate in community life. The psychological effects of food insecurity contribute to antisocial and violent behavior, amplifying social instability and increasing the risk of interpersonal conflicts. This deterioration in mental health and social cohesion undermines development and poverty reduction efforts in affected communities (Maharaj et al. 2017).*

#### **4. The Interdependencies Between Food Security and Justice**

While the classical definition of food security focuses on availability, accessibility, utilization, and stability, the recent literature has expanded the scope of analysis by integrating dimensions of justice, ethics, and equity. Concepts such as *food justice* and *food sovereignty* highlight the need for food systems to be not only efficient and resilient but also equitable and inclusive. In this context, it becomes relevant to explore how food insecurity can exacerbate corruption and erode trust in institutions, while, conversely, equitable food governance can support transparency, civic participation, and the protection of fundamental rights. Understanding the complex

interdependencies between food security and justice allows for the development of effective policies and programs that promote societal equity and institutional resilience. Rather than a simple cause-and-effect dynamic, the relationship between these areas is better described as a virtuous cycle, in which justice-oriented governance enhances food security, and secure access to food strengthens trust, equity, and social cohesion (FAO 2005; Fleetwood 2020). Food insecurity destabilizes justice systems, exacerbates social inequalities, fuels corruption, and undermines the protection of fundamental rights (United Nations Goals 16 n.d.) (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** The cycle from food security to justice. Source: Figure by authors.

Addressing food insecurity is essential to promoting social justice and building a justice system that respects and protects the rights of all citizens (Golay 2009; United Nations Goals 16 n.d.).

*4.1. How Food Security Is Linked to Justice*

Food security and justice are closely linked, as equitable access to adequate food is essential to promoting a fair and functioning justice system. A solid foundation for social justice and respect for fundamental human rights is created in a society where all citizens have access to sufficient and safe food resources. Food security contributes to reducing social and economic inequalities; protects fundamental rights; and reduces corruption and abuses of power, thereby strengthening a justice system that promotes equity and social inclusion (Golay 2009; United Nations Goals 16 n.d.).

#### 4.1.1. Fair Access to Resources and Social Justice

Food security implies equitable access to food resources, which contributes to a reduction in social and economic inequalities. In a society where all citizens have access to adequate food, social justice is promoted, and the tensions generated by inequality are reduced. This equitable access ensures that all members of society have an equal chance to live a healthy and productive life, thus contributing to social cohesion and strengthening a fair justice system. A lack of inequalities in access to food creates a sense of inclusion and solidarity, where every individual feels valued and respected, regardless of their socio-economic status (United Nations Economic and Social Council 2017; United Nations General Assembly 2017).

Equitable access to food resources also has a positive impact on other critical areas, such as education and health. Well-nourished children are able to focus and perform better in school, and healthy adults are more productive and able to contribute to the development of their communities better (United Nations Water Conference 2023). Thus, food security not only promotes social justice but also supports long-term socio-economic development, creating an enabling environment for a just and prosperous society (Box 10).

#### **Box 10.** Fair access to resources and social justice.

##### **- The Food Allowance Program in Brazil**

*In Brazil, the Food Allowance Program (Bolsa Família) was implemented to reduce poverty and improve food security by providing financial subsidies to low-income families. This program has had a significant impact on equitable access to food resources and the promotion of social justice. By providing financial resources to purchase food, the program ensured that all families, regardless of their socio-economic status, had access to adequate food. This initiative has contributed to reducing social and economic inequalities by providing equal opportunities for a healthy and productive life (Pye-Smith 2014; World Bank Group n.d.).*

##### **- The Supplemental Nutrition and Food Assistance Program in the United States**

*In the United States, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) provides food benefits to low-income families, ensuring they have access to nutritious food. SNAP is an example of public policy designed to promote equitable access to food resources and support social justice. The program helps millions of Americans secure their basic food needs, thereby reducing the risk of food insecurity and improving quality of life. SNAP helps reduce social and economic disparities by ensuring that all segments of the population have access to the resources they need to live healthy and active lives (USDA 2024).*

#### 4.1.2. Protection of Fundamental Human Rights

Food security is closely related to the protection of fundamental human rights. The right to adequate food is recognized as a fundamental human right, and ensuring this right is essential to the respect and protection of other rights, such as the right to health, the right to life, and the right to an adequate standard of living. Governments and international institutions have a responsibility to protect and promote the right to food, thereby ensuring a justice system that respects and protects the fundamental rights of all citizens (United Nations Water Conference 2023).

In addition, the protection of the right to adequate food is essential to prevent social exclusion and marginalization. A society that respects and protects fundamental rights ensures an environment in which all citizens can actively participate and contribute to the development of the community. Respect for fundamental rights creates a sense of trust in state institutions and justice systems, thus promoting social stability and peace (United Nations n.d.) (Box 11).

#### **Box 11.** Protection of fundamental human rights.

##### **- The School Feeding Program in Ghana**

*In Ghana, the National School Feeding Program was implemented to ensure that all children receive a nutritious daily meal at school. This program not only supports children's food security but also protects the fundamental right to education. By providing a daily meal, the program reduces absenteeism and dropout, allowing children to focus on their studies better and achieve better academic results. In this way, the program protects and promotes the rights to education and health, ensuring that all children have an equal chance to develop their potential (World Food Programme 2021).*

##### **- The "Right to Food" initiative in India**

*In India, the Right to Food initiative was launched to ensure that every citizen has access to adequate food as part of their fundamental rights. The Indian government introduced the National Food Security Act in 2013, which guarantees access to subsidized food for about two-thirds of the country's population. This law includes programs such as the Public Distribution System (PDS), which distributes essential food at reduced prices to the vulnerable population. By guaranteeing access to food, the initiative protects the fundamental right to life and health, contributing to reducing poverty and improving quality of life (Krishnan and Subramaniam 2014).*

##### **- The World Food Programme in Syria**

*In Syria, the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) has played a crucial role in protecting basic human rights during the protracted conflict. WFP has provided emergency food assistance to millions of war-affected Syrians, ensuring they have access to adequate food. By regularly distributing food and supporting vulnerable households, WFP has protected the right to food and prevented malnutrition and severe hunger. This has been essential to the survival of many people and to maintaining human dignity in the face of a devastating humanitarian crisis (World Food Programme 2024c).*



#### 4.1.3. Reducing Corruption and Abuses of Power

Starting from the recognition that food justice requires inclusive participation and equitable access to resources, another critical dimension emerges: the role of food systems in shaping patterns of governance, corruption, and institutional integrity. Food insecurity can amplify corruption and abuses of power, especially in contexts where the distribution of food assistance or agricultural subsidies lacks transparency. While food security alone does not automatically lead to equity, food systems governed by principles of justice, participation, and accountability can help reduce the risk of corruption and favoritism.

##### **Box 12.** Reducing corruption and abuses of power.

###### **- *Agricultural reforms in Rwanda***

*Rwanda has implemented significant agricultural reforms to ensure food security and reduce corruption in the distribution of agricultural resources. The government has introduced policies that promote transparency in the allocation of land and agricultural subsidies. By using modern technologies such as geographic information systems (GISs) and electronic ledgers to monitor agricultural land, Rwanda has been able to significantly reduce corruption and favoritism in the distribution of resources. These measures have ensured that resources are distributed fairly and efficiently, helping to increase agricultural production and improve food security (World Bank Group 2016).*

###### **- *The Food Allowance Distribution Program in Mexico***

*In Mexico, the Food Allowance Program (Prospera, formerly known as Oportunidades) was created to support low-income families and reduce corruption in the distribution of food aid. The program uses conditional cash transfers, where beneficiaries receive funds directly into their bank accounts based on meeting certain criteria, such as sending children to school and regular doctor visits. By eliminating middlemen and using transparent distribution mechanisms, the program has significantly reduced opportunities for corruption and ensured that resources reach those who need them most (Nino-Zarazua 2011).*

###### **- *Ethiopia's Food Security Project***

*Ethiopia launched the Food Security Project (PSNP) to improve access to food and reduce corruption in food aid distribution. PSNP uses an electronic card system to distribute food aid directly to eligible beneficiaries. This system ensures transparency and accountability, reducing the risks of corruption and diversion of resources. Beneficiaries receive food aid directly, without intermediaries, which helps ensure fair and equitable distribution. The project has significantly improved food security and reduced corruption in food-insecure rural areas (International Food Policy Research Institute n.d.).*

In equitable and transparent food systems, resource distribution mechanisms are more likely to reflect public interest rather than private or political agendas. Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms—along with community involvement in decision-making—can foster transparency and institutional accountability. Thus, food justice and equitable governance structures play an essential role in improving access for vulnerable populations and strengthening trust in both government and justice institutions (Camacho 2022; United Nations Goals 16 n.d.) (Box 12).

#### *4.2. How Food Insecurity Affects Justice*

##### *4.2.1. Impact on Social Inequalities*

Although food insecurity is not the only determinant of social inequality, research shows that the two are mutually reinforcing in vulnerable contexts. In many contexts, food insecurity tends to deepen existing social inequalities, especially where structural vulnerabilities already exist—such as poverty, gender discrimination, or ethnic marginalization. This creates an environment of social injustice, where access to resources is inequitable and favors only certain segments of the population. Social inequalities exacerbated by food insecurity can lead to social tensions and conflicts, undermining social stability and cohesion. Marginalized groups such as ethnic minorities, low-income people, and women are particularly affected by a lack of access to adequate food, which limits their ability to exercise their rights and participate actively in society (United Nations Goals 16 n.d.). This dynamic forms a vicious cycle in which inequality and food insecurity reinforce each other, undermining efforts toward justice and long-term development.

Food insecurity can also perpetuate cycles of intergenerational poverty. Children growing up in food-insecure households are at greater risk of malnutrition and poor school performance, which limits their future opportunities. This contributes to perpetuating social inequalities and maintaining a cycle of poverty and social exclusion. Addressing food insecurity is essential to breaking this cycle and promoting social justice and equity (FAO et al. 2023) (Box 13).

##### *4.2.2. Corruption and Inequitable Distribution of Resources*

Food insecurity can fuel corruption and the maldistribution of food resources. In food crisis situations, resources become extremely valuable, and powerful individuals or groups can manipulate their distribution in their favor. Although not all food-insecure contexts are characterized by corruption, in fragile governance systems, resource scarcity can increase the likelihood of corruption and favoritism in distribution. Corruption in the distribution of food resources undermines trust

in justice and governance institutions, fueling a vicious cycle of abuse and injustice. When food resources are distributed inequitably, marginalized groups are excluded and become even more vulnerable, exacerbating food insecurity and social instability (UN News Global Perspective Human Stories 2011; Maslen 2024).

Corruption in the distribution of food resources can have devastating effects on vulnerable communities. For example, during food crises, aid intended for the neediest can be diverted by corrupt officials or interest groups, leaving those in need without the resources essential for survival. This not only undermines social justice but also perpetuates a sense of mistrust and alienation among the affected population (UN News Global Perspective Human Stories 2011; Maslen 2024). Fighting corruption and ensuring a fair distribution of resources are essential to promoting justice and protecting the fundamental rights of all citizens (Box 14).

**Box 13. Impact on social inequalities.**

**- Food insecurity and the justice system in Kenya**

*In Kenya, food insecurity disproportionately affects poor and marginalized communities, exacerbated by an inequitable justice system. In rural areas and pastoral communities, where access to food is limited, there is a lack of legal representation and access to legal services. This makes it difficult for these communities to defend their land ownership rights and challenge the inequitable distribution of food resources. Lack of access to justice exacerbates social inequalities, leaving vulnerable communities without legal means to protect their fundamental rights (Lokuruka 2021).*

**- Food crisis and social inequalities in Venezuela**

*In Venezuela, the severe food crisis has exacerbated social inequalities and affected access to justice. The poor and marginalized population suffers the most from food shortages, and the distribution of food aid is often manipulated through corruption. This leads to an inequitable distribution of resources, where those with political connections receive more benefits. Venezuela's judicial system, plagued by corruption and political influence, fails to protect the rights of the most vulnerable, thus perpetuating social inequalities and exclusion (Doocy et al. 2019).*

**- The justice system and food insecurity in India**

*In India, food insecurity deeply affects marginalized communities, such as Dalits and tribals, who face systemic discrimination in accessing resources. The justice system often does not provide adequate protection for these groups, which exacerbates social inequalities. For example, disputes over access to agricultural land are often resolved in favor of the most powerful and wealthy, leaving vulnerable communities without the means to secure their own food. The lack of a fair and accessible justice system contributes to the perpetuation of food insecurity and social inequalities (McKay et al. 2023).*

**Box 14.** Corruption and inequitable distribution of resources.

**- Corruption in food aid distribution in Somalia**

*In Somalia, food aid distribution has often been marred by corruption, which has had a devastating impact on equitable access to resources and the justice system. Corrupt officials and armed groups have frequently diverted food aid intended for vulnerable populations, favoring certain groups in exchange for loyalty or personal gain. This manipulation of resources has perpetuated inequalities and left many communities without access to adequate food. In such a context, those affected by corruption had few legal means to claim their rights, as the justice system was also weakened by corruption and political influence. This led to a lack of trust in state institutions and an increase in social tensions and conflicts (Baczynska et al. 2023; Bincof 2023).*

**- Corruption and the food crisis in Zimbabwe**

*In Zimbabwe, the food crisis has been exacerbated by endemic corruption in the distribution of resources, severely affecting the justice system and the fundamental rights of citizens. During recurring food crises, the government and local officials have been accused of misappropriating food aid and favoring political supporters. This corrupt behavior has resulted in an inequitable distribution of resources, leaving vulnerable communities without access to adequate food. The politically influenced and corrupt judicial system has failed to protect the rights of affected citizens, thus perpetuating injustice and social exclusion. Corruption in the distribution of resources has severely undermined trust in government and the justice system, fueling social discontent and political instability (Budzi 2022; Biri 2024).*

#### 4.2.3. Erosion of Fundamental Rights

Lack of access to adequate food erodes basic human rights, affecting the ability of individuals to exercise other rights and freedoms. Without adequate food, the right to health, education, and work is severely compromised, leading to reduced quality of life and social exclusion. The erosion of fundamental rights creates an environment of injustice and discrimination, thereby undermining the basis of a fair and functioning justice system (United Nations n.d.; United Nations Water Conference 2023).

Food insecurity can also exacerbate other social problems such as domestic violence and crime. People living in food insecurity are more likely to experience stress and anxiety, which can lead to violent and antisocial behavior. This contributes to a vicious cycle of instability and injustice, where food insecurity and the erosion of fundamental rights reinforce each other (McKay and Bennett 2023). Ensuring food security is essential to protecting and promoting the fundamental rights of all citizens, thus creating an environment of justice and equity (Box 15).

### Box 15. Erosion of fundamental rights.

#### - *The food crisis and fundamental rights in Yemen*

*In Yemen, the protracted civil war has led to a severe food crisis, which has severely eroded the basic rights of the population. Lack of access to adequate food has affected the right to life and health of millions of Yemenis. In addition, courts and legal systems have been nearly paralyzed by the conflict, making it impossible to protect citizens' rights. Women and children were the most affected, suffering from severe malnutrition and lack of access to medical and educational services. The government and international justice institutions have failed to intervene effectively to protect these fundamental rights, exacerbating the humanitarian crisis and perpetuating the cycle of poverty and injustice (World Bank Group 2023; Ministry of Planning Yemen 2022).*

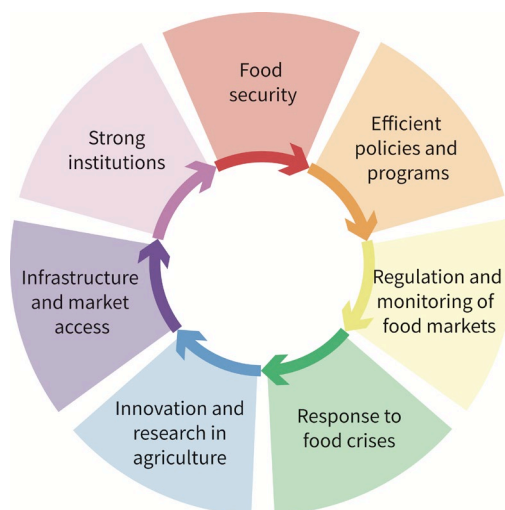
#### - *Food insecurity and human rights in Venezuela*

*In Venezuela, the economic and political crisis has led to extreme food insecurity, eroding the basic rights of citizens. Lack of access to basic food has severely affected the right to adequate nutrition and health. The justice system, plagued by corruption and political influence, failed to protect citizens' rights, making the situation worse. Protests against the government were violently repressed, and the right to free expression and peaceful assembly were repeatedly violated. Citizens who tried to claim the right to food and other basic rights were often arrested or harassed. Food insecurity has been used as a tool of political control, severely undermining the justice system and eroding trust in state institutions (Human Rights Watch 2016; Doocy et al. 2019).*

## 5. The Interdependencies Between Food Security and Strong Institutions

Food security is closely linked to the presence of strong and effective institutions capable of implementing public policies and programs that ensure equitable access to food for all citizens. Such institutions—whether governmental or non-governmental—play a crucial role in resource management, market regulation, and coordinated responses to food crises (United Nations Goals 16 n.d.; Balan et al. 2022; Trasca et al. 2007). Their effectiveness is essential for maintaining social stability, guaranteeing the rule of law, and promoting sustainable development (United Nations n.d.) (Figure 3).

However, the mere existence of strong institutions does not guarantee equitable outcomes. While institutional strength can support resilience and justice in some contexts, in others, it can enable control over food systems, politicize access to aid, and even weaponize hunger (Kemmerling et al. 2022; Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler 2015; Maxwell and Caldwell 2008). As recent conflicts have shown, institutions with a high administrative capacity can also be used to deny food, manipulate its distribution, or repress dissent, turning food insecurity into an instrument of coercion and exclusion (De Waal 2017; Baczyńska et al. 2023).



**Figure 3.** The cycle from food security to strong institutions. Source: Figure by authors.

This dual role of institutions requires a more critical lens: their capacity to support or sabotage food security depends on the values they embody and the governance frameworks within which they operate (World Peace Foundation 2023; Stimson Center 2025). In fragile or authoritarian regimes, institutional strength can reinforce inequalities rather than mitigate them. In contrast, where governance is transparent and accountable, institutions become a cornerstone for ensuring food justice and protecting fundamental rights (Camacho 2022; United Nations Goals 16 n.d.).

This section explores both sides of this complex relationship, illustrating, through real-world cases, how institutions shape food security outcomes, for better or for worse.

## 5.1. *How Food Security Is Linked to Strong Institutions*

### 5.1.1. Effective Policies and Programs

Strong institutions are essential to the development and implementation of effective policies and programs to ensure food security. These institutions have the responsibility to develop long-term strategies that promote equitable access to food resources, support sustainable agricultural production, and reduce poverty (United Nations Goals 16 n.d.; United Nations n.d.). Well-designed policies such as agricultural subsidies, school feeding programs, and social safety nets depend

on strong institutions being effectively implemented and monitored (Committee on World Food Security 2013). The ability of institutions to coordinate and manage these policies contributes directly to a nation's stability and prosperity by ensuring that all citizens enjoy the fundamental right to adequate food (Box 16).

**Box 16.** Effective policies and programs.

**- The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) of the European Union**

*The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) of the European Union is an example of success in the implementation of effective policies and programs due to the existence of strong and coordinated institutions. EU institutions, such as the European Commission, play a crucial role in the development, implementation, and monitoring of the CAP. Through the CAP, farmers receive subsidies and financial support to improve their productivity and maintain food price stability. The CAP also promotes sustainable agricultural practices and environmental protection. Strong EU institutions ensure the efficient allocation of funds and adaptation of policies to local needs, thus contributing to a stable and resilient food system across the European Union (European Commission n.d.). However, the CAP has also been subject to criticism, particularly regarding its uneven distribution of subsidies, its environmental impact, and its role in perpetuating inequalities between large agribusinesses and small farmers (Pe'er et al. 2019). Recognizing both its achievements and its limitations is essential to understanding the complex role of strong institutions in shaping food systems.*

**- The "Fome Zero" program in Brazil**

*Brazil's "Fome Zero" (Zero Hunger) program demonstrates how strong institutions can implement effective policies to ensure food security. Launched in 2003, the program was coordinated by the Brazilian government through the Ministry of Social Development, which played a central role in managing and monitoring the initiative. "Zero Hunger" includes food subsidies, school feeding programs, support for family farming, and the distribution of food to vulnerable populations. Brazil's strong institutions have ensured the efficient allocation of resources and distribution of benefits to the most vulnerable. The impact of the program in reducing hunger and poverty underlines the importance of efficient and coordinated institutions in the implementation of food security policies (Elver 2019; Da Silva et al. 2011).*

### 5.1.2. Regulation and Monitoring of Food Markets

Strong institutions play a crucial role in regulating and monitoring food markets to prevent abuses and ensure transparency. Effective regulations can prevent speculation and manipulation that could lead to unsustainable increases in food prices, thereby protecting consumers, especially vulnerable ones. Regulatory institutions also ensure compliance with food safety standards, guaranteeing that products available on the market are safe and nutritious (United Nations Goals 16 n.d.; United Nations n.d.). The ability of these institutions to monitor and intervene quickly in food markets helps maintain stability and public confidence in the food system (Box 17).

**Box 17. Regulation and monitoring of food markets.**

**- The European Food Safety Agency (EFSA)**

*The European Food Safety Agency (EFSA) is a strong European Union institution responsible for assessing food safety risks and providing independent scientific advice. EFSA works with national authorities and other European institutions to regulate and monitor the food market, ensuring that food is safe for consumption. By rigorously assessing risks and setting safety standards, EFSA helps protect consumer health and maintain confidence in the European food system (EFSA 2012). However, as highlighted in policy evaluations (United Nations Goals 16 n.d.), the effectiveness of such institutions depends on the broader context of governance and the degree of transparency, accountability, and public engagement.*

**- The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in the United States**

*The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in the United States is an example of a strong institution involved in regulating and monitoring food markets. The FDA enforces food safety standards, thereby preventing the spread of foodborne illness and protecting public health. Through rigorous inspections, strict regulations, and education programs, the FDA helps maintain the quality and safety of food available on the market, thus ensuring food security for the American population (US Food and Drug Administration n.d.). However, according to the Committee on World Food Security (2013), its institutional performance must be continuously assessed to avoid regulatory capture, especially in complex food systems influenced by commercial interests.*

**- The Competition Commission of South Africa**

*The South African Competition Commission plays a crucial role in regulating food markets to prevent monopolistic and abusive practices that could affect food prices and availability. By investigating and sanctioning anti-competitive behavior, this institution ensures the proper functioning of the food market, protecting consumers from unjustified price increases and unfair commercial practices. The Competition Commission thus contributes to maintaining the stability of the food market and ensuring fair access to food for all citizens (Competition Commission South Africa n.d.). However, as suggested by the United Nations (n.d.), effective regulation also requires addressing the underlying social inequalities that shape market access and consumption patterns.*

**5.1.3. Response to Food Crises**

Strong institutions are often considered vital to an effective response to food crises, whether caused by natural disasters, conflicts, or other major disruptions. Their capacity to coordinate emergency responses, distribute food aid, and rebuild infrastructure is critical to preventing hunger and restoring food security (United Nations Goals 16 n.d.; United Nations n.d.).

However, institutional strength alone does not guarantee just or humanitarian outcomes. In certain conflict zones, strong institutions have been used to control the distribution of food aid, manipulate access to basic resources, or weaponize hunger as a means to exert political or military pressure (Kemmerling et al. 2022; De Waal 2017).



These dual possibilities—protection versus oppression—underscore the need for transparent and accountable institutions, especially in fragile or authoritarian contexts, where a strong administrative capacity can be used either to alleviate suffering or to deepen it (Box 18).

**Box 18. Response to food crises.**

**- *The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP)***

*The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) is a strong global institution specializing in responding to food crises. WFP intervenes quickly in emergency situations, providing food and nutritional assistance in areas affected by conflict, natural disasters, or economic crises. For example, during the food crisis in Syria, WFP distributed food and food vouchers to millions of internally displaced people and refugees, ensuring that these vulnerable populations had access to adequate food. WFP's ability to mobilize resources and collaborate with governments and other humanitarian organizations is essential to effectively responding to food crises and prevent hunger (Word Food Programme n.d.).*

**- *The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in the United States***

*The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in the United States is an example of a strong institution that plays a crucial role in responding to food crises caused by natural disasters. FEMA coordinates the federal emergency response, including the distribution of food and drinking water to communities affected by hurricanes, floods, and other disasters. Through partnerships with federal and state agencies and non-governmental organizations, FEMA ensures a rapid and effective response, reducing the impact of food crises on the population and contributing to the rapid recovery of affected communities (US Federal Emergency Management Agency n.d.).*

**- *The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations***

*The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) is a powerful international institution involved in responding to and preventing food crises by developing resilient food systems. FAO provides technical assistance and support to governments to improve food security and respond effectively to food crises. For example, during the food crisis in East Africa caused by severe droughts, FAO worked with local governments to implement emergency programs, including the distribution of drought-resistant seeds and the provision of technical assistance to manage water resource. These interventions helped to stabilize food production and prevent famine in the region (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations n.d.).*

**- *The government of Ethiopia in the Tigray conflict***

*In the context of the civil conflict in Tigray, Ethiopia, strong state institutions have been implicated in the systematic blockade of humanitarian aid and the use of hunger as a weapon of war, according to international reports. Although the Ethiopian state has institutional capacity, this has been used to obstruct the delivery of food to civilian populations, exacerbating famine-like conditions and contributing to mass suffering (Stimson Center 2025; World Peace Foundation 2023; The Conversation 2022). This case illustrates how institutional strength can be instrumentalized to perpetuate injustice rather than prevent it, particularly in authoritarian or militarized regimes.*

#### 5.1.4. Promoting Innovation and Research in Agriculture

Strong institutions play a critical role in promoting innovation and research in agriculture and food security. By funding and supporting agricultural research, institutions can facilitate the development of new technologies and sustainable agricultural practices that increase productivity and reduce negative environmental impact. Agricultural education and training programs supported by strong institutions help improve farmers' knowledge and skills, enabling them to adopt more efficient and sustainable practices (United Nations Goals 16 n.d.; United Nations n.d.). Innovation and research supported by strong institutions are essential to ensuring long-term food security and adapting to climate change and other global challenges (Box 19).

##### **Box 19. Response to food crises.**

###### **- The Horizon 2020 program of the European Union**

*Horizon 2020 is a research and innovation program of the European Union which includes components dedicated to agriculture and food security. This program funds collaborative research projects between academic institutions, research organizations, and industry, promoting the development of innovative agricultural technologies and sustainable solutions for food production. For example, through Horizon 2020, the EU has supported the development of precision agriculture and water management technologies that have improved the efficiency of agricultural production and reduced environmental impact. Strong EU institutions play a crucial role in managing and implementing this program, thus ensuring the promotion of innovation and research in agriculture (Horizon Europe 2021).*

###### **- The International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT)**

*The International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) is a strong agricultural research institution that promotes innovation and the development of sustainable solutions for agriculture in semi-arid regions. ICRISAT collaborates with governments, universities, and international organizations to develop drought-resistant crops and agricultural techniques adapted to changing climate conditions. For example, ICRISAT has introduced drought-resistant varieties of maize and sorghum into East Africa, helping to increase agricultural productivity and improve food security in the region. By promoting research and innovation, ICRISAT helps farmers adopt more efficient and sustainable agricultural practices (International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics n.d.).*

###### **- Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) Agricultural Research Program**

*The Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) is a strong institution involved in promoting agricultural research and innovation. ICAR coordinates a vast network of agricultural research institutes and universities in India, focusing on the development of advanced agricultural technologies and sustainable practices. Through its research programs, ICAR has developed disease- and pest-resistant crop varieties; efficient irrigation techniques; and natural resource management methods. These innovations have helped increase agricultural productivity and improve the incomes of Indian farmers, thereby ensuring long-term food security (Indian Council of Agricultural Research n.d.).*

### 5.1.5. Infrastructure Development and Market Access

Strong institutions are fundamental to developing the infrastructure needed for food production and distribution. Investments in infrastructure such as roads, irrigation systems, warehouses, and markets are crucial to facilitate farmers' access to resources and markets. Effective institutions can mobilize resources and coordinate efforts to develop and maintain this infrastructure, ensuring that food can be efficiently transported from farm to market (United Nations Goals 16 n.d.; United Nations n.d.). Access to markets is essential for farmers to sell their produce and generate income, thus contributing to food security and rural economic development (Box 20).

#### **Box 20. Infrastructure development and market access.**

##### **- The World Bank Program for Roads and Rural Development in sub-Saharan Africa**

*The World Bank is a powerful institution supporting rural infrastructure development and market access in sub-Saharan Africa. Through its rural development programs, the World Bank finances the construction and improvement of rural roads, irrigation systems, and food storage facilities. For example, in Ethiopia, the World Bank financed a rural development project that included the construction of access roads for farmers, thereby facilitating the transport of agricultural products to markets. These investments have improved farmers' access to markets and increased their incomes, contributing to food security and economic development in the region (Berg et al. 2016).*

##### **- Vietnam's Community-Based Rural Infrastructure Project**

*In Vietnam, the government, in collaboration with international institutions, implemented the Community-Based Rural Infrastructure Project to support infrastructure development and access to markets for local farmers. This project included the construction of rural roads, irrigation systems, and local markets, thus facilitating the transport and marketing of agricultural products. The project also provided training and technical support for farmers, helping them adopt more efficient farming practices. Vietnam's strong institutions coordinated and implemented this project, ensuring that resources were used efficiently and the benefits reached rural communities, thereby contributing to food security and poverty reduction (Vietnam—Community-Based Rural Infrastructure Project: Environmental Assessment n.d.).*

##### **- The "Feed the Future" initiative in Kenya**

*"Feed the Future" is an initiative of the United States government, implemented through the Agency for International Development (USAID), that supports the development of agricultural infrastructure and access to markets in Kenya. The program included investments in infrastructure such as access roads, storage facilities, and irrigation systems, as well as training programs for farmers. By facilitating access to markets, Kenyan farmers have been able to sell their produce at better prices and increase their incomes. USAID, in collaboration with local institutions, played a crucial role in the coordination and implementation of this initiative, contributing to the improvement of food security and economic development of rural communities in Kenya (USAID 2023).*

## 5.2. How Food Insecurity Affects Institutions

### 5.2.1. Erosion of Trust in Institutions

Food insecurity can erode public trust in institutions, including governments and international organizations. When citizens do not have access to adequate and consistent food, they lose confidence in the ability of institutions to protect them and ensure their well-being. This lack of trust can lead to protests, riots, and political instability, undermining the authority and legitimacy of institutions (Kassa et al. 2023). Institutions weakened by a lack of public trust become less effective in implementing the policies and programs needed to address food insecurity, creating a vicious cycle of inefficiency and public dissatisfaction (Box 21).

#### **Box 21.** Erosion of trust in institutions.

##### **- The food crisis in Venezuela**

Venezuela has faced a severe food crisis over the past decade, characterized by food shortages and hyperinflation. The government could not manage food distribution effectively, resulting in a lack of basic food for a large part of the population. This inability of institutions to meet the basic needs of citizens has severely eroded public trust in government and other state institutions. Massive protests and the mass migration of Venezuelans to neighboring countries reflect the high level of distrust in institutions' ability to manage the food crisis and protect citizens' rights (Human Rights Watch 2016; Doocy et al. 2019).

##### **- The food crisis in South Sudan**

South Sudan, the world's youngest nation, has faced a severe food crisis caused by prolonged internal conflict and political instability. Severe food insecurity has affected millions of people, and the government and international institutions were perceived as ineffective in meeting the basic needs of the population. This perception of inefficiency and corruption has undermined trust in government and humanitarian organizations, fueling resentment and social tension. Lack of trust in institutions has contributed to exacerbating conflicts and perpetuating instability in the region (Chagutah 2023; Siddig and Vos 2024).

##### **- Managing the food crisis in Somalia**

Somalia has been plagued by chronic food insecurity, exacerbated by severe droughts and armed conflict. The Somali government, weakened by years of war and corruption, has been unable to provide the necessary aid to the affected population. This has led to a significant loss of confidence in the government's ability to protect citizens and manage crises. In many cases, the population has turned to armed groups or non-governmental organizations for help, further undermining the government's authority and its ability to rebuild state institutions and promote stability (Prah 2023).

### 5.2.2. Deceleration of Economic and Social Development

Food insecurity negatively affects economic and social development, limiting the capacity of institutions to promote growth and prosperity. Lack of access to adequate food reduces labor productivity, affecting the health and work capacity of the population. This leads to lower incomes and increased poverty, which in turn puts pressure on public services and government budgets (United Nations Goals 16 n.d.; United Nations n.d.). Institutions become overburdened and unable to provide basic services such as education, health, and social protection, thus affecting social cohesion and long-term stability (Box 22).

#### **Box 22.** Deceleration of economic and social development.

##### **- The food crisis in Yemen**

*In Yemen, protracted conflict and severe food insecurity have had a devastating impact on economic and social development. Government institutions, already weakened by years of conflict, were unable to effectively manage the distribution of food aid and support economic recovery. Lack of access to adequate food has led to widespread malnutrition, affecting the health and productivity of the population. This has had a knock-on effect on the economy, reducing work capacity and household incomes, which has exacerbated poverty and hindered social development. Weakened institutions failed to deliver essential services such as education and health, which perpetuated the cycle of poverty and undermined the country's long-term stability (World Bank Group 2023).*

##### **- The food crisis in Ethiopia**

*In Ethiopia, the recent conflict in Tigray has shown how strong state institutions can be used not only to alleviate food crises but also to exacerbate them. Numerous international reports have documented how hunger has been systematically weaponized, with deliberate blockades of humanitarian aid and restrictions on the distribution of food to civilian populations (The Conversation 2022; World Peace Foundation 2023; Stimson Center 2025). This deliberate use of starvation as a method of warfare severely undermined not only the survival of the affected communities but also prospects for economic and social development. Rather than supporting recovery, institutional capacity has been instrumentalized to maintain control, deepening poverty, increasing mortality, and fueling long-term instability.*

### 5.2.3. Exacerbation of Corruption and Abuse of Power

Food insecurity can exacerbate corruption and abuse of power in the distribution of resources. In food crisis situations, resources become extremely valuable, and corrupt officials and interest groups can manipulate their distribution for personal gain (Camacho 2022; United Nations Goals 16 n.d.). This corrupt behavior undermines the effectiveness and integrity of institutions, making them unable to adequately respond to the needs of the population. Corruption and abuse of power in

the context of food insecurity contribute to perpetuating inequalities and increasing social discontent, thus destabilizing institutions and society as a whole (Camacho 2022; Maslen 2024) (Box 23).

**Box 23.** Exacerbation of corruption and abuse of power.

**- The food crisis in Nigeria**

*In Nigeria, severe food insecurity, combined with conflict and political instability, has exacerbated corruption and abuse of power in government institutions. In regions affected by the terrorist group Boko Haram, the distribution of food aid was often hijacked by corrupt officials and armed groups, who used food as a means of control and manipulation. Boko Haram is an Islamist terrorist organization operating in northeastern Nigeria and neighboring countries known for its violent attacks and use of terror to achieve its goals. Government institutions, weakened by corruption and a lack of transparency, were unable to ensure the equitable distribution of resources and protect the vulnerable population. This undermined public trust in state institutions and perpetuated the cycle of corruption and abuse, exacerbating food insecurity and social instability (Riebe 2022; World Food Programme 2024b).*

**- Food aid management in Sudan**

*In Sudan, food insecurity has been exacerbated by endemic corruption and abuse of power in the management of food aid. During food crises, government officials have been accused of embezzling funds and manipulating the distribution of food in favor of political supporters and interest groups. This practice has undermined the efficiency and integrity of government institutions, leaving many citizens without access to necessary food aid. Corruption and abuse of power have eroded public confidence in the government and its ability to manage food crises, perpetuating food insecurity and exacerbating social and economic inequalities (Chagutah 2023; World Food Programme 2024a).*

#### 5.2.4. Hindering Institutional Reforms

Food insecurity can hinder the implementation of institutional reforms needed to improve governance and resource management. Institutions weakened by food crises and a lack of resources become less able to implement structural reforms that promote transparency, accountability, and efficiency. This perpetuates systemic inefficiencies and vulnerabilities, hindering sustainable development and strengthening strong institutions (United Nations 2008; FAO 2010; United Nations Goals 16 n.d.). Institutional reforms are essential to building the capacity to respond to food insecurity and creating a resilient and equitable food system (Box 24).

**Box 24. Hindering institutional reforms.**

**- Hindering agrarian reforms in Zimbabwe**

*In Zimbabwe, chronic food insecurity hinders the implementation of institutional reforms needed to improve governance and management of agricultural resources. Controversial land reforms in the 2000s, which included the forced redistribution of land from white farmers to black farmers, led to a drastic decline in food production. This agricultural crisis was exacerbated by corruption and the lack of capacity of government institutions to effectively manage the redistribution process and support new farmers. The resulting food insecurity created an environment in which institutional reforms were difficult to implement, undermining efforts at economic and social stabilization (Scoones et al. 2011; World Bank Group 2024).*

**- Impeding political reform in South Sudan**

*In South Sudan, severe food insecurity caused by armed conflict and political instability has prevented the implementation of the institutional reforms needed to build a functioning state. The Sudanese government, weakened by years of civil war and a lack of resources, has failed to implement reforms to improve the transparency, accountability, and efficiency of public institutions. Food insecurity exacerbated social and political tensions, creating an environment in which reforms were difficult to achieve. This has perpetuated instability and undermined national reconstruction and peacebuilding efforts (Siddig and Vos 2024; World Food Programme 2024a).*

**5.2.5. Aggravation of Conflict and Instability**

Food insecurity can exacerbate conflict and political instability, thereby affecting the functioning of institutions. Lack of access to adequate food can generate social and economic tensions and fuel intercommunity and political conflicts. Under such conditions, institutions become overburdened and unable to manage conflicts and maintain public order. Armed conflict and political instability undermine the capacity of institutions to provide basic services and implement food security policies, perpetuating a vicious cycle of violence and insecurity (United Nations 2008; FAO 2010; United Nations Goals 16 n.d.) (Box 25).

### Box 25. Aggravation of conflict and instability.

#### - Conflict and food insecurity in Syria

*In Syria, food insecurity has been both a cause and a result of the protracted armed conflict. The civil war destroyed agricultural infrastructure and disrupted supply chains, leading to severe food shortages. At the same time, lack of access to food fueled social and political tensions, exacerbating the conflict. Government institutions and international organizations were unable to effectively manage the food crisis, which further undermined stability and perpetuated the cycle of violence. Food insecurity has been used as a weapon of war, with various armed groups controlling access to food resources to exert power and influence (FAO et al. 2021; Theofanidis et al. 2022).*

#### - Food crisis and conflict in Yemen

*In Yemen, the severe food crisis has been exacerbated by the civil war, which has led to deep political and economic instability. Blockades and armed conflicts have prevented access to food and humanitarian aid, leaving millions of people hungry. Weakened and divided government institutions failed to respond to the needs of the population, fueling discontent and intensifying conflict. Food insecurity fueled recruitment into armed groups, who offered food in exchange for loyalty and support, thus helping to perpetuate violence and instability in the region (FAO et al. 2022; World Bank Group 2023).*

#### - Food insecurity and conflict in the Central African Republic

*In the Central African Republic, food insecurity has played a major role in fueling intercommunal conflict and political instability. Competition for limited food resources and agricultural land has intensified ethnic and religious tensions, leading to violence and forced displacement. Weak and corrupt government institutions were unable to effectively manage the food crisis, which undermined trust in the authorities and perpetuated the cycle of violence. Food insecurity created an enabling environment for armed groups, which exploited the situation to recruit members and consolidate their control over territories and resources (Maharaj et al. 2017; Carre and Radosta 2018).*

## 6. Towards a Reconciled Humanity: Food Security, Peace, Justice, Institutions, and Their Future

Peace, justice, and strong institutions are the fundamental pillars of a stable and prosperous society, and food security is the invisible thread that sustains and harmoniously binds them together. Without adequate food security, peace becomes fragile, justice is diluted, and institutions lose their effectiveness and credibility. All of humanity needs to explore and act on the multiple facets of this interdependence, highlighting how equitable and secure access to food can prevent conflict, strengthen justice systems, and strengthen governmental and international institutions (United Nations 2024).

In the context of peace, food security plays an essential role in preventing social tensions and conflicts. Lack of adequate food can breed deep discontent, amplifying inequalities and fueling resentment. Food stability, on the other hand, contributes



to social cohesion and reducing vulnerabilities and promoting sustainable and just peace. Without constant and equitable access to food, peace is only a fragile illusion, threatened by every food crisis.

Justice is the foundation of a fair society, where the rights of all citizens are respected and protected. Food security is intrinsically linked to justice, as access to adequate food is a fundamental human right. An efficient and fair justice system cannot exist without ensuring this essential right. Food insecurity perpetuates social inequalities, marginalizes vulnerable groups, and undermines social cohesion. Ensuring food security is essentially about enacting social justice and promoting equity in all aspects of community life.

Strong institutions are the backbone of a resilient and prosperous nation. They are responsible for implementing policies and programs that ensure food security for all citizens. Effective, transparent, and accountable institutions are able to manage resources fairly, respond promptly to crises, and promote sustainable development. In the absence of such institutions, food security becomes an unattainable ideal and society remains vulnerable to instability and corruption.

Promoting food security must be recognized as a strategic priority, closely linked to peace, justice, and institution building. Investments in sustainable agriculture, infrastructure, and innovation are essential to ensure a robust and resilient food system. Also, continuing education and training for farmers, along with research and technological development, is vital for adapting to the challenges of climate change and other global factors. To achieve these goals, transparency and accountability in resource management must be a priority. Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, together with the involvement of communities in decision-making processes, contribute to the creation of a fair and reliable food system. Fighting corruption and ensuring a fair distribution of food resources are fundamental to strengthening institutions and strengthening public trust in them (United Nations 2024).

In the context of food crises, an effective and coordinated response is crucial. Collaboration between governments, international organizations, and the private sector is needed to ensure the rapid and equitable distribution of food aid. Prevention and rapid response strategies to food crises are indispensable to protecting vulnerable populations and maintaining social stability.

Food security is not just a matter of survival but of human dignity and social justice. Ensuring equitable access to food contributes to building a society where every individual can live with dignity and respect. Ultimately, promoting food security is an investment in the future of humanity, in global peace and prosperity. Every step taken to ensure access to adequate food is a step towards a more

peaceful, fair, and stable world, where every individual can contribute to the common development of society.

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# Optimizing Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions in Trinidad and Tobago Through Artificial Intelligence (AI)-Based Technologies

Roshnie A. Doon

## 1. Introduction

Established in 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are an array of targets that form the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which countries around the world have used to address various sustainable development issues from their social, economic, and environmental dimensions (UN 2024). These sustainable development problems highlight and seek to address various issues, including poverty, gender inequality, increased inequalities, climate change impacts, and governance challenges that countries around the world face in varying degrees of intensity. Since the SDG targets are often interconnected, countries must then ensure that the development, implementation, and evaluation of policies to address one problem does not affect the outcomes of other targets in different areas. Thus, there is a need for a balanced approach to be taken so that countries can meet the needs of the current generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own sustainable development needs (Aydogan et al. 2023).

In the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region, the SDGs have been the basis for the development of many policies to address issues such as the undernourishment of children, the rising cost of energy, and high levels of unemployment. Regarding the implementation of policies designed to address these issues, a UN (2023c) report on global sustainable development has revealed that the LAC region has made considerable progress in the areas of venture capital and eradicating undernourishment in the region, as reflected by its steady decline between 2000 and 2014, as well as improved access to electricity. These socioeconomic problems, together with low levels of investment, high unemployment, and a sharp upsurge in criminal activity, gender-based violence, gender inequality, and poverty, coupled with the slow pace of economic growth in the LAC region, as reflected by the contraction of its GDP in 2020, has the potential to undo many of the SDG's targets of the region (OECD 2020).

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, both the level of undernourishment and the rate of unemployment were seen to be increasing in the LAC region. This outcome may in part be due to the lack of access to social safety nets by workers in the informal sector both during and after the pandemic period, i.e., from January 2020 to May 2023 (UN 2023b). The pandemic slowed the progress of the LAC region in achieving its SDG targets, and the inability of most SMEs to absorb the shocks created by the pandemic in the region has still produced fewer negative spillovers than other regions like other Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member countries. Moreover, women in precarious forms of employment are likely to experience significant negative effects on both their economic autonomy and ability to access future opportunities, as these forms of work are not only low-paying but have high levels of job insecurity. Such insecurity and the reduced status of women in the LAC region may lead to a high risk of poverty as it encourages persons such as Venezuelan migrants to flee to neighbouring countries like Trinidad and Tobago, where such movement may have inadvertently contributed to the intensifying homicide rate, social exclusion, and gender-based violence in Trinidad and Tobago (Doon 2023).

Specific attention to SDG 16, which focuses on peace, justice, and strong institutions, in the case of the LAC has seen the region, inclusive of Trinidad and Tobago, having met none of the targets under this goal. While some progress has been made in reducing the incidence of violence, violent deaths, abuse, exploitation, human trafficking, the torturing of children, corruption, and bribery, efforts to promote the rule of law, transparency, accountability, and freedom to access and promote vital freedom in the LAC has been eroding (UN-ECLAC 2022b), thus reducing the LAC's ability to meet the 2030 Agenda deadline for SDG 16. Considering these challenges, for this chapter, emphasis will be placed on examining in detail how AI-based technologies can be used by Trinidad and Tobago as a tool to achieve SDG Targets 16.1–16.7 and 16.9–16.10.

## **2. Overview of Trinidad and Tobago's Progress in Implementing SDG 16**

### *2.1. Examining the Advancement of the SDGs in Trinidad and Tobago*

The drive to meet the various targets of the 2030 SDG agenda by the LAC is one that, as previously discussed, is not without its challenges, as collectively, the region has made progress as 48% of the SDG targets are moving in the correct direction, while some crucial areas like reducing all forms of violence, encouraging both sustainable food production and resilient agricultural practices, achieving full and productive employment for all citizens, and equal pay may not be achieved by

2030, as 27% of the targets have shown no changes between 2021 and 2023 (UNDP 2023). Progress on these targets and others is likely to become stagnant as the region suffers from a host of structural issues such as weak legislation and social inequality, ongoing gender inequality issues, and weak resilience to global economic shocks, as well as a lack of innovation, investment, and financing to implement the SDG targets (UN-ECLAC 2022a).

Given these issues faced by the LAC region in reaching the SDG targets, this creates the foundation for examining in greater detail the situation that arises in various countries, like Trinidad and Tobago. The Sustainable Development Report (SDR) which examines Trinidad and Tobago's progress toward achieving the SDG based on its 2020 Voluntary National Review (VNR) report reveals that while the island has achieved 37% of its SDG targets, there has been limited progress made on 37% of its targets, while for 25.9% of these targets, progress has deteriorated. The main reason behind such an outcome is that the overall development of many of the SDGs is improving but at a slow pace, while others are stagnating (SDR 2023b). A closer look into the specific targets under each goal shows that Trinidad and Tobago, for 2020–2023, have achieved numerous specific targets in areas such as the following:

- Reducing the incidence of poverty, undernourishment, the proportion of the urban population living in slums, the export of plastic waste, and both the maternal and neonatal mortality rates.
- Increasing the subjective well-being of citizens, the enrollment of children at the primary level, the literacy rate, the male–female labour force participation ratio, the population's access to electricity, clean water, cooking fuel, and access to roads in rural areas SDR (2023a).

Despite the progress made, the UN-ECLAC (2022a) highlights that the debt service in the Caribbean region varies considerably, with Trinidad and Tobago's total public debt being relatively high, at 82.4% of its GDP for 2020, and its average service of total debt being particularly low, at 12.3% of government income for 2010–2019. Such a high level of public debt can create significant implications for Trinidad and Tobago as it may impede the country's ability to achieve its SDG targets. Continued inflationary pressures and constraints on government spending created by such debt imply that the ability of the economy to withstand global economic/financial shocks is not only prone to becoming weakened, but that the cost of borrowing is also likely to increase while reducing credit for private investment and scope to implement counter-cyclical fiscal policies to deal with economic downturns that may emerge (Burriel et al. 2020).



These problems are likely to undermine Trinidad and Tobago's economic growth and create conditions for financial fragility to prevail. It is under these conditions that the socioeconomic fabric of Trinidad and Tobago's society may begin to unravel, particularly for women and vulnerable citizens. The gradual, and at times sluggish, pace at which the targets are being addressed can regrettably have significant ramifications on the population of Trinidad and Tobago, as these problems can persist in the future. The inability of citizens to acquire the bare necessities needed to live a decent life implies that the presence of poverty can become intergenerational and perpetual, leading to a complex prevalence of social exclusion and a deepened sense of helplessness (Mutale and Mtapuri 2023). The stalled progress on these SDG targets has devastating impacts on the health and well-being of citizens and can also promote the destabilization of both communities and the economy as these unmet needs can escalate political instability, misgovernance, conflict, and insecurity, as well as gun violence, which erodes any progress that Trinidad and Tobago has made towards achieving SDG 16 (Yeboah and Okoro 2024).

Closely connected to the achievement of the SDG is the United Nations Global Digital Compact (GDC), which provides countries around the world with a broad framework of guidelines for the governance of AI and digital cooperation. Bearing in mind the challenges that many developing nations, including Trinidad and Tobago, face in bridging the digital divide, the goal of the GDC has been to secure a digital future for all countries by closing such a gap by accelerating growth across all SDG targets, encouraging the development of an inclusive digital economy that respects all human rights, ensuring access to affordable internet connectivity, and advancing the equitable governance of both data and AI (UN n.d.b). In particular, the GDC focuses on the equitable provision of digital technologies, including commitments to support several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), such as SDG9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure), SDG10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) (UN n.d.a).

The GDC, through its push for global cooperation to close the digital divide, has been aligned to several targets of SDG16, such as targets 16.6 (develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions), 16.7 (ensure responsive, inclusive and representative decision-making), 16.9 (provide universal legal identity), 16. A (ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms), and 16. C (promote and enforce non-discriminatory laws and policies) (UN n.d.b). To advance these specific targets of SDG16, the GDC has focused on developing guidelines to (1) ensure that there is transparency and accountability within digital public infrastructures that support government institutions; (2) promote inclusive governance with all

stakeholders such as civil society and private and public sector entities in a digital environment; and (3), most importantly, safeguard users' digital rights by promoting non-discriminatory digital policies and facilitating public access to information, digital public infrastructure, and open standards (UNICRI 2023).

## *2.2. The Current State of Trinidad and Tobago's Efforts Towards Meeting SDG 16*

Bearing in mind Trinidad and Tobago's overall performance regarding its accomplishments relating to the various SDG targets, when it comes to SDG 16, i.e., peace, justice, and strong institutions, there is still great room for improvement, as the only targets that were successfully achieved under this goal were reducing the number of children involved in child labour, the exportation of major conventional weapons, and improving the freedom of the press index, with the country's estimated index being 76.5 in 2023 (SDR 2023b). Although challenges remain, Trinidad and Tobago has made some improvements in realizing the many targets of SDG16, although with varying levels of success. These advancements include redefining access to justice by improving the quality and efficiency of the criminal justice system by adopting procedural rules and legal amendments to ensure higher levels of competency and transparency (UN 2023a). Advances in the crime detection rate were made through the establishment of divisional command centres; infrastructural developments, i.e., construction of new police stations and equipment updates; restructuring of the police service; encouraging greater collaboration between state agencies and Non-Profit Organizations (NPOs); the registration of NPO's as well as legislative changes such as new Criminal Procedure rules; and amendments made to the Legal Aid and Advice Act (MPD 2020).

In the areas of creating a more effective, accountable, and inclusive state institution, Trinidad and Tobago, through structural reforms, has updated regulatory frameworks and streamlined its public sector mandates (MPD 2020). The Central Statistical Office (CSO) was also included in SDG 16.6 as a part of Trinidad and Tobago's mandate to improve public structures and systems through its conversion into an independent body, i.e., the National Statistical Institute of Trinidad and Tobago. However, as evidenced by the lack of information and data to support the development of SDG targets in the SDR (2023b) and the VNR 2020 report, little progress has been made in this area, concerning the statistical monitoring and evaluation of the SDG targets by the CSO.

In addition to these initiatives, Trinidad and Tobago has planned several projects to address problems related to transnational crime, cybercrimes, anti-corruption, and human trafficking. Some of these projects include (1) the updating of the training

manual for peace and justice and the training of complainants, (2) the provision of certificates of analysis to court proceedings that may be helpful in cases on human trafficking and domestic violence, (3) the strengthening of institutional capacity in the areas of violence against women and the protection of children against violence and exploitation, (4) the recruitment of forensic pathologists, and (5) increasing capacity to deal with crime through the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) programmes on global maritime crime, cybercrime, and anti-corruption (UNTT 2024).

Despite these improvements and planned projects, many of the targets under SDG 16 continue to pose serious challenges, particularly in the areas of the rising incidence of homicides, which reduces the safety of citizens in the areas that they live in, as well as the rising level of corruption within the state judicial system, as reflected by a corruption perception index of 42 in 2023 (TI 2024). The breakdown in Trinidad and Tobago's SDG 16 targets has been linked to the lethargic pace at which convicts are sentenced, the sluggish pace of administrative proceedings, and, to a lesser extent, the moderate rate at which births are registered, the limited accessibility and affordability of legal advice, as well as the expropriation of properties (MPD 2020). Many of these challenges persist not only because of the inability of the national security system to make a significant impact on the prevalence of crime and serious criminal offences, but also the insufficient resources needed to improve the effectiveness of the Office of the Director of the Public Prosecutions, the prison service, and the judiciary.

As reflected by the SDR (2023a), the overall developments made toward achieving the targets of SDG 16 are on the decline in Trinidad and Tobago, with most goals either stagnated or showing restrained improvement. The inability of Trinidad and Tobago to achieve consistent progress on the targets of SDG 16 unfortunately, implies that it may threaten any of the successful developments made towards achieving a better quality of education, greater gender equality, and reducing inequalities. This is especially important as, in highlighting the progress made on SDG 16 for Trinidad and Tobago, there is hardly any emphasis on developing accountable and transparent institutions that have an inclusive and participatory style of decision-making at all levels throughout the country; promote and enforce non-discriminatory laws, as well as the freedom of information; and work for the protection the fundamental freedoms of citizens. This is likely to erode the trust that citizens may have in the state and public institutions; undermine the safety and security of citizens, as continued violence and injustice may make

communities vulnerable to criminal activity; and encourage social and economic exclusion (UNDP-OGC 2021).

### **3. The Function of Digital Technologies in Accomplishing the SDGs**

Considering the rapid shifts in digital technologies driven by artificial intelligence (AI), which allows business entities to innovate at an unprecedented rate and cultivate a culture of flexibility, it is not surprising that these rapid technological changes can now be harnessed to achieve the SDGs (Van Dijk and Van Grieken 2019). These shifts can also change the context in which SDGs in Trinidad and Tobago are being addressed, leading to accelerated progress in achieving SDG targets. According to Ingram et al. (2022), although there are many ways in which digital technologies can influence SDG targets, the magnitude of the impact itself is often connected to the country and the resources available, i.e., financial, and digital (physical infrastructure, digital platforms, and applications), as well as its economic environment.

It has been estimated that 70% of SDG targets can benefit from digital solutions, which, as governments embark on their digital transformation programmes, can be integrated with their sustainability projects to encourage greater action, innovation, and funding opportunities (Juex 2023). With such digital transformation taking place, it is easier for digital technology to play a greater role in the progression of SDGs because it can identify gaps within strategic plans and generate innovative digital solutions. Firstly, the use of digital technology can be used to evaluate massive data repositories to identify patterns, trends, and anomalies that can be used to encourage a more informed understanding of policy decisions that are also evidence-based. The use of digital technology can support the targets in SDG 17 by strengthening the ties that Trinidad and Tobago has with not only countries in the global south and north, but also the Caribbean region for partnerships, through knowledge sharing, capacity building, the facilitation of multistakeholder partnerships through digital platforms, and the transfer of environmentally friendly green digital technologies, as well as high-quality data, between countries (UN 2023c).

Secondly, digital technology can provide citizens particularly the vulnerable segments of Trinidad and Tobago's population and those living in rural and remote areas with better access to and distribution of information on SDG-related programmes and initiatives in areas that are necessities for life, i.e., food, clean drinking water, sanitation, healthcare, shelter, and education. This can, in turn, boost the implementation of digital solutions that promote both sustainable production and consumption, which can range from greater access to digital financial services and data-driven agricultural practices to improve crop yield, to the use of health

informatics and telemedicine to improve patient care, as well as the use of digital technologies to support smart water use and wastewater management (ITU 2021).

Thirdly, digital technologies can encourage the construction of digital infrastructure like that of the Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI), which can be used to support the provision of public sector services provided by the state with digital tools, digital platforms/domains, and AI-based technologies like cloud computing, 5G, and Big Data (Wang et al. 2021). The use of these e-government types of services in Trinidad and Tobago has the added benefit of not only providing more efficient delivery of government services through online government portals for the submission of documents for taxes, land acquisition, divers' permits, and passports, but also reducing the bureaucracy and increasing the transparency of the process (Mina-Raiu and Melenciuc 2022). The building of such an infrastructure, while necessary for many of the previously mentioned SGD targets, is also crucial for SDG 16 targets as it nurtures trust between the state and the population, as well as the private sector and civil society, whilst encouraging the socioeconomic inclusion of vulnerable groups in Trinidad and Tobago (Bogdan-Martin 2023).

Investing in digital technologies to fuel the digital transformation of Trinidad and Tobago's economy is an essential aspect of achieving the SDGs. However, despite the many benefits of digital technology, Trinidad and Tobago has been falling behind in establishing its digital infrastructure because of the lack of funding and investment, regulatory and legislative barriers, and the lack of domestic innovation ecosystems (UN 2023b). In addition, where digital infrastructure exists, issues surrounding its availability and efficiency, perhaps as the result of inadequate resources to power the integration of these technologies, may deepen the presence of inequalities (ITU-UNDP 2023).

#### **4. The Role of AI-Based Technologies in Realizing SDG 16 in Trinidad and Tobago**

AI-based technologies have also played an important role in the development of SDG16 in promoting peaceful and inclusive communities, providing justice, and building effective, transparent, and accountable institutions. Using AI-based digital solutions can not only assist the state in providing a more streamlined delivery of public services in Trinidad and Tobago but also strengthen democracy, simplifying the process of acquiring justice, as well as maintain the transparency and accountability of all state-run public institutions (ITU-UNDP 2023). For this chapter, emphasis will be placed on how Trinidad and Tobago can use AI-based technologies to address specific target areas under SDG16, i.e., SDG Targets 16.1–16.7 and 16.9–16.10.

#### *4.1. Violence, Abuse, Exploitation, and Human Trafficking (SDG Targets 16.1 and 16.2)*

Interpersonal violence is violence that encompasses a great majority of the problems highlighted by targets 16.1, 16.2, and 16.4 of SDG16, such as homicides, the prevalence of violence and abuse (physical, sexual, and psychological) amongst children and adults, and human trafficking, all of which result in the physical and mental harm of the victim and that is often fueled by gun violence. Although the incidence of interpersonal violence in Trinidad and Tobago has traditionally been high due to a wide range of issues, such as being brought up in an abusive environment, witnessing instances of abuse and violence in the home and community, or perceptions surrounding the gendered roles of men and women and the normalization of violence, since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, these problems, especially in the areas of violence, abuse, and homicides, have escalated, where in 2022, there were 30,640 criminal offences, 605 homicides, and 3066 reports of domestic violence (CSO 2024a, 2024b, 2024c).

Considering these disturbing statistics, although there have been many interventions made, such as increasing the size of the counter-trafficking unit to prevent the trafficking of migrant workers and Venezuelan refugees, providing shelters for domestic violence and adult/child trafficking victims, and providing psychosocial support, in many instances, the assistance afforded to victims, either financial or legislative, is not only inadequate but also inefficient, as its provision is both poorly measured and lacking in consistency, as corruption, complicity, and the illicit gun trade continues to persist (USDS 2023). Within the literature, there have been several AI-based solutions to address problems such as domestic violence, homicides, and human trafficking. Looking at these three cases, AI-based solutions such as AI-driven chatbots such as LAW-U used in Thailand, and virtual assistants, can become a valuable asset to the relevant law enforcement authorities in Trinidad and Tobago in providing not only constant support to both victims and survivors, such as legal guidance in cases where direct support is restricted, but also assistance to victims and survivors regarding how to preserve crucial evidence needed for police investigations (Saglam et al. 2024).

In addition to this, the use of machine learning (ML) algorithms and data mining tools used to predict the prevalence of intimate partner violence perpetration amongst homeless youth in Los Angeles, United States, together with wearable devices and smart home sensors to detect signs of abuse, when implemented by authorities in Trinidad and Tobago, can play a vital role in identifying potential domestic violence cases in high-risk areas and preventing its occurrence, as resources can be more effectively placed (Harkin and Merkel 2022). Similarly, AI algorithms (machine

learning and deep learning techniques), AI-powered video surveillance, Neural Network algorithms, and computations models can be used for predictive policing in order to better understand the patterns and trends embedded within criminal and forensic data, as well as to identify and analyze the social media activities of criminal entities for messages related to human trafficking and prostitution (images, geotags, keywords) (Cortes and Silva 2021).

Several countries are using AI-based technologies to assist in crime detection, such as Spain, through the use of ModeRad to filter through Twitter messages; PROMETEA, used by Argentina to undertake intelligence searches; the Explainable AI (XAI) model, used in Mexico; the Correctional Offender Management Profiling for Alternative Sanctions (COMPAS), used in the prison service in the United States (US); and the Pre-Crime Observation System (PRECOBS), used by the Bavarian police system for crime detection (Cortes and Silva 2021; Loyola-Gonzales 2019). Using AI-based solutions like these countries, authorities in Trinidad and Tobago will not only be better equipped to identify perilous areas where violent crimes, theft, and other offences are more likely to occur, but will be assisted to improve their decision-making and understanding of criminal behaviour, and encourage national, regional, and international cooperation to reduce domestic and transnational crime.

#### *4.2. Illicit Gun Trade and Organized Crime (SDG Target 16.4)*

Moreover, gun violence in Trinidad and Tobago is a notable and consistent problem that, as in many Caribbean islands in the region, has plagued the country for years and is attributed to high rates of gun violence, homicides, and different types of organized crime (money laundering, human trafficking, cybercrime, bribery, extortion, embezzlement). The illicit gun trade and organized crime have also created a climate of fear and insecurity within communities in Trinidad and Tobago, which erodes the indicators of SDG 16.1.4, which is concerned with the ability of citizens to feel safe while walking alone in their communities after dark, particularly urban areas (Wallace et al. 2021). Although the state has implemented several initiatives to address the thriving gun trade and the proliferation of illegal firearms, such as the National Crime Prevention programme and the Fire Arms Act of 1995, these problems persist not only because of the country's proximity to Venezuela, but also because of the marginalization of vulnerable communities, weak gun control measures which increase the ease at which guns are being filtered into communities, and the recruitment of vulnerable young adults by gangs to engage in criminal activities and turf and retaliation attacks, and unproductive state intervention (Baird et al. 2023).

Given that illicit guns have penetrated communities, it is not surprising that the intensity of organized crime and other criminal activities has grown in Trinidad and Tobago. To address this thriving gun trade, many countries around the world have integrated AI-based solutions into their crime detection plans to combat problems such as organized crime, terrorism, and gun violence. AI-based firearms detection models such as “You Only Look Once” (YOLOv3) and ZeroEyes AI gun detection technologies, can play an important role in the early detection of firearms, as the models can be used to forecast criminal activity, detect illicit gun transactions, monitor criminal networks, and recognize different types of weapons used in mass shootings such as pistols and AR rifles through real-time smart surveillance (security cameras and video surveillance systems), to provide the authorities with notifications, which can improve their response time (Kamtam et al. 2024; ZeroEyes 2023).

In addition to these digital solutions to control gun violence, authorities in Trinidad and Tobago can also take advantage of AI-based systems to fight organized crime, such as money laundering, by using analytical machine learning models like that used by the European Central Bank (ECB), to detect suspicious transactions (Tundis et al. 2021). Intelligence-led predictive policing in the form of information-analytical activity (IAA), such as that developed by Farion et al. (2022) to address cross-border organized crime and border security in Ukraine, can also be adapted for the case of Trinidad and Tobago to address border security as the intelligent algorithms used allow for the extraction of information from internet resources to perform intelligent analysis, as well as to identify and classify criminal activity. The use of Geospatial Intelligence Systems and Mapping tools, like in the case of the Owerri Metropolis in Nigeria, can also become instrumental in the analysis and management of criminal activity in Trinidad and Tobago, as the technology helps law enforcement visualize crime hotspots and anticipate criminal activities that may take place in these areas, which in turn can lead to better response mechanisms and resources allocation (Nkwachukwu and Ogboke 2015).

#### *4.3. Access to Justice, Information, and Public Services (SDG Targets 16.3, 16.9, and 16.10)*

In developing countries around the world, access to public services, information, and justice is a significant challenge for many citizens, due to several underlying issues such as transparency and accountability and weak regulatory frameworks and enforcement that create excessive bureaucratic red tape and hinder the decision-making process of officials. In the case of Trinidad and Tobago, such an outcome is not uncommon, as citizens have experienced major challenges in registering the births of their children and accessing affordable forms of justice, and



the slow pace of administrative proceedings, as highlighted earlier, limits the capacity at which public services are delivered (UNTT 2024). This, in turn, erodes the trust that the public may have in the provision of state services to which they are legally entitled, as they may be unable to monitor how the state uses their information in the decision-making process to develop and implement strategies (Androniceanu 2021). Such a breakdown in public confidence and trust can lead to severe problems such as corruption, bribery, mismanagement of state funds, and discrimination, which will be discussed in the next section.

The acceleration of digital transformation has enabled citizens and the state to leverage digital technologies globally to provide easier access to justice, information, and provision of public services that improve the social value of the provisions made (IDB 2022). Considering the challenges faced, within the literature, several AI-based solutions and technologies are highlighted that can assist in improving citizens' access to justice in Trinidad and Tobago. The use of AI is quite useful as it helps legal professionals not only process many cases but also extract valuable information that may be related to cases and improve how case law research is conducted, leading to the provision of more accurate legal advice (Kirsiene et al. 2022). Such changes, while having the potential to reform the justice system in Trinidad and Tobago, also have the added benefit of encouraging citizens' confidence in acquiring justice, as the process is more efficient and more cost-effective as the use of AI drives down the cost, while increasing accessibility. Some of the practical applications of AI technologies that have been implemented, particularly in the justice system, include the following:

(1) Companies such as LegalAI in Berlin use AI-based technologies such as ML algorithms to automate the pre-court litigation process of large amounts of cases and analyze large volumes of case laws and regulations (Legal AI 2023). Meanwhile, use of AI in litigation and dispute resolution processes in the Supreme Courts of Brazil and Africa has already been used to conduct trials at a faster pace (support, pre-judgement, and judgement), reducing the time and cost associated with judgments and any procedural delays (De Sousa et al. 2022; Egeruoh-Adindu 2021). The use of predictive AI-based analytics through ML and Natural Language Processing (NLP) can also help to identify patterns and trends in legal proceedings.

(2) The restructuring of the judicial system to integrate an e-filing system that allows for a completely digital submission regarding the filing of complaints, written statements, the generation of wills, and the digitization of case records can improve the ease at which information becomes accessible in Trinidad and Tobago. Such examples of an e-filing system that integrates AI and Deep Learning (DL) includes the Smart Court concept implemented by the Chinese judicial system to encourage

internal judicial reform through the development of judicial big data and Mizan II, which is an integrated case management system used in Palestine to manage the filing and storing of legal information (Hao and Chen 2020; ITU-UNDP 2023).

(3) AI-powered chatbots can provide free legal advice to citizens who cannot afford legal services. Examples of Legal AI chatbots and assistants supported by Open AI's Chat GPT, NLP, Sequoia, and others, that are used in law firms include Juro Legal AI assistant, developed in the UK, and the Generative AI chatbot Harvey AI, which can assist citizens in making simple inquiries about legal concepts or in more complex problems. Its use has a wide range of benefits from improving the productivity and efficiency of law firms and legal professionals, to conducting legal research, streamlining the research process, and improving access to information in a manner that is user-friendly, and affordable for citizens of Trinidad and Tobago (Juro 2024; Counsel AI 2024).

#### *4.4. Corruption, Bribery, Transparency, Accountability, and Inclusion (SDG Targets 16.5, 16.6, and 16.7)*

Based on the corruption perception index, nearly 50% of the countries around the world, including Trinidad and Tobago, have scored below 50 on a scale where 0 is highly corrupt and 100 is very clean (TI 2024). Trinidad and Tobago has made very little progress in achieving the SDG target 16.5, which implies that the efficacy of the justice system may be deteriorating as corruption, bribery, and abuse of power continue to thrive. When this occurs, SDG targets 16.6 and 16.7, which concern the transparency and accountability of accessing public services and legal services, may erode, as vulnerable persons may not be able to access these services.

In connection with the previous section, i.e., on access to justice, information, and public services, the use of AI can help to significantly reduce all forms of corruption, bribery, and fraud, while developing a system of transparency and accountability within all state-level institutions. AI has a significant impact on the transparency and accountability of the AI-based technologies used by the state in its governance and decision-making processes. The critical role that AI-based technologies play in addressing problems such as human trafficking, organized crime, limited access to justice, and public services highlights the importance of ensuring that these systems have a high level of transparency and accountability to ensure that their use promotes trust, fairness, and dependability (Mardiani et al. 2023).

To incorporate accountability and transparency in AI systems and to ensure that the decision-making process is unambiguous, developers can use Explainable AI-based (XAI) methodologies to provide greater insight into the output generated

and the decisions made after a complex ML model has been trained. Within the literature, model-agnostic and specific methods such as the Local Interpretable Model-Agnostic Explanations (LIME) model, the Shapley Additive exPlanations (SHAP) model, and the Layer-wise Relevance Propagation (LRP) model, can be used to generate detailed explanations by examining the output to determine its future importance. In doing so, experts will be able to better understand *how* and *why* AI-based decisions are made based on the output generated and in doing so, make more ethical decisions (Holzinger et al. 2022). To provide a more comprehensive explanation, Explainable AI methodologies such as Transparent Interpretable Models, as well as Explainable Interface Methods such as Feature Relevance, and Counterfactual and Visual Explanations can be combined. In doing so, experts will be able to model parameters based on the characteristics of the output and highlight the most crucial inputs that contributed to the output, thus reducing bias, nepotism, and error in the decision-making process in state institutions at all levels in Trinidad and Tobago (Love et al. 2023).

In addition to improving the transparency and accountability of the decision-making process, AI can also be used to analyze large volumes of data to identify patterns and irregularities that may indicate corrupt practices. Governments can improve their ability to detect and prevent instances of bribery and fraud by using AI-powered systems to monitor financial transactions, procurement processes, and other activities that are susceptible to corruption. As explained by Berru et al. (2020) and Bhowmik (2008), different types of AI techniques such as outlier detection, clustering, visualization, prediction, and classification, as well as data mining techniques such as rule-, data-, and statistics-based algorithms, can be used to reveal different kinds of corrupt practices such as embezzlement, fraud misappropriation of funds, favouritism and nepotism amongst state contracts, bribery, and collusion.

The incorporation of AI-anti-corruption tools (AI-ACT) used in Brazil, such as anti-corruption bots—such as Geocontrol, used in the Federal Court of Accounts; Iris, an irregularities risk indicator used by the Court of Accounts of the State of Rio de Janeiro; and Delphos, used by the Federal Police to detect suspicious activity—can also become a crucial aspect of reducing corruption as they can cross-check and visualize data to rapidly recognize, forecast, review, and communicate anomalies in related or different types of corrupt practices to experts in order to increase accountability and transparency (Odilla 2023). The use of AI in the governance of Trinidad and Tobago has the potential to transform how states operate, promoting transparency, accountability, and fairness in all aspects of state institution operations

at all levels. By harnessing the power of AI technologies, the state can build trust with its citizens and create a more inclusive and equitable society in Trinidad and Tobago.

## **5. The Challenges and Risks of Adopting AI for SDG16**

When applied in a thoughtful, strategic, and inclusive manner, the use of AI-based technologies can undoubtedly play a major role in helping Trinidad and Tobago to achieve the targets of SDG 16, which encourages the growth of a more peaceful, and inclusive society. In this regard, the use of AI is likely to have great potential for peace and development in that (1) it can, through the analysis of data from social media and economic indicators, predict and identify early signs of resource-driven disputes that may stem from competition for, control, and use of scarce resources, as well as aid in the efficient use of resources, and (2) it can assist in identifying common ground amongst countries in conflict zones to develop peaceful negotiations through simulations and real-time conflict scenario testing (Wahlisch 2025; Sanguila 2024). It is important to note, however, that while AI is undoubtedly beneficial as it offers transformative tools, its use does come with risks, challenges, and ethical concerns, especially if the technology is employed to support corrupt practices (ITU-UNDP 2023). When misused by non-state actors, it risks not only privacy violations but often exacerbates existing inequalities, which may lead to the worsening of human rights violations, weakened security, a lack of transparency and inclusiveness in peace-building dialogues, and a breakdown in communication and collaboration between governments and civil society groups (Sanguila 2024). Thus, for purposes of this chapter, emphasis will be placed on the risks and challenges of adopting AI for SDG 16 in the context of (1) poor data, inequality, discrimination, and bias, and (2) legislation and regulation.

### *5.1. Poor Data, Inequality, Discrimination, and Bias*

One of the most critical areas that support the progression of the SDG is that of data, which contains a wide range of types such as geospatial information, social media, satellite imagery and real-time data sensors. Data plays a major role in assisting policymakers in achieving the targets of SDG 16 because the data analytics produced can encourage the use of an evidence-based approach to governmental decision-making and governance which can improve the perception of the state and the value of its public services (Charles et al. 2022). Furthermore, using high-quality data analytics can help policymakers identify problems, patterns, and trends in the data, accurately measure SDG indicators, and design effective policy measures (Nilashi et al. 2023). With this information, policymakers will be able to optimize their

limited resources and better understand how the outcomes of SDG 16 interact with the targets of the other SDGs. It must be noted however that access to large datasets, which are likely to be collected at a faster pace using AI-based technologies, does not automatically equate to better quality data. This is because the pre-processing of data design and preparation, i.e., the process of making new data more understandable and accessible, allowing for analysis, communication, and decision-making, if performed incorrectly, due to its time-consuming and complex nature, can negatively impact the type and quality of datasets and models generated, as well as the overall trustworthiness of the models used (Liang et al. 2022; Isgut et al. 2022). Whang et al. (2023) go one step further in suggesting that not only new data but also old and existing data and models should be revised through re-labelling and cleaning to improve the data, as well as the model's accuracy, predictiveness, performance, and overall robustness. Notwithstanding the vital importance of high-quality data Trinidad and Tobago continues to experience data quality and collection challenges, as reflected by a lack of comprehensive data on the indicators of SDG 16 in areas such as discrimination, human trafficking, illicit financial inflows, bribery, and corruption within state institutions (UNSD 2024). These problems are likely to persist because of a lack of infrastructure (to collect and store data), as well as the resources needed to create large high-quality training datasets that are an essential component to training, validating, and testing AI models.

Due to the time-consuming and costly nature of these datasets, the adoption of AI-based technologies may be slower in countries such as those in sub-Saharan Africa and Trinidad and Tobago, where high-quality data are absent. This, in turn, can threaten the peace, justice, and governance of countries, as it can worsen existing problems of inequality, discrimination, and human rights abuses under SDG16, as these problems can become more pronounced when supported by inaccurate data analytics (Vibbi 2024). Given this, the training data used may be unrepresentative of (1) underserved communities such as at-risk communities that may be vulnerable to a high incidence of crime, gang violence, drug, illicit guns, and human trafficking; (2) vulnerable population segments such as the poor, destitute, disabled, and victims of crime and abuse, who may be more likely to experiencing adverse social and economic outcomes; and (3) industries in the areas of traditional crafts, food preparation, textiles, and wood processing, which use minimal technology in their daily operations but may employ persons who are considered to be at risk and low-skilled (ITU-UNDP 2023).

Given that poor-quality data has far-reaching implications for the successful implementation of AI-based solutions, Trinidad and Tobago must invest in the

technology stack, i.e., the hardware and software needed to build, test, and train AI systems. Investment in such infrastructure has the added benefit of enhancing technical capacity and creating complete secure data ecosystems. Furthermore, it can also provide policymakers with greater insights into the collection of data on the indicators of SDG 16, as the governance of data is now spread across multiple networks (Janssen et al. 2020). Without the implementation of a well-structured data system, policymakers will not only be prevented from deploying cutting-edge AI-based solutions to track the performance of targets that are lagging but also identifying any irregularities in the data and output produced, which may be an indication of discrimination, bias, human trafficking violations, bribery, and corruption (Beduschi 2020).

### *5.2. Legislation and Regulation*

When AI-based technologies and solutions are embedded in the governance framework, stringent regulation and oversight must be implemented to ensure that AI-based technologies are used responsibly to prevent sensitive information such as forensic, criminal, and conviction reports from being leaked into the public domain, as the information derived from data analytics and its subsequent output can be harnessed to influence public opinion in favour of corporate or political interests through the creation and dissemination of false information, rather than being utilized for the betterment of society (Matthews 2024). The misuse of AI in the literature is known as agenda-setting, where the technology is used to manipulate and control populations, engage in psychological aggression against other nations, and shape important issues for antisocial purposes (Pashentsev 2023). This can be achieved through the manipulation of global information resources, including social networks and the media.

Furthermore, the unregulated use of AI, particularly in the areas of national security and justice, can raise several important problems, as its integration into national security databases that have poor protective measures can be misused by criminal entities within both the public and private sector entities to encourage corrupt activities such as bribery, money laundering, white collar crime, organized crime, and terrorism. To mitigate these risks, it is essential to develop a regulatory framework that incorporates transparency, accountability, and human review at each stage of the AI-driven processes throughout its integration in matters concerning security, justice, and the provision of public sector services in Trinidad and Tobago to actively promote human values (Amariles and Baquero 2023). Such an approach is important for the use of AI-based technologies and the output they produce in terms

of AI governance, as if this is not audited, there may not be mechanisms in place for citizens to seek redress and hold state agencies liable based on the decisions made using AI (Casper et al. 2024). This, in turn, reduces the trust in and transparency of using AI for justice, security, and public sector matters.

To circumvent these problems, state agencies in Trinidad and Tobago must develop strong AI-based legislation to not only (1) guide the implementation and use of AI systems, (2) ensure the ethical use of the technology, (3) mitigate against the risk of a cybersecurity threat, and (4) encourage trust and accountability amongst users and developers, but also to provide legislation that, most importantly, (5) evolves alongside AI to mitigate against potential harms. As AI-based systems become more complex, such a continuous evolution of AI-based legislation has become crucial to maintaining privacy, accountability, and trust because of the many harms and risks, such as the perpetuation of societal bias and data breaches. Thus, there is a need to have in place frequent audits, transparency mechanisms, and frameworks for the governance of data, so that the legislation can adapt to changes in AI so as not to become obsolete, while also addressing the overlaps in other existing laws concerning data and consumer protection, as well as intellectual property (Zhao 2023). While many countries may have adopted a proactive approach towards AI regulation and legislation, many countries, including the United States (US), Japan, and Canada, still do not have any comprehensive AI regulation and legislation in place, as regulatory and legislative action are being taken through existing laws and policies (Baig 2023). As explained by Sazhinov (2022), the inconsistent progress in the development of AI regulation and legislation occurs due to the following reasons:

- A lack of international cooperation due to elite developers employed by global tech giants who prefer to develop AI regulations and then impose them on other countries around the world to maintain their global standards and economic interests and gain a competitive advantage;
- National interests where politicians may politicize the development of AI regulations, as they may perceive them as being barriers to their running of the domestic economy;
- International agencies such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC), have all taken different approaches to developing AI regulations which may not be readily adopted due to differences in its governance structure.

The lack of standardized practices, while encouraging the fragmentation of AI regulation and legislation, can also lead to a lack of consistency, which prevents cooperation amongst countries and prevents the development of universal AI standards and ethical protocols.

### *5.3. Ethical Considerations: Risks and Harms of AI*

Explorations of the use of digital technologies, including AI, for promoting peace, justice, and good governance, as discussed in this chapter, demonstrate that its application can be used in multiple ways that can help developing countries like Trinidad and Tobago not only promote the rule of law, identify trends and opportunities, and evaluate its current style of governance and justice system to reduce corruption but also support its efforts in reducing cross-border crime involving the trafficking/smuggling of persons and firearms/counterfeit and excisable goods (GOCI 2023). Its use can further improve citizens' access to legal information by streamlining case management and ensuring that disputes are resolved in a manner that ensures transparency and accountability. However, even with the many benefits that AI promises for promoting peace, justice, and good governance in Trinidad and Tobago, there are several harms and ethical considerations that need to be considered.

An example of this is the consideration that the use of AI-based systems within the judicial system in Trinidad and Tobago may undermine equitable social justice, as, depending on the type and quality of data used to train AI-based models, it may amplify bias and worsen the prevalence of discrimination during the adjudication process (Javed and Li 2025). In the presence of such prejudice, the use of AI-powered surveillance tools with features such as facial recognition, crowd monitoring, audio detection, and behavioural monitoring, can violate the rights of persons to privacy and freedom of expression when used in security systems, and lead to the creation and proliferated use of military drones used in autonomous weapons systems (LAWS) (Alajrami et al. 2019). These AI-based systems possess the capability and agency to operate independently based on sophisticated programming and pre-defined trigger mechanisms to achieve their goals, often bypassing critical human oversight (Andrada et al. 2023). This lack of accountability and human agency can lead to severe violations of human rights, as decisions are being made by algorithms rather than with human judgement. In such cases, AI-based systems can pose a significant threat to peacebuilding activities and social cohesion, as they can undermine trust and accountability by using biased data and propagate propaganda between groups



through misinformation, which harms peace efforts rather than supporting them (Giovanardi 2024).

In this context, developing countries like Trinidad and Tobago, when implementing AI-based systems into the governance and justice system, need to also consider how these systems, when embedded within social structures such as communities and organizations, influence human behaviour. From a sociotechnical perspective, AI-based systems, through their technical design, algorithms, data inputs/outputs feed-back loops, and predictive modelling, are likely to influence not only the decision-making process of organizations but also amplify existing social inequalities (Kudina and Van de Poel 2024). Furthermore, how these AI inputs/outputs are defined can adversely impact how the system is used and perceived by social structures, as over-reliance can diminish human agency by reducing autonomy and confidence, critical decision-making skills, efficiency, and productivity, as well as narrowing perspectives and the inclusion of diverse groups (Di Plinio 2025).

The implications of such AI-based technologies necessitate urgent discussions on their ethical use, particularly as the policies that inform the use of AI in many developing countries including Trinidad and Tobago are often ambiguous and ineffective at ensuring that judicial outcomes are indeed transparent. Without well-defined accountability mechanisms and ethical frameworks, it is possible that AI can negatively impact social justice in Trinidad and Tobago, in that it can exacerbate societal biases, inequalities, and privacy violations while creating the conditions for misinformation to thrive, which can undermine the governance and judicial process (Cath 2018). This can create unintended consequences for vulnerable groups in Trinidad and Tobago such as women, children, the elderly, minority groups, migrants, and refugees, as well as persons living under extreme cases of poverty and homelessness, as they may have not only limited access to technology but also have lower levels of digital literacy. As a result, this may lead to a sense of disempowerment as it may hinder their participation and representation in public forums and consultations, their use of e-governance services, and access to information on both their human and digital rights, public services, and government policies (UNDESA 2022; Pangrazio and Sefton-Green 2021).

Apart from issues surrounding the ethics of AI and digital technologies, even though its use can help minimize corruption while maximizing transparency and accountability, developing countries like Trinidad and Tobago may find it increasingly difficult to integrate AI-based systems to identify early signs of conflict, monitor digital platforms for inciting violent acts, analyze historical data on conflict,

and facilitate dialogues because of a multitude of interrelated factors. This is because many developing countries like Trinidad and Tobago often lack the establishment of a robust digital network and infrastructure to support the operation of these AI-based systems (Folorunso et al. 2024). Given that these systems often require high-quality data, efficient software to store and process data, fast but low-latency networks to support the movement of such data, and, most importantly, a significant amount of electricity to sustain the functioning of these systems, it may be challenging to integrate AI-based systems in countries like Trinidad and Tobago where such infrastructure may be underdeveloped, particularly in rural and remote areas (Aderibigbe et al. 2023).

In addition, while developed countries have often shaped the development and use of AI, it is possible that developing countries like Trinidad and Tobago may inadvertently worsen the socioeconomic outcomes of vulnerable groups when funding for essential resources like healthcare, education, and public utilities are diverted away from these areas to fund the integration of AI-based systems that may be exclusively owned and designed by businesses in countries in developing countries (Khan et al. 2024). As a result, not only will countries like Trinidad and Tobago be less likely to develop and implement AI-based systems, as well as the training needed to support them, but it may further deepen the dependence of AI-lagging countries on AI-dominant countries (Khan et al. 2024). Such a dependency may limit the transferability of AI-based systems to developing countries like Trinidad and Tobago, as the designs of such applications may not have been adapted to consider the socioeconomic conditions, cultural differences, technological landscape, and level of skilled labour required for their implementation.

## **6. Conclusions**

AI has significant importance for the accomplishment of SDG16 by Trinidad and Tobago because of its potential to address various challenges experienced by the state in collecting data and implementing policies related to the targets of SDG16. The use of AI-based technologies, as demonstrated by this chapter, plays a crucial role in promoting peace, justice, and the creation of strong state-run institutions for several reasons such as providing easier access to justice, protecting the constitutional rights of citizens, monitoring the progress of SDG16 targets through the collection of data on indicators in real-time, and encouraging innovation and evidence-based decision-making. The use of AI can also become a key player in contributing to peace efforts and addressing human rights violations by not only fostering reconciliation but also monitoring peacekeeping camps in potential conflicts and humanitarian

disasters. Considering Trinidad and Tobago's commitment to achieving the targets of SDG16 using AI, it is imperative to acknowledge the various challenges and ethical considerations associated with its implementation. Trinidad and Tobago must ensure that the use of AI complies with human rights and ethical guidelines, safeguarding the safety, security, and privacy of its citizens. Moreover, maintaining transparency and accountability in the state's utilization of AI for matters related to peace, justice, and governance is paramount. This requires careful consideration of how AI is employed to promote the goals of SDG16 while upholding ethical standards and protecting the rights of citizens in Trinidad and Tobago.

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