SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS

SDG16: Promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies

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Introduction

While the United Nations was founded specifically to preserve and ensure global peace in the aftermath of the Second World War, the Millennium Development Goals did not include targets related to reducing conflict or ensuring peace. While controversial, SDG16 was included in the Global Transformation Agenda in 2015 on the basis that peace, justice, and inclusivity are all preconditions for a sustainable and prosperous society. Conflict, injustice and persecution make progress on the other SDGs extremely difficult, both directly and indirectly (UN, 2015). For example, progress on SDG4, Quality Education, is seriously hindered in conflict situations, due to the risk posed to children attending schools in war zones or high-risk areas.

SDG16's 12 targets focus on fostering strong and just institutions. Weak institutions create deficits in public accountability and foster corruption and, without strong and transparent judicial authorities and institutions, justice is less likely to be served (European Commission (EC), 2020). Strong institutions empower countries to enhance just practices and help ensure the safety of the population (EC, 2020). SDG16 assumes that accountable democratic systems of government are essential to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda as a whole.

SDG 16 covers issues including the reduction and eventual eradication of violence, the development of effective, accountable and transparent institutions, ending abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against children, reducing arms flows, and promoting the rule of law (UN, 2020a).

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The European Union and SDG16

Like the United Nations, the European Union was born out of a desire to prevent catastrophic war, and the EU is committed to the implementation of SDG16 together with the Global Agenda. The European Commissioner for the economy, Paolo Gentiloni (tasked with 'coordinating the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in the context of the European Semester cycle of economic governance') argued in June 2020 that the EU has achieved significant progress on SDG16: 'Life in the EU has become safer, as deaths due to homicide or assault have decreased and fewer Europeans report crime, violence and vandalism in their area' (Gentiloni, 2020; EC, 2020).

Within the EU, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union reaffirms all relevant and applicable SDG16 targets. The preamble states that the Union, 'founded on the indivisible values of human dignity, freedom, equality and solidarity … is based on the principles of democracy and the rule of law' (reaffirming targets 16.3, 16.6, 16.10, 16.7, and 16.b). Title IV, Article 32, the 'prohibition of child labour and protection of young people at work', reaffirms 16.2. Where targets are not directly applicable to the Charter, there are programs in place to ensure progress. For example, the European 'Drugs Strategy and Action Plan' is focused specifically on Target 16.4. This program, beginning in 2021, aims to address the security and health implications of narcotics through a better coordinated approach to combating drug trafficking and drug use—activity valued at approximately €12 billion, with the internet emerging as a key marketplace (EC, 2020b). Preventing or reducing the illegal circulation and subsequent use of these substances is also expected to positively impact SDG Target 16.1, by addressing associated effects, including violence (EC, 2020b).

The European Security Union Strategy, which came into effect at the beginning of 2020 and will run for five years, addresses targets 16.1, 16.2, and 16.4. This strategy has three main targets: organised crime, terrorism and radicalisation, and digital security. These priorities either directly reference SDG16 targets, such as 16.4 (the fighting and prevention of organised crime), or address them indirectly, such as 16.1 (where countering terrorism is expected to reduce violence in Europe). Fighting crime in the digital age is also relevant to 16.2, as a significant portion of digital crime involves human trafficking on the unregulated 'dark web' (EC, 2020c). The Security Union Strategy adheres to five key principles, which further align with SDG16 targets. For example, two relevant to Target 16.6 are 'ensuring better application implementation of existing EU legal instruments' and 'guarantee more transparency, accountability and democratic control' (EC, 2020c). Similarly, the principal of ensuring 'full compliance with fundamental rights' is relevant to Target 16.10.

Externally, the European Union recognises that the Global South faces particular challenges in the implementation of SDG16. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said in November 2019 that 'Sustainable development cannot exist without peace and security. We therefore make sure to support our partner countries' efforts to reduce their vulnerability and build their resilience and political stability' (von der Leyen, 2019). EU programs that address SDG16 include the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI), the Development Cooperation instruments, and the EU Instrument Contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP) (EC, 2020d).

Case Studies

The EC-UNDP Joint Task Force on Electoral Assistance
Since 2003, in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme, the European Union has been working to improve electoral assistance across the globe, with the aim of strengthening open and inclusive democratic governance. The EC-UNDP Joint Task Force on Electoral Assistance has to date involved more than 185 elections (EC-UNDP, 2020a), including in Lebanon and Guinea-Bissau.

In Lebanon, the Lebanese Assistance Project (LEAP) spanned seven years, from 2012 – 2019. LEAP had an overall budget of US$11.6 million, with the majority (US$9.2 million)

contributed by the European Union through the DCI (EC, 2017a; EC-UNDP, 2020b). LEAP was led by Chief Technical Advisor Dan Radelesu and consisted of another nine team members. LEAP worked in cooperation with the relevant Lebanese ministries, including the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities, and other stakeholders such as the Supervisory Commission for Elections. They focused on addressing five main areas: the management and administration of elections, election supervision, voter education and awareness raising, the resolution of electoral disputes, and women's participation.

The December 2018 Final Evaluation Report concluded that overall, the project was success and should continue. The Directorate General for Political Affairs and Refugees 'considers that the project support is essential and a must for holding, fair, transparent and comprehensive elections'. The report notes that in future, the promotion of youth and women's participation in elections should be further developed (Gomez, 2019).

In Guinea-Bissau, the EC-UNDP task force was in place for 14 months, from October 2018 until December 2019. The project had an overall budget of US$7.7 million, with the largest contribution of US$2.9 million once again coming from the EU (EC-UNDP, 2020d). The objective of the program was to enhance the capacity of Guinea-Bissau 'to hold legitimate, transparent and credible elections' (EC-UNDP, 2020e). The on-the-ground team supported the Bureau of Technical Support of the Electoral Process (GTAPE), the National Election Commission (CNE), and Regional Election Commissions (CREs). Activities included providing financial assistance for voter registration activities, civil campaigns regarding voter mobilisation and civic education, technical assistance for operationalising planning and local staff training, and the deployment of advisers across the country. The program supported the registration of 761,676 new voters and the training of an estimated 12,000 polling staff (EC-UNDP, 2020d). In February 2020, the Head of UN Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Guinea-Bissau, Rosine H. Sori-Coulibaly, stated that there was now a 'window of opportunity for sustainable peace and stability, national cohesion and reconciliation' (UN, 2020).

The ASEAN-EU Enhanced Partnership Action Plan and the ASEAN-EU Plan of Action
The 2013-17 ASEAN-EU Enhanced Partnership Action Plan was adopted at the ASEAN-EU Ministerial Meeting in Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei, in April 2012 (ASEAN-EU, 2012). The Action Plan included 90 Joint Actions under the banners of Political-Security, Economic-Trade, and Socio Cultural. Although SDG16 was not adopted until three years later, the plan is directly applicable to the goal and its targets. For example, Joint Action 1.2.13, like SDG16.2, focuses on curtailing human trafficking. Similarly, Joint Action 1.2.15, like SDG16.5, focuses on 'combating corruption' through the UN Convention Against Corruption. Action 1.3.1 addresses SDG16.2, 16.10 and 16A by specifically 'building initiatives aimed at enhancing the promotion of human rights through the technical cooperation programmes as well as giving support to the ASEAN commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC)'. Action 1.4.1 calls for the development of 'ASEAN-EU cooperation in multilateral fora, including in the United Nations and other bodies within the UN system, as well as in Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), and the G20 in order to strengthen the multilateral system and, where appropriate to develop joint positions'. Overall, there was significant alignment between the Enhanced Partnership Action Plan and SDG16.

After it expired in 2017, the Enhanced Partnership was replaced by the ASEAN-EU Plan of Action (ASEAN, 2017). With a planned duration of four years from 2018-22, the Plan reinforces previous objectives and actions, while also adding a new thematic of sustainability and climate change. Addressing Target 16B, objective 3.5 of the Plan calls on members to 'Address regional and global environmental challenges and promote sustainable development' and directly references the SDGs, further calling on members to 'Conduct ASEAN-EU Dialogue on Sustainable Development as a platform to discuss development issues and sustainability issues and the implementation of the Agenda 2030 and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)' (ASEAN-EU, 2017).

Progress and Criticism

Even small progress on the targets of SDG16 would mean substantive improvement to the lives of people everywhere. For example, the European Commission estimates that each year, €1.12 trillion is stolen from developing countries via corruption, theft, tax evasion and bribery (EC, 2020). Twenty five per cent of children under the age of five do not have their births legally recorded, which often results in the denial of legal rights and access to justice and social services (UN, 2020). In 2019, the UNHCR recorded that 79.5 million people were fleeing war, persecution and conflict—a historical record (UN, 2020a).

The 2020 Report of the UN Secretary General found that despite some progress, implementation of SDG16 has been slow and further undermined by the ravages of the COVID-19 pandemic (UN, 2020c). The report states that the global rate of homicide per 100,000 people has only declined by 0.1 per cent from 2015 to 2018. Nearly 80 per cent of children aged 1-14 years old in 69 mostly low- and middle-income countries were subjected to a 'form of psychological aggression and/or physical punishment at home in the previous month' (UN, 2020c). Nevertheless, some progress has been observed: 'The number of countries with binding laws and policies giving individuals a right to obtain access to information held by public authorities (the right to information) has continued to rise, reaching 127 in 2019' (UN, 2020c). Additionally, in 2019, the percentage of countries with compliant national human rights institutions increased to 40 per cent (UN, 2020c).

The 2019 UN World Public Sector Report offered a brief overview of the success of the institutionally focused SDG16 targets. The report found that due to conflicting targets and contested definitions, 'measuring institutional dimensions of SDG16 poses challenges of various orders, in turn making it difficult to define "progress" along any of them'. Some targets need to be carefully balanced; for example, SDG16.6, developing transparent institutions at all levels, and 16.10, protecting fundamental freedoms such as privacy, raise the challenge of balancing privacy and transparency (UN, 2019). Another challenge is raised by the contested definitions and conceptual debates surrounding specific terms in the targets. As the report outlined, 'all institutional principles of SDG16 are not conceptually unified'. For example, terms like 'accountability' and 'transparency' are in some cases used interchangeably, and in others as distinct concepts (UN, 2019).

Measurement and progress are also often hampered by a lack of data. According to Hope (2020), 'A country cannot, for example, end abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against, and torture of, children (Target 16.2) without knowing how many children are being catered for and their regional distribution'. These difficulties are often compounded by insufficient financing and a lack of political will or leadership (Hope 2020).

Significant questions remain about both the possibility of meeting SDG16, and its appropriateness. In the wake of mass protests movements against violent and racist policing across the world, SDG16 has come under renewed scrutiny for the way in which it securitises human rights and development, and arguably fails to recognise the negative and violent relationship between police and vulnerable communities.

Conclusion

Faced with a catastrophic global pandemic, the United Nations has argued that the Sustainable Development Goals are more relevant than ever, and that rebuilding a more just and equitable world requires the implementation of the Global Agenda. In an April 2020 Policy Brief, the UN acknowledged the risk that compounding health, economic and environmental crises pose to the implementation of SDG16 in particular. It is crucial that responses to those crises are grounded in the protection and implementation of the SDG Agenda: 'Responses that are shaped by and respect human rights result in better outcomes in beating the pandemic, ensuring healthcare for everyone and preserving human dignity. But they also focus our attention on who is suffering most, why, and what can be done about it. They prepare the ground now for emerging from this crisis with more equitable and sustainable societies, development and peace' (UN, 2020d).

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