

# A 'Bold New Agenda' is Falling short: The Perils and Promises of SDG 16



SDG16 Data Initiative 2023 Report



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# **A 'Bold New Agenda' is Falling short: The Perils and Promises of SDG 16**



**SDG16 Data Initiative 2023 Report**

# Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Acronyms and abbreviations</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Introduction:</b> The 2023 SDG16 Data Initiative Report
<b>8</b>	<b>Chapter 1:</b> Insights from civil society: Halfway to 2030 Report on SDG16+
<b>12</b>	<b>Chapter 2:</b> Status of SDG 16 at the midpoint of Agenda 2030
<b>16</b>	<b>Chapter 3:</b> SDG 16.1—Patterns of violence in state and non-state armed conflicts
<b>23</b>	<b>In focus:</b> SDG 16.1.1: Data gaps in international homicide statistics
<b>26</b>	<b>Chapter 4:</b> SDG 16.2 Ending violence against children—some progress, yet heightened risks increase threats to children’s rights to protection
<b>36</b>	<b>Chapter 5:</b> SDG 16.3: Strengthening the rule of law and access to justice
<b>45</b>	<b>In focus:</b> SDG 16.4.2: Gaps in illicit arms flows data
<b>49</b>	<b>In focus:</b> SDG 16.5: Transparency International Canada—building a coalition to advocate for beneficial ownership transparency
<b>52</b>	<b>Chapter 6:</b> SDGs 16.6. and 16.7: Using democracy data to fill in the gaps
<b>62</b>	<b>Chapter 7:</b> SDG 16.10: Failing to assess progress on fundamental rights
<b>71</b>	<b>Conclusion:</b> Observations on the role and importance of official and non-official data
<b>80</b>	<b>References</b>
<b>87</b>	<b>Endnotes</b>



# Acronyms and abbreviations

CAD	Canadian dollars
CLD	Centre for Law and Democracy
CPJ	Committee to Protect Journalists
CSO	Civil society organizations
EU	European Union
FGM	Female genital mutilation
FLIP	Freedom of the Press Foundation
GSoD Indices	Global State of Democracy Indices
GTA	Greater Toronto Area
GVD database	Global Violent Deaths database
HLPF	High-Level Political Forum (on Sustainable Development)
ICVAC	International Classification of Violence against Children
IOM	International Organization for Migration
LIC	Low-income country
LMIC	Low- and middle-income country
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
RTI	Right to information
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SDSN	Sustainable Development Solutions Network
TI	Transparency International
UCDP	Uppsala Conflict Data Program
UEMS	Unplanned explosions at munitions sites
UMIC	Upper-middle income country
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
VNR	Voluntary National Reviews
WJP	World Justice Project







# Introduction

## The 2023 SDG16 Data Initiative Report

**Miguel Angel Lara Otaola<sup>1</sup>**

Senior Advisor for Democracy Assessment,  
International IDEA

### A ‘bold new agenda’ but little progress

In September 2015, a ‘bold new global agenda to end poverty by 2030 and pursue a sustainable future’ was unanimously adopted by all 193 United Nations member states (United Nations 2015). This agenda was met with ‘a thunderous standing ovation’, including from many world leaders. Applauding and cheering, however, are substantially easier than ending hunger, achieving gender equality and building effective and accountable institutions at all levels.

At the midway point of the 2030 Agenda, the promise to ‘leave no one behind’ is in peril, as rightly highlighted in a Special Report by the United Nations Secretary-General (United Nations 2023a). The official assessment of the 140 measurable targets shows that only about 12 per cent of the targets are on track, close to half are moderately or severely off track and about 30 per cent have stagnated or regressed below the 2015 baseline (United Nations 2023a).

Another recent United Nations report confirms this: violence is on the rise, human rights are being violated and inequality and corruption keep hindering progress (UNODC, OHCHR and UNDP 2023). It issues a ‘wake-up call’ for action on peace, justice and inclusion. The full picture, however, is even worse. This SDG16 Data Initiative report, which draws on non-official data by a consortium of dedicated

organizations, shows the landscape is even bleaker.

The SDG16 Data Initiative is a consortium of 18 partner organizations with a diverse range of focuses, which seeks to support open tracking of the global commitments made on Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 on ‘Peace, justice and strong institutions’. The Initiative supports ongoing efforts to develop an official indicator framework and draws on available unofficial data to help track progress towards implementation of SDG 16 (SDG16 Data Initiative n.d.), which seeks 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’ (United Nations 2023b).<sup>2</sup>

Unofficial data is key not only to identifying challenges with official data availability, measurement, accuracy and coverage, but also to better tracking of the implementation of SDG 16.

This 2023 SDG16 Data Initiative report, A ‘Bold New Agenda’ is Falling Short: The Perils and Promises of SDG 16, published at the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda, presents an outlook on the situation for SDG 16 according to the non-official data, outlines the main challenges ahead and makes recommendations not only on improving data collection, coverage and quality, but also on stepping up efforts to achieve SDG 16 by 2030. The report draws on information and current research from members of the SDG16 Data Initiative and covers most of the SDG 16 outcome targets (Table 1.1).<sup>3</sup>



**“The official assessment of the 140 measurable targets shows that only about 12 per cent of the targets are on track, close to half are moderately or severely off track and about 30 per cent have stagnated or regressed below the 2015 baseline.”**

**Table 1.1**  
**SDG targets**

	<b>Target 16.1</b>	Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere
	<b>Target 16.2</b>	End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children
	<b>Target 16.3</b>	Promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all
	<b>Target 16.4</b>	By 2030, significantly reduce illicit financial and arms flows, strengthen the recovery and return of stolen assets and combat all forms of organized crime
	<b>Target 16.5</b>	Substantially reduce corruption and bribery in all their forms
	<b>Target 16.6</b>	Develop effective, accountable, and transparent institutions at all levels
	<b>Target 16.7</b>	Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making at all levels
	<b>Target 16.8</b>	Broaden and strengthen the participation of developing countries in the institutions of global governance
	<b>Target 16.9</b>	By 2030, provide legal identity for all, including birth registration
	<b>Target 16.10</b>	Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements
	<b>Target 16.a</b>	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
	<b>Target 16.b</b>	Promote and enforce non-discriminatory laws and policies for sustainable development

Source: SDG 16 Hub, 'SDG 16 Indicators', [n.d.], <https://www.sdg16hub.org/landing-page/sdg-16-indicators>. Accessed 15 September 2023



## Official data and its limitations

Tracking SDG 16 is not an easy task. First, these are abstract concepts that summarize the aspirations of billions of people with diverse histories and experiences. Second, they are complex goals and achieving them will require the interaction of myriad institutions, procedures and values, as well as an element of chance. Third, many of the events that impact this goal frequently go undocumented, underreported or unmeasured.

To measure progress with SDG 16, the General Assembly asked the United Nations Statistical Commission to create an Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators (IAEG-SDGs), with a mandate to develop a global indicator framework for the targets in the 2030 Agenda (SDG16 Hub 2023). This framework, which was adopted in March 2017 (United Nations General Assembly 2017), contains 231 unique indicators, which have since been expanded. There are 12 specific targets and 24 indicators for measuring progress on SDG16 (United Nations 2023b: Annex 1).

These indicators, however, present a number of challenges. Official indicators are derived from national statistical systems, but not all national statistics offices are necessarily reliable, as basic principles for the use of data—on accountability, accessibility, accuracy, interoperability, disaggregation, timeliness and interpretability—are not always followed (United Nations Statistics Division 2022). There are also challenges related to methodology and the availability of data. While some indicators are clear, have international standards and are regularly produced by most countries,<sup>4</sup> others have no established methodology and are not regularly produced by countries (SDG16 Hub 2023). Obtaining comprehensive time series coverage is a common limitation.

Furthermore, not all the available official measures correspond with the concept underlying the target. For instance, Target 16.3, ‘Promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all’, is currently measured by three indicators: (a) the proportion of victims of violence in the previous 12 months who reported the violence (Indicator 16.3.1); (b) unsentenced detainees as a proportion of the overall prison population (Indicator 16.3.2); and (c) the proportion of the population that has experienced a dispute and accessed a formal or informal dispute resolution mechanism (Indicator 16.3.3). The rule of law is far broader than this, however, encompassing fundamental principles ranging from the separation of powers to ensuring due process in independent and competent tribunals.

To address the above challenges, and because not all aspects of the targets are covered by the indicators, it is welcome—and indeed to be encouraged—that new indicators should be developed to complement existing ones. For this reason, the SDG16 Data Initiative draws on data from its own partners, which follow rigorous methodologies and standards to obtain relevant and comparable information across countries. This allows us to identify challenges regarding data quality, availability and coverage. Most importantly, it provides a more comprehensive picture of the progress made and the remaining challenges surrounding SDG 16.



**“Official indicators are derived from national statistical systems, but not all national statistics offices are necessarily reliable, as basic principles for the use of data—on accountability, accessibility, accuracy, interoperability, disaggregation, timeliness and interpretability—are not always followed.”**

## SDG 16 and democracy as an enabler

SDG 16 is at the core of the 2030 Agenda. It is just one of 17 SDGs, but a goal that serves to achieve many other goals. The United Nations General Assembly (2015) has confirmed that the goals and targets are interlinked and integrated. Implementation of one goal can therefore have a multiplier effect. Conversely, failure to meet one of the goals can have detrimental effects across various others. As the TAP Network highlights in our report, SDG16+ was designed as an enabler to provide support for the achievement of other goals.

This interdependence is obvious. For instance, if the aim is to reduce gender inequality (Goal 5), this will require improvements in the quality of education for girls and women (Goal 4), as well as the promotion of productive employment and decent work (Goal 8), and would also be likely to contribute to reducing poverty (Goal 1). Similarly, failing on climate action (Goal 13) would result in shortcomings in protecting life below water (Goal 14) and on land (Goal 15), but also and especially in reducing inequality (Goal 10).

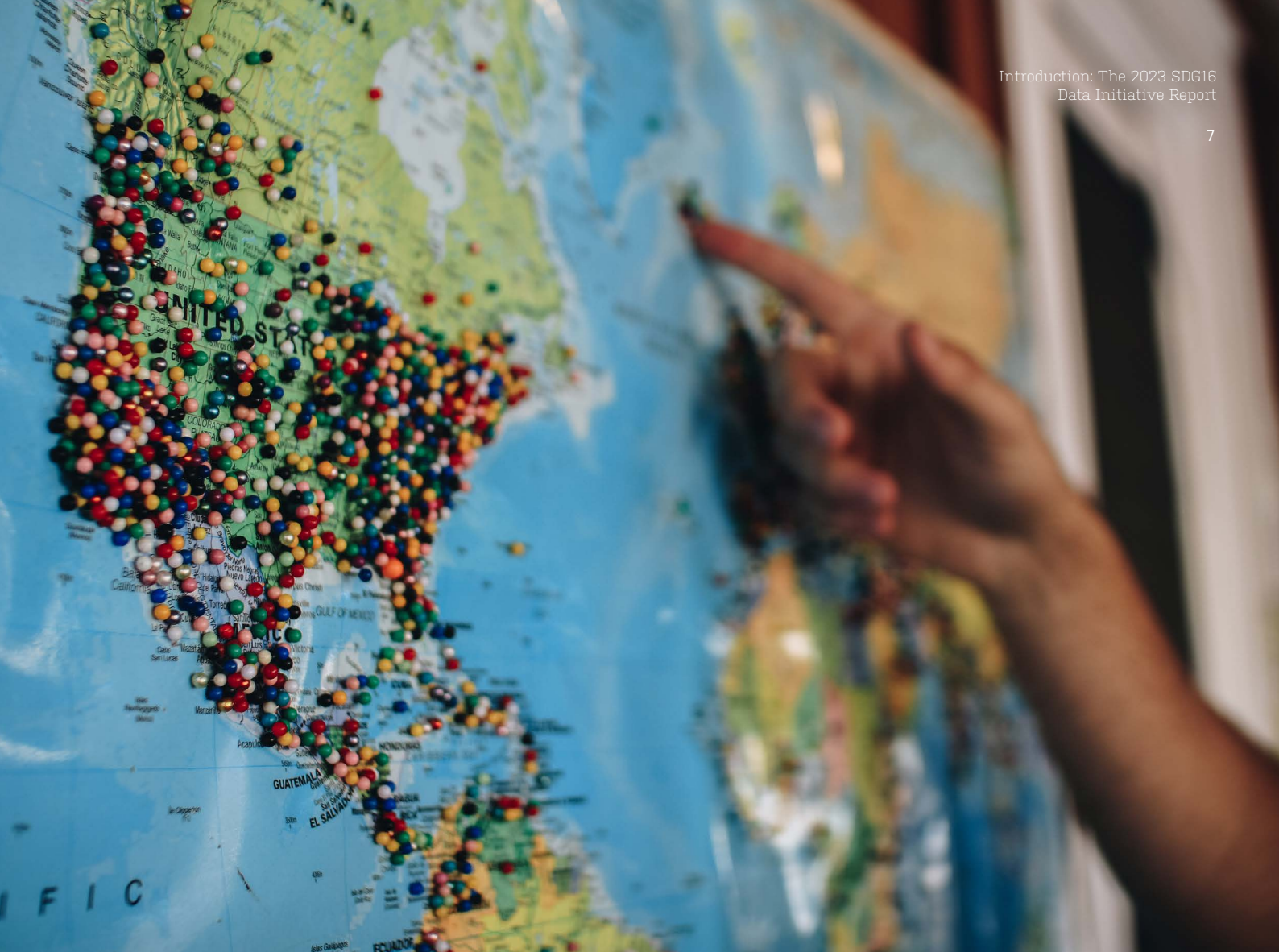
This interdependence is especially relevant for SDG 16, the characteristics of which make it particularly important for promoting and reinforcing other SDGs. SDG 16 is related to democratic governance. ‘Inclusive societies’, ‘Access to justice’ and ‘Effective, accountable and inclusive institutions’, are all related to a type of government that seeks to empower its citizens and protect their rights under the law.

International IDEA defines democracy as ‘popular control over decision making and political equality among those exercising that control’ (International IDEA 2018: 5). While imperfect, and always open to improvement, democracy is superior to all other political arrangements as it possesses more checks on power, promotes liberties and maximizes self-determination (Dahl and Shapiro 1998: 45). Thus, under this type of government, ordinary citizens are better able to influence the public agenda and policymaking, not only by voting, but by exercising the many other rights available to them from advocacy to protest, conducting independent research, investigative journalism, and so on.

These democratic rights are also tools for demanding better education (Goal 4), improved health (Goal 3), a cleaner environment (Goals 7, 13, 14 and 15), clean water (Goal 6), decent working conditions (Goal 8) and more equality (Goal 10), to name only a few. Whereas authoritarians silence, democracy gives voice and action, and is a powerful incentive for governments to pay attention to and address general needs (Sen 1999). As SDG 16 expands, so does democracy, and with it the voice and influence of the people grows—especially of the marginalized and most vulnerable.



**“SDG 16 is related to democratic governance. ‘Inclusive societies,’ ‘Access to justice,’ and ‘Effective, accountable and inclusive institutions’ are all related to a type of government that seeks to empower its citizens and protect their rights under the law.”**



## Way forward

In this report, the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) highlights that all the SDGs are severely off track, aggravated by the pandemic in 2020 and other crises. Moreover, there is even a risk that the gap between rich and poor countries on sustainable development, as measured by the SDG Index, will be wider in 2030 than it was in 2015. SDG 16 is one of the targets facing the most challenges. The population-weighted average score on SDG 16 is lower now than it was in 2015.

Delivering on SDG 16 will be difficult. The non-official data provided by SDG16 Data Initiative partner organizations for this report highlights the extent of the challenges we face. We therefore call on the governments of the world to review their SDG strategies and commit to more inclusive, transparent, accountable

and just governance. We must remember that SDG 16 not only is intrinsically valuable, but also contributes to achievement of many other SDGs, from a reduction in poverty and inequality to climate action. Our future is at stake. At the SDG16 Data Initiative we hope that this outlook on the challenges facing SDG 16 and the need for better data will help countries pay more attention to and increase their investment in achieving this goal.

*The SDG16 Data Initiative would like to thank the following partners for their contributions to this report: the Centre for Law and Democracy, the Global Forum for Media Development, International IDEA, the Peace Research Institute Oslo, the Small Arms Survey, the Transparency and Accountability Network, Transparency International Canada, the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network, the World Justice Project and World Vision.*



A woman with dark hair in a bun, wearing a colorful patterned blouse and a dark skirt with floral embroidery, is weaving on a loom. The background is a rustic stone wall. The image is overlaid with three large, light blue semi-circular graphic elements at the bottom.

# Chapter 1



# Insights from civil society:

## *Halfway to 2030 Report on SDG16+*

### **John Romano**

Director, Transparency, Accountability and Participation (TAP) Network

In July 2023, the Transparency, Accountability and Participation for Agenda 2030 (TAP) Network and key partners around the [#SDG16Now Campaign](#) launched the *Halfway to 2030 Report on SDG16+: A Civil Society Assessment of Progress Towards Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies*. This report, co-drafted by over 30 expert partner organizations, represents a joint civil society effort to assess progress at this critical halfway point to the 2030 target date for implementation of the SDGs. In addition to providing in-depth analysis of key issues surrounding SDG16+, the report makes recommendations to governments and the international community on where action and ambition must be directed in the second half of SDG implementation to 2030. The report also examines the leadership role of civil society in advancing SDG16+ at all levels to date, showcasing best practices and case studies around civil society action.

The report finds that as we reach the halfway point of Agenda 2030, there are some reasons for hope but many more causes for concern. As UN Secretary-General António Guterres outlines in the 2023 special edition of the SDGs Progress Report, the SDGs are off track and most are currently unlikely to achieve their 2030 targets. SDG 16 is among the least successful: all the targets are off track and a sizeable number are even regressing. Many were already lagging before the compound effects of the conflict in Ukraine and the COVID-19 pandemic hindered progress still further.

The report concludes that as of 2023, of the 12 SDG 16 targets, none are likely to be achieved by 2030. Only two of the SDG 16 targets—on birth registration and national human rights institutions—are showing signs of progress, while a handful of indicators in other targets also show positive but inadequate progress. Five targets are regressing: on peace and violence; children; the rule of law and access to justice; fundamental freedoms; and discrimination. Of particular concern is the stalled progress on achieving peace-related objectives. The remaining five targets have changed little since their adoption.

The absence of advances and the regression in achieving SDG16+ not only cast doubt on the effectiveness of the SDGs, but also have tangible consequences for people worldwide. In 2023, an estimated 339 million people will require humanitarian assistance and protection globally—the highest figure in decades.<sup>5</sup> Killings of human rights defenders have increased substantially since the 2030 Agenda was adopted; 401 human rights defenders were killed in 26 countries in 2022 (Front Line Defenders 2022). Globally, it is estimated that approximately one billion children between the ages of 2 and 17—half of all children in the world—experience physical, emotional or sexual violence every year, and this trend is moving in the wrong direction (Hillis et al. 2016).

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Access the full report, TAP Network and #SDGNow, *Halfway to 2030 Report on SDG16+: A Civil Society Assessment of Progress Towards Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies*, at [www.sdg16now.org/report](http://www.sdg16now.org/report)

This report, which reflects the analysis of hundreds of civil society, United Nations and government stakeholders from across the world, substantiates concerns that progress towards SDG16+, where it exists, has been slow and uneven. Around 60 per cent of respondents from our global-constituent survey felt that there had been little progress or backsliding on SDG16+, both internationally and domestically. A majority felt that governments engaged with civil society organizations (CSOs) at Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), but much less so outside of that process. The biggest challenges identified were funding, accountability and transparency, lack of data and lack of inclusiveness with regard to marginalized communities.

All of these problems highlight the need for civil society to play a larger role in promoting SDG 16. Civil society already plays a crucial role in SDG 16 implementation; many of the best sources of information on progress on SDG 16 are produced by civil society and academic institutions. Citizen-generated data is particularly important for demonstrating impact at the local level. Spotlight reporting highlights the gaps in the official reporting and should be more formally incorporated into official processes. More positively, a greater number of countries appear to be formally including CSOs and others in their reviews, albeit somewhat superficially at present. At the same time, limits on civic space and growing authoritarianism are making it harder for civil society to operate effectively.

The report also outlines key recommendations from civil society on addressing some of the gaps identified. A key recommendation is that the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) should conduct a detailed annual review of SDG 16 and better examine how the interlinkages are working. Governments should be honest in their reviews of and data collection on their progress and deficits. Many other recommendations focused on the need for renewed and specific commitments by governments to advancing SDG16+, particularly around the 2023 SDG Summit and the Summit of the Future, to be held in New York in September 2024.

The report notes significant gaps in the financing that is essential for the successful achievement of SDG16+ and of the overall 2030 Agenda. Governments and the international community must come to the 2023 SDG Summit with transformative financial commitments. These should include national commitments to resource domestic mobilization and to budgetary allocations, as well as financial commitments from donors on SDG16+. Moreover, reforming the international financial architecture will be essential to address structural barriers and ensure long-term financing for sustainable development.



## SDG16+ as an enabler and exploring interlinkages

A central feature of the SDGs is their interlinkages. The goals, targets and indicators are interconnected, and implementation of each supports the attainment of the others. Given this interconnectivity, various goals, targets and indicators should be considered in tandem when working towards implementation, to safeguard against the potential to undermine essential objectives and the effectiveness of the broader agenda. The preamble to the 2030 Agenda affirms that ‘the interlinkages and integrated nature of the Sustainable Development Goals are of crucial importance in ensuring that the purpose of the new Agenda is realized’. In other words, all 17 SDGs depend on one another and no single goal can be fully achieved alone.

SDG 16 was designed to be an enabler or, in other words, to provide support for the achievement of the other SDGs. SDG 16 targets critically important issues that have significant implications for people worldwide, such as violence, insecurity, conflict, injustice, exclusion, inequality, discrimination, weak institutions and poor governance. These issues also undermine government capacities to achieve sustainable development on numerous fronts: from protecting identity and reducing bribery and corruption to removing barriers to access to education and essential services, ensuring public participation to give people a voice and a role in decision making, providing access to information to facilitate oversight and transparency, respecting people’s fundamental freedoms to give them the opportunity to challenge decisions and ensuring access to justice for people to protect and assert their rights.

SDG 16 is rooted in a human-rights-based framework that addresses issues of universal relevance and importance to people of all nations. Sustained peace and non-violence, access to justice, the rule of law, effective and accountable institutions, inclusive governance, participatory decision making and respect for

human rights are all essential to advances in other areas of sustainable development. These are all key elements of SDG 16 that ensure that the foundational objectives of ‘leaving no one behind’ and ‘reaching the furthest behind first’ are upheld.

The success of SDG 16 is equally reliant on the other goals. Progress with targets on peace, justice and inclusion will directly affect the outcomes of all the other SDGs, while social, economic and environmental progress plays an equally important role in creating the conditions necessary for peace, justice and inclusion.

### Additional resources on SDG16+ Interlinkages

The [TAP Network SDG16+ Toolkit ‘Targets Guide’](#) outlines the international processes relevant for each target.

The [TAP Network and #SDG16Now report Halfway to 2030 Report on SDG16+](#) explores the broad interlinkages between SDG 16 and all the other SDGs.

The Danish Institute for Human Rights has developed a searchable online database, [The Human Rights Guide to the Sustainable Development Goals](#), that illustrates the links between the SDGs and human rights and labour laws.

Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies (2019), a [Roadmap for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies](#), explores a wide range of SDG 16 target interlinkages with other SDG targets.

UNODC, OHCHR and UNDP (2023) Global Progress Report on Sustainable Development Goal 16 Indicators: A Wake-up Call for Action on Peace, Justice and Inclusion. Available at: <https://www.undp.org/publications/global-progress-report-sustainable-development-goal-16-indicators-wake-call-action-peace-justice-and-inclusion>





# Chapter 2



# Status of SDG 16 at the midpoint of Agenda 2030

## Guillaume Lafortune

Vice President and Head of Paris Office, UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN)

## Grayson Fuller

Manager, SDG Index and Data, UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN)

At the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda, all the SDGs are severely off track. The world made some progress on the SDGs between 2015 and 2019, although this was already vastly insufficient to achieve the goals.

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and related crises, however, SDG progress has stalled globally. Fewer than 20 per cent of the targets are on track to be achieved globally and there is even a risk that the gap between rich and poor countries on sustainable development, as measured by the SDG Index, will be wider in 2030 than it was in 2015. The lack of fiscal space in low-income countries (LICs) and low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) presents a major barrier to investing in the SDGs.

SDG 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions is particularly off-track. The population-weighted average goal score for SDG 16 is slightly lower in 2021 (the most recent year with complete data) than it was in 2015. The dashboard for SDG 16 is 'red', denoting major challenges.

At the global level, performance gaps are particularly important on indicators such as homicide rates, child labour and freedom of the press. High-income countries, especially Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) and European Union member states, perform better than the rest of the world on SDG 16. In terms of trends over time, however, averages by country income group reveal that all country groups are either stagnating or moving backwards on SDG 16, except for the upper-middle income countries (UMICs). In the UMICs, on average there has been some progress over the period on indicators related to safety and access to justice, which drives up the total SDG 16 score.



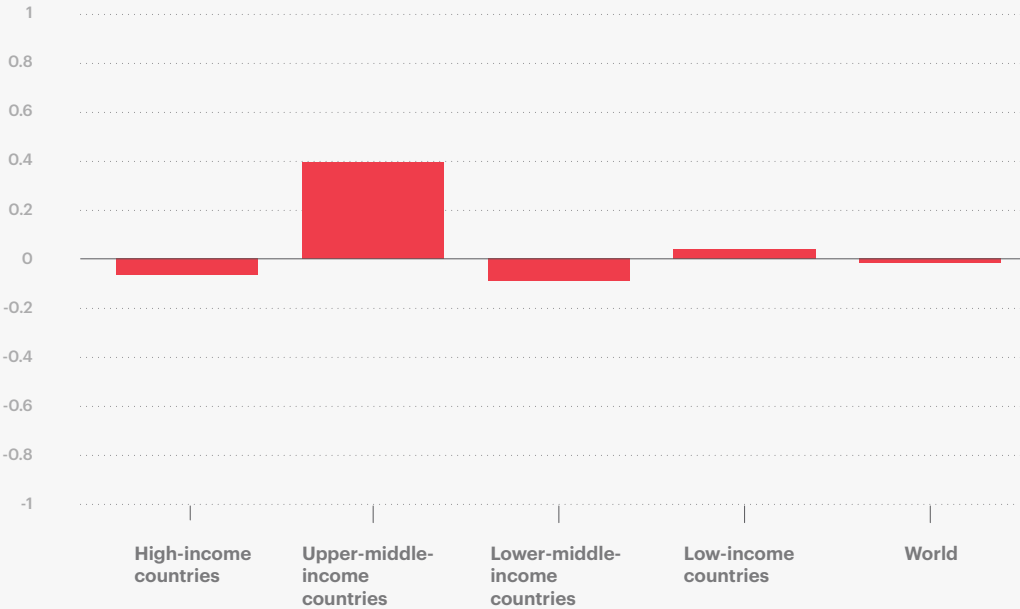
"At the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda, all the SDGs are severely off track. The world made some progress on the SDGs between 2015 and 2019, although this was already vastly insufficient to achieve the goals."

**Figure 2.1**  
World SDG Dashboard at the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda



Source: Sachs et al. 2023.

**Figure 2.2**  
Annualized point change in SDG 16 score, 2015–2021, by country income group and world average



Source: Author, based on Sachs, J., Lafortune, G., Fuller, G. and Drumm, E., *Implementing the SDG Stimulus: Sustainable Development Report 2023* (Dublin: Dublin University Press, 2023), <https://sdgtransformationcenter.org/reports/sustainable-development-report-2023>

**Note:** Annualized change (in percentage points) between 2015 and 2021 on the total SDG 16 score. SDSN measures SDG 16 using 12 indicators that come from official and non-official data sources: homicides per 100,000 population (UNODC); unsentenced detainees as a percentage of prison population (UNODC); Percentage of population that feels safe walking alone at night in the city or area where they live (Gallup); birth registrations with civil authority (percentage of children under age 5) (UNICEF); Corruption Perceptions Index (worst 0–100 best) (Transparency International); children involved in child labour (percentage of population aged 5 to 14) (UNICEF); exports of major conventional weapons (trend-indicator value constant million USD per 100,000 population) (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute); Press Freedom Index (worst 0–100 best) (Reporters sans frontières); access to and affordability of justice (worst 0–1 best) (World Justice Project); timeliness of administrative proceedings (worst 0–1 best) (World Justice Project); expropriations are lawful and adequately compensated (worst 0–1 best) (World Justice Project); persons held in prison per 100,000 population (UNODC). For further details see Sachs et al. (2023).

Nonetheless, no UMIC—or any other country income group—is on track to achieve SDG 16.

Good governance and strong institutions are important enablers of achieving sustainable development. All countries, poorer and richer alike, should use this moment at the midpoint to 2030 to critically review and revise their national SDG strategies and commit to strengthening good governance for the SDGs and multilateralism, as emphasized in SDG 16 and SDG 17 on Partnerships for the Goals. National governments must ensure both domestic implementation, including a reduction of negative spillovers, and international implementation by building a global governance and financial architecture that delivers the SDGs. Persistent data gaps must also be addressed on SDGs 16 and 17, and geospatial information further leveraged to better target interventions to those that might be left behind.

In addition to measuring performance on SDG 16, the SDSN also surveys its global network each year to understand how governments are integrating the SDGs into public practices and procedures through speeches, budgets, national indicators, investment frameworks and coordination units, and collaborating with each other to achieve the goals. There was no expectation in 2015, when the SDGs

and Agenda 2030 were adopted, that all the goals and targets would be achieved at their midpoint. However, by 2023 one might expect that most countries would have implemented ambitious policy, regulatory and investment frameworks compatible with achieving major SDG transformations. It might also be expected that all countries would have at least once documented their progress and their plans for achieving the SDGs in a VNR presented at the United Nations. Unfortunately, major differences can be observed across countries, including G20 countries, in their SDG strategies and commitments (Sachs et al. 2023). At the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda, five countries are yet to engage with the VNR process, among them the United States.

The SDG policy agenda is complex. The SDGs call for lasting, long-term, directed change. The SDSN is now a global network of more than 1,900 member organizations, mainly universities, organized in 53 national and regional chapters. The SDSN places great emphasis on long-term national planning to coordinate public investment, regulation and incentive structures over a time horizon of 20–30 years. Our special emphasis is on pathway analysis to help governments and business design long-term investment plans, and promote good governance and partnerships with scientists and civil society to achieve the SDGs.<sup>6</sup>

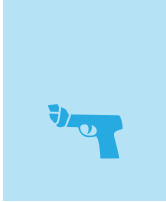
“All countries, poorer and richer alike, should use this moment at the midpoint to 2030 to critically review and revise their national SDG strategies and commit to strengthening good governance for the SDGs and multilateralism, as emphasized in SDG 16 and SDG 17 on Partnerships for the Goals.”





# Chapter 3





## SDG 16.1—Patterns of violence in state and non-state armed conflicts

### Mauricio Rivera Celestino

Senior Researcher, Peace Research Institute  
Oslo (PRIO)

Despite some evidence that violence has declined in recent decades and that we are currently living at one of the most peaceful times in human history (Pinker 2011; Gleditsch and Pickering 2014; but see also Braumoeller 2019), Russia's invasion of Ukraine reminds us of the fragility of international peace. It also highlights that SDG 16 is a timely imperative in the contemporary world—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.

This chapter describes patterns of violence in both state-based and non-state armed conflicts. While the number of state-based conflicts remained relatively stable in the period January 2021 to December 2022, the number of armed-conflict-related deaths nearly doubled in this period, largely due to the Ethiopian civil war and the Russia–Ukraine war. The chapter describes trends in violence in non-state armed conflicts, highlighting that government action to address such challenges often has long-term negative impacts on respect for human rights and the quality of democracy.

### Organized state violence

Examples of intrastate and interstate armed conflict abound from a historical perspective and in the contemporary world. Figure 3.1 shows the pattern of extra-state, interstate, intrastate and internationalized intrastate armed conflicts that led to at least 25 battle-related deaths in a single year in the period

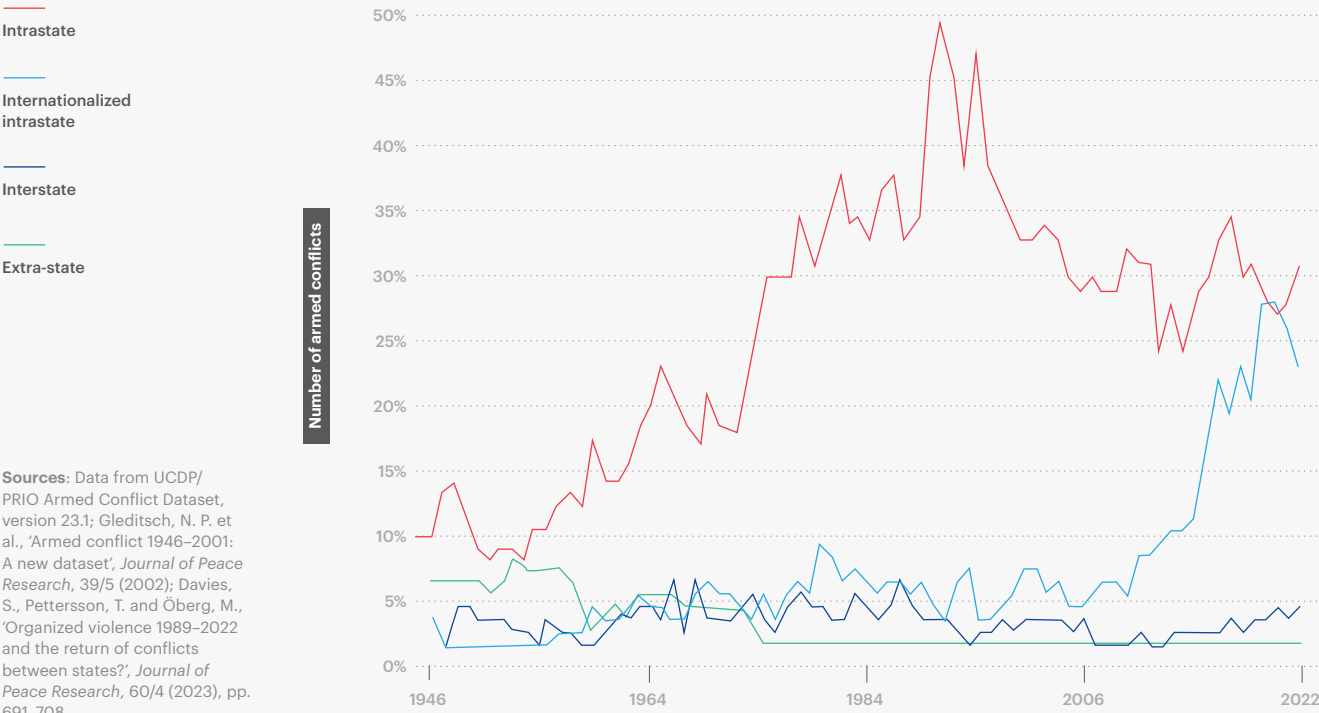
1946–2022.<sup>7</sup> It shows that extra-state and interstate armed conflicts remained stable at low levels throughout this period. There is no record of extra-state armed conflict since 1975 but there are significant variations in intrastate armed conflicts, which increased steadily between 1946 and 1992 but then declined from 1995, although the number of intrastate armed conflicts in 2022 is still higher than in the period before 1976. Moreover, the reduction in intrastate armed conflict is matched by a steady and substantive increase in the number of internationalized intrastate armed conflicts since 2007, which peaked in 2019 and 2020. This parallel trend might reflect how the nature of intrastate armed conflict has changed over the past several decades, linked to increased participation by foreign governments in intrastate armed conflict.

Figure 3.2 shows the number of conflict-related deaths between 2000 and 2022, based on data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP). Conflict-related deaths remained relatively low between 2001 and 2010, but this was followed by a steady increase that reached its peak in 2014, at 116,121 deaths. These figures decreased in the period 2015–2020 but increased substantially in 2021 and 2022. Notably, conflict-related deaths more than doubled from 84,472 in 2021 to 204,331 in 2022, a pattern driven by the Ethiopian civil war and the Russia–Ukraine war, which account for 101,000 and 81,500 conflict-related deaths, respectively (see Figure 3). While optimists might argue that resolution of these two conflicts would represent a significant decline in conflict-related deaths worldwide, sceptics might fear that the involvement of other actors in both the Ethiopian civil war and the Russia–Ukraine War could lead to an escalation of violence in both conflicts.

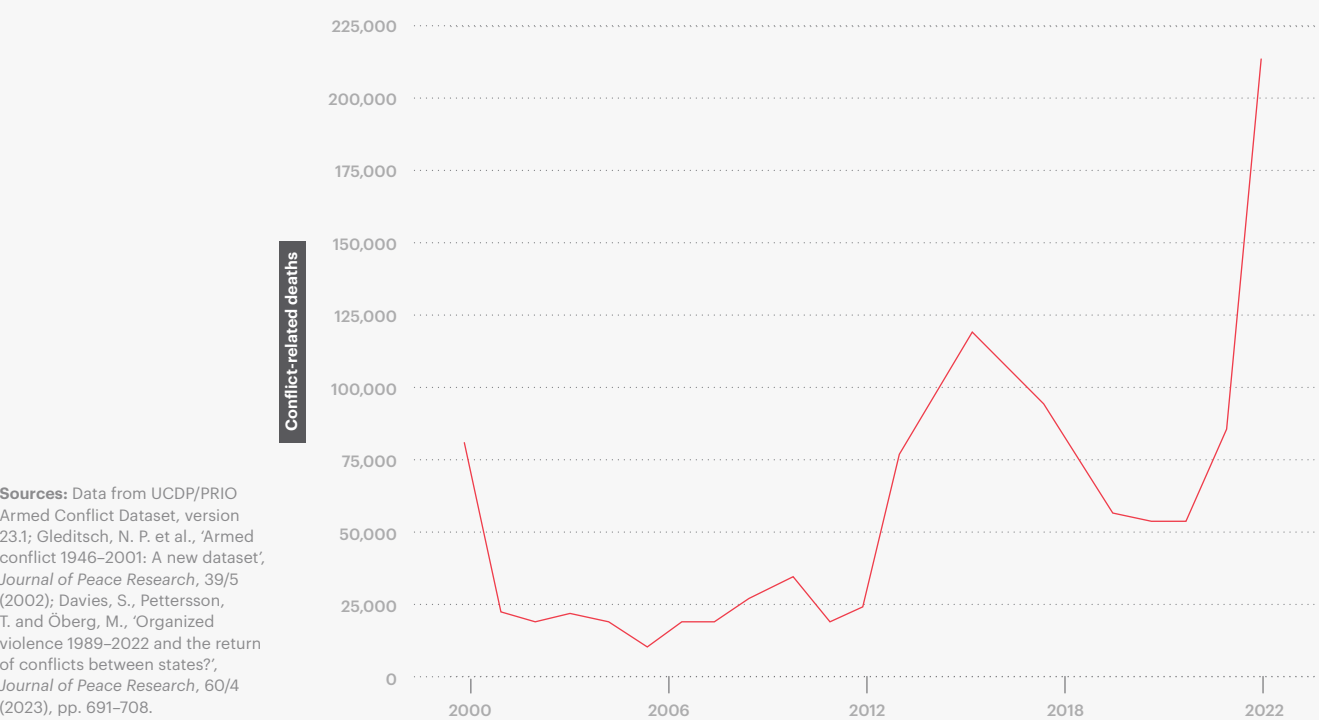


**“Conflict-related deaths more than doubled from 84,472 in 2021 to 204,331 in 2022, a pattern driven by the Ethiopian civil war and the Russia–Ukraine war, which account for 101,000 and 81,500 conflict-related deaths, respectively.”**

**Figure 3.1**  
State-based armed conflict, 1946–2022

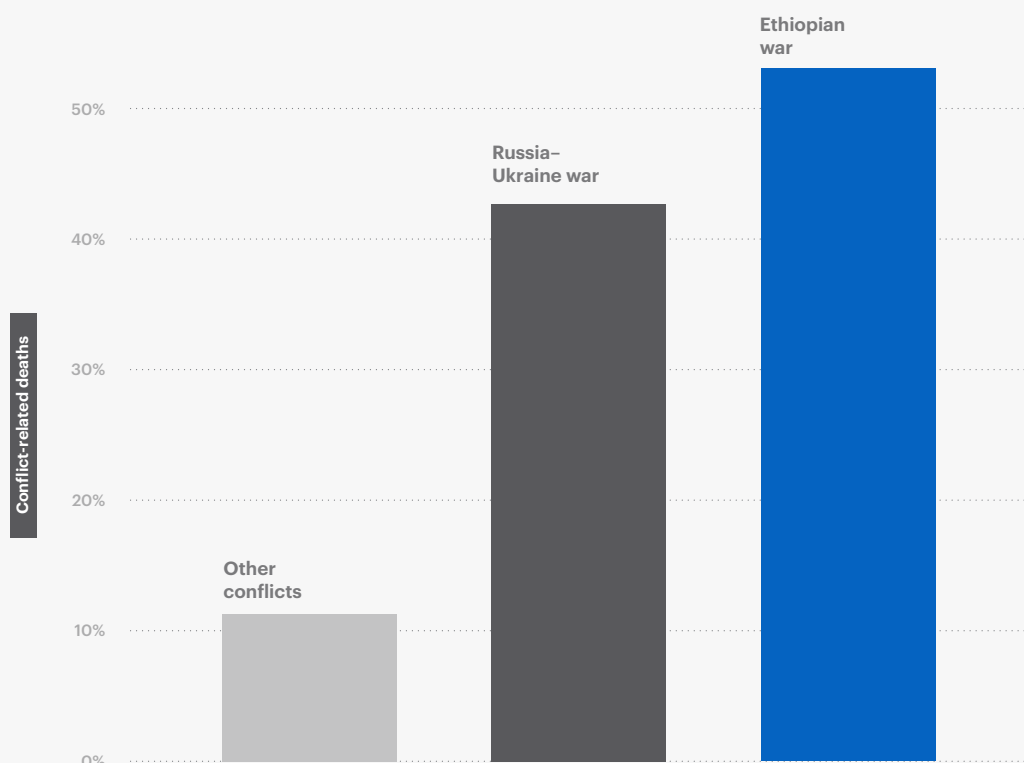


**Figure 3.2**  
State-based armed conflict, 1946–2022





**Figure 3.3**  
Distribution of state armed-conflict-related deaths in 2022



**Sources:** Data from UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset (GED) Global version 23.1; Davies, S., Pettersson, T. and Öberg, M., 'Organized violence 1989–2022 and the return of conflicts between states?', *Journal of Peace Research*, 60/4 (2023), pp. 691–708.

### Organized non-state violence

Violence by organized criminal groups such as gangs and cartels has long been a frequent occurrence even in areas where state-based armed conflict has either ended or not been present. A large proportion of this violence is perpetrated by organized criminal groups against rival groups, state actors such as the police and the armed forces, and civilians. In the case of El Salvador, for example, the Chapultepec Peace Accords ended the civil war in 1992 but more people have died from violence in the post-war period than were killed during that war.

Despite the challenges presented by recording violence by non-state armed actors, the UCDP is an invaluable independent resource that captures at least a fraction of the violence perpetrated by criminal organizations. The UCDP data specifically identifies the severity of non-state armed conflicts, defined as battles 'between two organized armed groups, neither of which is the government of a state, which results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in a year' (Shawn et al. 2023). Non-state conflict-related deaths ranged between 6,839 in 2000 and 17,982 in 2014, but there has been a significant increase in the number of such deaths in the past decade. This reached a peak in 2021 at 25,689 deaths and while it declined to 21,426 in 2022, there is no evidence that this is the start of a downward trend (see Figure 3.4).

**Figure 3.4**  
**Non-state armed-conflict-related deaths, 2000–2022**

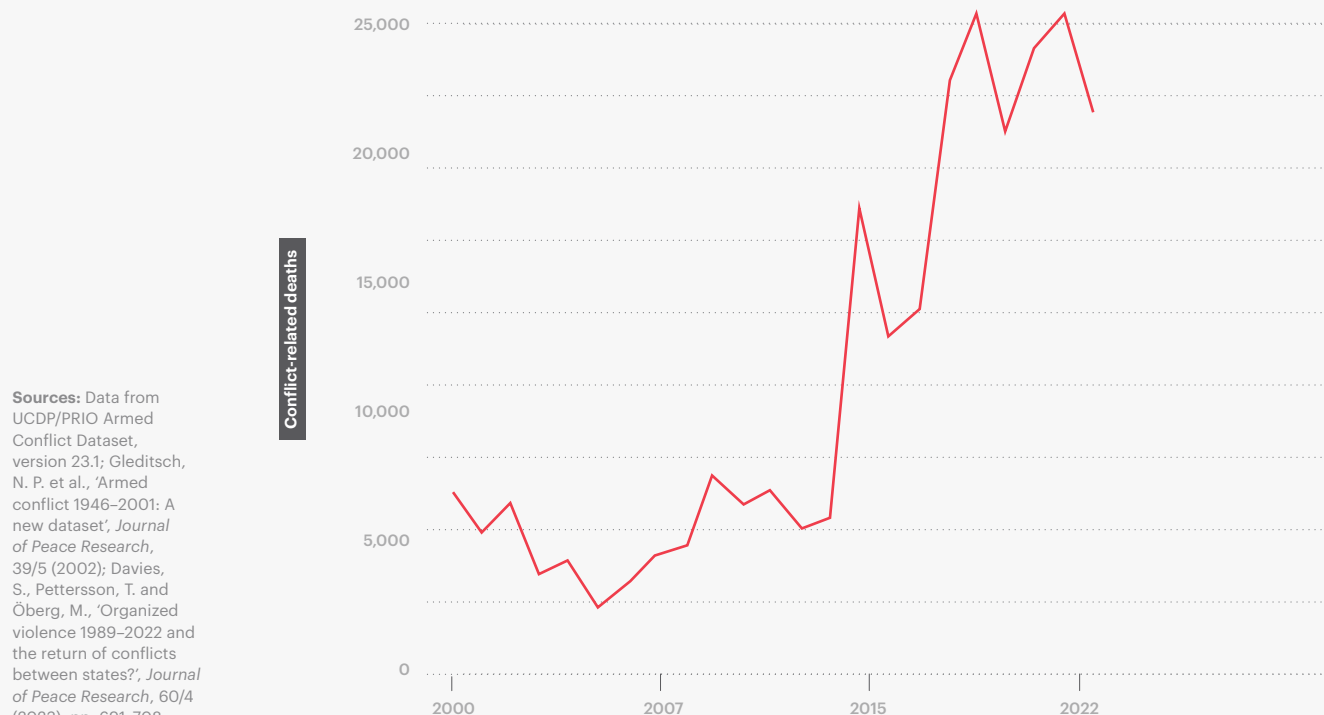


Figure 3.5 shows the cumulative number of conflict-related deaths in the period 2015–2023, disaggregated by type of conflict. It reveals two broad patterns about the severity and location of conflict-related deaths. State-based armed conflicts account for the largest proportion of conflict-related deaths, which are heavily concentrated in the Middle East, Africa and Asia. The number of conflict-related deaths in Europe is largely driven by the Russia–Ukraine war. State-based conflict data, on the other hand, depicts Latin America as the most peaceful region. This contrasts with common descriptions of Latin America as the most violent region, based on homicide data from the World Health Organization (UNODC 2019). Many specialists argue that organized criminal groups are responsible for a significant amount of the violence in this region (see Rivera 2016; Trejo, Albarracín and Tiscornia 2018). Figure 3.5 reflects the nature of violence in Latin America, a region that has been almost free of civil wars in recent decades

but accounts for almost 90,000 deaths (53 per cent) in non-state conflicts registered between 2015 and 2022. The main threat to peace and individual security in Latin America arises not from state-based armed conflict, but from gang wars between heavily armed criminal organizations fighting for control of routes and territories (Lessing 2018). This is particularly the case in Mexico, a middle-income country that accounted for the majority of the most lethal non-state armed conflicts in 2022, in which drug cartels were the main actors.

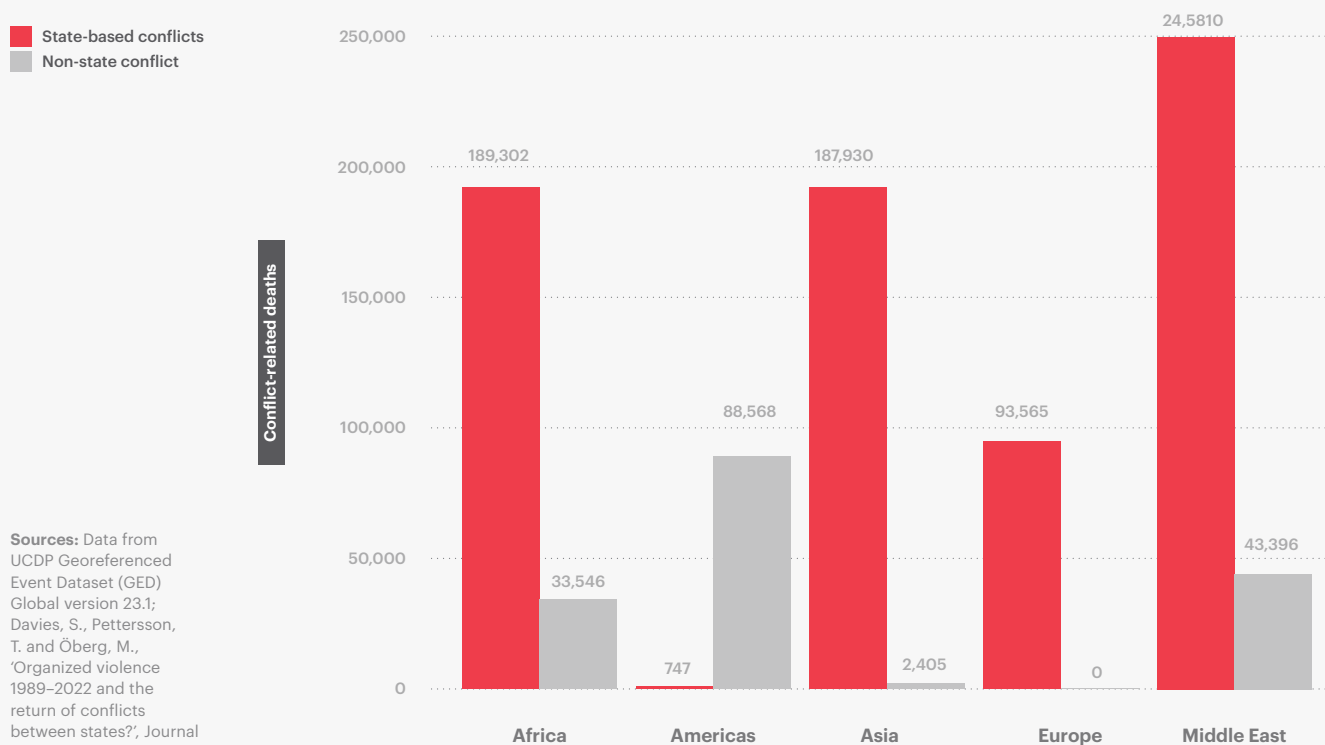
A key question in many countries is how governments can act to curb violence by non-state armed actors and improve public safety. Political authorities from opposing ideological viewpoints often highlight divergent strategies for addressing this challenge, from implementing social policies to tackle the social roots of violence to increased militarization of public security and the use of heavy-handed policies against criminal



entities. The latter policies often receive popular support from among the electorate. At the same time, however, they come at the expense of lowering governments' threshold for respect for human rights. In an excellent investigation, for example, the independent media outlet, Animal Politic, recorded about 1,500 cases of extrajudicial killings and disappearances perpetrated by the Mexican security forces in an 18-year period, during which three different political parties had been in power (Moreno 2023). This investigation shows how civilians also suffer from abuses of state power even if they have no connections to organized crime. In El Salvador, President Nayib Bukele imposed a state of exception in March 2022 to fight gang violence and strengthen public security. Bukele's policy has involved the suspension of citizens' rights, concentration of executive power and the militarization of public security. This so-called

war on gangs seems to have been effective—the homicide rate in El Salvador was 107 murders per 100,000 population in 2015, and just 8 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 2008—and has increased Bukele's popularity (Pérez 2023), but human rights organizations such as Cristosal and Human Rights Watch have registered thousands of abuses at the hands of law enforcement actors, such as arbitrary detention, extrajudicial killing and disappearances (Sandoval n.d.). Broadly speaking, the examples of El Salvador and Mexico highlight a worrying trend, whereby the security imperative of reducing violence and non-state armed conflict is linked with systematic violations of human rights and impunity among state security actors, sometimes with the support of large segments of the population.

**Figure 3.5**  
Conflict-related deaths by type of conflict and region, 2015–2023







# In focus

## SDG 16.1.1: Data gaps in international homicide statistics

**Gergely Hideg**

Survey Specialist, Small Arms Survey

In connection with the objectives on peaceful and inclusive societies set out in Agenda 2030 (UN General Assembly 2015; IAEG 2016), global data sets on violence have an essential role to play in identifying priorities, monitoring progress and building support for evolving norms around violence reduction worldwide. The Small Arms Survey's flagship Global Violent Deaths (GVD) database is arguably the most comprehensive of these data sets. By pooling a multitude of international and national sources (Pavesi 2017) to map and collect data on various types of violent deaths in 222 countries and territories, the GVD database mitigates, as far as possible, reporting gaps at the national level. Nonetheless, gaps exist and typically overlap across various sources. Data on countries that is not available through any of the international sources is unlikely to be covered by national statistics readily available for research. The GVD database fills such gaps with estimates.

In the upcoming 2023 edition of the GVD database (Small Arms Survey 2023), 29 per cent of the data points were missing across the matrix of all countries and territories, on the one hand, and of all reporting years

between 2015—the starting year of the 2030 Agenda—and 2021, on the other. This means that in 29 per cent of cases there is no information available on the number of intentional homicides in a particular country for a specific year from any of the consulted sources, including the official data source at the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, which is the custodian for this indicator. On the most basic—and required—disaggregation, by sex of victim, the global missingness of data in the monitoring period reaches 42 per cent (see Table 3.1). Other types of disaggregation, such as by the victim's age, by lethal method or any intersection between possible disaggregation criteria, are even less available.

Missingness of data varies greatly across world regions. In northern Europe, for example, we have non-disaggregated homicide counts for each year in each country for the whole monitoring period 2015–2021; in other words, the missingness of data is 0 per cent. Europe generally has low levels of missingness for non-disaggregated (2 per cent) and sex-disaggregated (7 per cent) homicide counts. On the other hand, the missingness for non-disaggregated homicides was 56 per cent in Africa and 59 per cent in Oceania.



**“In the quest for global peace and inclusive societies outlined in Agenda 2030, comprehensive data sets on violence, like the Small Arms Survey's GVD database, serve as critical tools. Despite gaps, these data sets remain pivotal for identifying priorities and advancing norms in reducing violence worldwide.”**

**Table 3.1**

Missingness in general homicide statistics and sex-disaggregated data by continents and regions, 2015–2021

	Possible data points, 2015–2021 <sup>8</sup>	Intentional homicides, total		Intentional homicides, female victims	
	count	available <sup>9</sup>	missing	available	missing
<b>Africa</b>	<b>392</b>	<b>172</b>	<b>56%</b>	<b>109</b>	<b>72%</b>
Eastern Africa	140	65	54%	39	72%
Central Africa	56	15	73%	11	80%
Northern Africa	42	22	48%	19	55%
Southern Africa	35	25	29%	18	49%
Western Africa	119	45	62%	22	82%
<b>Americas</b>	<b>350</b>	<b>288</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>252</b>	<b>28%</b>
Caribbean	168	118	30%	99	41%
Central America	56	56	0%	56	0%
Northern America	35	28	20%	19	46%
South America	91	86	5%	78	14%
<b>Asia</b>	<b>357</b>	<b>278</b>	<b>22%</b>	<b>201</b>	<b>44%</b>
Central Asia	35	19	46%	17	51%
Eastern Asia	56	49	13%	38	32%
South-Eastern Asia	70	45	36%	21	70%
Southern Asia	70	59	16%	32	54%
Western Asia	126	106	16%	93	26%
<b>Europe</b>	<b>322</b>	<b>317</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>299</b>	<b>7%</b>
Eastern Europe	70	69	1%	62	11%
Northern Europe	84	84	0%	81	4%
Southern Europe	105	102	3%	99	6%
Western Europe	63	62	2%	57	10%
<b>Oceania</b>	<b>133</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>59%</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>69%</b>
Australia and New Zealand	14	13	7%	12	14%
Melanesia	35	10	71%	4	89%
Micronesia	42	22	48%	16	62%
Polynesia	42	10	76%	9	79%
<b>World</b>	<b>1,554</b>	<b>1,110</b>	<b>29%</b>	<b>902</b>	<b>42%</b>



As with so many indicators, a critical gap in data availability is the significant time lag in data being made accessible to the public (see e.g., Hideg and del Frate 2020). Even if data is made available, it often takes years for official statistics to be generated, verified and disseminated. This gap is shorter when consulting national sources and somewhat longer with international resources. Due to this publication gap, the upcoming 2023 update of the GVD database, while recording 2022 statistics where available, will focus on data up to 2021, as data for 2022 was still rarely available as of mid-2023. However, the number of countries and territories for which intentional homicide data could be retrieved for 2021 (132) is already significantly lower than

for 2020 (159) and the availability of data has generally decreased since 2015 (see Figure 3.6). The peaks of reporting were in 2010 (199 countries reporting) and 2015 (188), the latter possibly reflecting a coordinated international push to establish national benchmarks for Agenda 2030.

The absence of reasonably recent factual data is of great concern as it means that data on the most recent years is often subject to major revision in subsequent years as updates to national or international statistics become available. It is therefore hard to reliably track progress towards the SDGs in real-time, even if data eventually becomes available in certain world regions.

**Figure 3.6**

**Data gaps in general homicide statistics and sex-disaggregated data, 2004–2021**





# Chapter 4



## SDG 16.2: Ending violence against children—some progress, yet heightened risks increase threats to children's rights to protection

**Arelys Bellorini**

Senior United Nations Representative, World Vision

### Trends and challenges

Violence against children—defined as all forms of physical, sexual and emotional or psychological abuse, maltreatment, neglect or negligent treatment, bullying, exploitation, injury and homicide—occurs at an alarming rate in homes, schools and communities around the world, as well as online.<sup>10</sup> Perpetrated by parents or caregivers, neighbours, teachers, strangers, intimate partners and peers, violence against children has devastating, immediate and lifelong consequences for both individual children and societies.<sup>11</sup>

Globally, it is estimated that approximately one billion children between the age of 2 and 17—half of all children in the world—experience physical, sexual or emotional violence every year (Hillis et al. 2016). One-third of students aged 11–15 years had been bullied by their peers in the past month (World Health Organization 2020). An estimated 40,150 children were victims of homicide in 2017, accounting for 8.4 per cent of all homicides globally (World Health Organization 2020: 16). In 2021, the United Nations verified nearly 24,000 grave violations against children in conflict.<sup>12</sup> In the same year, children represented more than half the civilian casualties of landmines and explosive remnants of war (UN General Assembly 2022).

While all children are at risk of experiencing violence, some groups are especially vulnerable. Girls are at increased risk of gender-based violence, child trafficking, online harassment and bullying, child marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM) (UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children n.d.a). It is estimated that an adolescent girl dies as a result of violence somewhere in the world every 10 minutes (UNICEF n.d.). Children and adolescents with disabilities are also more likely

to experience physical and sexual violence and neglect than their peers without disabilities (UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children n.d.b).

Multiple and overlapping crises are exacerbating children's vulnerability to violence, notably increasing poverty, social and economic inequalities, forced displacement, conflict, climate change, environmental degradation, natural disasters, food insecurity, widespread violence and political instability (UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children 2023: para. 4; World Health Organization 2020: v). The COVID-19 pandemic is also likely to have long-lasting negative consequences for progress with ending violence against children. World Vision estimates that the pandemic and its related quarantine restrictions, lockdowns and school closures may have put up to 85 million girls and boys worldwide at greater risk of violence (World Vision International 2020a).

According to UNICEF, the global prevalence of child marriage declined from 21 per cent in 2016 to 19 per cent in 2022, but up to 10 million more girls are at risk of becoming child brides by 2030 due to the pandemic (United Nations 2023a: para. 33). An estimated additional two million cases of FGM are also expected over the next decade (United Nations 2021: para. 41). Progress on ending child labour has also stalled for the first time in two decades. The number of children engaged in child labour rose to 160 million worldwide at the beginning of 2020, an increase of 8.4 million children on the levels at the beginning of the previous four years (United Nations 2023a: para. 36). Widespread lockdowns and school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic not only increased children's vulnerability to different forms of violence,<sup>13</sup> but also compromised the ability of child protection systems to promptly detect, respond to and prevent cases of violence against children (Bhatia et al. 2021).



Despite the increase in the availability of data on violence against children in recent years, there are still significant challenges in assessing progress on ending such violence, given that the phenomenon remains largely undocumented, underreported and unmeasured (UNICEF n.d.). Progress on ending violence against children is also hindered by the insufficient level of investment in violence prevention and child protection by most governments. A recent survey of 155 countries found that while 80 per cent of them had at least one national action plan on preventing violence against children, fewer than one in four had fully funded these plans (UNICEF et al. 2022: 6). The launch of the International Classification of Violence against Children (ICVAC) in 2023 is expected to address some of the data-related challenges in relation to measuring violence against children.<sup>14</sup> In turn, it is hoped that more and better data will prompt countries to better assess the level of investment needed to end all forms of violence against children by 2030.

## Official data on progress towards achieving SDG Target 16.2

This section provides an overview of progress with achieving SDG Target 16.2 based on official data on the SDG 16.2 global indicators.

### 16.2.1 The proportion of children aged 1 to 17 years who experienced any physical punishment and/or psychological aggression by caregivers in the past month

Violent discipline at home is the most widespread and socially acceptable type of violence against children. In the 75 countries—mostly low- and middle-income countries—with available data for the period 2014 to 2022, 8 out of 10 children aged 1 to 14 years had been subjected to some form of psychological aggression and/or physical punishment at home in the previous month (United Nations 2023a: para. 44).<sup>15</sup> In 70 of those countries, at least half of all children experienced violent

discipline by caregivers on a regular basis (United Nations 2023a).

Both physical punishment (or corporal punishment) and psychological aggression tend to overlap and occur frequently together, exacerbating the short- and long-term harm they inflict. While regional estimates suggest that there is little variation between boys and girls (UNICEF 2023b), data from UNICEF indicates that children with disabilities are more likely to experience violent discipline at home than their peers without disabilities, especially severe physical punishment (UNICEF 2022, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c).

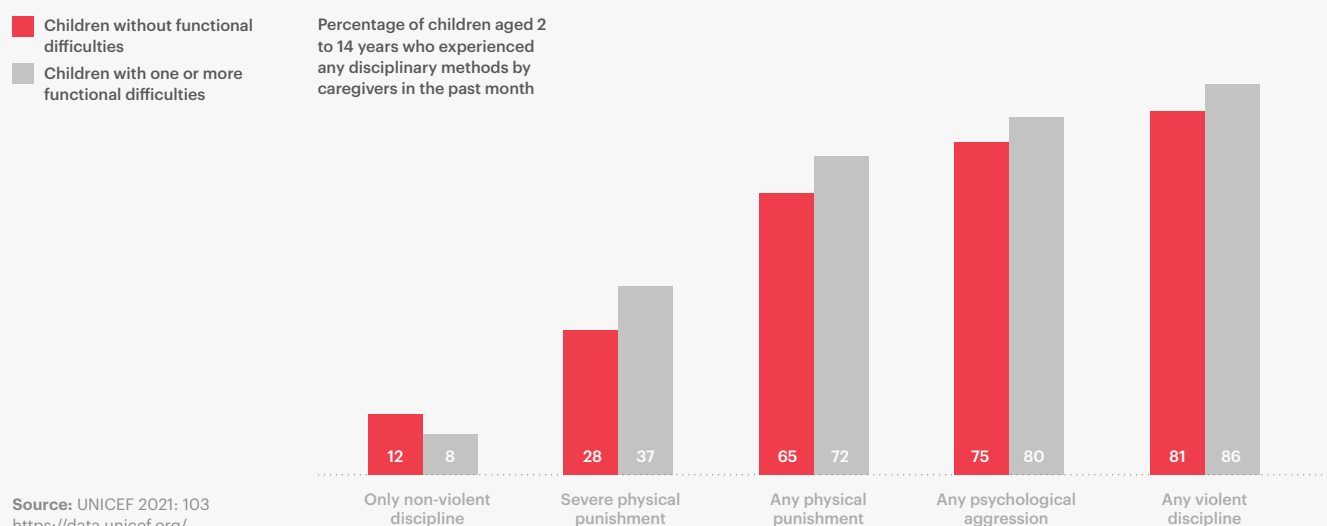
Although some progress has been made, the majority of children worldwide (86 per cent) lack legal protection from violent discipline in all settings. As of July 2023, 65 countries had prohibited all forms of corporal punishment of children in all settings and 27 more countries had committed to reform their laws to achieve a complete ban (End Corporal Punishment 2022). Corporal punishment is still more likely to be banned in schools, in penal institutions and as a criminal sanction than in other settings such as the home, alternative care and daycare (End Corporal Punishment 2022). At the current rate, it is unlikely that all countries will achieve a complete legal ban by 2030.

### 16.2.2 Number of victims of human trafficking per 100,000 population, by sex, age and form of exploitation

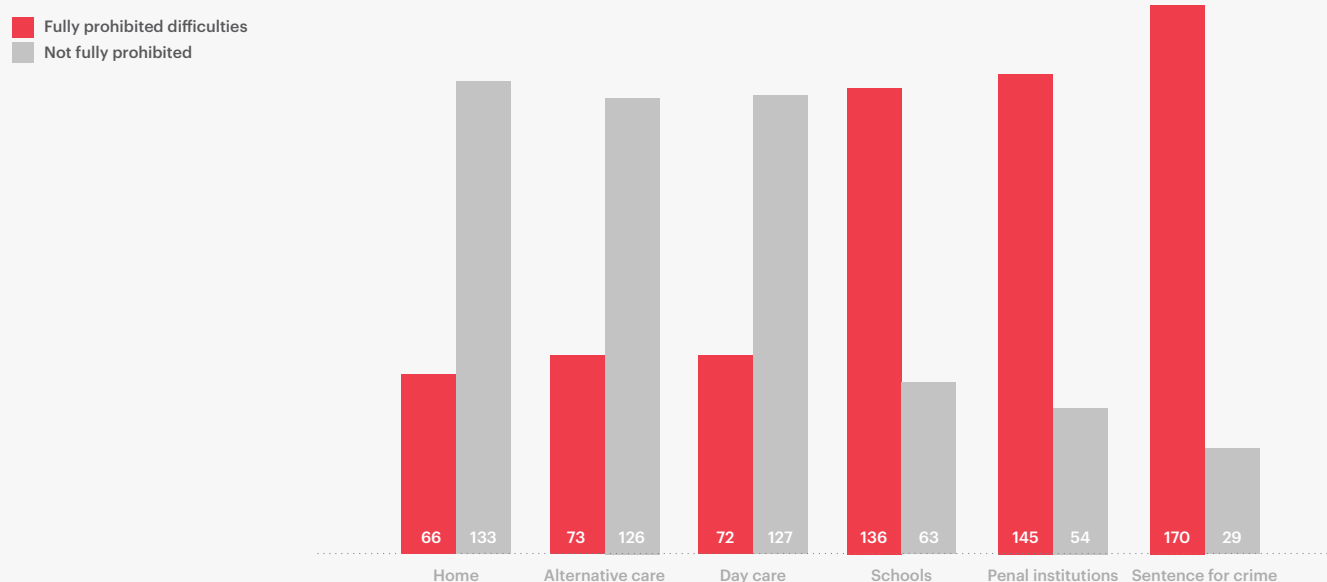
Child trafficking impacts and exploits girls and boys both within and between countries.<sup>16</sup> According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), children accounted for 35 per cent of all detected victims of trafficking in 2020 (UNODC 2022: xv), the highest proportion since 2004. Among all detected victims of trafficking in 2020, 18 per cent were girls and 17 per cent were boys. Girls are more likely to be trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation while boys are more likely to be trafficked for the purposes of



**“According to UNICEF, the global prevalence of child marriage declined from 21 per cent in 2016 to 19 per cent in 2022, but up to 10 million more girls are at risk of becoming child brides by 2030 due to the pandemic.”**

**Figure 4.1****Children with disabilities are more likely to experience violent discipline than their peers without disabilities**

Source: UNICEF 2021: 103  
<https://data.unicef.org/resources/children-with-disabilities-report-2021/>

**Figure 4.2****End Corporal Punishment, 'Progress', 2018,**

Source: End Corporal Punishment, 'Progress', 2018.

forced criminality or forced labour. It is notable that male victims of trafficking—both boys and men—have been detected in greater numbers over the past decade (UNODC 2022: xi).

Girls and women are three times more likely to suffer physical or extreme violence—including sexual violence—compared to boys and men, while children are almost two times more likely to suffer physical or extreme violence than adults. Girls are also 1.5 times more likely to suffer violence than women, regardless of the type of criminality involved or the form of exploitation, making them especially vulnerable as victims during trafficking (UNODC 2022: 25).

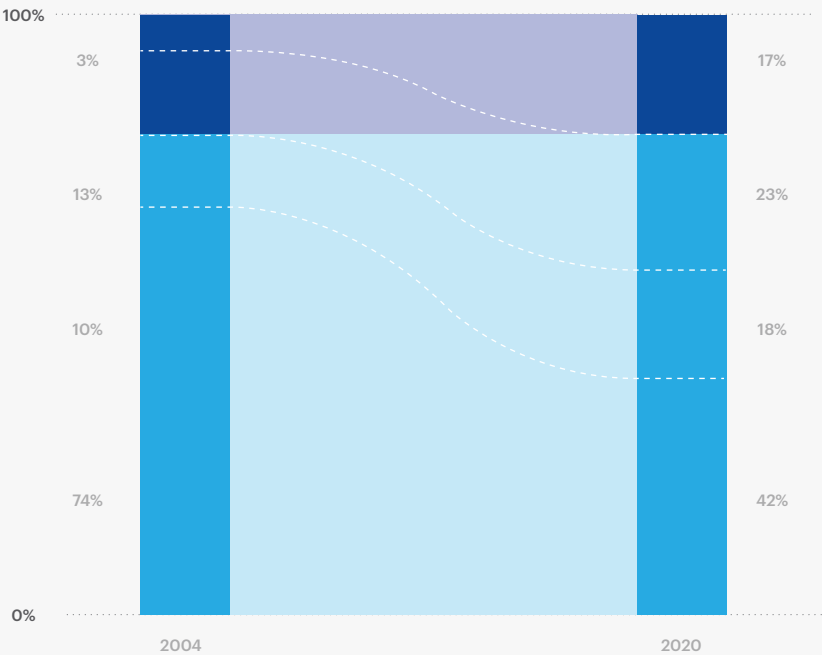
In 2020, the number of trafficking victims detected worldwide fell for the first time in 20 years, a decrease of 11 per cent on 2019. According to UNODC, this could be linked to lower levels of institutional capacity to detect victims, fewer opportunities for traffickers to operate due to COVID-19 restrictions, or some forms of trafficking moving to more hidden locations and thus less likely to be detected (UNODC 2022: iii).

The United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children remains the primary international agreement on combating human trafficking. It had 181 states parties as of 23 February 2023 (UNODC n.d.). Despite its near universal ratification, and the significant attention and sustained efforts of the international community for more than two decades, trafficking in persons—including children—remains endemic (ICAT 2020: 4) and is unlikely to be eliminated by 2030. Moreover, the available data continues to capture only the number of detected child victims of trafficking, leaving many more unassisted and invisible to the authorities (United Nations 2023a: 45).

**16.2.3 Proportion of young women and men aged 18–29 who had experienced sexual violence by age 18**

Sexual violence is one of the gravest forms of violence against children, both girls and boys.<sup>17</sup> Acts of sexual violence, which often occur together with other forms of violence, can range from direct physical contact to unwanted exposure to sexual language and

**Figure 4.3**  
Trends in the profile of victims detected, 2004–2020



Source: UNDC elaboration of national data



images (UNICEF 2023c). Global data on sexual violence is limited and this presents serious challenges. For the period 2014–2021, only 55 countries—mostly low- and middle- income countries—have internationally comparable data on sexual violence against girls and only 12 have produced such data for boys (United Nations 2023a: para. 44). Furthermore, incidents of sexual violence in childhood are severely underreported, especially among boys, as many victims are unable or unwilling to report them.

The World Health Organization estimates that 120 million women and girls—1 in 10 of them children—suffer some form of forced sexual contact before the age of 20 (World Health Organization 2020: 14). UNICEF states that at least 5 per cent of young women report experiences of sexual violence in childhood in more than one-third of countries (UNICEF 2023c). There are no global estimates for sexual violence against boys.<sup>18</sup> This represents a marked gap in the global understanding and prevention of, research on and response to this type of violence (End Violence Against Children 2022). In addition to data-related challenges, progress on reducing sexual violence against children has undoubtedly been hindered by the increase in conflicts, natural disasters and other humanitarian crises, as well as the increasing use of digital technologies by children, all of which put children at greater risk of sexual abuse and exploitation.

## Non-official data about progress on 16.2

### Violence against children with disabilities

A systematic review by the *Lancet* in 2022 found that one-third of children with disabilities had been victims of violence in the period 1990–2020, and that children with disabilities were more than twice as likely to experience violence than their non-disabled peers (Fang

et al. 2022). At least 36 per cent of children with disabilities had experienced emotional abuse, almost 32 per cent had experienced physical violence, 19 per cent experienced neglect and 11 per cent experienced sexual violence. Nearly 40 per cent of children with disabilities had also experienced bullying by their peers. According to the study, children with disabilities ‘may be the target of violence because of societal stigma or their inability to verbalize, identify, or defend themselves from abuse. Parents may also act out of frustration or anger at children who have high care needs or behavioural challenges’ (Fang et al. 2022).

The *Lancet*’s findings are consistent with other non-official sources of data. The Committee on the Rights of the Child and the Committee on the Rights of Children with Disabilities have expressed concern that children with disabilities are ‘disproportionately vulnerable to violence, including corporal punishment, neglect and abuse, in all settings’, including the family home (2021: para. 7). UNICEF also cites academic research that indicates that children with disabilities experience higher rates of bullying than children without disabilities (UNICEF 2023c), a finding that is supported by a UNESCO technical brief on school violence and bullying.<sup>19</sup>

It is difficult to ascertain the extent of progress to reduce levels of violence experienced by children with disabilities—based on either official or non-official data—without time series data that is disaggregated by disability status and other relevant characteristics. Until such data is readily available, it should be assumed that children with disabilities continue to face higher levels of violence than their non-disabled peers.



**“Global data on sexual violence remains severely limited, particularly concerning boys, posing significant challenges in understanding, preventing, and responding to these crimes. Additionally, non-official sources highlight the stark vulnerability of children with disabilities to various forms of violence, underscoring the urgent need for more comprehensive, disaggregated data to drive effective interventions and protections for these marginalized groups.”**

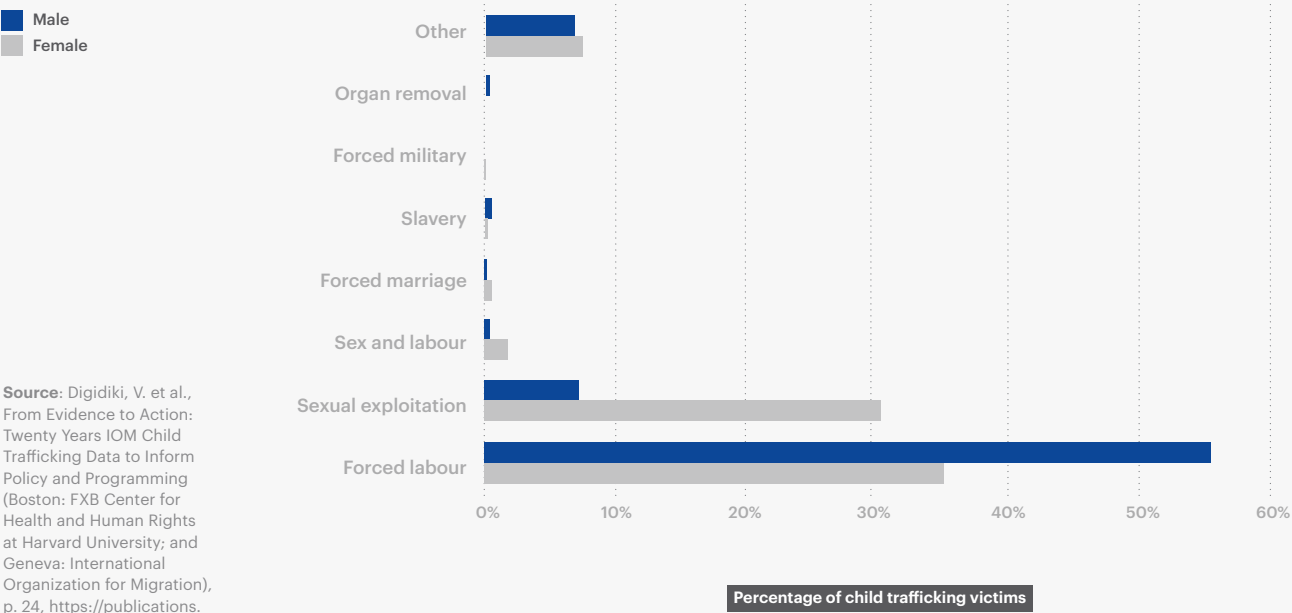
Child trafficking

A 2023 report by Harvard University and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) provides insight into the trends and patterns of child trafficking on a global scale (Digidiki et al. 2023). According to data from the IOM Victims of Trafficking Database,<sup>20</sup> children accounted for 18.3 per cent of all victims assisted by the IOM in the period 2002–2021 (Digidiki et al. 2023: 11), almost half the proportion estimated by UNODC in 2020.<sup>21</sup> Of the child victims, 57.4 per cent were girls and 42.6 per cent were boys. The data shows that 43.4 per cent of the children were trafficked for forced labour, 20.8 per cent for sexual exploitation and a smaller proportion for both purposes. Girls were more likely to report sexual exploitation (30.3 per cent) than boys (7.3 per cent), and boys more likely to report forced labour (55.5 per cent) than girls (35 per cent) (Digidiki et al. 2023: 25). In terms of trafficking methods, false promises were the most common means of control reported by children (58.9 per cent), followed by psychological and physical abuse (56.3 per cent and 50.6 per cent, respectively). Sexual abuse was used mainly to control girls (Digidiki et al. 2023: 21–22).

More than half of child victims of trafficking (51.1 per cent) reported the involvement of friends or family in their recruitment (Digidiki et al. 2023: 18). Other factors that were found to make children more vulnerable to trafficking were lower levels of education and being born in a low-income country (Digidiki et al. 2023: 48). According to the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, which received more than 19,000 reports of possible child sex trafficking in 2022, traffickers also often target youth who lack strong support networks, have experienced violence in the past, are experiencing homelessness or have been marginalized by society (National Center for Missing & Exploited Children n.d.).

While non-official data provides greater insight into the factors that make children more vulnerable to trafficking, it has the same shortcomings as official data. Most notably, it is based only on confirmed cases of child victims of trafficking, which makes it impossible to know how many children are trafficked each year and whether there has been any progress in reducing child trafficking over the past two decades.

Figure 4.4  
Forms of trafficking among child victims by gender



### Online child sexual abuse and exploitation

While official data on sexual violence against children remains limited, non-official sources provide a wealth of information on the exponential growth in online child sexual abuse and exploitation.<sup>22</sup> A decade ago, there were fewer than one million reports of child sexual abuse material online (Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children 2023). In 2022, the National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children's CyberTipline received more than 32 million reports of suspected online child sexual exploitation, an increase of 47 per cent on 2020 (National Center for Missing & Exploited Children 2022). Approximately 90 per cent of reports involved uploading of child sexual abuse material by users outside the United States (National Center for Missing & Exploited Children 2022). Notably, the online enticement of sexual acts from children increased by 82 per cent between 2021 and 2022. One of the contributing factors was an alarming spike in reports of financial sextortion of children.<sup>23</sup>

The Internet Watch Foundation's 2022 Annual Report provides further data on the nature and characteristics of the growth of online child sexual abuse and exploitation. In 2022, the foundation assessed 375,230 reports of suspected online child sexual abuse and confirmed that more than 68 per cent of these reports contained child sex abuse imagery (Internet Watch Foundation 2023: 3). Girls accounted for the overwhelming majority of the child abuse imagery (96 per cent), although there was a notable increase in the number of images of boys compared to 2021 (Internet Watch Foundation 2023: 45). Child sex abuse imagery of children aged 11–13 years was the most prevalent (58 per cent), although imagery of children aged 7–10 years increased from 23 per cent in 2021 to 36 per cent in 2022 (Internet Watch Foundation 2023: 36). There

was also an increase in the proportion of the most severe images of child sex abuse.<sup>24</sup> In 2022, these accounted for 20 per cent of all child sex abuse images, up from 18 per cent in 2021 and 17 per cent in 2020 (World Vision International 2020b: 32). In terms of regions, 66 per cent of all child sex abuse material was hosted in Europe, 18 per cent in Asia and 16 per cent in North America (World Vision International 2020b: 67).

These non-official data sources indicate an increase in both the scale and the severity of online child sex abuse and exploitation, which should raise alarm bells for policymakers and parents alike worldwide.

### Children's views on violence against children

One of the most important sources of non-official data on violence against children is the opinions and perspectives of children themselves. Child-led research facilitated by World Vision in several countries in 2019 and 2020 offered tremendous insight into the lived experience of violence according to children.<sup>25</sup>

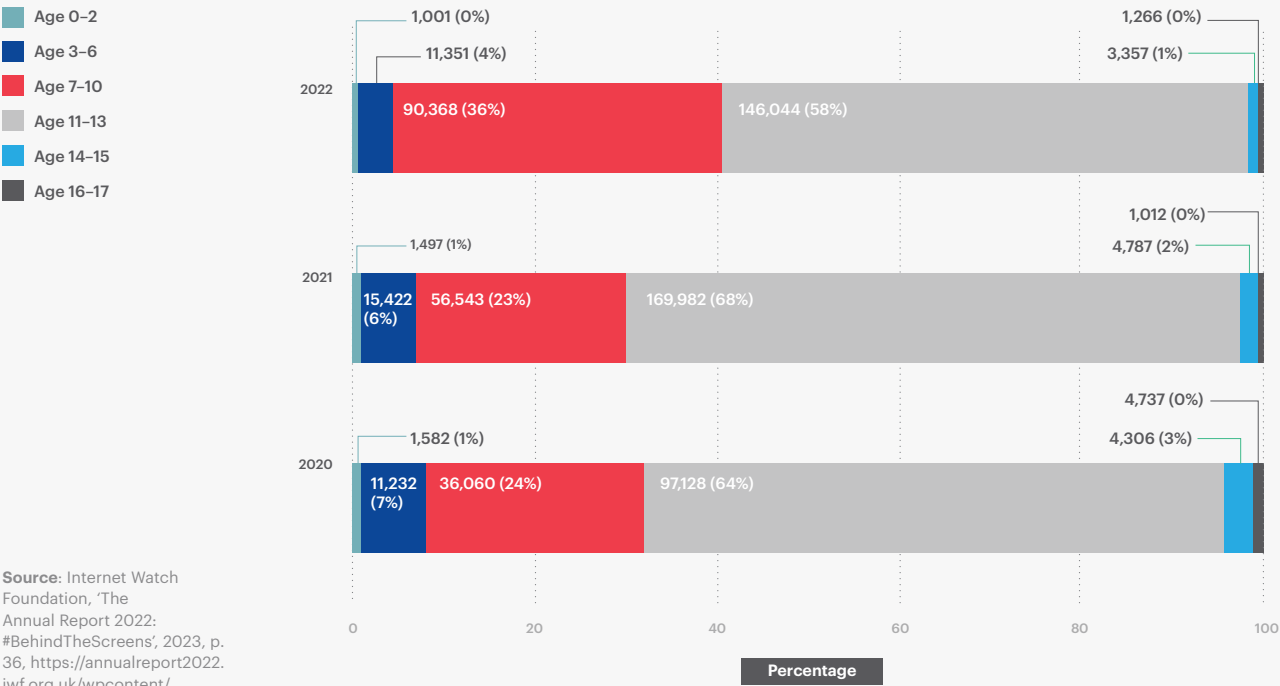
In Bosnia and Herzegovina, child researchers investigating physical and psychological violence found that of the 36 per cent of survey respondents who confirmed that they had been exposed to violence, only 42 per cent had reported that violence. The research found a fear of reporting, but also a perception that the violence was not that damaging (World Vision International 2020b: 15). The child researchers also found that violence was such an everyday occurrence that victims often did not know that they were a victim of abuse (World Vision International 2020b: 4).



**“Non-official data starkly portrays the escalating and distressing reality of online child sexual abuse and exploitation. Reports show a surge in incidents and severity, emphasizing the urgent need for heightened awareness and decisive action from global policymakers and parents alike.”**



**Figure 4.5**  
Number and proportion of child sex abuse over the past three years



Source: Internet Watch Foundation, 'The Annual Report 2022: #BehindTheScreens', 2023, p. 36, [https://annualreport2022.iwf.org.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2023/04/IWF-Annual-Report-2022\\_FINAL.pdf](https://annualreport2022.iwf.org.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2023/04/IWF-Annual-Report-2022_FINAL.pdf)

In Nicaragua, child researchers investigating family abuse found that the majority of parents used violence to educate and discipline their children because they themselves had suffered abuse in their childhood and only knew how to educate their children in the same violent way (World Vision International 2020b: 22). The child researchers concluded that ‘child abuse is a reality that we live with and see every day’ (World Vision International 2020b: 23).

In Romania, child researchers investigating sexual violence against children found that children did not know all of the different forms of sexual abuse,<sup>26</sup> which is important for victims to be able to report a case. Younger children

had a lower level of awareness and were less aware of different forms of violence. According to the child researchers’ survey, one in six children knew friends or peers who were being sexually abused; over 80 per cent were girls and 46 per cent were between 14 and 18 years old, while 35 per cent of physically abused children were under the age of 14. The child researchers also found that only 2 in 5 children told their parents about sexual abuse, only 3 in 10 reported the case to the police and only 1 in 5 told their friends about the abuse (World Vision International 2020b: 25).

## Recommendations

To make progress towards achieving Target 16.2, all UN member states should work in partnership with key stakeholders, such as civil society, academia, private sector entities and children, to implement the following:

- Strengthen and enforce legislative frameworks to ensure that there are laws in place that prohibit all forms of violence against children in all settings and that address the risk factors for violence.
- Develop and implement national action plans and strategies to end violence against children that are fully costed and funded, and include timebound and measurable targets to end all forms of violence against children, including those from marginalized groups.
- Develop and implement a national coordinating framework for integrated national planning, communication and action across all government ministries and stakeholders.
- Implement evidence-based solutions to end violence against children, including the INSPIRE strategies,<sup>27</sup> which have been successful in reducing violence against children.
- Increase government delivery of community-based social behaviour campaigns that contribute to social and behaviour change and prevent violence against children.
- Increase funding and transparency in budgets for integrated, cross-sectoral child- and gender-sensitive protection and violence prevention, and mobilize additional funding from other sources.
- Prioritize and invest in research and regular data collection and dissemination, including by focusing on neglected forms of violence against children, disaggregating data for different types of violence,<sup>28</sup> and supporting the production and dissemination of non-official data on violence against children.
- Commit to regular monitoring of and reporting on violence against children, including in national statistical programmes, voluntary national reviews at the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) and the international human rights reporting processes for the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Universal Periodic Review.
- Be informed by the views of children by supporting their meaningful and active participation in research on violence against children—including child-led research—and in the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of initiatives to end violence against children.
- Become a global champion for the prevention of violence against children, including by becoming a pathfinder country under the Global Partnership and Fund to End Violence against Children.<sup>29</sup>



# Chapter 5





## SDG 16.3: Strengthening the rule of law and access to justice

**Kathryn Grace Hulseman**

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### Target 16.3: A tool for progress

Target 16.3, promoting the rule of law and ensuring equal access to justice, is a critical component of the 2030 Agenda. Sustainable development will remain out of reach until the rule of law and access to justice are fully realized. While the timeline for the 2030 Agenda is more than half complete, progress on Target 16.3 has not yet reached that mark. This section sets out the critical role of Target 16.3 in global development and human rights, benchmarks current progress, identifies key challenges preventing progress and highlights priority actions for justice decision makers. The view from halfway to 2030 is cloudy. Without decisive, data-driven action the ideals of Target 16.3 will remain elusive.<sup>30</sup>

Now more than ever, strengthening the rule of law and advancing people-centred justice are critical for meeting the aspirations of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In recent years, the global community has encountered multifaceted threats to peace and human development, such as the continuing global erosion of the rule of law (World Justice Project 2022: 9); the COVID-19 pandemic and the corresponding increase in extreme poverty (World Bank Group 2022: xiii); violent conflicts, including the Russian invasion of Ukraine, civil war in Myanmar and violent extremism in the Sahel (Council on Foreign Relations n.d.); and the ever-worsening degradation of nature (United Nations 2023a). Amid this challenging landscape, the SDGs

remain a beacon for all people, lighting a path towards equitable, inclusive and sustainable development. Each of the goals has defined targets with corresponding indicators, which facilitates the establishment of baseline measures, enables periodic monitoring of progress and encourages accountability and transparency. The targets and indicators serve to operationalize the SDGs, translating aspirations into action.

*The rule of law is a durable system of laws, institutions, norms, and community commitment that delivers four universal principles: accountability, just law, open government, and accessible and impartial justice. (World Justice Project n.d.a)*

The importance of the rule of law and access to justice cannot be overstated. It is through the rule of law and access to justice that all people—regardless of their background or identity—can wholly and effectively participate in society. William H. Neukom, co-founder and CEO of the World Justice Project (WJP), notes that ‘the rule of law is the foundation for healthy communities of justice, opportunity, and peace’ (World Justice Project n.d.a). The interlinkages between Target 16.3 and the other SDGs are undeniable: without the rule of law or equal access to justice, it is impossible to ensure gender equality (SDG 5) or advance social equity (SDG 10). Eliminating poverty and hunger (SDGs 1 and 2, respectively) and promoting strong environmental governance and stewardship (SDGs 13, 14 and 15) require the cultivation of strong laws and institutions that meet the needs of all people and allow for productive interactions between individuals and their governments.



**“Now more than ever, strengthening the rule of law and advancing people-centred justice are critical for meeting the aspirations of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.”**

As 2023 marks the halfway point to completion of the 2030 Agenda, it is clear that many of the goals are not on track. The United Nations notes that ‘about half of these targets are moderately or severely off track; and over 30 percent have either seen no movement or regressed below the 2015 baseline’ (United Nations 2023a: 4). Despite the critical nature of Target 16.3, it is one component that is at significant risk of not being met. This is due in part to a limited understanding of both the problem and effective solutions. This section explores how and why the global community is failing to advance the rule of law and access to justice, and offers actionable steps for correcting course.

The official indicators are concrete tools for assessing progress through the consideration of civil and criminal justice. Target 16.3 has three official indicators: Indicator 16.3.1 captures the proportion of victims of crime—victims of robbery, physical assault or sexual assault—who reported the crime to the authorities. Indicator 16.3.2 quantifies the efficacy and fairness of the criminal justice system by determining the proportion of detainees who are awaiting trial and have not been convicted of a crime. In contrast, Indicator 16.3.3 is oriented towards the civil justice sector, evaluating the use of dispute resolution mechanisms. One strength of this combination of indicators is that each considers a discrete and complementary aspect of the rule of law or access to justice. Taken together, they can provide nuanced insights. In addition, the metadata for each indicator provides guidance on data disaggregation, emphasizing the importance of understanding how justice experiences can be shaped by gender, race and other socio-economic factors (UN DESA n.d.a).

**Target 16.3:** Promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all.

- **Indicator 16.3.1:** Proportion of victims of violence in the previous 12 months who reported their victimization to competent authorities or other officially recognized conflict resolution mechanisms.
- **Indicator 16.3.2:** Unsentenced detainees as a proportion of overall prison population.
- **Indicator 16.3.3:** Proportion of the population who have experienced a dispute in the past two years and who accessed a formal or informal dispute resolution mechanism, by type of mechanism.

Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Sustainable Development, ‘Goal 16’, [n.d.b].  
<https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal16>

The potential of Target 16.3, however, is limited by the lack of official data, which obscures understanding of the status of the rule of law and access to justice and impedes progress. The official indicators are intended to be tracked and reported on by UN member states using official data. However, relatively few countries have reported recent data to the SDG Indicators Database. This is a persistent challenge that has been discussed in prior reports by the SDG16 Data Initiative (2022: 43). Table 5.1 shows the number of countries that have reported data on the official indicators at least once and the number that have done so since 2021 or 2022.



**“Despite the criticality of Target 16.3 within the 2030 Agenda, it stands significantly at risk of not being fulfilled. A limited understanding of the issue and effective solutions has contributed to this risk, uncovering the challenges the global community faces in advancing the rule of law and access to justice.”**

**Table 5.1****Data availability for Target 16.3 indicators in the SDG Indicators Database**

Indicator	# Countries (At least once)	# Countries (2021/2022)
16.3.1—Robbery	49	6
16.3.1—Physical assault	38	7
16.3.1—Sexual assault	29	1
16.3.2—Unsentenced detainment	191	92
16.3.3—Use of dispute resolution mechanisms	5	5

Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Statistics Division, SDG Indicators Database, <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/dataportal>. Accessed 3 November 2023.

This lack of data makes it challenging—and often impossible—to understand the level of progress by individual countries towards achieving Target 16.3, while also constraining macro-level analysis of trends among regional and economic peers. Beyond problem diagnosis, the lack of official data prevents the development, implementation and monitoring of relevant public policies and programmes.




Improving data coverage also means improving the availability of disaggregated data. Disaggregated data allows for more nuanced analysis and understanding of differential experiences of justice and the rule of law. Without this information, policies cannot be effectively targeted at those who need them most. While many of the countries reporting data include gender-disaggregated figures, the SDG Indicators Database does not contain any data on Target 16.3 disaggregated by ethnicity, migration background, citizenship, age or disability status, all of which are included as recommended disaggregation factors for at least one of the indicators.<sup>31</sup>

The data that is available suggests a lack of progress towards Target 16.3. Crime reporting rates remain low and the number of unsentenced detainees is stagnating (UN DESA n.d.a). Echoing trends noted in the 2022 SDG16 Data Initiative Report, crime reporting rates vary based on the type of crime. Of the countries that did report data for 2021, the highest rate of robberies reported to the authorities was 64 per cent in Australia, compared to 11 per cent in Mexico. Australia also had the highest reporting rate for physical assault in 2021 (60 per cent), while New Zealand's rate is one-third of that (20 per cent). Mexico is the only country for which 2021 data on sexual assault reporting is available: only 5 per cent of people who experienced sexual assault reported it to the authorities. Globally, approximately one-third of people currently detained have not been convicted of a crime. This rate has remained relatively constant since adoption of the SDGs in 2015 (UN DESA n.d.c).<sup>32</sup> Data on Indicator 16.3.3 is so sparse that it is impossible to draw any global conclusions. At the country level, use of dispute resolution mechanisms varies significantly from a high of 94 per cent in the State of Palestine (2022) to a low of 46 per cent in The Gambia (2021) (UN DESA n.d.c).<sup>33</sup>

In addition to limited data coverage, Target 16.3 is inherently constrained by the three official indicators by which it is measured. While two of the three indicators (16.3.1 and 16.3.2) focus on criminal justice, related topics such as the prevalence of crime, youth incarceration and prison conditions fall outside the realm of measurement. Similarly, Indicator 16.3.3 considers matters of civil and administrative justice but is limited in scope by its singular focus on one possible component of a person’s justice experience, failing to consider their

understanding of their own rights, their access to information or the affordability of a dispute resolution mechanism, among other things. As a group, the three indicators are primarily focused on justice processes rather than outcomes. In addition, the indicators fail to consider individuals’ perspectives on their experiences. For example, Indicator 16.3.3 measures how many people use dispute resolution mechanisms but does not consider whether they found those mechanisms to be effective, fair or worthwhile.

**Table 5.2**  
**Scope of Target 16.3 indicators**

Indicator	Measures	Does not measure
 <b>16.3.1</b> <b>Crime reporting by victims of crime</b>	Trust in government institutions and public services to uphold the rule of law and provide resolution	Efficacy of police and criminal justice services; perceptions of justice experience and outcomes
 <b>16.3.2</b> <b>Unsentenced Detainment</b>	Respect for human and legal rights	Length of detainment; treatment of detainees; perceptions of judicial experience
 <b>16.3.3</b> <b>Use of dispute resolution mechanisms</b>	Access to and use of justice services, both formal and informal	Efficacy of dispute resolution services; perceptions of justice experience and outcomes



## New data-driven insights on access to justice

Civil society actors are central to understanding and advancing progress on Target 16.3, particularly in the light of the limited official data coverage. While governments and public actors are the primary parties responsible for upholding the rule of law and ensuring access to justice, civil society plays a crucial role in providing additional support through independent data gathering, monitoring and advocacy. The WJP is a global leader in the collection and analysis of legal needs survey data. In conjunction with official efforts, research from civil society can provide additional insights and perspectives on Target 16.3. It is important to note, however, that while civil society can play an important role in advancing progress on Target 16.3, there is no substitute for public policy and government action.

Novel analysis by the WJP offers insight into the status of Indicator 16.3.3 in 62 countries. While official data coverage on Indicator 16.3.3 remains severely limited—only five countries have reported data to the UN Statistics SDG

Indicators Database (UN DESA n.d.c)—the WJP leverages its household-level access to justice data to fill the knowledge gap. In the majority of countries surveyed, more than half of respondents who needed access to a dispute resolution mechanism were unable to access one (Barba et al. 2023: 5). This is a glaring problem: when people are unable to access a dispute resolution mechanism, they may be unable to resolve their problem in a timely, affordable or efficient manner. Furthermore, lack of access to dispute resolution mechanisms can compound existing inequities.

The justice gap remains. In 2019, the WJP estimated that 1.4 billion people globally were in the justice gap because they lacked access to civil or administrative justice (World Justice Project 2019: 13). Building on this, the WJP's most recent country-level analysis of the justice gap found that at least 50 per cent of respondents are in the gap in half of all countries surveyed (Barba et al. 2023: 6). This reinforces the understanding of the justice gap as ubiquitous: being denied access to justice is an unfortunately common experience around the world.

### Box. Red Dot Foundation

#### The Red Dot Foundation: Ending violence against women and girls through localized data collection and action

The Red Dot Foundation is the 2022 World Justice Challenge Winner for Equal Rights and Non-Discrimination. The Red Dot Foundation's mission to 'end violence against women and girls using crowdsourced data, community engagement and institutional accountability' is embodied by the SafeCity platform, an innovative tool that leverages geo-located data to identify where sexual and gender-based violence is occurring. This is a strong example of how people-centred data collection can inform programming and how civil society efforts can complement public efforts on the SDGs. SafeCity builds on Indicator 16.3.1 by providing additional insights into where and when violence is happening. The information complements that of Indicator 16.3.1 by collecting new, nuanced data and offering people alternative ways to report crimes. This can be particularly beneficial in situations where there is a lack of trust in the authorities or negative stigma associated with the crime that has been perpetrated. The information synthesized on the platform has been used to implement localized approaches to improving safety for women and girls, including awareness campaigns in more than 25 communities (World Justice Project n.d.b).

## A plan of action for Target 16.3

As evidenced by the existing official data and research by civil society, decisive action is required if Target 16.3 is going to be met on time. Advancing the rule of law and access to justice in a people-centred manner requires policies tailored to the target population, location and context. In 2021, the WJP developed three key data priorities for strengthening people-centred justice. Informed by consultations with nearly 100 stakeholders, these priorities are adaptable to nearly all contexts and remain relevant for the advancement of Target 16.3 (Chapman et al. 2021).

- Understand the scope, nature and impact of justice problems.
- Design and deliver people-centred justice strategies.
- Measure what works, then learn and adapt.

These data priorities can be tailored to Target 16.3. Table 5.3 illustrates their relevance to each of the three official indicators.

Although far from exhaustive, Table 5.3 offers a brief window into the myriad routes for investigation and learning on people-centred policymaking that the WJP's data priorities offer with regard to advancing Target 16.3. The global community must seize on work such as the OECD framework for good practice principles for people-centred justice (Chapman et al. 2021), among others, to advance understanding of and action to achieve Target 16.3 and SDG 16 more broadly. The following recommendations serve as a jumping off point for decision makers ready to make progress on these important issues.

**Table 5.3**

The WJP's key data priorities for people-centred justice and the Target 16.3 indicators

Data priority	Indicator 16.3.1	Indicator 16.3.2	Indicator 16.3.3
<b>Understand the scope, nature and impact of justice problems</b>	What proportion of crimes are not reported to the authorities? Which socio-demographic groups are the least likely to report crimes? Why do people not report crimes?	What types of crimes are most unsentenced detainees accused of? What socio-demographic groups are most likely to be held in pre-trial detention?	Why do people fail to use dispute resolution mechanisms? What are the most and least frequently used mechanisms? How do the type and severity of justice problems experienced inform the decision to use a dispute resolution mechanism?
<b>Design and deliver people-centred justice strategies</b>	What do victims of crime want from the justice authorities? Which justice services would encourage better reporting of crime?	What services do people held in pre-trial detention need and want? How can justice services meet the needs of all parties?	How can dispute resolution mechanisms be better tailored to people's needs? What types of dispute resolution mechanisms are most desirable?
<b>Measure what works, then learn and adapt</b>	Which reforms improve trust in the justice authorities? Which interventions effectively improve crime reporting rates? Which tools are most useful for reducing crime rates?	What are the most effective approaches for minimizing pre-trial detention?	How effective are dispute resolution mechanisms in resolving justice problems? How can service providers deliver satisfactory services for all?

- Improve data coverage by investing in official data and collaborating with other data actors to leverage existing unofficial data.
- Drive action through the design and implementation of effective justice interventions. Leverage cost–benefit and impact analyses, as well as qualitative studies to identify the most effective policies and programmes.
- Engage with civil society actors, particularly grassroots organizations, on all types of justice interventions. Prioritize the experiences of the people most affected by a lack of the rule of law and the justice gap in order to uphold the value of people-centricity.
- Broaden the conversation on Target 16.3 to include facets of the rule of law and access to justice that are not directly measured by the official indicators but are critically important to achieving Goal 16.

The next seven years will offer a bold opportunity to strengthen the rule of law, advance access to justice and cultivate a more sustainable global community for the next generation. However, the challenges impeding the achievement of Target 16.3 are very real. Decision makers must learn the lessons of the first half of the 2030 Agenda in order to ensure successful realization of these ambitious—but essential—goals.









# In focus

## SDG 16.4.2: Gaps in illicit arms flows data

**Nicolas Florquin**

Head of Data and Analytics, Small Arms Survey

**Indicator 16.4.2: Proportion of seized, found or surrendered arms whose illicit origin or context has been traced or established by a competent authority in line with international instruments**

Official data is scarce for Indicator 16.4.2, which focuses on measures related to the seizure and tracing of firearms. The 2022 Sustainable Development Goals Extended Report found that ‘countries still face significant challenges when establishing the illicit origin of firearms’ (UNSD 2022b: 9). Based on data received from 55 states, the report notes that, on average, 83 per cent of seized firearms are potentially traceable by their unique markings. However, information collected from 20 states reveals that only 28 per cent of all seized and marked firearms were successfully traced. Tracing rates also tended to be lower in states burdened by higher numbers of seizures, of 10,000 or more firearms per year (UNSD 2022b). These findings suggest that many states still lack the resources and capacities for the effective tracing of firearms.

While establishing the illicit origin of seized weapons is important for tackling and preventing the illicit trade in small arms, it is not on its own an indicator of the extent of illicit arms flows. Previous research has repeatedly highlighted the context-specific nature of arms

flows (de Tessières 2017; Nowak 2016). Illicit arms flows are multifaceted and encompass diversion (the unauthorized change in possession or use of originally legal weapons); cross-border trafficking; the recirculation of already illicit weapons; and illicit firearms production.

Trends in weapons flows can also vary depending on the type of weapon. In Ukraine, for instance, seizures of small arms and light weapons decreased between 2014 and 2016, whereas seizures of ammunition and explosive devices increased markedly in the same period (Martyniuk 2017: 5). Price trends in illicit markets for firearms and associated ammunition can also be inconsistent (Florquin 2014). Diverse, granular and complementary data sources are therefore required to capture the complexity of illicit arms flows in any context.

In the absence of official global indicators that capture the complexity of illicit arms flows, proxy indicators can provide complementary perspectives. Transparency in the authorized arms trade is important for preventing the diversion of legal weapons transfers but there has been little if any progress on reporting by major exporting states in the past 20 years (Small Arms Survey n.d.a). Moreover, many states chose to report to instruments such as the Arms Trade Treaty on a confidential basis, which impedes in-depth monitoring by civil society groups (Control Arms 2023).



**“The complexity of illicit arms flows demands diverse, granular data sources. Understanding trends, from weapon types to regional disparities in unplanned explosions and the rise of privately manufactured firearms, underscores the necessity of comprehensive monitoring beyond official global indicators.”**







Similarly, appropriate stockpile management practices can prevent the diversion of national stockpiles of weapons and ammunition (UN General Assembly 2021). The high occurrence and human toll of unplanned explosions at munitions sites (UEMS) in certain settings can reflect poor weapons and ammunition management practices and therefore indicate, by extension, a higher risk of diversion (Mailhot 2023). Data on UEMS available for the past 40 years shows a relative reduction in cases in the past decade. There are important regional disparities, however, and some explosions still result in hundreds of casualties, which suggests that much progress can still be made in this area (Small Arms Survey n.d.b).

Illicit production of arms is challenging to monitor by definition. Indeed, the proliferation of ‘privately manufactured firearms’, which include ‘ghost guns’, converted alarm pistols and 3D-printed firearms, in various regions complicates tracing efforts, as such weapons are produced outside of factory settings and often lack the unique markings required for tracing (Fabre et al. 2023: 90–100). Seizure data in the United States suggests that this is a rapidly growing problem: between 2016 and 2021, the ‘ATF received approximately 45,240 reports of suspected privately made firearms recovered by law enforcement, including in 692 homicide or attempted homicide investigations’ (United States Attorney’s Office 2022).

With respect to misuse, the rates and proportion of homicides perpetrated by firearms can shed light on criminal access to and use of these weapons over time and across regions (see also Box on SDG Indicator 16.1.1). While global trends in firearm homicides have been encouraging overall since 2016, the picture is uneven across regions and there are signs that the global picture has deteriorated since 2021 (Small Arms Survey n.d.c).

Illicit arms flows are multifaceted and can therefore only be comprehensively monitored through a combination of complementary indicators. Investing adequate resources in and developing capacities for collecting reliable cross-national data on the different aspects of illicit arms flows—their diversion, trafficking, illicit production and misuse—will be essential for assessing states’ progress towards achieving Target 16.4.



**“Monitoring illicit arms flows necessitates a multifaceted approach. Progress hinges on investing in robust data collection, addressing diverse aspects from diversion and trafficking to production and misuse. Such comprehensive monitoring is pivotal for evaluating states’ advancements towards Target 16.4.”**







# In focus

## SDG 16.5: Transparency International Canada—Building a coalition to advocate for beneficial ownership transparency

**Noah Arshinoff**

Interim Executive Director, Transparency  
International Canada

### Overview

The target of SDG 16.5 is to substantially reduce corruption and bribery in all their forms. While this is a huge task, Transparency International (TI) has been at the forefront of this work at a number of levels. TI has a global secretariat and national chapters in over 100 countries. The national chapters often champion their own advocacy agenda, which depends on the context in which they operate. TI Canada has been particularly active in the realm of advocating for greater transparency on beneficial ownership.

A beneficial owner is defined as the natural person who can be found at the end of an ownership chain. There is often just a single link between a beneficial owner and a company, but sometimes there are long and complex ownership chains of multiple legal entities. A beneficial owner is a person who ultimately has the right to some share of a legal entity's income or assets, or the ability to control its activities.

Beneficial ownership transparency reveals how companies and other legal entities or arrangements, such as trusts, are owned and controlled by their beneficial owners (Open Ownership n.d.). This is especially crucial when attempting to measure SDG Target 16.5.2 on 'the proportion of businesses that had at least one contact with a public official and that paid a bribe to a public official, or were asked for a bribe by those public officials during the previous 12 months'. Without clear beneficial ownership data, this information cannot be made available. Realizing that the opacity of company ownership was a significant hurdle to measuring how corporate vehicles are used for corrupt activity, TI Canada launched a campaign in 2016 to bring more transparency to corporate registration.

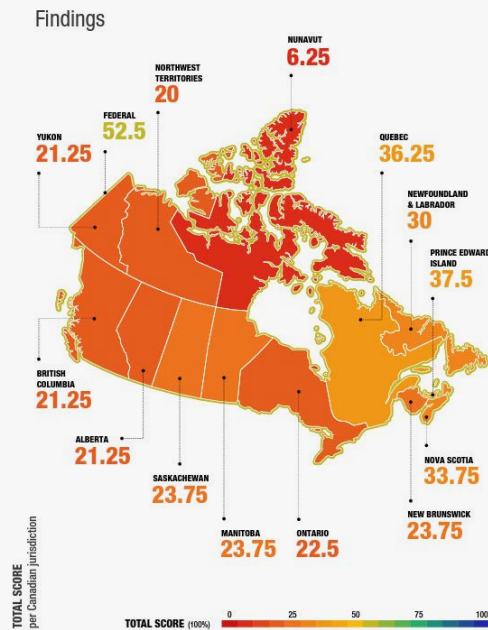
### Building a coalition

Recognizing the gargantuan task that lay ahead of not only changing the law, but changing an entire business culture, TI Canada partnered with Canadians for Tax Fairness and Publish What You Pay Canada to establish a coalition of like-minded organizations to advocate for beneficial ownership transparency. Affectionately known as the 'End Snow-Washing Coalition', coined to reflect the term used to describe a particular form of money laundering that occurs in Canada, the three organizations have been part of a formal partnership since 2016.

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**"Beneficial ownership transparency stands as a crucial aspect in measuring SDG Target 16.5.2, shedding light on the proportion of businesses engaging in bribery. Without clear data on beneficial ownership, this vital information remains unavailable, hindering the measurement of corrupt activities involving corporate vehicles."**

**Figure 5.1**  
**Canadian company data transparency index**



Source: Canadian Corporate Data Transparency Index  
<https://transparencycanada.ca/link-to-research-materials/canadian-corporate-data-transparency-index>

In 2019, the coalition released a follow-up report (Ross 2019), this time focused on opacity in the Toronto real estate market, which is the largest in the country. The coalition analysed more than 1.4 million residential property transactions in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) dating back to 2008. Between 2008 and 2019, GTA housing valued at CAD 28.4 billion had been acquired through companies, the vast majority of which were private entities with owners who could remain anonymous. These companies had made CAD 9.8 billion in cash purchases and taken out CAD 10.4 billion in mortgages from unregulated lenders. Companies are more than three times as likely as individuals to purchase real estate without a mortgage (in around 35 per cent of corporate purchases). When they do require loans, most go to private lenders. In all, at least CAD 20 billion appears to have entered the GTA housing market during the decade of study with no oversight from Canada's financial intelligence unit or the financial institutions tasked with conducting anti-money laundering due diligence on beneficial owners and sources of funds. The evidence showed that there was no way of knowing how much additional money, through trusts and nominees, had entered the market without undergoing anti-money laundering due diligence or reporting.

The coalition published another report in 2022, *Snow-washing, Inc: How Canada is Marketed Abroad as a Secrecy Jurisdiction* (TI Canada, Canadians for Tax Fairness and Publish What You Pay Canada 2022), which examined just how Canada's corporate laws and regulations were being exploited by anonymous companies to launder money.

## Building data

In 2016, TI Canada revealed in its report, *No Reason to Hide: Unmasking the Anonymous Owners of Canadian Companies and Trusts* (Ross 2016), that no one really knows who own almost half of Vancouver's most valuable properties, as the true owners hide behind shell companies, trusts and nominee owners. The report helped ignite public and political awareness about money laundering in Vancouver real estate. Subsequent investigative reports exposed how the 'Vancouver model' of money laundering filters overseas and domestic criminal funds into the city's real estate.

In an effort to provide data on corporate transparency and measure how effective the Canadian corporate registries were, the coalition published its *Canadian Company Data Transparency Index* in 2022 (Ross 2022). Using various transparency metrics, such as accessibility, searchability, data quality and depth of data, it was clear that Canada's business registries performed poorly. The report found that data is tightly controlled and narrow constraints are placed on how it can be searched. Some important data points, such as shareholder details, are not even collected by some registries—and in all but a few cases that information is not made public. None of Canada's business registries independently

verifies data to ensure that it is true and accurate; nor do they insist on verifying identification of the individuals setting up and controlling companies in their jurisdictions to encourage accountability. Using these criteria each jurisdiction in Canada was evaluated on a score out of 100, where 100 represents the most transparent.

## Fixing the problem

Given all the evidence collected by the coalition, numerous reports about the problem of the lack of beneficial ownership transparency in Canada, and how the secrecy surrounding corporate registries helps to fuel illicit finance in several economic sectors, including an overheated housing market, the federal government announced in 2021 that it would implement a federal beneficial ownership registry.

Bill C-46 amending the Canada Business Corporations Act was tabled in parliament in the spring of 2023 but still needs to pass the Senate to become law. The coalition views the Bill as a massive leap forward for Canada as, for the first time, company transparency is being enacted in law.

Nonetheless, various challenges remain. The data highlights lack of transparency as a major issue and a federal and publicly accessible beneficial ownership registry will not necessarily fix the problem. Canada is a federal state and each province has its own corporate registry. Until all the provinces and the federal government commit to beneficial ownership transparency, the problem of opaque structures could continue to plague Canada's efforts to demonstrate progress on SDG 16.5. Without open data, there can be no true analysis of progress.

## Headwinds and progress globally

Beyond Canada, over 120 countries are now committed to establishing central beneficial ownership registers. However, only around 50 countries have so far implemented such a register (Shornick, Rialet and Russell-Prywata 2023).

The European Union (EU) in particular has had to navigate some difficult headwinds challenging implementation of transparent company data. A 2022 decision by the Court of Justice of the European Union (2022) determined that the legal approach taken in the EU's fifth Anti-Money Laundering Directive to justify public access to beneficial ownership data did not appropriately balance privacy and transparency for the stated purposes of fighting money laundering. The decision found that public access to data was not sufficiently justified solely for the purpose of fighting financial crime.

The EU is pressing on, however, and steps are already being taken by the European Parliament (2023) to safeguard access to beneficial ownership information among key actors, and to strengthen verification and cross-country sharing of the information (Open Ownership 2023).

## The path forward

While hurdles remain to implementation in Canada, the EU and elsewhere, it is clear that beneficial ownership transparency is a key cog in the wheel of reducing corruption in all its forms. When corporate vehicles are left unchecked and can be used for illicit purposes, it becomes very difficult to adequately measure corruption. TI Canada and the End Snow Washing Coalition have shown that extracting data from an opaque system is difficult but not impossible. Armed with evidence, progress can be made on SDG 16.5.

- Civil society organizations should continue to pressure governments to enhance beneficial ownership transparency as a key tool to counter corruption and money laundering.
- A collective approach to countering corruption works best. Like-minded organizations should partner together to create a stronger voice for change.
- Legislation will not cure the problem. Implementation and enforcement are essential and are the steps where the details need to be carefully ironed out.





# Chapter 6





## SDGs 16.6. and 16.7: Using democracy data to fill in the gaps

### Michael Runey

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In International IDEA's previous contributions to the SDG16 Data Initiative Reports, Miguel Angel Lara Otaola (2021) argued that International IDEA's Global State of Democracy (GSoD) Indices constitute an excellent proxy measurement for progress towards SDG 16. In the subsequent report, Alex Hudson (2022) used GSoD Indices data to show that, without 'dramatic turnarounds', the ambitious targets set for 16.3 (on the rule of law and access to justice), 16.5 (corruption), 16.6 (accountable and transparent institutions) and 16.7 (responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision making) were unlikely to be met by the 2030 deadline.

It is the latter two targets—and how the GSoD Indices provide the tools for a more wide-ranging and holistic understanding of progress, or lack of progress, on achieving them at the national level—that are the subject of this section. Hudson (2022) notes that targets 16.6 and 16.7 deal with the difficult task of measuring and quantifying changes to political institutions, which entails extricating concrete data from concepts such as transparency, efficacy, accountability and responsiveness, for which no commonly accepted or rigorous definitions exist. While it may be possible to derive quantifiable, comparable data that helps to illuminate these concepts, obtaining that data in the necessary quantities needed to make an informed evaluation of progress on individual SDGs might be prohibitively costly in terms of time or resources for many or all SDG signatories.

Hudson (2022) also established that the SDGs did not mark a 'critical juncture' in the state of global governance, at least for these measures. Other research echoes these subdued conclusions, finding that the 'performance of national governments varies, and most countries lag behind in implementing the SDGs. Observable institutional change often merely replicates existing priorities, trajectories and government agendas ... there is scant evidence that governments have substantially reallocated funding to implement the SDGs' (Biermann et al. 2022).

That progress on the SDGs has been largely piecemeal and the adoption of the goals themselves only a minor factor in the progress that has been made should not be ignored, but nor should it be overstated. That the political consequence of the adoption of the SDGs may be limited is a separate question to the utility of achieving the goals in and of themselves. There may be important lessons to be learned based on a more complete understanding of which goals are being achieved, by which states and why or how.



**"The adoption of the SDGs hasn't constituted a pivotal turning point in global governance, particularly concerning targets related to institutional change."**

**Table 6.1**

<b>SDG 16.6: Develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels</b>	
<b>Indicator 16.6.1</b>	Primary government expenditures as a proportion of original approved budget, by sector (or by budget codes or similar)
<b>Indicator 16.6.2</b>	Proportion of population satisfied with their last experience of public services
<b>SDG 16.7: Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision making at all levels</b>	
<b>Indicator 16.7.1</b>	Proportions of positions in national and local institutions, including (a) the legislatures; (b) the public service; and (c) the judiciary, compared to national distributions, by sex, age, persons with disabilities and population groups
<b>Indicator 16.7.2</b>	Proportion of population who believe decision making is inclusive and responsive, by sex, age, disability and population group

### Considering parallel indicators

Comparing national progress on achieving the SDGs, as previous reports in this series have amply documented, is hampered by the dearth of reliable data—and in some cases its complete absence. Understanding national progress on the SDGs requires, first and foremost, trustworthy and comparable data (Guo et al. 2021).

Furthermore, perhaps more so with the governance-related targets than with the targets under the health- and economic development-related SDGs, it is important to keep in mind that all indicators are a statistical attempt to measure progress towards an idealized, abstract concept. Indicator 16.6.1, for example, implicitly argues that measuring a national government's ability to spend according to its budget is an effective proxy for developing effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels. Whether this makes sense in the light of feasible alternative indicators is the starting point of the next section. These and other themes are then explored in sections dedicated to Indicators 16.6.2, 17.7.1 and 17.7.2.

### 16.6.1: Governmental expenditure is within budget

Indicator 16.6.1 measures primary government expenditures as a share of the original budget. It states that 'expenditure between 85 per cent and 115 per cent of the original budget is considered consistent with good international practices' (UNSD 2023). Figure 6.1 visualizes the official data for 2021.<sup>34</sup>

Several highly developed states, including Canada, New Zealand, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States, do not appear to have submitted data for this indicator. As 57 of the countries in Figure 6.1 had not submitted data for 2021 at the time of writing in August 2023, Our World in Data used data from previous years to assign a score of under, over or on budget. The possible reasons for the significant amount of missing official data that should be publicly available from national finance ministries and central banks is beyond the scope of this paper, but the phenomenon is worth noting to underline the difficulty UN authorities often face in gathering accurate SDG-related data.

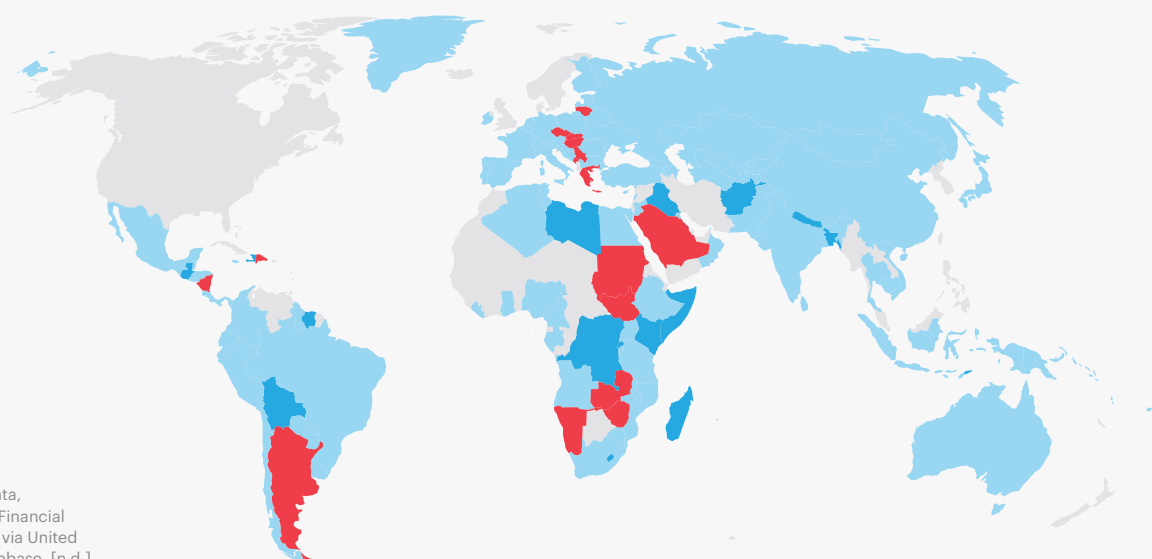
There are also valid questions to be asked about whether measuring adherence to an annual budget in the contemporary world is a desirable indicator for measuring effective and accountable public institutions. Global financial instability has increased significantly since the SDGs were adopted in 2015, meaning that many developing and some developed countries are subject to external financial and economic pressures. These may require major and unplanned fiscal or monetary interventions that necessitate departing from annual budgets (Dafermos, Gabor and Michell 2022; Rey 2018). The multi-year disruptions to global supply chains caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine are two such examples, as are the need to rethink models of state intervention in the economy in order to manage the 'green transition' (Kim et al. 2022; Juhasz, Lane and Rodrik 2023; Mason 2022).<sup>35</sup>

A narrower critique that does not question the underlying desirability of rigid adherence to budgetary frameworks is identified by UN researchers in the 'metadata' note describing how this data is collected and its limitations (UNSD 2023). As Indicator 16.6.1 is an aggregate measure, variations in performance across budget categories are not well-captured. A country could habitually underfund its social welfare, healthcare or education obligations while directing public funds to security services intended to ensure regime stability without affecting its progress towards the target. A country that dedicated a significant proportion of its annual budget to paying foreign bondholders instead of programmes for citizens or domestic investment would also have an easier time performing well on this target. As adherence to budgetary expenditure targets is intended as a statistical proxy for the development of 'effective, accountable and transparent' institutions 'at all levels', both these broad and narrow critiques suggest that examining parallel indicators would be worthwhile.

**Figure 6.1**

**Primary government expenditures as a share of original budget, 2021**

Over budget  
On budget  
Under budget  
No data



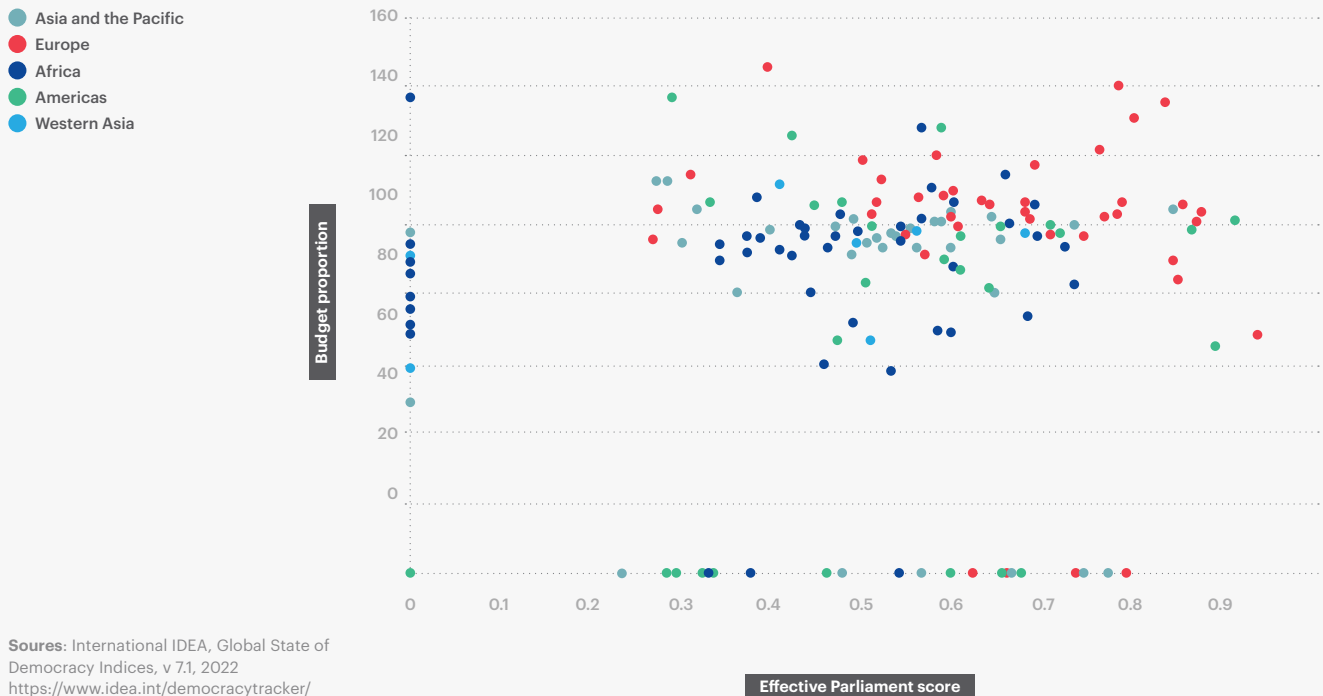
Source: Our World in Data,  
Public Expenditure and Financial  
Accountability program via United  
Nations Global SDG Database, [n.d.],  
[https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/  
govt-expenditure-share-budget](https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/govt-expenditure-share-budget)

It is therefore worth exploring whether there is any relationship between SDG Indicator 16.6.1 and complementary measures of effective, accountable and transparent institutions from the GSoD Indices. Figures 6.2 and 6.3 illustrate the variation in SDG Indicator 16.6.1 and its relationship to GSoD Indices measures of Effective Parliament and Predictable Enforcement, respectively. Both these variables attempt to measure the same goal as SDG Indicator 16.6.1 using different approaches. Effective Parliament is a composite of five variables taken from expert-coded data sets that measure practices such as legislative oversight, constraints on executive power, activities of opposition parties and the extent to which legislatures question officials in practice. Predictable Enforcement is a composite of ten such variables from four data sets measuring the impartiality and quality of

public administration, official transparency and the quality of public service employment and retention policies.

Several conclusions are immediately obvious. First, SDG Indicator 16.6.1 shows far less variation than either GSoD Indices measure. Most of the countries that reported data land within the 'on budget' framework of 85–115 per cent of the original budget.<sup>36</sup> Second, there is no apparent correlation between performance in either GSoD Indices measure of official institutional efficacy and adherence to best international practices on government expenditures—non-responsive, kleptocratic governments appear no more or less likely to be over or under budget than their well-run, transparent counterparts.

**Figure 6.2**  
16.6.1 as Effective Parliament vs budget proportion

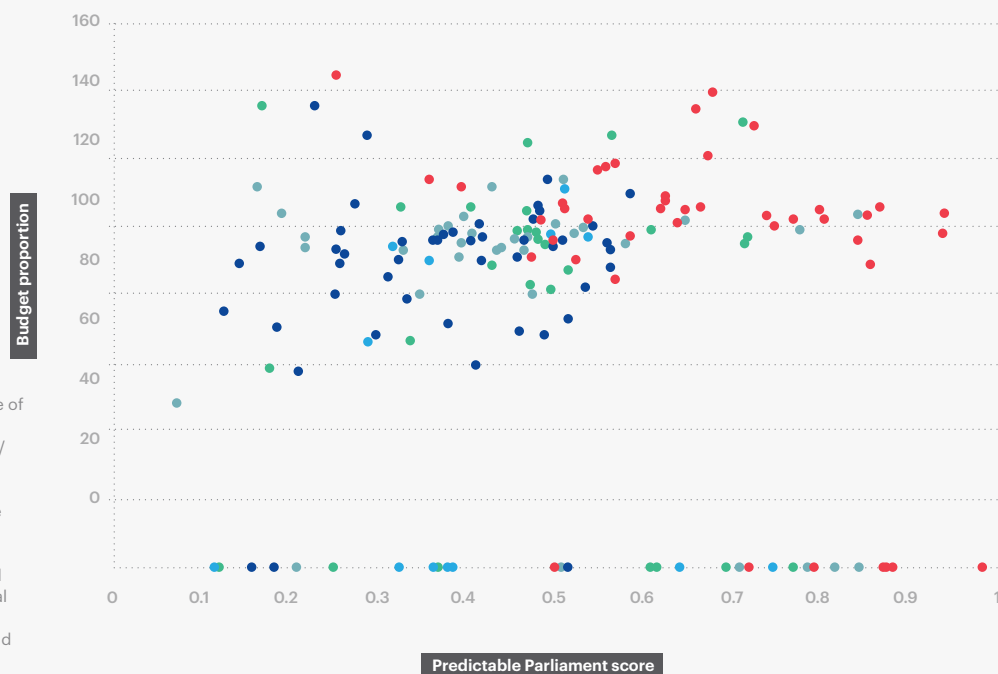




**Figure 6.3**

**16.6.1 as Predictable Enforcement vs budget proportion**

- Asia and the Pacific
- Europe
- Africa
- Americas
- Western Asia



**Sources:** International IDEA, Global State of Democracy Indices, v 7.1, 2022  
<https://www.idea.int/democracytracker/about-the-gsod-indices>

**Notes:** Figures 6.2 and 6.3 compare the Effective Parliament and Predictable Enforcement scores from the GSoD Indices with the proportion of allocated budget funds spent derived from official UN SDG data. A correlation between either of the GSoD Indices measures and UN SDG data would appear as the dots clustered together in a line. That both graphs are made up of a random cloud of dots illustrates that there is no correlation between the UN SDG measure and either GSoD Indices measure.

What is also striking is the cluster of countries on the left side of Figure 6.2, as a score of zero on Effective Parliament is reserved for countries that have undergone either a coup or equivalent state collapse, indicating that not even an ongoing or successful overthrow of a government has a reliable impact on its ability to keep within its budgetary obligations.

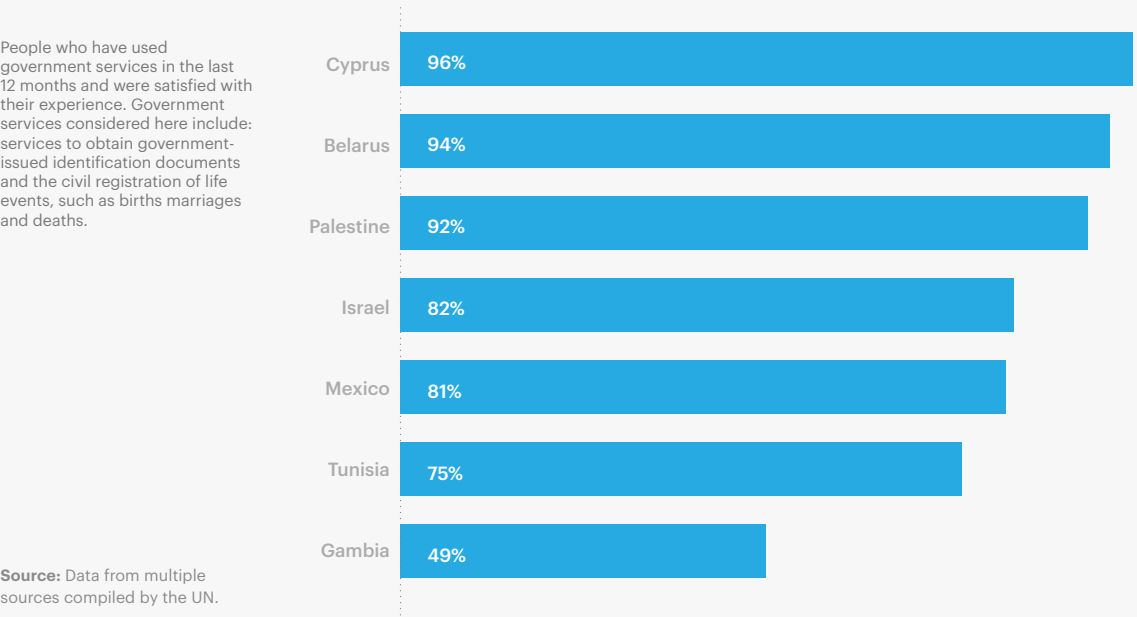
SDG Indicator 16.6.1 therefore appears theoretically shaky in the light of post-2015 developments in our understanding of the relationship between public debt and service provision and the dependence of non-core central banks on the rates set by a handful of powerful central banks, as well as the fragility of global supply chains exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Its utility as a measure of SDG 16 is undermined by its lack of variability and lack of correlation with other robust measures of public institutional quality.

16.6.2: Satisfaction with public services

SDG Indicator 16.6.2 aims to capture the percentage of a national population that is satisfied with their experience of basic government services. However, official data on this indicator is only available for seven countries and only for one year, most likely due to the high costs of conducting representative national surveys. This data is shown in Figure 6.4.

The lack of available data for Indicator 16.6.2 means that this discussion does not need to delve as deeply into conceptual or theoretical issues as for Indicator 16.6.1. Two issues, however, are worth highlighting. One is that without concerted—and costly—efforts to reach the marginalized social groups in the democracies surveyed, reported levels of satisfaction are almost certain to be overstated, as groups without regular access to the internet, mobile phones or other tools on which surveyors rely will not be included (Bonevski et al. 2014; Firchow and Mac Ginty 2017). The second issue is visible from Figure 6.4: it is simply not believable that an overwhelming majority of both Palestinians and Belarusians, the former who live under various forms of

**Figure 6.4**  
Share of population satisfied with government services, 2022



blockade or occupation and the latter under a regime of brutal mass repression, are exceptionally satisfied with the provision of government services (Hopkins 2023; UNCTAD 2022).<sup>37</sup>

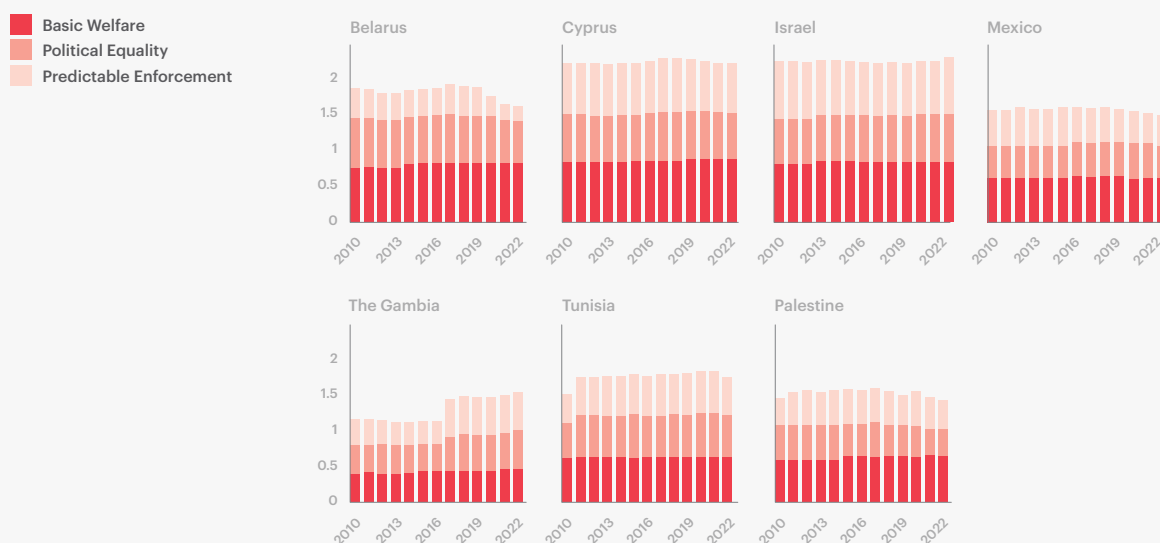
However, in the absence of survey data or a global agency willing to foot the bill for such a costly and lengthy endeavour, it is possible to assemble a proxy for satisfaction with government services using GSoD Indices data. One such measure would be to aggregate Basic Welfare, which measures health equity, capability of the social safety net, education and so on; Predictable Enforcement (see above); and Political Equality, which attempts to measure whether social groups are being systematically excluded. A visualization of this measure over time for the countries included in Figure 6.4 is shown in Figure 6.5.

In contrast to 16.6.1, this aggregate value would appear to roughly align with the survey data that is both trustworthy and available, and depart from official UN data where it was collected under conditions that do not match the assumptions built into conducting public surveys (Morris 2022). While the multi-year

crackdown that followed the 2020 Belarusian election has not yet made an impact on Basic Welfare, the decline in the aggregate measure as a result of the other two factors is clearly visible. In The Gambia, we see significant growth following the end of two decades of autocratic rule in 2016, and in Mexico a slight decline under President Andrés Manuel López Obrador. As would be expected, highly developed states such as Cyprus and Israel score highly on this composite metric, slightly above middle-income Tunisia. Palestine is no longer a high-performing outlier, but declining in line with the advance of Israeli settlers and an increasingly aggressive Israeli Government (Shulman 2022).

With the necessary caveat that this is a first attempt, and a broader comparison with representative public surveys that have not been conducted by UN statisticians would be necessary before proceeding further, this serves as a simple demonstration of the ability of GSoD Indices data to provide solutions to complex data collection problems.

**Figure 6.5**  
Satisfaction with government services: a proxy in selected countries



Source: International IDEA, Global State of Democracy Indices, 2023. <https://www.idea.int/gsod-indices>

## 16.7.1 and 16.7.2: Representation in public institutions

Indicator 16.7.1 seeks to measure the ‘proportions of positions in national and local institutions, including (a) the legislatures; (b) the public service; and (c) the judiciary, compared to national distributions, by sex, age, persons with disabilities and population groups’. In practice, the data collected refers to women’s representation in the upper and lower houses of parliament and the judiciary. Data for the third measure is extremely limited and not available for most countries in the world, while data for the first two is available from and regularly updated by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU n.d.).

The challenge for Indicator 16.7.1, as UN researchers have identified and described in metadata documentation (UNSD 2022d), is that the data currently being collected does not include public servants and, being limited to gender representation, tells us little about any social, ethnic, religious or otherwise marginalized groups. In this case, the GSoD Indices could be used to supplement the existing, but limited, data.

Indicator 16.7.2, which aims to measure the ‘proportion of population who believe decision making is inclusive and responsive, by sex, age, disability and population group’, suffers from the same lack of official data as 16.6.2—and for the same reasons as stated above. It is therefore reasonable for our purposes to attempt to measure it together with Indicator 16.6.1.

The GSoD Indices measure of Political Equality comprises two subcomponents: Social Group Equality (12 data points drawn from three data sets); and Gender Equality (eight data points, one of which is the percentage of women in the lower house of a country’s parliament, drawn from four data sets). A reasonable interpretation of SDG 16.7 is that the degree of representation and influence on decision making that women and marginalized social groups had in governmental institutions at the time when the SDGs were adopted in

2015 was broadly unsatisfactory and in need of improvement. If the opposite were the case, there would have been no need for SDG 16.7. Therefore, we can use the GSoD Indices measures of Political Equality and its subcomponent Gender Equality to assess how the situation has developed in recent decades.

Figure 6.6 shows the annual total of countries in the GSoD Indices data set that experienced a statistically significant five-year advance or decline in Political Equality (left) and Gender Equality (right). Significant advances are coloured dark red and declines light red. The rapid increase in declines that began between 2010 and 2015 is unprecedented in the GSoD Indices data set. These have also taken place during more than 20 years of steady growth worldwide in women’s representation in the lower houses of parliament—from single digits in the late 1990s to over 25 per cent in 2022 (IPU n.d.).

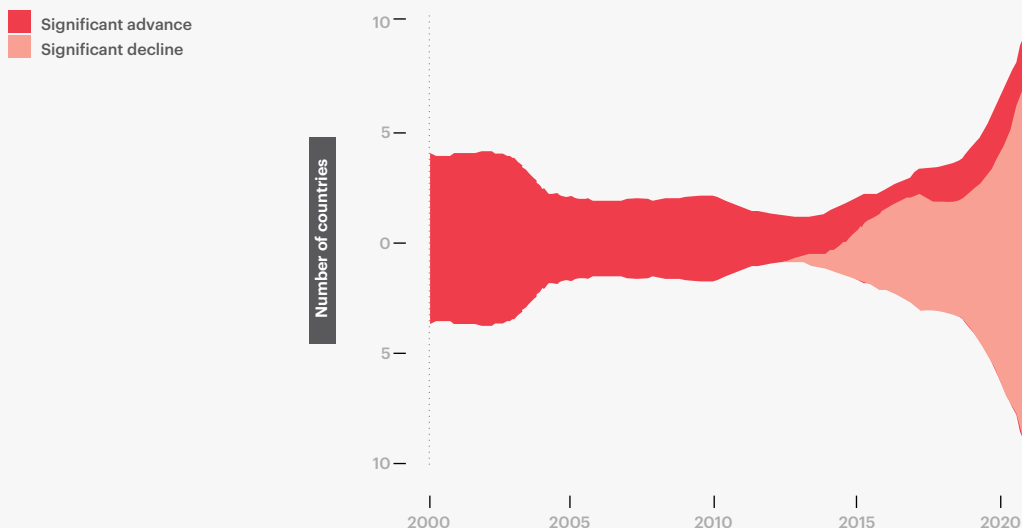
This suggests that, in this case, the limitations of official SDG data are not just producing a misleading picture of the state of women’s and various social groups’ political equality around the world, but masking a period of backsliding on the representation of women and marginalized social groups, and their influence on decision making.

## Conclusion

The importance of accurately measuring progress towards achieving the SDGs as we near the halfway point to the 2030 deadline is clear. Without a thorough understanding of progress, the next analytical steps to identify the underlying drivers of and obstacles to their achievement cannot be taken. In some cases, the culprit, such as the lack of nearly any data whatsoever, is obvious. In others we need to dig deeper to identify theoretical or conceptual weaknesses in the units of measurement or the official methodology. The good news is that ample alternative indicators exist, such as the GSoD Indices, and these can help policymakers and researchers better understand the successes and failures to date.

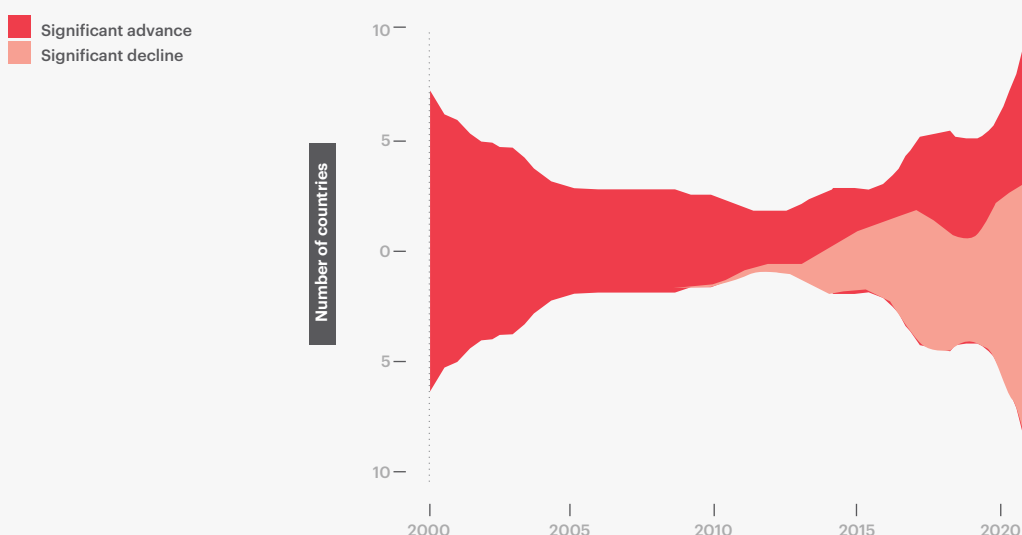


**Figure 6.6**  
Advances and declines in Political Equality



Source: International IDEA,  
Global State of Democracy  
Indices, v. 7.1, 2023, [https://  
www.idea.int/gsod-indices](https://www.idea.int/gsod-indices)

**Figure 6.7**  
Advances and declines in Gender Equality



Source: International IDEA,  
Global State of Democracy  
Indices, v. 7.1, 2023, [https://  
www.idea.int/gsod-indices](https://www.idea.int/gsod-indices)

PURA VI

# Chapter 7



## SDG 16.10: Failing to assess progress on fundamental rights

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**Laura Becana Bal**

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### Target 16.10: Trends and challenges

**Target 16.10: 'Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements'**

Target 16.10 and its two indicators aim to measure progress on achieving respect for freedom of expression and other human rights. Rapid technological advances in digital communications and the way governments respond to these represent both opportunities and challenges for the free dissemination of information and ideas, as well as the potential for censorship. Progress on this target has been limited and many countries have stalled or even experienced backsliding in this area. Furthermore, our research shows that states and other official actors are failing to put the required effort into conducting a fair assessment of how well they are progressing on these indicators.

### Data on Indicator 16.10.1

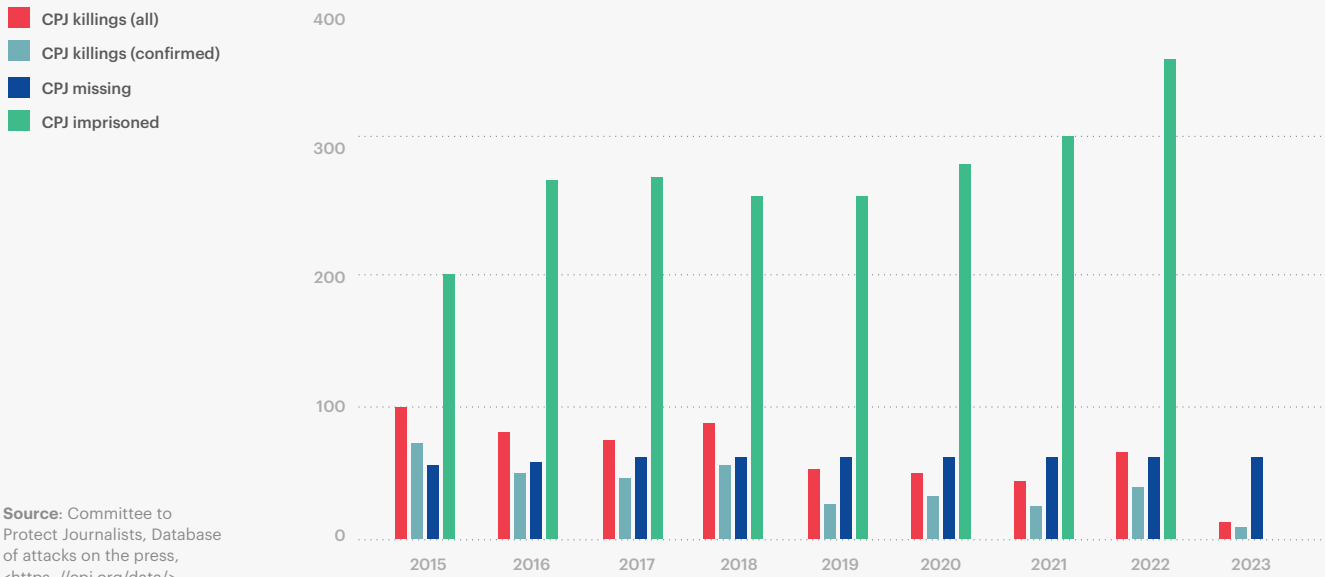
A number of actors collect official data related to Target 16.10.1, which focuses on the harshest physical measures against key human rights defenders. In relation to journalists and media workers, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) compiles annual data on the number of journalists killed,<sup>38</sup> categorizing each case as resolved, information pending or ongoing, and distinguishing between deaths in a conflict

zone and deaths in other circumstances. A leading source of non-official data in this area, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ),<sup>39</sup> distinguishes between killings of journalists and of media workers. The CPJ also distinguishes between cases where journalists were killed in direct reprisal for their work and cases that are 'unconfirmed' in this regard. The CPJ also collects data on the number of journalists who have been imprisoned, which has nearly doubled since 2015 (Getz 2022),<sup>40</sup> and set a new record in 2022 (see Figure 7.1).

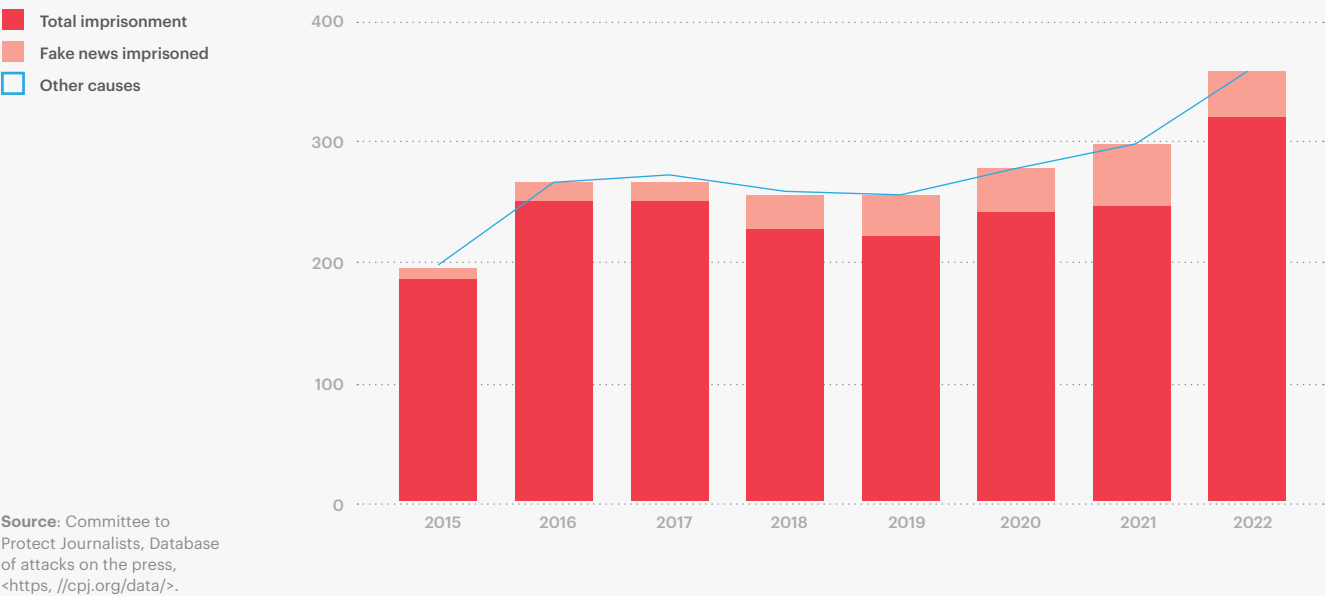
UNESCO's 2022 report, *Knowing the Truth is Protecting the Truth* (UNESCO 2022a), notes that despite the reduction in the number of journalist killings since 2008, there are worrying trends: (a) most journalist killings occur outside the newsroom, suggesting that risks to journalists extend to their personal lives and are not limited to their working environments; (b) the percentage of women journalists killed is rising; and (c) journalist deaths outside of areas of armed conflict are also rising, suggesting a broader set of risks to the safety of journalists.

In recent years, many governments have enacted bans on so-called fake news, which is often vaguely defined and subjectively interpreted, variously providing for steep fines, imprisonment or content takedown (Getz 2022; Lim and Bradshaw 2023). While such bans may be justified by a desire to combat the spread of disinformation, in practice they are more often manipulated by governments to criminalize journalists who challenge official narratives or publish critical content. As a result, despite their claims and justifications, these laws often lead to self-censorship, which has a serious chilling effect on freedom of expression, undermines independent journalism and erodes democratic values (Lim and Bradshaw 2023).

**Figure 7.1**  
Committee to Protect Journalists data on SDG 16.10.1



**Figure 7.2<sup>41</sup>**  
Imprisonments due to fake news laws







### Limitations of Indicator 16.10.1

The 2022 SDG16 *Data Initiative Report* (Bjelic Vucinic, Ball and Mendel 2022) notes that many organizations have called for an expansion in the scope of Indicator 16.10.1 to better measure progress on the protection of fundamental freedoms. This indicator focuses only on the harshest measures, such as killings, kidnappings and torture, and therefore fails to capture more nuanced threats to freedom of expression and other fundamental freedoms, such as those posed by physical assaults, digital attacks, surveillance, and gender-based harassment—which particularly affects women and non-binary journalists. The indicator also fails to assess the multifaceted erosion of fundamental freedoms, such as through repressive legal frameworks, restrictions on digital rights and the lack of preventive action or remedial measures for violations (Bjelic Vucinic, Ball and Mendel 2022).

Non-official data sources that go beyond Indicator 16.10.1 contribute a more comprehensive view of the challenges connected with making progress on

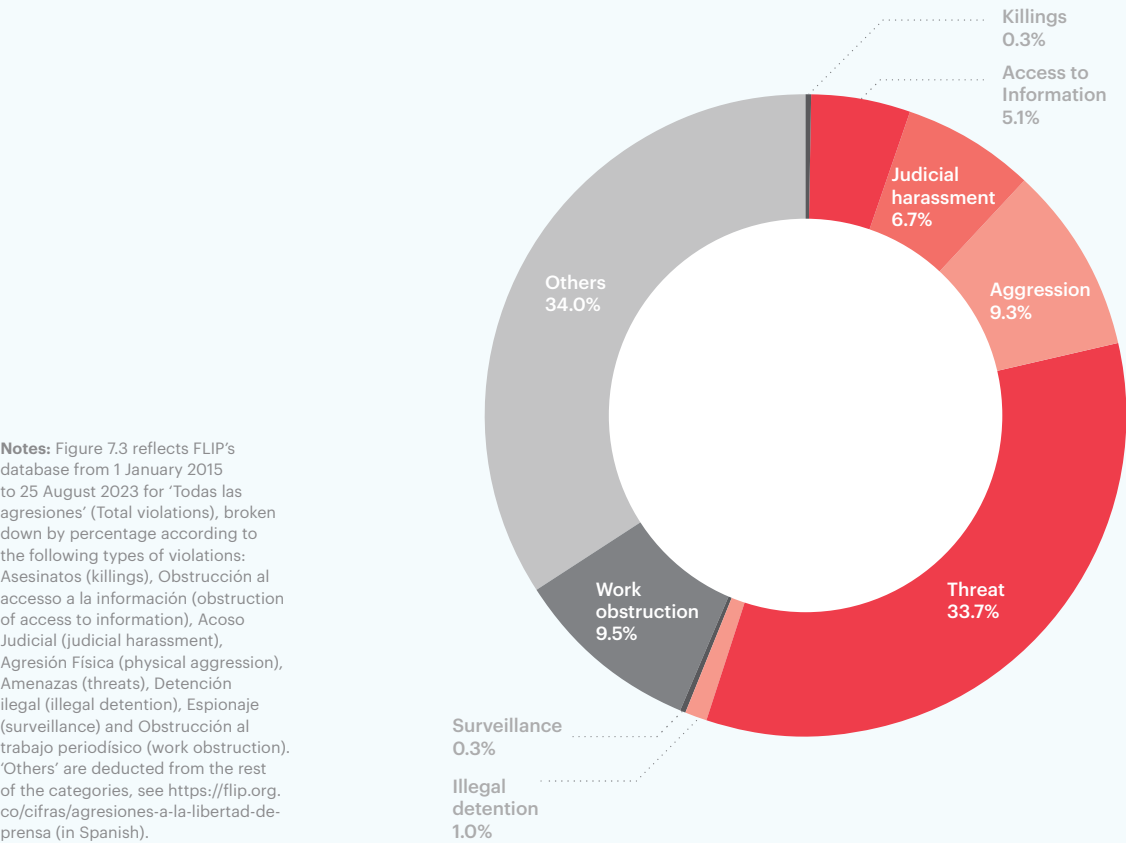
fundamental freedoms (UNESCO 2022b). These sources not only highlight brutal attacks, but also shed light on the wider context, revealing patterns and nuances that the indicator fails to grasp, as well as the underlying forces driving violence and repression of human rights (UNESCO 2022b).

By recognizing the importance of non-official data, societies can develop better targeted strategies to address the multifaceted obstacles to achieving respect for fundamental freedoms. Relying solely on the formal indicator and official data limits our understanding of the real challenges and hampers our ability to devise effective solutions. Embracing non-official data complements official data on Indicator 16.10.1 by contributing not only to accurate measurement of progress on the indicator itself, but also to the formulation of effective policies and other measures to protect fundamental freedoms. This will help to guide efforts to foster an environment where journalists and other human rights defenders can operate without fear.

**Box**  
**Non-official data in context: Colombia**

Data collected by organizations such as the Foundation for Press Freedom (Fundación para la Libertad de Prensa,<sup>42</sup> FLIP) adds depth to our understanding of progress on SDG Target 16.10. While official data focuses primarily on the number of journalists killed, non-official data addresses various other types of violations, such as threats, judicial harassment and other forms of intimidation. Between 2015 and 2023, for instance, FLIP recorded 4,042 different types of violation in Colombia,<sup>43</sup> of which only 0.3 per cent were killings of journalists and 1 per cent were cases of illegal detention. The most prominent violations of press freedom were threats against media workers (33.7 per cent), obstruction of journalists’ work (9.5 per cent), aggression (9.3 per cent) and judicial harassment (6.7 per cent). This broader perspective profiles the diverse challenges faced by journalists and other media workers, providing a more holistic view of the threats to freedom of expression and press freedom in the country.<sup>44</sup>

**Figure 7.3**  
**Total 4,042 violations documented by FLIP between 2015 and 2023**





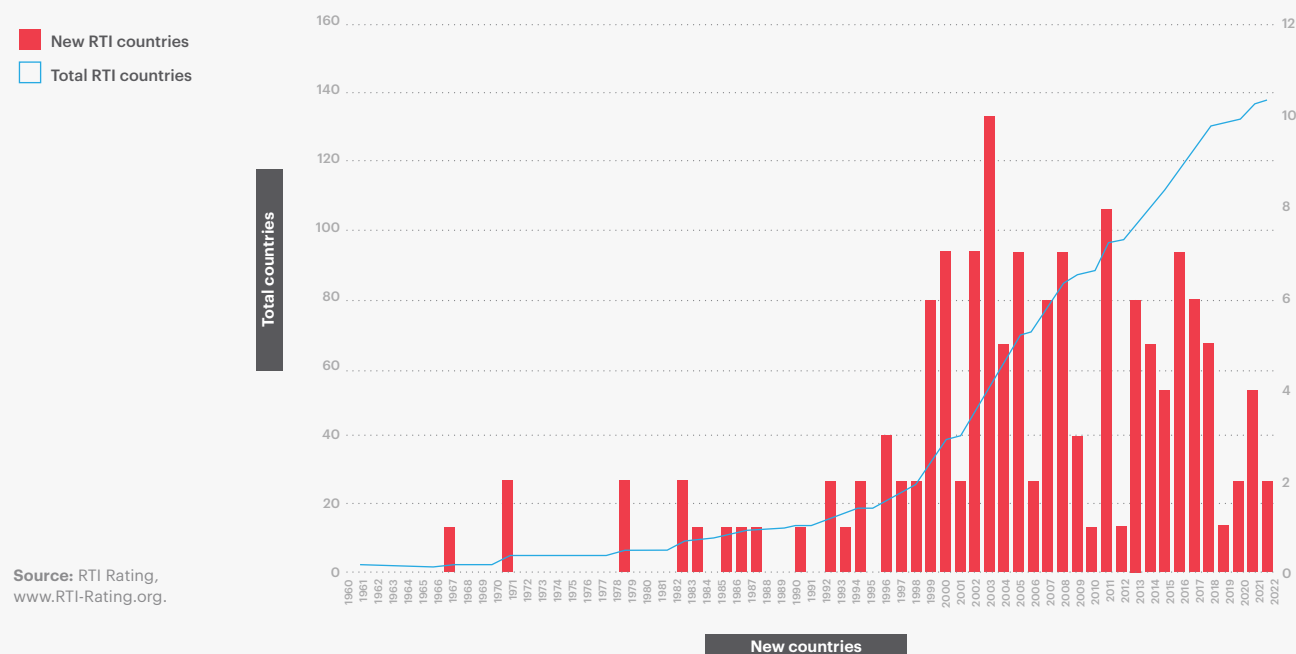
### Data on Indicator 16.10.2

Indicator 16.10.2 addresses the adoption and implementation of laws giving individuals a right to access information held by public authorities, or right to information (RTI) laws. It focuses directly on progress in respect of the fundamental freedoms it covers, thereby avoiding some of the challenges associated with Indicator 16.10.1. In addition, the reference to 'in accordance with national legislation and international agreements' in Target 16.10 incorporates international standards into the assessment of progress on this indicator. This is helpful, since they are already quite developed. At the same time, however, it has proved difficult to devise acceptable methodologies for assessing progress. One consequence of this is that official reporting—including that undertaken by UNESCO, the UN custodian agency for this indicator—has been biased in favour of suggestions that significant progress has been made when in fact this does not appear to be the case. This highlights the importance of non-official data for this indicator.

On the adoption of RTI laws, the leading methodology for assessing whether a country has a 'developed legal framework' for guaranteeing RTI, as well as the strength of that framework, is the RTI Rating implemented by the Centre for Law and Democracy (CLD).<sup>45</sup> Although Indicator 16.10.2 formally refers to 'constitutional, statutory and/or policy guarantees', experience around the world clearly demonstrates that it is only where a legal framework, as a minimum, establishes clear rules for making and responding to requests for information and the grounds for refusing such requests (exceptions)—a developed legal framework—that it is possible to talk sensibly about a legally guaranteed RTI. Thus far, there has been little official discussion of the issue of how strong the legal framework for RTI needs to be for it to be recognized as a proper legal guarantee of this right. While UNESCO collects some information on the legal framework (see below), the RTI Rating provides a much more sophisticated and granular assessment of the strength of such frameworks, including by ranking countries' frameworks according to their strength.



**Figure 7.4**  
Number of countries with right to information legislation



Source: RTI Rating,  
[www.RTI-Rating.org](http://www.RTI-Rating.org).

The RTI Rating shows that, as of the end of September 2023, 138 countries, and 135 UN member states, had adopted and developed legal frameworks on RTI (see Figure 7.4). From among the 193 UN member states, 107 had passed their laws before September 2015, when the SDGs were formally adopted, which means that 86 states had not done so. Since then, 28 more UN member states have adopted RTI laws, representing one-third of the 86 outlying states. This represents important progress. At the same time, the pace of adoption over the past five years has been less than two per year. If this pace continues, only 14 more countries will have adopted laws by September 2030, the deadline for the SDGs, meaning that progress on adopting RTI laws will represent less than half those countries that lacked one in September 2015. Furthermore, these new laws are relatively weak compared to laws adopted before 2015. The average position of the 28 new laws is 76th of the 136 countries assessed using the RTI Rating, which is well below the midpoint.

Less data is available when it comes to assessing implementation of RTI laws. The CLD has developed a sophisticated methodology in the form of the RTI Evaluation,<sup>46</sup> an in-depth assessment tool for assessing a range of implementation metrics. However, only a small number of these more comprehensive assessments have been completed so far. The Freedom of Information Advocates Network, the main global network that brings together RTI advocacy organizations and individuals that focus on this right, has also developed a methodology for CSOs to use to assess implementation.<sup>47</sup> This has been applied numerous times in different countries by different CSOs but the assessments are not available centrally at a single location.

UNESCO has developed a combined eight-question survey for states to complete to assess both the nature of legal guarantees on RTI and how they are implemented. However, only three of the eight questions, representing four of the nine points, focus



on implementation, which provides only a partial insight into this complex issue.<sup>48</sup> Equally seriously, the survey responses provided by states are not independently verified by UNESCO and the overall results indicate that there are some important biases in the data.

In all, 102 countries completed the survey in 2021, which increased to 122 in 2022. In both years, the data clearly contained elements of bias.<sup>49</sup> For example, the average score of the top 50 per cent of these countries in 2021 is 8.25 out of 9, or 92 per cent, and this was almost unchanged in 2022—based on the top 62 countries at 8.29 or 92 per cent. As wonderful as this would be, it is clearly not remotely credible. One of the top 50 per cent countries in 2022—Burundi—does not even have an RTI law and yet somehow earns 7.9 points, which is an impossibility given the questions on the survey. On the other hand, one of the six countries that scored zero points in 2022—Namibia—has adopted an RTI law. Again, it is not possible for a country with an RTI law to score zero. Obviously, some sort of verification of the data is needed before it can be relied on.

In sum, it is clear that non-official data on the adoption of RTI laws is more comprehensive and far more detailed and richer than the corresponding official data. On implementation of RTI laws, the official data, and the UNESCO data in particular, is more comprehensive than either of the non-official data sources. However, it suffers from two flaws that ultimately make it unreliable: first, it probes the complex area of implementation rather superficially; and, second—and more significantly—it is clearly biased, presumably based on many states' desires to paint their performance as being better than it is and the lack of any quality control on the part of UNESCO.

## Recommendations

In the light of the challenges posed by the very nature of Indicator 16.10.1 and both official and non-official data sources, not to mention the evolving landscape of information dissemination and the protection of fundamental freedoms, the following recommendations are made with a view to improving the monitoring of progress towards achieving SDG Target 16.10:

- Data collection on Indicator 16.10.1 should, as far as possible, provide breakdowns across relevant metrics, such as gender and the reason for the measures being tracked. Data collection should also go beyond the strict limitations of the indicator and look at related issues, such as physical attacks, harassment—especially if gender-based—and digital attacks.
- If possible, additional indicators should be adopted under this target to better reflect the complex nature of progress on fundamental freedoms, for example looking at law reform efforts and the imprisonment of journalists and other human rights defenders.
- Consideration should be given to establishing a minimum standard on whether legal rules on the RTI in a country represent a proper legal framework for guaranteeing this right.
- More effort needs to be put into assessing implementation of RTI laws using both official and non-official data. More probing and detailed questions on this topic should be incorporated into the UNESCO survey while donors should provide more support for civil society work in this area.
- UNESCO should engage in some form of quality control in relation to the data it collects on both adoption and implementation of RTI laws, perhaps starting with cases where the data provided clearly does not reflect the genuine situation on the ground.



**“Efforts to monitor progress toward SDG Target 16.10 must expand data collection beyond strict indicators. We need comprehensive breakdowns, additional indicators, and more detailed assessments of RTI law implementation, alongside stronger support for civil society efforts and quality control in data collection by organizations like UNESCO.”**







# Conclusion

## Observations on the role and importance of official and non-official data

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### Introduction

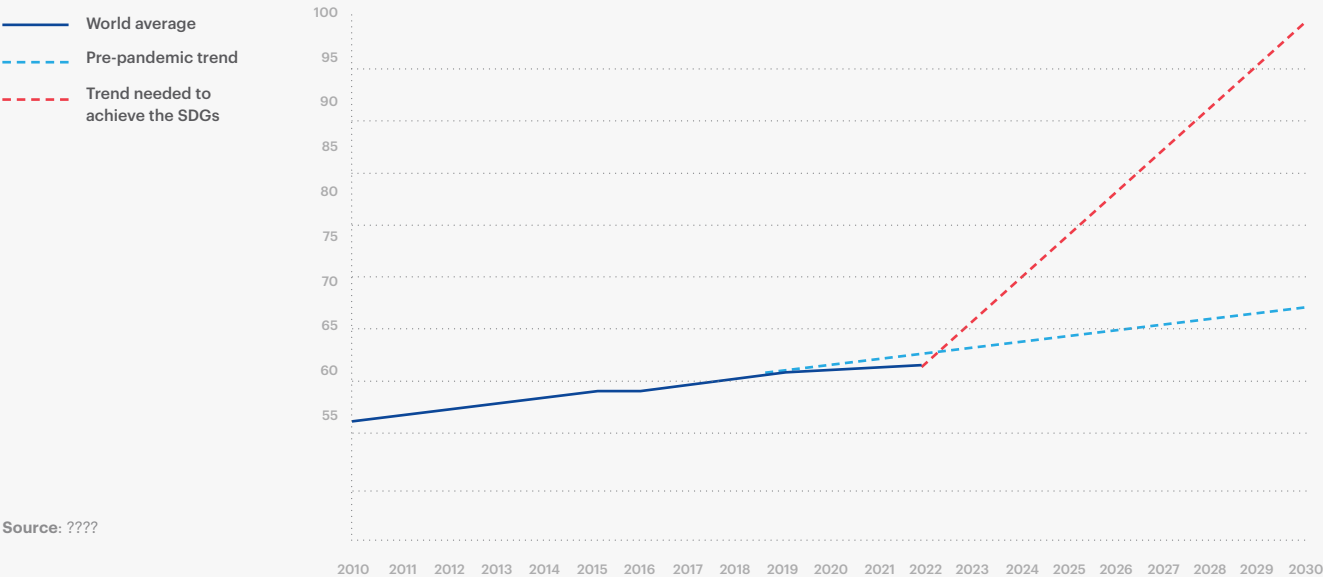
The SDGs formally came into force on 1 January 2016 and they run until the end of 2030, so the end of June 2023 was the halfway point for achieving them. All of the various contributions to this report—chapters, infocus and case studies—chronicle how far behind we are in terms of reaching ‘substantial progress’, the UN standard for achievement of the SDGs,<sup>50</sup> in terms of the various targets under SDG 16. Official statistics offer a similar assessment. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals Progress Chart 2023 assesses that no target under Goal 16 has been met (one of only six goals for which this was the case) and only 33 per cent of the targets under Goal 16 have made ‘Fair progress, but acceleration needed’. Only Goal 2 (zero hunger), Goal 4 (quality education) and Goal 11 (sustainable cities and communities) are doing worse.<sup>51</sup>

This is part of a much wider trend of non-achievement of the SDGs. In a speech in April 2023, the United Nations Secretary-General noted: ‘Unless we act now, the 2030 Agenda will become an epitaph for a world that might have been’, adding: ‘Halfway to the deadline for the 2030 Agenda, we are leaving more than half the world behind’.<sup>52</sup> The UN Progress Chart 2023 suggests that among the 138 of the 169 SDG targets that could be assessed,<sup>53</sup> only 15 per cent were on track to be achieved by 2030, 48 per cent showed ‘moderate or severe deviations from the desired trajectory’ and 37 per cent showed no progress (stagnation) or even regression below the 2015 baseline.<sup>54</sup> According to Sachs et al. (2023), overall progress between 2015 and 2019 on global achievement of the SDGs, as measured by their SDG Index, improved only from 64 per cent to 66 per cent and, as of 2022, the Index is below 67 per cent. These results are shown in Figure 8.1, along with the gap between actual performance and what is needed to achieve the SDGs by 2030.<sup>55</sup>



**“The UN Progress Chart 2023 suggests that among the 138 of the 169 SDG targets that could be assessed (UNStats 2023a), only 15 per cent were on track to be achieved by 2030, 48 per cent showed ‘moderate or severe deviations from the desired trajectory’ and 37 per cent showed no progress (stagnation) or even regression below the 2015 baseline.”**

**Figure 8.1**  
SDG Index world average: pre-pandemic trend and trend needed to achieve the SDGs by 2030



Many of the chapters in this report highlight the lack of official data and in some cases even the fact that the collection of this data has been declining. Perhaps the starkest example of this is in Chapter 5 on Target 16.3, focusing on the rule of law, which indicates that only 55 countries have data on any of the indicators under this target, and only five countries have data for Indicator 16.3.3, use of dispute resolution mechanisms. Similarly, In focus: SDG 16.4.2—Gaps in illicit arms flows data states: ‘Official data is scarce for Indicator 16.4.2, which focuses on measures related to the seizure and tracing of firearms’, and again refers to the fact that data on this is only available from 55 countries. In other cases, chapters in this report highlight challenges in the very availability of official data (see below).

It is understood, essentially across the board, that the various indicators under each target are surrogate measurements for the main result sought. However, the degree of surrogacy varies considerably. For example, Target 4.1, on completion of ‘free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes’ is assessed by Indicator 4.1.1, looking at the

proportion of children at different levels of school achieving at least minimum proficiency in reading and mathematics. Contrast this with Target 16.10, part of which is the protection of fundamental freedoms, which is assessed by Indicator 16.10.1, looking at the number of human rights defenders who have been killed, kidnapped, disappeared, arbitrarily detained or tortured, which is far less closely connected to its target than Indicator 4.1.1. Many of the targets under Goal 16 refer to multifaceted social phenomena. As indicated in the Introduction, these are ‘complex goals that to be fulfilled require the interaction of myriad institutions, procedures, values’. As such, in many cases the target–indicator gap is large for Goal 16.

Chapter 1: Insights from civil society: Halfway to 2030 Report on SDG16+, notes that SDG 16 ‘was designed to be an enabler’. It targets structural issues, such as violence, insecurity and conflict, as well as features relating to government capabilities, such as effective, accountable institutions and responsive, participatory decision making, for which progress is essential to moving forward on any of the SDG targets. Chapter 2 on the status of



SDG 16 at the midpoint of Agenda 2030 notes that ‘Good governance and strong institutions are important enablers of achieving sustainable development’.

It may be noted that the cross-cutting role of many of the SDG 16 targets, in the sense of representing preconditions or at least significant enabling conditions for achieving the other targets, means that a failure to achieve progress in this area will have an outsized impact on achievement of all the other SDGs. While there is a difference between failing to achieve progress and failing to measure that achievement, if we do not know how we are doing, it will be nearly impossible either to motivate relevant actors to focus on areas of need or to target properly measures to address failure. As such, collecting solid data on actual progress on the SDG 16 targets, as assessed through both official indicators and wider measurements, is crucially important.

Two of the previous points—that official data is often lacking (and sometimes sub-standard) and that the target–indicator gap is often large for Goal 16, suggesting that wider measurements are needed—highlight the importance of non-official data for this Goal. In many cases, as highlighted in this report, non-official data is far more comprehensive

than official data. In some cases, it has also been collected for longer, providing a better longitudinal view of progress. At least as importantly, non-official data often provides wider insights than just the metrics covered by the official indicators. As such, especially where the target–indicator gap is large, it can provide much richer and deeper insights into real progress on the target in question.

This conclusion starts by providing a general overview of where, according to the non-official data presented in this report, the world is in terms of achieving some of the SDG 16 targets. It then reviews some of the special challenges relating to assessment of progress on Goal 16, followed by a deeper dive into some of the data issues mentioned above, as well as the challenges associated with the indicators. It ends with some general recommendations for improving assessment of progress on SDG 16, while noting that individual chapters often also include recommendations for moving forward in terms of achieving the actual targets they cover.



## Overall progress on SDG 16

Chapter 1 provides insights from the Transparency, Accountability and Participation for Agenda 2030 (TAP) Network report, *Halfway to 2030 Report on SDG16+*, which reviews many of the targets and indicators under SDG 16. In a sobering reference, that chapter notes: ‘The report concludes that as of 2023, of the 12 SDG 16 targets, none are likely to be achieved by 2030’, and that only two indicators are even showing signs of progress while ‘a handful of indicators in other targets also show positive but inadequate progress’. Chapter 2: Status of SDG 16 at the midpoint of Agenda 2030 notes: ‘The population-weighted average goal score for SDG 16 is slightly lower in 2021 (the most recent year with complete data) than it was in 2015’, a rather startling conclusion. That chapter also notes that the gap between rich and poor countries may actually be wider in 2030 than it was in 2015, thus belittling the core Agenda 2030 theme of leaving no one behind.

One theme that is reflected in that chapter as well as many others, and in UN documents, is that states are simply failing to allocate sufficient resources to achieving SDG 16. Or, to put it more generally, as noted in Chapter 2: Status of SDG 16 at the midpoint of Agenda 2030, while there was no expectation that the SDGs would be achieved by the midpoint, one might at least expect that most countries would have put in place ambitious plans and frameworks for achieving major progress, which has certainly not been the case. Chapter 4 on SDG 16.2 for the SDG16 DI Report from World Vision provides a very concrete example of this, noting that while 80 per cent of 155 countries surveyed had at least one national action plan on preventing violence against children, less than 25 per cent had fully funded those plans.

It is not the aim here to review progress on all of the different targets and indicators covered in this report. Rather, a few examples are provided just to give a sense of how far progress has stalled. Chapter 3: Patterns of violence in state and non-state armed conflicts notes that between 2021 and 2022 the number of armed-conflict-related deaths nearly doubled, mostly as a result of the conflict in Ethiopia and the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. While this is (hopefully) a short-term result, it demonstrates a key feature of some of the SDG 16 targets and indicators: that progress is far from linear. The same chapter notes that there has also been a significant increase in non-state conflict-related deaths in the past decade.

Chapter 5: SDG 16.3: A Tool for Progress notes: ‘Crime reporting rates remain low and the number of unsentenced detainees is stagnating’. Specifically on the latter, this number has remained stagnant since 2015, at one-third of those detained. Chapter 7: SDG 16.10: Failing to assess progress on fundamental rights

notes, in relation to Indicator 16.10.1, looking at the harshest physical measures against key human rights defenders, that killings of journalists have declined but that imprisonment of journalists has increased substantially since 2015, illustrating both the inadequacy of the official indicator as a way of measuring how well states are doing in terms of ensuring public access to information and protecting fundamental freedoms, and the lack of real progress on achieving Target 16.10.



**“Halfway to 2030 Report on SDG16+ concludes that as of 2023, of the 12 SDG16 targets, none are likely to be achieved by 2030, with only two indicators showing signs of progress. A handful of indicators in other targets also show positive but inadequate progress.**

## Special SDG 16 challenges

SDG 16 represents a brand new set of agreed development metrics for the international community. This gives rise to challenges in terms of both making progress on the various targets under this goal and measuring that progress.

Many of the 23 indicators that fall under the 12 targets for Goal 16 demonstrate a particular sensitivity to the prevailing political climate in each country, given their strong focus on more governance-related issues. This is to some extent true for other goals and targets, since different governments have different priorities when it comes to development challenges such as education or transportation. But the priority given to addressing issues such as violence against children, reducing corruption and ensuring responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision making at all levels are far more dependent on the government of the day. As such, progress may vary considerably depending on the type of government.

For most of the SDG targets, while innovation and determination are always relevant, it is generally the case that if a state focuses attention and resources on an issue, success of some sort will almost inevitably follow. In contrast, even reasonably determined efforts by government may not always lead to success on some Goal 16 indicators. For example, there are no established pathways to ensuring progress in terms of addressing corruption, a particularly stubborn problem to root out, or even to reducing violence in society, although, of course, there are strong recommendations in each of these areas.

The collection of good data and information is central to measuring progress on all of the SDG indicators, and this is also true for the indicators under Goal 16. However, for some SDG 16 indicators, methodologies for collecting data are still developing or have only been finalized recently, since these indicators were only recognized as development metrics fairly recently, often only in 2015 with the adoption of the SDGs. For example, UNESCO is the custodian agency for Indicator 16.10.2 but only developed and applied a methodology for this in 2019 and then amended its methodology considerably in both 2020 and 2021, with 2022 being the first year the same methodology was reapplied, leaving limited space for longitudinal

comparison.<sup>56</sup> This may be contrasted with many of the indicators under other SDGs.

A related issue here is the fact, as set out clearly in the various contributions to this report, that states are not collecting anywhere near enough comprehensive data on the Goal 16 indicators. While it is understandable that it might have taken states some time to gear up for collecting and processing data on new indicators, using new methodologies, that can no longer be accepted at this point in the SDGs process as a reason for the lack of data collection. However, it may to some extent explain the relatively weak reporting on some of the SDG 16 indicators in the Voluntary National Review reports (UNESCO 2022b).<sup>57</sup> While civil society efforts to collect data on Goal 16 indicators have been quite extensive, some of which are outlined in this report, important gaps remain.

Furthermore, not all of the indicators under Goal 16 are even properly numerical in nature, in the sense that there is enormous variance as to what might qualify as meeting the value set out in the indicator or that value is substantially subjective in nature. For example, Indicator 16.1.4 asks what proportion of the population feels safe walking around alone in the areas where they live, something that may decline as better information about safety risks is made available, even if actual safety improves. This is also true of Indicator 16.6.2, looking at the proportion of the population that was satisfied with their last experience of public services. Indicator 16.10.2 looks at the number of countries that adopt and implement legal guarantees for public access to information. While the number of countries with laws can be counted, Target 16.10 makes it clear that these must be ‘in accordance with ... international agreements’, which clearly goes beyond just counting laws, while implementation is again a very complex, essentially non-numerical metric.

The indicators under Goal 16, like many of the wider SDG indicators, vary considerably depending on cross-cutting identity factors such as gender and historic disadvantage of groups within a country. As indicated in the various contributions to this report and as summarized below, even on the key metric of gender, many states do not collect disaggregated data and this drops off sharply for other identity factors, even where this is explicitly built into the indicator—as is the



case, for example, with the indicators under Target 16.7 on ensuring responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision making at all levels. The need to collect broadly disaggregated data is essential, given that a core goal of the SDGs is to ‘leave no one behind’, described by the UN as ‘the central, transformative promise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals’ (United Nations Sustainable Development Group n.d.).

## Data issues

Many of the different chapters in this report highlight problems with official data collection on the various indicators under SDG 16, mostly focusing on the lack of collection of such data, especially longitudinally over time, as well as the lack of disaggregation of data, for example along gender or other grounds. At a very general level, the Introduction notes that ‘not all national statistics offices are necessarily reliable’, that some indicators ‘have no established methodology and are not regularly produced by countries’ and that ‘obtaining comprehensive time series coverage is a common limitation’. This is supported by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals Progress Chart 2023, which lists Goal 16 as having the second-highest number of targets for which there was ‘insufficient data’, at 42 per cent (with Goal 11 being the highest, at 60 per cent).

This is borne out by the different contributions to this report, as illustrated by a few examples. In focus: SDG 16.1.1: Data gaps in international homicide statistics notes that for the Small Arms Survey’s upcoming 2023 edition of the GVD database, ‘29 per cent of the data points were missing across the matrix of all countries

and territories, on the one hand, and of all reporting years between 2015 ... and 2021, on the other’. Even basic disaggregation by the gender of the victim was not present for 42 per cent of the data points and other types of disaggregation were even less available. Another challenge here is the time lag before information becomes available, which for official statistics often takes years. Furthermore, the availability of data has generally decreased since 2015.

In terms of data on sexual violence against children, Chapter 4 indicates that for the period 2014 to 2021, only 55 countries have internationally comparable data on girls and only 12 on boys, the latter being an unacceptably low figure. On the other hand, ‘non-official sources provide a wealth of information on the exponential growth in online child sexual abuse and exploitation’.

A similarly small number of countries produce data on the three indicators under Target 16.3, on the rule of law, according to Chapter 5. Data on the proportion of victims of violence who reported on their victimization even once since 2015, broken down into categories (robbery, physical assault and sexual assault), is available for only 50 countries or fewer, while this rises to 55 countries for unsentenced detainees as a proportion of the prison population, and drops to just 5 countries for the use of dispute resolution mechanisms to resolve disputes. While many countries do report gender-disaggregated figures, none reported figures to the SDG Indicators Database disaggregated by any other metrics.



**“Many of the indicators for the targets under SDG 16 represent poor surrogate measurements for the achievement of the target.”**

In focus: SDG 16.4.2: Gaps in illicit arms flows data, starts out by noting that ‘official data is scarce for Indicator 16.4.2’, which refers to the proportion of seized arms that are illicit. Once again, data only appears to be available from a rather small number of states while tracing rates vary considerably and, troublingly, tracing rates are lower in states with higher numbers of seized firearms.

Similarly, Chapter 6: SDG 16.6. and 16.7: Using democracy data to fill in the gaps, indicates that as of August 2023, 57 countries had not provided information for 2021 on government expenditures as a share of the original budget, something which should not be too difficult to measure. In terms of the representation of different groups in legislatures, the judiciary and the public service, disaggregation by gender is ‘extremely limited’ for the third measure and mostly limited to gender representation for the first two. The situation is quite extreme for Indicators 16.6.2 and 16.7.2, which assess satisfaction with government services and the inclusivity of decision making, respectively, where data is only available for seven countries.

The data that is available for Indicator 16.6.2 appears to be at least partially distorted, with rates of 94 per cent and 92 per cent for satisfaction with government services in Belarus and Palestine, respectively, being ‘simply not believable’. This problem was also present with the data on access to information laws, as reflected in Chapter 7, where the fact that the average score of the top 50 per cent of countries was 92 per cent in the UNESCO survey used to measure this was described as being ‘clearly not remotely credible’.

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals Progress Chart 2023 assessed 4 of the 12 targets under Goal 16 as having achieved ‘Fair progress, but acceleration needed’. However, for one-half of these—namely targets 16.7, inclusive decision making, and 16.10, access to information and fundamental freedoms—the CSOs gathering the non-official data reflected in this report come to a very different conclusion: that progress is stagnating or regressing. Given the comments above, this suggests that even the pessimistic official evaluation of progress on SDG 16 is overly optimistic.



## Challenges with the indicators

As noted in the introduction to this conclusion, many of the indicators for the targets under SDG 16 represent poor surrogate measurements for the achievement of the target. While there will often be a target-indicator gap, due to the complexity of many targets, this is arguably larger for many of the SDG 16 targets. This point is made explicitly in many of the chapters in this report, some of which are highlighted below. Often, non-official data takes a broader approach to assessing progress on targets, thereby providing an invaluable wider picture than just the official indicators. It may be noted that the report by Sachs et al. (2023: Table 4) also diverges significantly from the official SDG indicators, suggesting that it does not consider them to be very reliable surrogates for the targets under that goal. For example, for Target 16.5, that report relies on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, a complex tool for assessing perceptions of corruption, rather than the actual indicators here, which look at the proportion of people who paid or were asked for a bribe by an official and the proportion of businesses who did the same. Another example is provided below.

In terms of the rule of law, Chapter 5 concedes that it is a strength that the three indicators under Target 16.3 'each considers a discrete and complementary aspect of the rule of law or access to justice'. It goes on to note, however, that: 'Target 16.3 is inherently constrained by the three official indicators by which it is measured'. Among other challenges is that even many criminal justice issues, only one part of the wider notion of the rule of law, are not covered by Indicators 16.3.1 and 16.3.2, such as youth incarceration and prison conditions. For its part, 16.3.3, looking at civil and administrative justice, only focuses on one possible part of the justice experience, namely whether a dispute resolution mechanism was used, but not on issues such as whether the mechanism was deemed to be effective or fair.

In focus: SDG 16.4.2: Gaps in illicit arms flows data notes that while assessing the proportion of seized arms that are illicit is important for certain social goals, 'it is not on its own an indicator of the extent of illicit arms flows' and 'Diverse, granular and complementary data sources are therefore required to capture the complexity of illicit arms flows in any context'. It goes on to recommend the use of proxy indicators, such as transparency in the authorized arms trade, while also noting that there has been little progress in that area over the last 20 years.

Chapter 6 notes various conceptual and statistical problems with using the ability of governments to spend according to their budget as a proxy for developing effective, accountable and transparent institutions. It notes that the last few years have seen unprecedented budget uncertainty, not least due to the unpredictable spending necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, that countries could comply with this indicator while underfunding social welfare to the benefit of security services, and that countries which dedicate a higher proportion of their budget to paying down foreign debt would be likely to experience less budget divergence than those that focus on domestic programmes. These factors are all quite clearly utterly unrelated to the quality of public institutions which this target seeks to assess.

A perhaps extreme example of the target-indicator gap is with Indicator 16.10.1, looking at the harshest physical measures against key human rights defenders as a proxy for protecting fundamental freedoms. Many countries do not experience any incidents of this type, such as torture and disappearances, against human rights defenders, giving them no room to improve, which is the whole thrust of the SDGs. Furthermore, this ignores issues such as imprisonment of human rights defenders, alignment of the legal framework for these freedoms with international standards and the fair application of the legal rules, all essential metrics for this issue. This may be contrasted with the report by Sachs et al. (2023), which relies on Reporters Without Borders' Press Freedom Index, a much more sophisticated tool for assessing at least one fundamental freedom, that is, freedom of expression.



## Conclusions and recommendations

This report provides a number of general conclusions about SDG 16, of which the two starkest are that, overall, the world is making at best only extremely limited progress on this goal, and may even be backsliding, and that the reliability of official data to assess progress on SDG 16 targets is severely limited both by the lack of primary collection of that data and by distortions in that primary data collection and interpretation, the latter enabled by the often subjective and non-numerical nature of the indicators. Both of these failures point to the need for states to do vastly better in both areas. A related failure, which takes on increased importance in light of the central, transformative promise of the SDGs to leave no one behind, is the even more limited collection of information which is disaggregated by gender or other metrics of vulnerability.

On the other hand, this report also highlights the important role of non-official data not only in supplementing official data on the established indicators—by both adding to the available data and improving the reliability of that data—but also in collecting adjacent data on other factors that are closely associated with the achievement of progress on the targets, thereby enriching the overall picture in terms of whether progress is actually being made. While this work by civil society organizations is important and impressive, it is also constrained by the high cost of collecting such data, the lack of resources being made available to do this work and, in some cases, by growing restrictions on civil society that make it more difficult to collect relevant data.

All of the SDGs are important and interrelated. However, SDG 16 is fundamentally an enabling goal since it covers structural issues that undermine the achievement of all SDGs, such as violence and armed conflict, as well as features of governance, such as effective institutions and participatory decision making, which are preconditions for progress, given the central role of public institutions in achieving the SDGs. As such, failures on SDG 16 have an outsized impact on the achievement of the overall 2030 Agenda. If the SDGs are to

become more than an ‘epitaph for a world that might have been’, in the words of the United Nations Secretary-General, states simply have to do much better on SDG 16.

Many of the various contributions to this report set out recommendations for improving performance in relation to the specific issues they address, whether that is in the area of assessing progress or actually achieving it. Here, we limit ourselves to a few general cross-cutting recommendations relating to the assessment of progress on all SDG 16 targets and indicators.

- States should allocate considerably more resources and attention to engaging in fair and objective assessment of their progress on SDG 16 targets, which should include but go beyond just the official indicators for these targets.
- As part of the above, states should place far more priority on collecting data on progress that is disaggregated by gender and other relevant metrics of vulnerability.
- The international community should provide significantly more support to civil society organizations that engage in the collection of non-official data on SDG 16 including, where appropriate, by working in collaboration with those organizations to improve data collection.

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# Endnotes

1. Miguel Angel Lara Otaola, Senior Advisor for Democracy Assessment, International IDEA.
2. The 17 Goals are available at <<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>>.
3. Targets 16.a on strengthening national institutions through international cooperation and 16.b on promoting non-discriminatory laws and policies are not outcome targets, but rather means of implementation, and not included in this report. 'Means of Implementation' targets have been criticized for their formulation, relevance and difficulty of implementation (Bartram et al. 2018). Moreover targets 16.8 and 16.9 are not covered in this year's report.
4. These are categorized as Tier I indicators (SDG16 Hub 2023).
5. See the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) States of Fragility Reports for 2018 to 2022, which can be downloaded at <<https://www.oecd.org/dac/states-of-fragility-fa5a6770-en.htm>>.
6. The chapter builds on SDSN's 2023 Sustainable Development report. Sachs, J., Lafortune, G., Fuller, G. and Drumm, E., *Implementing the SDG Stimulus: Sustainable Development Report 2023* (Dublin: Dublin University Press, 2023), <https://www.doi.org/10.25546/102924>
7. *Extra-state* armed conflicts occur between a state and a non-state group outside its own territory, where the government side is fighting to retain control of a territory outside the state system. *Interstate* armed conflicts involve two or more states. *Intrastate* armed conflicts involve a government and one or more insurgent groups and *internationalized intrastate* armed conflicts are intrastate conflicts in which there is involvement of foreign governments with troops.
8. Denotes the number of all country years in the given geography for the period 2015–21. For example, if 222 countries and territories are monitored globally for a period of seven years, this results in 222x7=1,554 possible data points.
9. 'Available' means that either the rate per 100,000 population or the count is available from any type of resource included in the GVD database for the particular year.
10. The Convention on the Rights of the Child defines violence against children as 'all forms of physical or mental violence, injury and abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse' (United Nations General Assembly 1989).
11. Violence against children impairs brain development, physical and mental health, and children's ability to learn, undermining their childhood development and well-being and limiting their potential and future productivity as adults. In addition to perpetuating the cycle of violence across generations, violence against children also has catastrophic economic costs for countries. One seminal study suggests that the economic costs could be as high as 8 per cent of global gross domestic product (GDP), while national studies from a range of countries estimate that it could cost up to 5 per cent of GDP (UNICEF 2022: 2).
12. The six grave violations are: killing and maiming of children; recruitment or use of children as soldiers; sexual violence against children; abduction of children; attacks against schools or hospitals; and denial of humanitarian access for children. For more information see Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (n.d.).
13. In addition to increased risks of child marriage, FGM and child labour, school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic made children more susceptible to recruitment and use by parties to conflict, child trafficking, sexual exploitation and recruitment to criminal gangs. The pandemic also increased gender-based violence, and there are reports of increased domestic violence, especially against girls (United Nations 2021: para. 42).
14. For more information see UNICEF (2023a).
15. In Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), psychological aggression refers to the action of shouting, yelling or screaming at a child, as well as calling a child offensive names, such as 'dumb' or 'lazy'. Physical punishment is defined as shaking a child, hitting or slapping them on the hand, arm or leg, hitting them on the bottom or elsewhere on the body with a hard object, spanking or hitting them on the bottom with a bare hand, hitting or slapping them on the face, head or ears, and beating them over and over as hard as possible. Physical punishment is intended to cause physical pain or discomfort but not injuries (UNSD 2022).

16. Article 3, paragraph (a) of the UN Trafficking in Persons Protocol, defines trafficking in persons as ‘the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs’. Article 3, paragraph (c) further states ‘The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of a child for the purpose of exploitation shall be considered ‘trafficking in persons’ even if this does not involve any of the means set forth in subparagraph (a) of this article’ (United Nations General Assembly 2000).
17. ‘Sexual violence’ is often used as an umbrella term to cover all types of sexual victimization including child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation. According to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, ‘Sexual abuse and exploitation includes: (a) The inducement or coercion of a child to engage in any unlawful or psychologically harmful sexual activity; (b) The use of children in commercial sexual exploitation; (c) The use of children in audio or visual images of child sexual abuse; and (d) Child prostitution, sexual slavery, sexual exploitation in travel and tourism, trafficking (within and between countries) and sale of children for sexual purposes and forced marriage’. Sexual abuse also ‘comprises any sexual activities imposed by an adult on a child, against which the child is entitled to protection by criminal law. Sexual activities are also considered as abuse when committed against a child by another child, if the child offender is significantly older than the child victim or uses power, threat or other means of pressure. Sexual activities between children are not considered as sexual abuse if the children are older than the age limit defined by the State party for consensual sexual activities’ (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child 2011: para. 25).
18. Data from 24 mostly high- and middle-income countries shows that the prevalence of sexual violence ranged from 8 per cent to 31 per cent in girls and 3 per cent to 17 per cent in boys under the age of 18 (World Health Organization 2020: 14).
19. The evidence presented in the technical brief suggests that learners with disabilities are disproportionately affected by school violence and bullying at all ages and in all learning settings, and that the vulnerability of students with disabilities to school violence and bullying is influenced by age, gender and type of disability (UNESCO 2021).
20. Primary data was collected from more than 69,000 victims of human trafficking of all ages and genders between 2002 and 2021, who escaped trafficking and registered with the IOM for protection and assistance (Digidiki et al. 2023).
21. The difference in the estimates of the proportion of child victims of trafficking could be explained by the time coverage of the IOM’s database from 2002 to 2021.
22. According to the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children, online child sexual exploitation and abuse involves the production and sharing of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) or any content that depicts sexually explicit activities involving a child. This may include photographs, videos and digital images which are then used for self-pleasure and/or shared more widely on the internet. It can involve child grooming by adult perpetrators, the live streaming of child sexual abuse, the generation of sexualized self-images by children themselves and/or the malicious or unintentional sharing of CSAM between peers, which may take the form of sexting, ‘sextortion’, sexual harassment or revenge porn (Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children 2023).
23. ‘Financial sextortion’ is a crime in which children are targeted to share explicit photographs and then threatened by offenders that they will share the images with the child’s friends, family or others unless they give the blackmailer money (National Center for Missing & Exploited Children 2022).
24. The most severe images are classified as Category A, which are defined as ‘Images involving penetrative sexual activity; images involving sexual activity with an animal, or sadism’ (Internet Watch Foundation 2023: 115).
25. Child-led research is a participatory process where children and young people lead their own research process, including designing questionnaires, collecting information, analysing results, and writing and disseminating a report (World Vision International 2020b: 8).
26. For example, 4 out of 5 children did not know that sexual intercourse without actual penetration is a form of sexual abuse, while 3 out of 5 children did not know that pressing a child to have sexual intercourse, even without penetration, is a form of sexual abuse. Furthermore, 7 out of 10 children did not know that forcing children to look at images and/or films with sexually explicit content is a form of sexual abuse. In relation to touching intimate body parts, 1 out of 2 children did not know that an abuser touching intimate parts of their own body in front of the child is a form of sexual abuse, 3 out of 5 children did not know that making a child pretend to touch an abuser’s intimate body parts is a form of sexual

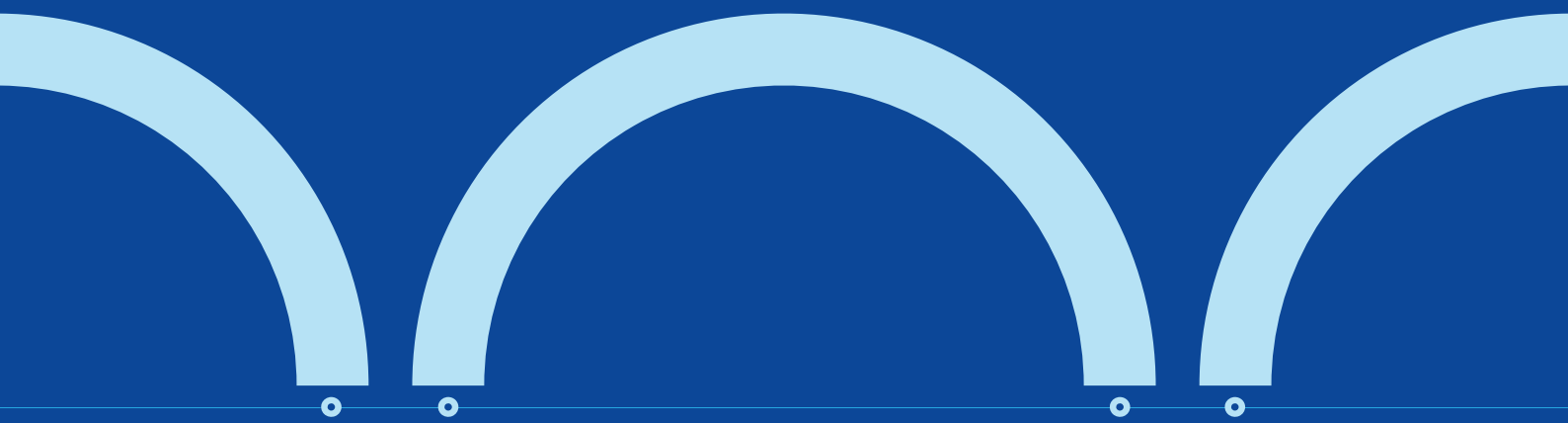


- abuse and 2 out of 5 children did not know that touching a child's intimate parts is a form of sexual abuse (World Vision International 2020b: 24).
27. The INSPIRE strategies are a collection of evidence-based recommendations on how to prevent and respond to violence against children. They cover implementation and enforcement of laws; norms and values; safe environments; parent and caregiver support; income and economic strengthening; response and support services; and education and life skills (World Health Organization et al. 2016).
  28. In particular, data should be disaggregated by income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migration status, disability, geographic location and other relevant characteristics.
  29. For more information see Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children, <<https://www.end-violence.org>>.
  30. The author thanks Daniela Barba for helpful comments and feedback, and Hannah Rigazzi for research assistance.
  31. Recommendations on disaggregation for each indicator are as follows: Indicator 16.3.1, sex, type of crime, ethnicity, migration background and citizenship; Indicator 16.3.2, age, sex and length of pre-trial detention; and Indicator 16.3.3, type of dispute resolution mechanism, sex, disability status, ethnicity, migration background and citizenship (UN DESA n.d.a).
  32. Indicator 16.3.2. Note that these figures are not disaggregated by gender or any other factor.
  33. Indicator 16.3.3. Note that these figures are not disaggregated by gender or any other factor.
  34. Data for 2022 is also available online but is far less complete.
  35. The United Nations uses statistical measures to accommodate one-year deviations from adherence to planned budgets, but not longer. In a world where technically simple but politically difficult tasks such as sovereign debt restructuring are expected to drag on for years through no fault of the debtor country, a single year's exception is clearly insufficient (Thomas, Do Rosario and Mfula 2023).
  36. Countries that report no budget data are scored as zero for the purposes of these figures and appear as dots along the x-axis.
  37. For more on the topic of the unreliability of public opinion surveys in dictatorships and otherwise authoritarian regimes see Morris (2023).
  38. UNESCO, Observatory of Killed Journalists, <<https://www.unesco.org/en/safety-journalists/observatory>>.
  39. Committee to Protect Journalists, Database of attacks on the press, <<https://cpj.org/data/>>.
  40. Based on the data available as of 31 August 2023 in the CPJ database of attacks on the press from 2015 to 2023. Note that no data is available on journalists imprisoned in 2023.
  41. Based on the data available in the CPJ's database related to imprisonment of journalists: total imprisonments between 2015 and 2022 and imprisonment in relation to fake news charges, <[https://cpj.org/data/?status=Imprisoned&start\\_year=2015&end\\_year=2022&group\\_by=year](https://cpj.org/data/?status=Imprisoned&start_year=2015&end_year=2022&group_by=year)>.
  42. See 'About FLIP', <<https://flip.org.co/en/sobre-la-flip/quienes-somos>>.
  43. Data collected from FLIP's monitoring tool on press freedom violations from 2015 to 2023, <<https://flip.org.co/cifras/agresiones-a-la-libertad-de-prensa>>.
  44. More information on FLIP's methodology and collection of press violations is available in Spanish at <[https://cms.flip.datasketch.co/uploads/FLIP\\_metodologia\\_documentacion\\_agresiones\\_2023\\_f4c6014636.pdf](https://cms.flip.datasketch.co/uploads/FLIP_metodologia_documentacion_agresiones_2023_f4c6014636.pdf)>.
  45. The home page for the RTI Rating is at <<https://www.rti-rating.org>>, while the Country Data page, showing the results of the assessment of laws, is at <<https://www.rti-rating.org/country-data/>>.
  46. The home page for the RTI Evaluation is at <<http://www.rti-evaluation.org>>, while the Methodology page, showing how the assessment works, is at <<https://www.rti-evaluation.org/methodology/>>.
  47. The methodology and a scoring sheet for recording results can be found, respectively, at <[http://foiadvocates.net/wp-content/uploads/SGD-16.10.2-measuring-implementation.18-09.rev\\_docx](http://foiadvocates.net/wp-content/uploads/SGD-16.10.2-measuring-implementation.18-09.rev_docx)> and <[http://foiadvocates.net/wp-content/uploads/SGD-16.10.2-Data-Sheet.score\\_rev-1.xlsx](http://foiadvocates.net/wp-content/uploads/SGD-16.10.2-Data-Sheet.score_rev-1.xlsx)>.
  48. The questionnaire is available at <<https://eyeonglobaltransparency.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Instruction-Manual-UNESCO-Survey-on-Public-Access-to-Information-English-1.pdf>>.

49. The author is in possession of this data.
50. See, for example, UN Statistics Division, Sustainable Development Goals Progress Chart 2022 Technical Note, which refers to success in achieving different Indicators as 'Substantial progress/on track', see p. 4 and following, <[https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2022/Progress\\_Chart\\_Technical\\_Note\\_2022.pdf](https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2022/Progress_Chart_Technical_Note_2022.pdf)>.
51. Available at: <<https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2023/progress-chart/Progress-Chart-2023.pdf>>.
52. Secretary-General's remarks to launch the Special Edition of the Sustainable Development Goals Progress Report, 25 April 2023, <<https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2023-04-25/secretary-generals-remarks-launch-the-special-edition-of-the-sustainable-development-goals-progress-report-delivered>>.
53. See UNSD, 'The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023: Special edition technical note for progress assessment', p. 1, <[https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/files/report/2023/Progress\\_Chart\\_Technical\\_Note\\_2023.pdf](https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/files/report/2023/Progress_Chart_Technical_Note_2023.pdf)>. This is based on available global trend data and analysis provided by custodian agencies, while 31 targets lack sufficient data points or additional analysis to be assessed.
54. See <<https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2023/progress-chart/>>.
55. It may be noted that this report diverges very significantly from the official SDG indicators. For example, for Target 16.5, it relies on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index rather than the actual indicators under this target, which are fundamentally different values.
56. The 2021 methodology can be found in UNESCO (2021).
57. UNESCO has reported that only 54 per cent of all countries which provided VNR reports between 2019 and 2021 reported on Indicator 16.10.2.



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