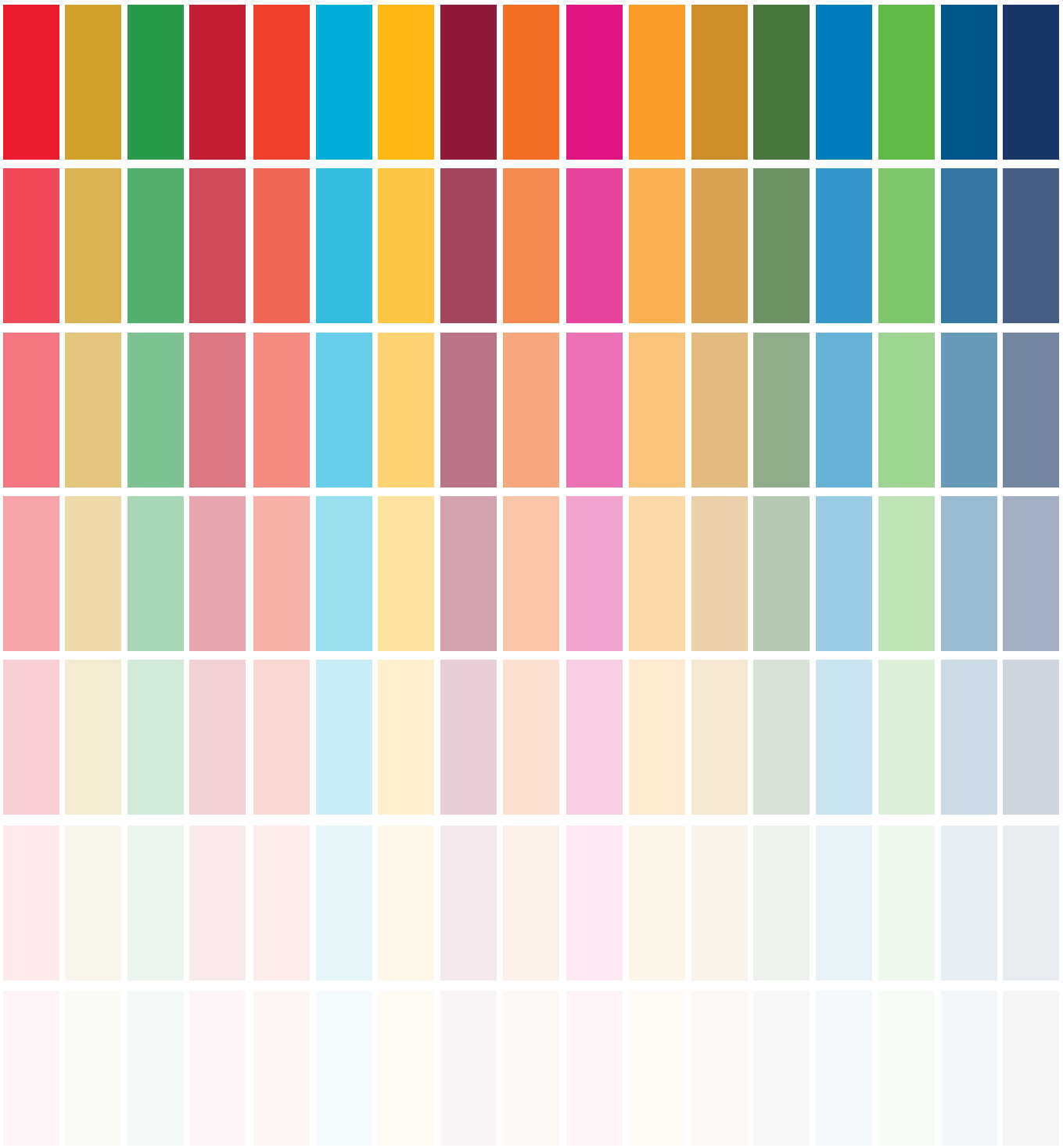
SDG 16, Gender Equality & Social Development: Pathways Towards Justice, Inclusion, and Sustainable Development

SDG 16 DATA INITIATIVE REPORT
2025





World Values Survey

Sustainable Development Solutions Network
A Global Initiative for the United Nations

Global Forum for Media Development

Centre for Law and Democracy

30 years International IDEA

TAP Network
Transparency, Accountability & Participation for 2030 Agenda

World Justice Project

Results for Development

small arms survey
25 years

Governance Action Hub

SDG16 data initiative

SDG 16, Gender Equality & Social Development: Pathways Towards Justice, Inclusion, and Sustainable Development

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More information about the SDG 16 Data Initiative can be found at www.sdg16.org.

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Acronyms & Abbreviations

CLD	Centre for Law and Democracy
CSO	Civil Society Organization
CPJ	Committee to Protect Journalists
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
EU SEE	European Union System for an Enabling Environment for Civil Society
FF4D	Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development
GFMD	Global Forum for Media Development
GSoD	Global State of Democracy
IDEA	International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
R4D	Results for Development
RTI	Right to Information
SAS	Small Arms Survey
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SDSN	Sustainable Development Solutions Network
TAP	Transparency, Accountability and Participation
UCMs	Unilateral Coercive Measures
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
WJP	World Justice Project
WVS	World Values Survey



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Introduction

Amanda Sourek, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance

In 1995 world leaders took a significant step towards advancing equality, social and economic development, and justice for all. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (United Nations 1996) and the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development (United Nations 1995) established the moral and institutional pillars that later formed the basis of the Millenium Development Goals and the current 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted in 2015. As the world approaches the final years of the SDGs, the commitments made 30 years ago remain central to the aspirations of today, including gender equality and women's empowerment, democracy, transparent governance, social justice and peace—all indispensable for people-centred development and enshrined in SDG 5 and SDG 16.

The 1995 Beijing Declaration identified gender equality as both a human right and a necessary condition for sustainable development. It highlighted 12 key areas of concern, including violence against women, armed conflicts, women's participation in decision making and the protection of women's human rights—elements that now form the basis of SDG 5, which aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls (UN DESA n.d.). Similarly, the Copenhagen Declaration acknowledged that social development depends on strong, democratic institutions and accountable governance. Its effort to promote the rule of law and advocate for societies that are stable, safe and just aligns with the core principles of SDG 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions. These two goals mirror the declarations' shared message—that sustainable development requires societies that are both inclusive and just.

Yet, progress since 2015 has been uneven. Gender equality indicators have improved modestly—such as a small rise in women's parliamentary representation globally from 23 per cent in 2015 to 27 per cent in 2025 (IPU n.d.)—but transformative change remains elusive: 102 countries have never had a woman serve as Head of State or Government, the gender pay gap remains significant, and protection from violence is still just a hope with 1 in 3 women experiencing physical or sexual violence within their lifetime (UN News 2024). Meanwhile, there has been alarming stagnation and even regression in many of the SDG 16 targets, with declines in rule of law, representative decisionmaking, institutional transparency and accountability, and fundamental freedoms (Silva-Leander and Sourek 2025). These trends threaten to erode the democratic, inclusive and social foundations envisioned in 1995 and reaffirmed in the 2030 Agenda.

Against this backdrop, this report examines the key role of gender equality, peace, justice and strong institutions in achieving social development and the 2030 Agenda, guided by the principles set out 30 years ago. The research also assesses progress and setbacks over the past decade, drawing from official and non-official data records. Chapter 1 demonstrates that non-official, civil society–generated data is indispensable for monitoring SDG implementation, countering misinformation and ensuring accountability—particularly for SDG 16.7 on inclusive decisionmaking. It showcases active monitoring initiatives, including the CIVICUS Monitor, the European Union System for an Enabling Environment for

Civil Society and the Global Aid Freeze Tracker. These efforts reveal widespread challenges and severe funding cuts—disproportionately affecting women-led organizations. The chapter calls on governments to: (a) reaffirm and protect civic space and digital rights; (b) deploy flexible, long-term funding, prioritizing grassroots and feminist organizations and their data work; and (c) institutionalize the use of non-official data through partnerships with national statistic offices and United Nations agencies.

Chapter 2 examines the growing divergence between global military expenditure and investments in sustainable development and its impact on the achievement and financing of the UN SDGs. It highlights how escalating geopolitical conflicts have driven unprecedented military spending globally, reaching USD 2.7 trillion in 2024. Simultaneously, official development assistance is declining, with cuts of up to 31 per cent projected by 2029, undermining global solidarity and SDG financing. This trade-off, alongside a surge in unilateral coercive measures (sanctions), is exacerbating global fragility, whereby declining resources are available for social development priorities such as poverty reduction, health, education and climate action, and multilateral cooperation is weakened. Crucially, this also erodes the institutional capacities and trust required for peace, justice and inclusive governance, thereby weakening progress on SDG 16. This chapter calls for urgent reform of the international financial architecture, the reallocation of military funds towards sustainable development, and the reinforcement of rules-based multilateralism and diplomacy to reverse the deepening crisis of peace and global governance.

Chapter 3 shows that, while progress has been made in legal protections for women's rights, persistent gender gaps in leadership and employment continue to undermine both gender equality and public trust in institutions. It identifies an equality–trust paradox, where citizens with stronger egalitarian views often report lower institutional trust—especially when reforms are symbolic, governance is weak, or expectations for fairness are unmet. For social development, this paradox means durable progress requires linking gender equality with credible governance reforms, ensuring that institutions not only adopt equality norms but also deliver accountability, integrity and inclusion to sustain legitimacy and build cohesive societies.

Chapter 4 highlights the multi-dimensional links between democracy and SDG 16 and that both continue to be strong drivers of inclusive and equitable social development and prosperity. The chapter emphasizes that democracies generally outperform non-democracies on key social development metrics, including gender equality, economic and social group equality, basic welfare and low corruption levels. Additionally, the chapter explores the importance of democratic quality, the rule of law as vital for social progress, democratic representation and participation, and the benefits of democratization for societies. The chapter also shows that any authoritarian regimes outperforming democracies on social development indicators are generally outliers. Despite these strong and positive correlations, the chapter also finds that democratic governance does not inherently or consistently ensure positive development outcomes, with empirical evidence showing that, when democratically elected governments struggle to provide social development for their citizens, trust in democracy declines.

Chapter 5 shows that, despite the proliferation of data and global alignment around the SDGs, governance reforms continue to yield uneven results, particularly for marginalized and minority groups. This chapter argues that truly inclusive governance requires a shift from output-oriented and quantitative indicators towards approaches that integrate local knowledge, qualitative insights and shared ownership by historically excluded populations.

Chapter 6 highlights that 2024 was a dire year for the SDG Indicator 16.10.1, with a record number of journalists killed, increases in the jailing of journalists, and ongoing online attacks, especially against female journalists.

The chapter shows that the media still has a long way to go in achieving gender equality itself but also that it can play a vital role in promoting gender equality, such as by supporting policy changes, influencing social values, and directing development efforts towards women's needs. In terms of SDG Indicator 16.10.2, the chapter demonstrates the weak progress made in adopting new right-to-information (RTI) laws since 2015, and provides a broad overview of data gaps regarding progress on implementation of those laws. The chapter demonstrates that the right to information can bring important equality benefits for women, enhancing their ability to make effective decisions and to access services, training, safety-net benefits, loans and housing, among other things. Despite this potential benefit, the available evidence, although somewhat limited and anecdotal, indicates that women are far less active users of the right to information than men, suggesting that more needs to be done to promote gender equality in terms of the use of RTI laws.

Chapter 7 asserts that equal access to justice for all is essential to achieving social development. Still, justice remains out of reach for an estimated 5.1 billion people globally (WJP 2019), 1.4 billion of whom have failed to obtain justice specifically due to their unmet civil or administrative justice needs (WJP 2023). With a focus on SDG Target 16.3, this chapter explores the interlinkages between access to justice, the rule of law and social development. Official and unofficial data indicate that the global community is falling short of making progress on SDG Target 16.3, with crime reporting remaining persistently low, especially for sexual violence and assault; rates of pre-trial detention remaining relatively high; and justice outcomes continuing to show stark disparities for people living in vulnerable situations. Furthermore, information gaps obscure the true scale of unmet justice needs while constraining progress and innovation. Without a people-centred, evidence-based and inclusive approach, efforts to promote justice and advance social development will remain fragmented and incomplete in the years to come.

This report provides valuable insights that underscore that realizing the 2030 Agenda depends on revitalizing the commitments made 30 years ago and which are now reflected in SDG 16 and SDG 5—to build societies grounded in equality, justice, democracy, social protection and human dignity.

About us

The SDG16 Data Initiative, coordinated by International IDEA, is a consortium of 18 partner organizations with a shared goal to open tracking of the global commitments made on SDG 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions. The Initiative provides non-official data on the implementation and monitoring of this vital goal, aiming to fill critical data gaps for SDG 16—one of the SDGs with most data gaps. To this end, we include both global and complementary indicators, presented with official and non-official data, while identifying potential challenges in data quality, availability, and coverage that need to be addressed.

Previous reports by the SDG16 Data Initiative have focused on the key role of non-official and more robust data in tracking progress towards the achievement of the SDGs. This report applies the Initiative's data to focus on the core interlinkages between SDG 16, SDG 5 and social development.

This report contains contributions by the following partners: the Centre for Law and Democracy; the Global Forum for Media Development; the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA); Results for Development; the Small Arms Survey; the Transparency, Accountability and Participation (TAP) Network; the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network; the World Justice Project; and the World Values Survey Association.

Chapter 1



Photo credit: Chaiyapruek2520, Getty Images Pro

Existential Threats to Civil Society and the Imperative for Supporting Non-official Data: A Crisis for SDG 16 and Beyond

Elena Marmo, Transparency, Accountability and Participation (TAP) Network

In 2025, 10 years after the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), progress towards achieving the SDGs has stagnated and even seen significant backsliding on many fronts, with only 18 per cent of SDG targets being fully on track (United Nations 2025). Further exacerbating challenges to progress, civil society around the world is confronting a convergence of compounding and existential threats. Threats around the closing of civic space and a rise in anti-democratic trends are stifling civic participation, eroding democratic institutions, impeding inclusive governance and weakening social development efforts on all fronts. Meanwhile, many civil society organizations, especially those from marginalized communities, face chronic underfunding and resource insecurity as a result of recent widespread aid cuts, further limiting their ability to respond to crises and community needs and to organize (Humentum 2025).

As global aid budgets shrink, military spending rises, and civic space contracts, the viability and vibrancy of civil society are increasingly at risk. These trends jeopardize progress on SDG 16's core targets—including accountable institutions, access to justice and inclusive participation—while weakening the broader social fabric needed for sustainable development and effective financing for development.

As such, through the lens of SDG 16.7 (responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision making), this chapter will highlight the importance of non-official data sources for effective monitoring and accountability while also outlining the grave threat that shrinking civic space, anti-democratic trends and funding cuts pose to this crucial data stream.

As the Transparency, Accountability and Participation (TAP) Network has highlighted in previous reports by the SDG16 Data Initiative, non-official data generated by civil society has a key role to play in monitoring and understanding progress (or lack thereof) on the 2030 Agenda (SDG16 Data Initiative 2023). Further, civil society actors are responding rapidly, both documenting and measuring the aforementioned challenges, utilizing quantitative and qualitative data to develop narratives and a diverse range of data sets to counter misinformation and disinformation.

This chapter will explore the challenges and threats—and how civil society actors are mobilizing and using data to counter them—and the urgent need for action by governments to reverse these trends and safeguard civil society actors, given their pivotal role in the data ecosystem as sources of non-official data.

As governments convene for the Second World Summit on Social Development in November 2025, the Copenhagen Declaration's commitment to 'a stable legal framework' and 'full respect for all human rights and

fundamental freedoms and the rule of law, access to justice, the elimination of all forms of discrimination, transparent and accountable governance' remains of critical relevance, and in tandem with SDG 16 is a key tool for accelerating action to protect human rights and the enabling environment in which civil society and their non-official data can contribute to social protection, social cohesion and the SDGs overall (United Nations 1995).

How are civil society actors measuring these threats?

In response to the challenges outlined above, civil society actors are coming together to track and monitor the impacts of existential threats. This chapter will explore several specific contributions in this regard, including Accountability Lab and Humentum's Global Aid Freeze Tracker to measure the impact on organizations across the world affected by the United States of America Government's aid freeze; the European Union System for an Enabling Environment for Civil Society (EU SEE), a consortium of international civil society organizations in 86 countries that utilizes an Early Warning and Monitoring Mechanism to document changes and shed light on critical trends in the enabling environment for civil society; and the CIVICUS Monitor, a database compiled by the global civil society alliance CIVICUS that combines a number of data sources to track and rate the openness of civic space. Their work not only demonstrates the urgent need for action to remedy and respond to these threats but also the ability of civil society actors to rapidly generate data, understand trends and support governments in tracking the realities of SDG implementation.

1. Setting the scene: Existential challenges facing civil society

The 2025 High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development provided a critical opportunity to take stock of many of the root causes of SDG inaction, including how existential threats to civil society impact the ambition, action and accountability for the SDGs overall. Civil society has been at the forefront of protecting public services and supporting marginalized communities even in the face of adversity; at present, shrinking civic space, anti-democratic trends, anti-rights narratives and downward funding trends all threaten the existence of civil society actors in many countries and contexts. Further, the existential threats facing civil society are deeply gendered. As civic space shrinks, funding dries up, and anti-rights narratives gain traction, feminist movements and women-led organizations are among the most impacted (Humentum 2025).

Shrinking space and anti-democratic trends

This growing crisis for civil society globally is marked by the intensification of persecution, legal repression and propaganda. Human rights defenders and activists are increasingly forced into exile due to hostile environments and the proliferation of 'foreign agent' laws. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) face smear campaigns, surveillance, funding restrictions and even forced closures (International Service for Human Rights 2025). In Russia, for example, pro-Kremlin actors manipulated Telegram channels to spread misinformation (Monckton 2025), and in Peru, civil society organizations faced targeted harassment and surveillance following their filing of a lawsuit against corporations fishing in protected waters (EU SEE 2025c). Digital repression and militarized control are on the rise, while structural institutions meant to ensure accountability—such as ombudsman offices—are being hollowed out, as in the recent proposal in Colombia (Human Rights Watch 2025).

These dynamics are not just national but global, as authoritarian tactics and narratives spread across borders.

Anti-rights and anti–civil society narratives

Additionally, civil society is being forced to justify its existence in the face of weaponized narratives around inefficiency, corruption and nationalism. In the United States, for example, cuts to USAID, the State Department and the US Institute of Peace have been justified by narratives that civil society actors are corrupt and inefficient (Civic Space Watch 2025).

There is a growing need to defend the very idea of civil society and human rights, particularly as funding for communications work is often among the first to be cut. The dominance of conservative narratives and state-controlled media, combined with disillusionment towards international institutions, further undermines public trust. Targeted attacks to undermine civil society range from government-ordered media blackouts in Kenya to arrests, and in some cases murder, of social media activists or journalists in Lesotho and Pakistan (EU SEE n.d.). However, legitimacy and engagement can be rebuilt through grassroots information campaigns, citizen journalism, algorithm hacking and reclaiming narratives based on dignity.

Gender equality advocates—particularly those working on issues such as sexual and reproductive health and rights, gender-based violence and LGBTQI+ inclusion—are increasingly targeted, with narratives being promoted to undermine their work (EU SEE 2025b). Attacks on these individuals mirror broader global trends of democratic backsliding and are often fuelled by patriarchal, nationalist and anti-rights ideologies that seek to roll back hard-won social protections and rights for sexual and reproductive health and the rights of LGBTQI+ persons (International Planned Parenthood Federation 2025).

Funding cuts and aid freezes

Civil society actors face major structural and political barriers in accessing funding, including competition caused by siloed funding approaches among governments, donors and civil society actors themselves. Shrinking space for CSOs due to restrictive government regulations such as foreign agent laws (Kirova 2024), increasing military budgets at the expense of development aid, and rigid, inflexible funding mechanisms (Jasho 2024) is further exacerbated by the spread of misinformation and negative narratives that undermine the legitimacy of civil society actors, particularly from far-right influences (Thompson 2023).

With less funding than ever before, CSOs face challenges in developing creative communications to counter these narratives and in finding time to scale up fundraising, all while continuing to defend their work and provide services to communities in need.

It is also important to note that the recent US Government funding cuts did not take place in isolation. Several major EU donors—Germany, France, the Netherlands, Sweden and Switzerland—have also reduced foreign aid spending, with plans to scale up defence spending (Pichon and Mácsai 2025).

Civil society actors are reporting a ripple effect, noting that, in a June 2025 study conducted by Pact (2025), there were significant reductions (66 per cent) or reductions (28 per cent) in terms of democracy, human rights and governance (DRG) projects in their countries generally. These funding cuts could result in further deteriorate democratic norms and enabling environments for civil society actors to deliver on development outcomes, including those related to social protection and social cohesion.

The potential impact of funding cuts was further articulated in International IDEA's 2025 Impact Study of Foreign Aid Cuts on Democracy, Rights and Governance, which surveyed organizations working in the DRG sector, finding that following funding cuts 'governments [were] intensifying their

restrictions on civil society and media underthe pretext of national security' (International IDEA 2025).

2. Civil society data and monitoring of existential threats

As previously mentioned, civil society actors are at the forefront of monitoring and documenting these threats and trends in an effort to better understand and demonstrate the profound impact they will have on both civil society at large and the collective pursuit to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

CIVICUS Monitor

The CIVICUS Monitor, launched in 2016, combines several independent sources of data to measure the openness of civic space in countries around the world. In describing its methodology, the CIVICUS Monitor notes that, 'because civic space is influenced by complex economic, social and political processes, the CIVICUS Monitor draws upon a number of quantitative and qualitative data for its analysis and ratings. The intention is to mitigate sampling errors and data bias and prevent over-reliance on any particular data set' (CIVICUS Monitor 2024a).

The CIVICUS Monitor's 2024 Annual Report, People Power Under Attack, rates civic space conditions based on data collected throughout the year from country-focused civil society organizations, regionally based research teams, international human rights indices and the CIVICUS Monitor's in-house experts. The following are among the report's findings:

- 7 in 10 people live in closed or repressed countries;
- of the over 50 rights violations monitored, the detention of protesters was the most prevalent violation in 2024, occurring in at least 76 countries; and
- almost 30 per cent of people worldwide are living in countries where civic space is completely closed.[1] (CIVICUS 2024)

While these figures are startling, they represent data collected throughout 2024, well before foreign aid cuts amplified the challenges described above. The figures tell the story of funding cuts weakening an already struggling and fragile civil society (Sesan 2025).

The CIVICUS Monitor also utilizes narrative stories to demonstrate both the resilience of civil society actors and the successes of actors in pushing back against shrinking civic space and existential threats (CIVICUS Monitor 2024b) Not only do initiatives like the CIVICUS Monitor demonstrate the crucial role of civil society actors in holding the line and protecting civic space in restrictive environments, but they also highlight breakthroughs and best practices that create the enabling environment needed to achieve the SDGs.

The EU System for an Enabling Environment for Civil Society

Similarly, the EU System for an Enabling Environment for Civil Society (EU SEE) implements an Early Warning and Monitoring Mechanism to document changes and shed light on critical trends in the enabling environment for civil society. Through alerts

[1] *The CIVICUS Monitor assesses the civic space conditions of 198 countries and territories and condenses this information into a score for each of them. Based on the score, a country can be rated as open, narrowed, obstructed, repressed or closed. These ratings are conceptualized as broad bands, where a variety of civic experiences can exist within any given rating category. The goal of ratings is to offer robust comparisons between countries over time; meanwhile, the scores offer more detailed information on the state of civil society freedoms within those broad categories. Civic space is defined as the respect in law and practice for the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression. Built into each of the three core freedoms is the understanding that a state has a duty to protect civil society and must go beyond simply refraining from interfering in citizens' enjoyment of their rights.*

indicating significant changes to the enabling environment and enabling environment snapshots that capture downward or upward trends in the enabling environment for civil society, EU SEE provides rapid monitoring and comprehensive reviews of challenges and opportunities for civil society actors. Further, in-depth country focus reports also compile and assess data on six key principles for the enabling environment: (a) respect and protection of fundamental freedoms; (b) a supportive legal and regulatory framework; (c) accessible and sustainable resources; (d) an open and responsive state; (e) a supportive public culture and discourses on civil society; and (f) access to a secure digital environment.[2]

The focus of EU SEE's reporting moves from simply documenting changes in the enabling environment for civil society to explore and understand why they may be happening, to unpacking similarities or trends in the deterioration of civic space so that actors—be they civil society organizations, donors or governments—can take action urgently. EU SEE recently highlighted similarities in the weaponization of foreign agent laws in Burundi, El Salvador and Indonesia while drawing connections between repression and policing experiences by media, labour and union protesters in Panama and Somalia (Sih and Abruzzini 2025).

Further, EU SEE has also explored the links between foreign aid cuts and shrinking civic freedoms and deterioration in enabling environments for civil society actors (EU SEE 2025a). Their analysis noted that 40 per cent of respondents were experiencing 25–50 per cent budget cuts—not only translating into service delivery interruptions, including social protection programming, but also weakening the civil society sector. EU SEE's report clearly articulates the risks of defunding programming on human rights, fundamental freedoms, democracy and governance, noting that in Indonesia 'USAID has played a critical role in promoting democratic governance and accountability […] . The loss of U.S. support could hinder efforts to combat corruption, promote human rights, and engage citizens in governance processes, potentially leading to democratic backsliding' (EU SEE 2025a).

Global Aid Freeze Tracker

To measure the impacts of the US Government's stop-work orders issued in early 2025, Accountability Lab and Humentum launched the Global Aid Freeze Tracker. This ongoing survey has been completed by 816 organizations thus far, with a May 2025 report highlighting the first 226 survey responses from organizations impacted by the stop-work orders (Global Aid Freeze Tracker 2025). The tracker measures these impacts in quantitative terms while also collecting qualitative narratives and stories of these impacts to paint a holistic picture of the devastatingly widespread life-or-death consequences of these funding cuts.

Of the surveyed organizations in the May 2025 report, 32.7 per cent were considering closing one or more offices, while 32.5 per cent noted that their entire organization was at risk of closure after the withdrawal of US Government support. Some 54.3 per cent of organizations had already laid off staff at the time of the survey, while another 14.6 per cent were actively considering layoffs. Further, the data shows that the sectors most impacted include health, gender and governance.

Not only does this survey data highlight the tremendous impact of US Government funding cuts and of the overreliance on a single donor, but it also demonstrates that, given the approved and anticipated cuts by European donors, it is likely that a growing number of civil society organizations—particularly in the Global South—will face significant financial and operational challenges in the year ahead. These effects will not only threaten civil society overall but will also lead to profound impacts on SDG implementation, monitoring and accountability.

[2] *To view country reports in more detail, visit https://eusee.hivos.org/countries/.*

3. Implications for SDG monitoring and accountability

The aforementioned citizen-generated reporting, as a form of non-official data, offers a crucial check and balance that can help to ensure that official data portrays a full picture of national and local contexts. In some contexts, non-official data can also help to verify or contest official reporting by national statistical offices to ensure their impartiality and consistency, particularly in cases where the government-led reporting process (such as in the case of the Voluntary National Reviews or Universal Periodic Reviews) has become politicized. The inclusion of non-official data would support the legitimacy of collective data and paint a truly accurate picture of progress towards achieving the SDGs. Initiatives such as the Collaborative on Citizen Data is a positive example in this regard, as it promotes collaboration between national statistical offices and civil society on citizen data initiatives to combine official statistical rigour with grassroots perspectives, producing more inclusive, timely and relevant data for policymaking (United Nations Statistics Division n.d.).

Especially when it comes to issues such as access to justice, the rule of law or human rights, governments should not be given sole responsibility for monitoring and reporting on their performance. Corruption might be present or civil society perspectives on the effectiveness of service delivery might be vastly different from government perspectives. The use of a balanced range of monitoring sources is important for building public trust in and the credibility of the SDGs and the way they are monitored. Further, it is critical that civil society actors are resourced and trained so that their data is of high quality and therefore usable for national statistical offices. Civil society organizations may require capacity-building assistance to ensure that their data collection is credible, accurate, transparent, timely and free of bias.

As such, with funding cuts and shrinking civic space, the ability of civil society to engage in data collection and reporting is under threat. International IDEA's recent Impact Study of Foreign Aid Cuts on Global Democracy, Rights and Governance found that awards of USD 310 million from USAID for data collection and data analysis were cut, USD 27 million of which had already been committed (International IDEA 2025).

Where local and grassroots organizations can complement official sources of data by filling gaps and offering a more complex and accurate picture of progress at all levels, it can also ensure that the perspectives and experiences of communities or population groups that might be overlooked by official data collection practices are documented and taken into account in SDG processes (Villalona et al. 2021). In some cases, non-official data has been collected for longer than national statistical offices have been tracking the SDGs, which provides a useful long-term picture of progress and change. However, funding cuts may jeopardize organizations' ability to continue data collection and, in some cases, service delivery, potentially undermining trust in civil society actors and their access to marginalized communities.

Without non-official data sources, the reporting landscape risks painting a picture of SDG progress that is incomplete and lacks nuance, in particular as it relates to the lived realities of people at the local level. The non-official data sources outlined in this chapter present aggregated trends and reporting while also managing to capture disaggregated quantitative data and qualitative stories that can help to counter harmful narratives and trends that undermine the achievement of the SDGs.

4. Opportunities for non-official data and civil society

The data community is faced with a clear opportunity to embrace non-official data sources and, in the process, to call on governments to protect and expand civic space, democratic freedoms and the enabling environment for civil society actors to thrive. Not only can civil society actors play an important role in reporting on SDG progress, but without a robust civil society functioning as a development partner, no government will be able to achieve the SDGs. Further, social development requires a robust civil society sector, underpinned by the rule of law, fundamental freedoms and human rights to ensure social cohesion and social protection. Civil society actors engaging in data collection are an essential part of these efforts.

In order to sustain and support non-official data and civil society as a data partner, it is crucial that governments take the following three actions:

1. Reaffirm global commitments to civic space and an enabling environment for civil society actors. Governments must ensure enabling environments for civil society actors, including legal protections, digital rights and civic freedoms.
2. Deploy sustainable and flexible funding. Governments should support long-term core funding, especially for grassroots and feminist movements, including with particular attention to data collection and analysis initiatives conducted by civil society, such as those mentioned in this chapter.
3. Institutionally recognize the role of non-official data. Governments should strengthen the validation, uptake and use of non-official data in SDG monitoring at the national and global levels and encourage partnerships between national statistical offices, UN agencies and civil society.

Chapter 2



Photo credit: Hugo Magalhaes, Pexels

The Surge in Military Spending, Sanctions, and the Erosion of Financing for Peace and Social Development

Guilherme Iablonovski and Eduardo Weirich, UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network

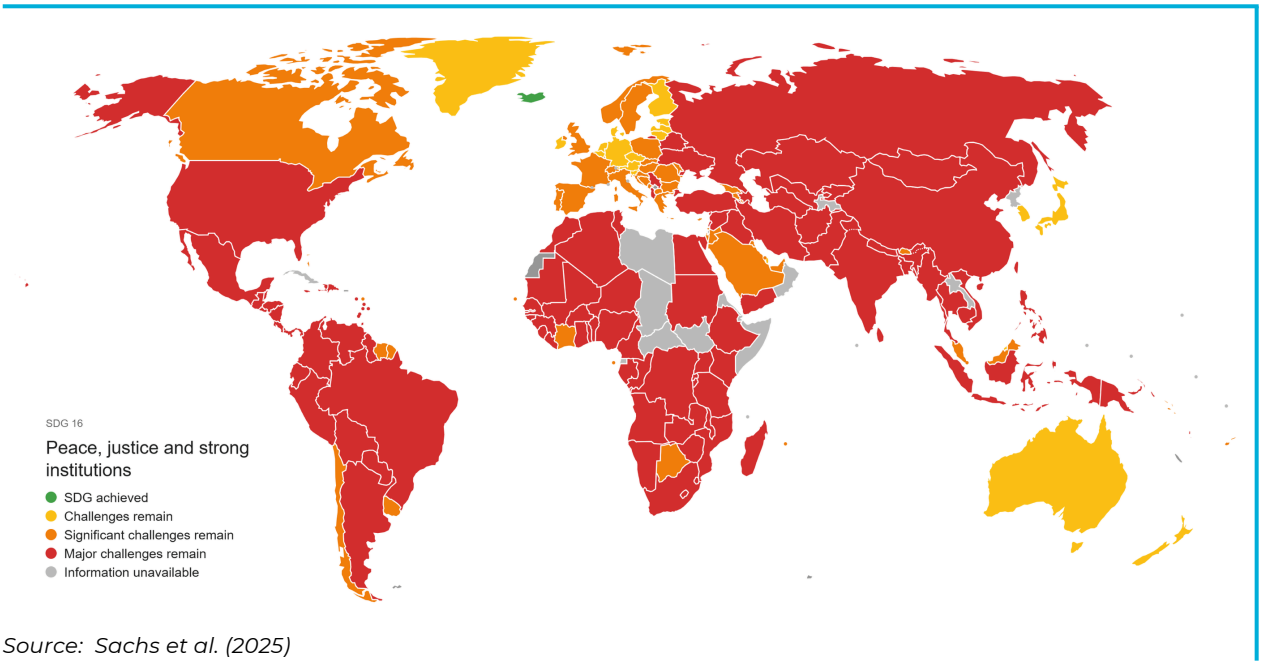
Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions) focuses on promoting peaceful and inclusive societies, ensuring access to justice for all, and establishing effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels (United Nations General Assembly 2015). It is one of 17 SDGs, which form a roadmap to address global challenges, referred to as the 2030 Agenda, adopted by all UN member states in 2015.

According to the 2025 Sustainable Development Report, SDG 16 is particularly off track, with no or very limited progress in countries around the world since 2015. Only one country, Iceland, has to date achieved SDG 16. The rest of the world faces either major or significant challenges in implementing this goal; most countries are either stagnating or backsliding, in particular on two SDG 16 targets: the Press Freedom Index and the Corruption Perception Index (Sachs et al. 2025).

Both new and ongoing violent conflicts around the world are derailing the global path to peace and the achievement of Goal 16. Setbacks in achieving SDG 16 also trigger ripple effects across all the SDGs, undermining overall progress towards the achievement of the 2030 Agenda.

The 1945 UN Charter states that all UN member states must 'practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbours' and 'unite strength to maintain international peace and security' (United Nations 1945). In 2024, however, the number of armed conflicts worldwide reached an all-time high (UCDP 2025). The year 2022 witnessed the first increase (50 per cent) in conflict-related civilian deaths since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda (UN DESA 2023). Between 2023 and 2024, conflict-related lethal violence climbed further to over 48,000 fatalities, predominantly civilians (UN OHCHR 2025). This surge is being driven mainly by intensifying violence in various parts of the world, including Gaza, Sudan and Ukraine (UN OHCHR 2025). The Russian invasion of Ukraine has led to over a million military and civilian casualties and the displacement of over 14 million people since 2022, marking one of the most significant refugee crises in recent history (UNHCR 2024). Internal conflicts have also escalated in countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Myanmar and Sudan, displacing a record 120 million people around the world (UNHCR 2024).

Figure 2.1. SDG 16 global implementation status, by country



Source: Sachs et al. (2025)

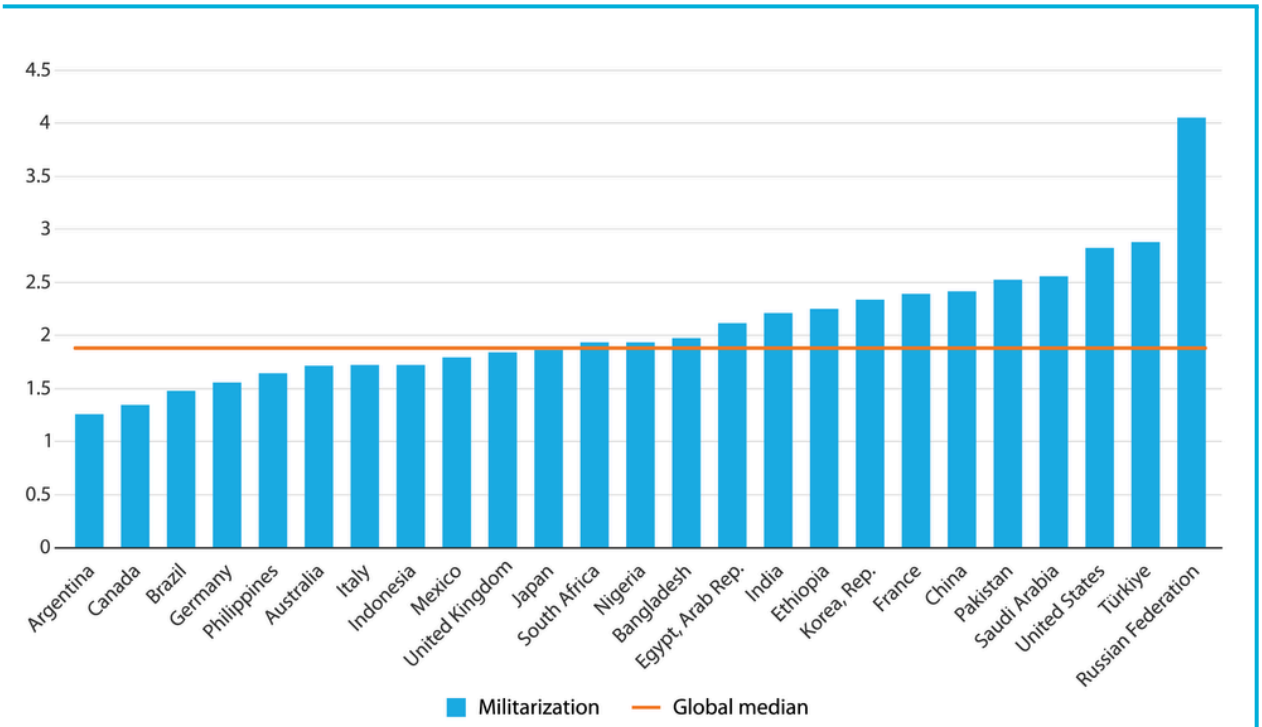
The slow progress on SDG 16, particularly on its first target, reducing violence (16.1), has also been marked by a significant shift in the worldwide landscape of public spending, with increases in military expenditure alongside a reduction in foreign aid. Additionally, a sharp rise in unilateral sanctions has been observed since 2021, adding yet another obstacle to trust building, multilateralism and international cooperation (Sachs et al. 2025).

Participation in conflicts and militarization

The 2025 Sustainable Development Report (Sachs et al. 2025) includes an indicator assessing countries' participation in conflicts and militarization. This indicator relies on data from the 2024 Global Peace Index, compiled by the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP 2024). It is calculated as the average of a country's score in the Global Peace Index's Militarization domain and in two external dimensions of the Ongoing Conflict domain - (a) relations with neighbouring countries and (c) external conflicts (number of conflicts and resulting mortality).

The Militarization domain includes comparable data on military expenditure as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP), the number of armed services personnel per capita, and financial contributions to UN peacekeeping missions. Among G20 and other large countries, Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Germany, Indonesia, Italy, Mexico, and the Philippines perform best on this indicator (scoring below the global median). By contrast, the Russian Federation performs the worst globally (Figure 2.2).

Figure 2.2. Global Peace Index: Militarization and external conflicts (G20 and other large countries), 2024



Note: From 1 (best, less militarized) to 5 (worst, more militarized). The global median is 1.86, calculated based on IEP (2024). Source: J. D. Sachs, G. Lafortune, G. Fuller and G. Iablonovski, Financing Sustainable Development to 2030 and Mid-Century: Sustainable Development Report 2025 (Dublin: Dublin University Press, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.25546/111909>.

Unilateral coercive measures as a factor undermining international relations and multilateralism

Unilateral coercive measures (UCMs), commonly referred to as sanctions, are measures imposed by one or more countries without the authorization of the UN Security Council. UCMs are often intended to combat terrorism, prevent war, drive policy change or address human rights violations. Since UCMs may lead to social problems and raise humanitarian concerns in the targeted countries in the long term, their use is considered contrary to international law, international humanitarian law, the UN Charter, and the norms and principles governing peaceful relations among countries (UN OHCHR 2025). Additionally, UCMs imposed by countries issuing major reservice currencies essentially cut off poorer countries from international capital access (Sachs et al. 2025).

As UCMs often bypass the UN Security Council and erode trust in international governance frameworks, SDG Targets 16.3 (rule of law at the national and international levels, equal access to justice) and 16.6 (effective, accountable and transparent institutions) are weakened, with a direct effect on perceived legal legitimacy.

The 2030 Agenda also stipulates that 'States are strongly urged to refrain from promulgating and applying any unilateral economic, financial or trade measures not in accordance with international law and the Charter of the United Nations that impede the full achievement of economic and social development, particularly in developing countries' (United Nations 2015: §30).

All forms of sanctions - economic measures (trade and finance restrictions), travel bans, arms and military measures, but also embargoes - are technically illegal unless they

are countermeasures or authorized by the UN (Sachs et al. 2025). Nonetheless, sanctions can be a vital non-military tool for upholding the rule of law and human rights by holding violators accountable; however, they risk unintended humanitarian costs, may entrench authoritarian regimes and can often harm ordinary citizens more than political elites (Hufbauer et al., 2008).

A sharp increase in sanctions has been observed in recent years. Between 1949 and 2023, a total of 2,458 sanctions were imposed (GSDB 2025). Figure 2.3 illustrates the recent global spike in all types of sanctions (trade, arms, military, financial, travel), particularly financial, since 2020. Between 2018 and 2020, for instance, an average of 52 sanctions were registered per year worldwide, while the numbers rose fourfold between 2021 and 2023, to an average of 209, mainly driven by escalating geopolitical tensions around the world and, in particular, new sanctions on Russia (Felbermayr et al. 2025).

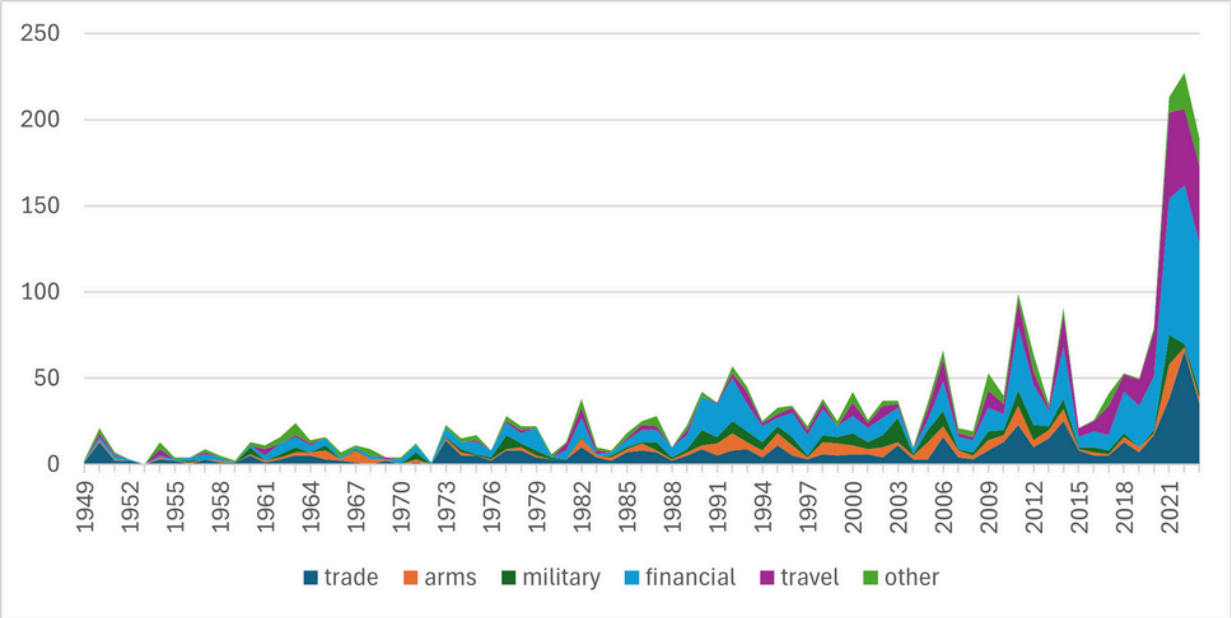
Between 2021 and 2023 sanctions were imposed for a range of objectives and were distributed relatively evenly across combating terrorism (15.5 per cent), addressing democracy violations (21.0 per cent), responding to human rights violations (25.7 per cent), promoting policy change (23.6 per cent) and ending wars (22.2 per cent) (GSDB 2025).

Historically, arms and military sanctions have been used infrequently, even during critical moments of increased geopolitical tensions, such as the Cold War and the Gulf Wars. In 2021, however, the use of these kinds of sanctions spiked, with the imposition of 19 arms sanctions and 16 military sanctions, mainly applied by the United Kingdom, but these figures receded again in 2022 (two arms and two military sanctions) and 2023 (three arms and four military sanctions) (GSDB 2025).

Arms and military sanctions are not the primary types of UCMs, representing, since 1949, 11 per cent and 10 per cent of all kinds of sanctions, respectively.

Overall, only a small number of countries frequently use UCMs as a policy tool, with the USA leading by a wide margin. Arms and military sanctions account for 6.2 per cent and 10.6 per cent of all US sanctions, while the most

Figure 2.3. **UCMs (completed and ongoing) worldwide by type and starting year (1949–2023)**



Source: Compiled by the authors, based on data from the Global Sanctions Data Base (https://www.globalsanctionsdatabase.com/). UN Security Council sanctions are excluded.

common type of US sanctions are financial (40.9 per cent). The USA is followed by the European Union (Table 2.1). The Russian–Ukrainian war has played a role in the recent spike in sanctions, with 33 sanctions levelled against Russia in 2022 and 2023. Consequently, Russia has received more sanctions (48) than any other country, not even counting those that were imposed before the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

The 2025 Sustainable Development Report provides an indicator on the use of sanctions adopted unilaterally from 1950 to 2021 that remained in place as of 2022 or later (Sachs et al. 2025). The data on UCMs are sourced from the Global Sanctions Database (GSDB, 2025) , which provides information on sanctions imposed against countries, including the first and last year the sanctions were imposed (Felbermayr et al. 2020; Drexel University Center for Global Policy Analysis, Hochschule Konstanz and WIFO n.d.). Sanction regimes adopted unilaterally by regional organizations, such as the EU or the League of Arab States, are attributed to their individual member states.

Table 2.1. Total use of UCMs (1949–2023)

Top 10 sanction-applying countries			Top 10 sanctioned countries		
Country or group	**Sanctions applied**	**Sanctions received**	**Country**	**Sanctions applied**	**Sanctions received**
USA	589	12	Russia	42	48
EU	160	7	China	17	39
UK	100	7	Myanmar	0	37
Canada	67	11	Belarus	1	35
Norway	52	3	North Korea	0	31
Japan	43	2	Cambodia	2	30
Russia	42	48	Pakistan	0	30
Australia	40	4	South Africa	6	29
Liechtenstein	40	1	Fiji	0	28
Albania	39	8	Libya	3	25

Note: Sanctions adopted by regional organizations, such as the EU, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the League of Arab States, have been attributed to each member state of those organizations. The global median is two.

Source: Compiled by the authors based on the Global Sanctions Data Base (https://www.globalsanctionsdatabase.com/).

Table 2,2 presents ongoing UCMs, taking into account geographical[1] and income-based country groups[2] (Sachs et al. 2025). Overall, North America has a higher average in terms of the number of sanctions imposed due to the USA's 171 total ongoing sanctions, followed by Eastern and Western Europe, primarily due to the EU's sanctions. The Asian and Latin American regions have the lowest average UCM score. Overall, there are 100 countries with zero ongoing sanctions. The average values across income groups reveal that high-income countries are the primary users of UCMs, with an average of 27.37 sanctions, up to 15 times higher than other income groups. Lower-middle-income countries display the lowest average (1.84), followed closely by low-income countries, whose average (3.16) was slightly

Table 2.2. Average number of UCMs by region and income group (ongoing imposed sanctions), 1949–2021

Region	**UCM (average)**
North America	95.5
Western Europe	36.13
Eastern Europe and Central Asia	23.79
Middle East and North Africa	3.19
Sub-Saharan Africa	3.04
East Asia and the Pacific	0.97
South Asia	0.5
Latin America and the Caribbean	0.12
Income category	**UCM (average)**
High-income	27.37
Upper-middle-income	3.52
Lower-middle-income	1.84
Low-income	3.16

Note: The UCM score considers all sanction acts by countries in the period 1950–2021 that were still in place in 2022 (Sachs et al. 2025); the average is the arithmetic mean of the number of applied sanctions.

Source: Compiled by the authors, based on data from J. D. Sachs, G. Lafortune, G. Fuller, and G. Iablonovski, Financing Sustainable Development to 2030 and Mid-Century: Sustainable Development Report 2025 (Dublin: Dublin University Press, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.25546/111909>; and Drexel University Center for Global Policy Analysis, Hochschule Konstanz and Österreichisches Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung (WIFO), Global Sanctions Data Base, [n.d.], <https://www.globalsanctionsdatabase.com/>, accessed 10 September 2025.

[1] *Classification based on UNICEF (2023).*
[2] *Classification based on Metreau, Young and Eapen (2025).*

elevated by some West African countries. The upper-middle-income group (3.52 average) includes a mix of countries with zero UCMs (24 out of 59 countries) and a small number of countries that drive the average up, such as Albania (21 sanctions) and Montenegro (19 sanctions).

While the use of sanctions has expanded in recent years, their effectiveness in achieving the intended outcomes remains uneven. The use of UCMs can put political and economic pressure on countries in an effort to constrain aggression and obtain leverage for negotiations, but sanctions rarely succeed alone, and they are not a standalone solution to geopolitical conflicts. Furthermore, they may have long-lasting negative consequences for global stability, such as violations of international law, the erosion of the UN's authority, the polarization of the global order with the formation of blocs and adverse humanitarian impacts. These impacts can reduce trust in the universality of rules and institutions and undermine global cooperation and multilateralism in the long term (Douhan 2023).

Taking Russia—the most heavily sanctioned country in the world—as a recent example, the results so far have been mixed. While sanctions have weakened Russia's economic potential and war-making capacity, they have not led to the end of the war. Furthermore, sanctions have catalysed stronger geopolitical fragmentation in the world (Felbermayr et al. 2025).

In conclusion, the sharp rise in sanctions over the past decade highlights changing dynamics in international relations and multilateralism, where economic and military measures are playing a larger role in state practices, despite being condemned by the UN. It should also be noted that many high-income countries, which are most active in applying UCMs, are also among those increasing their military spending and cutting back on foreign aid, which further impedes progress on sustainable development and peace.

A surge in the discrepancy between foreign aid and defence spending

Military spending is rising in every region of the world, with more than 100 countries having increased their military spending in 2024. Global military expenditure reached USD 2.7 trillion in 2024, marking a 9.4 per cent increase in real terms from 2023 - the steepest year-on-year rise since at least the end of the Cold War (SIPRI, 2025). Countries in North America accounted for 37 per cent of global military spending in 2024, followed by countries in Europe (26 per cent), Asia and Oceania (23 per cent), the Middle East (9.0 per cent), South America (1.9 per cent) and Africa (1.9 per cent). Since the adoption of the SDGs in 2015, US military spending has increased by 19 per cent; China's, by 59 per cent; India's, by 42 per cent; and Russia's military expenditure has doubled (SIPRI, 2025).

While absolute spending is led mainly by the USA, China, Russia, Germany and India, rapid growth in defence spending has been observed in Europe and the Middle East, driven by escalating geopolitical tensions and ongoing conflicts, such as the Russia–Ukraine war and the Israel–Gaza conflict (SIPRI, 2025).

Total military spending by members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) amounted to USD 1.5 trillion in 2024, representing 55 per cent of global military expenditure. In 2024 18 out of 32 NATO members met the 2 per cent GDP defence investment target, up from 11 in 2023 (Liang et al. 2025). In 2025 NATO members endorsed a new national spending benchmark of 5 per cent of GDP to be invested annually in defence by 2035 (Tian, Scarazzato and Ricard 2025). This decision sends a strong political signal of unity and commitment among allies to collectively share the costs of defence and security. The downside is that it encourages other countries to expand their own military capabilities. Therefore, the growth in militarization around the world in the coming years is unlikely to stop, potentially fuelling the arms race and undermining efforts towards trust building and dialogue.

Growing military spending will also come at the expense of education, healthcare, housing, social welfare and climate action, thus impeding social development and overall SDG progress in many parts of the world. A recent analysis of the impact of military spending on government budgets demonstrates that countries allocating more than 3 per cent of their GDP to defence often experience fiscal deficits exceeding 2 per cent of GDP (Abbasov 2025). Moreover, a 1 per cent increase in military spending relative to GDP can be associated with a 0.1–0.3 per cent rise in the debt-to-GDP ratio over the medium term (OECD 2020). In addition, there is the crowding-out effect, whereby higher defence budgets divert resources from public investments in education, healthcare and infrastructure. Abbasov (2025) underscores the trade-offs between national security imperatives and fiscal sustainability.

Several UN resolutions and reports also highlight the link between disarmament and development (Sachs, Lafortune and Fuller 2024). The 10th special session on disarmament's final document, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1978, underlined the 'close relationship between disarmament and development', adding that 'resources released as a result of the implementation of disarmament measures should be devoted to the economic and social development of all nations (United Nations General Assembly 1978). The 1987 International Conference on the Relationship between Disarmament and Development led to the adoption of an action plan that included commitments to reduce military spending and redirect the resources saved towards development (United Nations 1987).

In parallel to increases in military spending, significant cuts are being made by several countries to their foreign aid budgets. Developed countries are expected to dedicate 0.7 per cent of their gross national income to Official Development Assistance (ODA), as established in a 1970 UN resolution and recommitted through the 2030 Agenda in 2015 (under SDG 17.2 [implement all development assistance commitments]). Nonetheless, since early 2024, at least nine Development Assistance Committee (DAC)[3] countries, plus the EU, have announced cuts to their bilateral aid budgets, contributing to a 7.1 per cent drop in ODA in real terms in 2024 and projected additional declines of up to 17.0 per cent in 2025 (Sachs et al. 2025). Based on the announced cuts, ODA volumes are expected to shrink by approximately 26–31 per cent from 2024 to 2029 (Pudussery and Gulrajani 2025).

Figure 2.4 shows that in 2024 only four DAC member countries (Denmark, Luxembourg, Norway and Sweden) met the long-standing ODA target of 0.7 per cent of gross national income (excluding in-donor refugee costs), while NATO's military spending guideline of 2 per cent of GDP was met or exceeded by 23 out of the 32 DAC members at the time. Additionally, most of the 28 members of both NATO and the DAC that met the NATO defence target in 2024 did not meet the ODA target in the same year.

While the number of DAC members that had achieved the target of earmarking 0.7 per cent of gross national income for ODA remained stable from 2015 to 2024 (only four members in both years), the number of DAC members that reached the military expenditure target almost quadrupled over the same period—from 6 in 2015 to 23 in 2024. Figure 2.5 compares the evolution of spending on ODA and military across 31 individual DAC member countries. In-donor refugee costs are excluded, as they are made within donor countries to cover the first-year costs of sustaining refugees from developing countries arriving in their country and can be reported as ODA.[4] Overall, DAC members spent almost nine times more on their respective militaries than on ODA in 2024.

[3] The OECD's Development Assistance Committee is an intergovernmental body that oversees global public spending targets for aid spending. In March 2025 its membership expanded from 32 to 33 high-income country members and the EU.

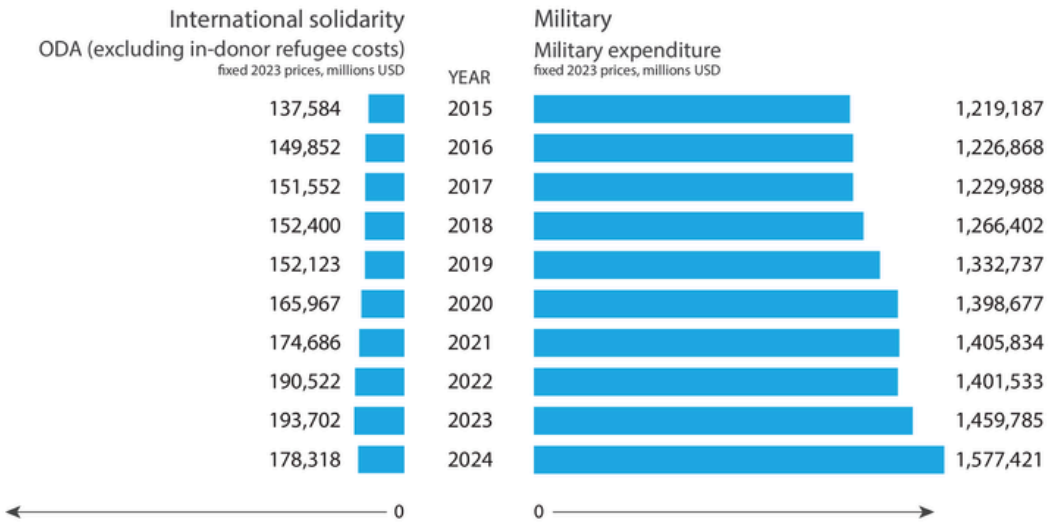
[4] The DAC Civil Society Reference Group expressed concerns about the underlying trends reflected in the ODA figures and in particular about how they believe donors are inflating their ODA figures via the payment of in-donor refugee costs, which 'constitutes a payment by donors to themselves' (OECD, 2025b).

Figure 2.4. Number of DAC members that achieved internationally agreed targets on international solidarity versus military expenditure since the adoption of the SDGs, 2015–2024



Note: ODA excludes in-donor refugee costs. All DAC members except the EU are covered as a bloc.

Figure 2.5. Total ODA spending versus military spending in DAC members (31) since the adoption of the SDGs, 2015–2024, USD millions



Note: ODA excludes in-donor refugee costs. All DAC members are covered, while the EU as a bloc is excluded.
Source: Compiled by the authors, based on data by OECD/DAC (OECD, n.d.) and SIPRI (2025).

In 2024 the 32[5] DAC members (including the EU) spent USD 207.6 billion on ODA, or 0.33 per cent of their combined gross national income (OECD 2025b). When excluding in-donor refugee costs, the total falls to USD 178.3 billion. In contrast, the same 31 DAC member countries spent more than USD 1.5 trillion for military purposes, representing over 50 per cent of the global military budget in 2024. With the new NATO members' commitment to reach 5 per cent of GDP by 2035, global military spending is unlikely to slow down in the near future.

Globally, military budgets increased by 37 per cent between 2015 and 2024 (SIPRI, 2025). During the same period, ODA grew at a similar rate but declined by 7.1 per cent in real terms in 2024 (OECD 2025a), while military expenditure rose by 8.0 per cent among the same group of countries from 2023 to 2024. In 2025, several traditional donor countries announced additional reductions in their aid budgets, with estimates showing a nearly 20.0 per cent drop in ODA (UNCTAD 2025).

In addition to total ODA cuts, the fraction of total ODA dedicated to peace is also decreasing. In 2021 DAC members' spending on peace fell to 9.6 per cent of total ODA—a 15-year low. Furthermore, global investment in conflict prevention has also decreased since 2019. ODA spending on conflict prevention in fragile contexts was at a five-year low in 2021, amounting to only 3.8 per cent of DAC members' total ODA for such contexts (OECD 2023).

Consequences for SDG financing and achievement

Given that governments operate with limited resources and are often under fiscal pressure, an increase in one area of expenditure, such as military spending, frequently necessitates difficult trade-offs and reductions in other budget areas (Welch and Laub 2025).

Soaring military spending has been explicitly linked to massive reductions in ODA by some countries. For instance, the UK announced a cut to its development budgets, bringing ODA as a percentage of gross national income from 0.5 per cent to 0.3 per cent, to boost defence spending (Welch and Laub 2025). This conflicting trend of an increase in military spending and a reduction in ODA further impedes the mobilization of the funding required to achieve the SDGs, as redirecting international aid can negatively affect social protection for the most vulnerable groups and countries. This diversion of resources is particularly damaging, as the SDGs are fundamentally an investment agenda. Securing more sustainable, inclusive social development also represents a long-term investment in stability and collective security.

According to estimates, the SDG financing gap totalled USD 4.0 trillion in 2022–2023 and is projected to increase to USD 6.4 trillion by 2030 if significant measures are not implemented (OECD 2025a).

The UN under-secretary-general and high representative for disarmament Affairs stated that:

> the cost to achieve quality universal primary and early secondary education for all (Goal 4) would barely exceed 3 per cent of global annual military spending, while eliminating extreme poverty and hunger (Goals 1 and 2) would amount to only about 13 per cent of annual military spending. Reinvesting 5 percent of global military spending would also exceed the initial annual costs of adapting to climate change in developing countries (Goal 13). So little could do so much. (UNODA 2020).

In 2024, through the adoption of the Pact for the Future, UN member states raised concerns about the potential impact that the global increase in military spending could have on sustainable development (United Nations 2024).

[5] *At the time of publication, the DAC had 33 members, with Latvia joining in March 2025.*

The global trend of increasing military expenditure at the expense of ODA poses a particular risk for climate action (Kinney et al. 2025). Every day, military activity is responsible for around 5.5 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions, meaning that if the world's militaries were a country, they would be the fourth-largest emitter in the world. Additionally, military activity deprives vulnerable nations of crucial financial support for climate adaptation and mitigation. One of the targets of SDG 13 (urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts) requires developed countries to back upthe climate finance commitments made to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. Still, a new climate finance target of USD 1 trillion was rejected at the 2024 UN Climate Change Conference (COP29). A USD 300 billion budget was agreed upon instead, which evidences the insufficiency of funding and bolder commitments (Kinney et al. 2025).

The global inability to address climate risks also undermines the international community's ability to prevent conflict and sustain peace around the world, thus achieving SDG 16. The UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs positions climate change, with its cascading effects, as a potential threat multiplier of violence and insecurity (UN DPPA 2022). Climate-related changes in transboundary water resources, food security, sea levels, flood risks and migration patterns are already impacting the stability of many countries (Day and Caus 2020).

For millions of people, ODA remains an important source of financing for climate adaptation, education, healthcare, food security, emergency relief and conflict prevention (WHO 2025). Reduced ODA will have far-reaching implications for institutional capacities to deliver essential public services in many low-income and fragile states, thus contributing to human insecurity and state fragility.

Civil society and non-governmental organizations—often at the forefront of providing basic services, humanitarian work and safeguarding the public good—already face the direct consequences of aid suspensions, including job losses, service disruptions and scaled-down operations (Gichuki 2025). Aid suspensions can in turn contribute to the risk of (more) conflict and instability, perpetuating a vicious cycle and impeding global efforts towards more sustainable social development. Therefore, significant cuts to ODA also have direct implications for achieving SDG 16.

Creating the foundation for sustainable, peaceful and inclusive social development through reform of the global financial architecture and reinforced diplomacy

While ODA is a precious resource for sustainable development in developing countries, it alone cannot fill the estimated SDG financing gap of around USD 1 trillion to USD 4 trillion per year (Sachs et al. 2023). Without significant reforms, this gap is expected to widen to USD 6.4 trillion by 2030 (OECD, 2025a). The effectiveness of ODA is further diluted as substantial portions are increasingly allocated to in-donor country refugee costs and aid to specific large-scale crises rather than core long-term development objectives (Sachs et al. 2025).

With less than 20 per cent of SDG targets on track, a fundamental shift in global spending priorities and financial systems is urgently required.Sachs et al. (2023) highlight that the current global financial architecture fails to channel global savings at the necessary pace and scale to fund SDG investments, particularly in poor and vulnerable countries. This failure will have detrimental impacts on achieving social development outcomes, as it has led to deep, chronic and crippling underinvestment, exacerbated by a financing shortfall in developing countries, a direct consequence of inflation and rising interest rates following global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Developing countries are subjected to higher borrowing costs and

liquidity risks due to inherent inefficiencies in international financial markets. Sovereign borrowers in developing countries often must borrow in foreign currencies, making them vulnerable to exchange rate fluctuations and unable to rely on their central banks as effective lenders of last resort during liquidity crises. Furthermore, commercial credit rating methodologies are heavily criticized for their narrow focus on short-term liquidity while neglecting the long-term growth potential and positive spillovers of SDG investments. This methodological bias leads to systematic penalties and high interest rates for developing economies (Sachs et al. 2023).

According to the 2025 Sustainable Development Report, key areas where the global financial architecture needs reform include the funding of the UN system, which amounts to less than 2 per cent of annual global military spending and is negatively affected by delays in payments by some of the largest contributors (Sachs et al. 2025). The report also makes a strong case for substantial increases in official funding from the World Bank and other multilateral development banks, supported by necessary capital increases and debt relief to create the fiscal space for SDGs. Multilateral development banks are seen as crucial for overcoming inefficiencies in international capital markets by borrowing on favourable terms and relending to developing countries at long maturities and low interest rates (Sachs et al. 2025). Other necessary changes include the reform of private capital markets, the creation of new revenue streams such as international taxes on maritime shipping and global aviation to fund institutions safeguarding the global commons, and the redesigning of country systems for economic planning, fiscal frameworks and project implementation to effectively channel substantial long-term investment into sustainable development.

In essence, the diversion of resources for military purposes, coupled with an antiquated financial architecture, is jeopardizing humanity's ability to address pressing global challenges. In recent years, countries have prioritized hard power, military strength and sanctions in the name of peace rather than holistically addressing the root causes of fragility, such as inequality, weak governance and exclusion, and building resilient and peaceful societies. Genuine peace and stability require not just the absence of conflict but the presence of robust, equitable and sustainable development, which current global spending and the existing financial architecture are failing to support.

The international community has so far been unable to keep pace with the increasing scale and complexity of social, environmental and climate risks facing humanity. While it has managed to mobilize trillions on military spending and withstand hundreds of sanctions, it has been unable to secure a fraction of that amount for protecting the planet and humanity. As a result, international efforts to tackle global challenges remain ad hoc, incoherent, uncoordinated and insufficient. This approach is proving to be ineffective, as the geopolitical and security landscape is increasingly volatile. While building an appropriate defence system is vital for security, excessive military spending is not only socially and economically unproductive, but it also creates distrust and can escalate military tensions.

Moving forward, it would be essential to redirect financial resources to achieving the SDGs, as doing so would strengthen the foundations for sustainable and inclusive social development and improve conditions for peace and stability in the long run. Recently, at the fourth International Conference on Financing for Development (FF4D), member states committed to catalysing investment at scale for sustainable development, addressing the debt and development crisis, and reforming the international financial architecture. More specifically, countries acknowledged the urgency of undertaking sustained efforts to reverse declining trends in ODA and urged developed countries to scale up and fulfil their respective ODA commitments, including the

long-standing commitment by most developed countries to achieve the targets of giving 0.7 per cent of gross national income for ODA to developing countries (United Nations 2025). The FF4D commitment sends a strong political signal, but it will be credible only if it is translated into tangible actions.

Finally, more efforts and resources need to be dedicated to strengthening rule-based multilateralism and renewing collaboration between governments and multilateral agencies. Reinforcing dialogue and diplomacy needs to become a priority. There is a strong need for novel ideas and reflection on how conflict prevention and collective security are conceptualized to ensure a shift from hard power and deterrence to dialogue and trust-building. Utilizing science in diplomacy can serve as an effective tool for building bridges and fostering cooperation among nations by creating a shared, science-based understanding, even in the midst of geopolitical tensions.

Chapter 3



Photo credit: Africa images

Gender Norms and Public Trust in a Global Perspective

Kseniya Kizilova, World Values Survey Association

Monitoring of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) underscores uneven progress across two domains central to inclusive governance—gender equality (SDG 5) and peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG 16). On SDG 5, the adopted indicators point to a familiar asymmetry. The legal frameworks protecting women's rights have largely been expanded, and the majority of countries have ratified equal-rights commitments, yet disparities in political participation and decision making remain. In 2024 women held only 27 per cent of seats in national parliaments globally and occupied 35 per cent of positions in local governments and 27 per cent of managerial roles (UN Women and UN DESA 2024). These gaps are generated by pervasive social norms that endorse men's dominance in politics and the labour market, such as the widespread belief that men make better political leaders or should have priority in employment when jobs are scarce (UNDP 2023). Existing survey evidence indicates that such attitudes remain widespread in many regions and can slow progress towards both gender- and governance-related SDG targets (Haerpfer et al. 2024).

In the same vein, SDG 16 indicators point to substantial deficits in public trust in institutions, access to justice and perceptions of inclusion in political decision making (OECD 2024; UNDP 2024). Monitoring indicators reveal that transparency has undoubtedly advanced over recent decades. If only 14 countries had access-to-information laws in 1990, by 2022 that number had risen to 135. However, enactment does not always guarantee implementation, which remains a recurrent challenge (United Nations 2024). Two structural gaps are especially salient. Many countries still lack a national human rights institution, and among those that have one, less than half are accredited as fully compliant with the Paris Principles—UN standards adopted in 1993 requiring a broad legal mandate, operational independence and pluralism, adequate resources, and effective investigatory and complaints-handling powers (United Nations 2022). The result is enduring weaknesses in accountability and human rights protection that blunt the promise of institutional reform.

However, SDG 5 and SDG 16 are interrelated and serve as mutually reinforcing pillars of inclusive governance. Commitment both to gender equality and to peace, justice and strong institutions relies on inclusion, equality and accountability as the normative foundations (Cram 2024). The relationship between the two goals can be understood in terms of four dimensions— (a) legitimacy; (b) enforcement; (c) governance quality; and (d) sequencing and risks.

First, commitments to end discrimination (Target 5.2) and ensure women's full and effective participation in decision making (Target 5.5) provide the social basis for fair, inclusive and representative institutions (Target 16.7). When half the population lacks voice or power, institutional fairness is normatively thin.

Second, commitments to end discrimination (Target 5.1), eliminate all forms of violence and harmful practices against women and girls (Targets 5.2 and 5.3), secure equal rights to economic resources (Target 5.a), and adopt and enforce gender-equality policies and legislation (Target 5.c) acquire actual meaning and

implementation only where courts, police, and administrative systems can prevent and remedy discrimination (Targets 16.3 and 16.6).

Third, gender-diverse leadership and gender-responsive accountability (Targets 5.5 and 5.c) can improve integrity and responsiveness (Targets 16.5 and 16.7), while weak or selective institutions can in turn neutralize representational gains.

Finally, given the interplay described above, reforms in either domain recalibrate public expectations in the other. Symbolic equality without credible enforcement can elicit scepticism, while effective institutions can convert equality commitments into lived rights.

To address these dynamics, this chapter utilizes the World Values Survey (WVS) 2017–2022 cross-national survey data from 90 countries to examine the interrelations between gender-related social norms (as proxies for SDG 5) and public confidence in institutions (as proxies for SDG 16). This analysis aims to disentangle individual-level expectations from the country-level normative environment, on the one hand, and to distinguish patterns across representative versus law-and-order institutions, on the other. The objective is to identify the conditions under which support for equality aligns with or, instead, sharpens scrutiny of state authority.

The findings in this chapter show that aligning gender equality with credible governance reforms can help build trust in institutions, strengthen accountability and foster inclusive political coalitions—conditions essential for durable progress towards social development and equitable and sustainable societies. The analysis also shows that sequencing equality and governance reforms can be key to preventing backlash, closing trust gaps and ensuring that reforms are substantive rather than symbolic. These insights can inform the World Social Summit by grounding its agenda in strategies that link SDG 5 and SDG 16, ensuring that equality norms are matched by governance performance capable of securing durable public confidence and sustainable social development.

Gender equality perceptions and gender norms bias

The WVS provides one of the most extensive sources of cross-national data on public attitudes, including norms and beliefs related to gender roles and gender equality. The seventh wave of the survey was conducted in 2017–2022 and covered 92 countries and societies worldwide. All surveys use nationwide stratified random samples of the adult population (18 years of age or older) to ensure that the findings reflect the views of citizens across diverse social groups and are representative of the society at the national level. The surveys mostly employed random probability sampling, and in some cases used random sampling with control quotas. Sample sizes varied from 1,200 to 3,500 respondents (with an average of 1,530 respondents per country).

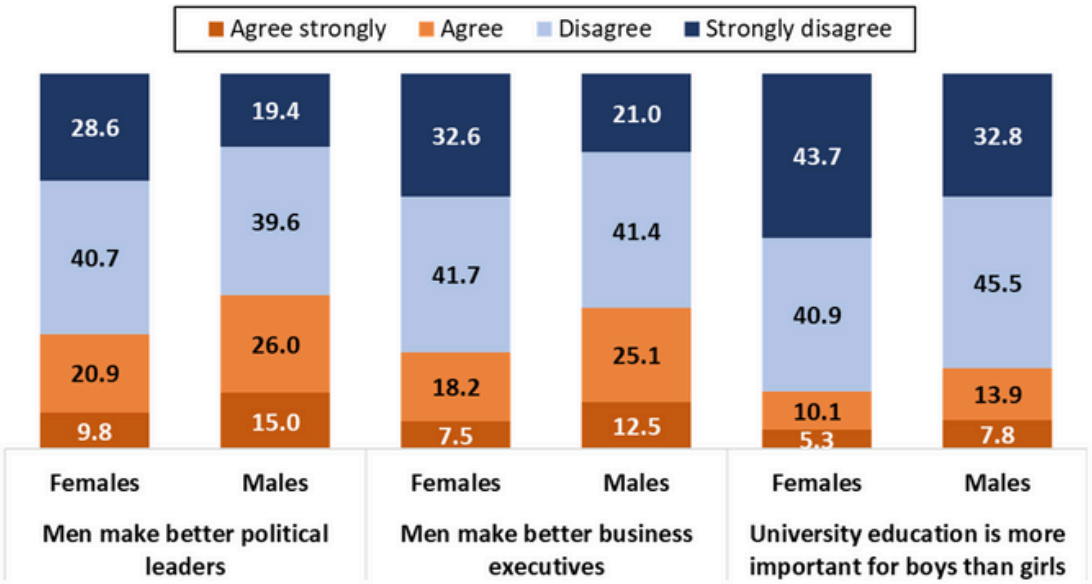
Among the many studied themes, the WVS questionnaire included a set of questions that capture public perceptions of gender roles in leadership, business, education and employment—attitudes that are directly relevant for SDG 5 on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. In this analysis, four survey items are used, capturing public perceptions of gender roles in leadership, education and employment: (a) whether men are believed to make better political leaders than women (pertinent to Targets 5.1 and 5.5); (b) whether men should be more entitled to a job than women if jobs are scarce (pertinent to Targets 5.1 and 5.a); (c) whether men are perceived as better business executives than women (pertinent to Targets 5.1, 5.5 and 5.a); and (d) whether university education is considered more important for boys than for girls (pertinent to Targets 5.1 and 4.5).

The share of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with each statement provides

an estimate of the share of the population rejecting gender equality. Each indicator speaks to a distinct pathway to institutional trust. Political and business leadership perceptions relate to norms surrounding women's ability to be involved in high-level decision making, whether in the public or private sector, which in turn could impact perceptions of the representativeness or responsiveness of institutions. Education relates to norms of equal opportunity and fairness, while employment priority concerns distributive justice and social protection. Importantly, respondents' attitudes should not be understood as isolated individual beliefs but as reflections of deeply embedded structural power relations that reproduce and sustain gender inequality within social, political and economic systems (UNDP 2023).

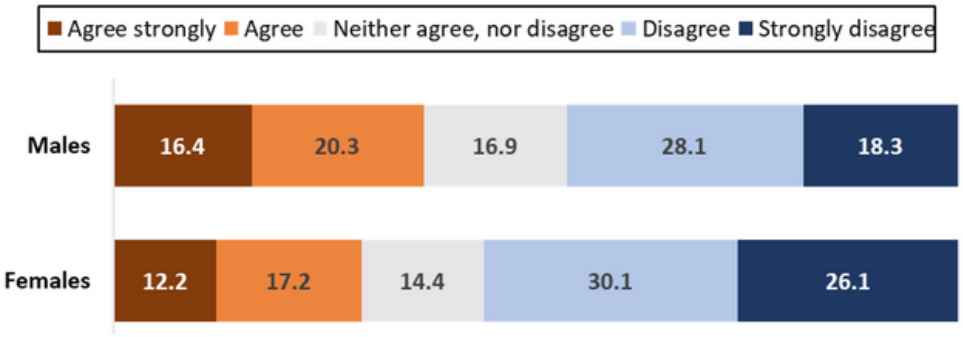
On average across all surveyed countries, agreement was highest for the statement that 'men make better political leaders than women' (36 per cent), followed closely by 'if jobs are scarce, men should have job priority' (34 per cent) and 'men make better business executives' (32 per cent). Agreement with the statement that 'university education is more important for boys than for girls' was markedly lower at 19 per cent, suggesting that explicit bias in education is less prevalent than perceptions about men's superiority in leadership and employment rights. Disaggregating the data by gender shows that men in almost all countries are more likely than women to agree with traditional gender norms. This difference is present across all four indicators but is particularly pronounced for political leadership (Figure 3.1) and employment priority (Figure 3.2)—domains directly linked to the distribution of power and economic resources.

Figure 3.1. Gender equality perceptions and gender norms bias



Source: EVS/WVS (2022). European Values Study and World Values Survey: Joint EVS/WVS 2017-2022 Dataset (Joint EVS/WVS). JD Systems Institute & WVSA. Dataset Version 5.0.0, doi:10.14281/18241.26

Figure 3.2. Gender equality perceptions and gender norms bias



Source: EVS/WVS (2022). European Values Study and World Values Survey: Joint EVS/WVS 2017-2022 Dataset (Joint EVS/WVS). JD Systems Institute & WVSA. Dataset Version 5.0.0, doi:10.14281/18241.26

The WVS survey findings show substantial variation in the prevalence of gender norms bias across countries and regions, reflecting the interaction of cultural, economic, political and religious factors (Table 3.1). In North Africa and West Asia, restrictive gender norms are particularly entrenched across all dimensions. On average, 63.4 per cent of respondents agree that men make better political leaders, though values range widely from 83.0 per cent in Egypt and 73.4 per cent in Libya to 43.9 per cent in Tunisia. The belief that men should have employment priority when jobs are scarce is especially strong, averaging 71.4 per cent and reaching 89.6 per cent in Egypt, 85.4 per cent in Pakistan and 81.5 per cent in Jordan, compared with 61.7 per cent in Lebanon. The perception that men are better business executives averages 55.0 per cent, peaking in Pakistan (77.8 per cent) and Egypt (74.9 per cent), while 36.4 per cent of respondents in Lebanon express this view, the lowest in the region. Gender bias in education, although less prevalent, remains substantial at 31.9 per cent on average, with endorsement highest in Pakistan (60.4 per cent) and Iran (47.3 per cent), and lowest in Lebanon (15.2 per cent).

In Central Asia and the Caucasus, restrictive gender norms are also common. On average, 63.4 per cent of respondents agree that men make better political leaders, with the highest levels in Tajikistan (74.5 per cent) and Uzbekistan (63.4 per cent), compared with 61.8 per cent in Armenia at the lower end of the regional spectrum. The belief that men should have employment priority averages 59.8 per cent, rising to 73.1 per cent in Uzbekistan and 71.2 per cent in Kyrgyzstan, while the lowest level is observed in Armenia (56.7 per cent). The perception that men make better business executives is also strong, averaging 60.3 per cent, and reaching 70.8 per cent in Kyrgyzstan and 66.4 per cent in Tajikistan, with 57.1 per cent in Armenia marking the lowest in the region. Gender bias in education is more pronounced in this region relative to others, averaging 36.8 per cent, with endorsement highest in Uzbekistan (59.1 per cent) and Kyrgyzstan (54.4 per cent), and lowest in Georgia (16.3 per cent).

In South Asia, restrictive gender norms are somewhat lower than in the previously discussed regions and feature greater variation across countries. On average, 56.0 per cent of respondents agree that men make better political leaders, with endorsement reaching 64.1 per cent in Bangladesh, compared with 31.0 per cent in Singapore and 46.3 per cent in Thailand at the lower end. Agreement with the claim that men should be given employment priority when jobs are scarce averages 56.9 per cent, with extremely high levels in Myanmar (81.6 per cent), while Singapore (27.9 per cent) and Thailand (31.2 per cent) report the lowest support. The belief that men make better business executives stands at 49.6 per cent,

peaking in Bangladesh (69.2 per cent) and Indonesia (62.7 per cent) but falling to 23.4 per cent in Singapore and 32.8 per cent in Thailand. Gender bias in education is also substantial, averaging 35.3 per cent, with the highest values again in Bangladesh (44.4 per cent), while Singapore (17.6 per cent) and the Philippines (27.3 per cent) represent the lowest levels in the region.

In sub-Saharan Africa, which features limited coverage in the European Values Survey/WVS data set, 51.0 per cent of respondents on average agree that men make better political leaders, with endorsement reaching 75.7 per cent in Nigeria and falling to 40.7 per cent in Ethiopia. Agreement with the claim that men should have priority in employment when jobs are scarce averages 48.8 per cent. The perception that men are better business executives averages 40.5 per cent. Educational bias is comparatively less pronounced in the region (22.7 per cent on average) yet still varies from 42.1 per cent in Nigeria to 14.3 per cent in Zimbabwe.

In East Asia, levels of restrictive gender attitudes are moderate compared with the most affected regions. On average, 37.9 per cent of respondents agree that men make better political leaders, with endorsement highest in China (50.4 per cent) and lowest in Japan (29.3 per cent). The view that men should have priority in employment when jobs are scarce averages 38.1 per cent. The belief that men are better business executives stands at 32.3 per cent, with the highest levels in South Korea (47.9 per cent) and China (34.1 per cent), and the lowest in Japan (22.6 per cent). Educational bias is somewhat less pronounced, averaging 21.8 per cent and ranging from 33.7 per cent in South Korea to 11.4 per cent in Taiwan.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, 21.5 per cent of respondents on average agree that men make better political leaders, with the highest levels in Nicaragua (25.2 per cent) and Venezuela (25.8 per cent), and the lowest in Brazil (18.6 per cent). Agreement with the claim that men should have priority in employment when jobs are scarce averages 22.3 per cent, rising to 30.7 per cent in Ecuador and 30.6 per cent in Bolivia, with 13.2 per cent in Uruguay marking the regional minimum. The perception that men are better business executives averages 18.3 per cent, with the highest support in Chile (29.5 per cent) and Venezuela (19.6 per cent), compared with 11.8 per cent in Uruguay. Education-related bias averages 16.7 per cent, ranging from 21.9 per cent in Bolivia to 5.8 per cent in Uruguay.

In Europe, restrictive gender attitudes are comparatively limited across all dimensions. On average, 26.2 per cent of respondents consider men to be better political leaders, with endorsement reaching 44.7 per cent in Czechia and 41.3 per cent in Romania, whereas the lowest proportions are found in Spain (9.0 per cent), Sweden (5.2 per cent) and Iceland (5.2 per cent). The view that men should be given employment priority in times when jobs are scarce is supported by 19.9 per cent of respondents, with the highest levels in Cyprus (40.6 per cent) and Slovakia (39.4 per cent), compared with only 2.9 per cent in Sweden and 10.8 per cent in Spain. Men's superiority in business leadership is affirmed by 23.4 per cent of respondents on average, though endorsement rises to 55.9 per cent in Russia and 54.8 per cent in Belarus, while falling to 3.4 per cent in Iceland and 4.7 per cent in Sweden. In Europe, gender bias in education is the least pronounced of all regions surveyed, averaging 10.1 per cent, and ranging from 31.6 per cent in Slovakia to 1.4 per cent in Sweden and 0.8 per cent in Iceland.

In North America and in Oceania, restrictive gender attitudes are the least entrenched globally, with both regions displaying consistently low endorsement across all dimensions. In North America, only 16.5 per cent of respondents in the USA and 15.2 per cent in Canada believe that men make better political leaders, while support for employment priority for men is as low as 5.2 per cent and 5.7 per cent, respectively. Educational bias is minimal, at 6.8 per cent in Canada and 9.9 per cent in the USA. In Oceania, attitudes are even less restrictive, with agreement that men make

better political leaders at 12.6 per cent in Australia and 6.5 per cent in New Zealand, and employment priority for men supported by just 6.8 per cent and 5.3 per cent, respectively.

Educational bias is almost absent, at 2.4 per cent in Australia and 2.8 per cent in New Zealand.

Table 3.1. Gender equality perceptions and gender norms bias by region

Region	Men make better political leaders (agree in %)	If jobs are scarce, men should have job priority (agree in %)	Men make better business executives (agree in %)	University education more important for boys (agree in %)
Sub-Saharan Africa	51	48.8	40.5	22.7
North Africa and West Asia	63.4	71.4	55	31.9
Central Asia and the Caucasus	63.4	59.8	60.3	36.8
East Asia	37.9	38.1	32.3	21.8
South Asia	56	56.9	49.6	35.3
Europe	26.2	19.9	23.4	10.1
Latin America and the Caribbean	21.5	22.3	18.3	16.7
North America	15.8	5.4	13.5	8.4
Oceania	9.6	6	8.4	2.6

Source: EVS/WVS (2022). European Values Study and World Values Survey: Joint EVS/WVS 2017-2022 Dataset (Joint EVS/WVS). JD Systems Institute & WVSA. Dataset Version 5.0.0, doi:10.14281/18241.26 The regions include only those countries that took part in the survey.[1]

[1] *Sub-Saharan Africa: Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, Zimbabwe. North Africa and West Asia: Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Pakistan, Tunisia, Türkiye. Central Asia and the Caucasus: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan. East Asia: China, Hong Kong, Japan, Macau, Mongolia, South Korea, Taiwan. South Asia: Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Maldives, Myanmar, Pakistan, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam. Europe: Albania, Andorra, Austria, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Montenegro, Netherlands, North Macedonia, Northern Ireland, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Ukraine. Latin America and the Caribbean: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru, Puerto Rico, Uruguay, Venezuela. North America: Canada, United States. Oceania: Australia, New Zealand. \– Response: EVS/WVS conduct separate surveys/samples in Great Britain and Northern Ireland. For this reason, they are cited separately rather than as one unit.*

Altogether, these findings suggest that progress towards SDG 5 is uneven not only across regions but also along different dimensions of gender equality. Attitudes about leadership and labour markets seem to be more rigid than those concerning education. In areas that are characterized by continued traditionalism, inclusiveness and the perceived legitimacy of political institutions might be undermined. These results underscore the enduring divide between international commitments to gender equality and gender-biased social norms that still shape common beliefs. Although there is legislative and institutional progress in many countries, public opinion—especially about leadership and labour markets—has been slow to change, and there are persistent barriers both to gender equality and to other forms of inclusive governance.

A large amount of literature points to gender norms as situated within structural, cultural and political contexts rather than as merely personal beliefs. Economic modernization and women's schooling and labour force participation are also associated with consistent liberal shifts among attitudes, especially in Western Europe and Latin America, where advances in women's employment and family policy reforms have transformed views on gender roles (Inglehart and Norris 2003; Htun and Weldon 2018; OECD 2019). By contrast, in areas where there is sustained conflict and economic volatility, such as the Middle East and North Africa, traditional gender roles are maintained because they serve a protective function (Moghadam 2003; UNDP 2023).

A factor of major importance is cultural and religious traditions. Comparative research finds, for instance, that more hierarchical interpretations of Islam and Orthodox Christianity are associated with greater support for the male authority. At the same time, Protestant traditions in Northern Europe historically induce a more egalitarian perspective (Norris and Inglehart 2004; Rizzo, Abdel-Latif and Meyer 2007). In South Asia, patrilineal kinship systems and dowry practices continue to reinforce conservative attitudes despite increasing girls' educational attainment (Jejeebhoy and Sathar 2001). Ainsworth and Hickey (2022) also point out how established culture and religious institutions intersect with political systems to curtail women's involvement in public life.

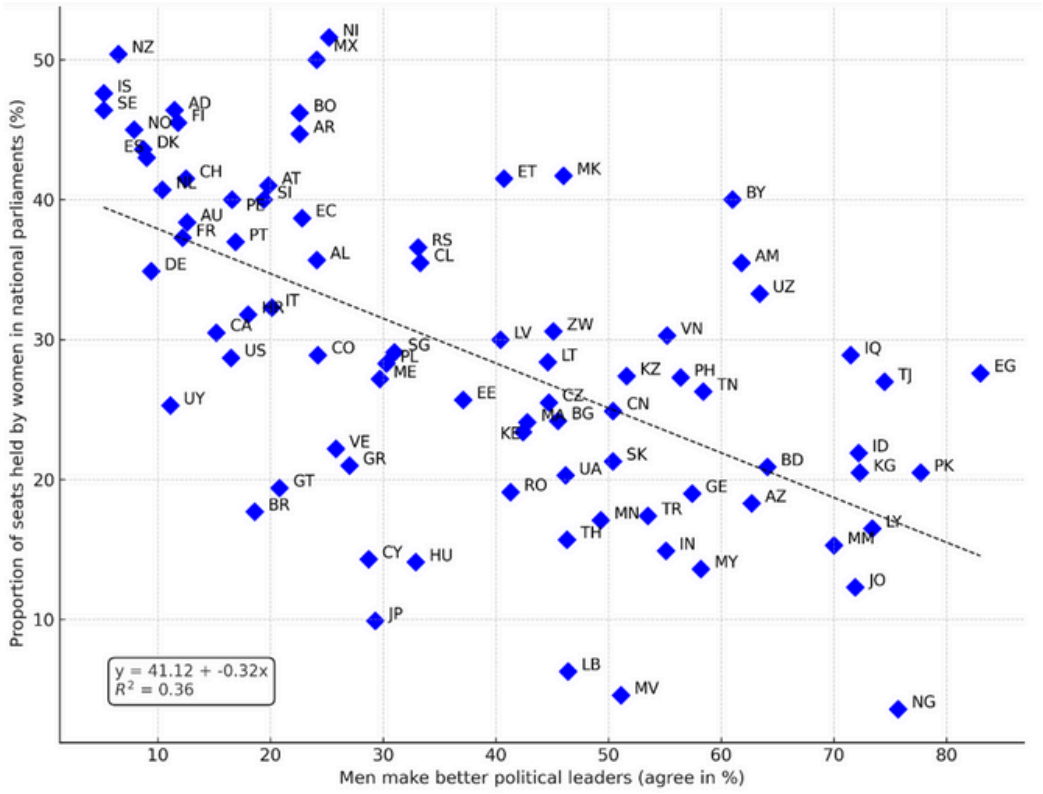
At the individual level, predictors are consistent across regions: higher levels of education, younger age and residence in an urban area correspond to more egalitarian beliefs (Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Seguino 2007; OECD 2014). In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, exposure to urban labour markets and global media correlates with lower support for employment priority for men (Coffé and Bolzendahl 2010). In Eastern Europe, women and people in younger age groups also hold more egalitarian opinions than men and people in older age groups, but support is still less favourable than in Western Europe (Rochon 1998; Gerber and Zavisca 2016).

Finally, political regimes and ideologies shape the persistence of norms. Patriarchal norms often continue to serve as a source of legitimacy for authoritarian systems, which can be seen in countries in Central Asia and the Caucasus, where gender-equality reforms coexist with deeply ingrained male authority structure (Kandiyoti 2007; Alexander and Welzel 2011). By contrast, the presence of democratic institutions and gender quota policies in Latin America accelerated developments in terms of both gender representation and public opinion (Krook 2009; Schwindt-Bayer 2009). The UNDP (2023) points that institutionalized gender norms are the most difficult to modify specifically because they have become embedded in institutional structures of political power and economic distribution. In the same vein, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Social Institutions and Gender Index identifies discriminatory family codes and limits to women's property rights as persistent barriers across regions (OECD 2014, 2019). Together, this body of work emphasizes that restrictive gendered expectations are underpinned by institutional legacies, cultural conventions and

political power relations, explaining their endurance even when formal equality is codified.

Because attitudes may both shape and reflect structural power dynamics, it remains critically important to examine whether restrictive gender norms correspond systematically to institutional inequalities. To do so, we combine WVS data on gender norms bias with two external benchmarks—the proportion of parliamentary seats held by women (IPU, 2025) and the V-Dem index (Coppedge et al., 2025) measuring women's access to state business opportunities (values vary from 0 to 4), both for the respective WVS survey year (2018–2022). The results confirm systematic associations between restrictive gender norms and institutional inequalities across both political and economic domains. Agreement with the view that men make better political leaders than women is moderately but significantly correlated with the proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments (r = 0.30) (Figure 3.3). This finding indicates that, in contexts where restrictive attitudes concerning women's participation in leadership are widespread, such as Egypt (83.0 per cent), Pakistan (77.7 per cent) and Iraq (71.5 per cent), women's representation in legislatures tends to be markedly lower (20.5–29.8 per cent), whereas in countries with comparatively egalitarian attitudes, including Sweden (5.2 per cent), Iceland (5.2 per cent) and Spain (9.0 per cent), parliamentary representation is substantially higher (43.0–50.4 per cent).

Figure 3.3. **Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments and attitudes towards men's political leadership**

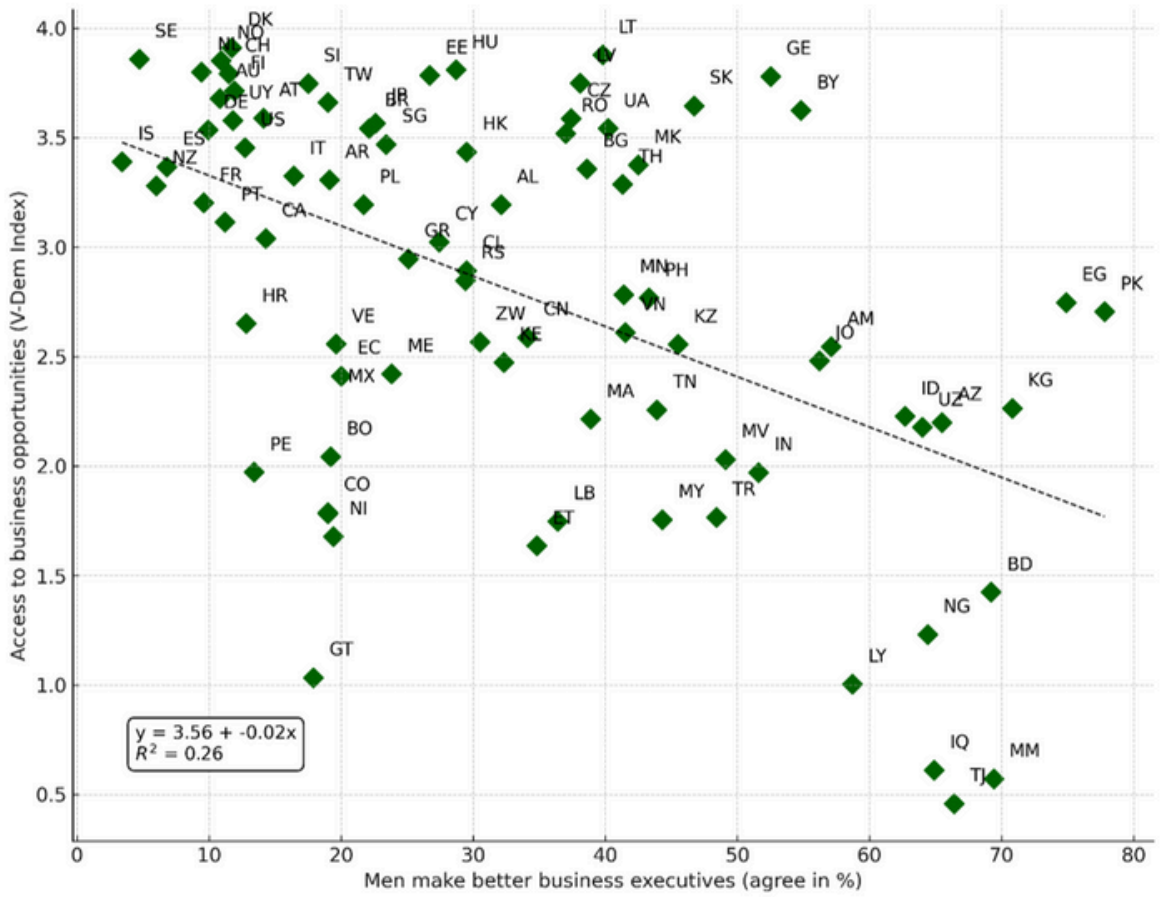


Sources: EVS/WVS (2022). European Values Study and World Values Survey: Joint EVS/WVS 2017-2022 Dataset (Joint EVS/WVS). JD Systems Institute & WVSA. Dataset Version 5.0.0, doi:10.14281/18241.26; Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). (2025). Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments (%) [Data set]. Data retrieved from World Bank Gender Data Portal: Source: EVS/WVS (2022). European Values Study and World Values Survey: Joint EVS/WVS 2017-2022 Dataset (Joint EVS/WVS). JD Systems Institute & WVSA. Dataset Version 5.0.0, doi:10.14281/18241.26

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A comparable relationship is observed in the economic sphere (Figure 3.4). Endorsement of the belief that men make better business executives than women is associated with lower scores on the V-Dem index of women's access to state business opportunities. The data reveals that countries with entrenched attitudinal bias, such as Myanmar (69.4 per cent), Iraq (64.9 per cent) and Iran (49.9 per cent), have limited access to state business opportunities for women (index values 0.41–0.61). By contrast, countries with comparatively egalitarian attitudes display markedly higher scores on women's access to business opportunities: Denmark (11.7 per cent), Sweden (4.7 per cent) and New Zealand (6.0 per cent) exhibit much high values (3.28–3.86). Although the magnitude of the correlations is moderate (r = 0.37), the consistency of the patterns across two distinct domains underscores the conclusion that restrictive gender norms are not confined to the domains of public norms and attitudes but correspond systematically to measurable structural inequalities in politics and the economy.

Figure 3.4. **Women's access to economic opportunities and attitudes towards men's leadership in business**

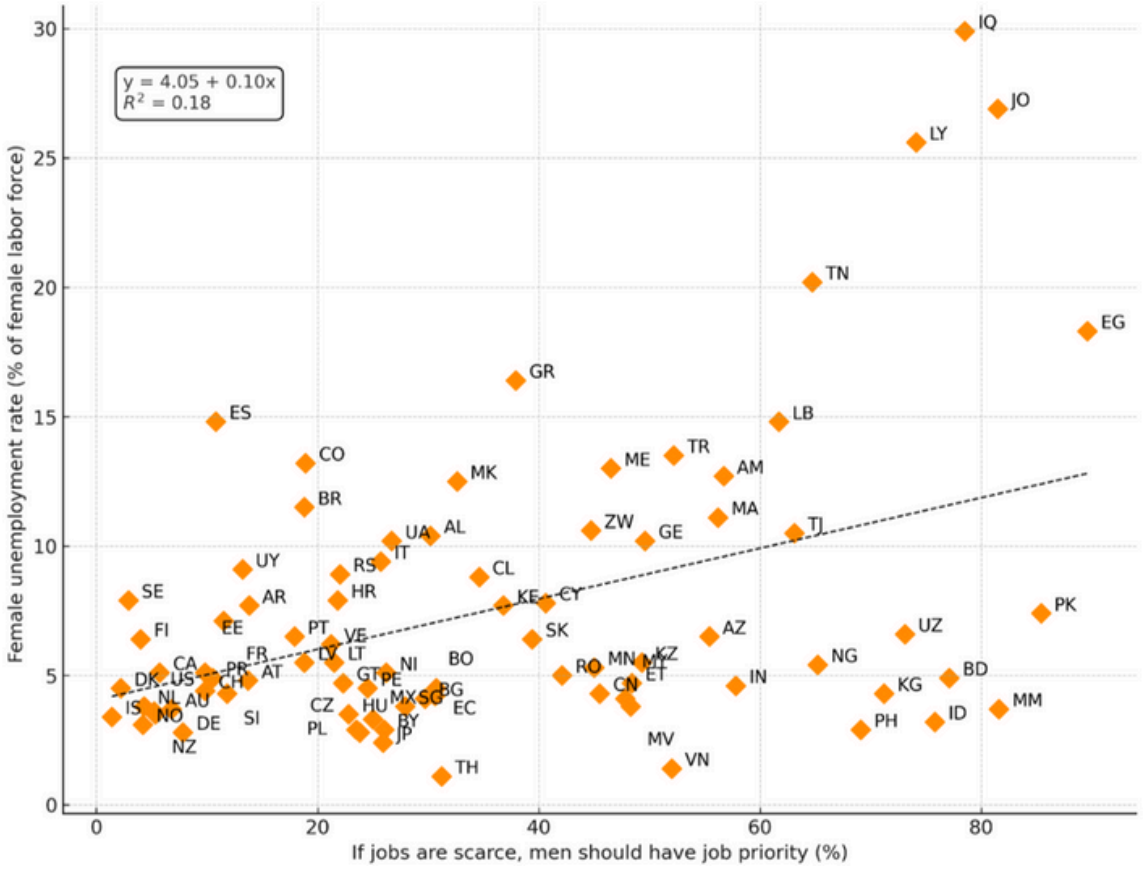


Sources: : EVS/WVS (2022). European Values Study and World Values Survey: Joint EVS/WVS 2017-2022 Dataset (Joint EVS/WVS). JD Systems Institute & WVSA. Dataset Version 5.0.0, doi:10.14281/18241.26; Coppedge, Michael, et al. 2025. "V-Dem Country-Year Dataset v15" Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project. Sources: EVS/WVS (2022). European Values Study and World Values Survey: Joint EVS/WVS 2017-2022 Dataset (Joint EVS/WVS). JD Systems Institute & WVSA. Dataset Version 5.0.0, doi:10.14281/18241.26; Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). (2025). Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments (%) [Data set]. Data retrieved from World Bank Gender Data Portal: Source: EVS/WVS (2022). European Values Study and World Values Survey: Joint EVS/WVS 2017-2022 Dataset (Joint EVS/WVS). JD Systems Institute & WVSA. Dataset Version 5.0.0, doi:10.14281/18241.26. European Values Study/ World Values Survey 2018-2022; V-Dem 2018-2022.

Restrictive gender norms extend into the labour market, though the associations are weaker than in politics and business. Agreement with the statement 'If jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women' is modestly but significantly correlated with women's unemployment (r = 0.24) (Figure 3.5). In countries where restrictive attitudes are widespread—such as Egypt (89.6 per cent), Pakistan (85.4 per cent) and Iraq (78.5 per cent)—women's unemployment rates remain elevated (18.3–29.9 per cent).

By contrast, in more egalitarian contexts, including New Zealand (5.3 per cent), Sweden (2.9 per cent) and Iceland (1.4 per cent), endorsement of employment priority for men is rare, and women's unemployment is comparatively low (3.4–7.9 per cent). This finding suggests that, while the correlation is weaker, restrictive gender norms in the labour market still correspond to measurable disadvantages for women's employment opportunities.

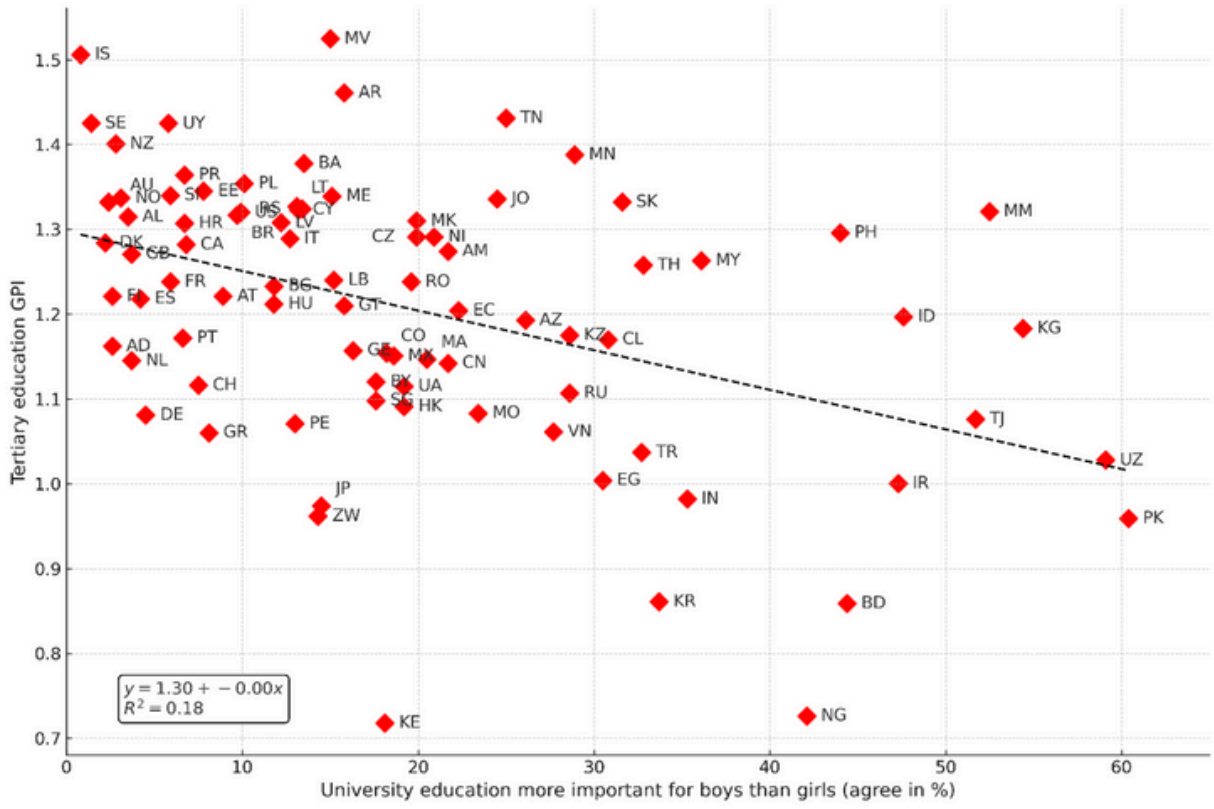
Figure 3.5. Unemployment among women and public support for employment priority for men



Sources: EVS/WVS (2022). European Values Study and World Values Survey: Joint EVS/WVS 2017-2022 Dataset (Joint EVS/WVS). JD Systems Institute & WVSA. Dataset Version 5.0.0, doi:10.14281/18241.26; International Labour Organization. (2025). Female unemployment (% of female labor force) (modelled ILO estimate) [Data set]. Data retrieved October 14, 2025, from World Bank World Development Indicators: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.FE.NE.ZS

A comparable pattern is observed in education, though again the association is weaker than in politics and business. Agreement with the statement that 'University education is more important for a boy than for a girl' is weakly but significantly correlated with lower gender parity in tertiary education enrolment (r = 0.17) (Figure 3.6). In countries where restrictive attitudes are widespread—such as Pakistan (60.4 per cent), Uzbekistan (59.1 per cent) and Bangladesh (44.4 per cent)—the gender parity index in higher education remains below equality (0.86–0.98). By contrast, in countries with comparatively egalitarian views, including Iceland (0.8 per cent), Sweden (1.4 per cent) and Uruguay (5.8 per cent), the parity index exceeds 1.0 by a wide margin (1.42–1.51), indicating equal or greater participation on the part of women and girls in tertiary education. Although the correlation is modest in magnitude, these findings reinforce the following broader conclusion: restrictive gender norms correspond systematically, across political, economic, labour market and educational domains, to structural inequalities limiting women's opportunities.

Figure 3.6. Perceptions of gendered educational priorities versus gender parity in higher education



Sources: EVS/WVS (2022). European Values Study and World Values Survey: Joint EVS/WVS 2017-2022 Dataset (Joint EVS/WVS). JD Systems Institute & WVSA. Dataset Version 5.0.0, doi:10.14281/18241.26; UNESCO Institute for Statistics. (2025). School enrollment, gender parity index (gross enrollment ratio) [Data set]. Data retrieved October 14, 2025, from World Bank Gender Data Portal: https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/indicator/se-enr

Other studies on gender equality provide a context for the trends identified in the WVS. At the level of attitudes, the UNDP's Gender Social Norms Index shows that almost 9 out of 10 individuals hold at least one discriminatory attitude against women (UNDP 2023). On the outcomes side, the World Economic Forum's 2025 Global Gender Gap Report records that only 68.8 per cent of the gap closed globally and projects 123 years to parity (WEF 2025). The report also identified significant regional differences, with the lowest levels of parity observed in Middle East and North Africa (61.7 per cent) and South Asia (62.9 per cent), while relatively higher levels are seen in Europe (77.9 per cent) and Latin America and the Caribbean (74.5 per cent) (WEF 2025). The 2024 SDG Gender Index also shows that no country is currently on track to achieve gender equality by the year 2030. In the period 2019–2022, nearly 40 per cent of all countries experienced little or negative progress towards gender equality (Equal Measures 2030, 2024). Thus, in spite of official policy changes, structural barriers have endured. According to International IDEA's assessment, deterioration of democracy and erosion of gender equality go hand in hand. Thus, only 10 countries have made significant overall improvements since 2015, whereas access to justice has worsened globally (from 0.88 in 2015 to 0.77 in 2024, indicating a drop of 12 per cent), with sharp decreases particularly in the Americas (down 31 per cent) and the Middle East (down 21 per cent) (Silva-Leander and Sourek 2025). Finally, evidence from the OECD's Social Institutions and Gender Index on discriminatory social institutions sheds light on the possible mechanics behind these shifts. In both law and everyday practice, 28 countries still do not give women equal rights as the head of household, while in 21 countries married women are required to obey their husbands. The macro-level economic cost of such discriminatory institutions is around USD 6 trillion (≈ 7.5 per cent of global gross domestic product [GDP]), which in turn likely reduces women's political and economic participation in regions with continued prevalence of conservative norms (OECD 2023c).

Institutional trust in comparative perspective

Public trust in state institutions is a central indicator of political legitimacy, which in turn may affect citizens' willingness to observe laws, engage with civil society organizations and accept the decisions taken by politicians, particularly during crises. In this analysis, six survey items are used, covering trust across the main domains of governance and state authority: (a) confidence in parliament; (b) confidence in government; (c) confidence in political parties (all pertinent to Targets 16.6 and 16.7); (d) confidence in the judicial system (pertinent to Targets 16.3 and 16.6); (e) confidence in the police; and (f) confidence in the armed forces (with the last two factors being pertinent to Targets 16.1 and 16.6).

Yet trust is rarely distributed evenly across the institutional landscape. Cross-national research consistently shows that trust is generally higher in law-and-order institutions, such as the armed forces, police and the courts, than in representative political institutions, such as parliaments, parties and national governments (Jackson et al. 2011; Newton and Zmerli 2011; Norris 2011; Valgarðsson et al. 2025). Previous findings show that this difference is not only contextual but rather that individuals perceive law-and-order institutions to be more 'neutral' and less under partisan influence than their representative political counterparts (Jackson et al. 2011; Zmerli and van der Meer 2017; OECD 2023a, 2023b). Trust in government or parliament is strongly influenced by electoral preferences and outcomes, whereas confidence in the police is less contingent on whether respondents support the incumbent government (OECD 2023a, 2023b). Cross-regional empirical evidence also indicates that these gaps are pervasive—even in cases where historical legacies may suggest otherwise, such as portions of Latin America and the Caribbean, wherein confidence in armed forces and the police often exceeds levels observed for legislatures or political parties (Latinobarómetro 2021). Longitudinal cross-national trend data show that the relative

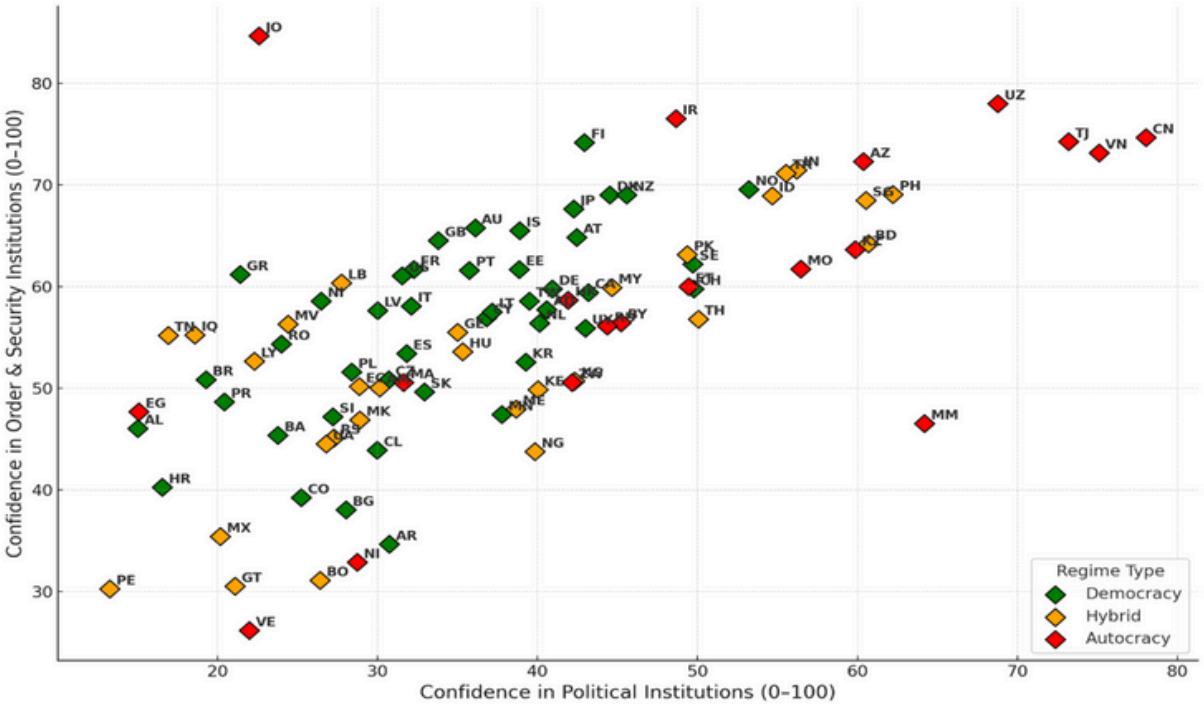
ranking of trust in 'implementing/order' versus 'representative' institutions is remarkably persistent over time, consistent with accounts emphasizing procedural justice and perceived impartiality as distinct foundations of confidence in courts and policing (Jackson et al. 2011; Valgarðsson et al. 2025).

To investigate these dynamics, this analysis employs WVS data to create two composite indexes (ranging from 0 to 100) for each of these dimensions—political institutions (parliament, political parties, national government) and law-and-order institutions (armed forces, police, courts). There is no predetermined threshold for sufficient trust ratings; scores are the mean of recoded and rescaled items, with higher scores indicating greater confidence. At the global level, the results highlight a substantive gap—39 percentage points on average for political institutions and 57 percentage points for law-and-order institutions—with an average difference of 22 percentage points found in almost all regions. This pattern is even more evident when we examine these indexes in the context of regime type (Figure 3.7). In autocracies (defined according to the Polity IV Project classification), political institutions are rated higher (51) and followed closely by trust in law-and-order institutions (62). In such contexts, political power may be depicted as integral and indivisible (entities that govern are the same ones that legislate and use force). As a consequence, perceptions of public trust might be about not only real endorsement but also the absence of overt criticism and the perpetuation of official narratives through state-administered media. These numbers should be read with caution, as self-censorship, social desirability pressures and preference falsification may inflate reported levels of confidence in authoritarian environments (Kuran 1997; Kalinin 2016; Truex 2016; Guriev and Treisman 2022; Tannenberg 2022).

Democracies display a different pattern: political trust is markedly lower (35), while trust in law-and-order institutions remains higher (56). Normatively, lower trust in representative institutions in democracies should not be read as a pathology. Democratic quality rests on an informed, sceptical or critical citizenry that supports the regime while demanding accountability from office holders (Easton 1975; Norris 2011). This perspective is consistent with research showing that confidence in the courts and the police is grounded in perceptions of procedural fairness and the impartial application of rules—foundations distinct from partisan evaluations of governments and parliaments (Jackson et al. 2011). Hybrid regimes form a mixed category, averaging 38 for political institutions and 54 for security institutions. Some lean towards the authoritarian profile, others towards the democratic; this fluidity reflects the unsettled character of hybrid systems, where institutional trust is particularly sensitive to political crises, corruption scandals and perceived abuses of power.

Country-level variation illustrates these contrasts. High-trust authoritarian profiles are visible in China (78 on the political trust index, 75 on law-and-order institutions), Vietnam (75, 73) and Uzbekistan (69, 78), where confidence in political and security institutions is both strong and closely aligned. Democracies such as Peru and Albania rank among the lowest in political trust (index values of 13 and 15, respectively), yet even in these cases law-and-order institutions are viewed far more favourably (30 and 46, respectively). Some Northern and Western European democracies, including Finland (43, 74) and Denmark (45, 69), show a more balanced configuration, with moderate political trust paired with high law-and-order trust. Hybrid regimes occupy a wide middle ground: Indonesia (55, 69) and Malaysia (45, 60) resemble the authoritarian pattern, whereas Ukraine (27, 45) mirrors the democratic distribution. Outliers add nuances to this picture. Libya (22, 53) and Lebanon (28, 60) maintain relatively high trust in law-and-order institutions despite political fragmentation and domestic conflicts. Ethiopia (49, 60) and Kenya (40, 50) exhibit moderate to high trust in both domains. Conversely, Guatemala, Mexico, Peru and Venezuela combine low political trust with low trust in law-and-order institutions.

Figure 3.7. Patterns of political trust by regime type



Sources: EVS/WVS (2022). European Values Study and World Values Survey: Joint EVS/WVS 2017-2022 Dataset (Joint EVS/WVS). JD Systems Institute & WVSA. Dataset Version 5.0.0, doi:10.14281/18241.26; Marshall, M. G., Gurr, T. R., & Jaggers, K. (2019). Polity IV Project: Political regime characteristics and transitions, 1800-2018. Dataset users' manual and codebook. Center for Systemic Peace.

Taken together, these patterns reveal a structural imbalance in how citizens experience and evaluate their states. Strong law-and-order institutions without commensurate political trust may deliver stability, but they do not necessarily foster the legitimacy, accountability or inclusiveness required for sustainable governance. For the SDG agenda, the message is double-edged. SDG 16 can be met procedurally—laws on access to information, functioning courts—yet still fall short substantively if representative institutions are not perceived as responsive, inclusive and clean. Stable democracies show that high trust in law-enforcement and judicial institutions is compatible with a critical stance towards politicians. However, when political institutions persistently lag, legitimacy erodes, participation thins, and reform coalitions weaken. The policy task is therefore not to lift trust in the abstract but to narrow the performance–expectation gap in representative politics while safeguarding the impartiality of law-and-order institutions.

Gender norms as a lens on institutional confidence: The equality–trust paradox

To examine how gender norms are associated with political trust, the analysis estimates multilevel regression models using WVS data. The analysis considers two dependent variables —trust in political institutions and trust in law-and-order institutions, modelled separately to preserve the distinctions in evaluative logic (i.e. partisan-based political trust versus more neutral confidence in order-and-security institutions). The main independent variable is the WVS cumulative gender equality index based on the attitudes towards women's leadership in politics and business, education and labour market rights. The analysis distinguishes between two levels of association

between gender norms and institutional trust. The within-country effects compare individuals inside the same country, essentially asking whether people who hold more egalitarian views than their fellow citizens tend to trust political or law-and-order institutions more or less. The between-country effects compare the average attitudes across countries, asking whether societies where most people support gender equality also show higher or lower overall trust in institutions. Following established practice (Raudenbush and Bryk 2002; Enders and Tofighi 2007), to distinguish within- and between-country effects, we broke down the gender norms index into two components—a country-level mean score, representing cross-national differences, and an individual-level deviation from this country mean, indicating whether some groups of respondents differ from their compatriots. This structure allows us to assess whether more egalitarian individuals differ in trust from their compatriots and whether more egalitarian societies differ in aggregate trust from less egalitarian ones. To address the influence of perceptions versus actual gains in gender equality, the models incorporate both attitudinal and structural indicators. At the country level, included predictors are the proportion of parliamentary seats held by women (%, IPU, World Bank), women's unemployment rates (%, International Labour Organization–modelled estimates, World Bank), and two V-Dem indicators capturing women's political empowerment and political participation (0–1 for both). All values correspond to the year (2018–2022) when the respective WVS survey was conducted.

Beyond gender-specific measures, a large body of research highlights that political trust is closely tied to perceptions of government performance in economic and governance domains (Mishler and Rose 2001; Norris 2011; Zmerli and van der Meer 2017). To account for these influences, further predictors are added: the World Bank's six Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGIs) as controls—voice and accountability, political stability, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law and control of corruption (Kaufmann, Kraay and Mastruzzi 2011). Additionally, GDP per capita (World Bank, purchasing power parity, constant 2021 international dollars) and the Corruption Perceptions Index (0–100, Transparency International) are included. Both economic performance and perceptions of integrity are well-established predictors of political trust: higher prosperity is generally associated with greater diffuse support for institutions, while perceptions of corruption consistently erode regime legitimacy (Seligson 2002; Norris 2011; Goodhart and Vu 2025). In addition to these macro-level performance measures, a subjective indicator from the WVS —namely, respondents' satisfaction with the way the political system works in their country (0–10 scale) is included into all models.

At the individual level, prior research consistently shows that demographic characteristics shape levels of trust, with gender, age, education level and income (10-point scale) among the strongest predictors (Newton 2001; Dalton 2004; Zmerli and Newton 2008). These variables are therefore included as controls in all models to ensure that the estimated relationships between gender norms and political trust are not confounded by basic socio-demographic effects (Table 3.2).

Before examining the findings of the model, let us briefly review what the past findings on the association between gender norms and political trust attitudes have been. Past research shows that the relationship is conditional upon both regime type and institutional domain. Confidence in representative institutions is closely linked to concerns about inclusiveness and fairness in democracies, while support for gender equality helps drive broader support for political authority (Easton 1975; Norris 1999, 2011; Dalton 2004). People who are supportive of gender equality are more likely to approve of institutions which represent democratic notions of participation and representation, while restrictive gender norms correlate with more authoritarian and exclusionary value orientations (Inglehart and Norris 2003; Welzel 2013). Therefore, in democratic settings, gender-equality attitudes are likely to be

positively associated with trust in political institutions, and somewhat less so in the police and the courts, where legitimacy is grounded in impartial and rights-based enforcement (Jackson et al. 2011). In autocracies, however, so-called traditionalist or patriarchal narratives are what tend to legitimate political authority, anchoring it in stability, hierarchy and social order (Waylen 2007; Donno and Kreft 2019). In such contexts, restrictive gender norms may more closely correspond with the state ideology and strengthen trust in both political institutions and law-and-order institutions too, while individuals who are egalitarian could be more sceptical towards authoritarian rule. Taken together, the body of literature implies that the expected relationship between gender norms and institutional trust is positive for egalitarianism under democracy but positive for traditionalism under autocracy, in line with more general patterns of regime legitimation.

The results, however, reveal a consistent equality–trust paradox. When comparing individuals within the same country (within-country variation), those with stronger gender-equality attitudes report significantly lower trust in both domains. In democracies, the individual-level coefficient is −0.098 ($p < 0.001$) for political institutions and −0.048 ($p < 0.001$) for law-and-order institutions, indicating a modest but statistically robust negative association, which is most pronounced for representative political institutions. In autocracies and hybrid regimes, the corresponding coefficients are −0.128 ($p < 0.001$) and −0.080 ($p < 0.001$) and show a stronger effect that extends to both institutional families. This pattern suggests that, in democratic contexts, citizens with stronger gender-equality values mainly target their scrutiny towards elected and representative bodies, whereas in hybrid and autocratic systems, dissatisfaction with politics generalizes more readily to the coercive arms of the state. By contrast, when comparing countries to each other (between-country variation), the normative climate matters mainly in non-democratic settings. In autocracies and hybrid states, higher average support for gender equality is linked to substantially lower trust in political institutions (−0.491, $p < 0.01$) and law-and-order institutions (−0.513, $p < 0.001$). This link suggests that, when equality norms are widely shared at the societal level but are not matched by substantive reforms, dissonance undermines legitimacy across both domains (Table 3.2).

At the individual level, the within-country gender norms variable is a robust predictor of lower institutional trust. In democracies, those who have more egalitarian attitudes have a lower level of confidence in institutions than the non-egalitarians in both areas, with a stronger effect on representative institutions (−0.098; $p < 0.001$; −0.048; $p < 0.001$). In autocracies and hybrid regimes, the pattern is even more pronounced: citizens who share gender-equality norms have significantly lower trust in both political (−0.128; $p < 0.001$) and law-and-order institutions (−0.080; $p < 0.001$). These findings sharpen the equality–trust paradox, suggesting that the citizens who are most supportive of gender equality are also the most sceptical of institutions, particularly in contexts where accountability is weak and symbolic reforms outpace substantive change.

As for structural measures of gender equality, the impact differs greatly by regime type. No consistent relationship between the share of women in parliament and the women's political empowerment index is observed in democracies. Instead, two relationships stand out. First, high women's unemployment is positively related to confidence in law-and-rder institutions. And second, the women's political participation index is negatively correlated with trust in political institutions. In contrast, the structural indicators in autocracies and hybrid regimes show stronger and more consistent associations. More specifically, women's representation in parliament is negatively correlated with confidence in law-and-order institutions, while higher women's unemployment is negatively association with trust in political institutions, but is positively correlated to trust in law-and-order institutions. Most notably, the index of women's political empowerment displays a highly positive association with trust in both domains in

Table 3.2. Gender norms and institutional trust: Multilevel models

	Democracies (N = 76,603, 45 countries)		Autocracies/Hybrid Regimes (N = 75,658, 47 countries)	
	Political Institutions	**Lw and Order Institutions**	**Political Institutions**	**Law and Order Institutions**
Level 2				
Gender norms (between) (WVS)	−0.154 (ns) (0.103)	0.235 (ns) (0.186)	−0.491** (0.166)	−0.513*** (0.136)
Women in parliament (IPU)	−0.003 (ns) (0.080)	−0.229 (ns) (0.144)	0.003 (ns) (0.105)	−0.202* (0.086)
Women's unemployment (ILO)	0.123 (ns) (0.206)	0.823** (0.370)	−0.862*** (0.194)	0.515*** (0.159)
Women's political empowerment (V-Dem	6.801 (ns) (17.426)	2.321 (ns) (31.300)	64.152** (24.824)	45.317* (20.374)
Women's political participation (V-Dem)	−33.991* (16.870)	−9.727 (ns) (30.337)	−47.239 (ns) (28.198)	−19.496 (ns) (23.143)
GDP per capita (WB)	0.00018** (0.00007)	−0.0000003 (ns) (0.00013)	−0.00011 (ns) (0.00010)	−0.00019* (0.00009)
Corruption Index (TI)	0.495*** (0.126)	−0.206 (ns) (0.225)	−0.123 (ns) (0.223)	0.125 (ns) (0.183)
WGI voice and accountability (WB)	−4.426 (ns) (3.403)	5.705 (ns) (6.118)	−14.311*** (2.492)	−9.610*** (2.046)
WGI political stability (WB)	6.448** (2.142)	2.326 (ns) (3.846)	−4.040 (ns) (2.557)	−0.366 (ns) (2.099)
WGI government effectiveness (WB)	−2.081 (ns) (2.339)	−6.795 (ns) (4.200)	14.961** (5.896)	14.132** (4.840)
WGI regulatory quality (WB)	−2.811 (ns) (2.760)	6.985 (ns) (4.946)	−4.967 (ns) (4.395)	−8.532* (3.609)
WGI rule of law (WB)	−3.697 (ns) (2.914)	10.793* (5.231)	3.887 (ns) (4.886)	5.137 (ns) (4.011)
Level 1				
Gender norms (within) (WVS)	−0.098*** (0.0048)	−0.048*** (0.0049)	−0.128*** (0.0049)	−0.080*** (0.0047)
Satisfaction with political system (WVS)	0.484*** (0.046)	−0.087 (ns) (0.047)	3.229*** (0.035)	2.207*** (0.034)
Age (WVS)	1.163*** (0.156)	0.707*** (0.159)	1.156*** (0.178)	0.384* (0.174)

Gender (female) (WVS)	3.915*** (0.033)	2.303*** (0.033)	−0.491*** (0.052)	−0.455*** (0.051)
Education (WVS)	0.043*** (0.005)	0.064*** (0.005)	0.025*** (0.006)	0.013* (0.006)
Income (WVS)	0.296*** (0.034)	0.392*** (0.035)	−0.168*** (0.043)	−0.036 (ns) (0.042)

*Notes: Liner mixed-effects models; *** p < 0.001, ** p < 0.01, * p < 0.05, (ns) = not significant.*
Sources: European Values Study. World Values Survey 2018-2022; World Bank; V-Dem; Transparency International

autocracies and hybrid regimes, while the association is not statistically significant in democracies. Together, these findings suggest that, in democratic contexts, attitudinal dynamics are the primary basis for the equality–trust paradox. In non-democratic settings, however, substantive institutional gains in women's empowerment are likely to provide legitimacy, but continued inequalities in representation and employment will perpetuate latent mistrust.

The relationship between governance indicators and institutional trust varies systematically by regime type. In democracies, political stability (6.448, $p < 0.05$) and rule of law (10.793, $p < 0.05$) are positively associated with trust, while corruption control also matters for trust in political institutions (0.495, $p < 0.001$). These results are consistent with performance-based models that emphasize institutional capacity and the predictability of rules as drivers of legitimacy. By contrast, in autocracies and hybrid regimes, government effectiveness emerges as the strongest positive predictor (14.961, $p < 0.01$ for political institutions; 14.132, $p < 0.01$ for law-and-order institutions). At the same time, voice and accountability are negatively associated with trust in both domains (−14.311, $p < 0.001$; −9.610, $p < 0.001$), underscoring that in non-democratic settings confidence is grounded in output delivery and regime control rather than participatory legitimacy.

Socio-demographic patterns broadly fit the so-called "critical citizens" perspective (Norris, 1999). In democracies, women report slightly higher trust in both political (3.915; $p < 0.001$) and law-and-order institutions (2.303; $p < 0.001$); education is positively correlated to political trust (0.043; $p < 0.001$) but negatively – to confidence in law-and-order institutions (−0.048; $p < 0.001$), while age is positively associated with trust across both domains (1.163; $p < 0.001$; 0.707; $p < 0.001$). Income is positively associated with confidence in both types of institutions as well (0.296; $p < 0.001$); 0.392; $p < 0.001$). In autocracies and hybrid regimes, by contrast, the pattern is reversed: women report significantly lower trust (−0.491 $p < 0.001$; −0.455 $p < 0.001$), and education is also negatively associated with trust across both domains (0.025 $p < 0.01$, 0.013 $p < 0.05$—small but consistent effects). Trust increases with age modestly (1.156; $p < 0.001$; 0.384; $p < 0.05$), while income shows no systematic effect on political trust across different regime types. Taken together, these results suggest that political resources and sophistication often translate into heightened scrutiny of institutions, particularly where accountability is weak. In non-democratic contexts, however, institutional trust is more dependent on visible performance outputs and regime consolidation.

For the SDG agenda, the implications are both strategic and diagnostic. Progress on SDG 5—whether through increased women's political representation, strengthened anti-discrimination frameworks, or expanded equality in education and labour markets—reshapes public expectations about fairness, inclusion and state performance. Where institutions targeted under SDG 16 deliver on those expectations with tangible gains in responsiveness, impartiality and accountability,

public trust can be sustained or enhanced. Where reforms are symbolic or partial, however, more egalitarian publics are likely to become sceptical, thereby narrowing the legitimacy base for further change.

Three priorities emerge from these findings. First, gender equality should be advanced in tandem with governance reform: legal and representational gains must be paired with visible improvements in integrity, service delivery and procedural justice to avoid a backlash in trust. Second, the political–order trust gap in democracies should be addressed by investing in mechanisms that make representative institutions more responsive and transparent while preserving the impartiality of law-and-order institutions. Third, purely symbolic equality reforms should be avoided in autocracies and hybrid regimes: without credible accountability and enforcement, such measures risk deepening cynicism across both political and security institutions. Sequenced and integrated reform —linking SDG 5's equality objectives with SDG 16's governance benchmarks—is therefore essential. Equality norms raise the bar for legitimacy, and only institutions that consistently meet that standard will secure durable public confidence and the political coalitions necessary for sustainable governance.

Chapter 4

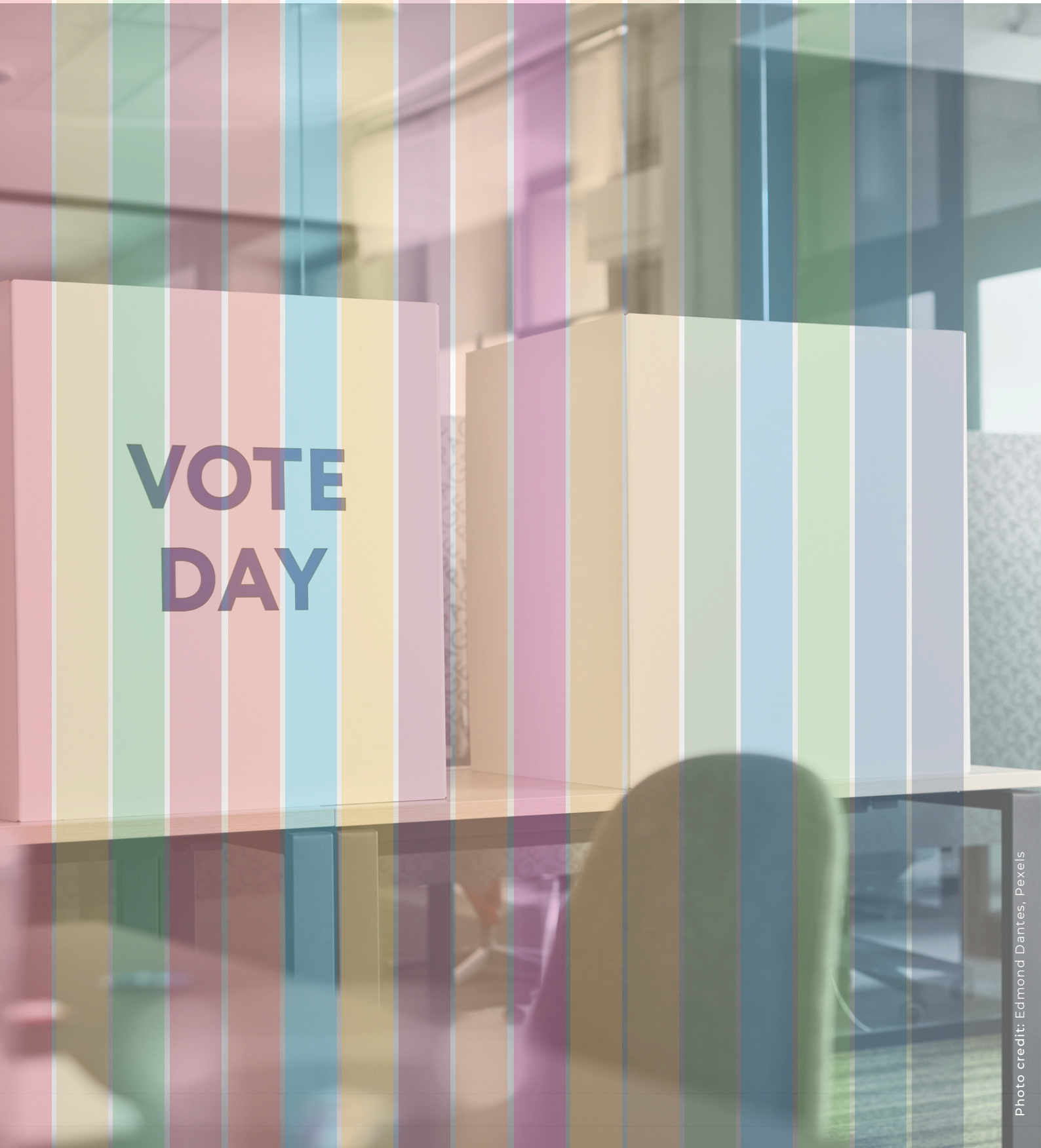


Photo credit: Edmond Dantes, Pexels

30 Years after the Copenhagen Declaration: Democracy, SDG 16 and Social Development: Nexus and Pathways

Annika Silva-Leander, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance

In 1995, at the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen, global leaders affirmed that 'democracy and transparent and accountable governance and administration in all sectors of society are indispensable foundations for the realization of social and people-centred sustainable development' (United Nations 1995). This declaration enshrined democracy as a pillar of social development, asserting its intrinsic connection to inclusive governance and equitable progress.

Thirty years later, this vision has been reaffirmed with new urgency. In a groundbreaking step, the Political Declaration to be presented at the 2025 World Social Summit in Doha once again explicitly recognizes democracy as essential to social development. In the draft declaration, United Nations member states commit to 'a political, economic, ethical and spiritual vision for social development that is based on human dignity, human rights, equality, respect, peace, democracy'. They further pledge to achieve social development for all by 'upholding democracy, the rule of law, good governance and access to justice, combatting all forms of corruption' (United Nations 2025). This explicit reference to democracy, after years of absence in UN declarations, marks a historic reaffirmation that democracy is an indispensable foundation for people-centred, sustainable social development.

This recognition comes at a critical juncture. Democratic backsliding is accelerating globally, and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions remains off track in many regions (International IDEA 2025; United Nations 2025). Progress on critical social development outcomes, such as health, education, poverty reduction, gender and social group equality, employment and economic equality, remains uneven and insufficient in many places, placing the achievement of the 2030 Agenda at serious risk (United Nations 2025). Recent events, including massive foreign aid cuts, the United States' withdrawal from the 2030 Agenda, Europe's scaled-back Green Deal ambitions and rising conflicts, risk further stalling progress.

This chapter takes the Copenhagen and Doha Declarations' explicit recognition of democracy as its point of departure and demonstrates, through empirical evidence and analysis, why democracy is indispensable to social development, thereby grounding the declarations in evidence. Drawing on International IDEA's Global State of Democracy (GSoD) Indices and existing scholarship, the chapter analyses the correlations between democracy and social development outcomes and traces the pathways through which democracy enables social progress. The analysis applies International IDEA's conceptual framework, which defines democracy through four interdependent building blocks:[1] Representation, Rights, Rule of Law and Participation. These building blocks also underpin SDG 16.

[1] *Based on International IDEA's GSoD Indices framework.*

The findings confirm that democracy is a powerful enabler of inclusive and equitable social development. The analysis also highlights a reciprocal relationship: stronger democracies are more likely to guarantee equitable access to welfare and promote social inclusion. And public satisfaction with social development outcomes reinforces legitimacy and trust in democracy. Conversely, when social development falters, democratic legitimacy and trust tend to erode, eroding the social contract and fuelling support for authoritarian alternatives. Yet democracy is not a guarantee of social development, and outcomes vary significantly across contexts and income levels. Instances of non-democratic regimes achieving substantial social development outcomes are, however, empirical outliers. More commonly, such regimes fall short on these outcomes.

The chapter concludes that advancing democracy and social development in tandem as part of the social contract is vital for carrying forward the legacy of Copenhagen, for honouring the landmark recognition of democracy in the Doha Declaration and for achieving the 2030 Agenda. The Doha Declaration's explicit commitment to democracy provides a renewed normative and political foundation, reminding the international community that meaningful progress remains possible when democracy and social development are advanced together.

1. Democracy, SDG 16, and social development outcomes: Indicators and correlations

1.1. Indicators of democracy, SDG 16 and social development

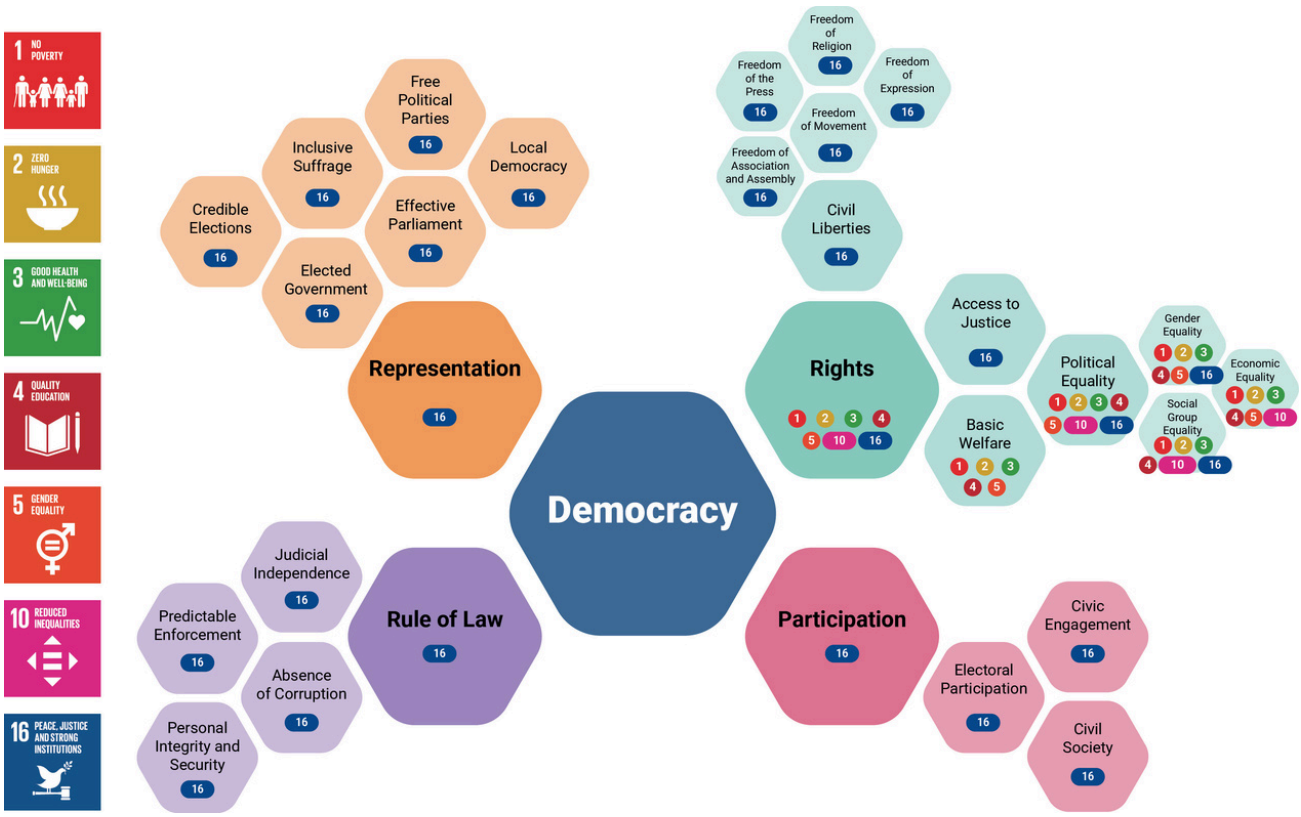
The 1995 Copenhagen Declaration states that sustainable development rests on three interdependent pillars—social development, economic development and environmental protection. It frames social development as both outcome and process— equitable gains in health and education, lasting poverty reduction and decent work for all, achieved via the fair distribution of opportunities and resources, accountable and transparent governance, democratic participation and inclusive, rights-based institutions (United Nations 1995).

Grounded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the GSoD framework considers social and economic rights a key dimension of democracy, therefore helping to assess democratic quality and some dimensions of social development and their relationship through the four democratic building blocks of Representation, Rights, Rule of Law and Participation (see Figure 4.1). The GSoD Indices measure progress on seven SDGs, all of which cover key dimensions of social development—poverty (SDG 1), hunger (SDG 2), health (SDG 3), education (SDG 4), gender equality (SDG 5), inequality (SDG 10), and six targets related to peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG 16) (see Figure 4.1 and Box 4.1) (International IDEA 2023).

Some of the GSoD Indices capture social development outcomes—notably the social rights–related measure of Basic Welfare, which aggregates data on health, education and nutrition. The Rights factors of the Political and Economic Equality indicators (Gender, Social Group and Economic Equality) assess equality outcomes such as intergroup and gender equality and the degree of economic, social and political discrimination and exclusion based on gender, socio-economic status or social identity. Others measure social development–related processes or enablers such as Rule of Law and Absence of Corruption (Box 4.1).

We use these five measures as proxies for outcome and process-oriented social development indicators to assess their correlation strength with the 29 GSoD democracy indicators and identify the most significant relationships. This analysis is complemented with evidence from scholarly literature, which it also draws on to delineate the causal pathways underlying these associations. The literature extends the analysis to additional dimensions of social development not captured by the GSoD Indices, including broader access to social services, poverty reduction and economic growth.

Figure 4.1. The Global State of Democracy Indices' and the Sustainable Development Goals' conceptual framework



Source: International IDEA, Global State of Democracy Indices, [n.d.], <https://www.idea.int/democracytracker/gsod-indices>, accessed 14 July 2025.

Box 4.1. International IDEA's Global State of Democracy Indices: Framework and SDG 16

International IDEA's Global State of Democracy (GSoD) Indices assess democratic performance across four building blocks—Representation, Rights, Rule of Law, and Participation—based on 29 Indices aggregated from 154 source indicators and 22 data sources. The Indices cover 174 countries from 1975 through 2024 and score each dimension from 0 to 1, with three performance tiers—low (0.0–0.4), mid-range (0.4–0.7) or high (0.7–1.0).

The GSoD Indices provide data for 6 of the 12 targets of SDG 16 (16.1, 16.3, 16.5, 16.6, 16.7 and 16.10), across all four GSoD dimensions:

1. Representation. Credible Elections, Inclusive Suffrage, Free Political Parties, Elected Government, Effective Parliament and Local Democracy (SDG 16.6 and 16.7). These measures focus on the quality of representative democracy.
2. Rights. Civil Liberties, including Freedoms of Expression, Press, Assembly, Religion and Movement (SDG 16.3, 16.7 and 16.10).
3. Rule of Law. Judicial Independence, Absence of Corruption, Predictable Enforcement, and Personal Integrity and Security (SDG 16.1, 16.3, 16.5, 16.6, 16.7 and 16.10). These measures assess governance-related dimensions: how power is exercised, how policies are made and how resources are managed.
4. Participation. Citizen participation in elections and through civil society (SDG 16.6 and 16.7).

Sources: Skaaning and Hudson 2025; International IDEA 2023.

Table 4.1. International IDEA's GSoD Indices' measures of social development and the Sustainable Development Goals

Social development outcome indicators in GSoD Indices	Sources and what they measure	SDGs	Other democracy measures in GSoD Indices (social development enablers)	What they measure	SDGs and targets
(Social) Rights: Basic Welfare	Indicators on health equality, infant mortality, life expectancy, nutrition and years of schooling aggregated from United Nations, World Health Organization and Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation datasets.	SDG 2: Nutrition SDG 3: Health SDG 4: Education	Representation	Credible Elections, Inclusive Suffrage, Free Political Parties, Elected Government, Effective Parliament and Local Democracy These measures focus on the quality of representative democracy.	SDG 16.6 SDG 16.7
Rights: Political and Economic Equality	Aggregated from eight different data sets to assess political equality between social groups and genders and the extent of discrimination and exclusion due to gender, economic status or social identity	SDG 1: Poverty SDG 10: Inequality	Rights: Civil Liberties	Civil Liberties, including Freedoms of Expression, Press, Assembly, Religion and Movement	SDG 16.3 SDG 16.7 SDG 16.10
Gender Equality	The GSoD Gender Equality score draws on 11 indicators from six sources —including V-Dem, the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, CIRIGHTS, the World Bank, the International Labour Organization and the Global Gender Gap Report —capturing both expert-coded and observational data on women's political rights, political participation and representation in legislatures and in civil society, power distributed by gender and women's political empowerment and exclusion, labour force participation, access to managerial positions, education attainment, control over financial accounts and legal guarantees of economic rights.	SDG 5: Gender Equality	Rights: Access to Justice	Gender-equal and effective access to justice, the incidence of judicial corruption, accountability for judicial misconduct, and the de facto realization of fair-trial guarantees, due process and civil rights protections	SDG 16.3

Social Group Equality	Measures intergroup equality in rights and power: whether civil liberties are enjoyed equally across social groups; the extent to which political power is structured by social identity (including sexual orientation); the degree of political exclusion by political or social group; and whether equal treatment under the law and equality of opportunity (in education, public office, employment, and anti-discrimination protections) are effectively guaranteed.	SDG 10: Inequality			
Economic Equality	Captures socio-economic equality and exclusion in rights and politics—parity of civil liberties across classes, distribution of political power, political exclusion by class and urban–rural location, the structural depth of poverty and inequality, and overall income inequality.	SDG 10: Inequality			
Rule of Law: Absence of Corruption	Assesses the incidence and systemic entrenchment of corruption—bribery, kickbacks, embezzlement and theft—across the public sector and the executive, the breadth of patronage and state–business collusion, the strength of institutional safeguards against official corruption, and the credibility of enforcement through prosecution and public accountability.	SDG 16.5	Rule of Law	Judicial Independence, Predictable Enforcement, and Personal Integrity and Security	SDG 16.1 SDG 16.3 SDG 16.6 SDG 16.7 SDG 16.10

Source: International IDEA 2023

1.2. Patterns of association and correlation

There is both a normative and an empirical case that democracy matters for social development. Democracy, through representative institutions, rights protection, rule of law and citizen participation (all central to SDG 16), provides the foundation for advancing equitable access and outcomes in health, education, equality, poverty reduction and the Sustainable Development Goals (International IDEA 2024). The GSoD Indices empirically confirm that democracies are more likely to create the conditions necessary for inclusive social development compared with non-democratic regimes. On average, Gender, Economic and Social Group Equality is around 40–47 per cent higher in democracies (across all levels of democratic performance), Basic Welfare is roughly 30 per cent higher, and corruption levels are about 50 per cent lower (see Table 4.2). In high-quality democracies (those that perform in the high range on all four dimensions of democracy), the differences are even starker: levels of Basic Welfare are about 66 per cent higher; levels of Gender Equality, Social Group Equality and Economic Equality are over twice as high; and levels of corruption in non-democratic countries are 90 per cent higher than in high-quality democracies (see Table 4.3).

Table 4.2. Average levels of selected GSoD measures by regime type[2]

GSoD measure/ Regime type	Democracies (all categories of performance)	Non-democracies	% Difference
Absence of Corruption	0.59	0.35	51%
Social Group Equality	0.6	0.37	47%
Economic Equality	0.58	0.37	44%
Basic Welfare	0.64	0.48	30%
Gender Equality	0.68	0.46	40%

Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy 2019: Addressing the Ills, Reviving the Promise (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.31752/idea.2019.31>. Calculations made based on 2024 data using the regime type formula of 2019.

[2] *Note that International IDEA no longer uses the regime-type classification.*

Table 4.3. Averages of selected GSoD Indices by levels of democratic performance

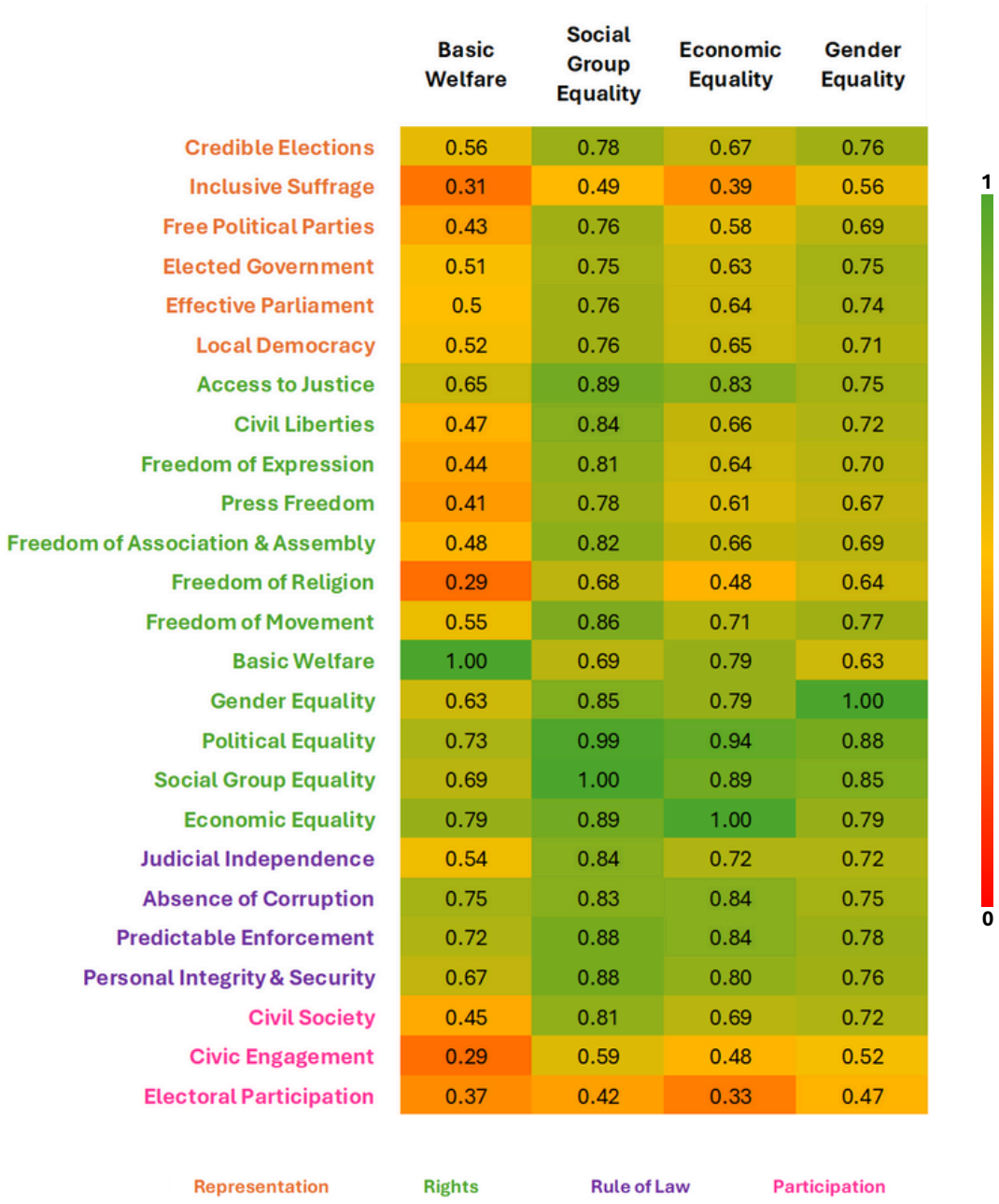
GSoD Indices sub-factors	High on all 4 GSoD building blocks	Low on all 4 GSoD building blocks	% difference
Absence of Corruption	0.82	0.31	90%
Social Group Equality	0.78	0.3	89%
Economic Equality	0.79	0.32	85%
Gender Equality	0.87	0.41	72%
Basic Welfare	0.83	0.5	66%

Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy: Democracy on the Move (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.31752/idea.2025.53>

The evidence does not support the claim that authoritarian regimes outperform democracies on social development (Siegle 2024). Any 'authoritarian advantage' consists mainly of a few outliers: high-performing autocracies exist but are empirical exceptions. Of the 74 countries without democratic elections, only five have high levels of Basic Welfare (Belarus, Kuwait, Qatar, Singapore and the United Arab Emirates), only two have high levels of Gender Equality (Cuba and Serbia), only one has low levels of Corruption (Singapore), and none have high levels of Economic or Social Group Equality. China that often projects itself as an authoritarian governance success model (Siegle 2025) falls in the mid-range on all these indicators and is thus not a high performer by any of these measures.

Disaggregating the building blocks of democracy reveals that different aspects matter for different dimensions of social development. An analysis of the correlations between the 29 GSoD measures and five social development outcomes shows that governance and rule of law are most strongly linked to Basic Welfare and Economic Equality. Indicators such as Absence of Corruption, Predictable Enforcement and Access to Justice (SDG 16.3, 16.5, 16.6) are critical drivers, while procedural dimensions—elections, parliament and rights (SDG 16.7, 16.10)—show weaker correlations. This finding reflects the role of the rule of law in ensuring transparent and equitable resource allocation, safeguarding accountability, and protecting service delivery from corruption or clientelism (Lo Bue et al. 2021). Inclusive social development—Gender and Social Group Equality—also correlates strongly with governance and Rule of Law, but also with Representation (elections, parliaments) and Civil Liberties. This underscores that governance may matter for basic welfare and fairness, but that democratic representation and rights are critical in determining how evenly and inclusively those gains are shared among social groups.

Figure 4.2. Correlation of democracy dimensions with social development outcomes using the GSoD Indices



Source: Based on calculations by International IDEA. 2025. Global State of Democracy Indices, 1975-2024, v.9 [dataset]. Stockholm: International IDEA. Available at: https://www.idea.int/democracytracker/gsod-indices

Despite strong correlations between specific dimensions of democracy and social development outcomes, the relationship is neither deterministic nor uniformly causal. Democratic governance does not inherently or consistently guarantee positive development results. Empirical evidence shows that many democratically elected governments struggle to deliver social development for their citizens, including reducing corruption, advancing gender equality, addressing socio-economic and political inequalities, and fostering sustained employment and economic growth (Fukuyama, Dann and Magaloni 2025).

Public opinion data also shows that a lack of perceived delivery to citizens on social development can contribute to declining trust in democracy (Fukuyama, Dann and Magaloni 2025). The 2024 Afrobarometer shows that, while a strong majority of Africans (66 per cent) continue to prefer democracy, satisfaction with its performance has declined sharply, with only 37 per cent expressing contentment. This erosion of trust is closely tied to perceptions of corruption, poor election quality and unresponsive governance. Although most Africans reject authoritarian rule in principle, many express conditional support for non-democratic alternatives when democratic leaders fail to deliver (Afrobarometer 2024).

A 2023 study by the UN Development Programme suggests that rising support for coups in parts of Africa is driven by a deepening crisis of trust in governments, especially among youth, who see elected leaders as failing to deliver inclusive development, curb corruption or address insecurity. This disillusionment—amplified by economic hardship and global shocks—has fuelled a perception that authoritarian or military alternatives may be more effective in delivering results (UNDP 2023).

Similarly, a 2023 Americas Barometer study shows that support for democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean declined from 68 per cent in 2004 to 59 per cent in 2023 due to widespread distrust in political institutions, persistent corruption, worsening economic conditions and growing food insecurity—leading many to doubt that democratic systems can effectively meet their needs or uphold justice (Lupu et al. 2023).

Even in high-income countries, satisfaction with democracy has declined (from 49 per cent in 2017 to 35 per cent in 2025). In the 12 countries studied by the Pew Research Center (Canada, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the USA), more people were dissatisfied with democracy (64 per cent) than satisfied. Perceptions about weak socio-economic performance drive this dissatisfaction (Wike, Fetterolf and Schulman 2025).

In a study conducted by the Center on International Cooperation, an absolute majority of respondents in all but one of the 12 countries surveyed felt like not enough was being done to address societal divisions (Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies and Center for International Cooperation 2021). When asked what would strengthen their support for democracy, respondents pointed to social development outcomes—more jobs, lower prices, better allocation of public funds, and improved infrastructure such as roads, hospitals, water, electricity and schools (Wike et al. 2024). Hence, democracy is an enabler of social development, but when it fails to deliver, trust in democratic institutions can erode, eroding the social contract and fuelling support for authoritarian alternatives.

2. Pathways between democracy and social development

There is also robust scholarly evidence that democracy and democratization foster inclusive institutions that significantly improve social development outcomes, such as health, education, employment, growth and equality. A key study by Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) shows that countries transitioning to democracy experience long-term economic growth—up to 20 per cent higher GDP per capita within 25 years, driven by increased

investments in health, education and capital. Another study shows that democratic transitions lead to a doubling of social protection spending, improved government transparency and better targeting of welfare policies, which helps reduce inequality (Murshed et al. 2022; Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies and Center for International Cooperation 2021). Evidence also shows that education outcomes in democratizing countries tend to rise with sharp increases in secondary school enrolment, and public spending tends to shift towards primary education, particularly benefiting rural and low-income populations (Acemoglu et al. 2015; Ansell 2005; Stasavage 2005). Democracies tend to achieve lower infant and maternal mortality and longer life expectancy, especially in countries with sustained democratic governance (Gerring et al. 2012; Bollyky et al. 2019; Wang, Mechkova and Andersson 2019). Gender equality and women's empowerment also advance significantly in democratic contexts (Zagrebina 2020; Hornset and Soysa 2022).

In contrast, studies show that autocracies and autocratization correlate with negative development trajectories. For example, autocratizing countries face a 1.3 per cent drop in life expectancy and reduced health coverage, and non-electoral autocracies underperform on HIV prevention, healthcare access and financial protection (Wigley et al. 2020). Inequality, low education investment and weak service delivery tends to be more prevalent under authoritarian rule. Even within autocracies, the mere presence of multiparty elections correlates with improved development outcomes (Miller 2015). In sum, studies show that democracy and democratization tends to offer stronger foundations for equitable development, whereas autocracies and autocratizing countries often lack the institutional checks, transparency and accountability mechanisms critical for delivering inclusive and sustained social outcomes - compounded by unreliable and frequently manipulated economic data (Magee and Doces 2015). Moreover, democracies generally deliver steadier, more predictable economic growth, whereas autocracies (with the exception of China) generally tend to swing between rapid booms and severe collapses (Knutsen 2019).

The rest of this section is dedicated to an analysis of the pathways through which democracies deliver better social development.

Rule of law and corruption control (SDG Targets 16.3 and 16.5)

Effective rule of law—a key feature of robust democracies, which tend to have 62 per cent higher levels of rule of law than non-democracies—enables social development by reducing corruption, ensuring that resources reach the most vulnerable, and fostering equal access to justice within a predictable and accountable legal framework. Empirical studies show that countries with stronger institutions and less corruption (generally democracies) tend to achieve better outcomes in poverty reduction, education and health. Studies also show that reducing corruption correlates with improved public service delivery, economic equality and lower levels of malnutrition (Jenkins 2021; Dwi Nugroho et al. 2022). Access to justice enables marginalized populations to claim entitlements, while legal identity facilitates access to formal employment and education (Mbise 2020). A study of the COVID-19 pandemic showed that democracies managed COVID-19 more effectively and experienced fewer deaths than non-democratic regimes largely because of lower levels of political corruption (McMann and Tisch 2023).

Conversely, weak rule of law undermines social development. Studies show that high levels of corruption divert resources from health and education and incentivize rent seeking over human capital formation (Dridi 2014). Corruption in the health sector leads to inflated costs and the proliferation of counterfeit medical products (Mantegazza 2023). In education, it reduces enrolment rates and diverts public spending (Dridi 2014). Economic growth suffers as business environments

become uncertain and unattractive for investment (World Justice Project 2022). Furthermore, corruption reinforces inequality by allowing powerful actors to monopolize benefits, often at the expense of vulnerable groups (Rabnawaz 2015). The absence of legal protections limits gender equality and economic inclusion (UN Women et al. 2019).

Violence and conflict (SDG 16.1)

Data from V-Dem shows democracies provide better conditions for sustainable peace than autocracies (V-Dem 2023). The presence of violence and conflict directly impedes social development by destroying infrastructure, displacing populations and undermining public trust in institutions. Armed conflict correlates with reduced school attendance, lower human capital formation and long-term economic stagnation (UNDP 2023; Mukombwe, du Toit and Hendriks 2024). Health outcomes deteriorate as systems break down, and communicable diseases spread (Iqbal 2006). Organized crime distorts public spending, diverting funds from education and health towards security (Reynolds and McKee 2010).

On the other hand, societies that prevent conflict and uphold peace benefit from more stable environments conducive to investment and inclusive development. Participatory governance and women's representation in peace processes are associated with longer-lasting peace and more equitable post-conflict recovery (Endeley and Molua 2024). Transparent institutions, by reducing opportunities for illicit activities and ensuring access to justice, are central to creating environments where development can thrive (Sohail and Savill 2008; Spyromitros and Panagiotidis 2022).

Representation and Participation (SDG Targets 16.6 and 16.7)

Elections and inclusive political participation are essential for ensuring accountability, responsiveness and equitable policy outcomes. Electoral competition drives investments in education and health, especially in underserved areas. Elections matter for development outcomes because they create incentives for governments to deliver public goods and social services—such as education, health, infrastructure and social protection—in order to gain or retain voter support. Empirical evidence shows that electoral dynamics, including the threat of being voted out of office, create pressure for redistributive policies and accountability, making elections a central mechanism through which democracy translates into improved social development outcomes (Lizzeri and Persico 2004; Min 2015; Ofosu 2019).

Yet electoral processes are not universally effective. In weak democracies or manipulated elections, participation may not translate into real policy influence. Nonetheless, the introduction of multiparty elections in autocracies suggests that electoral dynamics—rather than full democratic transition alone—can be powerful levers for development (Miller 2015). However, as the correlation analysis showed, while elections can create accountability pressures, they do not guarantee social development unless paired with a strong rule-of-law framework that ensures that public resources are not siphoned off, that rights are upheld, and that institutions remain transparent and responsive. In combination, these legal guarantees are more likely to enable electoral incentives to translate into sustained, equitable service delivery.

Rights (SDG Targets 16.3, 16.7 and 16.10)

As International IDEA's data showed in section 1.2, fundamental rights—such as freedom of expression, association and access to information—are enablers of inclusive social development, particularly for gender and social group equality. These rights also allow citizens to advocate for better services, hold leaders accountable and participate in decisions affecting their lives (Acuña Alfaro 2024).

Where rights are suppressed, however, development tends to be less inclusive, and a weak media and civil society are less able to hold powerholders to account and monitor the effectiveness of service delivery. Violations of rights, including gender-based violence and child abuse, contribute to long-term declines in health, educational attainment and income (UN Women et.al 2019). Environments that do not uphold rights are also less likely to implement redistributive policies or expand access to social services. These findings suggest that civil and political rights are not just intrinsic to democratic systems but also instrumental for achieving inclusive social development. While the rule of law provides the institutional backbone for development and guarantees that rights are upheld, it is rights that anchor inclusiveness, ensuring that the fruits of development are shared equitably across different social groups.

Conclusion

As global development ambitions hang in the balance, the evidence presented in this chapter affirms the instrumental role of democratic governance in driving inclusive and equitable social development, as central to the social contract. The impact of democracy on social development depends not only on the presence of institutions but on their representativity, integrity and inclusiveness. Effective rule of law and corruption control are essential for ensuring fair access to public goods and services. The prevention of violence and conflict provides the foundation for sustained growth and human development. Elections and participatory governance enable citizens to influence policies that affect their well-being. Rights and freedoms ensure all rights are equally protected and create the enabling environment for civic space and inclusive dialogue. Hence, the core elements of democracy—elections and representation, rights, rule of law and inclusive participation—are mutually reinforcing components of the democratic ecosystem, each dependent on the others to generate the legitimacy, responsiveness and distributive capacity necessary to achieve social development.

The evidence is undeniable: the erosion of democratic norms and institutions undermines the very conditions required to advance social development and achieve the 2030 Agenda.

We call on all member states to preserve in the Political Declaration of the World Social Summit 2025 a clear recognition of the intrinsic linkage between democracy and social development and to accelerate urgent action on both fronts. The credibility of our collective efforts depends on upholding this commitment, ensuring that democracy and social development move forward together, with renewed resolve and concrete action.

Chapter 5



Photo credit: Nelson David Alonso Charry

Bridging Quantitative and Qualitative Data and Local Power Dynamics in Collaborative Governance

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Despite more and better data, improved service delivery models and a global agenda for years centred around the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the results of governance reforms remain uneven, particularly for marginalized and minority groups. While SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions) emphasizes the importance of transparent, inclusive decision making, and SDG 5 (gender equality) calls for the empowerment of women and girls in public life, the indicators typically used to assess their progress—such as budgets, service delivery and participation rates—are output-focused and quantitative, failing to capture the power relations and the dynamics of exclusion operating at the local level.

Since early 2024 Results for Development (R4D) has been undertaking so-called governance explorations, built with diverse stakeholders and focused on collaboration and inclusion. These explorations have informed Colombia's just energy transition and the design of a subnational collaborative model to implement territorial development plans in mining areas in Peru.

This chapter reflects on what has been learned so far, what it takes to move from intent to influence, the tensions and challenges that arise when working within entrenched systems, and the conditions that make inclusive governance possible in practice. This chapter argues that, for governance efforts to be truly inclusive, they must:

1. complement quantitative data with qualitative insights into local power structures, social norms and cultural protocols; and
2. embed minorities and historically excluded groups, such as women, Indigenous communities and youth, not merely as data points but as co-owners of governance processes.

1. Collaborative governance and SDGs 16 and 5

Collaborative governance moves beyond consultative tokenism to the co-creation of policy and shared ownership of implementation processes. Its core pillars—trust, legitimacy, durability—depend on recognizing power asymmetries from the outset and acknowledging that through lived experience, communities hold expert knowledge of their local context, opportunities, and challenges. . In the context of SDG 16, collaborative governance demands institutions that not only publish statistics but also foster equitable decision-making spaces. On the other hand, a collaborative governance approach to SDG 5 underscores that gender equality in governance is more than numerical parity; it requires shifting norms and structures that lead to disadvantages for women and minorities.

Similarly, even when it is data-driven, governance faces gaps in capacity and

inclusivity. Recent studies of local government units demonstrate that without qualitative methods—interviews, focus groups, participatory observation—data literacies remain uneven and exclude those without digital access (Yumen 2025). The CARE Principles—collective benefit, authority to control, responsibility and ethics—guide Indigenous data governance. They emphasize that data should serve community well-being, respect Indigenous authority, be managed responsibly and follow ethical practices rooted in Indigenous values (Carroll et al. 2020).

Different studies point out that gender mainstreaming—the systematic integration of a gender perspective across all governance actions—enhances policy quality when backed by sex-disaggregated data and intersectional analysis (OECD 2021). Yet, as feminist institutionalism highlights, institutions themselves are gendered; their informal rules often perpetuate exclusion unless consciously addressed (Grahn 2024).

Governance processes that intend to be truly inclusive require mechanisms to elicit and incentivize collaboration and regular feedback from those who are intimately familiar with the prevailing system and whose active engagement is needed to gradually change prevailing practices that result in exclusion.

2. The Governance Action Hub in Colombia and Peru

The Governance Action Hub, a program of Results for Development, is a lab focused on testing and supporting collaborative governance initiatives and coalitions, globally. When supporting collaborative governance in a new context, the first step is to identify entry points and emerging leadership around responding to a particular challenge or pursuing a shared objective. This step is followed by mapping diverse stakeholders who are not yet participating in existing processes but who are crucial to success, while also seeking to understand, whenever possible, the reasons behind their absence. Such insights can make or break multistakeholder processes; if important local actors are excluded—whether due to geography, politics, tradition or a history of conflict—the collective loses valuable perspectives that could strengthen strategies, deepen understanding of the prevailing system and enable more effective adaptation during implementation. Lessons from the Governance Action Hub's initiatives in Colombia and Peru are discussed below.

2.1. Power dynamics and exclusion in La Guajira (Colombia)

Collaboration with the Universidad de La Guajira made it possible to engage with multiple Wayuu communities in building a collective understanding of how energy communities (entities that community members form to generate and consume their own energy) can be introduced and sustained in the Guajira region of Colombia. Core lessons from qualitative instruments involving local and national stakeholders highlight insights that inform action, by highlighting best approaches to local engagement, and understanding the direction, pace and magnitude of outcomes over time For example, in the specific case of the Wayuu communities:

- Clan-based governance. Early engagement with Wayuu communities led to understand how decision making is at the same time non-hierarchical and mediated by palabreros (traditional mediators). Standard, Western consultation formats risk erasing these norms and deepening exclusion. Thus, more people in a meeting does not necessarily mean more inclusive.

- Gendered leadership. Women in matrilineal clans hold substantive authority, yet external actors often mistake their roles as symbolic. The strategic use of clan legitimacy to negotiate project terms by local women exemplifies grounded female leadership.

- Hidden disparities. Household interviews and clan mapping exercises revealed that many Wayuu families remained without electricity despite large-scale electrification projects—a disparity that standard metrics (e.g. the number of households electrified) failed to identify.

2.2. Building inclusion for territorial development in Cajamarca and Moquegua (Peru)

Both Cajamarca and Moquegua are regions with significant mining activity and a long tradition of citizen engagement, particularly consultations to inform the design and prioritization of local development projects. However, Moquegua has a lower social and economic vulnerability than other regions in Peru, with a high degree of inequality between urban and rural areas of the region, while Cajamarca has many of the poorest districts in the country and is highly rural (Latin American Post 2025).

To ensure the engagement of traditionally excluded populations in governance processes, broad outreach and qualitative data collection has allowed not only the Governance Action Hub but also other key playerss, to better understand the following key dynamics:

- Transactional participation. Stakeholders report that many existing or recent forums are rather 'fire-fighting' spaces devoid of follow-through during implementation. Quantitative attendance records have masked widespread withdrawal when promises went unfulfilled, as well as the dominance of a few local actors that either hold greater relative power at the local level or have more at stake in the discussion compared with minorities, who participated less due to prevailing social norms or who had less confidence in the process.

- Machismo and mobility. Deep-rooted gender norms in parts of the Andes limit women's participation—in some places, even beliefs that women bring bad luck to mining sites persist. Initiatives that seek to empower female leaders in mining communities—such as the Ministry of Energy and Mines' Magic Women (Mujeres Mágicas) project—succeeded in engaging a significant number of women solely by organizing women-only workshops and adjusting meeting times to care schedules.

- Intercultural exclusion. Official minutes in Spanish overlooked the importance of bilingual facilitation in the Aymara and Quechua communities. Qualitative feedback highlighted that formal mechanisms felt performative when cultural protocols were ignored.

3. Integrating quantitative and qualitative data for inclusive governance

The Governance Action Hub team has identified from existing and recent efforts a few key practices and tools that could be useful for integrating data approaches in support of collaborative governance efforts.

Mixed-methods diagnostics

- Quantitative layer. Geographic information systems mapping, service delivery metrics and budget tracking can help to identify disparities, gaps and opportunities to advance equity.

- Qualitative layer. Semi-structured interviews, focus groups and participant observation can help surface hidden power dynamics, cultural norms and informal leadership structures. They can also bring locally relevant solutions to the forefront.

Community-led data governance

- Co-designing data protocols with minority groups can help ensure greater respect for local data sovereignty (CARE Principles).

- Training local data stewards—women, youth and Indigenous narrators—can help build community ownership, strengthen trust, and ensure that data collection and interpretation reflect lived realities and diverse perspectives often overlooked by formal institutions.

Institutional embedding

- The integration of mixed-methods findings into formal planning cycles, with mandated follow-up mechanisms (social observatories, tripartite committees), can help ensure continuous accountability, adaptive learning and more inclusive decision making.

- The establishment of gender and inclusion focal points within municipal and regional bodies can help champion data-informed equity.

Accountability and transparency

- Both statistical dashboards and narrative case studies should be published to combine transparency initiatives with storytelling.

- Public dialogues where communities validate data interpretations and propose corrective actions should be organized.

Conclusion and recommendations

Collaborative governance is not a mere aspiration; it is essential for legitimacy, sustainability and equity. By complementing quantitative data with qualitative insights into power and exclusion, and by embedding those most affected at every stage of governance, institutions will be better suited to deliver on the promise of SDG 16 and SDG 5—transforming data into shared agency and inclusive impact.

To advance collaboration and inclusion in pursuit of SDG 16, local efforts and their supporters should consider:

- conducting power structure analyses alongside data analytics, explicitly mapping who benefits and who is left out;

- institutionalizing mixed methods, reserving budget lines for qualitative research and participatory monitoring;

- empower marginalized voices by embedding representatives of women, Indigenous peoples and youth in data governance bodies;

- align funding models with relational timelines; funders must accept that trust building and co-creation cannot be rushed; and,

- looking beyond established indicators towards more holistic and comprehensive measurements, a perspective that should be emphasized in future development agendas.

Chapter 6



Photo credit: Microgen, Getty Images Pro

How Freedom of Expression and the Right to Information Contribute to Gender Equality and Social Development

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This chapter focuses on media freedom, the right to information (RTI)—or the right to access information held by public authorities (as covered by Sustainable Development Target 16.10)—and advancing gender equality (SDG 5) as vital components of the wider notion of social development. While the evidence shows that women have still not managed to attain equality in terms of either freedom of expression or the right to information, it also demonstrates that both are able to contribute significantly to gender equality and women's empowerment, in other words to the attainment of SDG 5. It is thus important for states, as they work towards making progress generally on the indicators under SDG Target 16.10, to include a specific focus on ensuring equal enjoyment of these rights by women and men in all of their diversity.

This chapter is divided into two main parts, the first looking at these issues from the lens of media freedom, and the second from the lens of the right to information.

Part 1. Indicator 16.10.1: Number of verified cases of killing, kidnapping, enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention and torture of journalists, associated media personnel, trade unionists and human rights advocates (for 2024)

Despite Indicator 16.10.1 being a distinct element in relation to the theme of this chapter —namely, how media freedom and the right to information are essential to ensuring gender equality and sustainable development—it is important to reflect on stark data showing that, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (n.d.a), 2024 was the deadliest year for journalists since the organization began collecting data more than three decades ago.

According to UNESCO's 2024 'Director-General's Report on the Safety of Journalists and the Danger of Impunity' (UNESCO 2024a), killings of journalists, media professionals and social media producers rose by 38 per cent in 2022–2023 compared with the previous two-year period. The report warns that such attacks, particularly in conflict zones, risk creating 'zones of silence' and information vacuums for local populations and the globe.

UNESCO reports that since October 2023 at least 62 journalists and media workers have been killed in the line of duty in Palestine, excluding deaths in circumstances unrelated to

their work, while the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights reports that at least 242 Palestinian journalists have been killed in the same time frame (United Nations News 2025). The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) notes that at least 124 journalists and media workers were killed worldwide in 2024, nearly two thirds of them Palestinians killed by Israel (n.d.a).

There are notable discrepancies between the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the CPJ in the total numbers of journalists killed in Palestine since October 2023, which may be linked to methodological differences.[1] The more formal process that UNESCO is implementing can be slower and may partly explain the misalignment with CPJ data.

Regardless of the source or the variance in figures, even the lower estimates are alarming, prompting 29 member states of the Media Freedom Coalition to issue a statement condemning violence against journalists and media workers and highlighting the exceptionally high numbers of fatalities, arrests and detentions in Gaza (Media Freedom Coalition 2025).

Table 6.1. Comparative data on journalists killed and imprisoned, 2022–2025

Year*	Journalists killed (UNESCO Observatory)	Journalists killed (CPJ)	Journalists imprisoned (CPJ)	Journalists killed (RSF)	Journalists imprisoned (RSF)
2022	88	42 (motive confirmed) 69 (including media workers and motive unconfirmed)	370	63	–
2023	74	82 (motive confirmed) 103 (including media workers and motive unconfirmed)	338	55	513
2024	82	103 (motive confirmed) 124 (including media workers and motive unconfirmed)	362	54	550
2025**	65	47 (motive confirmed) 63 (including media workers and motive unconfirmed)	–	–	–

Sources: UNESCO's Observatory of Killed Journalists, CPJ's data on journalists and media workers killed, Report 2024 ROUND-UP Journalists killed, detained, held hostage and missing (RSF, 2024)

**Databases accessed in August 2025*
*** Data collected up to August 2025*

[1] *The CPJ (n.d.a) verifies cases through at least two independent sources, including interviews with families, friends, colleagues and authorities, to gather as much information as possible about each case. UNESCO records cases of journalist killings flagged by member states, field offices or specialized observers and adds them to an internal monitoring list. It then verifies, through multiple press freedom, media and human rights sources, whether the killing was linked to the journalist's work, such as a reprisal or during an assignment (United Nations News 2025).*

According to the CPJ (n.d.a), 2024 was also a record year for journalists jailed because of their work, with the second-highest total ever recorded—362 incarcerated worldwide as of 1 December 2024 (see Table 6.1 for data comparison). China, Israel and Myanmar were the worst offenders, followed by Belarus and Russia.

UNESCO (2024a) further notes that, beyond physical threats, journalists face mounting financial and legal pressures. A newly identified trend is a 42 per cent rise in attacks on journalists covering environmental issues between 2019 and 2024, underscoring the evolving risks confronting the media. The CPJ also highlights broader patterns of legal harassment, including the targeting of journalists from marginalized ethnic groups, the imposition of disproportionately harsh prison sentences and the use of vague or politically motivated charges such as terrorism, extremism, incitement, defamation and the spreading of so-called fake news. Notably, 11 per cent of all imprisoned journalists in the CPJ's 2024 census were convicted on false news charges.

Taken together, these findings underscore not only the scale of violence and repression faced by journalists worldwide but also the urgent need for stronger international safeguards to protect media freedom as a cornerstone of democratic accountability, gender equality and sustainable development.

Gender dimensions of journalist safety

Turning to gender-specific concerns under Indicator 16.10.01, data from recent years reveal notable trends regarding the safety of women journalists. According to the CPJ database, nearly 20 per cent of the journalists whose killings were confirmed as work-related in 2022 were women. This figure declined to 13.4 per cent in 2023, before rising slightly to 15.5 per cent in 2024 (CPJ n.d.a). Notably, 2024 saw the highest number of women journalists killed while on active duty, with 16 such cases reported (CPJ n.d.a).

A growing body of evidence underscores the alarming prevalence of online violence targeting women journalists (Posetti et al. 2021). In 2024 UNESCO and the International Federation of Journalists conducted a survey of journalists reporting on environmental issues in order to map specific risks, pressures and reporting challenges faced during their work. Out of 905 respondents, women journalists reported higher levels of digital attacks and harassment than men who responded. Eighty-three per cent of women journalists that had experienced attacks or threats while reporting on environmental issues said that these experiences had impacted their mental health (UNESCO 2024a). These findings illustrate the gendered dimensions of such threats, demonstrating how digital technologies and online platforms are being misused to perpetrate harassment and abuse.

Journalism and development

A new publication by UNESCO (Stiglitz, Schiffrin and Groves 2024) presents a compelling case for the critical role of journalism in strengthening democracy, civic engagement and government accountability. The report underscores that public investment in journalism enhances societal trust and yields a measurable impact on the protection and promotion of human rights, as well as in achieving sustainable development outcomes. Empirical evidence from around the world the publication is referring to—including studies in Africa, India, Latin America and the United States—demonstrates that independent media informs citizens, influences voting behaviour and motivates governments to respond to public needs. These studies confirm that media exposure increases political engagement, fosters fairer resource allocation and incentivizes officials to act in the public interest. However, the authors note that these positive outcomes rely on the presence of free, diverse and high-quality journalism, as low-quality, polarized or propagandistic media can

undermine accountability. The UNESCO publication finding highlights the importance of governments and donors paying close attention to the independence and quality of the media outlets they support.

Case study: Africa

Amplifying change—How the media can advance gender equality and social development

This case study illustrates how freedom of expression (SDG 16.10) and access to information intersect with gender equality (SDG 5) in practice across Africa. By examining gender-sensitive journalism and media initiatives, it highlights both the barriers women face and the transformative potential of inclusive media to advance accountability, equity and sustainable social development. Across Africa, media institutions stand at a crossroads: They can either perpetuate inequality or dismantle it. Public-interest journalism can expose abuses, expand civic participation and hold power to account, but fragile funding, underrepresentation of women in leadership and hostile environments limit its reach. Advancing gender equality is inseparable from achieving SDG 5 (United Nations 2015). Across Africa, media institutions occupy a pivotal position in shaping social and political discourse. Their practices can either reinforce structural inequalities or contribute to dismantling them.

When equity is prioritized, the media becomes a catalyst for change. In Nigeria, BBC Africa Eye's 2019 investigation into sex for grades spurred reforms at more than 20 universities by exposing systemic sexual harassment (BBC 2019). In Tanzania, the radio drama Tamapendo, produced by the community organization Uzikwasa reduced community acceptance of child marriage by 22 per cent. In Senegal, rural women mobilized through community radio, such as Guindiku FM, to demand new markets (World Education 2021). In Nigeria, Women Radio 91.7 trains female journalists to investigate corruption and builds financial independence through its EquipHer initiative. Its multilingual programming—over 100 episodes in English, Hausa, Pidgin English and Yoruba—challenges stereotypes and amplifies women's voices in governance and media, including through podcasts exposing workplace discrimination (Egwu 2024).

Other initiatives are strengthening this momentum. In Togo, AfrikElles combines activism and journalism, engaging women traders through its Women in Ecojogging (Femmes en Ecojogging) project—community clean-ups that double as spaces for informal interviews and trust building (AfrikElles Media 2022). In Somalia, Bilan Media's all-female newsroom broke precedent by bringing women's rights coverage to national television for the first time (Bilan Media 2022). Across the continent, the Africa Women Journalism Project (AWJP) has worked with newsrooms to promote gender-sensitive reporting and amplify women's perspectives, particularly in francophone Africa (AWJP 2023). In South Sudan, the long-running radio drama 'Life in Lulu' has fostered dialogue on peacebuilding and equality for more than a decade (BBC 2021). In Kenya, the Nation Media Group increased gender content by 45 per cent after establishing a gender desk (Kassova and Addy 2022). In the digital sphere, Usawa Inc.'s podcast Swaiba: The Audible African Woman tells intimate, accessible stories of young women reshaping politics and workplaces (BBC 2020).

Still, systemic barriers persist. The Global Media Monitoring Project (n.d.) found that women make up just 24 per cent of news subjects and 20 per cent of expert sources, while nearly half of all stories reinforce stereotypes. WAN-IFRA's 2024 study shows women hold only 31 per cent of editorial leadership and 10 per cent of business leadership roles in African newsrooms (WAN-IFRA 2024). Safety is another barrier: UNESCO's 2021 report 'The Chilling: Global Trends in Online Violence against Women Journalists' revealed that 73 per cent of women journalists face online harassment or abuse (Posetti et al. 2021). Promising efforts also collapse without structural support. Uganda's Mama FM, a pioneering women-led station, nearly shut down due to unpaid transmitter costs—evidence that financial fragility can unravel decades of progress overnight (Mama FM 2022). In francophone Africa, the AWJP's 2023 report found that 63 per cent of newsrooms cover gender fewer than five times a month, sidelining women in political and economic reporting (AWJP 2023).

These setbacks highlight why sustainability must be central to reform. When investments endure, the impact is transformative. FarmRadio's review of interactive radio in Burkina Faso, Mali and Senegal found 96.0 per cent of listeners shifted their attitudes towards gender-based violence, 93.5 per cent credited radio with changing attitudes towards women's access to land, 95.0 per cent reported an increase in joint decision making, and 96.0 per cent supported fairer household roles (FarmRadio International 2022).

Cultural context is equally critical. In Senegal, RAES's television series C'est la Vie! is screened in local clubs, with each episode followed by workshops that reinforce lessons on reproductive health, maternal care and gender-based violence (Le Port 2022). In Ghana, UNICEF-backed radio programmes engage caregivers directly in gender-sensitive parenting (UNICEF Ghana 2021), while in Tanzania, the Binti campaign combats child marriage through digital storytelling (UNICEF 2022), complementing Tamapendo's culturally rooted fiction (Innovations for Poverty Action 2023).

Institutional reform is another pillar. The Tanzania Media Women's Association has, for over three decades, embedded gender-responsive policies in journalism and trained generations of reporters (TAMWA 2020). The UNESCO-supported stations Loliondo FM and Dodoma FM further this work at the community level. Across francophone West Africa, UNESCO training programmes have pushed 25 broadcasters to adopt gender equality action plans (UNESCO 2016), while the MediaSahel for Women project equips women in civil society and media with leadership skills to thrive in male-dominated environments (CFI,2022) . In Rwanda, the Gender Monitoring Office provides a policy benchmark for holding media institutions accountable (Gender Monitoring Office 2025).

However, scattered successes are not enough. The fragility of gender desks and the near collapse of outlets like Mama FM show that, without structural support, progress will falter. Sustainable change requires investment not only in stories but also in systems—newsrooms where women lead, governments that enforce equity and donors who build long-term infrastructure rather than funding short-lived projects. As UNESCO's Gender-Sensitive Indicators for Media stress, equity must be embedded at the structural level (UNESCO 2012).

The media's untapped potential lies in its proven, but underutilised, power to create societal transformation when supported by long-term, structural, gender-sensitive investment. When rural women secure market rights through radio, when podcasts normalize female leadership, when investigative journalism reshapes university policies—as in the 'sex for grades' scandal in Nigeria—the media drives transformation. The lesson from decades of African initiatives is clear: gender equality and social development are interdependent, not parallel, pursuits.

As Africa defines its development path, the media must be treated not just as a megaphone for change but as its blueprint. This approach means safeguarding women journalists, embedding equity into newsroom culture and investing in sustainable capacity. The stories we tell do not merely reflect society; they build it. The question is no longer whether the media can drive progress but whether governments, funders and civil society will equip it to do so.

Part 2. Indicator 16.10.2: Number of countries that adopt and implement constitutional, statutory and/or policy guarantees for public access to information.

This part of the chapter focuses on two issues. First, it outlines the latest statistical updates in terms of the adoption and implementation of laws giving individuals a right to access information held by public authorities, or right to information laws. Second, it focuses on how promoting respect for the right to information promotes gender equality, a key aspect of social development.

Progress on SDG Indicator 16.10.2

There are two quite separate aspects to SDG Indicator 16.10.2, namely the adoption and then implementation of right to information laws. In terms of the number of countries with such laws in place, an authoritative source is the RTI Rating,[2] run by the Centre for Law and Democracy. The RTI Rating not only tracks the adoption by year of right to information laws but it also assesses the strength of the legal framework for the right to information based on 61 discrete indicators. Scores are allocated for each indicator, for a possible total of 150 points overall on the RTI Rating.

According to the RTI Rating, no new RTI law[3] was adopted in 2024 or, to date, in 2025 (data current to 31 August 2025), only one was adopted in 2023, and an average of only two have been adopted in each of the last five years. In the almost exactly 10 years since the adoption of the SDGs in September 2015, 30 new RTI laws have been adopted (Figure 6.1), an average of three laws per year.[4] Thus, of the 86 UN member states which lacked RTI legislation when the SDGs were adopted, 56 still do not have laws. If we continue at the pace of the last five years, only 40 new laws will have been adopted over the period of the SDGs, meaning that we will have fallen well short of even the rather modest goal of cutting by 50 per cent the number of countries which do not have such laws over the period of the SDGs.

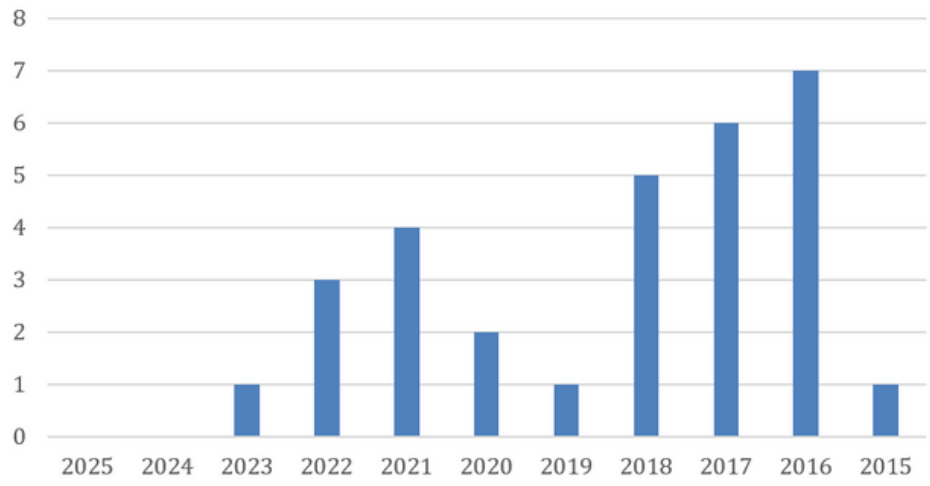
In terms of strength, the 30 laws which have been adopted over the period of the SDGs average 81.5 points out of a possible total of 150 points on the RTI Rating, or about 54 per cent. This score is well below the average score of 86 points, or 57 per cent, among all 140 right to information laws globally, meaning that the trend is that laws are getting weaker, not stronger, as one might hope and expect, given that we know far more about what makes a good law today than we did 15 or 20 years ago. In terms of relative areas of strength and weakness, by far the strongest area for the 30 new laws is in terms of their scope of coverage, at 71 per cent, followed by requesting procedures and promotional measures, both at 54 per cent. The weakest area is sanctions and protections, at 43 per cent, followed by exceptions, at 46 per cent (Figure 6.2).

[2] The home page for the RTI Rating is available at <https://www.rti-rating.org>, while the Country Data page, showing the results of the assessment of laws, is available at <https://www.rti-rating.org/country-data/>.

[3] These laws are also commonly referred to as access to information laws and sometimes freedom of information laws. The core idea of laws which create a right to access information held by public authorities is the same, regardless of the term used. Many civil society activists prefer the term 'right to information' as it incorporates the notion of a right, which is what these laws do achieve.

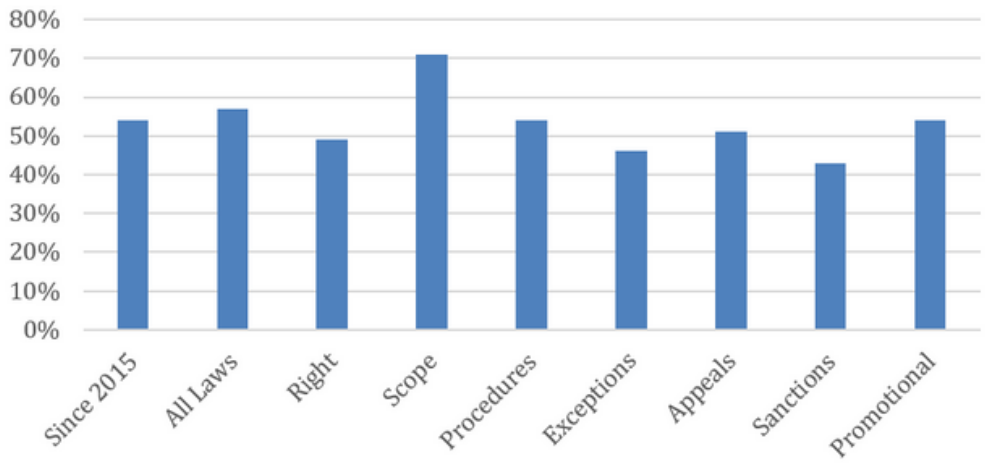
[4] All of the countries which have adopted laws can be found on the RTI Rating here, and the data can be arranged by date of adoption.

Figure 6.1. RTI laws adopted by year since 2015



Source: RTI Rating, [n.d.], <https://www.rti-rating.org>, accessed 14 October 2025.
**Data current to 31 August 2025*

Figure 6.2. Stronger and weaker areas in laws



Source: RTI Rating, [n.d.], <https://www.rti-rating.org>, accessed 14 October 2025.
**Data current to 31 August 2025*

In terms of evaluating implementation, there is still no comprehensive data in this area. However, a number of assessments have been undertaken via the RTI Evaluation,[5] run by the Centre for Law and Democracy. These assessments show a fairly consistent result of 'mediocre', or a yellow grade (out of three possible grades, red, yellow or green),[6] for the countries which have been assessed, with average performance being better in the Central Measures area (which looks at how the oversight system for RTI works) than in the three areas focusing on the performance of individual public authorities (namely the

[5] *The home page for the RTI Evaluation is available at <https://www.rti-evaluation.org/>, while the Evaluation page, showing the results of the assessments, is available at <https://www.rti-evaluation.org/evaluations/>.*
[6] *The RTI Evaluation has a complicated methodology for scoring, but red broadly represents a failing grade; yellow, mediocre performance; and green, good performance.*

Institutional Measures they have put in place and then Proactive Disclosure and Reactive Disclosure).

A far larger number of countries—125 in 2024—were assessed using the UNESCO Survey on Public Access to Information (UNESCO 2024b),[7] which has been accepted by the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on the Sustainable Development Goal Indicators (IAEG-SDGs) as the primary tool for self-reporting by UN member states on SDG Indicator 16.10.2 (UNESCO 2024b: 7). The survey involves eight questions and a possible total of 9 points,[8] and UNESCO reports that in 2024 the average score per region (ranked from top to bottom) was as follows:

Eastern Europe	7 out of 9 (78 per cent)
Asia and the Pacific	6.8 out of 9 (76 per cent)
Latin American and the Caribbean	6.8 out of 9 (76 per cent)
Western Europe and North America	6.6 out of 9 (73 per cent)
Africa	6.2 out of 9 (69 per cent)
Arab States	6.2 out of 9 (69 per cent)

Although the full data is not accessible in a format that can be processed, these results are more modest than those of previous years, with the average score of the top 50 per cent of countries which filled out the survey in 2021 and 2022 being 92 per cent, which is just not credible.[9] However, these scores are still very high as averages. In addition, the individual country scores do not, in many cases, line up with the results of the RTI Rating (noting that five of the eight questions on the UNESCO Survey relate to the legal framework for the right to information).

Only three of the questions on the UNESCO Survey relate to the implementation of laws, and UNESCO's 2024 report indicates that data on some of these questions is limited, stating that 'only a limited number of countries and territories keep disaggregated data on refusals of requests for information', although the number self-reporting on refusals ticked up slightly between 2023 and 2024 (UNESCO 2024b: 10). UNESCO concluded this part of the report by stating: 'Countries must intensify their efforts to maintain accurate statistics, as meaningful progress can only be achieved through effective monitoring and evaluation.' (UNESCO 2024b: 11)

Overall, then, we can conclude that far more work still needs to be done to assess progress on the implementation of right to information laws.

[7] UNESCO's general page for its RTI work is available at <https://www.unesco.org/en/right-access-information?hub>

[8] The eight questions look at the following issues: (1) whether a country has an RTI law; (2) whether the law mandates a dedicated oversight body for RTI; (3) whether public authorities are required to appoint information officers; (4) what powers are allocated to the oversight body; (5) whether the exceptions to the right of access are set out in the RTI law; (6) the types of activities which have been carried out by the oversight body; (7) whether public authorities report on their activities to the oversight body; and (8) whether the oversight body keeps statistics on appeals.

[9] Although the UNESCO report refers to these scores as an 'upward trend' (UNESCO 2024b: 8), this claim does not appear to align with our observations from earlier years, although regional averages were not provided in the 2023 report, and, as noted, we do not have a processible version of the data to compare directly.

Right to information and gender issues

Numerous statements have been made about the importance of access to information for women. Several of the indicators under SDG 5 (achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls), refer to information. Indicator 5.6.2, for example, refers to the number of countries with laws guaranteeing equal access to sexual and reproductive health care, information and education. Target 5.b refers to enhancing women's access to information and communications technology, while Indicator 5.c.1 refers to countries with systems for tracing and making public information about allocations for gender equality and women's empowerment. The 2022 UNESCO report Promoting Gender Equity in the Right of Access to Information refers to a study showing women's interest in the value of information for such things as accessing government services, safety-net benefits, training, loans and housing (UNESCO 2022a: 6). The 2019 Article 19 report Tackling Gender Inequality Through Access to Information talks about access to information to enable women to do such things as understand and exercise their rights (Article 19 2019: 7. And a report by the Africa Freedom of Information Centre (2020) concludes the following:

> Access to information allows women to make more effective decisions; for example, with relation to property rights, education, and jobs, enables women to know and exercise their full range of rights, including the right to be free from violence, helps women to participate more fully in public life, is critical for holding government and service providers accountable and reducing corruption, bridges gender gaps and helps to shift power and provides opportunities for women's increased economic empowerment.

It is important, however, to distinguish between the wider development notion of access to information or development communications, in the sense of ensuring that women can in practice access information which is generally available, on the one hand, and actually using right to information laws to access information to protect the rights of women, on the other hand. Most of the references above focus more on the idea of development communications than the right to information per se.

The UNESCO report does include some recommendations for improving national right to information laws and practice to support women's access to information. In terms of the proactive publication of information, the report has two key recommendations: (a) to ensure that proactive publication obligations cover information which is most relevant to women; and (b) to ensure that proactively disclosed information is appropriately disaggregated by sex. The report also calls for institutional arrangements to be gender-sensitive, including gender balance among information officers and gender parity on information commissions (UNESCO 2022a: 16).

Gender balance has been a significant issue in many countries. For example, a recent report in The Times of India noted that 12 out of 29 information commissions in India have never had a single female commissioner, while a mere 9 per cent of all commissioners who have been appointed since the Right to Information Act came into force in 2005 were women (Pandit 2024). At the same time, RTI Evaluation assessments by partners of the Centre for Law and Democracy suggest that there is a rough gender balance among both commissioners and staff of oversight bodies in Ghana, Kenya, the Maldives, Mongolia and Sierra Leone.[10]

In terms of requests, reports from different developing countries show a marked differential in the number filed by women and men. One report suggested that, from among about 2.3 million RTI requests filed in India from January 2021 to September 2023, only 400,000 were filed by women, compared with 1.9 million filed by men (Newslaundry 2023). A report from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in Pakistan suggested that only 6 per cent of all right to information appeals to the Information

[10] *Project reporting, on file with the Centre for Law and Democracy.*

Commission between 2020 and 2022 were filed by women (Pakistan Press Foundation 2023). The numbers are less stark, but still significantly skewed, when it comes to developed countries. For example, polling in 2021 by mySociety and Opinium suggests that there was a 'gender difference in both awareness and use of [freedom of information], with men having higher awareness than women (68 per cent to 57 per cent), and greater use (16 per cent to 11 per cent)' (Parsons 2022).

One challenge here is the frequent absence of gender-disaggregated data regarding who is making requests. The lack of such data can be particularly challenging given that better practice is not to require requesters to provide identifying information beyond what is needed to respond to their requests, including as to their gender. This practice also means, however, that it is hard to track who is making requests. In their assessment of the Kenyan Access to Information Act, based on the Centre for Law and Democracy's RTI Evaluation methodology,[11] the Kenyan Commission on Administrative Justice noted that 'the absence of gender-disaggregated data on appeals raises concerns about the potential oversight of gender-related disparities in access to remedies' (Commission on Administrative Justice 2025).

As a result, in its report on its session at the Kenyan International Women's Day 2025 Celebration, the Commission on Administrative Justice recommended integrating 'gender, age, disability, and geographic markers into the Public Information Management System' so as to be able to track who is making requests and appeals. While requiring such information is not, as noted above, better practice, where it is available it is obviously useful to study it so as to be able to analyse whether there are gender biases in the processing of requests for information and possibly also appeals. The Commission also recommended allocating dedicated funding for outreach to women, in particular those who are marginalized, as well as the development of key performance indicators (KPIs) to monitor inclusivity in public information efforts, including those directed at women (Turning Point Magazine, 2025).

The issue of promoting gender equality in terms of requests for information has also been taken up in international declarations on the right to information. For example, the Tashkent Declaration on Universal Access to Information, adopted under the auspices of UNESCO by participants at the International Day for Universal Access to Information (IDUAI) in Tashkent on 29 September 2022, expresses concern, in the Preamble, 'about the persistent divides in society in terms of exercising the right of access to information, to the detriment of women and youth', among others. It then calls on member states to take 'effective steps to ensure equal access of all to information, including women, youth and historically disadvantaged groups' (UNESCO 2022b).

On a more positive note, there are also numerous stories about how women and women's groups have used right to information legislation to advance women's equality and to empower women. For example, UNESCO refers generally to the use of the right to information by women to allow 'for more informed, effective decision-making regarding a wide range of areas such as education, land ownership, business opportunities, and health, as well as the promotion and protection of other rights' (UNESCO 2022a).

A 2022 media report from Bangladesh, titled 'Meet the women using RTI to change the face of their neighbourhoods', details a number of powerful stories. Some of the changes that were wrought, directly or indirectly, by right to information requests included the following: (a) getting municipal employees to spray local areas regularly for mosquitoes (after first trying to intimidate the applicant to withdraw her request); (b) improving local waste collection services; and (c) improving local roads and getting manhole covers fixed (Billah 2022).

[11] *RTI Evaluation's methodology is available at <https://www.rti-evaluation.org>*

The Social Architects (n.d.), a non-governmental organization based in Sri Lanka, has a page on its website devoted to RTI success stories, several of which relate to women's empowerment. For example, one story relates how women used the 2016 Right to Information Act to obtain information about the functioning of monthly Rural Development Society (RDS) meetings—where important local development decisions were made, including getting access to funding from central government bodies. Armed with this information, the women were able to gain access to those meetings and thereby have a greater say in the development of their communities (The Social Architects 2023).

In Lázaro Cárdenas, in Chiapas state, Mexico, the local health centre had no doctor present and no medications available. The local group Ixim Antsetic Women's Group (Casa de la Mujer Ixim Antsetic) lodged a request with the Chiapas State Health Secretariat about the situation and discovered that both a doctor and medicines were provided for in the state budget. The community then mobilized, and eventually the services started to be provided (IFEX 2017).

Recommendations

- Further efforts should be made not only to curb the killings of journalists but also the abuse of legal rules and online harassment against them.
- Longer-term support should be made to support the work of women journalists and media which report on issues of concern to women, particularly of a developmental nature.
- Significantly greater efforts should be put into encouraging states which still do not have right to information laws to adopt them and states which have laws to improve implementation of them.
- More support should be provided for proper assessments of the manner in which right to information laws are being implemented
- More attention should be focused on promoting gender equality in the area of the right to information, including by promoting gender equality in the institutional arrangements to deliver the right to information, by supporting women to make more requests for information and by improving gender-disaggregated tracking of the making and processing of requests for information.

Chapter 7



Photo credit: 89Stocker

The Rule of Law and Access to Justice as Core Components of Social Development

Kathryn Grace Hulseman and Hannah Rigazzi, World Justice Project

In 2025, the global community will convene for the Second World Summit for Social Development, while the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development enters its final five years, offering an opportunity for shared reflection and collaboration. The Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development (United Nations 1995), one of the outcomes of the 1995 World Summit for Social Development, affirms that economic growth, social progress and environmental sustainability are interdependent pillars of sustainable development (United Nations n.d.). It sets forth 10 ambitious commitments seeking the eradication of poverty (commitment 2), the achievement of 'stable, safe and just' societies (commitment 4) and the guarantee of gender equity (commitment 5), among other things. The ethos of these commitments is reflected in the 2030 Agenda, specifically SDGs 1 (ending poverty), 5 (gender equality) and 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions), underscoring the continued relevance of these aspirations.

While the themes of the SDGs and the Copenhagen Declaration remain relevant, global progress—particularly towards SDG Target 16.3—remains lacklustre. Research by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) found that, in the first decade of the 2030 Agenda, there was a decline in Target 16.3–related factors and subfactors in the Global State of Democracy Index (Silva-Leander and Sourek 2025), the exact opposite of what one would hope to have seen.

The shifting global context demands a re-evaluation and a new strategy. The development sector is changing, as traditionally prominent donors, including the United States, significantly scale back—or outright eliminate—funding. This reduction in funding comes at a time when the rule of law and democracy are eroding in many countries, while violent conflicts such as those in Palestine and Ukraine are having catastrophic impacts on people and communities. These dynamics and more highlight the urgent need for course correction.

Declines in rule of law and access to justice threaten social development

This chapter focuses on SDG Target 16.3, which aims to promote the rule of law and ensure access to justice for all, and its relevance to social development. The World Justice Project (WJP) conceives of the rule of law as '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' (WJP n.d.).

Not only are they important in their own right, but the rule of law and access to justice are critical elements of social development that can facilitate the achievement of other dimensions of social development.

For example, discrimination and distrust in institutions can prevent victims, especially women, migrants and other individuals living in vulnerable situations, from reporting violence (Hulley et al. 2023). Weak or under-resourced justice systems may contribute to high rates of pretrial detention and delayed case resolution (Heard and Fair 2019). When education and information are inaccessible, individuals are less likely to understand or seek out available dispute resolution options (WJP 2019: 7; Singh 2020: 2423).

In the context of democratic backsliding and erosion of the rule of law, recent crises have further exposed fragile legal systems and deepened inequality in access to justice (Bonini 2017; UN DESA 2024). WJP's Rule of Law Index —a comprehensive data set that evaluates and ranks countries across eight key indicators[1]— finds that, from 2023 to 2024, the rule of law weakened in 57 per cent of the 142 countries surveyed (WJP 2024b). In 59 per cent of countries, checks on government power were eroded, and over 5.4 billion people now live in places where governments have curtailed fundamental freedoms, such as expression, assembly and privacy (WJP 2024b). Three major issues account for much of this deterioration—shrinking constraints on government powers, declining protections for fundamental rights and reduced access to justice (WJP 2024b). Also, weakening judicial and legislative oversight, heightened restrictions on civil liberties and longer delays in justice systems contributed to declines in WJP Rule of Law Index factors 1 (constraints on government powers), 4 (fundamental rights) and 7 (civil justice), respectively (WJP 2024a: 22).

These documented declines in the rule of law and access to justice make the achievement of social development difficult. As reflected in the 10 commitments, the rule of law and access to justice are goals unto themselves (see commitment 4 on stable, safe and just societies) as well as enablers of other facets of social development. The Copenhagen Declaration affirms that 'democracy and transparent and accountable governance and administration in all sectors of society are indispensable foundations for the realization of social and people-centred sustainable development' (United Nations 1995). This affirmation is underscored by recent research; for example, a meta-analysis found a high level of interlinkages in the literature between SDG Target 16.3 and SDGs 1 (no poverty) and 3 (good health and well-being) (Cram 2024). While recognizing these interlinkages is one thing, effectively operationalizing them is key to achieving Target 16.3 and advancing social development.

People living in vulnerable situations are disproportionately impacted by injustice

People living in vulnerable situations continue to bear the brunt of systemic injustice. Women, children, migrants, people with disabilities, individuals living in poverty and those facing health challenges experience deeper and more persistent barriers to justice, health, education and opportunities, reflecting an ongoing failure to fulfil the Declaration's central commitments, such as commitment 2, which demands the eradication of poverty 'through decisive national action and international cooperation' (UN DESA n.d.c).

Despite global improvements in extreme poverty rates since 1995, people who are living in poverty are more likely to face serious legal problems and encounter greater barriers to resolution, deepening hardship and reinforcing cycles of deprivation. These patterns suggest that the justice gap is not only a consequence of marginalization but also a driver of

[1] *The eight key indicators, or factors, on which the WJP Rule of Law Index are based are as follows: (a) checks on government powers; (b) corruption and transparency; (c) fundamental and equal rights; (d) open government; (e) civic engagement; (f) security; (g) business regulation; (h) and the functioning of regulatory, criminal and civil justice systems. More information is available at <https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/about>.*

continued socio-economic exclusion (WJP 2023b).

Despite the Copenhagen Declaration's assertion that the advancement of social development demands the alleviation of gender inequity, commitment 5 remains unfulfilled three decades after it was agreed upon. Gender inequities are persistent in both the dimensions of, and data reporting for, Target 16.3. According to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index, there was only a 0.1-point improvement in the global gender gap score from 2006 to 2024, indicating a 'lack of meaningful, widespread change' (World Economic Forum 2024). Research from the WJP finds that these gender disparities are particularly evident in access to justice. While men and women experience legal problems at similar rates, women face more family-related disputes and greater obstacles to resolving them. Across nearly 70 per cent of countries surveyed, women are more likely to experience economic, health-related or interpersonal hardships because of unresolved legal needs (WJP 2023b).

Health-related vulnerabilities are both a cause and a consequence of legal and social exclusion. Health justice research shows that integrating legal support into healthcare settings can address key social determinants of ill health, such as unsafe housing, a lack of public benefits, employment insecurity and immigration status, all of which disproportionately affect those living in poverty or facing discrimination (Genn 2019). These intersecting challenges are reflected in stark global inequalities: half of the world's population lacks access to essential health services, and nearly 100 million people are pushed into extreme poverty each year due to out-of-pocket health expenses (WHO 2017). Targeting legal services to areas of greatest need and identifying where legal problems are most concentrated can strengthen the infrastructure of justice and support more equitable health and, consequently, social development outcomes (Genn 2019).

Educational opportunity remains unequal despite its importance for social and legal empowerment. Globally, 258 million children and youth are out of school, with rates far higher in the world's poorest regions (Schmelkes 2020). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, students living in vulnerable situations, particularly Indigenous students, students living in rural communities and those living in poverty, consistently scored below national averages and faced higher dropout rates (Schmelkes 2020). The pandemic deepened this crisis: in sub-Saharan Africa, 45 per cent of students had no access to remote learning, and in Latin America, children in the highest levels of poverty may have fallen behind by as much as 88 per cent in terms of their expected progress in 2020 alone (Saavedra 2021).

These inequities have profound long-term consequences, with millions more children projected to fall into 'learning poverty', defined as being unable to read and understand a simple text by age 10, severely limiting their future ability to participate in civic life or assert their legal rights (Saavedra 2021). Literacy enables individuals to access legal information, navigate institutions and make informed decisions about their lives, while the denial of basic literacy reinforces cycles of poverty, exclusion and disempowerment (Amnesty International 2024). Furthermore, legal capability, defined as 'the knowledge, skills and confidence required to participate in legal systems and deal with one's own legal issues', is bolstered greatly by education (Olatokun 2022: 28).

Official Target 16.3 indicators highlight continued challenges

Official data on Target 16.3 reinforces the findings summarized above by highlighting limited progress towards achieving these goals in the decade since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda. The UN Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal

Indicators measures progress on Target 16.3 via three indicators, defined in Table 7.1 (UN DESA n.d.a). As of June 2025,[2] official data reported in the SDG Indicators Database points to significant shortcomings in the provision of access to justice and the rule of law (UN DESA n.d.b).

Table 7.1. Definition of Target 16.3 indicators

Indicator	Definition
16.3.1	Proportion of victims of violence in the previous 12 months who reported their victimization to the competent authorities or another officially recognized conflict resolution mechanism
16.3.2	Unsentenced detainees as a proportion of the overall prison population
16.3.3	Proportion of the population that has experienced a dispute in the previous two years and accessed a formal or informal dispute resolution mechanism, by type of mechanism

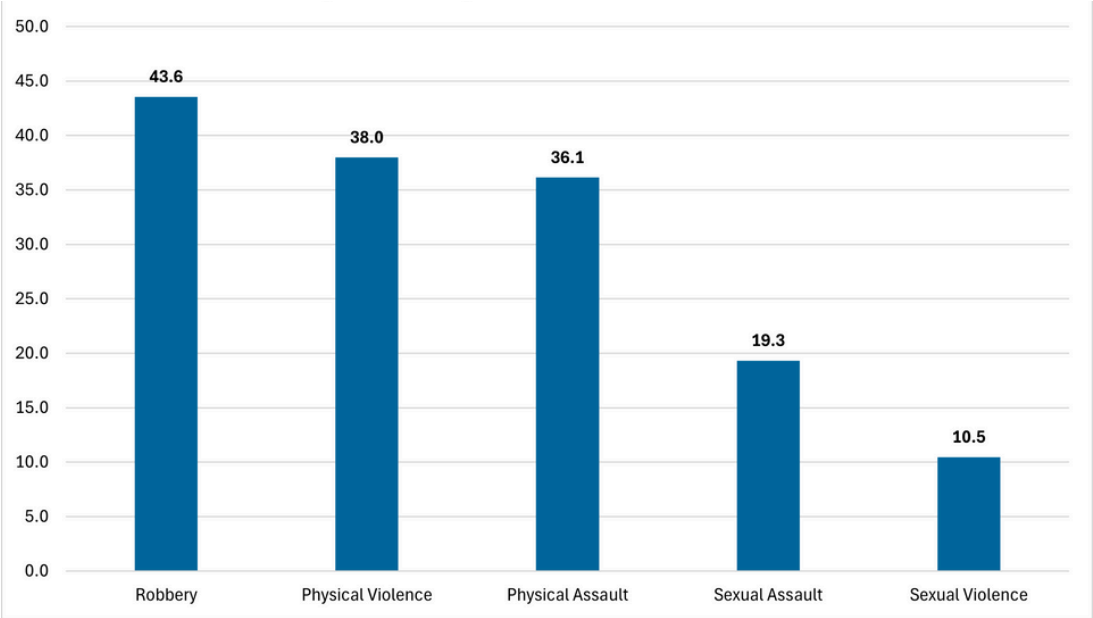
Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), 'Goals - 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels', [n.d.a], <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal16>, accessed 15 July 2025.

On average, crime reporting rates remain relatively low, particularly for problems related to sexual assault and violence. Figure 7.1 presents the average of the most recently available country-level data on crime reporting rates, by type of crime. While more than 40 per cent of robberies are reported to the authorities, less than 20 per cent of sexual assaults are reported. The lowest reporting rates are for crimes of sexual violence: globally, only 10.5 per cent of these crimes are reported to the authorities, indicating that the vast majority are not reported and therefore cannot be investigated or prosecuted. Low reporting rates can be influenced by various factors, including a lack of trust in authorities and stigma around crimes, particularly those that are sexual in nature (Wieberneit et al. 2024: 3750).

When this data is disaggregated by the gender of the victim of the crime, there is no clearly observable trend in gender-based differences at the global level. As illustrated in Figure 7.2, women are more likely to report experiences of sexual violence and physical assault than men are, with differences of +1.0 percentage point and +4.1 percentage points, respectively. On the other hand, men are more likely to report crimes of sexual assault (+1.9 percentage points), robbery (+1.0 percentage point) and physical violence (+7.2 percentage points) than women are. As factors shaping gender-based differences are often context-specific, decision makers should be sure to consider the country context and local factors.

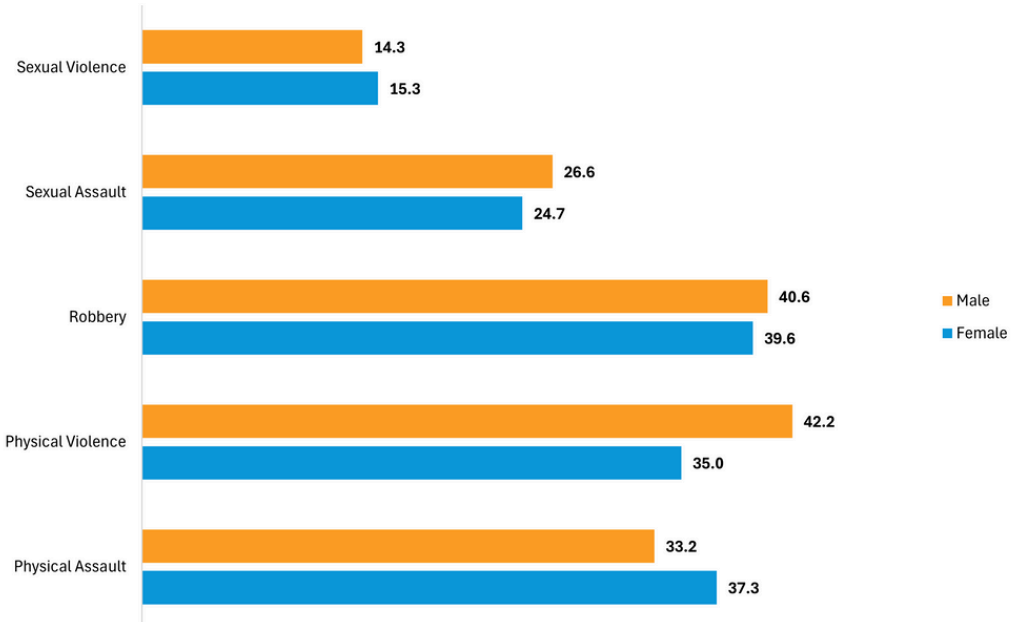
[2] *Data downloaded from the SDG Indicators Database on 27 June 2025.*

Figure 7.1. Proportion of crimes reported to the authorities, by type of crime[3] (global average of most recently available data)



Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), 'Goals - 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels', [n.d.a], <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal16>, accessed 15 July 2025.

Figure 7.2. Proportion of crimes reported to the authorities, by type of crime[4] and gender of the victim (global average of most recently available data)



Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), 'Goals - 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels', [n.d.a], <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal16>, accessed 15 July 2025.

[3] *Note that the crime reporting rate for psychological violence has been omitted from this chart, as only one country has reported data on this form of violence.*

[4] *Note that the crime reporting rate for psychological violence has been omitted from this chart, as only one country has reported data on this form of violence.*

Official data on Indicator 16.3.2 suggests that the prevalence of pre-trial or unsentenced detainment remains almost unchanged since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda a decade ago. Using the most recently available data for each country that has reported to the SDG Indicators Database, an estimated one in three people detained globally have not been convicted of a crime. This figure has remained relatively unchanged in recent years (UNODC 2024: 13). The rate of unsentenced detention is higher among women: 38.3 per cent of incarcerated women have not been convicted of a crime, compared with 33.2 per cent of incarcerated men (UN DESA n.d.b). There are notable regional variations in the prevalence of unsentenced detainment: the highest rate is recorded in Southern Asia, where nearly two thirds of detained persons have not been sentenced (UNODC 2024: 14).

Despite its importance, data on Indicator 16.3.3 remains severely underreported. The newest of the Target 16.3 indicators, Indicator 16.3.3, was adopted in 2020. As of the writing of this chapter,[5] only 10 countries[6] have ever reported official data on this indicator via the SDG Indicators Database, underscoring a critical gap in data on the scale and nature of justice needs globally. This lack of official, disaggregated data obscures the experiences of marginalized populations and hinders evidence-based policy responses. Without a robust data ecosystem, progress on social development is constrained, as equal access to justice is essential for eradicating poverty, promoting inclusion and ensuring the equitable functioning of societies.

Persistent official data gaps impede progress

One of the central challenges for advancing progress on Target 16.3 is the persistent lack of comprehensive official data. As summarized in Table 7.2, the number of countries reporting official data on Indicators 16.3.1, 16.3.2 and 16.3.3 varies notably. The greatest coverage is of Indicator 16.3.2 (unsentenced detainment): a total of 196 countries reported official data at least once, though only about half have provided data disaggregated by gender. This indicator also benefits from the most recent data coverage, with 62 countries reporting 2024 data. In contrast, Indicator 16.3.3 has the least data coverage. Only 10 countries have submitted data and, of those, 7 provided gender-disaggregated figures. The Gambia is the only country among those reporting data on any Target 16.3 indicator that reported data disaggregated by disability. The most recent data on Indicator 16.3.3 is from 2023, with three countries reporting data from that year. The available of data on Indicator 16.3.1 (crime victimization and reporting) varies by type of crime and is disaggregated by crime type. Reporting on psychological violence is extremely limited, with only Belgium having submitted data. In contrast, the most data is available for robbery, with 48 countries having reported data at least once.

Inconsistent reporting and the limited availability of disaggregated data pose major barriers to understanding and addressing people's justice needs and, in turn, to promoting social development more broadly. In the face of this limited official reporting, unofficial data plays an important role in filling these critical gaps.

For example, the WJP Global Legal Needs Survey provides country-level estimates of Indicator 16.3.3 for 62 countries, significantly more countries than official data is available for. The survey data indicates that, in 7 out of 10 countries, more than half of those who needed a dispute resolution mechanism could not access one (WJP 2023a). Furthermore, the survey facilitates analysis of the use of informal or alternative mechanisms; in 40 per cent of the countries surveyed, at least half of resolved disputes were handled outside of formal institutions (WJP 2023a). These findings show how unofficial data sources can illuminate

[5] This chapter is based on data reported to the SDG Indicators Database, which is developed and maintained by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Data was downloaded from the Database on 27 June 2025.

[6] Canada, Colombia, El Salvador, Gambia, Ghana, Nigeria, Peru, South Africa, State of Palestine and Tunisia.

justice realities where formal monitoring falls short.

To advance SDG 16.3 and the broader development agenda, coordinated efforts are needed to strengthen official data collection while recognizing and leveraging the value of unofficial sources. Disaggregated and people-centred data, from civil society, multistakeholder initiatives and other unofficial channels, are essential for identifying gaps, directing resources and designing justice systems that meet the needs of even the most vulnerable populations (WJP 2023b). As both official and unofficial data offer distinct but mutually reinforcing insights, their integration is key to building a complete and accurate picture of access to justice. Governments must lead in producing reliable official statistics while engaging with civil society partners to scale complementary data efforts. A robust, inclusive data ecosystem is not only a technical necessity but a foundation for accountability, equity and meaningful progress across SDG 16 and the entirety of the 2030 Agenda.

Table 7.2. Official data availability on Target 16.3, as reported in the SDG Indicators Database

		Number of countries reporting			
Indicator	**Description***	**Any Data**	**Gender-disaggregated data**	**Most recent year available**	**In the most recent year**
16.3.1	Physical assault	39	51 male, 60 female	2023	8
	Physical violence	26	16 male, 19 female	2024	1
	Psychological violence	1	1	2021	1
	Robbery	48	45 male, 55 female	2023	7
	Sexual assault	27	5 male, 9 female	2023	2
	Sexual violence	16	6 male, 11 female	2023	2
16.3.2	Unsentenced detainment	196	107	2024	62
16.3.3	Access to dispute resolution	10	7	2023	3

Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), 'Goals - 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels', [n.d.a], <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal16>, accessed 15 July 2025.

** Full definitions of the indicators are available at <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/dataportal>*

Conclusion

As the 2030 deadline approaches, the world is falling short on its commitments to justice, inclusion and sustainable development. While some progress has been made, the evidence is clear: too many people, especially those living in vulnerable situations, still face significant barriers that undermine their rights and opportunities. The justice gap remains wide and, without urgent, sustained action to advance access to justice and strengthen the rule of law, the broader goals of the Copenhagen Declaration and the 2030 Agenda will remain out of reach.

As global leaders contemplate the future of the development agenda, they should consider taking the following actions:

- investing in people-centred justice systems at all levels;
- closing information gaps by collecting, publishing and analysing official and unofficial disaggregated data;
- finding innovative ways to identify, understand and address people's legal needs;
- protecting and collaborating with grassroots actors to ensure that people's lived experiences are reflected in policy choices;
- undertaking efforts to better understand how intersecting and overlapping vulnerabilities impact individuals and their ability to access justice;
- standing up for the rule of law by countering authoritarian leaders and promoting democracy;
- reimagining the foreign aid system with an emphasis on sustainable and impactful investments;
- mainstreaming rule of law and access to justice in new development agendas; and
- reviewing and increasing justice budget allocations to best serve people's needs.

While Target 16.3 will likely not be met by 2030, it must not be abandoned. The rule of law and access to justice are catalysts for and enablers of social development, and one cannot be achieved without the other. The aspirations of Target 16.3—and SDG 16 more broadly—should be elevated as foundational components of any future development agenda, ensuring that access to justice paves the way towards a more inclusive, resilient and dignified future for all.

Additional Insights



Photo credit: AtlasStudio

The Importance of Gender-Responsive Approaches to Reducing Violence

Callum Watson, Small Arms Survey

Eliminating violence in all its forms is essential not just to ending conflict but to bringing about positive peace, which can be understood as the absence of structural violence (O'Reilly, Ó Súilleabháin and Paffenholz 2015: 6). Gender-based violence is a form of structural violence rooted in gendered power dynamics and socially prescribed gender roles, norms and expectations. Studies have demonstrated that gender equality, including women's empowerment, correlates with improvements in other human security metrics such as national income, economic growth, access to education and political participation (Cram 2024: 20–21). For this reason, gender-responsive approaches to reducing violence are key to unlocking social development gains by ensuring that diverse groups of women, men and gender minorities can fully participate in economic, social and political activities without fear.

While SDG Target 16.3 strives to end impunity for violence and crime, other targets such as 16.1 seek to prevent violence happening in the first place, while Target 16.4 aims to address illicit financial and arms flows that can create the conditions for violence and crime to take place. Given that (a) armed violence affects everyone; (b) arms can be used to facilitate gender-based violence and other human rights violations; and (c) women and girls are often in vulnerable situations, there may be a tendency to assume that efforts undertaken to achieve SDG 16 automatically contribute to realizing SDG 5. If approaches to SDG 16 are not inclusive and gender-responsive, however, they are unlikely to reach their targets.

Moreover, they may also jeopardize progress towards SDG 5 by reinforcing gender roles that present men as protectors, and women as potential victims. Sometimes termed 'benevolent sexism', these approaches may reduce women's risk of violent death in conflict-related contexts, as they are not expected to serve in front-line roles in conflict or crime response, but at the cost of maintaining unequal power relations that endanger them in their homes and communities through domestic violence and discrimination, for example (Glick and Fiske 1997: 121; Johnson et al. 2024: 5).

For these reasons, it is important to adopt gender-responsive approaches to reducing violence in order to achieve SDG16. An estimated 84 per cent of global violent deaths in 2021 were men, a figure that rises to 91 per cent when it comes to violent deaths committed by a firearm (Small Arms Survey 2023). Ninety per cent of suspected perpetrators of intentional homicide are men (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2023: 23). What these statistics do not capture, however, and what is not currently measured in the SDG framework, is that licit and illicit firearms are often used to facilitate non-lethal forms of gender-based violence and abusive and coercive behaviour, including sexual violence in conflict, even when a shot is never fired (Salama 2023: 23). Data is rarely systematically collected on this topic, but in the United States, for example, 1 million women survivors of intimate partner violence report having been shot at, and 4.5 million women report having been threatened with a gun by an intimate partner (Battered Women's Justice Project 2024: 3).

In other words, activities undertaken under SDG 5, such as Target 5.c on adopting and strengthening sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality, can contribute to creating the necessary conditions for achieving SDG 16. Research by the Small Arms Survey and others would suggest that efforts to engage men within the framework of SDG 5, especially when it comes to understanding links between certain male gender roles and the demand for both licit and illicit weapons (Watson and Shaban 2024) as well as the propensity to resort to armed violence, would be critical to reducing all forms of violence as well as levels of arms trafficking.

For example, a study in North Africa found that rigid gender norms that pressure men into finding a wife and a source of income and providing security in areas where resources are scarce can be exploited for the purposes of recruitment by non-state armed actors (Watson 2023). While violence committed by such actors jeopardizes efforts to further sustainable development, gaps in sustainable development such as economic deprivation, the government's inability to provide basic services like health and education, and poor security and justice provision all constitute risk factors for recruitment (Florquin et al. 2022: 44–45), and the effects of climate change can be a risk multiplier, as lower agricultural yields result in migration and community clashes over resources (Brunero et al. 2022: viii–xi). Women's economic, educational and legal inequality undermines their ability to engage in efforts that could mitigate these gaps and can lead to women's dependency on men engaged in violence (Johnston, True and Benalla 2019: 30–35). Attitude surveys have uncovered rare instances where women show a higher level of affinity towards violent extremism than men (Florquin et al. 2022: 123).

According to another study in Ukraine, there are social expectations that men should be able to use a firearm and that nearly half of Ukrainian men would like to own a firearm. Few women, however, said it would make them feel safer in their household, possibly because they know it carries the risk of domestic violence (Hideg 2023). As men—many with psychological trauma—return from the front lines, this risk may increase. At the same time, women have largely been sidelined from formal peace negotiations, reducing the likelihood that these kinds of security concerns would be reflected in a future peace agreement, thus jeopardizing prospects for sustainable peace and social development (Keshab 2025).

Finally, several studies have also explored how demand to acquire and use firearms may be influenced by music, movies and video games that influence male gender norms in certain societies (e.g. Schöb and Myrttinen 2022). The vast majority of firearms are owned by civilians (Small Arms Survey n.d.), and firearms-related violent deaths in non-conflict settings far outnumber those in conflict settings (Boo and Hideg 2024: 4). For some demographics (especially young men), community-based armed violence ranks among the highest cause of death (Dare et al. 2019). A study in the Caribbean also found that the cost of treating a single gunshot wound was between 3 and 11 times the health expenditure per capita, and would remove a victim from the labour market for nearly two months (Fabre et al. 2023: 140–44). In this way, there is a clear connection between SDGs 5 and 16 and SDG 3 on good health and well-being.

This research demonstrates how SDG 16 can contribute to SDG 5, and how SDG 5 is also a pre-requisite to achieving SDG 16, therefore highlighting the importance of integrating SDG 5 as a cross-cutting goal in order to successfully achieve the targets listed across all of the SDGs. In other words, gender-sensitive approaches are critical to the success of violence reduction efforts.

Conclusion



Photo credit: Jay Mantri

Conclusion

Amanda Sourek and Matteo de Campos Mello Grijns, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions covers a wide range of targets and indicators, each with different implications for social development and gender equality—all vital for achieving the 2030 Agenda. The diverse contributions to this report collectively demonstrate the pivotal role of SDG 16 as a driver of sustainable and inclusive social development, which also advances SDG 5 on gender equality. Together, these goals reinforce one another and serve as building blocks for sustainable development more broadly. At the same time, the deeply interconnected nature of these goals means that failures in respect of one can also hinder progress on the others. For instance, failure to achieve SDG 16 targets can impede pathways towards people-centred social development, which may amplify unequal and exclusionary social arrangements, undermining efforts to advance gender equality and the Sustainable Development Goals.

Overall, this report spotlights several closely linked priority areas that, if not urgently addressed, will continue to hinder social development and impede progress towards the achievement of SDG 16, SDG 5 and indeed the whole 2030 Agenda. These areas include the worldwide erosion of democracy and declining respect globally for foundational democratic rights, the intensification of violent conflicts, rollbacks in funding for civil society organizations and official development assistance (ODA), and the exclusion of minority groups and vulnerable populations—all setbacks that have been exacerbated by the weakened state of multilateralism and global collaboration on the SDGs.

Based on the analyses of specific SDG 16 targets and indicators discussed throughout this report, this concluding chapter summarizes key insights and highlights the main challenges and obstacles to advancing towards achievement of the SDGs. It also provides policy recommendations to promote progress across these interconnected areas.

Erosion of Democracy

The interlinkages between democracy and SDG 16 are well-documented. Several SDG 16 targets reflect core tenets of democracy—including justice, the respect for rule of law and absence of corruption, transparent institutions, participatory and representative decisionmaking, and the protection of fundamental freedoms—indicating a strong correlation between the strengthening of democratic and inclusive governance and the advancement of SDG 16 and the broader 2030 Agenda, including SDG 5 on gender equality. However, the erosion of democratic practices and institutions also means a lack of progress on SDG 16, and consequently other goals.

Stronger democracies have been shown to yield higher levels of basic welfare, equality and institutional integrity, while weak or no democratic governance correlates with poorer outcomes, fragility and exclusion. When democracies fail to deliver on social needs—through corruption, inequality or unresponsive governance—public trust erodes, threatening democratic legitimacy and fuelling support for

authoritarian alternatives. Ultimately, advancing democracy, SDG 16, SDG 5 and social development together is essential to realizing the visions first set out in Copenhagen (1995) and Beijing (1995)—that democracy is an indispensable foundation for the realization of social and people-centred sustainable development.

A few highlights from the chapters include:

- Shrinking civic space and growing anti-democratic movements are undermining public participation, weakening democratic systems, and obstructing progress toward inclusive governance and social development (Chapter 1).

- Democratic systems are far more effective in fostering inclusive social development than non-democratic regimes. On average, democracies achieve 40–47 per cent higher levels of gender, economic and social group equality, provide nearly 30 per cent better basic welfare outcomes, and experience roughly 50% less corruption. Only a few autocratic regimes achieve strong social outcomes and they are considered as empirical exceptions. Among the 74 countries without democratic elections, just five demonstrate high levels of basic welfare, only two show notable gender equality, and only one maintains low levels of corruption. None, however, perform well in ensuring economic or social group equality (Chapter 4).

- While democracy often yields stronger social development, the connection is neither deterministic nor uniformly causal. Many democratic governments still struggle to reduce corruption, promote gender equality, close socio-economic gaps, and sustain economic growth. Public dissatisfaction with these shortcomings has eroded trust in democracy, particularly when citizens feel that leaders fail to deliver tangible improvements (Chapter 4).

- The relationship between governance indicators and institutional trust varies by regime types. In democracies, trust in institutions is primarily rooted in performance legitimacy: trust is more likely to occur when political stability, the rule of law, and corruption control are strong. In contrast, in autocracies and hybrid regimes, institutional trust depends less on participation and more on government effectiveness, not transparency or accountability (Chapter 3).

- Political systems and ideologies deeply influence how gender norms evolve or persist. In authoritarian contexts, patriarchal structures often reinforce state legitimacy, even when formal gender reforms exist. On the other hand, democratic systems tend to foster conditions that accelerate gender equality. Through mechanisms such as free media, civil society engagement, and gender quota policies, democracies create spaces for advocacy, accountability, and public debate—allowing women greater visibility and influence (Chapter 3).

Violence and Conflict

Peace is a necessary precondition for effective and inclusive social development. Progress on SDG 16, which seeks to curb violence in all forms (through Targets 16.1, 16.2 and 16.B), is therefore essential to promoting social development and advancing gender equality. Nevertheless, its realization is undermined by mounting geopolitical tension, which has prompted unprecedented surges in violent conflict and military expenditure worldwide. Over the past five years alone, the rate of global conflicts has approximately doubled and the eruption of violent conflicts in the past decade has engendered thousands of civilian casualties, human rights abuses and widespread displacement, fuelling global instability, which inhibits all forms of development.

Other forms of violence also hinder progress on SDG 16, including violence against women, violence against journalists, political violence, urban violence, among others. Progress towards achieving SDG 16, gender equality and social development is directly influenced by violence and the growing number of conflicts in the world: in violent and conflict-ridden settings, the rule of law generally deteriorates, human capital decreases, arms flows increase and gender-based violence often spikes.

Peace cannot endure without justice and strong institutions, as reflected in SDG 16; however, they alone are not enough to guarantee peace. Member states must respect their commitments to peace under the UN Charter and adopt approaches that minimize trade-offs between expenditure on defence and social development. Some key highlights from the chapters include:

- When it comes to crimes of sexual violence, on a global average, only 10.5 per cent of these offenses are reported to authorities, meaning most incidents remain unreported and go unaddressed. This underreporting can be driven by factors such as limited confidence in law enforcement and social stigma, especially regarding crimes of a sexual nature (Chapter 7).

- Gender equality and women's empowerment are linked to improvements in national income, education, economic growth, and political engagement. Therefore, gender-responsive strategies to prevent violence is essential for advancing social development, as it enables women, men and gender minorities to take part safely and equally in economic, social and political life (Additional Insights).

- Journalists have faced increased violence and repression worldwide, which shows the urgent need for stronger international safeguards to protect media freedom as a cornerstone of democratic accountability, gender equality and sustainable development (Chapter 6).

- Democracies are far more effective than autocracies at sustaining peace, which is essential for social and economic development. Conflict and violence undermine progress by destroying infrastructure, displacing people, eroding institutional trust, and diverting public funds away from essential services like health and education (Chapter 4).

Gaps in Funding

One of the most significant challenges in promoting social development is the alarming fact that funding for development aid and civil society organizations is declining. Civil society actors have reported that funding cuts have severely impacted their work and their ability to deliver on development outcomes, including those linked to democracy, social protection and social cohesion.

Gaps in funding have also been impacted by the growing number of inter- and intra-state conflicts. Global conflicts have disrupted how countries spend on development and defense, leading to drops in ODA to support increased military expenditure. Increased global military investment at the expense of development aid erodes the capacity of both intergovernmental organizations and civil society actors in advancing social development and the SDGs.

Furthermore, the diversion of resources from social priorities—such as poverty reduction, health, education and climate action—is deepening global fragility and undermining multilateral cooperation and social development efforts. This erodes the institutional capacities, trust, and governance structures necessary for peace and justice, thereby impeding progress on SDG 16, the foundation for all other SDGs. Given the concrete interlinkages showing that SDG 16 reinforces all other goals, increasing financial support for SDG 16 should be treated as a priority for the advancement of gender equality, social development and the 2030 Agenda more broadly.

Some key information from the chapters include:

- Many civil society organizations, especially those representing marginalized groups, are struggling with severe funding shortages and financial instability due to widespread aid reductions, limiting their ability to mobilize, assist communities, and respond effectively to crises (Chapter 1).

- Civil society organizations face deep structural and political barriers that limit their access to sustainable funding. Competition among governments, donors, and CSOs—driven by fragmented and siloed funding systems—creates inefficiencies and inequities. This challenge is compounded by restrictive laws such as "foreign agent" regulations, growing military expenditures that divert resources from development aid, and rigid, short-term financing frameworks (Chapter 1).

- Increased military expenditures and reduced ODA are impacting the financial resources needed to meet the SDGs. Redirecting aid away from development priorities undermines social protection systems, particularly for vulnerable populations and low-income countries. This trend is especially harmful because achieving the SDGs requires sustained investment—both in inclusive social progress and in the long-term stability and security that such development generates (Chapter 2).

Exclusion of minority groups and marginalized populations

Women, migrants, persons living with disabilities, and individuals living in poverty face greater barriers to justice, access to information and other social opportunities, impeding social development—a far cry from the objectives set out in the Copenhagen Declaration and the 2030 Agenda's goal to leave no one behind. Discrimination against minorities and marginalized groups has been compounded by the combination of shrinking civic spaces as a result of democratic backsliding and rollbacks in funding for development. Persistent barriers such as gender bias, lack of legal literacy, health and education disparities, and distrust in institutions further prevent those who are marginalized from exercising their rights or seeking remedies.

Several chapters in this report spotlight non-official data, which can complement official, primarily quantitative, data that may overlook specific populations or marginalized groups, facilitating a holistic and inclusive approach towards social development and progress towards achieving the SDGs. To ensure inclusive and effective social development, governance efforts must incorporate qualitative insights and local perspectives from marginalized groups and minorities, including Indigenous communities, women, and youth–those most affected by exclusion.

Some elements discussed in the chapters include:

- Locally driven approaches to managing data, especially those that actively involve women, young people and Indigenous storytellers, can foster stronger community ownership, enhance trust and ensure that both data gathering and analysis capture real-world experiences and diverse points of view that traditional institutions may overlook (Chapter 5).

- A persistent gap remains between global promises on gender equality and the gender-biased social norms that continue to influence everyday attitudes. While many countries have made legal and institutional advances, public perceptions–in particular on women's role in leadership positions and in the workforce–have been slow to change, leaving persistent barriers to both gender equality and broader inclusive governance (Chapter 3).

- Minority groups and marginalized populations, including women, youth and migrants, are often the ones most affected by lack of trust in institutions and biases, which negatively affect how they report violence or crime inflicted upon them (Chapter 7).

- Despite the fact that unequal access to information disproportionately affects women, youth and marginalized groups, there are positive examples of how women and women's organizations have successfully used access-to-information laws to support gender equality and empower women, enabling better decision-making in areas such as education, land rights, business, health, and the protection of other fundamental rights. This shows the need for concrete measures to be taken by governments to enable equal access for all (Chapter 6).

Recommendations for governments, policymakers and other stakeholders

- Invest in accessible, inclusive and well-resourced justice systems that uphold the rule of law, counter authoritarianism, and ensure democracy and accountability at all levels of governance.

- Link equality objectives with governance benchmarks by promoting responsive, transparent and accountable institutions while avoiding symbolic reforms that lack enforcement—thereby fostering public confidence and sustainable democratic governance.

- Increase collaborative governance to better capture power dynamics and ensure that marginalized groups—especially women, Indigenous peoples and youth—are represented in data collection, governance, monitoring and decisionmaking processes.

- Explicitly embed democracy, rule of law, anti-corruption measures and civic freedoms into UN programmes of support for the SDGs, state laws and practices, and policymaking more broadly.

- Expand the collection and use of both official and non-official disaggregated data, so as to better understand people's diverse legal and developmental needs, and overlapping contexts of marginalization, supporting policies which are evidence-based and people-centered.

- Strengthen gender-equality efforts by focusing on legal and representational gains coupled with governance reforms that enhance integrity, service delivery and due process—ensuring that equality translates into tangible improvements in trust and institutional legitimacy.

- Strengthen safeguards against violence, legal harassment and online abuse targeting journalists and other human rights defenders—while providing sustained support for equality for women journalists and gender-equal media, so as to highlight developmental and equality issues.

- Promote the adoption and effective enforcement of right to information laws, ensure regular assessments of their implementation, and promote gender equality by empowering women to access information and improving the dissemination of gender-disaggregated data.

- Align development funding models with the time required for trust building and co-creation, and move toward more comprehensive and people-centred metrics that reflect inclusion, equity and shared accountability.

- Promote public trust by fostering social dialogue among governments, civil society and the private sector, and by institutionalizing citizen feedback mechanisms to help align policy decisions with people's needs.

- Redirect global financial resources towards achieving the SDGs by reversing declining trends in official development assistance, meeting the 0.7 per cent gross national income target for aid, and implementing the commitments made at the fourth International Conference on Financing for Development to reform the international financial architecture and address the debt–development crisis.

- Reinforce rules-based multilateral cooperation by prioritizing diplomacy, trust-building, and science-based dialogue as alternatives to conflict and deterrence, fostering renewed collaboration among governments, multilateral agencies and scientific communities to advance peace, stability and sustainable development.

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SDG16 data initiative