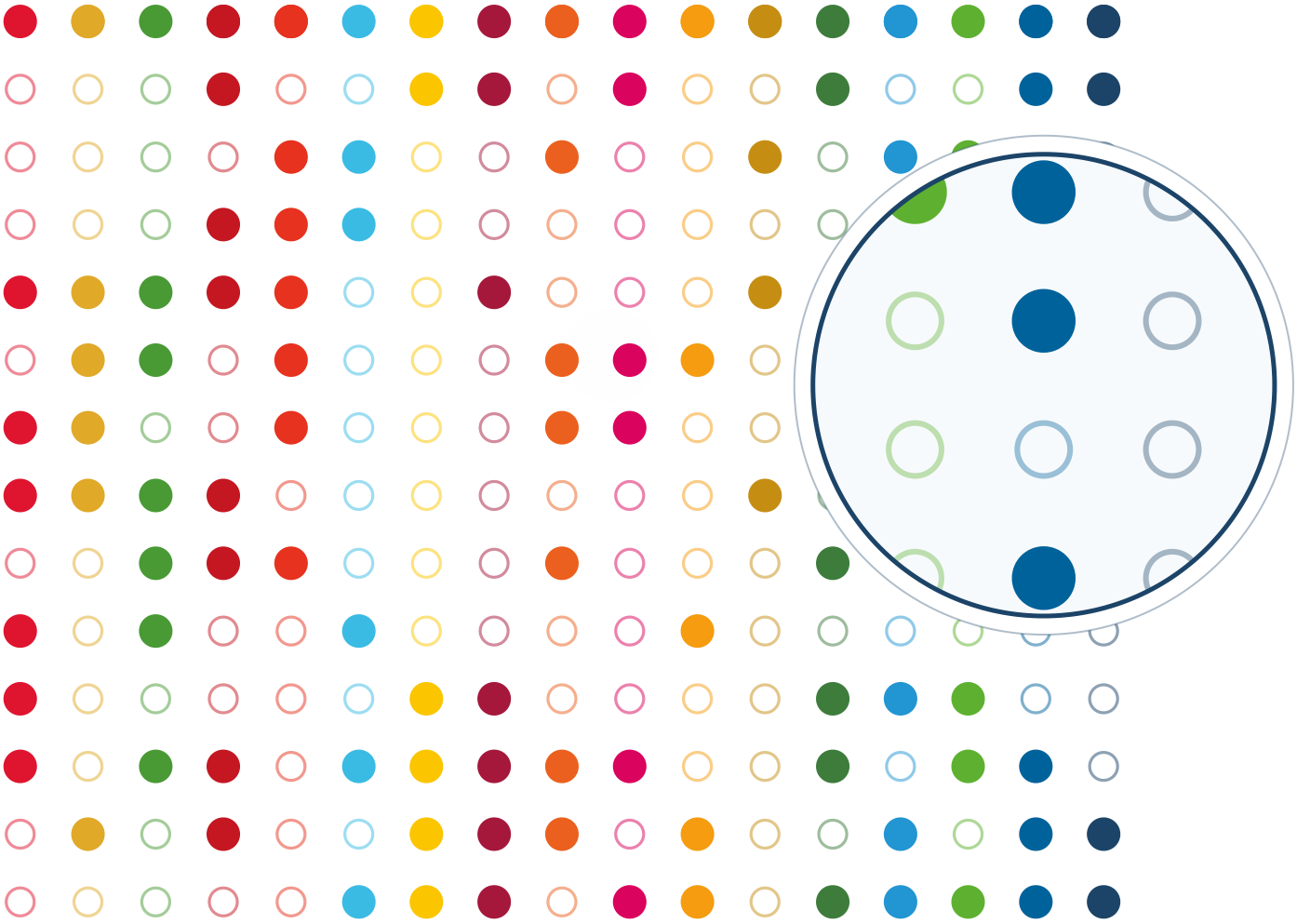
The Countdown to 2030: Leveraging Official and Non-Official Data to Assess Progress and Setbacks on SDG 16

SDG 16 Data Initiative Report 2026



Sustainable Development Goal 16:
Peace, justice and strong institutions


International
IDEA


TAP
NETWORK
Transparency,
Accountability &
Participation for
2030 Agenda


small
arms
survey


ABRAJI


GFMD
GLOBAL
FORUM
FOR MEDIA
DEVELOPMENT

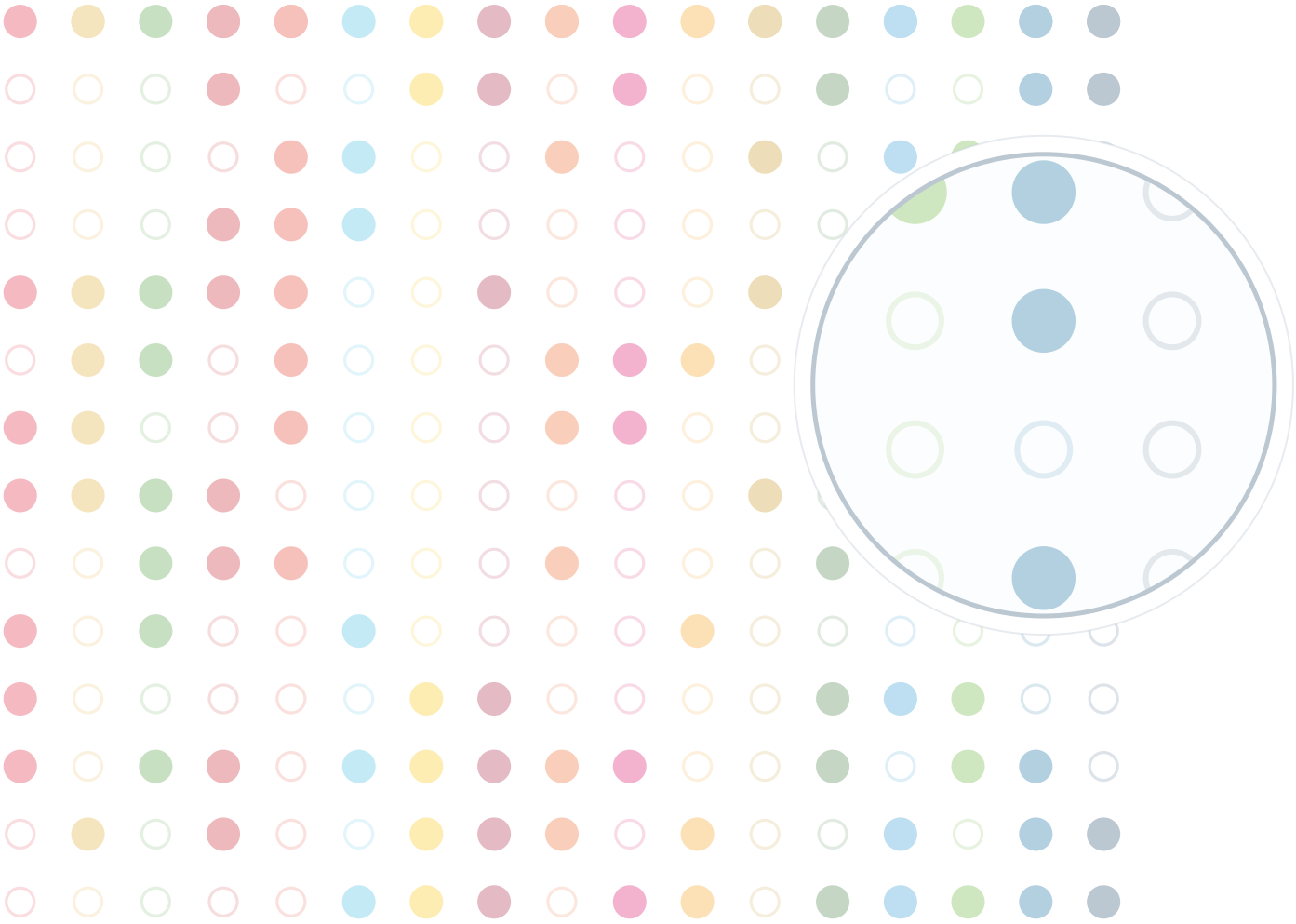

World Justice
Project


SDG16
data
initiative


CENTRE FOR LAW
AND DEMOCRACY

The Countdown to 2030: Leveraging Official and Non-Official Data to Assess Progress and Setbacks on SDG 16

SDG 16 Data Initiative Report 2026



Sustainable Development Goal 16:
Peace, justice and strong institutions

© **2026 International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance**



This publication is independent of specific national or political interests. The views expressed in this report and its individual chapters do not necessarily represent those of International IDEA, its Board, or Council members, the other chapter authors, their organizations, or the members of the SDG 16 Data Initiative.

With the exception of any third-party images and photos, the electronic version of this publication is available under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license. You are free to copy, distribute and transmit the publication as well as to remix and adapt it, provided it is only for non-commercial purposes, that you appropriately attribute the publication, and that you distribute it under an identical license. For more information visit the Creative Commons website: http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/.

International IDEA
Strömsborg
SE–103 34 Stockholm
SWEDEN
Tel: +46 8 698 37 00
Email: info@idea.int
Website: https://www.idea.int

Cover illustration: Veranika Ardytskaya
Design and layout: Veranika Ardytskaya
Copyeditor: Andrew Mash and International IDEA

DOI: https://doi.org/10.31752/69304
ISBN: 978-91-8137-251-9

Contents

6 Abbreviations

7 Acknowledgments

8 Executive Summary

10 Introduction

12 **Chapter 1:** Non-Official Data and the Stories We Tell Amid Crisis: Civil-Society-Driven Progress on the SDGs
Elena Marmo and Malaika Walker, Transparency, Accountability, and Participation Network

23 **Chapter 2:** Looking Back, Driving Forward: The Evergreen Importance of Target 16.3 for Sustainable Development
Kathryn Grace Hulseman and Hannah Rigazzi, World Justice Project

34 **Chapter 3:** Monitoring Illicit Arms Flows from the Field: Insights from the Caribbean and Ukraine
Nicolas Florquin, Small Arms Survey

40 **Chapter 4:** Data Brief: Tracking Progress on SDG 16 Targets (2015–2025) Through the Global State of Democracy Indices
Annika Silva-Leander, International IDEA; data review by Irene Postigo Sanchez

53 **Chapter 5:** Progress on the Right to Information: The Challenges of Monocular Vision
Toby Mendel, Executive Director, Centre for Law and Democracy

63 **Chapter 6:** Beyond Official Statistics: Civil Society Data and the SDG 16.10.1 Monitoring of Attacks Against Journalists in Brazil
Léticia Kleim, Abraji

68 **Chapter 7:** Conclusion: Toward a More Inclusive Post-2030 Monitoring Framework

70 About the Authors

Abbreviations

Abraji	Associação Brasileira de Jornalismo Investigativo (Brazilian Association of Investigative Journalism)
CLD	Centre for Law and Democracy
CPI	Corruption Perceptions Index (Transparency International)
CSPPS	Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding
CSO	Civil society organization
DHS	Demographic and Health Surveys
GSoD	Global State of Democracy
IAEG-SDGs	Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer
ODA	Official development assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
RTI	Right to information
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SDG16+	An expanded framework of peace, justice, human rights and inclusion that combines SDG 16 with related targets embedded in other SDGs
SIDS	Small Island Developing States
SLAPP	Strategic lawsuit against public participation
TAP Network	Transparency, Accountability, and Participation Network
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VNR	Voluntary National Review
WFP	World Food Programme
WJP	World Justice Project

Acknowledgments

This report was conceptualized by the partners of the SDG 16 Data Initiative and coordinated by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) as the report editor. This report would not have been possible without the outstanding contributions from its authors, listed below:

Chapter 1 (Elena Marmo and Malaika Walker, TAP Network); Chapter 2 (Kathryn Grace Hulseman and Hannah Rigazzi, World Justice Project); Chapter 3 (Nicolas Florquin, Small Arms Survey); Chapter 4 (Annika Silva-Leander, International IDEA, with support from Irene Postigo Sanchez); Chapter 5 (Toby Mendel, Centre for Law and Democracy); and Chapter 6 (Léticia Kleim, Abraji).

A peer review was also performed with experts from the SDG 16 Data Initiative partner organizations, civil society, and nongovernmental and intergovernmental organizations. The SDG 16 Data Initiative peer reviewers were (in alphabetical order): Annika Silva-Leander, Irene Postigo Sanchez, Elena Marmo, and Grace Hulseman. The external peer reviewers were Alexandra Wilde (United Nations Development Programme), Margaret Williams (United Nations Trade and Development), and Peter Van Sluijs (Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding).

The SDG 16 Data Initiative would like to thank its 18 partner organizations and guest contributors for their support throughout the years and in the making of the 2026 annual report. More information about the SDG 16 Data Initiative can be found at www.sdg16.org.

Executive Summary

The SDG 16 Data Initiative is a collaborative effort coordinated by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA). It brings together international organizations, civil society organizations, and research institutions to strengthen monitoring of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16. Its annual report draws on complementary data to assess progress, identify gaps in official monitoring, and inform policy responses.

With only four years remaining until the deadline for achieving the SDGs in 2030, progress on SDG 16 remains a cause for concern. Indicators related to peace, justice, effective institutions, civic freedoms, and democratic governance are stagnating or deteriorating across many countries. Meanwhile, persistent gaps in official data limit understanding of progress and setbacks and hinder the development of effective policy responses.

This report demonstrates the critical role of non-official and complementary data in addressing these gaps. Drawing on perspectives from diverse contributors, it shows how combining official statistics with surveys, field research, qualitative evidence, and citizen-generated data provides a fuller picture of SDG 16. These sources also reveal dimensions of governance, justice, and rights that remain largely invisible within official monitoring frameworks. Six key findings emerge.

1. Governance-related dimensions of SDG 16 have deteriorated since 2015. Analysis using Global State of Democracy Indices finds global declines over the past decade in four of the five SDG 16 targets examined: the rule of law, effective institutions, representative decision-making, and fundamental freedoms. Countries experiencing conflict, fragility, and democratic backsliding face particularly sharp reversals, highlighting the relationship between democratic governance and sustainable development.

2. Progress on access to justice remains insufficient, despite significant advances in measurement. The World Justice Project identifies persistent challenges, including high levels of pre-trial detention and limited crime reporting. However, people-centered justice indicators, legal needs surveys, and standardized measurement frameworks have considerably strengthened systems for collecting and using justice data since 2015. These innovations offer practical opportunities to improve accountability, policymaking, and monitoring beyond 2030.

3. Understanding security challenges requires evidence beyond aggregate statistics. Research by the Small Arms Survey on illicit arms trafficking in Ukraine and the Caribbean demonstrates how field research, judicial records, public health data, interviews, and open-source information reveal trafficking routes, proliferation risks, and local dynamics overlooked by official seizure statistics. Future monitoring frameworks must therefore integrate national reporting with localized, context-sensitive evidence.

4. Significant gaps persist between formal commitments and implementation. Analysis by the Centre for Law and Democracy shows that progress in adopting right-to-information laws has slowed considerably, while reliable information about implementation remains scarce. Similar challenges affect other SDG 16 targets, for which measuring the existence of laws and institutions is easier than assessing their effectiveness. Future monitoring must place greater emphasis on enforcement, outcomes, and citizens' lived experiences.

5. Civil-society-generated data and storytelling can strengthen inclusive monitoring and accountability. The chapter by the Transparency, Accountability, and Participation (TAP) Network demonstrates how community experiences, particularly those of marginalized populations, can complement official statistics.

6. Independent monitoring helps reveal threats that often remain invisible in official statistics. Evidence from the Brazilian Association of Investigative Journalism (Abraji) shows how journalists' associations document threats facing journalists, including digital harassment, gender-based violence, and strategic lawsuits intended to silence public participation.

Across these findings, a central lesson emerges: data gaps are not merely technical challenges. They influence what governments, international organizations, and citizens can identify, prioritize, and address. In justice, governance, fundamental freedoms, and civic participation, inadequate data can obscure both progress and deterioration. Complementary evidence can provide earlier warnings of emerging risks, inform more effective responses, and strengthen public accountability.

As discussions advance on the development framework that will succeed the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the report calls for more inclusive, multidimensional approaches to monitoring sustainable development. This requires stronger partnerships between national statistical systems, civil society, and independent data producers, alongside greater investment in innovative measurement methods. It also requires recognizing democratic governance, human rights, civic space, and lived experience as essential dimensions of sustainable development. Combining official and complementary evidence is fundamental to accurately assessing progress and advancing peaceful, just, and inclusive societies.

Introduction

More than a decade after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) remains substantially off track. SDG 16, on peace, justice, and strong institutions, is among the goals facing particularly significant challenges, with stagnation or deterioration across dimensions such as governance, justice, and fundamental rights. In addition, assessing progress is complicated by substantial data gaps. Under 30 percent of the SDG 16 indicators have sufficient longitudinal data to measure progress over time. These limitations make it difficult to identify where advances are taking place, where setbacks are emerging, and where attention is most urgently needed.

Against this backdrop, the SDG 16 Data Initiative seeks to strengthen the evidence base for monitoring progress on SDG 16 by highlighting the contribution of non-official data sources and independent indicators. Such sources serve two distinct but complementary purposes: they help address gaps in official data availability and provide measures of dimensions that are insufficiently captured by the official SDG indicator framework. Together, they contribute to a more comprehensive and nuanced assessment of progress toward peaceful, just, and inclusive societies.

The chapters in this report demonstrate how this work strengthens understanding and monitoring across the different areas covered by SDG 16. The World Justice Project highlights the contribution of independent survey data to measuring access to justice, particularly where official reporting on dispute resolution is limited. The Centre for Law and Democracy shows that understanding progress on the right to information requires attention not only on the adoption of legislation, but also on the quality of legal frameworks and their implementation. The Small Arms Survey illustrates how field research, judicial records, and open-source information can complement official firearms statistics by revealing illicit trafficking dynamics in Ukraine and the Caribbean. Similarly, the contribution from the Brazilian Association of Investigative Journalism (Abraji) on Brazil demonstrates how civil society monitoring can document attacks against journalists, including digital violence, gender-based harassment, and judicial intimidation, that may be overlooked in official records.

International IDEA's analysis addresses a further limitation of the official framework: its relatively narrow coverage of democratic governance. Drawing on the Global State of Democracy Indices, it provides additional measures of electoral representation, political participation, civil liberties, judicial independence, and the rule of law. The Transparency, Accountability, and Participation Network complements these quantitative approaches by emphasizing the importance of qualitative evidence, storytelling, and lived experiences in understanding exclusion, accountability, and the realities of marginalized communities.

Taken together, these contributions underscore the value of an inclusive and multidimensional approach to SDG

16 monitoring. Strengthening official statistical systems is essential, but more comprehensive assessments also require independent indicators, civil-society-generated evidence, and qualitative research. As the international community approaches 2030 and considers the future development agenda, recognizing these complementary contributions more fully, as well as more systematic collaboration with civil society and non-United Nations organizations, will be important for strengthening accountability, informing policy, and ensuring that progress toward peaceful, just, and inclusive societies is assessed in its full complexity.

Chapter 1

Non-Official Data and the Stories We Tell Amid Crisis: Civil-Society-Driven Progress on the SDGs

Elena Marmo and Malaika Walker, Transparency, Accountability, and Participation Network

This chapter examines the growing importance of civil-society-generated data and storytelling in monitoring Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) progress amid shrinking development funding, restrictions on civic space, and widening data gaps. It highlights how lived experiences, particularly those of marginalized communities, can complement official statistics, strengthen accountability, and inform more inclusive policymaking. Drawing on practical examples, it makes the case for greater recognition of and investment in ethical, community-led storytelling to advance SDG16+ and shape the sustainable development agenda beyond 2030.

1.1. Introduction

Data collection efforts have suffered amid the spread of authoritarianism, which has eroded trust in government systems, and dramatic funding cuts to development assistance. The information countries and donors previously relied on is quickly becoming outdated and unreliable for decision- making. Civil society is not immune to these funding catastrophes. As organizations continue to face repression, they too will need to continue to find creative ways to serve their populations, track their impact, and produce material that spreads their message while encouraging both donors and governments to meet their commitments and expand funding.

Storytelling is a necessary component of the evidence base because it provides governments, donors, and civil society with the opportunity to focus on what matters—the people they have committed to serve. Personal reporting provides people with the ability to share lived experiences of their context and exercise their rights over sensitive data collection in a way many marginalized groups are rarely afforded. For these reasons, this chapter explores the role and impact of civil society storytelling as a trusted data source in advocacy, policy creation, and advancing the SDGs, imagining the role it could play in the near future while analyzing civil society efforts to center the most affected communities in storytelling best practices. Rooted in SDG 16's commitment under Target 16.7 to "ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making at all levels," the chapter explores how the use of non-official data sources, including

storytelling, can enhance governance processes and shed light on both the challenges and the roadblocks to SDG progress, and the transformative potential of greater investment in the SDGs, including SDG16+ and beyond.

1.2. Importance of Non-Official and Civil Society Data

Non-official data is a term that describes any data that comes from outside a country's national statistical system or is unverified by the statistical system, such as data produced by the United Nations, civil society organizations (CSOs), research institutions, academia, the private sector, and citizens themselves. It ranges from global surveys (e.g., Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index [CPI] and the Open Budget Survey) and indices (e.g., the United Nations Development Programme's Multidimensional Poverty Index) to personal, qualitative data generated by some of the world's most marginalized people at the local level (e.g., the citizen-generated data project Map Kibera). It also includes data extracted from publicly available (open) datasets to track a specific phenomenon or issue (e.g., Publish What You Fund's Aid Transparency Index and the SDG 16 Data Initiative) and information collated through expert assessments (e.g., CIVICUS's annual State of Civil Society Report). All of these data sources have played a critical role in measuring progress toward the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda, and identifying and analyzing concerning trends and opportunities for greater action. While it is possible for national statistical offices to consider and validate non-official data sources in measuring SDG progress (Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities 2013), by and large non-official data sources are not considered acceptable sources of data for official SDG progress reporting.

There is a compelling case for the creation of an inclusive ecosystem of data production that supports the use of non-official data and data from a broad range of producers. The inclusion of non-official data can not only support better reporting and tracking of progress on the SDGs, but also foster a greater culture of civil society inclusion and civic ownership of the SDGs while strengthening the capacity of civil society actors and national statistical offices alike.

While the 2030 Agenda contains some positive language about creating an inclusive framework for action on sustainable development at all levels, there is insufficient appreciation of the role that non-official data can play in measuring and monitoring the SDGs. The 2030 Agenda states that the SDG follow-up and review process will be rigorous, based on timely, reliable evidence disaggregated by different groups in society, to which non-official data can make a crucial contribution. Indeed, the 2030 Agenda states that, while the global review should be "primarily based on national official data sources," it will also "promote transparent and accountable scaling-up of appropriate public-private cooperation to exploit the contribution to be made by a wide range of data… while ensuring national ownership in supporting and tracking progress." There is therefore a strong foundation for partnership between official and non-official data producers outlined in the 2030 Agenda. As the global community nears the 2030 deadline for the SDGs and places strong emphasis on implementation, this partnership can serve as a tool for better understanding what is and is not working at the highly local level.

Furthermore, the United Nations Statistics Division's Collaborative on Citizen Data penned the *Copenhagen Framework on Citizen Data*, which recognizes that "citizen contributions to data also help overcome the data challenges we face today, such

as invisibility of marginalization in official statistics, lack of trust in institutions and the disconnect between local issues and national policymaking, fostering a more inclusive decision-making process" (Collaborative on Citizen Data 2023: 4). The inclusion of citizen-generated data squarely supports the achievement of **SDG 16.7: Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels.**

An important feature of citizen-generated non-official data is that it can highlight issues that are otherwise "invisibilized" by the lack of available data (see box 1.1). With this in mind, there are many examples of civil society "shadow" or "spotlight" reports, prepared by civil society coalitions in parallel with countries' official Voluntary National Review (VNR) reporting. These reports, especially when prepared by civil society operating in highly restricted civic space environments, can offer important counternarratives and datasets to challenge official reporting that might underrepresent challenges and injustices (see box 1.2).

Box 1.1. **Red Dot Foundation: Barriers to police reporting and perceptions of safety in Greater Manchester**

The Red Dot Foundation undertook a research project to analyze patterns of gender-based violence and reporting behavior among student communities in Greater Manchester, United Kingdom (Red Dot Foundation 2025). The research found that women and LGBTQ+ people reported the highest levels of harassment and the lowest levels of trust in law enforcement among those surveyed. When they experienced harassment or assault, these populations turned to family and friends or mental health services rather than the police, noting a lack of trust in the institution, or a cumbersome reporting process that felt frustrating and unhelpful.

This demonstrates the importance of citizen-generated and non-official data for understanding trends in gender-based violence and identity-based harassment. Where institutions are perceived as untrustworthy, experiences of violence and harassment are likely to go unreported, and are therefore rendered invisible in the formal datasets used by national statistical offices. This also sheds light on the risk that incomplete data can present an overly rosy picture of progress simply because data gaps exist.

Box 1.2. **Belarusian Civil Society Coalition's 2025 Civil Society Shadow Report**

In 2025, the Belarusian Helsinki Committee (BHC) prepared an alternative report on the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 by the Republic of Belarus, and contributed to a coalition report on all the SDGs, developed by representatives of Belarusian civil society (BHC 2025).

While the Belarusian Government prepared and presented an official Voluntary National Review (VNR) in 2025, it systematically excluded civil society actors from its preparation. Civil society's parallel reporting specifically revealed the role of political and social repression in deepening inequality and exclusion, while government reporting presented a progressive picture of SDG progress. In particular, on SDG 16, the civil society report highlighted that while the official Belarusian VNR "focuses on technical legal reforms, omitting political repression," "civil society reality" is marked by an understanding that "no progress on SDG 16 is possible under systemic repression." The report notes that the Belarus legal system functions as a tool of repression, specifically as: (a) there are over 1,150 political prisoners in detention; (b) trials lack due process and trials in absentia have become widespread; (c) nearly 2,000 nongovernmental organizations have been liquidated since 2020; and (d) new laws criminalize nearly all independent cultural, media, or civic activity as "extremism."

The efforts of Belarusian civil society to advance true accountability on the SDGs through shadow reporting (see box 1.2) are not unique, as civil society around the world frequently prepares such reports, despite the lack of official space for their presentation at the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development. Civil society actors have called for formal inclusion of their non-official reporting in future sustainable development frameworks.

1.3. Impact of Global Trends on Data Collection and of Funding Cuts on CSOs

Alarmingly, funding for sustainable development has declined to its lowest level since 2015. In 2025, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) found that official development assistance (ODA) fell to USD 174.3 billion, marking a 23.1 percent decline in real terms compared to 2024, the largest annual drop in the history of ODA. This loss of funding is likely to be detrimental to data collection. As governments continue to pull funding and cut employment from agencies responsible for data collection, tracking advances and accountability on the SDGs becomes increasingly challenging. This is especially relevant to SDG 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions) as SDG 16.6 aims to increase the accessibility, transparency, and accountability of institutions, while 16.10 commits to ensuring public access to information and protection of fundamental freedoms. Without proper funding, relevant and reliable data will not be able to inform constituents, civil society, or decision-makers on the most effective and essential interventions to achieve the SDGs.

Box 1.3. USAID and the Demographic and Health Surveys

One of the starkest examples of funding cuts for sustainable development is the dismantling by the US Government of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). While best known for funding direct development assistance, for decades, programs such as the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) Program conducted survey data collections in more than 90 low- and middle-income countries, tracking trends in childhood and maternal mortality, child health, nutrition, malaria, tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS, anemia, and education, as well as gendered perceptions of these topics. These predominantly qualitative data have been used by governments, civil society, and the United Nations alike, informing the 2017–2018 Pakistan DHS Program on childhood mortality, a new support program for pregnant women, while data from the 2016 Uganda DHS survey on gender-based violence inspired students from Makerere University to create a mobile app to connect survivors to service points. DHS data were also used to track 30 indicators supporting the SDGs, on health, sanitation, and education (Powell et al. 2026). The Brookings Institution has highlighted how the cancellation of DHS funding had an immediate impact: 18 of 25 countries that expected to issue surveys in 2025 had their most recent survey round disrupted (Angola, Burundi, Republic of the Congo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Guinea, Indonesia, Malawi, Mali, Nigeria, Philippines, Rwanda, South Africa, Tajikistan, Timor-Leste, Togo, Zambia, and Zimbabwe). Four surveys were near completion but never finalized (Indonesia, Malawi, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe). Two countries have not held their final dissemination event, so the data have not been made public (Mali and Tajikistan). Five countries—Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, and Uganda—terminated their malaria indicator survey and Nepal halted its Service Provision Assessment, which collects information on health service availability and quality of care (Grown 2025).

USAID employees also worked with national statistics offices on strengthening their skills to design, disseminate, and analyze extensive household and health surveys. The loss of training and data oversight skills represents a threat that the global community has not yet accounted for.

While civil society and international institutions scramble to make up for lost development funding, the silent crisis of destabilized data ecosystems looms in the not too distant future, threatening early reporting programs and the creation of effective policy at the national and international levels. The World Food Programme (WFP) reports that organizations have made tremendous efforts to continue their work, attempting to maintain business as usual in the face of decreased funding. Working with restricted organizational capacity, the WFP continues to release reports highlighting food insecurity around the world, while acknowledging that "Only 800,000 WFP interviews took place in 2025, down from 1.1 million in 2024. Only 18 WFP offices conducted real-time monitoring in 2025, down from 35 in 2022, making it more challenging to target aid in risky, rapidly evolving humanitarian contexts" (European Commission 2026).

While, in some cases, vital data collection persists, quality and adaptability questions arise. This issue is compounded by the modern digital landscape (notably, artificial intelligence), which encourages information replication based on convenience, and often lacks the complexity of analysis that a human-rights-based approach to sustainable development demands (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2019). Civil society, which acts as the fundamental steward for bringing people-centered approaches to sustainable development, faces a multitude of existential threats to its work, most notably shrinking ODA, challenges in accessing funding, surveillance, smear campaigns, restrictive legislation, and attacks on free speech and the media.

The Global Aid Freeze Tracker, launched by Accountability Lab and Humentum to measure the impacts of the US Government's stop-work orders issued in early 2025, found that organizations working in governance, health, and gender were most impacted by USAID funding cuts. Almost 40 percent of organizations reported that they would have to lay off or furlough between 31 percent and 100 percent of their staff. Many organizations have been forced to close outright. The Global Democracy Coalition's 2025 report, *When Aid Fades: Impacts and Pathways for the Global Democracy Ecosystem*, notes that over USD 300 million in USAID awards for democracy research and analysis worldwide was estimated to have been cut, "further shrinking the evidence base that underpins democracy policy and advocacy" and disproportionately impacting the Global South (Global Democracy Coalition 2025: 23). When civil society is unable to continue its work due to funding restrictions, and when the evidence base supported by funding for data collection shrinks, it is subsequently unable to hold governments to their commitments.

The International Center for Not-for-Profit Law notes that authoritarian-leaning governments in Latin America have taken advantage of these closures and financial hardships to continue their attacks on civic space. In El Salvador, Nicaragua, Peru, and Venezuela, organizations report experiencing coordinated negative rhetoric campaigns, often suggesting that CSOs support terrorist and criminal organizations, especially where a CSO has been focused on anti-corruption efforts or the protection of minority rights. These attacks have forced civil society to scale back or adapt its work in these areas as a means of organizational survival, while some CSOs have transitioned to seeking out financial support from local private philanthropy (International Center for Not-for-Profit Law 2025). The pressures placed on civil society to scale back its work mean the loss of critical transparency mechanisms, along with knowledge and learning, creating cascading challenges at a time when there does not seem to be the political will to face them.

The world is experiencing a marked shift toward authoritarianism. The CIVICUS Monitor found in 2025 that only 7.2 percent of the global population lives in countries with free or relatively open civic space, representing the largest ever shift toward restricted access to fundamental freedoms (CIVICUS 2025). While official and unofficial data collection faces challenges and declining funding, the importance of innovative methods for data collection that center local and grassroots perspectives will only increase. Narrative storytelling provides an opportunity for personal ownership that quantitative data often lacks, meaning that the most marginalized voices can be heard, in accordance with the 2030 Agenda's "Leave No One Behind" principle. The emotive nature of storytelling encourages retention of information, while also shifting mindsets.

1.4. The Value of Qualitative Data and Data Storytelling in Narrative Format

Against this backdrop of threats to data collection, this chapter identifies how and why storytelling is valid and impactful, recognizing that storytelling best captures lived realities, particularly when captured, shared, and amplified by CSOs as a trusted recipient and communicator of information. While the global community races to the 2030 deadline for the SDGs with a focus on both implementation and preparing for what comes next, the chapter encourages the global community to invest systematically in bridging the official/non-official data divide, including through the use of storytelling as an undervalued but deeply impactful and respectful tool. This can be of particular importance to work on SDG 16, given the complexities involved in measuring progress and demonstrating the importance of targets related to democracy, the rule of law, civic space, and reducing violence.

The 2025 SDG 16 Data Initiative Report presents a case study of work to merge quantitative and qualitative reporting methods to assess progress on SDG 16 and SDG 5 in Colombia and Peru. The chapter 5 on "Bridging Quantitative and Qualitative Data and Local Power Dynamics in Collaborative Governance" (p. 64), highlights how quantitative methods can fail to capture power relations and the contours of exclusion in communities. Instead, the Governance Action Hub found that "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" (SDG 16 Data Initiative 2025: 66).

Scientific research showcases the value of narrative storytelling in helping audiences to retain and understand critical information when making a decision: "the average impact of statistics on beliefs fades by 73% over the course of a day, but the impact of a story fades by only 32%" (Graeber et al. 2024). This demonstrates the real power of narrative stories in shaping understandings and beliefs, and suggests that when combined with quantitative data, stories can support longer-term recollection. This presents opportunities for the policy community to consider how documenting progress can merge the quantitative and qualitative. According to Graeber et al.:

> Our results also have implications for the communication of statistical information. If policymakers, marketers, or leaders aim to convey statistical information effectively, they may wish to complement it with anecdotes to ensure that the information sticks with the audience. … Moreover, our results suggest that persuaders should factor in the time structure when

> picking their mode of persuasion: if messaging occurs close in time to the audience's anticipated action, statistics and quantitative facts can be more powerful than stories; as soon as a delay is involved, stories trump statistics. (Graeber et al. 2024)

As the 2030 deadline for achieving the SDGs approaches, the data community must think clearly about how best to demonstrate both the transformative impact of investment in action on SDG 16 and its targets, and the real danger of inaction. To this end, the UN Statistics Division has prepared a *Practical Guide to Data Storytelling in Voluntary National Reviews and SDG reporting* to help countries and national statistics offices better tell data stories to their audience. This is particularly relevant for VNRs, as the guide notes, "As a data communicator or a storyteller, statisticians and data scientists put together the narrative—the storyline, the title, the key message(s), the structure, and the language—and tell the data story for the audience. It is a top-down process where data storytellers present the core statistical finding(s) and explain why and how they matter" (UNSD 2022: 12). Further initiatives, such as the *Global Education Monitoring Report 2026: Access and Equity, Countdown to 2030* by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), merge quantitative data collection with personal stories to highlight progress on SDG 4, on quality education. The report suggests, "to understand progress in access and equity, combine data and stories." Using this methodology, UNESCO explores SDG 4's relationship with SDG 16.b, "promote and enforce non-discriminatory laws for sustainable development," articulating their interdependence through narrative stories where data struggles (UNESCO 2026).

Many storytelling tools and frameworks are available to support these efforts, such as The Story of Self, Us, and Now, The Pixar Technique, and Simon Sinek's Golden Circle. The Transparency, Accountability, and Participation (TAP) Network along with Forus International, Alliance for Peacebuilding, and Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (CSPPS) have created the SDG16+ Storytelling Initiative to better understand how civil society colleagues can harness their collective storytelling power to advance action on SDG16+. Importantly, through a series of skills-based workshops and webinars, it has become clear that there are many ethical and safety considerations that must be taken into account when telling stories, particularly on SDG16+ issues. Some of these considerations and best practices are discussed in *Key Takeaways: SDG16+ Storytelling Iniative* (SDG16+ Storytelling Initiative 2026).

1.5. What Does This Mean for Storytelling?

It is clear that storytelling faces many challenges. There is still substantial work to be done in expanding the use and acceptance of storytelling in the minds of decision-makers and the data community. As Sarah Dillon and Claire Craig explain in their book, *Storylistening: Narrative Evidence and Public Reasoning*: "… the persuasive power of stories has contributed to their delegitimization among the modes and models of rationality that have grounded Western democratic norms of evidence and public reasoning, norms consolidated in the Enlightenment, and rooted in rationalistic, positivist, and empiricist traditions" (Dillon and Craig 2021). Many people have been conditioned and educated in a tradition that sees storytelling as inferior to cold hard numbers. This requires a repositioning to a mindset where lived realities and statistics can be seen as complementary rather than dichotomous.

In an ideal scenario, civil society would have the capacity to collect both qualitative and quantitative data in equal measure but, as funding wanes, using the tools that many of us have readily available provides a critical first step toward effecting social change. The impact of storytelling for social change has already emerged through the use of digital and social platforms in movements such as #MeToo and Fridays for Future (Volunteer Connection 2025). However, social media presents a multitude of other challenges at a time when disinformation and echo chambers significantly impact algorithms. Creating an environment where storytelling is valued beside traditional methods of data collection will require the creation of systems where stories have the time, space, and funding to be heard by leaders in forums that do not formally recognize narrative and non-official sources.

Box 1.4. **The Nuclear Truth Project**

The Nuclear Truth Project is a joint storytelling and advocacy initiative, working toward building support and political will for the total abolition of nuclear weapons and redress of associated nuclear harms. Through affected community-crafted protocols, it outlines best practices for "working within, with and alongside affected communities; challenging nuclear secrecy and seek[ing] archival justice; and building community connections" (Nuclear Truth Project n.d.). The storytelling initiative features a multitude of lived experiences and testimonials from populations that have faced the horrors of nuclear weapons. Projects are carried out in a way that allows communities subject to systemic violence, colonialism, climate destruction, and the physical and rippling impacts of conflict to lead and share their own narrative without outside influence or pressure, where institutional demands do not come before the dignity of the person.

In the light of the issues around long-term violence, testing, and exploitation of communities impacted by nuclear harms, the Nuclear Truth Protocols serve as a critical method of institutional accountability for civil society, governments, scientists, medical, and other professionals to work with affected communities in a way that does not cause more harm but instead works to create an open, accountable, and safe environment for relationships that are centered around the Protocols' key pillars: rights, respect, and reciprocity.

View the Nuclear Truth Protocols.

As reliable qualitative data become more difficult to access and organizational strain increases, reliance on storytelling has the potential to be a transformative tool for transparency and change, while acting in a way that ensures respect and accountability to the individuals telling their story, which is critical to ensuring that initiatives are carried out in a way that does not recreate the institutional violence they are intended to mitigate. Tokenistic input from storytellers is not enough. The Nuclear Truth Project shows us that methods for equal contribution to and power distribution over stories are possible.

1.6. Conclusions

In a world facing multiple conflicts and existential threats, where decision-makers and civil society are constantly pressed for enhanced efficiency, it can seem that storytelling is a continued strain. In order to do meaningful work, however, efforts must continue to build the capacity to deeply listen to one another. The power of sovereign and localized stories to stand alongside qualitative data can enhance organizational successes, the perception of initiatives, and decision-making capabilities.

The "Defend: Human Rights, Fundamental Freedoms, and Leaving No One Behind" portion of the Civil Society Declaration on SDG16+ calls on governments to "support and foster an enabling environment for independent media and journalism" as a critical recommendation for advancing SDG 16 and the entire 2030 Agenda (CSPPS 2026: 7). Civic space, media freedoms, and peacebuilders continue to face repressive attacks because they are impactful, and because they have the capacity to expose humanitarian wrongdoing and institute public good that centers individuals and holds institutions accountable to their duties and commitments. Storytelling is an essential tool in carrying on this work. As the global community heads toward the 2030 deadline for achieving the SDGs, storytelling can play a pivotal role in demonstrating why and how the SDG 16 targets and indicators matter in people's everyday lives, and what drives progress toward achieving them. This can help us to strengthen the case for keeping the interconnected priorities of peace, justice, civic space, human rights, and democracy as integral elements of a sustainable development framework beyond 2030.

References

BHC (Belarusian Helsinki Committee). 2025. *Belarusian Civil Society Report on Sustainable Development Goals Implementation*. https://belhelcom.org/sites/default/files/belarusian-cso-report-on-sdgs-implementation-2025_compressed.pdf.

CIVICUS. 2025. *CIVICUS Monitor*. https://monitor.civicus.org/globalfindings_2025/.

CSPPS (Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding). 2026. *Rebuilding Trust in a Time of Crisis: Taking a STAND for SDG16+. 2026 Civil Society Declaration on SDG16+*. https://publicadministration.desa.un.org/sites/default/files/2026%20Civil%20Society%20Declaration%20on%20SDG16%2B_1.pdf.

Collaborative on Citizen Data. 2023. *The Copenhagen Framework on Citizen Data*. https://unstats.un.org/UNSDWebsite/citizenData/events/The-Copenhagen-Framework-on-Citizen-Data-new-design.pdf.

Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities. 2013. *Recommended Practices on the Use of Non-Official Sources in International Statistics*. https://unstats.un.org/unsd/ccsa/documents/practices.pdf.

Dillon, Sarah, and Claire Craig. 2021. *Storylistening: Narrative Evidence and Public Reasoning*. Routledge.

European Commission. 2026. "A Declining Data Footprint." 2 March. https://knowledge-for-policy.ec.europa.eu/publication/declining-data-footprint_en.

European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. 2019. *Data Quality and Artificial Intelligence: Mitigating Bias and Error to Protect Fundamental Rights*. https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2019-data-quality-and-ai_en.pdf.

Global Democracy Coalition. 2025. *When Aid Fades: Impacts and Pathways for the Global Democracy Ecosystem*. https://globaldemocracycoalition.org/when-aid-fades-impacts-and-pathways-for-the-global-democracy-ecosystem.

Graeber, Thomas, Christopher Roth, and Florian Zimmermann. 2024. “Stories, Statistics, and Memory.” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 139 (4): 2181–225. https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjae020.

Grown, Caren. 2025. “An Ode to the Demographic and Health Survey Program.” Brookings Institution, 6 March. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/an-ode-to-the-demographic-and-health-survey-program.

International Center for Not-for-Profit Law. 2025. “Latin America’s Response to a Changing Funding Landscape: What We Are Learning from the Region.” July. https://www.icnl.org/post/analysis/latin-america-response-to-changing-funding-landscape.

Nuclear Truth Project. n.d. “Rights, Respect & Reciprocity: Protocols for Seeking Nuclear Truth with Integrity.” https://nucleartruthproject.org/protocols.

Powell, Josh, Gina Lagomarsino, and Claire Melamed. 2026. “The Data Crisis Following USAID’s Withdrawal: Opportunities to Reimagine Data Systems.” Development Gateway, 8 October. https://developmentgateway.org/blog/the-data-crisis-following-usaids-withdrawal-opportunities-to-reimagine-data-systems.

Red Dot Foundation. 2025. *Greater Manchester Data Report 2025: Data Collected on the Greater Manchester Safety Audit*. https://reddotfoundation.notion.site/Barriers-to-Police-Reporting-and-Perceptions-of-Safety-in-Greater-Manchester-3522e5962d3a802c815bdea12c8a3eed.

SDG 16 Data Initiative. 2025. *Promoting Progress on SDG16 and SDG5 as Pathways to Inclusive Social Development*. SDG 16 Data Initiative Report. https://www.sdg16.org/reports/2025/11/12/sdg-16-data-initiative-report-2025.html.

SDG16+ Storytelling Initiative. 2026. *Key Takeaways: SDG16+ Storytelling Initiative*. https://tapnetwork2030.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/SDG16-Storytelling-Initiative---2025-Key-Takeaways-1.pdf.

UNSD (United Nations Statistics Division). 2022. *Practical Guide to Data Storytelling in Voluntary National Reviews and SDG Reporting*. https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/data-storytelling.

UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization). 2026. *Global Education Monitoring Report 2026: Access and Equity, Countdown to 2030*. UNESCO Digital Library. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000397618

Volunteer Connection. 2025. “10 Digital Activism Campaign Examples.” 7 September. https://www.volunteerconnection.net/10-successful-digital-activism-campaigns.

Chapter 2

Looking Back, Driving Forward: The Evergreen Importance of Target 16.3 for Sustainable Development

Kathryn Grace Hulseman and Hannah Rigazzi, World Justice Project[1]

Cognizant of the rapidly approaching conclusion of the 2030 Agenda, this chapter provides a stock take of Target 16.3 on advancing the rule of law and universal access to justice, and an assessment of the opportunities for continuing to strengthen progress toward this goal up to and beyond 2030. Target 16.3 faces very real challenges—including erosion of the rule of law, stagnation in rates of pre-trial detention, and gaps in data coverage. Notable areas of progress include the overall strengthening of the justice data ecosystem. This chapter argues that Target 16.3 should be treated as a point of departure rather than a conclusion. Post-2030 efforts should resist pressure to settle for easier, less people-centered options. Priorities should include strengthening collaboration among actors, improving use of non-official data and standardized survey tools, emphasizing the importance of disaggregation for understanding differential experiences, and paying close attention to digital access, exclusion, and privacy as artificial intelligence and other technologies reshape justice delivery.

2.1. An Inflection Point for the Global Development Agenda

The current state of the 2030 Agenda is, by most measures, bleak. Only 18 percent of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets are currently on track to be achieved by 2030, and 17 percent have demonstrated only moderate progress relative to projected trajectories. Progress on half the SDG indicators is advancing too slowly to be achieved by 2030, and one-fifth are in decline, a trend compounded by environmental degradation and escalating global conflict (Willige 2025). Constrained funding, the withdrawal of the United States from a leading role on the global stage, and unresolved structural challenges within the United Nations system have collectively exacerbated a slowdown in progress toward achieving the SDGs (Neelam 2025; UNRIC 2026).

The persistence of extreme poverty and critical public health challenges further illustrate the scale of the shortfall. A recent UN report highlights that about 10 percent

[1] The authors thank Daniela Barba, PhD, Director of Research on Access to Justice, WJP, for her guidance and input. The chapter also benefited from the feedback of Annika Silva-Leander, International IDEA, Elena Marmo, TAP Secretariat, and Peter van Sluijs, CSPPS.

of the global population is still living in extreme poverty. Rates of food insecurity and maternal mortality far exceed reduction targets and about a quarter of people globally do not have access to clean water (UNSD 2025). According to one assessment, "the transition to a truly sustainable, prosperous and peaceful future for all feels more like a chimera than a goal within reach," due to continuing poverty, intensifying climate crises and biodiversity loss, and increasing geopolitical tensions (Nature Sustainability 2025: 849).

SDG 16 and its Target 16.3 to promote the rule of law and ensure equal access to justice for all are not exempt from this broader pattern of challenges. Progress on SDG 16 specifically is "significantly off track" (CSPPS 2026). The World Justice Project (WJP) Rule of Law Index® in 2025 found that more than two-thirds of countries (68 percent) experienced a decline in the rule of law, marking the *eighth* consecutive year in which more countries experienced declines than improvements. The primary factors fueling this decline are deteriorating constraints on government powers; shrinking space and weakening mechanisms for civic participation; increasing restrictions on the freedoms of opinion, expression, assembly, and association; and worsening delays in civil justice systems (WJP 2025). An estimated 5.1 billion people, about two-thirds of the global population, lack meaningful access to justice; and 1.4 billion of them are in the justice gap due to unmet civil and administrative justice needs (Chamness Long and Ponce 2019; Barba and Ponce 2023).

The consequences of injustice and erosion of the rule of law are not restricted to Target 16.3. Rather, the rule of law and equal access to justice for all are enabling factors for the entire 2030 Agenda. It is through the rule of law and access to justice that people can wholly engage with society, exercise their rights, and uphold their dignity. Research from International IDEA finds a particularly strong evidence base for the relevance of Target 16.3 to achieving Goal 1 (no poverty), Goal 3 (good health and well-being), Goal 8 (decent work and economic growth), and Goal 13 (climate action) (Cram 2024). Failure to achieve Target 16.3 is having cascading negative consequences on other elements of the sustainable development agenda.

This chapter first discusses the progress made on the official Target 16.3 indicators and the current status of data coverage. Box 2.1 considers the case of The Gambia, one of very few countries to report data on Indicator 16.3.3. The latter sections take a broader perspective, building on the above discussion of the interlinkages between Target 16.3 and sustainable development to discuss how Target 16.3 should be seen as a point of departure rather than arrival. This is followed by an exploration of how the justice data ecosystem has been strengthened in the decade since the adoption of the SDGs. In conclusion, the chapter argues that post-2030 efforts must resist pressure to set aside aspirations in favor of easier options, and instead embrace collaboration as a tool for building on the progress that has been made.

2.2. Target 16.3 Indicators Suggest That Access to Justice Remains Beyond the Grasp of Many

Data on the three official Target 16.3 indicators—measuring crime victimization reporting rates (Indicator 16.3.1), unsentenced or pre-trial detention (16.3.2), and access to dispute resolution mechanisms (16.3.3)—highlight persistent justice gaps. Indicator 16.3.1 offers insights into whether people are reporting their experiences of injustice to the authorities. This provides important context for data on the prevalence of crime and can also serve as a proxy for institutional trust, as people who do not trust the authorities

to effectively or fairly respond to their problems may be less likely to report them. Analysis of official data indicates that people who experience physical assault and robbery are more likely to report their victimization than people who experience sexual assault (see table 2.1) (UNSD 2025).

Experiences of robbery are three times more likely to be reported to the authorities than experiences of sexual assault. However, while the reporting rate for robbery is the highest of the three categories in table 2.1,, it is still quite low. More than half of people who experience a robbery do not report it.

Table 2.1. Average crime victimization reporting rates, by type of crime, according to most recently available national level data

Indicator	% people who reported their experience of crime to the authorities (median)	Number of countries (most recently available figures)
Robbery	45%	45
Physical assault	35%	40
Sexual assault	15%	22

Source: Estimates from United Nations Statistics Division. 2025. *The Sustainable Development Goals Extended Report 2025: Inputs and Information Provided as of 30 April 2025.* https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2025/extended-report/Extended-Report-2025_Goal-16.pdf.

Indicator 16.3.2 measures a relatively common practice: globally, about one-third of all people in prison have not been convicted of a crime. The factors motivating the use of pre-trial detention vary by context but are often related to inefficiency or dysfunction in the justice system, risk averse decision-making, and laws mandating pre-trial detention in cases of certain types of crime (Penal Reform International and Thailand Institute of Justice 2025). In most contexts, the use of pre-trial detention runs contrary to fundamental principles of human rights and can ultimately harm both individuals and societies (Heard and Fair 2019).

Unfortunately, the data indicate that pre-trial detention is no less common today than it was at the commencement of the 2030 Agenda. In 2015, 29.4 percent of people incarcerated globally had not been convicted of a crime, compared to 30.9 percent in 2024. While men and women experience comparable rates of pre-trial detention at the global level, the rate of pre-trial detention for women has increased at a greater rate than that for men, up by 14 percent between 2015 and 2024, compared to a 4 percent increase for men in the same period (UNSD 2025). Rates of pre-trial detention vary notably by country and region. Some of the highest rates reported in 2023–2024 were in Haiti (84 percent) and India (74 percent). In addition, in Gabon, Pakistan, Paraguay, Nigeria, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Sri Lanka, more than two-thirds of detainees were unsentenced. Of the 109 countries that reported data on this for 2024, 21 reported that a majority of detainees were unsentenced (UNSD 2025). Regionally, the highest average rates of unsentenced detention are observed in Central and Southern Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and Oceania, all of which saw a worsening of the problem between 2015 and 2023. The most notable improvement over that time was in Latin America and the Caribbean, where the average rate of unsentenced detention declined from 41 percent to 30 percent (UNSD 2025).

There are insufficient official data available to assess global or regional trends on access to dispute resolution mechanisms (Indicator 16.3.3). Only 11 countries have reported data on this indicator. However, the

WJP has produced non-official estimates for Indicator 16.3.3 for 62 countries using data collected in the WJP Global Legal Needs Survey. These estimates indicate that in 7 of 10 countries, more than half (62 percent) of people who needed a dispute resolution mechanism were unable to access one due to a barrier such as cost, distance, or lack of knowledge (Barba and Ponce 2023).

2.3. Official Data Coverage of Target 16.3 Indicators is Imperfect but Improving

The availability of official data on the three Target 16.3 indicators in the SDG Indicators Database is imperfect (UN DESA n.d.). Only Indicator 16.3.2 (unsentenced detainees as a proportion of overall prison population) approaches global coverage, drawing on administrative prison records available for 198 countries and jurisdictions. Between 100 and 140 countries report data for any given year. However, not all these countries report gender-disaggregated data, which limits understanding of disparities. The number of countries reporting data on Indicator 16.3.1[2] varies notably based on the type of crime. Eighty countries have reported data on crime reporting rates for robberies at least once, but that number drops to 18 for reporting on sexual violence, and only one country has ever reported figures on crime reporting rates for psychological violence. The number of countries reporting data on Indicator 16.3.1 for a given year has never exceeded 40, and the availability of gender-disaggregated data is consistently lower. Data availability is lowest for Indicator 16.3.3 (access to dispute resolution mechanisms),[3] where only 11 countries have ever reported data (see table 2.2).

Table 2.2. Number of countries and jurisdictions reporting official data on Target 16.3 in the SDG Indicators Database

Indicator	No. reporting data at least once	No. reporting gender-disaggregated data at least once	Most recent year available	No. reporting data in most recent year
16.3.1: crime victimization reporting rates				
Physical assault	71	52 men/61 women	2024	7
Physical violence	29	16 men/20 women	2024	6
Psychological violence	1	1	2021	1
Robbery	80	44 men/53 women	2024	6
Sexual assault	27	6 men/10 women	2024	4
Sexual violence	18	6 men/12 women	2024	5
16.3.2: unsentenced detainment				
	196	140 men/144 women	2024	110
16.3.3: access to dispute resolution mechanisms				
	11	8	2025	2

Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. n.d. "SDG Indicators Database." Accessed 26 June 2026. https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/dataportal.

[2] Indicator 16.3.1 measures crime victimization reporting rates, officially defined as proportion of victims of physical, psychological, and/or sexual violence in the previous 12 months who reported their victimization to the competent authorities or other officially recognized conflict resolution mechanisms.

[3] Indicator 16.3.3 is formally defined as the proportion of the population that has experienced a dispute in the past two years and accessed a formal or informal dispute resolution mechanism, by type of mechanism.

While data coverage is imperfect, it has notably improved since adoption of the 2030 Agenda (see table 2.3):

- **Indicator 16.3.1:** Data coverage has improved for all the crime victimization reporting rates, most markedly for crimes related to robbery and physical assault. Between 2015 and 2025, the number of countries reporting data on crime victimization reporting rates for robbery increased by 10, while an additional 17 countries reported data on crime victimization reporting rates for physical assault. The increase is larger for gender-disaggregated figures.
- **Indicator 16.3.2:** In 2015, 187 countries and jurisdictions reported data on unsentenced detention at least once. By 2025, an additional 9 countries had reported data at least once, bringing the total to 196. The biggest improvement here has been the increase in reported gender-disaggregated data. In 2015, 43 countries reported figures for men at least once and 44 countries for women. A decade later, those numbers had more than doubled: 117 countries reported on women and 113 on men.
- **Indicator 16.3.3:** the number of countries reporting official data on access to dispute resolution mechanisms currently stands at 11, while 8 have reported gender-disaggregated data at least once. While it is easy to highlight the drastically lower number of countries reporting data compared to Indicators 16.3.1 and 16.3.2, the novelty of the indicator must be borne in mind. It was only adopted in 2020, and there was no pre-existing data for this indicator as there was for the other two indicators. The indicator is arguably among the newest conceptually and relies on information gathered directly from legal needs surveys, which are much less common than crime victimization surveys—and more focused on the people experiencing the problem rather than the institution that may be used to resolve it. Put in context, the number of countries able to report official data at this point is notable as it can be quite burdensome for statistical agencies to capture this information.

Table 2.3. Number of countries reporting data in the SDG Indicators Database on Target 16.3, 2015–2025 (cont.)

Indicator	All respondents			Women			Men		
	2015	2025	Change	2015	2025	Change	2015	2025	Change
16.3.1: physical violence	7	25	+8	4	20	+16	4	16	+12
16.3.1: physical assault	23	40	+17	9	61	+52	9	52	+43
16.3.1: robbery	40	50	+10	2	53	+51	4	43	+39
16.3.1: sexual violence	5	16	+11	4	12	+8	1	6	+5
16.3.1: sexual assault	21	27	+6	2	10	+8	0	6	+6
16.3.1: psychological violence	0	1	+1	0	1	+1	0	1	+1

Table 2.3. Number of countries reporting data in the SDG Indicators Database on Target 16.3, 2015–2025 (cont.)

Indicator	All respondents			Women			Men		
	2015	2025	Change	2015	2025	Change	2015	2025	Change
16.3.2: unsentenced detainment	187	196	+9	44	117	+73	43	113	+70
16.3.3: access to dispute resolution mechanisms	n/a	11	+11	n/a	8	+8	n/a	8	+8

Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. n.d. "SDG Indicators Database." Accessed 26 June 2026. https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/dataportal.

These improvements in data coverage have real impacts for people. When countries collect and report official data, this supports more informed policies and interventions, connects stakeholders with each other to form valuable partnerships working toward common goals, and increases transparency and accountability. The Gambia is an interesting case study in data reporting on Indicator 16.3.3. Since adoption of the indicator in 2020, The Gambia has reported official data twice, including estimates disaggregated by gender and urban/rural split (see box 2.1).

Box 2.1. Improving data coverage to drive justice in The Gambia

The Gambia is one of 11 countries to have reported data on Indicator 16.3.3 in the SDG Indicators Database. The country reported estimates of access to dispute resolution mechanisms in 2021 and 2025. These estimates are available for the overall population, and also disaggregated by gender, urban/rural population, and, in 2021, disability status.

The data suggest that access to dispute resolution mechanisms has improved in recent years. Between 2021 and 2025, the proportion of those who have experienced a dispute in the past two years and were able to access a formal or informal dispute resolution mechanism rose from 46.4 percent to 66 percent, a 42 percent improvement. Disaggregated data suggest that the improvements are relatively inclusive: over the four-year period, the rates of access to dispute resolution mechanisms increased by 33 percent for men and 48 percent for women. Similarly, both urban and rural access improved, albeit with a notable gap between the two as access in urban areas increased by 28 percent while rural areas reported a 75 percent improvement (table 2.4).

A specific area for improvement remains addressing the persistent gender-based disparities in access to dispute resolution mechanisms. While men and women both saw improvements in their group-specific rates of access, the gap between men and women widened between 2021 and 2025.

This overall improvement is reflected in the WJP Rule of Law Index 2025 factor scores for both Civil Justice (Factor 7) and Criminal Justice (Factor 8), and represents a continued strengthening of The Gambia's judiciary since the 2017 election (WJP 2025; Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2026). Furthermore, the observed trends could suggest that targeted measures, such as projects in partnership with multilateral institutions like those with the International Development Law Organization, the European Union, and the United Nations Development Programme in The Gambia, can drive real change in the SDG 16 targets (IDLO 2023; UNDP The Gambia 2026).

Table 2.4. Proportion of people who are able to access a dispute resolution mechanism, 2021 vs. 2025, The Gambia

	2021	2025	Change (percent)	Change (percentage points)
Overall	46.4%	66.0%	+42.0%	+19.6
Male	52.0%	69.3%	+33.0%	+17.3
Female	41.9%	62.2%	+48.0%	+20.3
Urban	47.5%	60.9%	+28.0%	+13.4
Rural	43.3%	76.1%	+76.0%	+32.8

Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. n.d. "SDG Indicators Database." Accessed 26 June 2026. https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/dataportal.

2.4. The Target 16.3 Indicators as a Point of Departure, Not a Conclusion

In taking stock of Target 16.3, it is easy to focus on the shortcomings. The challenges are real, but it is important to view Target 16.3 as a starting point for advancing justice and inclusion, rather than the end goal. As it stands, the indicators would benefit from being more people-centered: two of the three (Indicators 16.3.1 and 16.3.2) are derived from administrative data, while Indicator 16.3.3 offers limited insights into people's justice journeys.

Where possible, decision-makers should also consider whether and how people access other types of justice services, the rates at which problems are resolved, and the consequences and co-occurrence of problems. Information relevant to understanding access to justice in the criminal space includes the fairness and expediency of trials, the treatment of detainees, and recidivism rates, to name just a few. Importantly, decision-makers should also look to other SDG 16 targets that capture components of the rule of law to cultivate a more complete understanding. For example, Targets 16.4 and 16.5 assess corruption, and order and security. Non-official data from the WJP Rule of Law Index complements these measures through a more comprehensive evaluation of the rule of law as ensuring "accountability, just law, open government, and accessible and impartial justice" (WJP n.d.).

Viewing the Target 16.3 indicators as a departure point opens the door to continued evaluation and improvement of what is measured and how. As we move toward and beyond the 2030 Agenda, future measurement efforts would benefit from the adoption of new and non-official measurement frameworks, such as those described below.

2.5. Successes in Strengthening the Justice Data Ecosystem

Perhaps one of the clearest successes of Target 16.3 is the analytical infrastructure it has generated, specifically with regard to measuring access to justice in a people-centered way. The adoption of Indicator 16.3.3 in 2020 expanded the scope of the Target 16.3 indicators to include civil dispute resolution. Informed by data on people's experiences, rather than administrative data, and accounting specifically for people who *needed* a dispute resolution mechanism rather than only those who could access one, Indicator 16.3.3 is arguably the most people-centered of the three official indicators. Its adoption as an official indicator reflects a substantive commitment to understanding and addressing the justice gap.

Recognizing the need for better data to monitor progress on this and other SDG 16

indicators, the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights collaborated on the SDG 16 Survey Initiative, producing a survey module that actors can implement in their own contexts (UNDP et al. 2022). Such a tool reduces the barriers to data gathering while also strengthening data quality by standardizing the collection of information. Recently, the WJP supported the development of a Measurement Framework for People-Centred Justice Systems,[4] which seeks to address the "data-rich but information-poor" reality of many justice systems through a standardized approach to leveraging data to inform policy (de Langen et al. 2026: 7). The WJP has operationalized the outcome indicators from this framework to evaluate people's justice needs across reform contexts in England and Wales, demonstrating the policy value of such a measurement approach (Barba et al. forthcoming 2026). In addition, the SDG 16 Data Initiative in and of itself reflects the importance of monitoring the official data landscape and contributing to it with informal data. This project is an example of the combination of the two data streams leading to a richer and more complete understanding of indicators related to SDG 16.

2.6. The 2030 Fulcrum for People-Centered Justice

An evaluation of the current status of Target 16.3 finds both successes and shortcomings. Data coverage has improved but there are still notable gaps, particularly with regard to the availability of disaggregated data, which are crucial for understanding disparate experiences. Existing official data suggest slow or stagnant progress at the global level, and non-official sources find continued erosion of the rule of law in a majority of countries. These are genuine issues that the global community must reckon with urgently, as injustice has immediate and tangible impacts on people and communities, often with sustained consequences. As the conclusion of the 2030 Agenda approaches, many efforts to take stock of its impact are likely to highlight challenges such as these—as they should. However, these challenges should not be seen as a reason to dismiss Target 16.3, but rather as a reason to reaffirm the importance of advancing people-centered justice through data-driven and evidence-based policies in the post-2030 era.

Collaboration among public and private actors, including civil society, will be an essential tactic for addressing gaps in data coverage. Measuring Indicator 16.3.3 might seem particularly burdensome as it requires information often gathered through resource-intensive legal needs surveys. Embracing non-official data, such as data gathered via the WJP Global Legal Needs Survey, and using tools such as the SDG 16 Survey Initiative's survey module can help decision-makers access the information they need. Emphasis on disaggregated data, such as The Gambia's gender- and urban/rural-disaggregated data discussed above, is crucial for understanding how gaps in justice services vary across population subgroups.

Decision-makers must also consider the intersections among Target 16.3 and other key development initiatives. Advances in digital technologies in recent years, specifically the popularization of generative artificial intelligence tools, offer new opportunities for innovation in both justice service delivery and data collection. Efforts to advance access to justice through the use of digital technologies must consider digital

[4] Justice systems are inclusive of processes, services, and outcomes (de Langen et al. 2026).

access and exclusion, as well as safeguards for data privacy. The Target 16.3 indicators—and Indicator 16.3.3 in particular—can help to evaluate whether people are able to access the justice services they need.

As the 2030 deadline approaches, there will be plenty of opportunities to reflect on what worked and where improvements are needed. The need for continued progress on Target 16.3 is obvious. However, the justice data ecosystem is stronger than it was at the inception of the 2030 Agenda.

More countries collect and report official data, the methodologies for measuring people-centered justice have advanced, and new resources have been developed to standardize and operationalize key indicators in order to advance data-driven change. This momentum must continue to build in the coming years and into the next development era. Ultimately, it is not possible to achieve sustainable and inclusive development without guaranteeing the rule of law and access to justice for all.

References

Barba, Daniela, M. J. Durán Fedullo, V. Gómez Calderón, Kathryn Grace Hulseman, G. A. Núñez Peralta and Hannah Rigazzi. Forthcoming 2026. *Understanding the Justice Needs Gap in England and Wales: Public Right to Justice – Evidence Review Five*. Nuffield Foundation.

Barba, Daniela, and Alejandro Ponce. 2023. *Dissecting the Justice Gap in 104 Countries: WJP Justice Data Graphical Report I*. World Justice Project. https://worldjusticeproject.org/our-work/research-and-data/wjp-justice-data-graphical-report-i.

Bertelsmann Transformation Index. 2026. "Gambia Country Report 2026." https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/GMB.

Chamness Long, Sarah, and Alejandro Ponce. 2019. *Measuring the Justice Gap: A People-Centered Assessment of Unmet Justice Needs Around the World*. https://worldjusticeproject.org/ourwork/research-and-data/measuring-justice-gap.

Cram, Stacey. 2024. *SDG 16 as an Enabler of the 2030 Agenda*. Policy Paper No. 32. International IDEA. https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/2024-07/sdg16-as-an-enabler-of-2030-agenda.pdf.

CSPPS (Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding). 2026. *Rebuilding Trust in a Time of Crisis: Taking a STAND for SDG16+*. 2026 Civil Society Declaration on SDG16+. https://www.cspps.org/files/2026-06/2026%20Civil%20Society%20Declaration%20on%20SDG16%2B.pdf.

de Langen, Maaike, Tatyana Teplova, and Geoff Mulherin. 2026. *Towards a Measurement Framework for People-Centred Justice Systems*. Working Paper on Public Governance. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2026/06/towards-a-measurement-framework-for-people-centred-justice-systems_b1446e3b/f4c9dccb-en.pdf.

Heard, Catherine, and Helen Fair. 2019. *Pre-Trial Detention and its Overuse: Evidence from Ten Countries*. Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research. https://www.prisonstudies.org/sites/default/files/publications/pre-trial_detention_final.pdf.

IDLO (International Development Law Organization). 2023. "Improving Access to Justice in The Gambia." 13 March. https://www.idlo.int/fr/news/story/iaj-project-gambia.

Nature Sustainability. 2025 "A Post-2030 Vision." 8: 849–50, Editorial, 20 August. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-025-01623-8.

Neelam, Ryan. 2025. "The UN at Eighty: Multilateralism in Crisis," Council on Foreign Relations, 3 September. https://www.cfr.org/articles/the-united-nations-at-eighty-reform-for-a-new-geopolitical-era.

Penal Reform International and Thailand Institute of Justice. 2025. *Global Prison Trends 2025*. https://cdn.penalreform.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/PRI_Global-prison-trends-2025.pdf.

UN DESA (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs). n.d. "SDG Indicators Database." Accessed 26 June 2026. https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/dataportal.

UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime), and OHCHR (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights). 2022. *SDG 16 Survey Initiative Implementation Manual*. https://www.undp.org/publications/sdg16-survey-initiative.

UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) The Gambia. 2026. "Governance and Justice Reforms Gather Pace Under EU-UNDP GREAT Project in The Gambia." 8 April. https://www.undp.org/gambia/stories/governance-and-justice-reforms-gather-pace-under-eu-undp-great-project-gambia.

UNRIC (United Nations Regional Information Centre) for Western Europe. 2026. "SDGs: Real Progress, but Unprecedented Obstacles." Regional Information Centre for Western Europe, 7 October. https://unric.org/en/sdgs-real-progress-but-unprecedented-obstacles/.

UNSD (United Nations, Statistics Division). 2025. *The Sustainable Development Goals Extended Report 2025*: *Inputs and Information Provided as of 30 April 2025*. https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2025/extended-report/Extended-Report-2025_Goal-16.pdf.

Willige, Andrea. 2025. "Five Years to Go: Are We on Track to Meet the Sustainable Development Goals?" World Economic Forum, 12 September. https://www.weforum.org/stories/2025/09/sdg-progress-report-2025/.

WJP (World Justice Project). n.d. "What is the Rule of Law? Our Definition." https://worldjusticeproject.org/about-us/overview/what-rule-law.

WJP (World Justice Project). 2025. *WJP Rule of Law Index 2025*. https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/downloads/WJPIndex2025.pdf.

WJP (World Justice Project). 2023. "Dissecting the Justice Gap in 104 Countries: WJP Justice Data Graphical Report I." World Justice Project.

WJP (World Justice Project). 2019. "Measuring the Justice Gap: A People-Centered Assessment of Unmet Justice Needs Around the World". https://worldjusticeproject.org/our-work/research-and-data/measuring-justice-gap.

Chapter 3

Monitoring Illicit Arms Flows from the Field: Insights from the Caribbean and Ukraine

Nicolas Florquin, Small Arms Survey

This chapter examines the limitations of official statistics in monitoring illicit arms flows under SDG Target 16.4 and the value of complementary, field-based data. Drawing on research from Ukraine and the Caribbean, it demonstrates how mixed methods, including open-source analysis, interviews, surveys, and judicial and public health records, can reveal trafficking patterns, proliferation risks, and local dynamics that aggregate statistics often miss. It makes the case for integrating official and non-official data to strengthen evidence-based responses to illicit arms trafficking and inform monitoring frameworks beyond 2030.

3.1. Introduction

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Target 16.4 commits United Nations member states to significantly reduce illicit arms flows by 2030. Progress is monitored through Indicator 16.4.2, which measures the "proportion of seized, found or surrendered arms whose illicit origin or context has been traced or established by a competent authority."

According to the 2025 *Sustainable Development Goals Extended Report* for Goal 16, those countries that report this information have demonstrated some level of progress. In the period 2022–2023, national authorities from 67 countries reported to the UN Programme of Action on Small Arms process that they had collected 860,598 weapons globally. Of these, 50 percent were subsequently marked, 66 percent recorded, 65 percent destroyed, and 41 percent traced to national or foreign registries. The tracing figure is a notable increase on 2020–2021, when 29 member states reported tracing only 9 percent of seized weapons (UNSD 2025: 9–10).

While these figures suggest an upward trend in tracing capacity and activity in a number of states, they also remind us that many countries still face severe practical challenges establishing the history of illicit firearms, and that the majority of member states still fail to provide full reports on Indicator 16.4.2. Regions reporting high volumes of seizures, such as Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as Northern America and Europe, tend to report lower tracing rates than the 41 percent global average, highlighting the burden of establishing the illicit origin of seized arms in certain affected regions (UNSD 2025: 9).

Moreover, while useful for assessing states' efforts to combat firearms trafficking, relying solely on official national seizure statistics only partially captures illicit arms

flows (Target 16.4). High seizure rates can indicate either an influx of trafficking or enhanced police activity and efficiency; low numbers can signal secure borders or a lack of detection efforts and capacity. National seizure and tracing efforts therefore need to be placed in the broader context of evolving weapons trafficking dynamics, both local and global. Identifying and monitoring relevant and complementary non-official indicators is critical in this regard.

3.2. Adapting Non-Official Indicators to Diverse Landscapes

Supplementing macro-level statistics with field-based granular data can inform local interventions, generate constructive partnerships between civil society and governmental and intergovernmental actors, and provide important metrics for informing global policy discussions. By employing mixed-methods approaches, collaborative research initiatives can look beyond aggregate data to dissect micro-level weapons typologies, and trafficking mechanics and routes, as well as the actors driving illicit weapons markets. Field research is also useful in that it adapts methodologies to distinct regional settings. The work of the Small Arms Survey and its partners in Ukraine and the Caribbean illustrates how mixed-methods research contextualizes state data across both active conflict zones and non-conflict, high-violence environments, providing complementary, unique, and granular insight into illicit arms flows (table 3.1).

Table 3.1. Methodological complementarity in monitoring SDG Indicator 16.4.2

SDG Indicator 16.4.2 and national reports to the UN Programme of Action on Small Arms	Non-official metrics from collaborative field research
Aggregate global seizure data (more than 860,000 weapons from 67 countries) (UNSD 2025: 9).	Disaggregated weapon and ammunition profiles (models, calibers, modifications)
Documented increases in institutional tracing among reporting states	Mixed-methods monitoring of arms flows (court records, open source scraping, interviews, population surveys, public health data)
Focus on administrative state action (marking/recording/tracing/destruction)	Focus on illicit supply-chain mechanics, disaggregated trends in trafficking and misuse, weapon models and ammunition types, and actors
Reflective of state capacity and tracing efforts	Forward-looking community and conflict risk assessments

Source: Author's compilation based on the sources cited in this chapter.

3.3. Tracking Proliferation Risks in Active Conflict: The Case of Ukraine

In Ukraine, the massive influx of international military assistance and armed personnel alongside legacy small arms and light weapons has created a highly complex proliferation landscape where the primary policy concern shifts from domestic crime to the risks of large-scale diversion and post-conflict destabilization. While official record-keeping remains vital to monitor overall seizure quantities and trends, access to more granular data is often restricted by confidentiality and

a lack of readily shareable datasets. To investigate the mechanics of illicit flows safely and transparently, field research utilizes an innovative combination of open-source research and targeted field inquiries (Schroeder et al. 2025). Key methodological inputs include:

- **Open-source data scraping:** Systematically tracking digital imagery and text from individual seizure summaries published by state agencies on their webpages and social media channels. This builds a rich dataset for monitoring trafficking patterns and diversion risks at a more disaggregated level. Images of seized weapons allow monitoring of proliferation of models of specific concern, which can be identified through the physical features and visible markings (e.g., factory and batch numbers) seen on the larger systems (Schroeder et al. 2025: 33–56).
- **Battlefield-exposed informant interviews:** Conducting semi-structured interviews with Ukrainian active duty service personnel and veterans, military activists, their family members, and other civilians in frontline areas to assess the capture, loss, and internal management of "trophy" arms and ammunition (Schroeder et al. 2025: 57–72). This allows an assessment of future risks related to weapons and ammunition that are captured for use at the frontline but not always or systematically registered.
- **Population surveys:** Conducting consecutive waves of public opinion surveys across Ukraine to monitor shifting civilian perceptions of small arms far from the front lines. This polling monitors safety indicators—such as localized arms-related crime victimization rates, household weapon possession levels, and domestic firearms demand—and provides a forward-looking map of societal proliferation and post-conflict risks (Schroeder et al. 2025: 73–92).

This mixed-methods approach reveals the nuanced nature of post-invasion weapons flows in Ukraine. Open-source data scraping and visual analysis show that while seizures of civilian firearms such as shotguns and gas/pneumatic weapons have declined overall, seizures of military-grade light weapons such as grenades, rocket launchers, and mines more than doubled in 2023–2024 compared to pre-invasion levels. Crucially, the research found little evidence to support claims by pro-Russian sources that a large percentage of Western-supplied weapons imported by Ukraine are being diverted to criminal networks or armed groups (Schroeder et al. 2025: 34).

3.4. Uncovering Transnational Flows: The Case of the Caribbean

The Caribbean is a multi-jurisdictional archipelago characterized by high rates of firearm-related homicide in several countries but no official domestic firearms manufacturing capacity. Illicit weapons are primarily imported through complex transnational networks, frequently concealed within commercial cargo or postal shipments, or transferred via small, unmonitored maritime vessels (Agard et al. 2025: 59–88). Official seizure data alone do not capture the cross-border links in these supply chains. Mixed-methods research can use local judicial and public health data to fill information gaps:

- **Analysis of court records:** Extracting data from closed judicial proceedings and indictments to build and monitor typologies of illicit weapons, and reconstruct the logistical chains used by traffickers, including points of purchase in originating jurisdictions such as the United States, modes of transport, and

local distribution hubs (Agard et al. 2025: 59–88).

- **Illicit ammunition profiling:** Analyzing calibers, production dates, and the factory codes stamped on recovered ammunition headstamps to pinpoint the origins of cartridges used in violent crime. This approach can reveal whether violence is fueled by old, legacy stockpiles or an influx of more recently manufactured foreign rounds, offering a dynamic picture of illicit supply and misuse (Fabre et al. 2023: 101–24).
- **Public health monitoring of firearm injuries:** Fostering cross-disciplinary partnerships with regional public health bodies and practitioners to look beyond law enforcement data. Tracking hospital records of both non-fatal and fatal firearm injuries reveals evolving wound patterns (e.g., the number and seriousness of injuries), immediate treatment costs, resource strain on health care systems, long-term productivity losses, and the socio-demographic background of victims—providing multi-sectoral indicators of human insecurity missing from aggregate firearm homicide and seizure statistics (Agard et al. 2025: 89–114).

Applying these complementary methods clarifies illicit supply dynamics across the Caribbean archipelago. Seizure data, court records analysis, and ammunition profiling indicate that while handguns are still by far the predominant weapon seized, there has been a modest rise in the trafficking of high-risk items such as AK- and AR-rifles and high-capacity magazines affecting some countries, notably the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Trinidad and Tobago, and ongoing proliferation of a range of privately made firearms (Agard et al. 2025: 23; Fabre et al. 2023: 89–100). While a number of countries in the region have faced increased rates of gun violence up to 2024, others—such as Jamaica and Belize—have demonstrated measurable declines or stabilization in their homicide rates, highlighting a need to investigate these and other more positive experiences and lessons learned (Agard et al. 2025: 44–45).

3.5. Policy Implications

The utility of non-official data lies in its granularity, specificity, and contextual relevance. While the official SDG Indicator 16.4.2 can reveal how systematically states trace seized weapons, field-level research combines a range of available sources to shed light on local patterns of illicit arms flows. Taken together, these data provide an actionable set of measurements for guiding regional and national policy initiatives.

Moreover, field research actively tracks the proliferation of "ghost guns," privately made firearms that do not carry official serial numbers; the increasing use of 3D-printed firearms and components; and the circulation of machine gun conversion devices (e.g., Glock switches) that convert semi-automatic firearms into fully automatic weapons (Fabre et al. 2023: 89–100). This focus is essential for monitoring flows of the about one-quarter of seized weapons that, as assessed by the UN Statistics Division (2025: 9), are not traceable, presumably because many of them are ghost guns lacking serial numbers, or industrial weapons with obliterated marks.

The integration of non-official indicators on arms flows with formal statistics transforms how SDG Target 16.4 can be monitored and achieved. When policymakers are equipped with data that pairs seizures with more diverse sets of complementary field data, they can move past reactive policy stances. In the Caribbean context, mixed approaches to data collection inform regional processes such as the Caribbean Firearms Roadmap

and export control cooperation with source nations. In Ukraine, non-official data contribute to the design of post-conflict stabilization, and preventive weapons and ammunition management initiatives.

Ultimately, tracking illicit arms flows is most effective when it combines official metrics with field reality. As the international community prepares to evaluate SDG Target 16.4 and shape the post-2030 development agenda, institutionalizing complementary, field-based monitoring and information exchange mechanisms will be essential. Blending official state statistics with granular civil society research establishes a more durable, adaptive framework for monitoring global arms flows well beyond the 2030 horizon.

References

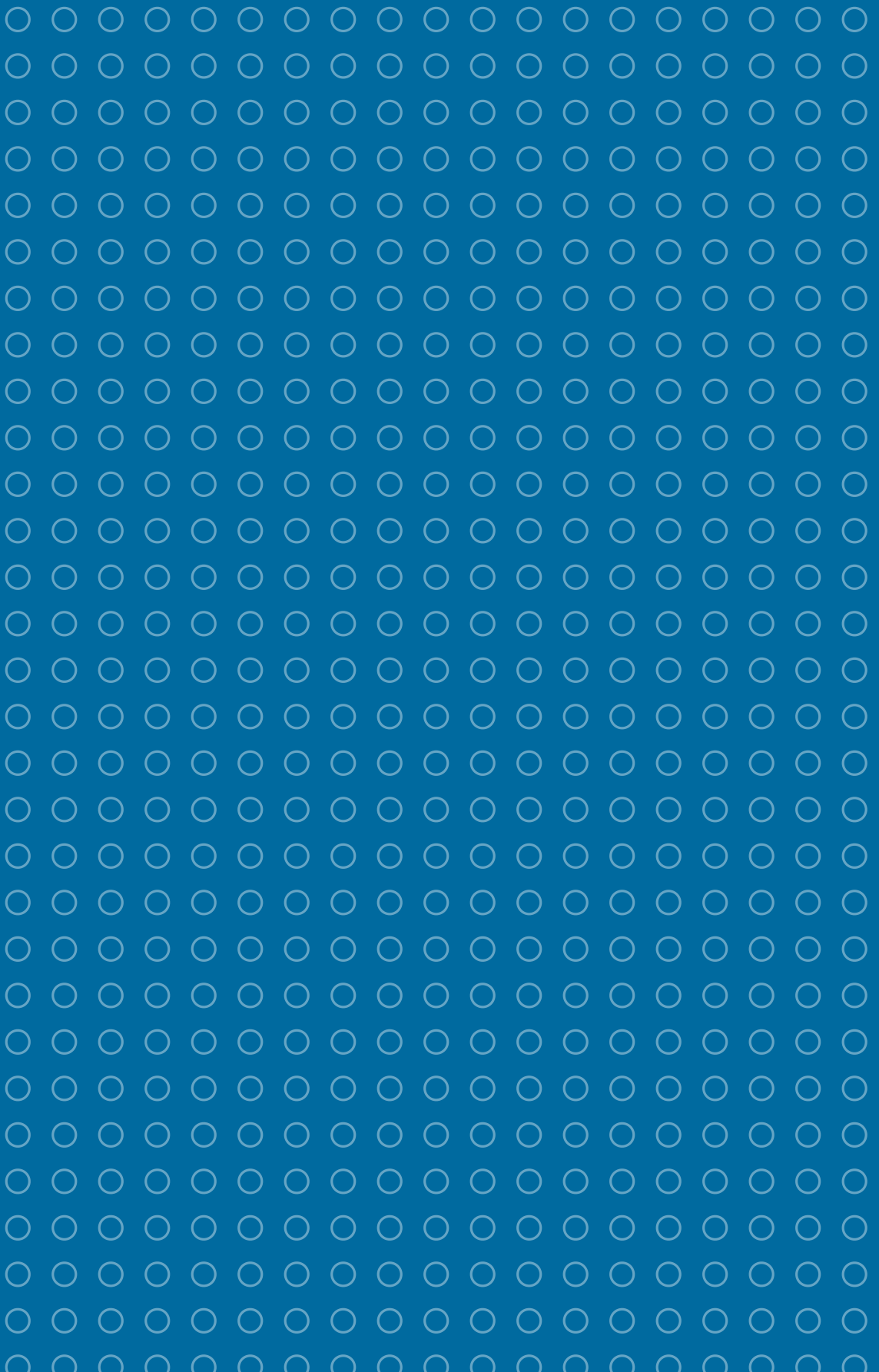
Agard, Joeleita, Simon Anderson, Anne-Séverine Fabre, et al. 2025. *Pathway to Policy: Firearms Trafficking and Public Health in the Caribbean*. CARICOM IMPACS, Caribbean Public Health Agency, GA-CDRC at The University of the West Indies, and Small Arms Survey. https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/resource/pathway-policy-firearms-trafficking-and-public-health-caribbean.

Fabre, Anne-Séverine, Nicolas Florquin, Aaron Karp, and Matt Schroeder. 2023. *Weapons Compass: The Caribbean Firearms Study*. CARICOM IMPACS and Small Arms Survey. https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/resource/weapons-compass-caribbean-firearms-study.

Schroeder, Matt, Maryna Maleoniuk, Taras Fedirko, et al. 2025. *Weapons Compass: Proliferation and Control of Arms and Ammunition in Wartime Ukraine*. Small Arms Survey and Center for Security Studies. https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/resource/weapons-compass-proliferation-and-control-arms-and-ammunition-wartime-ukraine.

UNSD (United Nations Statistics Division). 2025. *The Sustainable Development Goals Extended Report 2025: Inputs and Information Provided as of 30 April 2025*. https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2025/extended-report/Extended-Report-2025_Goal-16.pdf.

Chapter 4



Data Brief: Tracking Progress on SDG 16 Targets (2015–2025) Through the Global State of Democracy Indices

Using International IDEA's Global State of Democracy Indices to complement official SDG 16 monitoring.

Annika Silva-Leander, International IDEA; data review by Irene Postigo Sanchez

This chapter uses International IDEA's Global State of Democracy Indices to assess progress on five SDG 16 targets related to democratic governance between 2015 and 2025, complementing official UN monitoring data. It finds that despite advances in some countries and regions, four of the five targets have deteriorated globally, particularly effective institutions, representative decision-making, the rule of law, and fundamental freedoms. The findings underscore the importance of democratic governance for sustainable development and make the case for integrating more comprehensive democracy indicators into SDG monitoring and the post-2030 development framework.

4.1. Introduction

With only four years remaining until the 2030 deadline, the world is running out of time to deliver the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). More than a decade after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, progress remains off track (United Nations 2026). Advances have been too slow across most goals, and in many countries progress has stalled or been reversed. Recent reductions in international development assistance are not just slowing implementation, but threatening to reverse hard-won progress on governance, justice, human rights, and institutional reform. Funding cuts are weakening the institutions and support mechanisms that safeguard human rights and civic space, undermining democratic oversight, reducing civil society's capacity to operate independently and hold authorities accountable, and cutting off vital support networks for marginalized and vulnerable groups (Global Democracy Coalition 2025; CSPPS 2026).

Of all the SDGs, SDG 16 on peace, justice, and strong institutions is among the furthest behind, according to non-official data (Sachs et al. 2026). Progress has been limited across many of its targets, and monitoring has been particularly challenging. According to the United Nations, SDG 16 has some of the largest data gaps of any goal. Less than 30 percent

of indicators have sufficient trend data to measure progress over time (UNSD 2025). These gaps make it difficult to assess where progress is being made, where setbacks are occurring, and where policy action is most urgently needed.

To help to address these evidence gaps, high-quality, independent data sources can play an important role in complementing official SDG indicators. A separate challenge concerns the scope of the monitoring framework itself, particularly for SDG 16, where relatively few indicators capture key dimensions of democratic governance, such as representation, participation, rights, and the rule of law. International IDEA's Global State of Democracy (GSoD) Indices can help to fill this gap by providing more comprehensive globally comparable measures of democratic performance that complement the global SDG indicator framework (International IDEA n.d., 2023).

This chapter uses the GSoD Indices to track progress on 5 of the 12 SDG 16 targets that are most closely linked to democratic governance. Together, these indicators provide a richer picture of global, regional, and national trends than official statistics alone.

The findings paint a sobering picture. With just four years to go before the 2030 deadline, progress on democratic governance in many parts of the world is moving in the wrong direction. At the same time, however, the analysis identifies countries and regions where meaningful advances have been made, demonstrating that progress is possible with sustained political commitment and investment. SDG 16 and democratic governance underpin progress on the wider 2030 Agenda. Reversing the above trends and learning from where advances have been made will be essential to achieve the SDGs.

Key Findings

- Four (SDG 16.3, 16.6, 16.7, 16.10) of the five SDG 16 targets measured by International IDEA indicators declined globally between 2015 and 2025; the global average declined and more countries regressed than advanced.
- Only SDG 16.5 (reducing corruption) recorded a slight global improvement (+1.6%).
- Africa experienced the broadest regional deterioration in the five SDG 16 targets measured; Asia and the Pacific and the Middle East (Western Asia) experienced the smallest average declines, and recorded slight improvements or stagnation in the rule of law (16.3) and reducing corruption (16.5).
- Eritrea, The Gambia, Syria, Thailand, and Uzbekistan have recorded the largest percentage improvements on average across all five SDG 16 targets since 2015, albeit from different levels of baseline performance.
- Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Mali, Myanmar, and Nicaragua are the countries with the largest percentage declines on average across all five targets since 2015.
- Countries experiencing conflict, state fragility, and/or democratic backsliding are disproportionately represented among those with the steepest declines, while many of the strongest improvers are countries emerging from conflict or undertaking governance reforms.

4.2. Measuring SDG 16 Targets Using the Global State of Democracy Indices

International IDEA's Global State of Democracy (GSoD) Indices assess democratic performance across four core categories/dimensions—Representation, Rights, the Rule of Law, and Participation—based on 29 indices aggregated from 155 source indicators. The GSoD Indices cover 174 countries for the period 1975 to 2025. They score each dimension from 0 to 1. There are three tiers of democratic performance, depending on the score: low (0.0–0.4), mid-range (0.4–0.7), and high (0.7–1.0). For the period included in this analysis (2015–2025), datasets are available for 173 countries.

The GSoD Indices help monitor progress on 7 SDGs—SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions)—and 6 of the 12 targets of SDG 16 (16.1, 16.3, 16.5, 16.6, 16.7, and 16.10). This chapter only analyzed five of them, since SDG 16.1 is well covered by the Small Arms Survey chapter. The GSoD Indices complement official United Nations statistics with democracy-specific data, offering additional insights into democratic and rights-based dimensions of sustainable development.

The GSoD Indices complement official monitoring with additional indicators that are not included in the SDG framework, by providing non-official data on 6 of the 12 SDG 16 targets, across all four GSoD dimensions:

- **Rights**—Civil Liberties (Freedom of Expression, Freedom of Association and Assembly, Freedom of the Press, Freedom of Religion, and Freedom of Movement), Access to Justice, Basic Welfare, and Political Equality (including Gender Equality, Social Group Equality, and Economic Equality).
- **Representation**—Credible Elections, Inclusive Suffrage, Free Political Parties, Elected Government, Effective Parliament, and Local Democracy.
- **Rule of Law**—Judicial Independence, Absence of Corruption, Predictable Enforcement, and Personal Integrity and Security.
- **Participation**—Electoral Participation, Civil Society, and Civic Engagement.

These data are based not on member state reporting, but on a combination of expert-coded data (e.g., Varieties of Democracy [V-Dem] datasets) and institutional assessments (e.g., by Freedom House or the World Bank Global Findex). This multidimensional approach offers a globally comparable picture of the contribution of democracy to sustainable development, highlighting its role as an enabler of inclusive, peaceful, and resilient societies.

The score for each SDG 16 target was calculated as the average of the GSoD indicators mapped for that target (see table 4.1). Progress on each target is assessed using two complementary measures: changes in average scores and the number of countries experiencing statistically significant advances or declines. Average scores capture the magnitude of change across all countries, while statistically significant changes show how widespread progress or deterioration is among countries. Together, these measures provide a more complete picture of global trends.

This chapter examines progress on five SDG 16 targets: 16.3 (rule of law and access to justice); 16.5 (reducing corruption); 16.6 (effective, accountable, and transparent institutions); 16.7 (inclusive decision-making); and 16.10 (access to information and fundamental freedoms).

Table 4.1. SDG 16 targets and GSoD Indices (cont.)

SDG 16 target	Theme of target	Official indicators	Related GSoD indicators
SDG 16.3	Promotion of the rule of law and access to justice	**16.3.1** Proportion of victims of violence in the previous 12 months who reported their victimization to competent authorities or other officially recognized conflict resolution mechanisms **16.3.2** Unsentenced detainees as a proportion of the overall prison population **16.3.3** Proportion of the population who have experienced a dispute in the past two years and who accessed a formal or informal dispute resolution mechanism, by type of mechanism.	Rule of Law; Access to Justice; Judicial Independence; Predictable Enforcement
SDG 16.5	Reducing corruption	**16.5.1** Proportion of persons who had at least one contact with a public official and who paid a bribe to a public official, or were asked for a bribe by those public officials, during the previous 12 months **16.5.2** Proportion of businesses that had at least one contact with a public official and that paid a bribe to a public official, or were asked for a bribe by those public officials during the previous 12 months	Mixed-methods monitoring of arms flows (court records, open source scraping, interviews, population surveys, public health data)
SDG 16.6	Effective, accountable, and transparent institutions	**16.6.1** Primary government expenditures as a proportion of the original approved budget, by sector (or by budget codes or similar) **16.6.2** Proportion of the population satisfied with their last experience of public services.	Free Political Parties; Elected Government; Effective Parliament; Local Democracy; Judicial Independence; Predictable Enforcement; Civil Society; Civic Engagement
SDG 16.7	Inclusive, participatory, representative decision-making	**16.7.1** Proportions of positions in national and local institutions, including (a) legislatures, (b) the public service, and (c) the judiciary, compared to national distributions, by sex, age, persons with disabilities, and population groups **16.7.2** Proportion of the population who believe decision-making is inclusive and responsive, by sex, age, disability, and population group.	Representation; Credible Elections; Inclusive Suffrage; Free Political Parties; Elected Government; Effective Parliament; Local Democracy; Access to Justice; Participation; Civil Society; Civic Engagement; Electoral Participation; Political Equality; Social Group Equality; Gender Equality

Table 4.1. SDG 16 targets and GSoD Indices (cont.)

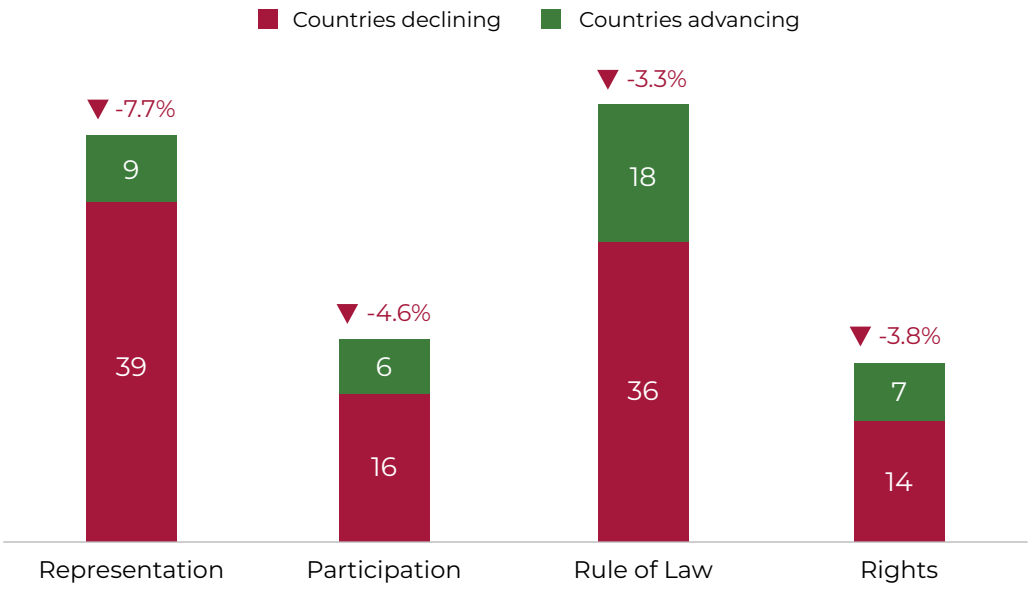
SDG 16 target	Theme of target	Official indicators	Related GSoD indicators
SDG 16.10	Access to information and fundamental freedoms	**16.10.1** Number of verified cases of killing, kidnapping, enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention, and torture of journalists, associated media personnel, trade unionists, and human rights advocates in the previous 12 months; **16.10.2** Number of countries that adopt and implement constitutional, statutory, and/or policy guarantees for public access to information.	Rights; Civil Liberties; Freedom of Expression; Freedom of Association and Assembly; Freedom of Religion; Freedom of Movement; Freedom of the Press; Predictable Enforcement; Personal Integrity and Security

4.3. Global Trends

The analysis shows that democratic performance has weakened across each of the four categories of democracy since 2015, registering more declines than advances. Representation experienced both the largest average decline and the widest spread of deterioration. Press Freedom (69 countries), Freedom of Expression (66), Civil Liberties (56), and Credible Elections (54) were the dimensions with the greatest number of countries with statistically significant declines.

Across the five SDG 16 targets analyzed, SDG 16.6 experienced both the steepest decline in global average score and the largest number of countries with statistically significant declines.

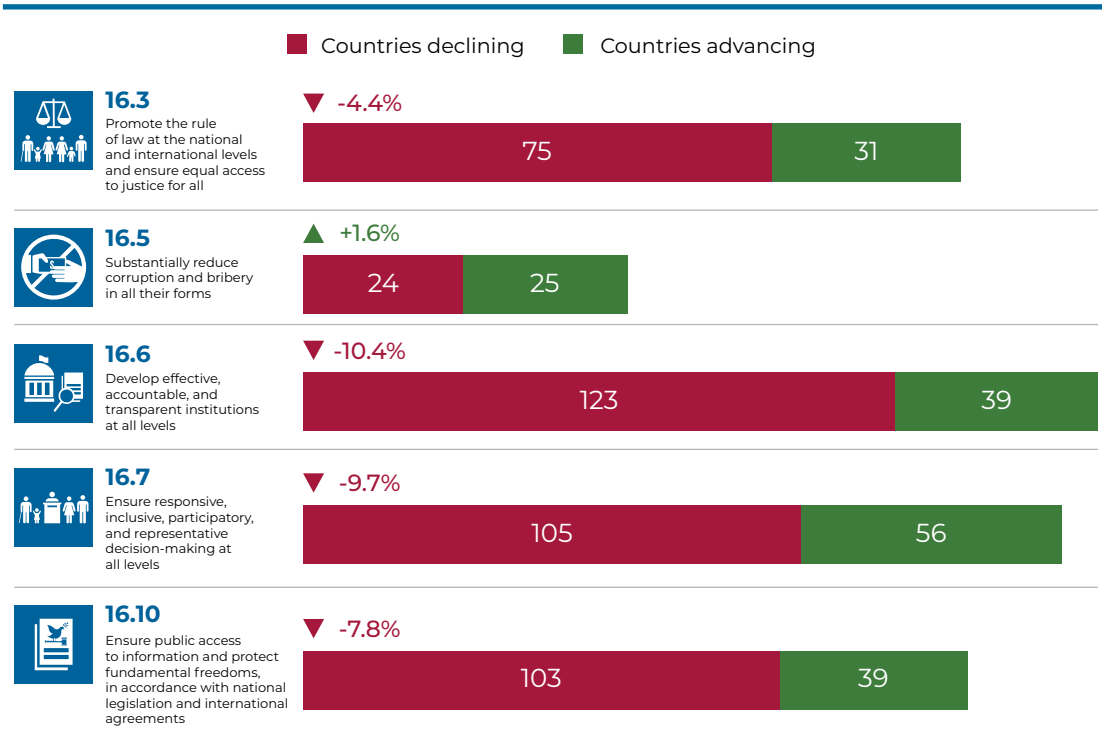
Figure 4.1. **Countries with significant declines and advances for four categories of democracy and percentage change, 2015–2025**



Source: Calculations based on International IDEA. 2026. Global State of Democracy Indices, v10. https://www.idea.int/ democracytracker/gsod-indices.

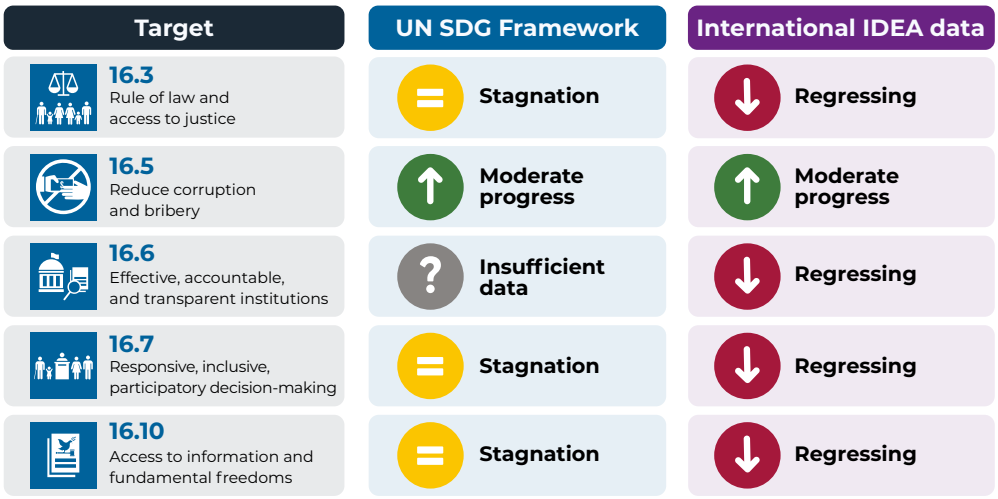
SDG 16.5 was broadly stagnant globally despite isolated country improvements. SDG 16.7 presents a mixed picture: while the global average score declined, it also recorded the largest number of countries experiencing statistically significant improvements.[5]

Figure 4.2. **Countries with significant declines or advances in any of the indicators used to measure SDG 16 targets and percentage change in global average score, 2015–2025**



Source: Calculations based on International IDEA. 2026. Global State of Democracy Indices, v10. https://www.idea.int/ democracytracker/gsod-indices.

Figure 4.3. **Comparison of the UN SDG framework and International IDEA data**



Source: Calculations based on International IDEA. 2026. Global State of Democracy Indices, v10. https://www.idea.int/ democracytracker/gsod-indices.

[5] These differences could reflect variations in indicator coverage. For example, SDG 16.7 has 15 indicators while SDG 16.5 is measured using only one, which affects the number of countries that may be identified as declining.

The Figure 4.3 compare assessments of progress toward selected SDG 16 targets based on the UN global SDG indicator framework and International IDEA's indicator framework. Differences in assessments reflect variations in the indicators, data sources, and methodologies used.

4.4. Regional Patterns

Since 2015, democratic governance has deteriorated across all regions. Declines were measured in all four pillars of democracy and in the average scores across the five SDG 16 targets. Africa and the Americas experienced the most pronounced setbacks, while Europe has remained the highest-performing region despite declines across all measured targets. Asia and the Pacific and the Middle East (Western Asia) demonstrated greater relative resilience, recording smaller overall declines and modest improvements in selected areas, although progress in the Middle East was often from a low baseline.

Africa

Africa emerged as the region experiencing the largest democratic governance setbacks. It recorded the largest average regional declines across all the targets measured for SDG 16.6 (-9.9 percent) and SDG 16.7 (-9.6 percent).

Americas

The Americas declined across all five targets. The sharpest deterioration compared to other regions was in the rule of law (16.3) (-6.7 percent) and fundamental freedoms (16.10) (-6.1 percent). There were also sharp declines in effective institutions (16.6) (-5.6 percent) and representative decision-making (-4.5 percent).

Europe

Europe continued to perform from a high baseline but experienced declines for every SDG target measure. Its average declines were the third largest after Africa and the Americas.

Asia and the Pacific

While Asia and the Pacific declined on its target average, the decline was less than for Africa, the Americas, and Europe. Like the Middle East/Western Asia and Africa, it saw slight improvements in the rule of law (16.3) (+0.6 percent) and reducing corruption (16.5) (+4.3 percent).

Middle East/Western Asia

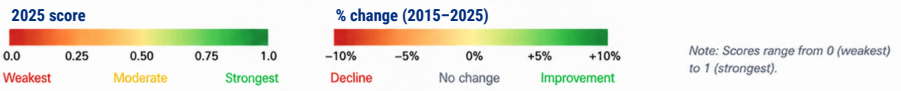
The Middle East experienced stagnation or modest improvements on its target average. There were improvements in reducing corruption (16.5) and a slight improvement in fundamental freedoms (16.10), albeit from a low baseline. However, there were declines in effective institutions (16.6) and representative decision-making (16.7).

- The declines in all four categories or dimensions of democracy since 2015 span all regions but the largest percentage declines were recorded in Africa, followed by the Americas.
- Asia and the Pacific, and the Middle East (Western Asia) experienced the smallest average declines and were the only regions that did not see declines across all four pillars of democracy, recording slight improvements or stagnation in the rule of law for Asia and improvement/stagnation from very low levels in the Middle East for rights, the rule of law, and participation.

- All regions have seen their average scores decline on the five SDG 16 targets measured since 2015.
- Africa experienced the most pronounced setbacks of any region on the SDG 16 targets measured; the sharpest declines were in effective institutions (16.6) and representative decision-making (16.7).
- Europe was the highest performing region in terms of the average score for the SDG 16 targets measured.
- Asia and the Pacific together with the Middle East demonstrated the most stability and resilience of all the regions; there were improvements in reducing corruption (16.5) in both regions, the rule of law (16.3) in Asia, and fundamental freedoms in the Middle East (16.10), albeit still at low levels.

Figure 4.4. Region scores per SDG 16 target in 2025 and percentage change from 2015

SDG 16 target		Africa	Americas	Asia and the Pacific	Europe	Western Asia (Middle East)
16.3 Promotion of the rule of law and access to justice	2025 score	0.3828	0.4840	0.4657	0.6433	0.3931
	% change (2015–2025)	–4%	–7%	+1%	–5%	–0%
16.5 Reducing corruption	2025 score	0.3565	0.4927	0.4566	0.6380	0.4417
	% change (2015–2025)	–1%	–1%	+4%	–2%	+7%
16.6 Effective institutions	2025 score	0.4328	0.5958	0.4809	0.6813	0.3416
	% change (2015–2025)	–10%	–6%	–3%	–4%	–4%
16.7 Representative decision-making	2025 score	0.4495	0.6112	0.5081	0.7020	0.3332
	% change (2015–2025)	–10%	–5%	–4%	–3%	–6%
16.10 Access to information and fundamental freedoms	2025 score	0.4825	0.6330	0.5122	0.7130	0.4027
	% change (2015–2025)	–6%	–6%	–3%	–6%	+0%



Source: Calculations based on International IDEA. 2026. Global State of Democracy Indices, v10. https://www.idea.int/ democracytracker/gsod-indices.

4.5. Country Highlights

Figure 4.5. The 20 highest performers across the five SDG 16 targets as measured by their average score in 2025

Country	Average score	Country	Average score
Denmark	0.92	Belgium	0.83
Norway	0.89	Luxembourg	0.82
Sweden	0.88	Uruguay	0.82
Germany	0.87	Czechia	0.82
Finland	0.87	Costa Rica	0.81
Switzerland	0.86	Iceland	0.81
Australia	0.84	Netherlands	0.81
Estonia	0.84	Taiwan	0.81
Ireland	0.83	Latvia	0.80
New Zealand	0.83	Chile	0.79

Figure 4.6. The 20 lowest performers across the five SDG 16 targets as measured by their average score in 2025

Country	Score	Country	Score
Eritrea	0.10	Libya	0.24
Afghanistan	0.10	Somalia	0.25
North Korea	0.15	Qatar	0.26
Myanmar	0.16	Tajikistan	0.26
Yemen	0.18	Nicaragua	0.26
South Sudan	0.18	Equatorial Guinea	0.27
China	0.20	Syria	0.29
Sudan	0.21	United Arab Emirates	0.30
Saudi Arabia	0.21	Azerbaijan	0.30
Turkmenistan	0.24	Venezuela	0.31

Figure 4.7. Countries with the largest number of declines in the five SDG 16 targets

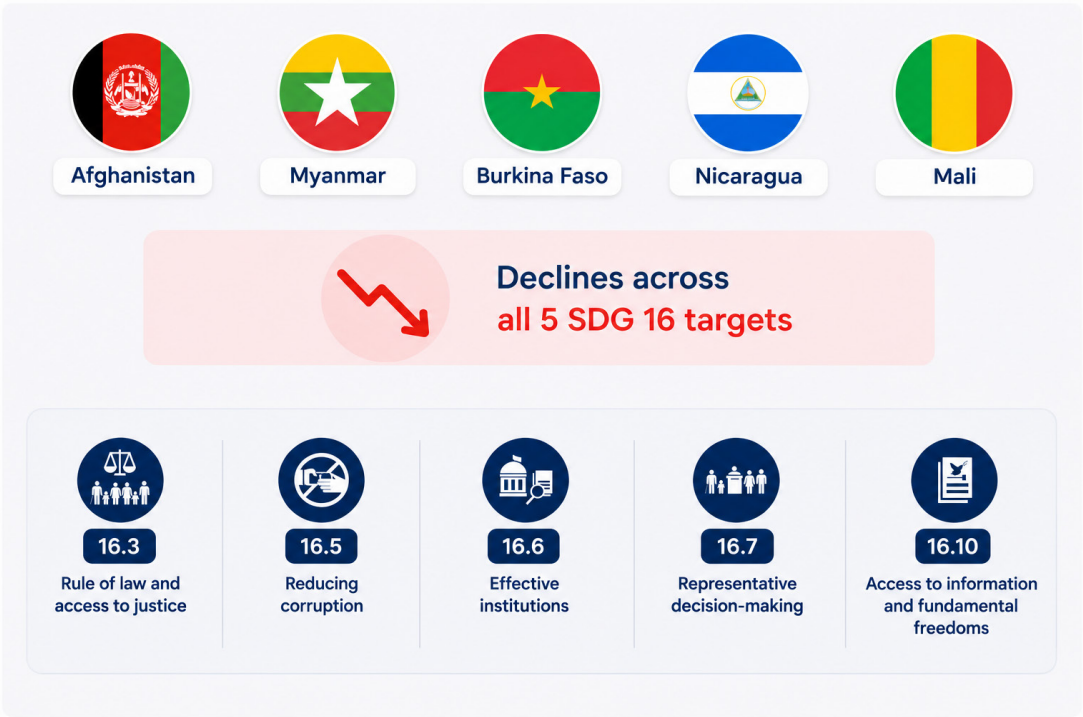


Figure 4.8. Countries with the largest number of advances in the five SDG 16 targets



The countries that experienced the strongest improvements in all five SDG 16 targets were Syria, The Gambia, Thailand, Eritrea, and Uzbekistan.

The findings suggest that performance changes in the SDG 16 targets are often associated with periods of political transition. Countries experiencing conflict, state fragility, and/or democratic backsliding are disproportionately represented among those with the steepest declines, while many of the strongest improvers are countries emerging from conflict or undertaking governance reforms. This highlights both the vulnerability of SDG 16 to political crises and the potential for rapid gains when countries embark on sustained institutional and democratic reform.

4.6. Conclusions

With just four years to go until 2030, the world is falling far short of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Of the 139 targets for which there are reliable historical trend data, only 36 percent are on track or making moderate progress (United Nations 2026). This analysis paints a concerning picture of five of the targets for SDG 16, showing a widespread deterioration in core dimensions of peaceful, just, and inclusive societies in much of the world. While important advances have been made in some countries and regions, declines in effective institutions, representative decision-making, the rule of law, and fundamental freedoms are becoming increasingly widespread.

These trends matter far beyond SDG 16 itself. International IDEA's analysis identifies SDG 16 and democratic governance as critical enablers of sustainable development. Countries with stronger democratic institutions consistently perform better throughout the broader SDG agenda. Conversely, democratic backsliding weakens the governance conditions required to deliver sustainable development, undermining progress not only on SDG 16 but across the entire 2030 Agenda (Cram 2024; Silva-Leander 2026a, 2026b). Protecting and strengthening democratic governance is therefore not only an objective in itself, but also an essential investment in achieving the full range of sustainable development outcomes.

At a time when the availability of official global SDG data remains uneven and funding for governance data collection is declining, complementary datasets such as the GSoD Indices can supplement the SDG framework. Additional data sources provide early warning of governance deterioration and offer policymakers a more comprehensive understanding of progress than official indicators alone.

Looking beyond 2030, the international community has an opportunity to build a stronger framework for assessing governance and measuring sustainable development. While the relationship between democratic governance and sustainable development is increasingly recognized, it is not yet adequately reflected in the targets and indicators used to monitor global progress. As member states begin to define a post-2030 framework, consideration should be given to incorporating more comprehensive measures of democratic performance in areas such as representation, participation, rights, and the rule of law. This would provide a more accurate picture of the governance conditions that enable sustainable development, strengthen accountability, and better equip governments and international organizations to identify, respond to, and anticipate democratic backsliding before it further undermines progress across the wider development agenda.

References

Cram, Stacey. 2024. *SDG 16 as an Enabler of the 2030 Agenda*. Policy Paper No. 32. International IDEA. https://doi.org/10.31752/idea.2024.47.

CSPPS (Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding). 2026. *Rebuilding Trust in a Time of Crisis: Taking a STAND for SDG16+*. 2026 Civil Society Declaration on SDG16+. https://www.cspps.org/files/2026-06/2026%20Civil%20Society%20Declaration%20on%20SDG16%2B.pdf.

Global Democracy Coalition. 2025. *When Aid Fades: Impacts and Pathways for the Global Democracy Ecosystem*. https://globaldemocracycoalition.org/when-aid-fades-impacts-and-pathways-for-the-global-democracy-ecosystem.

International IDEA. n.d. "Global State of Democracy Indices." https://www.idea.int/data-tools/tools/global-state-democracy-indices.

International IDEA. 2023. *The Sustainable Development Goals and the GSoD Indices, Revised Edition.* GSoD in Focus No. 15. https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/sustainable-development-goals-and-gsod-indices-revised-edition.

Sachs, Jeffrey D., Guillaume Lafortune, Grayson Fuller, and Guilherme Iablonovski. 2026. *Implementing Sustainable Development: 2030 and Beyond*. Sustainable Development Report 2026. Sustainable Development Solutions Network and Dublin University Press. https://doi.org/10.82163/225.

Silva-Leander, Annika. 2026a. 2026. *Democracy as Engine of Social Development and Shared Prosperity: An Overview of Evidence and Pathways*. International IDEA. https://doi.org/10.31752/99949.

Silva-Leander, Annika. 2026b. "Why Democratic Backsliding Should Be on the World Bank and IMF Agendas." International IDEA, 17 April. https://www.idea.int/news/why-democratic-backsliding-should-be-world-bank-and-imf-agendas.

UNSD (United Nations Statistics Division). 2025. "Funding Data and Statistics: The Essential Infrastructure for Development." June. https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2025/funding-data-and-statistics.

United Nations. 2026. *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2026*. https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2026/.

Chapter 5

Progress on the Right to Information: The Challenges of Monocular Vision

Toby Mendel, Executive Director, Centre for Law and Democracy

This chapter focuses on progress with advancing the right to access information held by public authorities or the right to information (RTI) globally, as covered by Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Indicator 16.10.2, which focuses on the adoption and implementation of these laws. Only 31 RTI laws have been adopted since 2015, leaving 54 UN member states still without one. Concerningly, these laws are weaker than the laws adopted before 2015. In terms of implementation, the overriding picture is one of data gaps rather than a clear picture of whether progress is being made. More resources are needed if we hope to address this gap. The adoption of SDG 16 represented an important expansion of traditional notions of what development means. At the same time, not enough thought was given as to how to assess these very different development metrics, which cannot easily be shoehorned into the prevailing statistical model used for the SDGs. Any post-2030 development agenda should maintain the broader approach of SDG 16, but far more attention and resources should be invested in assessing progress on these development targets.

5.1. Introduction

This chapter focuses on progress with advancing the right to access information held by public authorities or the right to information (RTI) globally, as covered by Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Indicator 16.10.2, which focuses on the adoption and implementation of these laws. Only 31 RTI laws have been adopted since 2015, leaving 54 UN member states still without one. Concerningly, these laws are weaker than the laws adopted before 2015. In terms of implementation, the overriding picture is one of data gaps rather than a clear picture of whether progress is being made. More resources are needed if we hope to address this gap. The adoption of SDG 16 represented an important expansion of traditional notions of what development means. At the same time, not enough thought was given as to how to assess these very different development metrics, which cannot easily be shoehorned into the prevailing statistical model used for the SDGs. Any post-2030 development agenda should maintain the broader approach of SDG 16, but far more attention and resources should be invested in assessing progress on these development targets.

Indicator 16.10.2 focuses on two distinct phases of putting in place RTI systems: the adoption and the implementation of laws that give effect to this right. Target

16.10 makes it clear that progress in this area should be assessed based on both national and international standards. There are solid data on the adoption of RTI laws by different states, including how far they align with international standards, available from the RTI Rating by the Centre for Law and Democracy (CLD).[6] However, there is virtually no reliable information, whether based on official or non-official data, about how well RTI laws are being implemented. Assessing progress on this indicator is like looking with one eye open, otherwise known as having monocular vision.

The chapter first outlines the most recent statistical updates and global developments on the adoption of RTI laws, the first part of Indicator 16.1.2. Second, it discusses the profound challenges that persist in terms of assessing the implementation of RTI laws, the second part of Indicator 16.1.2. Finally, it discusses some of the lessons learned from the experience with SDG Indicator 16.10.2 and offers some thoughts on how to factor that learning into what will hopefully emerge as the third global framework for assessing development progress, once the 15-year SDG period ends in 2030.

5.2. Progress with Adopting Right to Information Laws

The RTI Rating provides extremely reliable data not only on the adoption each year of RTI laws but also the strength of the legal framework for this right in each country as assessed against international standards. The RTI Rating is based on 61 discrete indicators, each of which measures the presence of a core feature of a strong RTI law.[7] 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 was adopted in 2024, only one was adopted in 2025, and just one has been adopted in 2026 to date. Only six new laws have been adopted in the past five years. Since the advent of the SDGs at the beginning of 2016, just 31 new RTI laws have been adopted, at an average of less than 3 laws per year.[8] Of these, 12 were in countries in sub-Saharan Africa, perhaps reflecting the relatively low previous rate of adoption in that region; 6 were in Asia-Pacific; 5 each were in Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Middle East and North Africa; and 3 were in Western Europe.

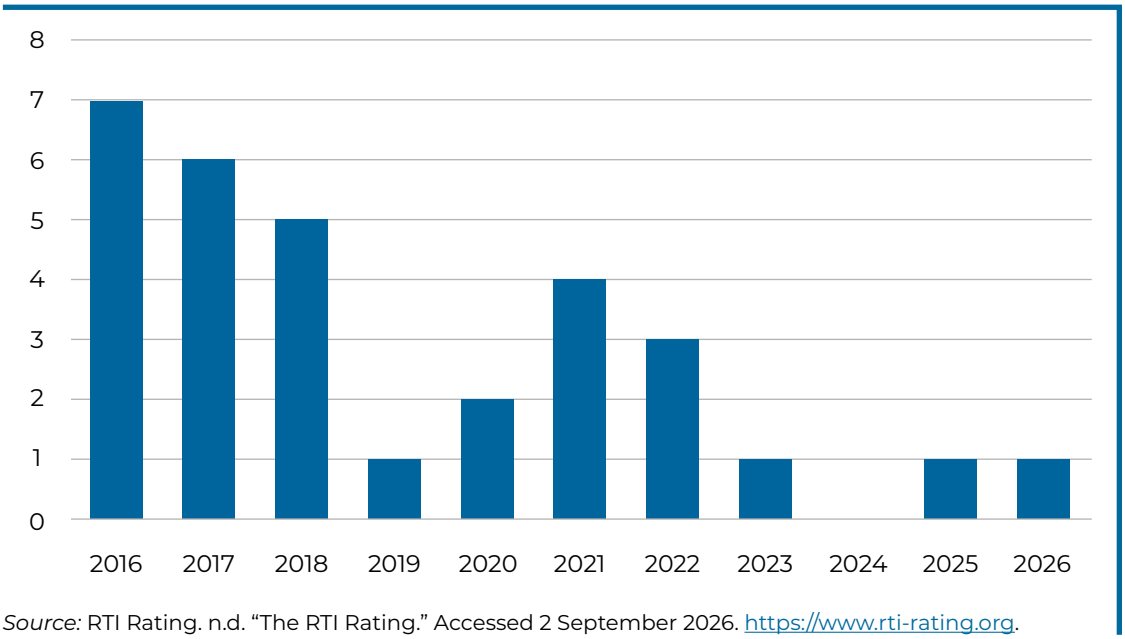
Figure 5.1 shows the number of laws that have been adopted annually since 2016. Of the 85 UN member states which lacked RTI legislation when the SDGs were adopted, 54 still do not have such laws. If, over the final four years of the 2030 Agenda, new laws continue to be adopted at the pace of the past five years, only 35 new laws would have been adopted over the entire period of the SDGs. This represents just 41 percent of those countries that lacked laws at the outset, which would represent only limited progress.

6 See the home page of the RTI Rating, https://www.rti-rating.org. The Country Data page shows the results of the assessment of laws at https://www.rti-rating.org/country-data/.

7 The specific indicators used for the RTI Rating are available at https://www.rti-rating.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Indicators.final_.pdf.

8 All of the countries that have adopted laws can be found on the RTI Rating website at https://www.rti-rating.org/country-data/. The data can be arranged by date of adoption.

Figure 5.1. RTI laws adopted since 2016, by year

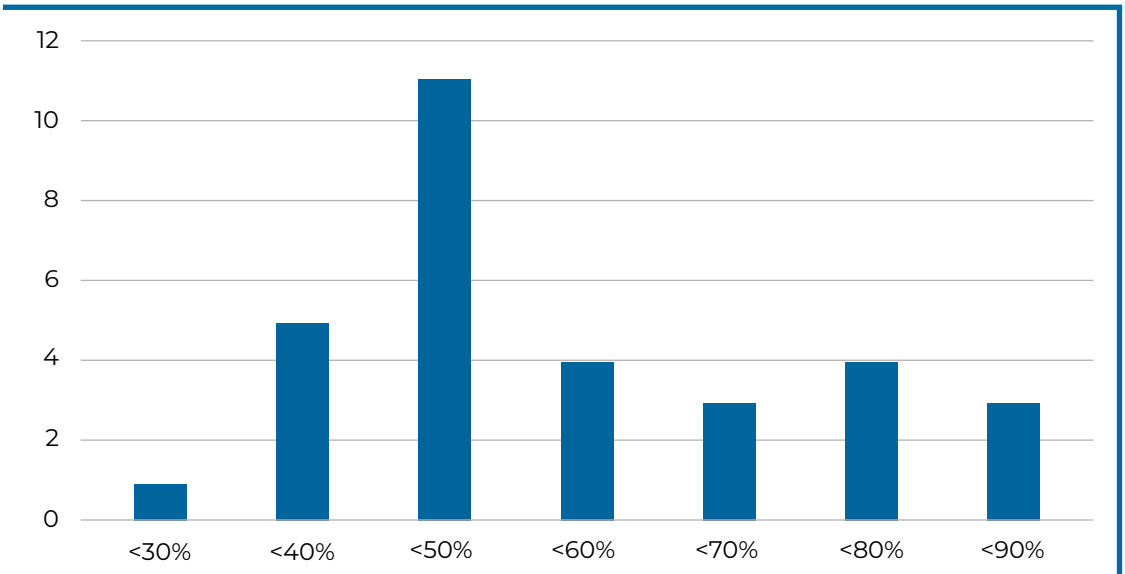


Source: RTI Rating. n.d. "The RTI Rating." Accessed 2 September 2026. https://www.rti-rating.org.

Even more concerning is the fact that the strength of the 31 laws that have been adopted over the period of the SDGs is distinctly weaker than those adopted previously. The new laws average just 54 percent on the RTI Rating while those adopted previously have an average score of 58 percent, a drop of 4 percentage points. The RTI Rating groups the 61 individual indicators into seven core categories. The gap between the 31 newer laws and all laws is consistently in the range of 12 to 15 percentage points for the first four categories: Right of Access (i.e., guarantees of the right); Scope (i.e., of coverage of the law); Requesting Procedures (i.e., the procedures for making and responding to requests for information); and Exceptions and Refusals (i.e., the grounds for refusing requests). Interestingly, the gap drops to 8 percentage points for the fifth category, Appeals; is zero for the last category, Promotional Measures (i.e., systems to support implementation of the law); and is actually positive by 2 percentage points for the sixth category, Sanctions and Protections (for those who release or obstruct the release of information). More research is needed to understand the reasons for this.

The significant overall drop in strength is obviously a matter of some concern. The reasons for it are not entirely clear but it could be that some of the more recent adopters felt pressure to adopt legislation but did so with limited commitment and weak laws. There is no clear standard under the SDGs for how strong a law needs to be to qualify as an RTI law. Figure 5.2 shows how the 31 laws adopted during the SDG period score within each 10-point percentage range. More than half (55 percent) score less than 50 percent, which indicates limited alignment with international standards, although a few score in the 70–80 percent range.

Figure 5.2. Strength of the 31 RTI laws adopted since 2016



Source: RTI Rating. n.d. "The RTI Rating." Accessed 2 September 2026. https://www.rti-rating.org.

There is scope for action to address the low pace of adoption of RTI laws. Specifically, 17 of the 54 UN member states that are currently reasonably democratic but still lack RTI laws have populations of under one million, mostly Small Island Developing States (SIDS). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has been working with the CLD to overcome the natural challenges these countries face in adopting RTI laws due to their small size (UNESCO 2025a). This offers an important opportunity to move forward in terms of adoption of RTI laws, but success here will require ongoing support from international actors, and UNESCO in particular.

5.3. Evaluating Implementation

In stark contrast to the situation regarding the adoption of RTI laws, both official and non-official data on how well they are being implemented are severely lacking.

While it is of the greatest importance to assess the strength of RTI laws, and this is obviously a precondition for implementation, understanding how well these laws are being implemented is if anything even more important, as it is through implementation that information is actually delivered to people. A stark if extreme example of the importance of assessing implementation is presented by Afghanistan, which lies at the very top of the RTI Rating (i.e., it has the strongest legal framework for RTI).[9] Anecdotal information shows that the law there is not being implemented at all. Requests for information are not being answered and the independent oversight body no longer exists.[10]

A number of implementation assessments have been initiated using the RTI Evaluation, run by the CLD. These assessments provide an in-depth examination of how well RTI laws are being implemented. At the same time, the relatively high level of resources

[9] Note that this law was adopted in 2018, before the Taliban took control of the whole of Afghanistan. The RTI Rating only assesses the strength of the legal framework for RTI and, since the Taliban has not amended the law, the score is unchanged.

[10] The author has received this information directly by email and voice calls from a number of reliable Afghan contacts.

required to apply this methodology means that only a relatively small number have been completed so far.[11]

UNESCO implements the main methodology for collecting official data on implementation of RTI laws. These data are collected in an eight-question survey that UNESCO administers annually. The survey covered 123 countries in 2025 and 125 in 2024. Based on this methodology, Indicator 16.10.2 was approved as a Tier I indicator by the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators (IAEG-SDGs) at its 10th meeting in October 2019 (UNESCO 2019).[12] A Tier I indicator is defined as one which "is conceptually clear, has an internationally established methodology and standards are available, and data are regularly produced by countries for at least 50 percent of countries and of the population in every region where the indicator is relevant."[13]

The approved UNESCO methodology, including the eight-question survey, is available from the central United Nations Metadata repository.[14] By its own terms, the survey contains three questions on the implementation of RTI laws. The other five focus on the adoption and content of these laws.[15] The three questions on implementation focus on: (a) whether the RTI oversight body has, during the reporting year, published an annual report, provided guidance and/or training to officials, raised public awareness, kept statistics on requests or appeals, or asked public authorities to keep statistics on their activities; (b) whether, in practice, public authorities provide the oversight body with reports on their processing of requests for information; and (c) whether the oversight body keeps statistics on appeals.

While this provides some insight into how the oversight body is functioning, this is only one part of the system. It is not possible to talk about assessing implementation without looking at how individual public authorities are actually performing in terms of providing information, which is the ultimate aim of all RTI systems. As a result, the UNESCO data is simply too narrow to provide any proper sense of how well implementation of RTI laws is going.

An additional problem with the UNESCO data is that it relies on self-reporting by states. The problem of highly unrealistic scores being achieved by many reporting countries, which was identified in early survey data (Mendel 2024: 40), appears to have been mitigated to some extent. However, UNESCO's report on its 2025 survey reports an overall average score of 70 percent (UNESCO 2026: 8), which still seems unrealistically high, especially given that at least eight of the countries do not even have RTI laws.[16]

[11] The homepage for the RTI Evaluation is at https://www.rti-evaluation.org/, while the Evaluations page, showing the results of the eight publicly available assessments, is at https://www.rti-evaluation.org/evaluations/. A number of other assessments are not shown on that page because either the partner that conducted the assessment asked for it not to be uploaded due to security concerns or there were flaws in the way the evaluation was conducted.

[12] The status of different indicators is available from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Statistics Division. 2026. "IAEG-SDGs: Tier Classification for Global SDG Indicators." https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/iaeg-sdgs/tier-classification/.

[13] See United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Statistics Division. 2026. "IAEG-SDGs: Tier Classification for Global SDG Indicators." https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/iaeg-sdgs/tier-classification/.

[14] Available at https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/metadata/.

[15] It should be noted that almost all of the information collected in these five questions is already available via the RTI Rating. One exception to this is whether the adoption of an RTI law is "in progress," a notoriously unreliable metric. The four countries listed by UNESCO as falling into this category in 2025 (UNESCO 2026: 8) have each been working on RTI laws for decades.

[16] The report does not contain data on which countries responded to the survey, but it does mention that 115 of the 123 respondent countries have some legal guarantee for RTI, which could just be a constitutional guarantee without implementing legislation.

Of course, the SDGs were founded on the idea of self-reporting and self-collection of base data by states. It is, however, worth noting that there are significant differences between how this approach works for most other indicators and in relation to Indicator 16.10.2. First, unlike most other indicators, there is no underlying methodology for collecting data or responding to the survey. For example, a positive response may be provided to the questions about whether the oversight body has provided training or raised public awareness, regardless of how extensive those activities have been. This cannot be compared to the relatively precise manner in which most indicators are assessed. Second, the indicators under SDG 16, certainly including Indicator 16.10.2, are more political than many others, such that states are reluctant to be shown to be laggards on them. As a result, the incentive to exaggerate country performance is much greater. When married with more flexibility to do so, based on the lack of a clear methodology for scoring results, this inevitably results in less reliable data. Third, as in its 2024 report (UNESCO 2025b: 10–11), the 2025 UNESCO report again highlights a core underlying data collection problem, stating: "record keeping remains a systemic challenge for tracking progress and strengthening ATI frameworks" (UNESCO 2026: 11). This is a polite way of saying that states are not collecting the basic data that are needed to answer UNESCO's survey questions.

Overall, it seems more than reasonable to conclude that we are essentially unable to determine reliably whether progress is being achieved on the implementation part of SDG Indicator 16.10.2, which represents at least half of the entire indicator. This conclusion is all the more surprising given that Indicator 16.10.2 has been approved as a Tier I indicator.

5.4. Lessons for the Post-2030 Agenda

The inclusion of SDG 16 among the SDGs was a massive advance in terms of official understanding of what constitutes sustainable development and a significant achievement for those who pushed for recognition of this broader understanding, including many civil society organizations. At the same time, the experience with Indicator 16.10.2 shows that neither official actors nor civil society groups thought through sufficiently the assessment challenges this would entail.

While the indicators under SDG 16 are not entirely unique in this respect, it is fair to say that most of them suffer from one of three challenges:

1. Collection of reliable data on the indicator has not been done systematically in the past and, at least in some cases, this is not easy to do. Indicator 16.3.3, the "proportion of the population who have experienced a dispute in the past two years and who accessed a formal or informal dispute resolution mechanism, by type of mechanism," which was adopted only in 2020, is a good example (see Chapter 2). As a result, many countries have not moved to collect reliable data on these sorts of indicators, which limits the ability to assess progress on them.
2. There is a wide gap between what is expressed in a target and what is measured by the indicator(s) under it. Target 16.3 on the rule of law is a good example, with its three indicators measuring: the proportion of victims of violence who reported it to the authorities; unsentenced detainees as a proportion of the prison population; and the proportion of the population which, having experienced a dispute, accessed a dispute resolution mechanism.

However, these represent only a partial, albeit important, element of the wider notion of the rule of law. This means that even if reliable data on the indicators are available, which is often not the case, these provide only a surrogate or partial assessment of progress on the core target. In addition, the above-mentioned challenge relating to the collection of data often also applies to these targets and indicators.

3. In rare cases, arguably only in the case of Indicator 16.10.2, the indicator closely tracks the target but, for this very reason, is complicated to measure. In this case, it is fortunate that there is a dataset, in the form of the RTI Rating, that tracks whether RTI laws have been adopted that are in line with international standards. However, the only widely applied methodology for assessing implementation of these laws suffers from both an enormous gap between the core value being assessed (in this rare case as expressed similarly in both the target and indicator) and serious direct data deficiencies.

When UNESCO first developed a survey for assessing Indicator 16.10.2, in 2019, there were two surveys. One was filled out by the oversight body and the other by a number of different public authorities. The first survey had 14 questions and numerous sub-questions, while the second had 10 questions, again with many sub-questions, and needed to be completed numerous times by different public authorities. UNESCO hired the CLD to administer these surveys, and it in turn hired local groups in each country. Data were in the end obtained for all 43 of the countries that submitted Voluntary National Reviews in that year. (SDG 16 was one of those which was subject to a thematic review that year.)

Although the depth of insights this extensive exercise provided was impressive, UNESCO quickly realized that it did not have the resources to continue with such an intensive data collection approach. Instead, it cut back the surveys significantly, combining them into one survey which could be completed by an oversight body, and ended verification of the results. As such, it had a practical tool that it could realistically apply widely and on an annual basis, but it had largely abandoned the goal of assessing genuine progress on indicator 16.10.2.

While this is a story about Indicator 16.10.2, similar stories could be told about most of the indicators under SDG 16 or, in some cases, about the failure of the indicators to comprehensively measure progress on the relevant targets. Ultimately, you cannot measure complex social and legal phenomena without investing significantly in data collection. In the final analysis, SDG 16 is an ambitious and fairly holistic approach to assessing development progress, but lacks key elements of what is required to assess progress properly.

The problems in assessing implementation of RTI laws highlight a wider problem with many of the targets under SDG 16. These targets usefully expanded on traditional notions of what development means but, at the same time, not enough thought was given to how to assess them. Instead, it was assumed that they could somehow be fitted into a more traditional development framework by reducing them to statistically measurable metrics. This has, for the most part, led to indicators which either do not closely track the targets they are meant to reflect or are themselves hard to measure. It is essential that any post-2030 development agenda maintain the broader understanding of development that is reflected in SDG 16. However, it is equally important that far more attention and resources are invested in assessing progress on these development targets. This will require more resources to be allocated to

assessing progress, but also a broadened understanding of how to measure progress beyond statistical comparisons, as well as investments in methodologies for this. All of this will require deeper collaboration between official actors and civil society, with the latter treated as genuine partners in the process rather than just monitors and sources of "non-official" data.

It would be truly unfortunate if a global post-2030 agenda system for assessing developmental progress were to exclude key development metrics like those captured by SDG 16, or even to fail to expand on the progress in this regard that was achieved in 2015. However, it would also be a serious failing to include these metrics and then to fail to measure them properly, as has happened with the 2030 Agenda.

To square this circle, states need to invest far more attention and resources in the areas of assessment and data collection. Structurally, at a minimum, the following are needed:

1. Additional resources to enable states to collect data on indicators that provide a reasonable if surrogate means of assessing progress on relevant targets.
2. Significant efforts to develop an approach to indicators that collectively does a reasonable job of assessing progress on the relevant targets. This may require a more imaginative and less rigid approach to the issue. The SDG indicators, which built on the more traditional development-focused Millennium Development Goals, take a predominantly statistical approach. It may be necessary to move away from such a data-focused approach to something more nuanced and subtle, even if this makes it more difficult to conduct strict comparisons. It would be better to have an assessment system that genuinely assessed the real developmental target than to sacrifice the latter so as to make everything strictly comparable. Other innovations, such as the idea of having primary and secondary indicators, could also help provide the necessary depth for the system of indicators.
3. More focus on how to develop standardized, longitudinally comparable methodologies to accompany the above. These will need to show whether real progress has been made on achieving the target, even if this cannot be reduced to numbers, while also remaining practical as information collection exercises.
4. Far more structural engagement with civil society organizations throughout the entire exercise. Not just as external actors producing "non-official data" as a means to pressure governments and intergovernmental organizations to do better, but as actual partners in the process. A more integrated approach to pooling ideas and resources in the area of assessing progress, rather than engaging in duplicative and sometimes competitive efforts, is likely to generate more robust results than the current bifurcated system, which involves terms such as "official" and "non-official" data, and puts states and nongovernmental organizations on opposite sides of the ledger instead of collaborating.

5.5. Recommendations

- Efforts to encourage states, in particular SIDS, to adopt RTI laws should continue and be expanded in the final four years of the 2030 Agenda.
- There is already some evidence that artificial intelligence could boost efforts to implement RTI laws. Research into and development of these and other potential implementation efficiencies should be expanded.

- For the remaining four years of the 2030 Agenda, as much effort should be made, and support allocated, as possible to conduct deeper assessments of how well RTI laws are being implemented.
- As planning for a possible post-2030 agenda system for assessing development progress gets underway in earnest, states should commit to continuing to expand the way development is understood and, importantly, to seriously address the new assessment challenges this brings in its wake.

References

Mendel, Toby. 2024. "States Cannot Address Poverty in Secret." In SDG 16 Data Initiative, *SDG 16 as a Key Vector for Eliminating Poverty*. SDG 16 Data Initiative 2024 Report. https://www.law-democracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/SDG16DI-Global-Report-2024.final_.pdf.

UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization). 2019. "Access to Information Gets an Upgrade in SDG Indicators Framework." Press release. 12 November. https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/access-information-gets-upgrade-sdg-indicators-framework.

UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization). 2025a. "UNESCO Opens Regional Workshop on Access to Information for Caribbean SIDS." 12 December. https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/unesco-opens-regional-workshop-access-information-caribbean-sids.

UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization). 2025b. *Oversight Bodies, Access to Data and Digital Tools as Essential Elements for Enhancing Access to Information: UNESCO's 2024 Report on Public Access to Information (SDG Indicator 16.10.2)*. CI/UAI/2025/WS/15 Rev. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000393238.

UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization). 2026. *UNESCO's Report on Public Access to Information*, 2025. CI/UAI/2026/WS/15. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000398030.

Chapter 6

Beyond Official Statistics: Civil Society Data and the SDG 16.10.1 Monitoring of Attacks Against Journalists in Brazil

Léticia Kleim, Abraji

This chapter examines how civil-society-generated data complements official statistics in monitoring violence against journalists in Brazil, revealing patterns of physical, digital, gender-based, and judicial harassment that might otherwise be overlooked.

Drawing on monitoring by the Brazilian Association of Investigative Journalism (Associação Brasileira de Jornalismo Investigativo, Abraji), it highlights evolving threats to press freedom and the importance of independent evidence for tracking progress on SDG Indicator 16.10.1. It demonstrates how sustained civil society monitoring has informed public debate, advocacy, and institutional responses, including government initiatives and judicial recognition of harassment against journalists.

Reliable data are the foundation of public policy. Governments can only respond effectively to problems that they are able to identify, measure, and understand. While criminal, judicial, and administrative records may capture individual crimes, they can rarely identify whether victims were targeted because of their journalistic work or connect different forms of violence to broader patterns of attacks on press freedom.

As a result, Brazil's national picture is primarily shaped by data produced by civil society organizations, notably the Brazilian Association of Investigative Journalism (Abraji), the National Federation of Journalists (Federação Nacional dos Jornalistas), the Committee to Protect Journalists, ARTICLE 19, and Reporters Without Borders (Reporters sans frontières). These organizations have become the main sources of evidence on the scale, characteristics, and evolution of violence against journalists in the country.

These initiatives do more than fill gaps in official statistics. By systematically documenting attacks over time, they reveal patterns, identify emerging threats, and serve as independent accountability mechanisms that provide evidence for public debate, advocacy, and policymaking.

6.1. Building a Record of Violence

Abraji began to systematically monitor attacks on journalists and media organizations in 2019, at a time when hostility toward the press was becoming increasingly visible in Brazilian political life.

The monitoring follows a methodology that expands SDG Indicator 16.10.1 by focusing on journalists and media workers, and working with 17 instead of 6 types of aggression. This methodology was developed by Red Voces del Sur, a regional network of organizations defending freedom of expression in Latin America and the Caribbean.

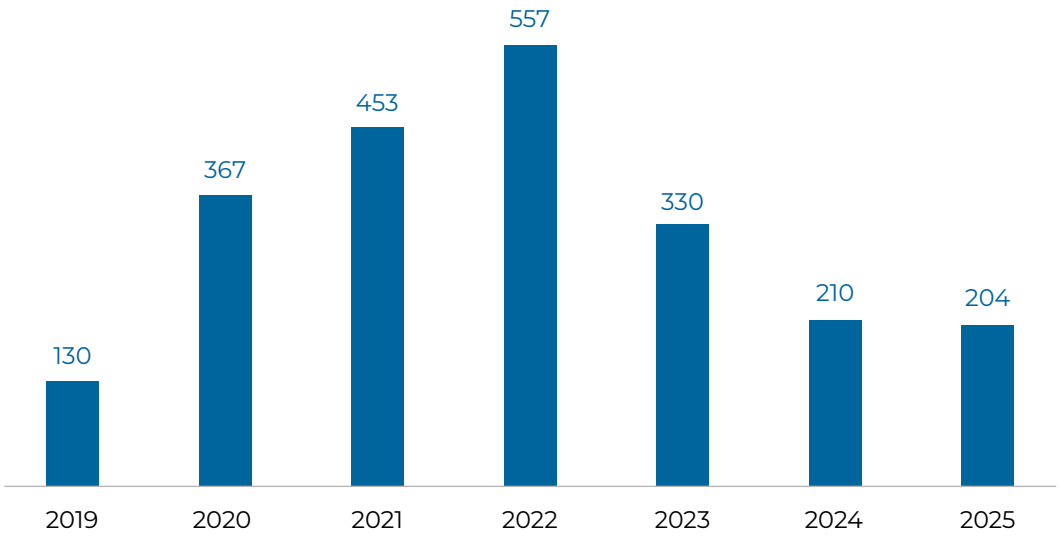
Cases are recorded as "alerts" and classified according to forms of violence, from physical attacks to threats, verbal and digital aggression, judicial harassment, restrictions on access to information, stigmatizing discourse, sexual violence, and technology-facilitated attacks. A single alert can contain more than one violation, which allows the data to reflect how different forms of violence often overlap. This approach provides something that an isolated police or court record cannot: a continuous account of how attacks against journalism are changing in response to political, social, and technological transformation.

6.2. From Political Escalation to Persistent Violence

Abraji's historical series reveals a sharp escalation in attacks against journalists between 2019 and 2022, when annual alerts rose from 130 to 557 (Abraji 2025a). This increase coincided with intense political polarization and sustained anti-press rhetoric from public authorities, which contributed to an environment in which hostility toward journalists became increasingly normalized and amplified on digital platforms.

Although the number of alerts fell to 330 in 2023 and stabilized at around 200 in 2024 and 2025, the data highlight a transformation rather than a resolution of the problem. In 2024, 40.9 percent of all alerts involved serious violations, such as physical assaults, threats, intimidation, or the destruction of equipment (Abraji 2025b). By 2025, attacks by state and non-state actors had become more persistent and dispersed throughout the year, affecting journalists across different areas of coverage, and suggesting that violence had become embedded in the daily practice of journalism rather than concentrated around major political events.

Figure 6.1. Attacks against journalists by recorded cases, 2019–2025



Source: Abraji. 2025b. "Monitor de Assédio Judicial contra Jornalistas no Brasil 2025" [Monitor of Judicial Harassment against Journalists in Brazil 2025], p. 21. https://www.abraji.org.br/publicacoes/monitor-de-assedio-judicial-contra-jornalistas-2025.

6.3. More Personal, Hybrid, and Digital Attacks

The data also reveal how the nature of the attacks has changed. In 2025, verbal, written, and digital aggression appeared in 36.3 percent of the 204 alerts, followed by physical attacks (27.0 percent) and stigmatizing discourse (25.0 percent). More than half of all attacks (55.4 percent) originated online or had significant online repercussions, highlighting the growing centrality of digital platforms in violence against journalists. Reporters and analysts accounted for 68.6 percent of all victims, demonstrating that attacks have become increasingly personalized. At the same time, state (43.6 percent) and non-state actors (44.6 percent) appeared in nearly equal proportions, indicating that hostility toward journalists is no longer confined to public institutions but has become socially diffused.

6.4. Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation: A Growing Threat

Although widely recognized in other parts of the world, strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) have long been a hidden reality in Brazil. Politicians and major business figures continue to misuse legal tools to restrict press freedom and undermine democracy (Abraji 2024). This reality has become apparent through the work of organized civil society. Abraji created the Monitor of Judicial Harassment against Journalists in Brazil, which developed a definition and methodology for identifying and measuring the problem through a collaborative process. Between 2008 and 2025, it identified 784 lawsuits with characteristics of SLAPPs. The impact of judgments in these lawsuits approaches USD 1 million, but the even greater impact on silencing and self-censorship cannot be captured by this pioneering data.

6.5. Inequalities Hidden in the Numbers

Civil society monitoring also makes it possible to examine dimensions of violence that are frequently absent from official records. Abraji's gender-based monitoring identifies cases in which misogyny, sexism, sexual violence, racism, or LGBTQ+-phobic content shape an attack. In 2025, explicit gender-based violence featured in 15.2 percent of all alerts. Among these cases, 77.4 percent involved sexist, misogynistic, or LGBTQ+-phobic comments. The data show that gender is not a separate form of violence but a factor that changes the language, intensity, and consequences of attacks.

6.6. From Civil Society Evidence to a Government Response

Years of monitoring and advocacy by journalists' and freedom-of-expression organizations have helped to put violence against journalists on the public agenda. Following pressure from civil society—and amid the attacks against media workers during the anti-democratic events of January 2023—the Ministry of Justice and Public Security created the Observatory of Violence Against Journalists and Social Communicators in February 2023. Its stated responsibilities are to monitor attacks, support investigations, maintain a database, and propose public policies.

The creation of the observatory represents an important recognition by the state that violence against journalists requires a specific public response. However, in its early years, implementation was incomplete, and its capacity to produce systematic official research or provide effective protection was limited. Civil society data therefore continued to guide most assessments of the national situation. In 2025, however, the government established an advisory council for the observatory and its work is gaining new momentum in 2026.

In April 2026, the government instituted a national protocol for investigating crimes against journalists and communicators (Brazil 2026). The protocol provides guidelines on prevention and police investigations, and recommends that security institutions maintain disaggregated records and submit data to the observatory. This is an important step, but its practical impact will depend on adoption, implementation, regular reporting, and coordination across Brazil's public security institutions.

A further impact of evidence-based advocacy is the Brazilian Supreme Court's ruling on the constitutional challenge filed by Abraji in 2024 regarding SLAPPs[17]. The ruling is a milestone in the recognition of judicial harassment by the Brazilian authorities. It took place after the launch of Abraji's Monitor, which provided data that proved that SLAPPs were not isolated cases, but a systematic practice of human rights violations that must be curbed[18]. The trajectory of the observatory and the Supreme Court ruling demonstrate the influence of—and the continued need for—non-official data. Civil society monitoring first revealed the scale of the problem and then helped to generate pressure for a government response. It remains essential for assessing whether that response is producing concrete results.

6.7. Making Violence Visible

The Brazilian experience demonstrates that civil-society-generated data do more than fill the gaps in official statistics. They reveal patterns, identify emerging threats, and provide evidence that supports advocacy and public policy change. While governments remain responsible for preventing attacks and ensuring accountability, meaningful progress on SDG Indicator 16.10.1 will depend on recognizing that civil society organizations are essential producers of public data. In Brazil, their monitoring has not only documented violence against journalists, but also helped shape the country's institutional response.

References

Abraji (Associação Brasileira de Jornalismo Investigativo [Brazilian Association of Investigative Journalism]). 2024. *Monitoring of Attacks on Journalists in Brazil: 2024 Report*. https://www.abraji.org.br/publicacoes/monitoring-of-attacks-on-journalists-in-brazil-report-2024.

Abraji (Associação Brasileira de Jornalismo Investigativo [Brazilian Association of Investigative Journalism]). 2025a. "Ataques gerais e violência de gênero contra jornalistas no Brasil 2025" [General attacks and gender-based violence against journalists in Brazil 2025]. https://abraji.org.br/publicacoes/ataques-gerais-e-violencia-de-genero-contra-jornalistas-no-brasil.

Abraji (Associação Brasileira de Jornalismo Investigativo [Brazilian Association of Investigative Journalism]). 2025b. "Monitor de Assédio Judicial contra Jornalistas no Brasil 2025" [Monitor of Judicial Harassment against Journalists in Brazil 2025]. https://www.abraji.org.br/publicacoes/monitor-de-assedio-judicial-contra-jornalistas-2025.

Brazil. Ministério da Justiça e Segurança Pública. Portaria MJSP n° 1.202, de 7 de abril de 2026. *Diário Oficial da União*, Brasília, DF, Apr. 2026 [Ordinance No. 1.202/MJSP, of 7 April, 2026. Official Gazette of the Federal Government, Brasília, DF, Apr. 2026]. https://www.in.gov.br/web/dou/-/portaria-mjsp-n-1.202-de-7-de-abril-de-2026-698588008.

17 Brazil. Supreme Federal Court. 2024 Direct Action of Unconstitutionality (ADI) No. 7055. Reporting Justice: Justice Luís Roberto Barroso. Electronic Justice Gazette, Brasília, DF. https://portal.stf.jus.br/processos/detalhe.asp?incidente=6325731.

18 *ibid*

Chapter 7

Conclusion: Toward a More Inclusive Post-2030 Monitoring Framework

As the international community begins to consider the development agenda beyond 2030, the contributions to this report highlight the need to strengthen both the scope and the inclusiveness of global monitoring frameworks. While the SDGs have advanced our understanding of the role of peace, justice, and strong institutions in the sustainable development process, persistent data gaps and limitations in indicator coverage continue to constrain assessments of progress. The post-2030 agenda offers an opportunity to build on these achievements while addressing shortcomings in how progress is defined, measured, and monitored.

A central recommendation emerging from the chapters is the need to recognize that complementary data sources and indicators will be integral components of future monitoring frameworks. This will require greater investment in data collection, more systematic collaboration between national statistical systems and independent data producers, and the development of methodologies that combine comparability with sufficient depth to capture complex governance challenges. As the contributions on access to justice and the right to information emphasize, monitoring should move beyond the existence of laws and institutions to assess their implementation, effectiveness, and impact on people's lives. Similarly, the chapters on illicit arms flows and attacks against journalists demonstrate the importance of granular, context-specific evidence for identifying emerging risks and informing policy responses.

Future frameworks should also broaden the dimensions of governance they measure. International IDEA's analysis highlights the importance of developing more comprehensive indicators of democratic representation, participation, fundamental rights, and the rule of law. The report underscores the need to integrate qualitative evidence and lived experiences, particularly those of marginalized communities, into assessments of progress.

Taken together, these recommendations point to a more inclusive, people-centered, and multidimensional approach to monitoring sustainable development. Such an approach will require sustained investment in independent data production, stronger partnerships with civil society, and greater recognition of the diversity of evidence needed to assess progress. Above all, the post-2030 agenda should preserve and reinforce the centrality of peace, justice, human rights, and democratic governance as foundations of sustainable development, while ensuring that the framework for measuring progress is sufficiently comprehensive to support meaningful accountability and action.

About the Authors

Nicolas Florquin | Small Arms Survey
Nicolas Florquin is Head of Data and Analytics and a Senior Researcher at the Small Arms Survey. His research focuses on armed actors and illicit flows of arms and ammunition, particularly in Africa, the Caribbean, and Europe. He previously worked with Geneva Call and the United Nations Panel of Experts on Liberia.

Kathryn Grace Hulseman | World Justice Project
Kathryn Grace Hulseman is a Senior Research Associate at the World Justice Project, where she supports a robust access to justice research agenda focused on understanding people's justice experiences around the world and supporting actors working to close the justice gap. She holds a master's degree in Global Human Development from Georgetown University.

Léticia Kleim | Abraji
Léticia Kleim is Legal Coordinator at the Brazilian Association of Investigative Journalism (Abraji), where she oversees initiatives including the Legal Protection Programme for Journalists and the Judicial Harassment Monitor. A lawyer and geographer trained at the University of São Paulo, she has extensive experience working with organizations dedicated to protecting fundamental rights.

Elena Marmo | TAP Network
Elena Marmo is the Deputy Director at the Transparency, Accountability, and Participation (TAP) Network, where her work focuses on fostering and supporting a vibrant and resilient ecosystem of civil society, champions, practitioners, and changemakers to collectively address systemic injustices and existential crises around peace, justice, human rights, and accountability. In addition to her work in policy and advocacy spaces, Elena serves as an Adjunct Assistant Professor in Peace and Justice Studies at Pace University. Elena holds an MSc in Violence, Conflict and Development from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London.

Toby Mendel | Centre for Law and Democracy
Toby Mendel is the Founder and Executive Director of the Centre for Law and Democracy and an internationally recognized expert on freedom of expression and the right to information. Previously Senior Director for Law at ARTICLE 19, he has advised governments, international organizations, and civil society on legal standards and reforms relating to freedom of expression and access to information.

Irene Postigo Sanchez | International IDEA
Irene Postigo Sanchez is an Associate Program Officer in International IDEA's Democracy Assessment Unit, contributing to the Global State of Democracy Initiative. Her research focuses on democracy and human rights in Western Asia and North Africa, building on previous experience with European Union and United Nations institutions and the International Criminal Court.

Hannah Rigazzi | World Justice Project

Hannah Rigazzi is a Research Associate on the Access to Justice team at the World Justice Project, where she previously supported the Rule of Law Index. She holds degrees in Political Science and Spanish from Rollins College in Florida, United States, and has experience with the Organization of American States.

Annika Silva-Leander | International IDEA

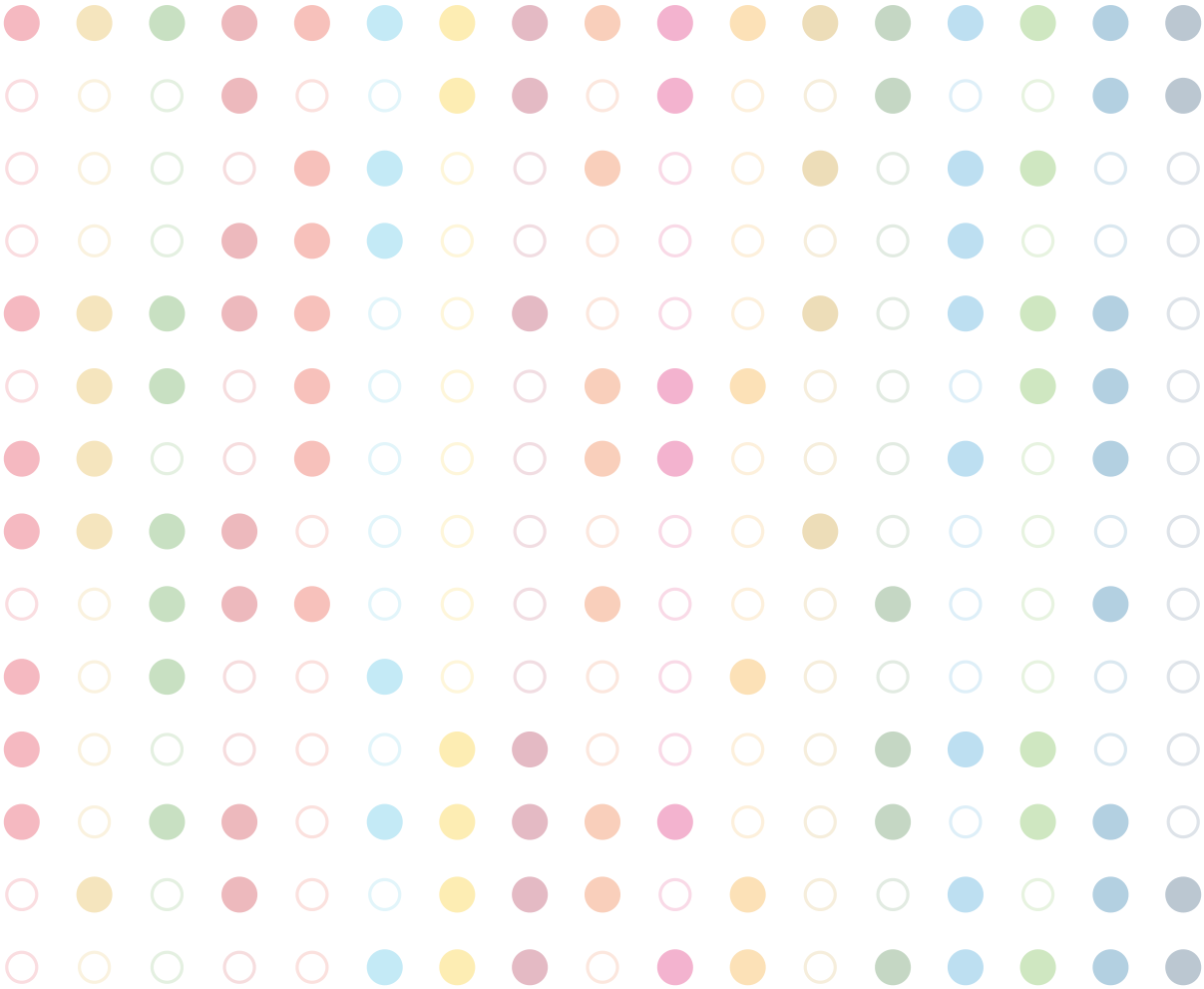
Annika Silva-Leander is Head of Strategic Initiatives and UN Permanent Observer at the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA). She leads International IDEA's UN democracy advocacy and research, the SDG 16 Data Initiative, and the Global Democracy Coalition, drawing on extensive experience in democratic governance and sustainable development, including previous leadership roles at International IDEA and the World Bank. She holds a PhD from the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Malaika Walker | TAP Network

Malaika Walker is a matriculating student of Peace and Justice Studies and Political Science at Pace University in New York City with a passion for international affairs, disarmament, peacebuilding, and social justice. During her time as an Advocacy and Engagement Associate at the TAP Network, Malaika contributed to coordination with the network's broad-based membership while also supporting thought leadership, research, and advocacy and campaign tools.

With only four years remaining until the deadline for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2030, progress on SDG 16 is increasingly at risk. Across many countries, indicators related to peace, justice, effective institutions, civic freedoms, and democratic governance are stagnating or deteriorating, while significant gaps in official data continue to constrain effective monitoring and policymaking. This report demonstrates that non-official and complementary data sources are essential to understanding progress and setbacks across SDG 16.

Drawing on evidence from civil society organizations, research institutions, and independent data providers, the report finds a broad decline in governance-related dimensions since 2015, alongside persistent challenges in access to justice, transparency, and accountability. At the same time, it highlights advances in justice measurement and the growing value of citizen-generated, field-based, and qualitative data in revealing realities often invisible in official statistics. Across all chapters, a common message emerges: stronger partnerships, more inclusive data ecosystems, and greater attention to implementation and lived experience are critical for monitoring progress, strengthening accountability, and advancing peaceful, just, and inclusive societies beyond 2030.



SDG16 data initiative