Progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is off track, and SDG 16 is no exception. Lack of progress on Goal 16 affects the achievement of all the other SDGs, as peace, good governance and effective institutions, access to justice, as well as freedom from fear and violence, are all critical enablers of sustainable development. Governance has been identified as “an essential lever of the systematic transformations needed to achieve all 17 SDGs”, as highlighted in the 2023 Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR), among others.

Progress towards SDG 16 is slow, and in some cases has been reversed. Efforts towards preventing and reducing violence, access to justice for all, inclusive governance and peaceful societies show signs of stagnation or regression. Conflict and violence are on the rise in several regions; human rights infringements continue to be recorded in many countries; and access to justice continues to be elusive for large portions of national populations, especially the most marginalized.

Available data on violence against children is deeply alarming. By the end of 2022, 43.3 million children, including 17.5 million child refugees and asylum seekers, were displaced due to conflict and
violence, exposing them to heightened violence and crime.\textsuperscript{1} In 2021, intentional homicides reached the highest level observed in the past two decades, with approximately 458,000 intentional homicides.\textsuperscript{2} Violence-related cases have a gender dimension, with globally nearly 89,000 women and girls killed intentionally in 2022.\textsuperscript{3} Little progress has been achieved to date in ensuring access to justice for all (target 16.3). The proportion of unsentenced prisoners remains at around 30 per cent of the global prison population, and overcrowding in prisons is reported by almost half of countries with relevant data.\textsuperscript{4}

Corruption continues to be a challenge in all regions. One measure of corruption used for the global SDG indicators—the prevalence of bribery as reported by individuals and firms—remains alarmingly high, with reported prevalence rates surpassing 20 per cent in many countries.\textsuperscript{5} In addition, corruption continues to undermine the delivery of public services and poses serious challenges to environmental governance, particularly the environmental rule of law, especially in developing countries. It also enables some of the most serious drivers of biodiversity loss, wildlife trafficking and deforestation.\textsuperscript{6}

There are promising indications of progress towards the achievement of several SDG 16 targets. There has been some progress on target 16.9

\textsuperscript{1} Annual report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, 2023, A/78/214.
\textsuperscript{3} The highest yearly number recorded in the past two decades. UNODC – UN Women, Gender-related killing of women and girls (Femicide/Feminicide), Global estimate of female intimate partner/family-related homicides in 2022.
\textsuperscript{4} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{5} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{6} https://www.unep.org/resources/publication/environmental-rule-law-tracking-progress-and-charting-future-directions
on birth registration. The proportion of those whose birth is registered increased from 71.2 percent in the period 2010-2016 to 77.2 in 2022. However, the birth of almost one quarter of children under the age of five worldwide was not registered, denying identity and access to social services to the most vulnerable. In addition, while there was a decrease in the overall number of victims of trafficking in persons from 2019 to 2022, it is challenging to obtain accurate data due to the fact that many victims remain undetected. The percentage of child victims detected increased from 28 per cent in 2014 to 35 per cent in 2021. Access to information is critical for enabling citizens to exercise their voice to effectively monitor and hold their governments to account. In 1990, only 14 countries had laws that specifically guaranteed the rights of citizens to access public information. In 2022, 135 countries have such laws or regulatory frameworks. Despite the increase, the implementation and enforcement of these laws can be challenging given the increasingly complex digital environments in many countries.

Women are underrepresented at senior levels of decision-making and continue to face glass ceilings that limit their career aspirations in the public service. Women are less equally represented in senior levels in public service roles than in lower-level positions.

Transparency is needed to build trust and foster equitable societies. A key ingredient of trust between people and their governments is the

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7 Global Progress Report on Sustainable Development Goal 16 Indicators: A wake-up call for action on peace, justice and inclusion (UNODC, OHCHR, UNDP 2023).
equitable and efficient management and spending of public resources. Robust accountability systems are critical, including strong checks and balances as well as transparency and civic accountability mechanisms. The role of oversight institutions such as parliaments and supreme audit institutions is crucial. They need to be adequately resourced and effectively collaborate with other oversight bodies.

Progress on SDG 16 is closely linked with the 2030 Agenda’s principle of leaving no one behind. Fostering social cohesion is critical and requires approaches that strive to include all segments of society. Governments need to ensure that access to resources and opportunities is exempt from discrimination. Policies need to reflect the needs of vulnerable and minority groups, including through addressing inherent structural inequalities and intersectional disadvantages. Failing to represent these groups in data narratives can lead to policies that fail to address or even worsen the challenges they face.

Data gaps remain a challenge for assessing progress towards targets in a meaningful manner. This year, for the first time, data are available on all SDG 16 indicators, although for some countries coverage continues to be limited, and more investment is needed to expand data availability. On average, across all SDG 16 targets, only 40 percent of countries have reported data for at least one year since 2015, limiting the information that could drive evidence-informed policies to accelerate progress towards this Goal.

Several tools have been developed in a relatively short period of time to meet the demands of measuring governance, corruption, crime, and access to justice, and to provide guidance on applying a human rights-based approach to data. New initiatives and partnerships also enhance cooperation on measuring SDG 16. An increasing number of countries
are undertaking comprehensive mappings of the SDG 16 data ecosystem and, showcasing them in their Voluntary National Reviews, using data from a wide variety of sources. Additionally, an increasing number of innovative partnerships between National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs), civil society and national statistical offices are also making headway.

The human rights implications of rapid development of digital technologies is a cross-cutting factor that affects progress towards SDG 16. In many ways—for example by facilitating the delivery of social protection services—digital technologies can support the SDGs and help enable the fulfilment of human rights. The responsible use of digital technologies has the potential to strengthen the effectiveness, transparency, and accountability of public institutions, and to promote equal access to justice for all. The use of digital tools has also helped to enable spaces for young people’s meaningful engagement and advocacy, including, for instance, during electoral processes. Yet national legal frameworks and regulatory reforms have struggled to keep pace with digital technology developments and their implications for upholding human rights, as well as ensuring equal access to such technologies and services. Robust assessments and ongoing evaluation are essential to safeguard against discrimination, interference with privacy rights and equal human dignity. Priority must be given to developing digital literacy, building critical digital infrastructure and strengthening child-sensitive, youth- and gender-responsive and people-centered digital services.

Against this backdrop, this session aims to emphasize the critical role of peace, justice, and strong institutions as foundational elements for achieving all SDGs. It will discuss best practices from different regions.
or sectors that demonstrate effective approaches to achieving SDG 16 and fostering synergies with other SDGs.

**Proposed questions for discussion**

- What integrated approaches can be leveraged to maximize synergies and limit trade-offs across SDGs, with SDG16? How can the High-impact initiatives (HIIs) launched at the SDG Summit in September 2023 be scaled up to have the highest impact?

- What measures are needed for building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels?

- What are some innovative approaches to integrating peacebuilding, justice reform, and institutional strengthening into broader development strategies?

- How can we strengthen cooperation and partnerships for peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development and provide access to justice for all?

- How can digital technologies be harnessed to ensure advancements in peace, justice, and inclusive societies?

- What measures can be implemented to enhance monitoring of SDG 16 implementation and increase the availability of relevant data at all levels? What kinds of new partnerships and cooperation are needed for this?