

SDG 16 AS AN ENABLER OF THE 2030 AGENDA

Policy Paper No. 32, July 2024



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Stacey Cram

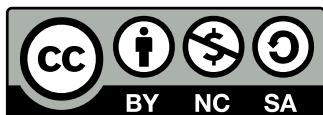


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This Policy Paper provides a current literature review and an in-depth meta-analysis of the evidence base that underpins assertions of interlinkages between Sustainable Development Goal 16—as an enabler—and the 2030 Agenda's other Sustainable Development Goals.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Policy Paper explores the interlinkages between Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) and the 2030 Agenda's other Sustainable Development Goals. Despite SDG 16's crucial role in promoting democratic principles, human rights and the rule of law, it is often overlooked, and the financing needed to deliver SDG 16 is substantial, requiring sustained investment for long-term development. This paper provides a comprehensive literature review and meta-analysis of 185 articles and highlights how SDG 16 acts as an enabler for other SDGs.

Key findings indicate substantial evidence of SDG 16's interlinkages with other goals, with high-impact interlinkages existing for SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). There is also a robust evidence base demonstrating SDG 16's positive impact on SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and SDG 13 (Climate Action), which are also examined in this paper.

The dimensions of SDG 16 with the strongest interlinkages are ensuring participatory decision making (SDG 16.7), justice (SDG 16.3), reducing arms flows and organized crime (SDG 16.4), building transparent institutions (SDG 16.6), reducing corruption (SDG 16.5) and ensuring peace (SDG 16.1). These focus areas show significant interlinkages with several other SDGs, underscoring the crucial role of rights, participation, representation and the rule of law in achieving sustainable development and addressing various interconnected challenges.

This paper calls for increased cross-sector collaboration and offers recommendations to United Nations Member States, policymakers working across the 2030 Agenda and other stakeholders working in areas where SDG 16 has high-impact interlinkages to make targeted investments, enhance research and safeguard those working on SDG 16 in order to fully leverage its potential in achieving outcomes on the 2030 Agenda.

Despite SDG 16's crucial role in promoting democratic principles, human rights and the rule of law, it is often overlooked.

INTRODUCTION

The Sustainable Development Goals are inherently interconnected, with each goal dependent on the others for its success. However, the specific ways in which these interdependencies function have not been fully articulated. SDG 16, which focuses on promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, providing access to justice for all and building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels, is increasingly recognized as pivotal in creating an environment conducive to achieving the entire 2030 Agenda. A growing body of evidence, often categorized under the [SDG 16+ agenda](#), demonstrates that SDG 16 is vital for the achievement of all other SDGs (see Annex A. Pathfinders' graphic depiction of the SDG 16+ framework).

In recent years, democracy has been in decline, the rule of law has weakened, civic space has been shrinking, and conflict-related deaths have reached a three-decade high.

SDG 16 is also vital for upholding key principles of democracy, as defined by the [Global State of Democracy](#) (GSoD) Indices, compiled by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), including rights, participation, representation and the rule of law (see Chapters 3 and 4 for a detailed breakdown). Yet, despite its critical importance, SDG 16 is often overlooked, and the financing needed to deliver SDG 16 is substantial, requiring sustained investment for long-term development (UNDP 2023; SDG 16 Hub 2019; Manuel and Manuel 2022). In recent years, democracy has been in decline,¹ the rule of law has weakened,² civic space has been shrinking,³ and conflict-related deaths have reached a three-decade high.⁴ These alarming trends underscore a lack of progress on SDG 16 and an urgency to accelerate action towards its achievement.

¹ In 2023, across every region of the world, democracy continued to contract (International IDEA 2023).

² More than 6 billion people live in countries where the rule of law weakened between 2022 and 2023. Human rights have declined in three out of four countries since a global rule-of-law recession began in 2016 (WJP 2023).

³ Civic space is becoming increasingly constrained with over 85 per cent of the world's population living in countries with serious civic space restrictions. Attacks on and persecution of human rights defenders by both state and non-state actors are on the rise (CIVICUS n.d.).

⁴ In 2023, 59 state-based conflicts were recorded in 34 countries, the highest number of conflicts registered since 1946 (Rustad 2024).

Despite the importance of SDG 16, detailed research and analysis on how it interlinks with and enables the delivery of other SDGs remain limited, with existing studies on interlinkages lacking an in-depth examination of SDG 16. This Policy Paper addresses this research gap by diving into the existing literature and offering an in-depth meta-analysis of the evidence base that underpins assertions of SDG 16's interlinkages with other SDGs. Through this analysis, the paper clarifies the SDGs and aspects of SDG 16 where the interlinkage seems to be the strongest. The main target audience is United Nations Member States and policymakers working across the 2030 Agenda to help them make an evidence-based and nuanced case for SDG 16 as an enabler of the Agenda.

The methodology used to review the 185 pieces of literature covered in this study is described in Chapter 2. The resources analysed reveal clear interlinkages between SDG 16 and all other SDGs, with the most substantial evidence existing for SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). Conversely, there is less evidence for interlinkages with SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy), SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure) and SDG 14 (Life below Water).

The dimensions of SDG 16 that appear to have the strongest interlinkages are participatory decision making (SDG 16.7), justice (SDG 16.3), reducing arms flows and organized crime (SDG 16.4), transparent institutions (SDG 16.6), reducing corruption (SDG 16.5) and peace (SDG 16.1). These focus areas show significant interlinkages with several other SDGs, underscoring the crucial role of rights, participation, representation and the rule of law in achieving sustainable development and addressing various interconnected challenges.

This paper outlines how UN Member States and policymakers working across the 2030 Agenda can accelerate action on development outcomes, such as health, poverty and education, by supporting and investing in SDG 16. It provides an initial, though not exhaustive, overview of existing research on interlinkages, with positive interlinkages prioritized over negative interlinkages, and highlights questions to encourage future collaboration and research between different sectors. Addressing areas with relatively less research in future studies will be essential to strengthening the evidence base across all aspects of SDG 16 and its connections with other goals.

The resources analysed reveal clear interlinkages between SDG 16 and all other SDGs.

The dimensions of SDG 16 that appear to have the strongest interlinkages are participatory decision making (SDG 16.7), justice (SDG 16.3), reducing arms flows and organized crime (SDG 16.4), transparent institutions (SDG 16.6), reducing corruption (SDG 16.5) and peace (SDG 16.1).

Chapter 1

BACKGROUND TO THE 2030 AGENDA AND SDG 16

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted in 2015 by 193 UN Member States, includes 17 goals focused on people, the planet, prosperity, peace and partnership. SDG 16 aims to promote peaceful and inclusive societies, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable institutions at all levels. Its impacts can occur throughout public and private society, in formal institutions and in de facto norms. For this reason, it is cross-cutting, impacting governance, the delivery of basic services and the ability to find resolutions when rights are denied; these are foundational elements⁵ for addressing the complex interlinkages between poverty, inequality, climate change and economic instability. The concept of **SDG 16+** identifies peace, justice and inclusion as the three main dimensions of SDG 16, comprising the 12 targets from SDG 16 and 24 targets from 7 other goals that directly measure an aspect of peace, justice and inclusion.

⁵ 2030 Agenda Sustainable Development Goals and targets can be seen in Annex A.

Table 1.1. SDG 16 targets and indicators

| | Target | Official indicators |
|-----------|---|---|
| SDG 16.1 | Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of victims of intentional homicide • Number of conflict-related deaths • Proportion of population that feel safe walking alone around the area they live |
| SDG 16.2 | End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence and torture against children | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proportion of children aged 1–17 years who experienced any physical punishment and/or psychological aggression by caregivers • Number of victims of human trafficking • Proportion of young women and men aged 18–29 years who experienced sexual violence by age 18 |
| SDG 16.3 | Promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proportion of victims of violence who reported their victimization • Unsensitized detainees as a proportion of the overall prison population • Proportion of the population who have experienced a dispute and accessed a formal or informal dispute resolution mechanism |
| SDG 16.4 | By 2030 significantly reduce illicit financial and arms flows, strengthen the recovery and return of stolen assets, and combat all forms of organized crime | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inward and outward illicit financial flows • Proportion of seized, found or surrendered arms whose illicit origin has been traced |
| SDG 16.5 | Substantially reduce corruption and bribery in all their forms | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proportion of persons who paid a bribe to a public official or were asked for a bribe • Proportion of businesses that paid a bribe to a public official or were asked for a bribe |
| SDG 16.6 | Develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Primary government expenditures as a proportion of the approved budget, by sector • Proportion of the population satisfied with their most recent experience of public services |
| SDG 16.7 | Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision making at all levels | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proportions of positions in national and local institutions compared with national distributions • Proportion of the population who believe decision making is inclusive and responsive |
| SDG 16.8 | Broaden and strengthen the participation of developing countries in the institutions of global governance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proportion of members and voting rights of developing countries in international organizations |
| SDG 16.9 | By 2030 provide legal identity for all, including free birth registration | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proportion of children under five years of age whose births have been registered |
| SDG 16.10 | Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms in accordance with national legislation and international agreements | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of verified cases of killing, kidnapping, enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention and torture of journalists, media personnel, trade unionists and human rights advocates • Number of countries that adopt and implement guarantees for public access to information |

Source: United Nations, 'Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development', [n.d.], <<https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>>, accessed 29 June 2024.

Chapter 2

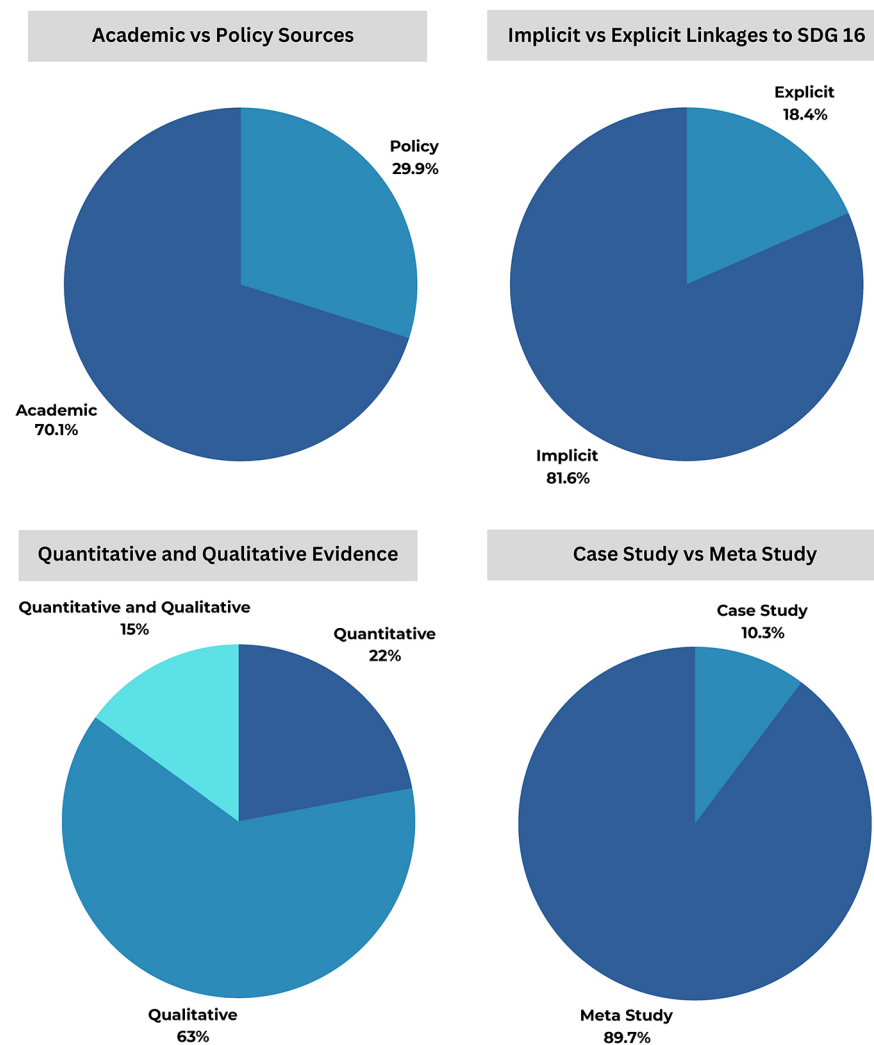
METHODOLOGY

This study is based on a scoping review of the literature on SDG 16 and its impact on other SDGs and development outcomes, as well as on SDG interlinkages. The literature search was carried out using online search engines and databases (Google Scholar, JSTOR, etc.). The researcher began looking for causal relationships through searches such as ‘How does X [SDG 16 element] impact Y [alternate SDG]?’ and then searching for ‘the relationship between X and Y’ where there was limited causal evidence.

Academic articles were prioritized in this search to find evidence with clear methodologies and robustly quantified and qualified results. Literature published between 2016 and 2024 was prioritized, with April 2024 being the cut-off date for the sampling; 13 articles written prior to 2016 were included. The breakdown of the resources used can be seen in Figure 2.1. A wide range of studies were examined through an initial screening of titles, abstracts and keywords to narrow down the sample to the final list of 185 papers. The researcher also noted where evidence surrounding an interlinkage was sparse or non-existent in an effort to determine if any trends emerged within the evidence gaps.

After the literature search and screening, an in-depth review of the studies in the final sample was carried out. A predefined coding scheme was followed to collect and synthesize information about the scale of analysis and the research methods used, and to determine whether SDG 16 was referred to as an enabler of the 2030 Agenda or of specific goals and whether the linkage was made referencing the SDG by name or outcome as described in the 2030 Agenda (e.g. SDG 1/no poverty) or more broadly on related outcomes (e.g. increased household income), and whether links were explicit or implicit, as well as to identify key evidence from the literature. The number of articles that referenced an SDG was tracked, and for each article reviewed it was noted when an individual target was mentioned as having a positive enabling effect on a specific goal. For example, if one article referenced that 16.1 enabled SDGs 1, 2 and 3, this would be noted as three occurrences of SDG 16.1 interlinkages

Figure 2.1. Breakdown of the sources reviewed



Source: Developed by the author.

in the literature. This accounts for why there are more occurrences in the literature than the number of articles reviewed. Negative occurrences were not tracked. High coverage is greater than 201 occurrences (90th percentile); medium coverage, 179–201 occurrences (80th percentile); low coverage, 156–179 occurrences (70th percentile); and the lowest coverage, below 155 occurrences (60th percentile). The highest number of occurrences was 224 (16.7, participatory decision making), and the lowest was 154 (16.8, participation of developing countries in global governance).

For a full list of the sampled literature, see Annex B.

METHODOLOGY CAVEATS

The analysis is based on a comprehensive, albeit non-exhaustive, review of the literature, and additional sources may exist that were not included. Meta studies were prioritized to increase the number of sources reviewed. This study primarily focused on explicit and implicit interlinkages referencing the SDG by name or outcome as described in the 2030 Agenda, which may not capture the full extent of the relationships between SDG 16 and other goals. The majority of the reviewed studies were qualitative, limiting the author's ability to draw robust quantitative conclusions. Negative linkages were not explored in depth. Some studies did look at negative linkages but identified SDG 16 as having low negative interlinkages; future research should examine the negative correlations related to SDG 16. Future research should also aim to incorporate more quantitative studies to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the interlinkages. This study notes the difficulty in distinguishing between correlation and causation in the observed interlinkages. Further research is needed to explore causal relationships and validate the findings.

COVID-19

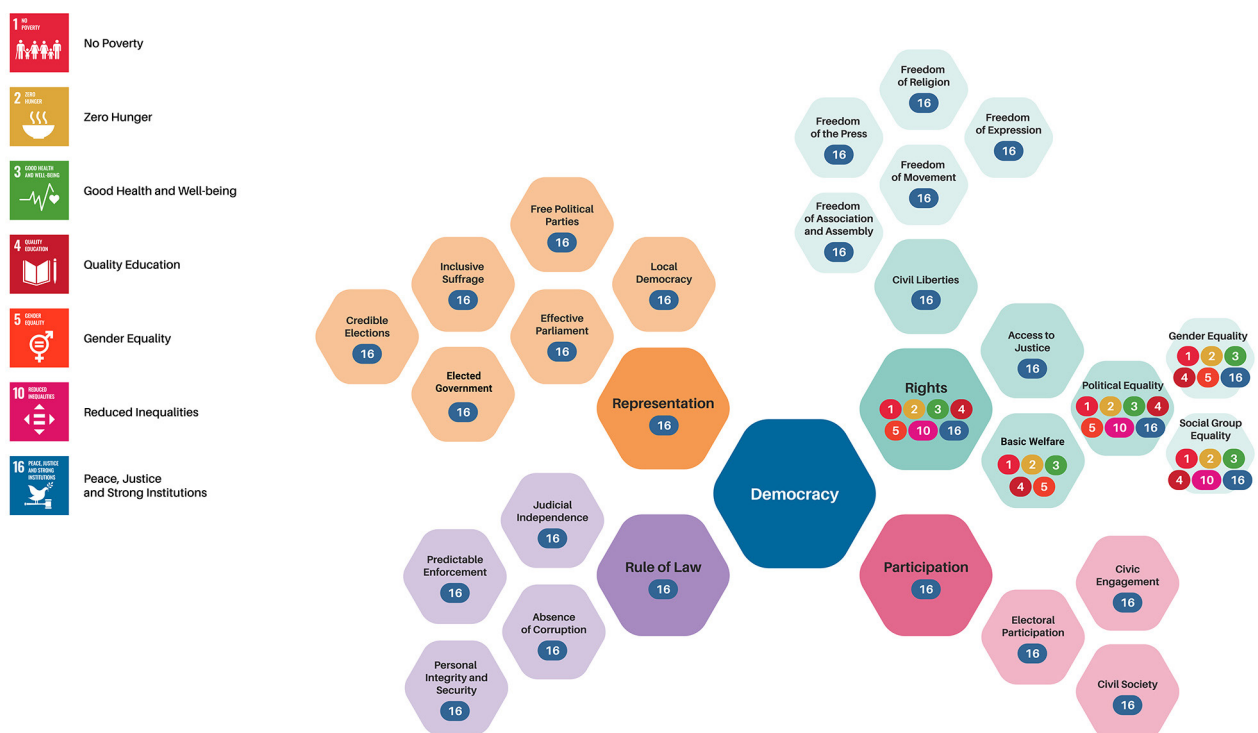
It is worth noting that the global pandemic may have fuelled an increased number of publications linking SDG 16 to SDG 3. Seven of the articles reviewed were written in direct response to the Covid-19 public health crisis, with others written after 2020 examining the impacts of the crisis.

Chapter 3

OVERVIEW OF KEY FINDINGS AND TAKEAWAYS FROM INTERLINKAGES

International IDEA's GSoD conceptual framework (Figure 3.1) has identified four key attributes for a healthy and functional democracy: rights, participation, representation and the rule of law. The 185 resources analysed for this study provide a strong body of evidence that each of the elements of the GSoD conceptual framework and the associated SDG 16 targets is critical for achieving sustainable development.

Figure 3.1. International IDEA's GSoD conceptual framework



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Initiative, [n.d.], <<https://www.idea.int/gsoD>>, accessed 29 June 2024.

The literature captures the negative impact of violence, corruption, injustice and insecurity on health, education, jobs, urban development and other Sustainable Development Goals. The positive effect of participatory decision making (SDG 16.7), justice (SDG 16.3), reduced arms flows and organized crime (SDG 16.4), transparent institutions (SDG 16.6) and reduced corruption (SDG 16.5) leads to gains for individuals and communities, alongside wider development gains. While fewer of the articles examined for this study look at direct interlinkages between peace (16.1) and development, the evidence that exists is robust and based on decades of historical analysis. All the areas listed above show significant interlinkages with several other SDGs, highlighting the critical role these elements play in achieving sustainable development and addressing various interconnected challenges.

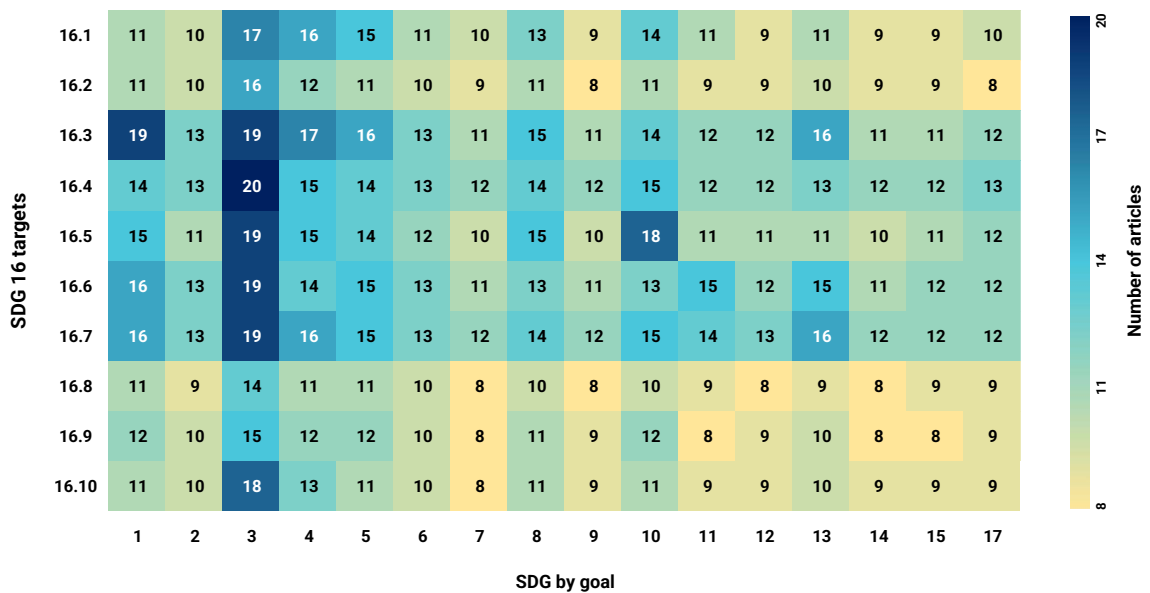
The resources analysed reveal weaker interlinkages between SDG 16 and all the other SDGs, with the most substantial evidence existing for interlinkages with SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). Conversely, there is less evidence for interlinkages with SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy), SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure) and SDG 14 (Life below Water) (Figure 3.2).

Figure 3.2. SDG 16 interlinkages



The number of articles available to analyse indicates that there is a strong research focus on this subject in academic and policy communities and the desire to substantiate claims of SDG 16 interlinking properties and its ability to enable sustainable development outcomes. Goals that have low coverage (SDGs 7, 9, 12, 14, 15 and 17) should be viewed as potential gaps in research and in the literature rather than as evidence that these goals do not enable other development outcomes. See full heatmap of sources analysed in Figure 3.3.

Figure 3.3. Heatmap of sources analysed, and number of positive occurrences in the literature¹



Source: Developed by the author.

¹ For each article reviewed, it was noted when an individual target was mentioned as enabling a specific goal.

Most of the studies reviewed look at interlinking properties across multiple countries or regions, with only 19 articles focusing on how SDG 16 enables development in a specific country context. Moreover, 132 resources focus on how SDG 16 helps enable a specific goal, 37 studies cover multiple goals, and 16 studies focus on how SDG 16 helps deliver the entire 2030 Agenda. The evidence examined is divided into qualitative studies (117), quantitative studies (39), and studies utilizing mixed quantitative and qualitative analyses (29). The limited number of quantitative studies makes it difficult to draw conclusions on the robustness of all 185 sources’ findings; only quantitative studies would allow for that. Future research should address this gap in quantitative studies which could also help interrogate whether certain interlinkages are correlations or causations, an issue not addressed in this Policy Paper.

Table 3.1. Interlinkages referenced in the literature

| SDG 16 target | Literature coverage ¹ | Number of occurrences | Notes |
|---|----------------------------------|-----------------------|--|
| SDG 16.7 (participatory decision making) | High | 224 | Strong research focus. |
| SDG 16.3 (justice) | High | 222 | Strong research focus. |
| SDG 16.4 (reducing arms flows and organized crime) | High | 216 | Strong research focus. |
| SDG 16.6 (transparent institutions) | High | 215 | Strong research focus. |
| SDG 16.5 (reducing corruption) | High | 205 | Strong research focus. |
| SDG 16.1 (peace) | Medium | 185 | Evidence base for conflict impacting sustainable development is robust. |
| SDG 16.2 (end abuse, violence and torture against children) | Low | 163 | Research on child abuse and violence is sufficient but limited on trafficking and torture of children. |
| SDG 16.8 (participation of developing countries in global governance) | Low | 154 | Large gap in evidence regarding the participation of developing countries in international governance. |

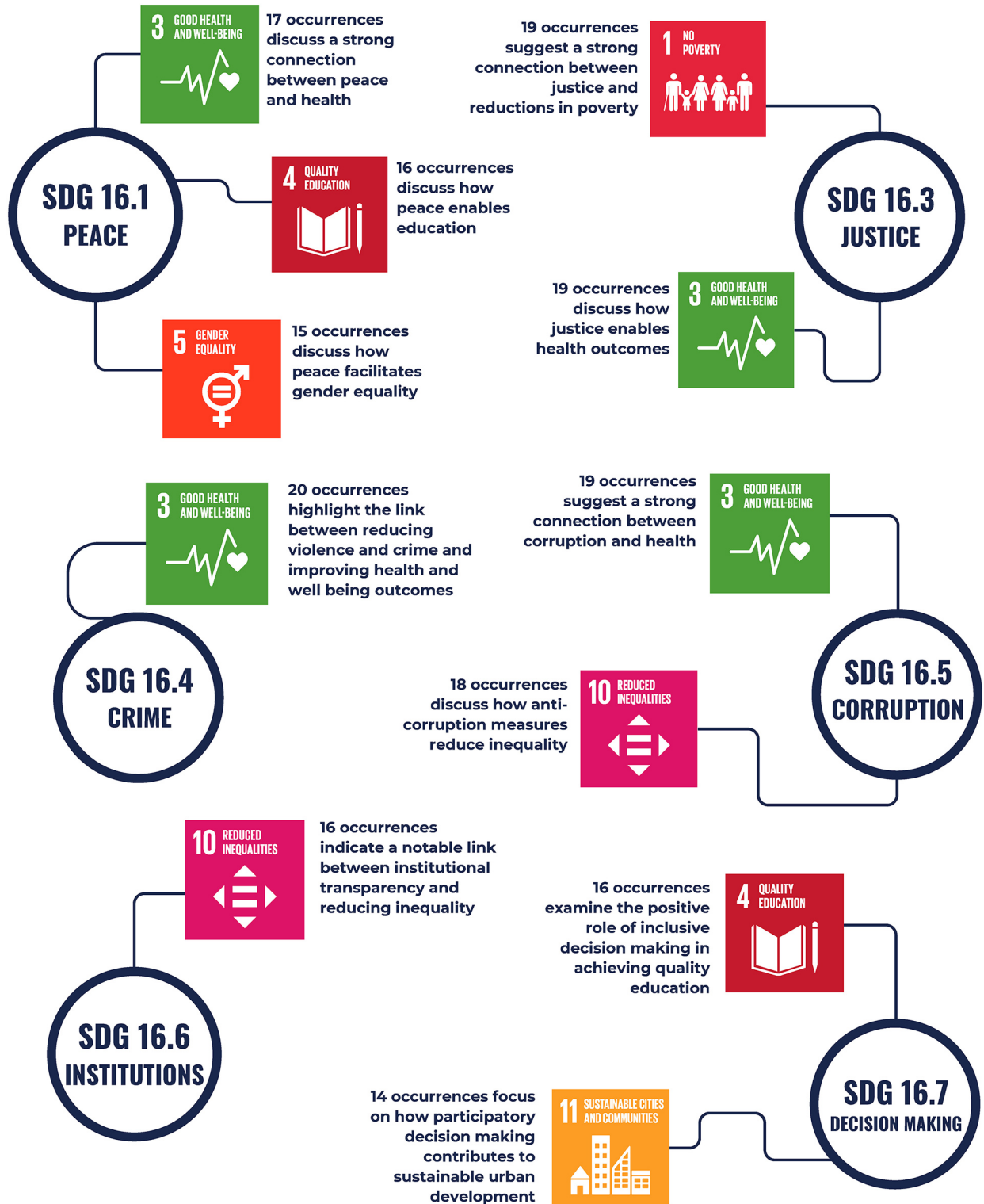
¹ High coverage is greater than 201 occurrences (90th percentile); medium coverage, 179–201 occurrences (80th percentile); low coverage, 156–179 occurrences (70th percentile); lowest coverage, below 155 occurrences (60th percentile).

The analysis found the following strong interlinkages (Figure 3.4):

- *Between SDG 16.7 (participatory decision making) and SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities).* Sixteen occurrences in the literature examine the positive role of inclusive decision making in achieving quality education. Fourteen occurrences in the literature focus on how participatory decision making contributes to sustainable urban development.
- *Between SDG 16.3 (justice) and SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being).* Nineteen occurrences in the literature suggest a strong connection between justice and reductions in poverty. An additional 19 occurrences in the literature discuss how justice enables health outcomes.
- *Between SDG 16.4 (reducing arms flows and organized crime) and SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being).* This pairing had the highest individual count, with 20 occurrences in the literature, highlighting the link between reducing violence and crime and improving health and well-being outcomes.

- *Between SDG 16.6 (transparent institutions) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities)*. This pairing had 16 occurrences in the literature, indicating a notable link between institutional transparency and reducing inequality.
- *Between SDG 16.5 (reducing corruption) and SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities)*. Nineteen occurrences in the literature suggest a strong connection between corruption and health. An additional 18 occurrences in the literature discuss how anti-corruption measures reduce inequality.
- *Between SDG 16.1 (peace) and SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality)*. Seventeen occurrences in the literature suggest a strong connection between peace and health. An additional 16 occurrences in the literature discuss how peace enables education, and 15 occurrences in the literature examine how peace facilitates gender equality.

Figure 3.4. Interlinkages by SDG 16 target



Chapter 4

SPECIFIC SDG LINKAGES WITH SELECT SDGS

The evidence base reveals clear interlinkages between SDG 16 and all other SDGs, with the most substantial evidence existing for SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). Conversely, there is less evidence for interlinkages with SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy), SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure) and SDG 14 (Life below Water).

The rest of this chapter will examine the 10 SDGs that have the highest number of occurrences in the literature (indicated by the blue bars in Figure 4.1), looking at how SDG 16 enables the attainment of that specific goal. Where there is evidence for the GSoD democratic principles of rights, participation, representation and the rule of law having enabling properties, these will also be highlighted.

SDG 1 (No Poverty). In total 136 occurrences in the literature highlight how SDG 16 targets help poverty alleviation. All SDG 16 targets have a high evidence base, with 16.3 (justice) being the most robust.

- Violence and conflict can negate progress towards the SDGs and have long-lasting impacts that perpetuate poverty and hinder development efforts. These impacts include but are not limited to deaths; increased numbers of orphans, widows and disabled individuals; the destruction of infrastructure; forced displacement; the spread of disease; malnourishment; and increased unemployment. These impacts jeopardize societal cohesion and exert adverse impacts on economic progress (UNDP 2023; Mukombwe, du Toit and Hendriks 2024).
- Poverty and corruption are interrelated: countries with lower levels of income have higher levels of bribery. Corruption, as measured through administrative bribery, remains prevalent globally, with 20 per cent of people who access a public service reporting having paid a bribe to do so (UNDP 2023). Studies indicate that effective governance reduces corruption

Figure 4.1. Number of occurrences in the literature for each SDG, broken down by SDG 16 target



Note: The graphs with the blue bars refer to goals with moderate to high coverage in the literature and will be examined in detail in the text; the graphs with the yellow bars refer to goals with low coverage in the literature.

Source: Developed by the author based on Annex B.

and crime, improves levels of participation and inclusion, and increases access to information, transparency and accountability, which are positively associated with poverty reduction (Sohail and Savill 2008; Spyromitros and Panagiotidis 2022).

- Justice provision can reap social rewards and have large economic benefits. Justice-based solutions can overcome key drivers of poverty, including forced evictions and lack of land (use) rights, and enable community-led solutions (Cociña et al. 2023; Weston 2022).
- Countries with stronger institutions and less corruption tend to have better poverty reduction outcomes. Evidence shows that investments in governance can significantly mitigate poverty (Allen et al. 2023). One economic study found that for every 1 per cent increase in corruption, there is a 0.2 per cent decrease in economic growth (Spyromitros and Panagiotidis 2022). Strengthening institutions and reducing corruption ensure that economic benefits are distributed more equitably, thus supporting vulnerable populations.

SDG 2 (Zero Hunger). In total 112 occurrences in the literature highlight how SDG 16 targets help reduce hunger. All SDG 16 targets have a high evidence base.

- Conflict and limited access to justice impact or restrict access to land, seeds, water, fair and stable markets, and agricultural work, thus hindering food security and increasing hunger (Mukombwe, du Toit and Hendriks 2024).
- Transnational organized crime can severely impact public health and food security by enabling the production and sale of unsafe food products (Caparini 2022), whereas corruption control can significantly reduce the number of undernourished people in developing countries (Dwi Nugroho et al. 2022).
- The protection and promotion of rights are critical to addressing hunger and achieving food security. Data from the International Food Policy Research Institute's Global Hunger Index illustrates that countries with stronger civil liberties, such as Ghana, have experienced significant reductions in hunger. This correlation suggests that ensuring civil liberties can create an environment conducive to better nutritional outcomes (Harris 2014).
- Increased levels of participation and inclusion are positively associated with poverty reduction (Balasubramanian et al. 2022). Participatory planning and measures that improve voice and accountability are more likely to result in pro-poor policies, which are crucial for achieving SDG 2 (Birner 2007). Enhanced accountability facilitates better communication and cooperation among stakeholders, improving the effectiveness of initiatives aimed at reducing malnutrition (Hoffman et al. 2022).

Box 4.1. SDG 2 example

Transparency and accountability in nutrition actions are promoted through nutrition accountability frameworks (NAFs). By developing SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound) commitments, tracking progress and ensuring stakeholders meet their commitments, NAFs aim

to improve food security and nutrition outcomes. This approach has led to better resource allocation, increased community participation and more effective interventions to combat malnutrition and enhance food security (Hoffman et al. 2022).

SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being). In total 176 occurrences in the literature highlight how SDG 16 targets help achieve health and well-being. All SDG 16 targets have a moderate evidence base.

- Conflict and crime worsen public health. Health-adjusted life expectancy data shows that environments where rights are violated due to conflict see significantly worse health outcomes (Iqbal 2006). Organized crime, including the illicit drug trade and human trafficking, severely undermines public health (Reynolds and McKee 2010).
- Corruption in the health sector can limit access to healthcare services, increase their cost and lead to the proliferation of substandard or counterfeit medical products (Mantegazza 2023). The World Health Organization has estimated that 1 in 10 medical products are 'substandard or falsified' in low- and middle-income countries, and this figure has been as high as 70 per cent (Caparini 2022). Corruption control measures ensure health services are more accessible and of higher quality, contributing to better health outcomes (Jenkins 2021).
- Participatory governance that engages communities in health policymaking supports health services in an effort to better meet the needs of a population and is a determinant for achieving universal health coverage (Kishore and Tripathi 2019). Democratic elections have been found to significantly reduce infant mortality rates, particularly in rural areas (Harding 2020).
- The rule of law is essential for creating a stable environment for health systems, serving as a social determinant of health and impacting disease transmission, risk of exposure to harmful products and access to safe living conditions. Strong legal frameworks are necessary to regulate these factors and protect public health (Dingake 2017). Increased access to justice ensures communities can hold parties accountable and secure the resources needed to protect their health (Gramatikov 2023; Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies 2019).

Box 4.2. SDG 3 example

In Gujarat, India, social accountability mechanisms have positive outcomes on maternal health. Local communities were trained to monitor the quality of maternal health services and collected data on healthcare facilities, service delivery and patient satisfaction.

This information was presented at public hearings, where community members, health officials and service

providers addressed the findings and grievances. As a result, there were tangible improvements in health services, leading to higher utilization of maternal health services, including antenatal care visits, institutional deliveries and postnatal care, ultimately reducing maternal mortality rates in the areas where these mechanisms were implemented (Hamal et al. 2018).

SDG 4 (Quality Education). In total 141 occurrences in the literature highlight how SDG 16 targets help achieve educational outcomes. All SDG 16 targets have a strong evidence base.

- Violence and conflict lead to reductions in school attainment and longer-term human capital among those exposed to violence. Evidence from Timor Leste suggests that waves of violence in the country resulted in persistent negative effects on primary school attendance and completion; boys were also less able to benefit from post-conflict recovery as a result of household trade-offs between education and economic survival that led to the removal of boys from school (Justino, Leone and Salardi 2014).
- Crime has the effect of displacing public expenditure away from productive assets, such as education, and directing resources towards protective measures (UNDP 2023). Organized crime negatively impacts educational outcomes by distorting incentives to invest in human capital (Cavalieri, Finocchiaro Castro and Guccio 2023).
- Abuse and neglect of children are linked to poor educational outcomes and mental well-being (Romano et al. 2015; Lazenbatt 2010; Owolabi 2012). Interventions that reduce violence at home and provide children and families with timely access to justice (e.g. faster processing times for domestic violence cases, and legal assistance through divorce proceedings) can reduce children's exposure to violence (Weston 2022; UN Women et al. 2019).
- Corruption limits the development of an economic and institutional environment that enhances education expansion and the formation of high-quality human capital formation. People can be incentivized to spend less time in education and to focus instead on accumulating political capital that enables them to wield bureaucratic power and to engage in rent-seeking activities. Corruption also diverts public funds away from education (Dridi 2014). Addressing corruption is pivotal for improving education systems (Jenkins 2021). Regression analysis reveals a strong link between corruption and lower secondary school enrolment rates. One study found

that a unit increase in corruption results in a drop in enrolment rates by nearly 10 per cent (Dridi 2014).

- Strong, inclusive institutions are essential for fostering education. Democratic elections were found to increase access to primary education in rural areas of sub-Saharan Africa (Harding 2020). Increased civil liberties significantly impact the quality of education within Asian countries (Saengchai, Maneerat and Pissanu 2020).
- Legal identity, including birth registration, is crucial for accessing education. In Tanzania possessing a birth certificate is a strong predictor of educational access (Mbise 2020).

Box 4.3. SDG 4 example

A study from different Italian regions found that the rule of law in a student's regional environment influences their educational decisions. Students in environments with stronger rule of law are more likely to pursue careers that contribute to societal well-being

than students raised in environments with weaker rule of law. Effective rule of law decreases resources that rent seekers may expropriate, thus reducing incentives to choose careers devoted to protecting producers from rent seeking (Nifo, Scalera and Vecchione 2017).

SDG 5 (Gender Equality). In total 134 occurrences in the literature highlight how SDG 16 targets help achieve gender equality. All SDG 16 targets have a strong evidence base.

Meaningful participation of women in decision-making and peace processes is associated with less violence, longer-lasting peace and fewer relapses into violence.

- Meaningful participation of women in decision-making and peace processes is associated with less violence, longer-lasting peace and fewer relapses into violence (Endeley and Molua 2024). Democracies that ensure women's representation in political processes tend to perform better in various dimensions of gender equality; this is especially true when institutions such as gender quotas and proportional electoral systems are utilized. Democracies generally deliver better outcomes for citizens, including women, due to accountability mechanisms that foster gender-sensitive policies (V-Dem Institute 2023; TAP Network 2019). Countries with higher levels of democracy and transparent institutions have higher rates of female labour force participation, thus contributing to gender equality (Beer 2009).
- Stronger legal frameworks correlate with reduced gender disparities (Barajas-Sandoval et al. 2023). Effective legal institutions are crucial for protecting women's rights, ensuring their access to justice and safeguarding them against violence and discrimination. Investing in justice for women—and especially eliminating legal barriers and reducing gender-based violence and child marriage—produces high returns in human development, national income, economic growth and the fulfilment of SDG 5 (UN Women et al. 2019; Moy, Cram and Maru 2019).

- Protecting fundamental rights, such as freedom of assembly, access to information and free media, is crucial for gender equality. In Kenya increased access to information was found to improve gender equality by providing women with greater access to education, family planning and economic opportunities (Wagacha 2007).
- Ensuring that women have legal identity documents can significantly improve their ability to participate in economic, social and political life, thereby advancing gender equality (Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies 2019; UN Women et al. 2019).

Box 4.4. SDG 5 example

In Mozambique a study found that effective access to justice could support women facing intense gender discrimination. In land-claim cases, every dispossessed widow or divorced woman with access to a community

paralegal was able to successfully assert her claim. Where cases stalled at the community level, paralegals were able to bring them to court, where decisions are more often in a woman's favour (Moy, Cram and Maru 2019).

SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation). In total 115 occurrences in the literature highlight how SDG 16 targets help enable access to clean water. All SDG 16 targets have a moderate evidence base.

- Organized crime in the water sector can significantly impair access to clean water and impede progress on SDG 6 (Segato et al. 2018). Effective legal frameworks are essential for tackling such activities and wider environmental crimes that impact water resources.
- Community-focused, participatory engagement strategies help improve development and monitoring measures in water infrastructure projects (Hove et al. 2019). In Argentina, when community lawyers worked alongside shantytown residents through legal and administrative actions, communities secured access to potable water and sanitation services (Moy, Cram and Maru 2019).
- Enhanced voice and accountability can support poor communities in their efforts to access clean water. One study found that a one-level increase in civil liberties⁶ leads to a 2.5 per cent increase in access to clean water for rural populations (Biser and Edwards 2012). Democracies with high accountability mechanisms provide 23 per cent more safe water access than autocracies (V-Dem Institute 2023).

⁶ The authors developed a civil liberties variable scale using the civil liberties subset of the Freedom in the World Index by Freedom House and the World Bank's World Development Indicators database. The full methodology can be seen in their paper.

Box 4.5. SDG 6 example

A comparison between Mauritius and the Democratic Republic of the Congo found that improvements in institutional quality, such as voice and accountability, regulatory quality and corruption control, can significantly increase access to sanitation in

countries with low levels of institutional quality, like the Democratic Republic of the Congo, when compared with countries with higher levels of institutional quality, like Mauritius (Francois, Kakeu and Kouame 2021).

SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). In total 127 occurrences in the literature highlight how SDG 16 targets help economic growth. All SDG 16 targets have a high evidence base, with 16.3 (justice) and 16.5 (reducing corruption) being the most robust.

- Political instability, violence and conflict disrupt economic activities, destroy infrastructure and deter investment. High-intensity inter-state conflict reduces annual growth by 0.18–2.77 per cent, and civil war reduces annual growth by 0.01–0.13 per cent (Polachek and Sevastianova 2012). The global economic impact of violence was USD 17.5 trillion in 2022, the equivalent of 12.9 per cent of global gross domestic product (GDP), or USD 2,200 per person. Homicide was the fourth-largest component in terms of total costs, accounting for 6.6 per cent of the global economic impact of violence (UNDP 2023). Adults who experienced abuse as children have decreased educational levels, earnings and employment (Currie and Spatz Widom 2010).
- Criminal activity negatively affects a country's capacity to attract skilled workers and both domestic and foreign investments. It also leads to a reduction in competitiveness between companies and an increase in uncertainty among businesses, which make conducting economic activities in high-crime areas a challenge (UNDP 2023).
- The role of corruption in hindering economic growth is well documented. Studies show that a 1 per cent increase in corruption is correlated with a 0.72 per cent decrease in the growth rate (Hung Mo 2001). By reducing corruption, SDG 16 fosters a trustworthy business environment, thus encouraging investment and economic activity. Quality data and transparent release of information associated with economic policy benefits the public and increases inclusiveness. Effective governance ensures that economic policies are implemented well, thus promoting sustainable economic growth (Nilsson et al. 2018; San Chia et al. 2022).
- Effective and inclusive parliaments ensure that all societal groups are represented in the legislative process, which leads to the creation of laws and policies that are conducive to economic development (TAP Network 2019). Political stability, fostered by inclusive representation and effective

governance, is a key driver of economic growth (Polachek and Sevastianova 2012; Anwar and Cooray 2012).

- Democratization leads to economic growth—on average 20 per cent higher GDP per capita after 25 years. Democracies also avoid the more catastrophic economic outcomes that characterize many autocracies (V-Dem Institute 2023).
- Access to legal identification is vital for securing employment and job opportunities. Birth certificates and identification documents are linked to employment in the formal sector, which grants workers greater benefits and job security. Restrictions on refugees' access to authorized work push them into informal, unregulated employment with greater labour infractions (Weston 2022; Hunter 2018; Arnold-Fernández 2024).

SDG 10 (Reduce Inequalities). In total 176 occurrences in the literature highlight how SDG 16 targets reduce inequalities. All SDG 16 targets have a strong evidence base, with target 16.5 (reducing corruption) being the most robust. SDG 10.2 and 16.7 are similar targets.

- Violent conflict has a strong negative influence on inequality. Following the end of a conflict, it can take up to four decades to return to pre-war levels of equality (Bircan, Brück and Vothknecht 2017).
- Corruption is a significant factor enabling inequality, as some entities gain more from the system than others through bribes (Rabnawaz 2015). Corruption control can significantly reduce inequalities (Dwi Nugroho et al. 2022).
- Transitioning to democracy leads, on average, to a more than 100 per cent increase in social protection spending (V-Dem Institute 2023). Improved access to information, transparency and accountability help to improve access to basic services, and the targeting of social protection policies and investments in this space can help reduce inequalities (Balasubramanian et al. 2022).
- Effective, accountable and transparent institutions foster inclusive decision-making processes, which are vital for reducing inequalities (Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies 2019). One study on the interlinkages between SDGs found that inclusive governance enables marginalized groups to have a voice in policymaking, which is crucial for achieving SDG 10 (Bennich et al. 2023).

SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities). In total 110 occurrences in the literature highlight how SDG 16 targets help achieve sustainable cities. All SDG 16 targets have a moderate evidence base.

- Organized crime and violence negate efforts to develop sustainable cities. 'Captured municipalities' have been found to divert resources which then benefit crime groups and undermine efforts to make cities

Corruption is a significant factor enabling inequality, as some entities gain more from the system than others through bribes.

Improvements in legal frameworks, the rule of law and governance are critical for reducing violence and ensuring access to justice, which are essential for urban development and inclusive cities.

Box 4.6. SDG 10 example

Mexico's official multidimensional poverty measure links human and social rights with economic well-being in a coherent framework. The social protection systems and direct cash transfer contributions introduced have proven to be the most effective policy

instruments to simultaneously reduce inequality and poverty, while promoting inclusive growth that reaches a broader base of the population (Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies 2021).

inclusive (Di Cataldo and Mastrorocco 2022). Reducing urban violence has a direct positive impact on living conditions in urban slums and informal settlements (Locke 2021).

- Corruption undermines public trust and diverts resources away from essential urban development projects. In urban settings, reducing corruption can ensure that resources are effectively utilized for sustainable infrastructure and public services, thus fostering inclusive and resilient cities.
- Improvements in legal frameworks, the rule of law and governance are critical for reducing violence and ensuring access to justice, which are essential for urban development and inclusive cities. The strength of the rule of law has been found to predict a government's ability to provide a liveable urban environment, thus emphasizing the importance of legal frameworks (White, Sepe and Masconale 2014).
- Civil society engagement, voter turnout and other forms of public participation are critical for ensuring equitable urban development. Engaging communities in governance and utilizing citizen solutions can enable municipalities to meet the needs of all community members and to achieve more sustainable cities (Kallergis 2022; Gollagher and Hartz-Karp 2013). One study found that only a multi-stakeholder urban design process will produce truly inclusive urban spaces that fulfil the right to the city (Kempin Reuter 2019).

Box 4.7. SDG 11 example

Amending local laws governing the use of alcohol and firearms is a proven means of preventing violence in urban areas. South Africa banned the sale of alcohol during its Covid-19 lockdown, and rates of violent crime plummeted. In the informal settlement of Diadema in São Paulo, Brazil, the prohibition of alcohol sales after 23:00 and the monitoring of

alcohol vendors were combined with infrastructure improvements such as street lighting and security cameras, the establishment of mediation centres for peaceful resolution of conflicts, and drug prevention education and apprenticeship schemes for youth. The city's homicide rate halved in two years (Locke 2021).

SDG 13 (Climate Action). In total 121 occurrences in the literature highlight how SDG 16 targets help achieve positive climate outcomes. All SDG 16 targets have a strong evidence base, with 16.3 (justice) and 16.7 (transparent institutions) being the most robust.

- Strong institutions and the protection of human rights are fundamental for addressing climate change, with democracies performing better than autocracies on climate change mitigation, producing more ambitious climate policies and delivering on them. In the nationally determined contributions under the Paris Agreement, fully democratic countries set, on average, targets of 1.6 degrees Celsius lower than full autocracies. Each new climate policy of this kind reduces CO₂ emissions by 1.79 per cent within three years (V-Dem Institute 2023).
- Transparent and accountable institutions allow for more effective environmental oversight. When participatory environmental governance is utilized, the result is higher environmental outputs, which are essential for effective climate action (Newig and Fritsch 2009).
- When communities are supported in their efforts to participate in governance and to co-generate data on climate alongside the scientific community, they can support better climate governance and reduce climate displacement and vulnerabilities (Kallergis 2022). Evidence shows that when local communities approach government and administrative institutions, invoke law with specificity and provide simple, community-generated evidence of violations, they can secure enforcement of environmental regulations (Maru 2023).
- Limited access to justice exacerbates the impacts of climate change on vulnerable communities, while increased access can mitigate these effects (Gramatikov 2023). As climate litigation increases in frequency and volume, the body of legal precedent grows, forming an increasingly well-defined field of law. Globally, 55 per cent of cases have had a climate-positive ruling, and some favourable outcomes have led directly to new climate policies and action. Even unsuccessful litigation can shape narratives around climate action, encouraging decision makers to change their approach (Setzer and Higham 2023).

Strong institutions and the protection of human rights are fundamental for addressing climate change, with democracies performing better than autocracies on climate change mitigation.

Box 4.8. SDG 13 example

Sierra Leone's laws on customary land rights and on the National Land Commission grant communities the right to free prior informed consent over industrial projects and establish land-use committees to secure effective land administration. Granting local

communities these rights and slowing disruptive development in ecologically sensitive areas are expected to reduce displacement. The inclusion of women in decision-making processes through local land-use committees is expected to increase gender equity (Maru 2023).

Chapter 5

RECOMMENDATIONS

The world is currently on track to achieve only 17 per cent of the SDG targets.

The world is currently on track to achieve only 17 per cent of the SDG targets (UN DESA 2024). This paper has demonstrated that recalibrating and investing in efforts to achieve more peaceful, just and inclusive societies can support the advancement of other critical elements of the 2030 Agenda. UN Member States and policymakers have a limited window to accelerate action on sustainable development. The recommendations that follow can support progress to that end.

STRENGTHEN HIGH-IMPACT AREAS

Increase collaboration across sectors. Forge new partnerships and test joint programming between stakeholders working on SDG 16 and stakeholders in other sectors, especially SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). For example, the integration of health initiatives into governance reforms aims to amplify impacts on both SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 16. A pilot programme involving both public health departments and legal aid organizations to address health issues exacerbated by legal injustices could be rolled out as a trial.

Increase investment for SDG 16. The financing needed to deliver SDG 16 is substantial, requiring sustained investment for long-term development and resilient societies (UNDP 2023). Elements of SDG 16 are being neglected, with vast budgets allocated for military and security sectors and humanitarian relief (Möller-Loswick 2017), and far less for people-centred, community-led initiatives and preventative interventions that support democratic principles (UNDP 2023; Weston 2022; Moy, Cram and Maru 2019; TAP Network 2019). As we approach the 2030 deadline, targeted funding in high-impact areas where SDG 16 can drive progress on other goals should be prioritized. Funders should explore mechanisms to encourage collaborative projects between

SDG 16 and other sectors (e.g. multisectoral partnership grants or co-financing arrangements).

Establish mechanisms for information sharing. Establish platforms for sharing data and best practices among actors working on different SDGs. For example, an online repository of case studies and research findings on SDG 16 interlinkages that is accessible to policymakers, researchers and practitioners would help in identifying synergies and enable smarter collaboration and investment. Building such a platform would require investment and technical expertise, and if such a platform were to be created, the parties involved should explore how advances in artificial intelligence could support such a process.

Safeguard those working on SDG 16. Future partnerships must look to safeguard stakeholders working on SDG 16. By increasing transparency, access to information and access to justice, these actors are advancing SDG 16's aims and other areas of sustainable development. However, it is becoming more dangerous and deadly for human rights defenders and journalists, with a 40 per cent increase in killings and a nearly 300 per cent increase in enforced disappearances from 2021 to 2022 (UNDP 2023).

The following questions should be addressed:

- What mechanisms can be implemented to facilitate information sharing and coordination between different actors working on high-impact areas?
- How can funding mechanisms be structured to incentivize collaboration between actors across sectors, encouraging joint projects and initiatives?
- How can the clustering of interlinkages be better explored? How might simultaneous investments in high-impact areas also link with advancement in other goals: for example, collaboration on participatory decision making (16.7) and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) may lead to advancements in SDG 4 (Quality Education) or SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities).

ADDRESS RESEARCH GAPS

Strengthen the evidence base. All SDG 16 targets and goals and *their* interconnections with other goals should be further researched. This is especially true for topics with relatively little research and gaps—for example, on pathways and transmission mechanisms. Expanding quantitative research would be especially useful to validate the findings and establish causality. Future studies should employ robust statistical methods to explore interlinkages.

Future partnerships must look to safeguard stakeholders working on SDG 16.

Negative interlinkages. This study has not examined the potential negative impacts that SDG 16 may have on achieving other goals or the trade-offs that may need to be made in efforts to achieve SDG 16 targets—for example, analysing how participatory decision making in renewable energy projects might slow down the transition to green energy, and finding ways to balance these interests. These negative interlinkages should be further researched to develop a holistic understanding of SDG 16’s role. This kind of research would help to design interventions that maximize positive outcomes while mitigating adverse effects. The articles reviewed for this study that examined negative impacts found that SDG 16 had few negative interlinkages.

Chapter 6

CONCLUSION

The analysis presented in this paper underscores the pivotal role of SDG 16 in enabling the achievement of the broader 2030 Agenda. Through an in-depth review of the literature, the evidence reveals that peace, justice and strong institutions are not merely complementary but foundational to sustainable development. Key principles of democracy such as rights, participation, representation and the rule of law are critical enablers across various SDGs, demonstrating robust interlinkages, particularly with SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), among others. Without concerted efforts to reverse declines in democracy and the rule of law and reduce the number of conflict-related deaths, attempts to achieve other SDGs will suffer.

However, the current evidence base is heavily skewed towards qualitative research, highlighting the need for more quantitative studies to validate and expand upon these findings. Furthermore, certain areas, such as the interlinkages with SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy) and SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure), remain under-researched, presenting significant opportunities for future inquiry.

The paper emphasizes the necessity of addressing existing gaps and fostering stronger collaborations across sectors to leverage SDG 16's full potential. Such an integrated approach is crucial for addressing immediate developmental challenges and building resilient systems capable of withstanding future shocks. By enhancing cross-sector collaboration, increasing targeted investments and expanding the research base, policymakers—united in their vision of a more just and peaceful world—can significantly accelerate progress towards achieving the 2030 Agenda.

Key principles of democracy such as rights, participation, representation and the rule of law are critical enablers across various SDGs, demonstrating robust interlinkages.

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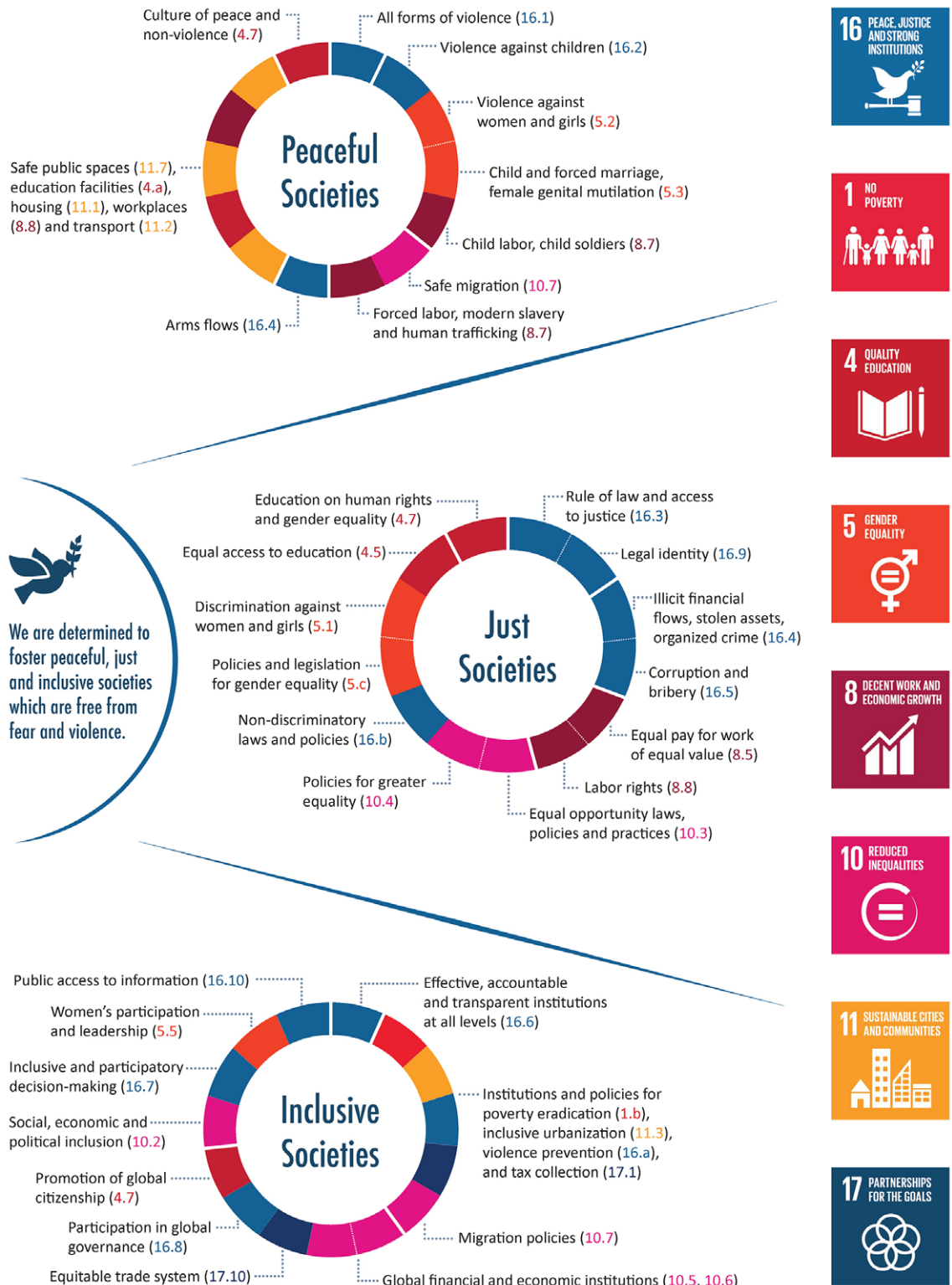
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Annex A. Pathfinders' graphic depiction of the SDG 16+ framework



Source: Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies, 'Accelerating action on SDG16+', [n.d.], <<https://www.sdg16.plus>>, accessed 30 June 2024.

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About the author

Stacey Cram is a non-resident fellow at New York University's Center on International Cooperation and an independent advisor, providing support to non-profits and multilateral organizations dedicated to advancing SDG 16 and people-centred justice. For seven years, she led Namati's global policy portfolios, playing a pivotal role in advocating the inclusion of a justice goal in the 2030 Agenda and the full implementation of SDG 16. She spearheaded the creation of the COVID-19 Grassroots Justice Fund and the Legal Empowerment Fund, and played a key role in establishing global initiatives like the Task Force on Justice and Open Government Partnership Coalition on Justice, contributing to the design of indicators that holistically examine the global justice gap. Stacey holds an MSc in Global Governance and Public Policy from Birkbeck College, University of London, and an MA in International Relations from the University of St Andrews.

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This Policy Paper explores the interlinkages between Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) and the 2030 Agenda's other Sustainable Development Goals.

Despite SDG 16's crucial role in promoting democratic principles, human rights and the rule of law, it is often overlooked, and the financing needed to deliver SDG 16 is substantial, requiring sustained investment for long-term development. This paper provides a comprehensive literature review and meta-analysis of 185 articles and highlights how SDG 16 acts as an enabler for other SDGs.

This paper calls for increased cross-sector collaboration and offers recommendations to UN Member States, policymakers working across the 2030 Agenda and other stakeholders working in areas where SDG 16 has high-impact interlinkages to make targeted investments, enhance research and safeguard those working on SDG 16 in order to fully leverage its potential in achieving outcomes on the 2030 Agenda.