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# Is UN Goal 16 on Peace Being Misused to Justify Securitization?

IPI Global Observatory

Two years ago, my organization Saferworld and many others hailed the United Nations global Sustainable Development Goal on peace, justice, and inclusion—SDG 16—as a major policy achievement. In fact, peace cuts across the goals and targets that make up the 2030 Agenda. But the agreement of SDG 16 was controversial, with some worried that a peace goal could put the wider development agenda at risk. And indeed, there are some alarming tendencies emerging, with some international actors using SDG 16 to justify "securitized" and counter-productive approaches to development.

Security and justice are essential for peace and development, but they should be defined in terms of how people across society experience them: the primary goal is human security, and only by prioritizing this can a solid foundation for state security be built. With this in mind, three recent developments are cause for concern.

First, in 2016, members of the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD-DAC) agreed on reforming their Official Development Assistance (ODA) rules on eligible peace and security activities, expanding the definition to include additional activities such as preventing violent extremism, migration management, and military costs for the delivery of humanitarian relief. This, along with initiatives to even further expand the definition of aid, potentially to include more security-related activities, are being positioned as a way to encourage aid spending on SDG 16.

In addition, DAC members can now report 15 percent of what they contribute to UN peacekeeping in their ODA figures (up from seven percent). Peacekeeping is often crucial and warrants international investment, including to urgently improve civilian protection. It should be noted, however, that the push for more ODA to be counted towards peacekeeping costs is taking place in a context in which the UN is being pressed to play a greater role in peace enforcement efforts, including a role in combating terror groups. While this might not be the main objective, given the temptation for member states to define their enemies as "terrorists," it is easy to see how this risks diverting aid more towards a military agenda for fighting wars rather than non-violent, preventative, and developmental approaches.

While encouraging investment in SDG 16 is commendable, it is not immediately clear what further expanding the definition of aid to include more security-related costs would achieve; many of the types of activities that would fall under SDG 16 already count. Those that do not should surely be covered by other budgets. Expanding the definitions could lead to a squeeze on spending on activities such as peacebuilding or humanitarian relief—already inadequate—as donors seek to reach ODA targets while spending more on hard security. It raises the concern that donors' security interests are being prioritized at the expense of citizens in conflict-affected countries.

ODA should be safeguarded to support SDG 16's transformative and preventative vision of peace rather than military and security agendas that could undermine it. This means ensuring ODA is impartial in its reinforcement of human security and human rights in line with social and economic development, rather than being distorted by donors' national security interests. DAC members should seize the opportunity to reaffirm this commitment at the upcoming OECD-DAC high-level

meeting. Focusing on issues like the conflict-sensitive delivery of ODA would be a useful way to further demonstrate their commitment to SDG 16.

Second, some governments and multilateral agencies want to strengthen linkages between SDG 16 and the push to merge countering and preventing violent extremism (C/PVE) into traditional development work. There are serious flaws in this agenda, many of them paradoxically acknowledged by the main proponents of C/PVE. Nonetheless, many development actors are embracing this merger, amid calls for governments to "take stock of which PVE activities are also being undertaken in furtherance of SDG 16" and for the OECD to "set an annual target" for ODA being spent on C/PVE.

Saferworld's analysis casts a critical eye on current counter-terror and C/PVE efforts. These interventions often overlook key factors that drive conflict and instability that SDG 16 aims to address, such as corruption and bad governance. Meanwhile, short-term hard security measures from states are going unchallenged as donors move to "partner" with, and reinforce, state and security services.

UNDP recently interviewed voluntary recruits into violent groups from Nigeria, Kenya, Somalia, and Sudan—all countries whose governments receive international support either to fight terrorism or address migration flows. Seventy-one percent of their interviewees identified heavy-handed government responses as the final trigger that motivated them to join up. This aligns with what is known about the drivers of conflict and terror attacks around the world, but is being poorly addressed in the C/PVE and counter-migration agendas that are threatening to undermine peace and development work. Responses also neglect the role of civil society in the needed change and transformation, with C/PVE efforts engaging civil society more as amplifiers of government and donor perspectives.

A third concern is the way SDG 16 (and specifically, its target 16.a on strengthening state capacities to combat terrorism and crime) is being usedby the European Union (EU) to justify "train and equip" assistance to security forces to "foster peace and development." However, providing training and equipment to governments "who lack the political will to undergo meaningful reforms and improve public security" may directly lead to less peaceful societies. A clear example of this approach is the EU effort to prevent migration by training and equipping repressive states. This runs a high risk of reinforcing the problems that have fueled instability and displacement in the first place. The EU would be better served to recognize migration as a symptom of regional insecurity, violence, and oppression, and adopt a strategy which puts addressing its causes at the forefront. This requires promoting sustainable development, human rights, and political and social inclusion, rather than reinforcing repressive state security apparatuses.

All of this is taking place against the backdrop of increased global military and security engagement. The world's military spending continues to soar (in 2016, it reached nearly $1.7 trillion), while peace and development activities remain chronically underfunded ($142.6 billion in 2016). Huge constraints have been put on UN peace efforts as a result of the Trump administration's recent budget cuts, and a third of all US foreign aid in 2015 went to military aid and security assistance.

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Global SDG 16 and its indicators put human security at the center by focusing on issues such as whether people feel safe walking home at night, or whether they think decision-making in their countries is inclusive. It represents a rare recognition that the most strategic tools available for addressing conflict and promoting long-term peaceful political transition are in fact peacebuilding, governance and development efforts. This vital agenda is put at risk if governments use it to pursue national and international security agendas. Global action for conflict prevention, peace and development—as set out in the 2030 Agenda and the Sustaining Peace UN resolutions—is urgently needed, but requires an international community that is serious about peacebuilding, ready to safeguard a coherent, peace-oriented approach to development and prepared to reject reactive, securitized responses to security threats.