

Peaceful societies – the orphaned SDG target?

Local progress towards SDG 16+ peaceful, just
and inclusive societies and what comes next



Global Partnership
for the Prevention of
Armed Conflict

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Table of contents

1.	Key findings	3
2.	Peaceful societies - the orphaned SDG target Improved SDG 16+ Implementation needs a localised agenda, greater political will, coalitions and integrated approaches	6
3.	Partnership with Civil Society for SDG 16+ peace goals Realisation of goals requires effective partnerships and safeguarding of civic space	9
4.	Recommendations	12
	Acknowledgements & Colophon	14

1 Key findings

Five years after the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were launched, Goal 16 on peaceful, just and inclusive societies is being reviewed for the first time in July 2019 during the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF). Heads of states and governments will be undertaking an overall review of all goals during the SDG Summit in September 2019. To accompany and inform these United Nations (UN) reviews, the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC) undertook a series of practice driven participatory assessments of the changes SDG 16 and related peace goals have brought about at national and local levels. These assessments provide a localized, in depth, qualitative analysis of SDG 16+ progress and government – CSO partnerships in two countries (Cameroon and Ghana), complemented by additional practical experiences and findings from other contexts.

These civil society led national review processes in Cameroon and Ghana, provide one clear message: there is not enough progress on SDG 16 and all other related SDG targets that drive peace, just and inclusive societies (SDG 16+). This is worrisome as delivery on SDG 16+ impacts our joint ability to achieve sustained progress on all goals. Governments, civil society and their partners need to accelerate and broaden bottom-up, people centered realisation of SDG 16+.

All countries assessed by GPPAC members have undertaken some measures towards achieving SDG16+, notably in the policy domain. This has led to the alignment of national development plans towards the SDGs (like in Fiji) or the development of

national visions and plans for 2030 (in Vanuatu and Egypt for example) or new laws (such as in Cameroon). However, in all countries (Cameroon, Ghana, Georgia, Vanuatu, Fiji, Egypt, Uganda, Tonga, Japan, Thailand, Sri Lanka and Serbia) where GPPAC members have been involved in SDGs reviews or SDGs related work, only marginal headway was documented in implementing and achieving SDG16+. A major reason for this is the lack of political will at all levels, which is particularly weak when looking at the ‘peace goals’. As a consequence, existing laws, visions and plans are often not implemented, or not implemented in a coordinated and integrated fashion. And national and global investment in civil society and grassroots approaches that respect their independence is wanting.

This is also linked to the lack of awareness, ownership, oversight, demand and related policy input by the broader public. The 2030 Agenda can only be localised if communities, particularly the most marginalised are more aware and knowledgeable about the Agenda and issues at hand.

For instance, in Ghana, the SDGs agenda is considered elitist while public access to relevant information such as government laws is limited in Cameroon. Broad as well as specialised public awareness initiatives on SDGs must be expanded via traditional and new media to reach a wider spectrum of citizens particularly the youth to enhance their interest as well as active participation in the SDGs.

This requires an enabling environment for an active citizenry including among others, access to information. However, in the past years in numerous countries, space for civic

action is increasingly reduced, preventing the exercise of fundamental freedoms and stopping crucial partnerships across the private sector, governments, intergovernmental institutions and civil society from emerging.

And yet, targeted implementation and partnerships are essential in achieving progress on SDG 16+. This is confirmed by the experience of GPPAC member, West Africa Network of Peacebuilding (WANEP), which has been working effectively with national governments, regional intergovernmental organisations, the private sector, civil society and donors on Early Warning and Early Response, notably around elections (among others the 2016 elections in Ghana and the 2017 elections in Liberia). Such partnerships, informed by grounded local experiences of integrated SDG implementation that build on local capacities, particularly women and youth peacebuilders, are needed to ensure that national SDGs policies and actions put people and the planet at their center of attention. SDG 16+ coalitions are key to increase political commitments, incentives and will for these targets. Through such coalitions existing norms and practices can be challenged and transformational change encouraged.

The findings in this Policy Brief draw on in-depth country reports from Cameroon and Ghana that were undertaken through GPPAC (Women in Alternative Action Cameroon and West Africa Network for Peacebuilding Ghana) and involved a statistically significant sample of the local population as well as national and international actors and analysts from civil society, government and the international community working in the fields of peacebuilding and development. The brief further builds on experiences from other GPPAC members from Egypt, Vanuatu, Fiji, Thailand, Serbia and Georgia who have worked on the SDGs themselves or accompanied official Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs).

Key Findings

- **Fostering political will: useful policies, infrastructures and joint approaches for peacebuilding, conflict prevention and development often exist but their implementation and funding is deficient. Commitments to SDG 16+, including by scaling up investment in civil society and grassroots approaches, must increase at all political levels.**
- **Incentives for more actions are required. Agile and responsive alliances of actors that jointly analyse and initiate timely collective actions and advocacy for SDG 16+ and break down existing exclusionary structures and practices must emerge. Support for and formation of formal and informal 'inclusive SDG 16+ coalitions' and partnerships are vital.**
- **Interest, ownership, active participation in and oversight over the SDGs is still weak. Broad as well as specialised public awareness initiatives on SDGs must be expanded via traditional and new media to reach a wider spectrum of citizens particularly the youth.**
- **Civil society often cannot operate, organize, assemble and express itself freely or demand accountability safely. This, however, is a fundamental prerequisite for the realization of the whole SDG agenda. Civic space must be expanded and protected.**
- **SDGs are often viewed and implemented through an 'elitist' and exclusive approach. Instead, the views, needs, and experiences of people most affected by issues at hand must co-determine the policies and actions affecting them. Relevant national and sub-national SDGs indicators must be developed in an inclusive manner to gain buy in and drive accountability. People centered approaches to SDGs priority setting and implementation are essential.**
- **Actions and policies relevant for SDG 16+ are often developed in isolation. This misses the point that only fully integrated and coordinated policy approaches and operational strategies for conflict prevention, peacebuilding and development can release the full 'transformative power' of the SDGs. Integration and coordination are needed. This requires partnerships, the adoption of adequately prioritized national SDGs implementation agendas and integrated implementation mechanisms.**
- **Inclusion and active participation in SDGs related policies, institutions and implementation is limited. Greater meaningful inclusion of civil society and other stakeholders, including women, youth and other groups, particularly those who are marginalized, are needed to strengthen accountability and provide alternatives that are gender and youth responsive.**

Peaceful societies – the orphaned SDG target

Improved SDG 16+ implementation needs a localised agenda, greater political will, coalitions and integrated approaches

In the main Voluntary National Review (VNR) messages submitted by ten member states in which GPPAC has been particularly active ahead of the 2019 HLPF, only three mention SDG 16 and just two mention achieving peaceful societies as a key focus of their national strategies¹. This reflects a broader trend. Within the overall SDGs agenda, SDG 16 has not received the attention it deserves, and within SDG 16, peaceful societies has been neglected as a key area of focus. A key challenge identified through research and practice remains the need for greater political incentives, will and joint action for the implementation of SDG 16+.

Working towards peaceful societies requires power moderated by participation. In many countries at national and sub-national contexts where violence and conflicts take place, existing power structures are part of the reasons why inequalities and grievances persist. The reviews undertaken in Cameroon and Ghana have shown that several measures for achieving SDG16+ were undertaken, notably in the policy domain². But they also revealed that very little progress was documented in implementing and achieving SDG16+. Part of the difficulty then lies in creating incentives to address

“If the socio-political crisis in the country is not given a lasting solution, then, all efforts made by Cameroon towards attaining the Sustainable Development Goal 16 on peace, justice and inclusive institutions would be compromised.”

Kwachu Justine Ngum,
Executive director WAA Cameroon

the status quo. This is for example the case in Cameroon with the ‘sticky issue’ of how to encourage a national dialogue to address the Anglophone and Francophone conflict, which clearly hampers progress on SDG 16+. A key recommendation for Cameroon was therefore for the government to suspend military operations and initiate an inclusive and democratic dialogue with leaders of the Anglophone armed and political movements and the local populations affected by the conflict. But this needs to go hand in hand with a broader political inclusion and social delivery approach that ensures effective

involvement and recognition of all groups across the country.

GPPAC members have seen particular value in one strategy to foster such political incentives, namely the development of ‘SDG 16+ coalitions’. GPPAC Pacific network members for example recognise that wider transformative change needs to happen to ensure that women’s voices are heard, that their issues are part of any prevention agenda, policy or budget commitment and that women are a full part of all peace tables. Those are some of the sustainable gender responsive alternatives that are needed. This can only be achieved by breaking down patriarchal structures and working through collective action to ensure that women’s leadership is systematically integrated at local, national and regional levels. To address this, GPPAC Pacific members set up the Shifting the Power Coalition, “since coalitions are more likely to challenge gender norms directly or indirectly and promote transformational change” as explained by coalition co-founder Sharon Bhagwan Rolls. Similarly, in exchanges GPPAC organised with the African Union, United Nations, World Bank and civil society from across the African Continent on prevention strategies, what emerged was a shared call to develop national prevention coalitions to rally political will and meet the 2030 goals.

Another key challenge faced by the 2030 Agenda is localisation – how to meaningfully respond and ‘translate’ SDGs to the needs on the ground. In Ghana, the research found an ineffective law enforcement and justice system, selective implementation of laws and policies due to corruption, and inadequate infrastructures was inhibiting local progress on the SDGs. Their implementation in Ghana is very centralized and elitist. It does not build on a bottom up approach or existing structures such as traditional authorities that serve the needs of the people. This mirrors experiences from Georgia where GPPAC member, the International Centre

on Conflict and Negotiation (ICCN) found that the country’s “SDG 16+ Country Nationalization Document” did not provide enough meaningful, concrete actions on peace and peacebuilding issues in its chapter on SDG 16 and 17. Instead of generic comments ICCN is calling for plans that fill specific gaps and build on existing capacities. This could include, for example, the establishment of a state peace foundation, funded through the government’s budget, that would promote peace at the national level; or the formal recognition of and support for national, particularly women, mediators. A strong localisation of the agenda and plans that popularizes key goals, translates them to local issues and builds on existing infrastructures is paramount to further progress. For this to happen, adequate tools that allow government, civil society and private actors to localise the SDGs, coupled with processes that ensure initiatives build on existing capacities for peace are needed.

“International bodies should work closely with CSOs because CSOs are closer to the people and understand their needs better. Moreover, these local bodies are most trusted in the context of mistrust.”

Participant in the validation workshop, Yaounde, Cameroon

As part of this, local, national and sub-national SDG indicators must be developed. This is essential to ensure that SDGs measure the most relevant local issues and progress to inform further actions, and gain continued support by policymakers and the local population. Developing local indicators emerged as an important step in the two

¹ These include: Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, Fiji, Sierra-Leone, Philippines, Lesotho, Vanuatu, Tonga and Cote-d’Ivoire – See <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/>

² For more information on those researches – see <https://gppac.net/sustainable-development-goals>

SDG reviews undertaken in Ghana and Cameroon to ensure we “measure what we treasure”. This should ideally lead to further exchanges and agreements with governments on key areas to prioritise and track, as well as link up to global SDGs data initiatives.

Has civil society managed to translate this global agenda to local realities? There is no clear answer yet. Many GPPAC members recognise and support the 2030 Agenda – but only a limited number have fully engaged in it and looked at ways it could enhance their work (or vice versa). For those that have fully embraced the SDGs, this is often because they capture the work of local peacebuilding and conflict prevention organisations in a holistic manner. For GPPAC members in the Pacific, for instance, the SDGs fully reflect their integrated approach to peace and development. The impact of climate change has established a need to link peacebuilding to climate change, human security, development, human rights, humanitarian responses, and women, peace, and security. Through the Shifting the Power Coalition, members in Bougainville, Fiji, Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Vanuatu are building on each other’s expertise in information-communication technologies linked to the application of peace education and dialogue, to disperse information before, during and after disasters. Through these initiatives, the network responds to the persistent under-representation of women in local government and governance structures, and the lack of responsiveness to women’s security needs.

Linking SDG16 with other SDGs, and investing in adequate infrastructures, including infrastructures for peace (such as the National Peace Council in Ghana) and access to justice in a coherent, integrated and inclusive manner is fundamental to sustainable development and peace. Such a coherent, integrated and inclusive approach is essential for the SDGs to really

become transformative. These approaches then need to include a whole range of complementary actions across all SDGs such as (peace) education, addressing inequalities and employment opportunities, fostering mediation with particular attention given to the active participation of women and youth, ensuring access to justice for all, and secure the active participation of citizens in political and decision-making processes and legitimate institutions.

“Women are not involved in the decision making process. This starts from school leadership positions to churches and many other key positions. Men are still leading in making all important decisions.”

Participant in the Women Focus Group discussion, Greater Accra, Ghana

SDG 16 and its peace targets are not receiving the attention they warrant by governments and are yet to be recognised as a transformative tool among civil society. This is a missed opportunity, as greater attention to this goal is paramount for progress on other key goals such as sustainable economic development. To bolster practical focus on SDG 16+, national and international SDG 16+ coalitions need to be strengthened with inclusive local implementation at the heart of their agenda. And given its cross-cutting nature underpinning the whole 2030 Agenda, SDG 16 should also be reviewed annually, particularly at national levels, as well as the HLPF. The HLPF must also provide increased structural space for civil society participation (including shadow reports and questions) following the example of the Universal Peer Review mechanism of the Human Rights Council.

3

Partnership with Civil Society for SDG 16+ Peace Goals

Realisation of goals requires effective partnerships and safeguarding of civic space

Levels of awareness, inclusion and active participation of civil society in the SDGs and VNRs specifically are limited. Research in Ghana highlighted for example the need to raise awareness first among the implementing agencies themselves, and then for the general public to identify what role they can play in achieving the goals. This lack of specialised knowledge, general knowledge and capacities creates a gap for public ownership, oversight and policy input. This is an area where CSOs can contribute meaningfully. Governments and civil society need to significantly step up their efforts to raise awareness about SDGs in general, and SDG 16+ and the VNR process in particular.

“Most members of the public are ignorant of the SDGs in general and the legal framework that covers the SDGs. They are not fully understood. Without this the government and people cannot play their roles in achieving the goals.”

Participant in the validation workshop, Yaounde, Cameroon

When launching the 2030 Agenda, governments officially recognised the role of civil society in helping spur implementation of the SDGs, and committed to conduct regular “open, inclusive, participatory and transparent” reviews, which draw upon contributions of civil society and a wide range of stakeholders.³ The Agenda also underscores the key role of partnerships with non-governmental actors for the achievement of those goals. The way partnerships have been picked up (or not) and the space for engagement provided by government has been patchy in the different countries where GPPAC has reviewed SDGs progress or tried to cooperate with governments in SDGs related work. The process used for the development of national plans for SDGs and for their monitoring (for instance through the VNRs) can open important opportunities for joint engagements and reflections with CSOs on issues such as ongoing internal conflicts or youth participation. In GPPAC’s experience CSO ‘shadow reports’ have provided opportunities for productive engagement with governments on difficult issues. SDGs, therefore, provide an important alternative framework for interaction and partnerships between civil society, government and other actors.

³ Paragraph 74 (d) of Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E

Rolling out partnership approaches, even when they were formally recognised, has remained a challenge in practice. Although Cameroon included CSOs in the initial prioritising of 2030 goals, the VNR process did not include civil society in a consistent manner. However, having the VNR and CSO shadow reporting accompanying it, has opened channels for discussion on challenging issues such as the need for inclusive talks between the government and Anglophone armed group which did not exist before. The VNR provided an interesting alternative framework of engagement between CSOs and government. This potential should be recognised and used in future civil society engagements in VNRs also.

There weren't any extensive consultations with CSOs in the VNR process of the countries where GPPAC members were engaged in the SDGs agenda. Yet, CSOs were often included at final validation stages, leaving limited space for more fundamental reviews and discussions. This slows down practical progress on peace and development lead from the ground. Wide, systematic and deep partnerships between government and CSOs must be encouraged and concrete examples on how they can happen and the practical benefits they have must be showcased – such as WANEP's work with governments on early warning and early response.

At a structural level, the reviews identified a lack of coordinated implementation of policies and actions to achieve SDG 16 and related national developmental targets. A first step, as identified in the Ghana review is to build, from national development plans, a national SDGs implementation agenda involving the various agencies that is then institutionalised at all levels and translated into local languages. To spur the implementation of the agenda, civil society in Ghana proposed to establish SDG committees or working groups, as multi-stakeholder platforms to ensure the effective implementation of the SDGs.

“We believe working with civil society and other institutions would help us successfully achieve the SDGs. We want to continue to build strong partnerships with government, CSOs and individuals to realise these goals. There is a need for us to synergise our efforts.”

Participant from the National Commission for Civic Education, Ghana

Through these, CSOs working on SDG16 and related goals could be activated to mobilize stakeholders, monitor and evaluate progress made on SDG16 and enhance reporting. Contextualized mechanisms and institutionalised infrastructures, which enable the effective, coordinated implementation of SDG 16+ targets in an accountable and transparent manner are needed.

Underpinning awareness raising, partnerships and implementation mechanisms is the fundamental issue of civic space, which is not a given. As CIVICUS stated in their State of Civil Society Report 2019, “The space for civil society – civic space – is now under serious attack in 111 of the world's countries [...] and only four per cent of the world's population live in countries where our fundamental civil society freedoms – of association, peaceful assembly and expression – are respected.” In Fiji, for example, the government has not provided the space for structural involvement of civil society in the SDGs priority setting, its implementation or in the VNR process. The Egyptian government has developed its own Vision 2030 strategy. Ideally, this should have opened avenues for work by civil society which otherwise would be difficult. However, despite

Vision 2030 embracing social justice, the government has been clamping down on civic actors and human rights defenders, leaving little space for productive engagement. Civic space is very severely limited and civil society is operating within a threatening environment. Likewise, in Cameroon, space for civil society is “restricted and constrained”. An open and secure environment for civil society, including the respect for fundamental freedoms and rights, is required as a fundamental pillar for inclusive, just and peaceful societies. Safeguarding it must be a priority for all governments and CSOs.

“Peaceful society is where you can go freely and not look over your shoulder. Due to fear, we lock ourselves in our homes just to ensure we are safe.”

Participant in Women Focus Group Discussion, Ashanti region, Ghana

4 Recommendations

Governments, intergovernmental bodies and civil society must jointly

1. Foster greater political incentives and will at local, national and international levels to prioritise and jointly implement SDG 16+. This includes securing sufficient and accessible funding for a diversity of actors at all levels, and innovation and investment in scalable solutions to build peace, strengthen governance and advance access to justice.
2. Support and create national, regional and international SDG 16+ coalitions that guarantee Civil Society's active participation. Such coalitions must advance the full participation of and respect for the rights of women and youth, promote transformative change in societies through the integration of relevant peace targets and generate more joint action. This includes among others peacebuilding, mediation, justice, informal youth-led, feminist or disarmament networks.
3. Secure a people-centered approach to peace, security, justice and social, economic and political inclusion when developing, implementing and monitoring SDG-related policies and practices. This must be done through ongoing, inclusive multi-stakeholder participation and consultations that include young people, women and minorities.
4. Raise broad awareness and build capacities about SDG16+, the SDGs in general and the VNR process through traditional and new channels and methods. This will create broader public ownership, oversight, actions and policy input.

Governments must

5. Use SDG 16+ as the lens through which an integrated, whole of society and government approach and implementation of the SDGs is developed. When deciding which SDG goals and targets to prioritise, governments and local authorities must start by considering the SDG 16+ goals, and the implications other priorities will have on those goals. This must ensure the three elements of SDG 16 – peaceful, just and inclusive societies – leverage each other and the whole SDGs agenda. An inclusive and integrated approach to SDG 16+ is required for the SDGs to play their transformative role.
6. Localize the SDG agenda in a way that builds on and strengthens existing capacities for peace. Only then can the SDGs effectively help address local issues and needs and promote necessary ownership and accountability. The key contributions of civil society, including women and youth peacebuilders as well as inclusive traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, must be recognized and promoted. They provide relevant localized expertise that must lead broader implementation strategies.
7. Enter into wide, systematic and deep SDG 16+ partnerships with CSOs for policy development, implementation and monitoring, including the VNR. In the process government must ensure that CSOs are adequately resourced, informed and equipped to play these roles, for example by formally including diverse CSOs throughout the whole VNR process.

8. Expand and protect civic space and guarantee an open and secure environment for civil society by ensuring the respect of fundamental freedoms and rights.
9. Promote transparent, accountable, representative and participatory institutions, decision making and implementation. Greater meaningful inclusion of civil society and other stakeholders, including women, youth and other groups, particularly those that have been marginalized, is needed to strengthen accountability and provide alternative approaches that are gender and youth responsive. In some contexts, such as Cameroon, decentralization could provide one way to further this.

The UN and member states must

10. Ensure political and financial support for conflict prevention and peace building.
11. Scale up investment in civil society and grassroots approaches that respect their independence towards implementing the SDG16+ agenda. This can be done by increasing global aid flows and the percentage of Official Development Aid, national budgets, and sector-specific funding, with an emphasis on the most fragile contexts, addressing human security needs and putting the furthest behind first.
12. Expand the SDG 16 indicator framework and implementation plans to include qualitative localized national and sub-national SDG indicators and milestones, developed in an inclusive and participatory manner. This should guide locally meaningful actions and purposeful monitoring. Civil society can contribute to this through its knowledge, expertise and follow-up through accountability processes.

13. Review SDG 16 annually and have it included in all VNRs as a mandatory requirement and provide increased structural space for civil society participation during the HLPF (including shadow reports and questions) following the example of the Universal Peer Review mechanism of the Human Rights Council. This should ensure sustained attention by all governments and agencies to the key role that SDG 16+ plays for progress on all other goals.

Civil Society must

14. Co-lead in the localisation of the SDGs so that they address local priorities and strengthen capacities for peace, inclusion, and justice, involving relevant government and UN agencies in the process.
15. Improve the evidence base and better explain what works to reduce violence, build peace, strengthen governance institutions, and advance justice through the provision of alternative localised data, qualitative experiences and analysis by civil society organisations.
16. Help ensure governments and the UN are more responsive, representative, transparent and accountable through the structured involvement of people at the center of the SDG agenda.

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Global Partnership
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The Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC) is a network of civil society organisations active in conflict prevention and peacebuilding practice world-wide, promoting a fundamental shift in how the world deals with violent conflict: moving from reaction to prevention. GPPAC members work together to inform policy, improve practice and facilitate collaboration amongst civil society, intergovernmental organisations and state actors.

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Colophon

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