

# **SDG16+ in Peril: An urgent call-to-action for safeguarding commitments to Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies**

## **2022 Rome Civil Society Declaration**

### **Context - The Perilous State of SDG16+ Today**

Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015, progress towards SDG16+ has been slow and uneven – and in many cases backsliding. On top of existing challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the world is currently confronted with tectonic geopolitical developments that pose serious threats to multilateralism and international law. The illegal invasion of Ukraine is causing widespread destruction, civilian deaths, and displacement. The crisis has pushed governments, especially in Europe, into investing more in military infrastructures and the production and proliferation of weapons of war. These are diverted vital resources that could be used to improve the quality of people's lives. The invasion of Ukraine has also distracted the international community's attention to other critical issues and human suffering, while its impact is worsening food scarcity and protection of human security in other settings. These include Afghanistan's takeover by the Taliban, recent military coups d'état in West Africa, as well as conflicts and resulting humanitarian crises in countries like Ethiopia, Myanmar, and Yemen. All warrant the attention of the international community.

Amid a global pandemic and widespread political upheaval, a growing number of people are living in countries with significant restrictions to their fundamental freedoms of association, peaceful assembly, and expression. Global public access to fact-based, accurate and relevant information has been diminished during the pandemic, alongside growing restrictions and repression of independent journalism. Additionally, with authoritarianism on the rise<sup>1</sup>, the 2030 Agenda's commitments on inclusive, responsive, and participatory decision making, along with respect for access to information and fundamental freedoms, have also assumed greater significance. The need for amplified commitments and stronger partnerships to ensure accelerated action that were highlighted in the broadly supported 2019<sup>2</sup> and 2021<sup>3</sup> versions of the Rome Civil Society Declaration on SDG16+ remain valid and have even been exacerbated by current crises. Diverting the international community's attention away from SDG16+, these global threats have negatively impacted its prioritisation and implementation. They have widened the gap between the stated ambition of the 2030 Agenda and where we are headed based upon current trajectories toward peaceful, just and inclusive societies.

This **2022 Addendum to the 2019 and 2021 versions of the Rome Civil Society Declaration** therefore raises the alarm on the further backsliding of SDG16+ and highlights what civil society stakeholders have identified as key

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<sup>1</sup> The latest update of CIVICUS Monitor ratings in November 2021 indicates that civil society continues to work in an increasingly hostile environment. CIVICUS data shows that there are 25 countries with closed civic space, 49 with repressed space, and 43 with obstructed space, meaning that 117 of 197 countries are assessed as having serious civic space restrictions. In comparison, 41 countries are rated as having narrowed civic space and just 39 countries have an open rating.

<sup>2</sup> 2019 Rome Civil Society Declaration on SDG16+ "Amplified Commitments and Partnerships for Accelerated Action: Rome Civil Society Declaration on SDG16+", available [here](#). In 2019, SDG16 was reviewed for the first time at the UN High-Level Political Forum 2019 (HPLF), marking the need for civil society to come together in order to update on the (lack of) progress towards the achievement of SDG16 and to share recommendations in the 2019 Rome Civil Society Declaration on SDG16+. The 2019 Declaration received endorsement from over 130 civil society organisations and networks.

<sup>3</sup> 2021 Rome Civil Society Declaration "A Renewed Call for Strengthening Commitments, Partnerships, and Accelerated Action for SDG16+", available [here](#). As SDG16 was reviewed for the second time at UN HLPF 2021, the Rome Declaration was revisited in 2021. The Rome Declaration was endorsed by 215+ civil society stakeholders, and looked specifically at the impacts of COVID-19 on the promotion of just, peaceful and inclusive societies.

areas where action is needed for peaceful societies to prosper. As civil society, we fear that if urgent action is not decided upon to propel greater action, governments and the international community will collectively fail to deliver on SDG16+ and the entire 2030 Agenda. **SDG16+ is in peril, urgent action is needed now!**

## **An urgent call-to-action for safeguarding commitment to Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies**

At a time when the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic is still fragile, particularly for countries across the Global South, the international community faces widening humanitarian crises due to extremely volatile geopolitical situations, conflicts, and climate-related events. Faced with a wide range of once-in-a-generation challenges, these emerging and worsening crises have made it clear that SDG16+ is in peril, and the risk of failure is as real as ever. In the absence of urgent action and commitments from governments and the international community towards SDG16+, numerous people will continue to suffer, with countless others at risk of being left further behind.

Despite these challenges, we believe in the real transformative potential of SDG16+, as it remains critical for the resolution of current crises and for building resilience to prevent and withstand future crises yet to come. If actors including Member States, UN bodies, multilateral agencies, donors, the private sector, CSOs, think tanks, research institutions, and others come together to collectively accelerate and increase efforts to implement SDG16+, good practices and processes for the realisation of peaceful societies will be systemised worldwide. Therefore, it is critical that the concerns and voices of local civil society and other stakeholders are thus taken into account and acted upon, with civil society committed as ever to advancing SDG16+ at all levels. This 2022 declaration is issued to call upon Member States and other actors to translate commitments into action.

This is particularly relevant as Member States continue discussions around the “**Our Common Agenda**” report with eyes on the **2023 SDGs Summit** and planned “**Summit of the Future**”. These moments of reflection serve as a critical opportunity for the international community to re-shift its priorities and political will to double efforts to implement SDG16+, and to bring progress on the 2030 Agenda back on track. The mid-term review point in 2023 should be used by all stakeholders to announce ambitious and bolder commitments that will help to truly realise and localise SDG16+, including by harnessing the role of civil society in advancing these efforts. Undoubtedly, without a focus on the SDG16+ targets for peace, justice and inclusion, none of the Sustainable Development Goals will be able to be delivered in full.

## **Recommendations for a renewed focus on delivering SDG16+ commitments**

### **1- Protecting civil society and expanding civic space and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and connecting SDG16+ with “Our Common Agenda”**

*Leaving No One Behind is at the core of the 2030 Agenda. Civil society participation and citizen engagement remain vital in delivering the 2030 Agenda, especially at the local and grassroots level. Yet, throughout the pandemic and in increasing instances of violence and conflict such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine, we see the diminishing of civic space and lack of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms from governments and duty-bearers in all regions and in all contexts. These types of crises are used as a pretext to limit access to information and restrict fundamental freedoms across societies worldwide. Protecting civil society and civic space makes a critical contribution to the effective prevention of conflict and the fight against impunity and corruption. Yet, SDG16+ still does not seem to be at the heart of our everyday business. Therefore we call on all actors to:*

- Not only stem the tide of shrinking civic space within countries and societies, but to actively promote, protect, and where possible enlarge an enabling environment for human rights defenders and fundamental freedoms for all people, making a special effort to address those groups particularly at risk;
- Focus on increasing direct support to local civil society actors and grassroots approaches in a way that enables leadership by local actors as well as equitable partnerships between international and local actors;
- Ensure the protection of human rights and other justice defenders by responding to their urgent appeals for help and provide support to those who took action as frontline responders (e.g. the Afghanistan evacuations) and

create an enabling environment for the implementation of their work, in line with the 2016 United Nations Human Rights Council Resolution on Civil Society Space<sup>4</sup>, especially in conflict-affected and fragile contexts.

- Ensure that land and environmental justice defenders, who are the most at risk, have access to protection from state and local actors, and work with businesses to ensure that they create space for and respect voices of communities impacted by their industry.
- Respect the independence of civil society actors and journalists to drive accountability for the sustainable development agenda, including on critical issues and ensure the safeguarding of these groups.
- Strengthen legal frameworks and implementation of existing legal frameworks on access to information.
- Support an ambitious ‘New Agenda for Peace’: one that advances a comprehensive and integrated approach to peace and security, and one that ensures full, equal and meaningful participation of civil society [with particular focus on women and youth] in all stages of peace processes and peacebuilding.

## **2 - Capacity Strengthening for enhancing implementation of SDG16+**

*Capacity strengthening, technical assistance, and investment in the area of implementation is critical for the advancement of SDG16+, especially as institutions are being rebuilt and reimagined as we begin to move towards a post-COVID world. For more tailored and effective programming, it is necessary to both recognise and enhance local capacities of civil society actors including community-, women-, and youth-led organisations. Strengthening the capacity of civil society enables it to better gather and analyse data in order to monitor the realisation of SDG16+ in their countries and worldwide, again strengthening policies and programming of state actors across the globe. Civil society’s capacity enhancement will ensure the effective implementation of peacebuilding projects and share learnings with programmes and policies at the international level. Therefore, we call on all actors to:*

- Inform donors and the private sector on the challenges civil society faces in accessing financing (especially as military expenditure is on the rise) and facilitate partnerships between donors, the private sector and local actors to ensure long-term, sustained, and flexible (core) funding to enhance the capacity of civil society.
- Enhance partnerships with civil society so that local actors are placed at the centre of decision-making for development cooperation on the national and international stages. Strengthening the capacity of CSOs means investing in greater mutual exchange and support so that decision-makers and policymakers have greater visibility on what they need to implement for the realisation of peaceful, just and inclusive societies.
- Ensure civil society has the means and capacity to implement effective peacebuilding projects, deliver training, and act as key agents of change for the 2030 Agenda.

## **3 - Overcoming challenges & threats to multilateralism in promoting and preserving peace and security**

*Many international institutions, partnerships, or fora such as the UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) exclude civil society from their decision-making processes. More often than not, civil society takes the backseat in engagement in peace processes or other relevant governance processes, such as the responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Especially given today’s geopolitical context, it is important to note that the 2011 World Development Report identified weak institutions as the main predictor of whether violence and instability will occur or reoccur in a fragile country. Continued investment in SDG16+ is therefore essential to advance the necessary systems change that promotes civil society-inclusive multilateralism in promoting and preserving peace and security. Therefore, we call on all actors to:*

- Ensure to embed the active inclusion of civil society, especially women and youth, in decision-making processes and multilateral institutions at the local, national and international level, both virtually as well as in person where possible;
- Provide the tools and means for civil society stakeholders to participate in said processes, as well as the means and right to monitor multi-stakeholder interventions;
- Establish civil society focal points across multilateral institutions such as the United Nations;
- Promote localised infrastructures for inclusive peace and sustainable development that critically look at the ‘traditional’ roles of international and local actors, while rethinking them and reassigning positions of power in the new multilateral order.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G16/160/85/PDF/G1616085.pdf?OpenElement>

#### **4 - Integrated approaches and SDG16+ interlinkages with other SDGs and recovery and resilience from the COVID-19 pandemic**

*Civil society's practical experience in implementing SDG16+ at all levels has shown us the critical role and interlinkages that SDG16+ has with every other SDG. In order to effectively deliver on these interlinkages, governments must provide and support safe, transparent, and inclusive platforms for coordination across society – civil society actors, including women's, youth and indigenous groups, government ministries, parliamentarians, journalists, students, and other key institutions at all levels. The devastating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted the critical role of investing in inclusive and responsive institutions, decision-making, and governance at all levels. Furthermore, the pandemic has exposed the deepening socio-economic inequalities within countries, as well as geo-political inequalities between countries, with equitable vaccine distribution still woefully lacking. It is critical for the international community and countries to realise that the people that have been most affected and left behind as a result of the pandemic will face the greatest challenges in "building back better" across their communities. Therefore, we call on all actors to:*

- Tackle the pandemic through a truly global response to COVID-19. The path to a more rapid and fair vaccine roll-out is clear. Addressing vaccine inequity needs to be given priority attention by production and fair distribution of COVID-19 vaccines.
- Local action for peace, justice and inclusion are crucially important for our common future. Seeing the persistent impact of COVID-19 measures around the globe, we urge to embrace a fragility, conflict and violence lens across all response and recovery strategies and to make SDG16+ the foundation for reset and recovery efforts, and for building more resilient societies and institutions going forward.
- Additionally, invest in political will, finance, and capacity to ensure that the 2030 Agenda's commitment to "reach those furthest behind first" is a priority for governments as well as the international community going forward in effectively "building forward better".
- Work collaboratively with governments, civil society, and donors to promote people-centred approaches, including ensuring equal, universal, affordable access to justice through legal empowerment, which can contribute to strengthening gender and youth equity, confronting environmental injustice, and ensuring community control of their land and natural resources, among other interlinkages.
- Recognise that access to justice and strong institutions are critical to preventing climate change. Urgently invest in ways to ensure that land and environmental justice defenders have access to justice and their voices are included in discussions about climate change. Create legal protections for community consultation and consent of any development projects that will impact their land and environment. Foster linkages between government institutions responding to climate change, ensuring that justice and land management institutions are included in conversations about climate change.

#### **5 - Strengthening data, monitoring, and accountability for SDG16+**

*It is clear that governments' and the international community's commitments to accountability for SDG16+ and the 2030 Agenda are non-existent at this half-way point to 2030. Worse yet, persistent attempts to weaken institutions at all levels remain disturbingly present in countries around the world, leading to an increased prevalence of authoritarianism and corruption in recent years, or corporate statism that prioritises profits and greed over people and the environment. Additionally, we have seen rampant misinformation, disinformation, and hate-speech take hold within societies. This represents a clear and urgent threat to democracies around the world, with political divides within societies deepening through the spread of false information and propaganda. Therefore, we call on all actors to:*

- Help push back on these worrying trends. Additional investments must be made in improving the quality and inclusivity of data on SDG16+ issues, including through survey-based perception and experiential data that taps into how citizens are experiencing "progress" towards SDG16+, or lack thereof, and in supporting civil society participation in measuring progress towards SDG16+
- Include investments in improving data literacy across societies, and improve how SDG16+ data and service providers communicate data for a broader audience to better inform its citizenry.

- Double down on providing spaces for dialogue and citizen participation in decision-making (mainly led by government actors), such as the many successful examples of citizen-led budgeting processes in countries and cities around the world.
- Work together to take effective steps in various areas, while respecting international human rights standards, to address misinformation, disinformation, and hate-speech, such as through media and information literacy, calling on social media platforms to do far more to combat these problems in a transparent manner, and addressing cases where governments intentionally disseminate these forms of content.

## **6 - Mobilising and scaling up commitments and investments around 2023 “Moments” - SDGs Summit and Summit for the Future**

*With 2023 representing the half-way point to the SDGs’ delivery date of 2030, governments and the international community sit at the precipice of a key moment. This is why Member States must ensure that the SDGs Summit and the planned Summit of the Future in 2023 represent urgent and serious opportunities for the international community to reinvigorate genuine political will towards the SDGs, and reverse the overtly downwards trend in implementation of the 2030 Agenda on all fronts. Therefore we call on:*

- Governments to come to the SDGs Summit in 2023 with concrete commitments that outline their plans for implementing SDG16+ and the entire 2030 Agenda in this critical second-half of implementation of the SDGs towards 2030. This should include an honest reflection of where progress currently stands in their respective countries, based on their previously reported Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) and specific details on how they intend on addressing any shortcomings in progress towards SDG16+ or other SDGs. These commitments should be developed through consultation with civil society and grassroots groups to effectively respond to their priorities.
- Additionally, governments must urgently remedy the lack of finance and capacity support towards SDG16+. If we are to make progress towards the 2030 agenda, all actors should:
  - Develop and invest in a comprehensive donor-collaborative “SDG16+ Fund”. This will provide an opportunity for governments and donors, including the private sector, to showcase themselves as “champions” that literally and figuratively support SDG16+, while providing critical resources for civil society and grassroots groups to advance SDG16+ at the local and national levels that are so urgently needed. The development of a fund such as this will be critical to turning the tide of SDG16+ towards a more positive outlook towards 2030.
  - Invest in and secure the replenishment of the Legal Empowerment Fund, a 10-year, \$100 million global fund, the first of its kind to support implementation of SDG16+ by providing vitally needed long-term, core funding to grassroots activists and organisations working to ensure marginalised and vulnerable communities can access justice.
  - Scale up investments for civil society and grassroots organisations, with a focus on flexible, core and long-term funding, while respecting their independence, by increasing global aid flows, national budgets, and sector-specific funding, with an emphasis on fragile and conflict-affected contexts and promoting access to justice and legal empowerment, while bringing an intersectional lens and placing the furthest behind first.
  - Reduce spending on militarisation, policing, and security that often deepens violence and harm faced by marginalised communities, and counter this imbalance by allocating a proportionate share of justice sector funding to legal aid and defender services.
  - Work with the private sector to generate additional funding to support implementation of SDG16+, in alignment with human rights principles and standards.
  - Ensure that sustainable recovery plans from COVID-19 include financing to achieve SDG16+, including to address the justice needs that have significantly increased due to the pandemic.

Without these concrete commitments from Member States on their ambitions and actions in this second-half of implementation towards 2030, the international community is doomed to fail at delivering on the SDGs by 2030, and repeating the same shortcomings and failures of the MDGs before them.