

If Not Now, Then When?

An urgent call for transformative SDG16+ commitments at the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda

2023 Rome Civil Society Declaration on SDG16+

Context - The urgent state of the 2030 Agenda and SDG16+

This year marks the halfway point of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, making 2023 a crucial year to re-think our commitments to the SDGs predefined in 2015. Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres, earlier in April urged member states and stakeholders to engage with concrete, true and bold commitments in the preparation for the SDG Summit. The 2023 Rome Conference provides an opportunity for civil society organisations to support this call and suggest new and strengthened implementations on SDG16+. In addition to this, the High Level Political Forum and the SDG Summit later this year are international gatherings that provide the space and the platform for civil society organisations to challenge and put SDG16+ at the forefront of global discussions. In this declaration, civil society is calling for genuine commitments from member states to bring bold and accelerated actions towards the SDG Summit in September.

The world is persistently confronted by manifestations of global, co-occurring and compounding threats. Next to the protracted recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, it is challenged by the increased pressures of the climate crisis and sharpening food insecurity. Geopolitical tensions are intensifying at the global level challenging international security and multilateralism. There are 56 ongoing conflicts worldwide leading to acute humanitarian crises, resulting in global energy crises and an intensification of food insecurity and famine. The armed conflict in Ukraine highlights the inconsistent attention of the international community *vis-à-vis* other conflicts. This violates the internationally-agreed humanitarian principles where resources should be allocated based upon needs, not on geo-political proximity.

The year 2022 saw global instability manifest in some unique, post-COVID forms that included increased violence, demonstrations, weaponised narratives and divisions. Crises in countries like Ethiopia, Myanmar, Sudan, Yemen, and the wider Sahel have escalated and expanded with instability, military coups, country divisions and perilous humanitarian conditions. The political situation in many fragile and conflict-affected settings and states has further worsened, where civil society actors and human rights defenders are impacted by measures taken by duty bearers. There is widespread destabilisation as we are witnessing democracy backsliding and expanding authoritarianism globally. The global conflict scene has diverted donor funds to military expenditures rather than allocating resources towards conflict prevention, peacekeeping and improving people's lives. Furthermore, there is a need for restructuring the global financial architecture and development system, to address, inter alia, the impact of the global debt crisis hampering progress on the 2030 Agenda in affected countries.

Recognising the geo-political challenges confronting every part of the globe, attacks on civic space and civil society which were previously cloaked under the guise of public health and security, are increasingly common and overt. Polarising narratives from state and non-state actors are shrinking the civic space and disabling civil society from carrying out its role as partners in development and in holding duty bearers to account.

Amidst expansive digital space for expression, civil society is restrained from operating in numerous countries, delegitimized and faced with constant threats and intimidation.¹ Constrained civil society participation has repercussions on the performance of global governance institutions in addition to hindering the possibility of inclusive and participatory decision-making processes that the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development promotes. There have been growing constraints on media freedoms, giving restricted space for freedom of expression and access to fact-based and accurate knowledge. We express concerns about the use of social media propagating adverse messages and the ongoing risks of dis- and misinformation. In the context of safeguarding freedom of expression, focused attention should be given to those groups whose rights are in jeopardy, such as women, youth, indigenous communities, LGBTQIA+ and other marginalised groups. Recognition for a committed and strong partnership to take action as stated in the previous Rome Civil Society Declaration SDG16+ in 2019², 2021³ and 2022⁴ is urgently needed.

After these versions of the Rome Civil Society Declaration, the 2023 Declaration calls for urgent action toward revitalised and transformative commitments on SDG16+ and emphasises key areas civil society stakeholders have identified that need immediate action and genuine commitment to prosperous, peaceful and inclusive societies. As civil society, we fear that if urgent and immediate action is not taken, governments and the international community will collectively fail to deliver on SDG16+ and the entire 2030 Agenda. Halfway to 2030, the promise to 'Leave No One Behind' and work together to secure the rights and well-being of everyone on a healthy, thriving planet is in peril. SDG16+ is in need of new and collaborative actions. Bold commitments for urgent action are needed now!

¹ The latest update from CIVICUS Monitor from March 2023 states that in 117 out of 197 countries, physical harassment and murder, or negative labelling, or restrictive legislations are used to constrain the civic space. The CIVICUS Monitor rates 38 countries as Open, 42 countries as Narrowed, 40 countries as Obstructed, 50 countries as Repressed and 27 countries as Closed.

² 2019 Rome Civil Society Declaration on SDG16+ "Amplified Commitments and Partnerships for Accelerated Action: Rome Civil Society Declaration on SDG16+", available [here](#). SDG16 was reviewed for the first time at the UN High-Level Political Forum 2019 (HPLF), marking the need for civil society to congregate and to provide an 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.

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

⁴ 2022 Rome Civil Society Declaration. "SDG16+ in Peril: An urgent call-to-action for safeguarding commitments to Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies", available [here](#). The Rome Declaration was revisited in light of backsliding on SDG16+. Building on previous years, the 2022 Declaration reflects entry points needed for the key events of 2023.

Time for genuine commitments and collaborative action to Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies

At a time of the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda, the international community is severely impacted by escalating humanitarian crises due to geopolitical conflicts and their consequences, and climate-induced events. These challenges demonstrate the crucial need to put SDG16+ at the forefront of the international discussion this year and bring civil society stakeholders in the wider decision-making processes. This is particularly important as we move towards the High Level Political Forum (HLPF) in July and the SDG Summit in September. These moments of reflection serve as an opportunity, and the ideal platform for the international community to redirect its priorities and political engagement to implement SDG16+. In the absence of true and bold commitments from governments and stakeholders towards SDG16+, we are at greater risk of not accomplishing leaving no one behind.

In spite of global challenges, we must take this opportunity to advocate more for the achievement of SDG16+, as it remains critical for the resolution of the ongoing perilous crises and for building resilience to prevent future grievances, crises and conflicts. It is an opportunity to synergise societies worldwide, bring the 2030 Agenda back on track and bring the voice of the furthest behind to the front. We therefore take the words of Secretary-General António Guterres further and demand member states, UN bodies, multilateral agencies, donors, the private sector, CSOs, think tanks, academic institutions, and others to congregate and collectively work on advancing and bringing progress on SDG16+ for the realisation of peaceful and inclusive societies. Therefore, it is critical that the concerns and voices of local civil society and other stakeholders are taken into account and acted upon, with civil society committed as ever to advance SDG16+ at local, national, regional and global levels. This 2023 declaration is issued to call upon member states and other actors to translate commitments into action and to ensure proper evaluation of both resources allocated to actions plans and commitments previously made.

At the mid-point of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development we call upon member states to announce bold and ambitious commitments that accelerate greater action on SDG16+. Without a strong and steadfast focus on the SDG16+ targets for peace, justice and inclusion, none of the Sustainable Development Goals will be delivered in full.

2023 Recommendations for a renewed focus on delivering SDG16+ commitments

1) Recognising and utilising SDG16+ as an enabler for achieving the 2030 Agenda and responding to current global crises as well as a development outcome

Besides being a crucial goal on its own, the interlinkages between SDG16 and the other goals in the agenda as expressed in using SDG16+, is critical for addressing the root causes of many of the world's challenges. In a world plagued by violence, violent conflicts, corruption, and widespread exclusion, greater action towards SDG16+ provides a high-yield opportunity for governments and the international community to address key challenges related to SDG implementation overall.

- Governments should include direct references to SDG16+ as a linchpin for the 2030 Agenda in SDGs Summit Declaration, recognising the critical importance of making progress on SDG16+ for

achieving all the other SDGs, and addressing the complex challenges and crises facing the world today.

- The programme of the SDGs Summit must also recognize the pivotal role of SDG16+ for the 2030 Agenda by featuring it as a key theme for the Summit overall, with SDG16+ integrated throughout the agenda and sessions of the Summit.
- We also call for the 2024 Summit of the Future to reflect the complementary nature of the New Agenda for Peace and SDG16+, including through the various consultations between all relevant stakeholders around the Secretary-General's Our Common Agenda Report, Pact for the Future and other key processes.

2) Delivering bold and ambitious commitments at the 2023 SDGs Summit, 2024 Summit of the Future and beyond

At this halfway point to 2030, the 2023 SDGs Summit represents a pivotal and indispensable moment for governments and the international community to bring SDG action and implementation on track. It is therefore critical for governments to come to the SDGs Summit with concrete commitments to action around SDG16+, which outlines specific actions they will take to deliver on the SDGs in this second half of implementation towards 2030. This will help ensure that the SDGs Summit recognises and showcases specific and positive examples of ambition and action towards SDG16+, primarily by governments, but including by civil society and a wide range of actors. It is our hope that these inspiring commitments to action will encourage and catalyse additional support for SDG16+, and provide opportunities for sharing, learning and storytelling amongst the global SDG16+ community.

- Governments and other relevant stakeholders must come to the 2023 SDGs Summit with targeted, focused and transformative commitments to SDG16+ action. This builds upon the UN Secretary-General's call for member states to convey "National Commitments to SDG Transformation" at the SDGs Summit.
- These commitments to act on SDG16+ must fit the SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and time-bound) criteria, and should be clear, verifiable and quantifiable data-driven actions that outline how governments will deliver on their existing SDG16+ obligations, and beyond.
- We call on governments to meaningfully include civil society as partners at all stages of the commitment-making process, to ensure that any commitments made are people-centred and responsive to the needs of citizens themselves.
- In addition to governments delivering commitments to act on SDG16+ at the SDGs Summit, civil society and other stakeholders should also be encouraged to outline similar commitments to action.
- Recognising the potential for civil society commitments to act on SDG16+, the UN and member states must recognise and showcase commitments from civil society in playing a critical, complementary role in supporting government commitments at the Summit.
- We call on the United Nations and its partners to ensure that the "National Commitments to SDG Transformation" called for by the Secretary-General are adequately compiled and tracked around the SDGs Summit, including by providing a transparent and inclusive platform for showcasing these commitments, helping to ensure follow-up and accountability.

- We call on the UN and member States to ensure that participation modalities at the 2023 SDGs Summit and 2024 Summit of the Future are as inclusive as possible, and that efforts are made to ensure inclusion of voices from developing countries, as well as marginalised and vulnerable groups and people living in fragile and conflict-affected settings or states.
- We reiterate our call for SDG16+ to be reviewed annually at the HLPF, including through the negotiations around the review of the HLPF modalities taking place in 2024 and by providing space annually for a discussion on the interlinkages with other goals under review. This reaffirms that SDG16 strongly links with all other goals, in line with the integrated and indivisible nature of the 2030 Agenda. A thematic review of SDG 16 at each forthcoming HLPF will also help realise the Agenda’s universal vision with scale and ambition, balancing all dimensions of sustainable development and ensuring we should leave no country and no one behind.

3) Delivering catalytic financing for SDG16+ and fixing a broken global financial system

A lack of financing and investments for SDG16+ across the board has thus far had devastating impacts on a government's ability to deliver people-centred results across the entire 2030 Agenda. Decades of investing in institutional reforms has left critical gaps in governance processes that render governments unable to respond to the challenges of their people today, and weakening their resilience to future global crises. It is therefore critical that continuous financing for SDG16+ should be a top priority for governments and the international community. Any further investments and financing towards SDG16+ and the 2030 Agenda overall must be complemented by comprehensive reforms to a global financial infrastructure that has exposed deepening cracks in recent years.

- In addition to coming to the 2023 SDGs Summit with clear “National Commitments to SDG Transformation” to act on SDG16+ and the 2030 Agenda, governments must also come to the SDGs Summit with financial commitments – including commitments to domestic resource mobilisation and budgetary commitments to deliver on the SDGs. For donors, this also includes financial commitments towards SDG16+ and the 2030 Agenda, which can also play a key role in helping donors meet their commitments to 0.7% of GDP for official development assistance.
- We strongly support the Secretary-General’s call for an ambitious “SDGs Stimulus Plan”, which calls for an additional \$500 billion per year towards sustainable development financing.
- In addition to scaling up financial commitments towards SDG16+ and the 2030 Agenda, member states and the international community must reform the global financial architecture and development system. This includes comprehensive reforms to International Financial Institutions to ensure a fairer system that addresses the debt crisis faced by many countries today, fairer taxation and tackling illicit financial flows.
- We reiterate our call from the 2022 Rome Declaration for donors to develop and invest in a comprehensive donor-collaborative “Global 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.

- Additionally, we call on governments to ensure continued investment and replenishment of other funds around specific SDG16+ issues, including human rights, such as the UN Peacebuilding Fund, Legal Empowerment Fund, the UN Democracy Fund, and ensure that increased core, flexible funds are provided to grassroots organisations close to communities.
- We support the call for expanding measurement of economic progress to a “Beyond GDP” model. This is of particular importance for SDG16+, as these measurements are critical for identifying where investments and actions for SDG16+ result in quantifiable positive impacts for governments and their people. By looking beyond GDP and considering a broader range of indicators, such as measures of social inclusion, access to justice, peacebuilding or investment in institutions and governance systems, we can more accurately gauge progress towards SDG16+ and make informed decisions about how to allocate resources and address areas where progress is lacking.
- Governments and the international community must make efforts to solve the increasingly urgent sovereign debt crisis. To do so, debt cancellation or restructuring must be considered, as well as other innovative mechanisms such as “debt swaps” that will further incentivize action towards SDG16+ and the 2030 Agenda overall.
- We reiterate the call from many civil society groups for the establishment of a Global Tax Body facilitated by the United Nations, to help reduce tax evasion and illicit financial flows, and help ensure fairness and transparency of the global tax system.
- We call upon the international community to come together for needed discussions in context of the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development.

4) Recognizing the indispensable role of civil society for SDG16+ and the 2030 Agenda, and expanding civic space

Civil society plays a critical role in recognising and delivering on SDG16+ because of its intermediary role between society and a government. Next to that, it has a vital role in ensuring the legitimacy and accountability of governments and institutions, including the private sector. Engaging with civil society is a prerequisite for governments to meet their commitments to leaving no one behind, and reaching those furthest behind first, and ensuring that our collective efforts to implement SDG16+ and the 2030 Agenda are people-centred. Besides this, and following the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (article 25), citizens and civil society representatives have the right to participate in the conduct of public affairs, to vote and to be elected and to have access to public services.

To use civil society data is essential for tracking progress towards SDG16+, especially for accountability. Civil society organisations (CSOs) often work closely with communities affected by conflict, violence, and injustice, and have unique insights into the challenges and opportunities for building more peaceful, just, and inclusive societies. By tapping into this knowledge and expertise, governments can gain a more accurate understanding of progress towards SDG16+ targets, including the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies, access to justice, and effective, accountable, and transparent institutions. Furthermore, civil society data can help to fill gaps in official statistics, providing more detailed information on issues such as human rights abuses, corruption, impunity, and conflict.

- We call on governments to establish and strengthen mechanisms for meaningful and sustained consultation with CSOs at all stages of the policymaking processes around SDG16+, from planning

and design to implementation and monitoring. For any consultations to be meaningful, individuals should be able to effectively exercise their right to access information held by public bodies. To this end and in accordance with SDG 16.10.2, governments should take steps to strengthen legal frameworks on access to information and improve implementation. *(To facilitate the latter, they should effectively assess the state of implementation of existing access to information laws.)*

- We call on governments to ensure that civil society is included in the Voluntary National Review (VNR) processes at all stages, including in follow-up to the VNRs, and through the expanded use of civil society, citizen-generated data and all other “non-official” data sources. This includes not only entry points for this data to be included into official statistical systems and in Voluntary National Review processes, but also includes additional funding to support civil society to produce and generate data within their own communities.
- Recognising the multi-dimensional nature of SDG16+, we encourage the international community to consider using alternative indicators and measures of progress that capture and reflect the full scope of issues contained within SDG16+. This includes the need to invest in more perception-based and experiential data collection, which more adequately takes into account how people are experiencing progress in their everyday lives.
- We call on all providers who have adhered to the OECD/DAC Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance to fully implement this Recommendation with full participation of civil society in both provider and partner countries.
- We call upon the international community to develop and add “civic space indicators” linked to SDG 16: Despite Target 16.10’s clear aim to protect fundamental freedoms, the global-level indicators adopted by the international community to assess progress towards achieving this target do not at present adequately measure the extent to which they are being protected.
- Recognising the increasing attacks on civil society actors, we call upon governments and other stakeholders to protect civil society actors and uphold their rights globally.