

**2021 HLPF Thematic Review  
Expert Group Meeting (EGM)  
Virtual, 18-20 May 2021  
Meeting Summary for Session on SDG 16**

### **1. Introduction**

The EGM on SDG 16, "Promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels", was convened in preparation for the 2021 HLPF. The meeting was co-led by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children (SRSG-VAC). It brought together experts from around the world to review progress made towards SDG 16 and to strategize on how to further accelerate progress and recover back better from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The EGM provided an overview of progress on a range of SDG 16 targets and stressed that their achievement was closely interlinked with progress across all the SDGs. The EGM focused on SDG Targets 16.1 and 16.2, framing the discussion around the importance of including children and youth in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and ensuring that no one is left behind.

### **2. Stocktaking and challenges**

Public trust in institutions is weakening due to increased opportunities for corruption, insufficient transparency and inequality in the delivery of services in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The importance of renewing the social contract was emphasized to ensure participation and engagement of the most marginalized, promoting an inclusive economy, a greener development model, and multi-level governance. The discussion also highlighted the need for strengthening provision of integrated health (including mental health), education, justice and child protection services built on a strong social protection foundation to achieve the SDGs.

Reliable and credible institutions were identified as crucial to the achievement of SDG 16; while persistent corruption and financial mismanagement were mentioned as impediments.

The lack of disaggregated, reliable and up-to-date data was mentioned as an additional challenge as it hinders effective monitoring. Although progress has been made since the last review, in terms of enhancing capacity to analyse trends through increased local level data and improved methodologies, conceptual clarity is needed to develop better common indicators required to operationalize SDG 16. For example, in relation to Target 16.1 on violence and related death rates reduction, gaps persist in the quality and quantity of data on the different forms of violence, preventing an accurate evaluation of the impact of the pandemic on new or continuing trends. In terms of Target 16.2, even prior to the pandemic, it was estimated that more than 1 billion children experience sexual, physical or emotional violence each year. And 1 in 3 women experience physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime. The COVID-19 pandemic has increased children's and women's risk of violence in their homes, communities and online, and has compromised the ability of systems and services to promptly detect and respond to incidents of violence.

Investing in children and youth and recognizing them as actors of positive change was mentioned as crucial with further emphasis on recognizing youth as leading forces towards the achievement of SDG 16. Although the perception of the role of young people in conflict has improved from one of victims, or perpetrators, to one of peacebuilders, more investment is required to build their resilience by equipping them with the capacities to overcome challenging situations, such as that induced by the pandemic. Building such resilience in young people must start early and have a lifecycle approach, taking into consideration the evolving capacity of children growing into youth and adulthood.

### **3. COVID-19 crisis impacts and recovery**

The COVID-19 pandemic poses a particularly significant threat to the three pillars of SDG 16, namely peace, justice and strong institutions. Mitigation measures, such as lockdowns, taken in response to the pandemic have intensified violence, making those already at risk even more vulnerable.

The pandemic has exacerbated existing socio-economic insecurity and inequalities that worsened violence and illicit activities, with severe repercussions for marginalized persons. Participants noted how children and women had been particularly impacted by constraints on the detection and response to violence and abuse, and that vulnerability to violence requires targeted interventions.

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly rolled back efforts to end poverty, affecting the safety, development and wellbeing of children and increasing the need for already-limited humanitarian aid. As the pandemic has hindered the provision of assistance to victims of violence in humanitarian crises, it has shown the importance of investing in local capacity to deliver aid and the need to focus on crime prevention at the sub-national level to address drivers of violence.

The importance of digitization has expanded at an unprecedented speed as many activities had to be shifted to online platforms due to the pandemic. The increased number of Internet users presented more opportunities for cyber criminals, such as the online abuse and exploitation of children. Furthermore, lack of connectivity and digital barriers were exposed as large parts of the world remain digitally excluded. Despite these challenges, there is increased interest in making digital spaces more inclusive. For instance, in some countries, petty crime experienced a significant reduction, while the establishment of virtual courts allowed the continuation of law enforcement activities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented an opportunity for some governments to suppress the voice of citizens through mass incarcerations and police violence, creating unsafe situations and fear among their population. Nonetheless, where a lack of good governance and violence prevail, civil society has played a key role in reaching out to mainstream and marginalized groups, providing information, and developing innovative and effective solutions to address the pandemic and its impacts. Civil society needs to continue to be given the space to find opportunities to create coalitions to protect and promote the pillars of SDG 16 and ensure progress in its implementation.

### **4. Policies and actions to maximize synergies, mitigate trade-offs and drive transformation**

The COVID-19 crisis was recognized by many as an opportunity to recover better; the changes it induced gave impetus to innovation and good practices and taught valuable lessons that can help ensure a better recovery and reconstruction.

Strong political will and adequate funding, as well as sound and timely evidence to guide action, is needed to address the inequality and exclusion that perpetuates violence. Moreover, effective design and implementation of policies and programmes requires the active participation of children and youth, whose engagement is only possible through the creation of enabling environments. Prevention of and responses to violence must entail law enforcement, and large-scale provision of integrated health, mental health, education, justice and social protection services that are sustainable during and beyond pandemics.

Transparency and accountability and an equitable, timely and effective delivery of social services is essential to building greater public confidence and trust in government. A whole-of-society, rights-based and adequately-funded approach to social protection is essential to enhance progress on all SDGs and to ensure that no one is left behind in the recovery.

Accelerated action is needed to address the digital divide. It is vital to ensure equitable access and digital literacy and skills to avoid further widening the gap. Additionally, it is important to improve understanding of the needs of vulnerable and excluded people, including leveraging digital platforms to create more inclusive spaces for persons with disabilities.

#### **5. Means of implementation: Mechanisms and partnerships to accelerate progress**

It was emphasized that to accelerate progress, all SDG 16 Targets should be given priority within the broader 2030 Agenda. Only a comprehensive and cross-cutting approach will eradicate the root causes of poverty, inequality and exclusion and accelerate achievement across all the SDGs. Peaceful and inclusive societies need a wide range of integrated and cross-cutting initiatives and the mobilization and cooperation of all.

Additionally, more relevant and disaggregated data to provide a clear and up-to-date understanding of the gaps and challenges and to implement evidence-based strategies is needed. Greater cooperation to ensure availability of public data and to build stable networks is required to measure the wide variety and complexity of the SDG 16 Targets. Many countries still lack an independent unified structure to monitor the indicators of each SDG Target.

To prevent and combat all forms of crime and violence, there needs to be more data on both its drivers and effects. Enhanced coordination is required to collect data at the local, national and regional levels to provide evidence for interventions. Responses to violence should be evidence-based, inclusive, coordinated, harmonized, and properly funded to have a long-term impact and ensure that no one is left behind.

To counter the increasingly complex threat of cybercrime, a cross-sectoral, multi-level and comprehensive approach characterized by new collaborative mechanisms is required. National capacities need to be strengthened through training, education and upward mobility. Training of police units was mentioned as a strategy to prevent and respond to online violence and crime, including the sexual exploitation and abuse of children. Technology must be utilized for service provision and reaching out to those who are in need. To maximize synergies in preventing and combating cybercrime, building technical literacy skills and raising awareness among children and youth at all stages of education were emphasized as a strategic addition to national human capacity.

The active participation of children and youth in the prevention and response to violence must be encouraged and capacities needed to strengthen their resilience needs to be built. Resilience to shocks and crises cannot be achieved without policy coordination and a whole-of-society approach that addresses discriminatory norms and social practices and aims to reduce inequalities.

The rule of law was stressed as key to tackling the multiple intersecting and overlapping layers of discrimination, and empowering people to claim their rights. The justice gap can only be narrowed if legal systems are reoriented towards justice for all not just a few. A people-centred approach, sound laws and enforcement mechanisms depend on well-equipped public institutions with qualified staff who have the right mindset and an anti-corruption ethic. Targeted, mission-oriented reforms in these aspects are needed to empower justice seekers and to promote fairer and more satisfactory outcomes.