Harnessing youth leadership to drive SDG 16: strengthening peace, justice, and institutions for resilient societies

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This policy paper presents insights and recommendations collected through consultations with the Better Learning Better Innovation (BIBO) Network, led by youth innovators and supported by UNESCO IESALC, to contribute to the 2024 United Nations Summit of the Future. Held on June 3, June 17, and July 15 , these consultations gathered youth from all five UNESCO regions –Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Arab States, Europe and North America, and Latin America and the Caribbean- ensuring a diverse and inclusive process.

The paper highlights the role of youth in achieving SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) by harnessing their energy, innovation, and leadership for transformative action. Empowering young people to drive efforts toward a sustainable and resilient future aligns with the Summit's goal of shaping a more inclusive and forward-looking global agenda.

As part of a broader initiative by the BIBO Young Innovators Network, this paper also connects with reviews of SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 1 (No Poverty), and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). Together, these papers present a comprehensive youth-led vision to inform and support the outcomes of the 2024 Summit of the Future, advancing progress across the Sustainable Development Goals.

Introduction

SDG 16, with its unique emphasis on peace, justice, and strong institutions, stands out in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It serves as the linchpin that underpins the achievement of all other SDGs (UNESCO, 2022). By fostering synergies across social, economic, and environmental dimensions, SDG 16

provides a comprehensive framework to tackle global challenges such as conflicts, climate change, and the erosion of public trust in institutions (General Assembly of the United Nations, 2023).

Furthermore, conflict prevention has substantial economic benefits, with every dollar invested in prevention saving $16 in emergency response costs (UNODC, OHCHR, & UNDP, 2023). Effective conflict prevention requires a holistic approach involving all levels of government and society. This approach emphasises the interconnectedness of peace and sustainable development, a crucial understanding for effective conflict prevention (UNDESA, 2023).

The decline in the rule of law, exacerbated by intersecting global crises, underscores the urgent need to strengthen the legal system (UNESCO, 2022). This is crucial to rebuild trust and advance the 2030 Agenda (UNDESA, 2018). Fair and impartial legal systems promote public confidence in governance, encourage civic engagement, and create an enabling environment for sustainable development. People-centred justice approaches, driven by data and evidence, are crucial for ensuring that justice systems meet the needs of all individuals, especially the most vulnerable (UNDESA, 2023).

Corruption remains a significant barrier to public service provision, undermining trust in institutions and obstructing Sustainable Development Goal 8 (Independent Group of Scientists, 2023). However, the potential of digital transformation to bridge existing inequalities and promote inclusive governance offers a hopeful path forward. Strengthening transparency, accountability, and integrity within judicial institutions, alongside robust oversight mechanisms, is essential to combat corruption. When harnessed responsibly, this digital transformation ensures no one is left behind (WFP & FAO, 2023).

Background

This year is pivotal in our global pursuit of Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16), which aims to foster peaceful, just, and inclusive societies. As we grapple with the intricacies of a world besieged by crises, the pressing need to fortify our allegiance to SDG 16 is glaringly urgent. The aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with the escalating climate crisis, food insecurity, and intensifying geopolitical tensions, is placing unprecedented strain on international security and multilateral cooperation (UNDESA, 2023).

Across the world, prolonged and emerging conflicts and an alarming surge in coups d'états underscore the immediate need for transformative action. From Armenia-Azerbaijan to China-U.S. tensions, Ethiopia, Haiti, Myanmar, Israel-Palestine, Sudan, the Sahel, and the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine, the globe is witnessing a distressing surge in violence and instability. The potential for broader conflicts, particularly in the Middle East, and the erosion of democratic governance, even in traditionally stable regions, present significant hurdles to achieving SDG 16 and its associated targets.

The conflict in Ukraine rages on, with no clear end in sight, posing a significant threat not only to regional stability in Europe but also to global peace and security. The repercussions of the war have been felt far beyond Europe, driving vulnerable populations, particularly in Africa, towards food scarcity. Similarly, the

escalating violence in Gaza and the broader Middle East underscores the immediate need to address conflicts that undermine human rights and jeopardise civilian safety. These conflicts claim human lives and disrupt entire regions' economic and social fabric, particularly the Middle East and North Africa.

The toll on humanitarian workers in these conflict zones has reached unprecedented levels. In the Occupied Palestinian Territories alone, over 196 humanitarian workers have lost their lives since October 2023, with a civilian mortality rate of 61%—a staggering figure that surpasses even the civilian losses of World War II. In Gaza, more children have been killed in the past six months than in all global conflicts combined over the last four years. These sobering statistics underscore the dire consequences of inaction and the critical need for a renewed international commitment to SDG 16.

As the international community faces these multifaceted challenges, the need to recommit to the principles of SDG 16—peace, justice, and strong institutions—is more urgent than ever. The global community must work together to address the root causes of conflict, protect human rights, and strengthen institutions that promote justice and inclusivity. Only through such concerted efforts with young people can we hope to achieve a peaceful and stable world for all.

Recommendations and calls-to-action

1. **Promote inclusive and participatory governance**

   - Governments should establish mechanisms for meaningful youth engagement at all levels of decision-making, ensuring that young people directly influence policies that affect their lives. This includes the formation of youth advisory councils, participatory budgeting processes, and platforms for intergenerational dialogue.

   - Young people should be given leadership roles in initiatives aimed at strengthening democratic institutions and promoting transparency and accountability. This can be achieved through mentorship programs, leadership training, and targeted support for youth-led organisations.

2. *Strengthen legal empowerment and access to justice*

   - Governments should prioritise legal empowerment programs that educate youth, particularly those from marginalised communities, about their rights and how to access justice. This includes integrating legal education into school curricula and creating youth-friendly legal services.

   - Justice systems should adopt innovative, data-driven approaches that are responsive to young people's needs and ensure that they are fair, practical, and accessible. This includes developing digital tools and platforms that enable young people to seek legal assistance and report injustices.

3. Combat corruption and promote transparency

- Youth should actively participate in anti-corruption campaigns and initiatives promoting public institutions' transparency. This includes participating in social audits, monitoring public expenditures, and advocating for open data policies.

- Governments should create opportunities for young people to contribute to developing anti-corruption strategies and monitoring their implementation. This can be achieved through youth-focused transparency networks and partnerships with civil society organisations.

4. Harness digitalisation for equitable development

- Digital literacy programs should be expanded to equip young people with the skills to navigate and shape the digital world. This includes training in cybersecurity, data privacy, and the ethical use of technology.

- Governments should ensure that digital transformation efforts are inclusive and do not exacerbate existing inequalities. This includes investing in infrastructure that provides equitable access to digital technologies and promoting youth participation in the governance of digital platforms and AI systems.

5. Promote peacebuilding and conflict prevention

- Youth should be at the forefront of peacebuilding efforts, leading initiatives that address the root causes of conflict, such as inequality, discrimination, and exclusion. This includes supporting youth-led mediation and dialogue processes and providing platforms for youth voices in peace negotiations.

- Governments should invest in education programs that promote a culture of peace and non-violence among young people. This includes integrating peace education into school curricula and supporting extracurricular activities that foster intercultural understanding and conflict resolution skills.

6. Advance gender equality and empowerment

- Governments and international organisations should support initiatives that promote gender equality and the empowerment of young women and girls. This includes increasing their representation in decision-making bodies and supporting their leadership in peace and security efforts.

- Youth-led organisations should be empowered to advocate for gender-sensitive policies and practices in public institutions. This includes providing resources for capacity-building,

networking, and advocacy campaigns focused on reducing gender-based violence and promoting women's and girls' rights.

7. **Ensure equitable resource management and environmental justice**

- Young people should be involved in the planning and implementing environmental policies that promote sustainability and address the impacts of climate change. This includes participation in climate justice movements, environmental governance, and the development of green technologies.

- Governments should prioritise the inclusion of youth in decision-making processes related to resource management, ensuring that their perspectives are considered in policies aimed at achieving environmental justice and equitable access to natural resources.

8. **Mobilise political and financial support for youth initiatives**

- Governments and international donors should increase political and financial support for youth-led initiatives that contribute to the achievement of SDG 16. This includes providing grants, technical assistance, and capacity-building programs for youth organisations working on peace, justice, and strong institutions.

- Youth should be engaged in advocacy efforts to ensure that SDG 16 remains a priority on the global agenda, particularly in platforms like the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development and the United Nations Summit of the Future.

Conclusion

Youth-led recommendations provide a roadmap for meaningful engagement in pursuing peace and justice. By prioritising the inclusion of young people in decision-making processes, investing in their education and leadership, and ensuring equitable access to resources, governments and international organisations can empower the next generation to lead the charge toward sustainable development. Moreover, digital transformation offers a unique opportunity to bridge inequalities and promote transparency, strengthening the foundations of peace and justice.

As we progress, the international community must mobilise political and financial support for youth initiatives contributing to SDG 16. The success of these efforts will depend on a collaborative and inclusive approach, where the voices of young people are heard, and their contributions are valued. Only through such concerted action can we achieve the peaceful and inclusive societies envisioned by SDG 16, paving the way for a sustainable and resilient future for all.

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