
Peaceful, just and inclusive societies: What role for the 2030 Agenda in the Horn of Africa?

Introduction

In 2015, UN Member States adopted the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#), which made ‘peaceful, just and inclusive societies’ a global priority. [Sustainable Development Goal \(SDG\) 16](#) – one of 17 such goals – includes targets that address drivers of conflict such as injustice, corruption and political exclusion. Many targets under other SDGs, for instance on inequality and gender, are also essential for realising peaceful, just and inclusive societies.

The term ‘SDG16+’ is increasingly used to describe these inter-connected commitments across the 2030 Agenda, and it offers an unprecedented opportunity to strengthen and transform preventative action on a range of peace-related issues. It is hoped that SDG16+ will inspire a more integrated approach between all those working on peace, governance, justice and gender equality, and will encourage coordinated efforts to address violence, injustice and exclusion at national, regional and global levels. It includes mechanisms for monitoring and accountability, including an ambitious [global indicator framework](#).

Although SDG16+ has great potential, much work lies ahead, especially in conflict-affected and fragile states (CAFS), which face the greatest challenges. Saferworld is exploring and learning about how stakeholders at different levels can translate the promise of SDG16+ into reality. Immediately after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, we suggested priorities for converting the [agreement into action](#). A year later, following initial research and consultations, we proposed [six conditions](#) to ensure SDG16+ commitments lead to positive change in people’s lives.

This briefing delves deeper, drawing on Saferworld’s experience of engaging on the 2030 Agenda and SDG16+ implementation in the Horn of Africa. While this region includes some of the hardest contexts in which to engage on these issues, it is also where support for peaceful, just and inclusive societies is most pressing. **If SDG16+ is to gain traction, these are the contexts where it needs to be demonstrated that the agenda can make a difference.** This briefing highlights early lessons – positive and negative – of how SDG16+ is playing out in the Horn of Africa.

The 2017 High Level Political Forum

Eighteen months into the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, the [2017 High-Level Political Forum](#) (HLPF, 10-19 July) is the second opportunity to review SDG progress. Each HLPF provides a platform for Member States to present a [Voluntary National Review](#) (VNR) of SDG progress, as well

as focusing at the global level on a selection of specific SDGs. This year there will be a global review of six SDGs, including those on [health](#), [gender equality](#) and [poverty eradication](#).

SDG16 is not up for review until the HLPF in 2019. However, it would be a mistake to assume that peace-related issues are not relevant at this – and every – HLPF. The 2030 Agenda identifies peace as one of five areas '[of critical importance for humanity and the planet](#)', and peace is a crucial enabler of all the other SDGs. So, **peace-related issues are fundamental to the story of SDG progress that will be told this month in New York.**

Presentations and debates at this year's HLPF should speak to the reality of those living in situations of violence, insecurity and marginalisation. The 2030 Agenda needs to change these people's lives for the better, and to do this it must be translated into action at national and local levels. To reflect the realities facing people on the ground, civil society needs to have a greater role in reviewing SDG progress and identifying areas for improvement. **This is particularly important for CAFS, as civil society voices from these contexts are seldom heard in global policy processes.**

Five emerging themes

Awareness is the foundation for implementation

At present, **the vast majority of the world's population has little awareness of the 2030 Agenda and the 17 SDGs, let alone of the targets under SDG16+.** Colombia – a leader in mainstreaming the SDGs into its national planning – recently reported that just [12 per cent of its people were aware of the SDGs](#). Denmark – a champion of the SDGs and SDG16+ both globally and domestically – also reported [12 per cent awareness among its people](#). Statistics on SDG awareness in the Horn of Africa are not available, but our experience suggests a similar picture. Low awareness levels may be unsurprising less than two years into a 15-year process – but they should remind those participating in the HLPF of the continuing importance of extending and raising awareness about the 2030 Agenda.

Civil society and other actors worldwide are already contributing to the implementation of SDG16+ through their work to achieve more peaceful, just and inclusive societies in different capacities. However, for the 2030 Agenda to reinforce these efforts and catalyse greater government accountability, civil society needs to be aware of, and understand, SDG16+. In the Horn of Africa, people told us about the need to 'localise' the SDG16+ targets and indicators to make them relevant to their work and the specific challenges they face. As one Sudanese activist [remarked](#): "unless I contextualise an indicator with people on the ground, it won't mean anything to them".

In Kenya, government, civil society and donor representatives identified corruption as the issue they would prioritise under SDG16. Civil society actors in Somaliland considered that SDG16+ targets focusing on gender equality could give new impetus to long-held objectives to promote women's political participation. These examples highlight the importance of translating the SDGs from '[abstract global concepts into the language and discourse of what is currently being contested in a particular context](#)'.

Raising awareness of SDG16+ and how it can be used to promote change in conflict-affected and fragile contexts is a daunting task, but there are positive examples to draw upon. In India, for example, Saferworld supported national civil society actors to translate SDG16-related documents into five local languages and to organise awareness-raising activities in different regions of the country. In [Bangladesh](#) and [Kenya](#), Saferworld analysed opportunities to advance SDG16 by building upon existing national development and peacebuilding frameworks, strategies and institutions. In Bangladesh, we partnered with the large and highly respected NGO, BRAC, to develop a multi-year programme to promote and operationalise SDG16 across the country. Saferworld has also explored how the 2030 Agenda – in particular SDGs 5 and 16 – can help advance gender, peace and security in [South Africa](#), India and Brazil. **These and similar initiatives offer useful models for raising awareness of SDG16+ in the Horn of Africa and more widely.**

Ensuring people own the 2030 Agenda

As governments in the Horn of Africa take on board the 2030 Agenda, **the SDGs – including SDG16 – are being reflected in new development plans.** [Kenya](#) will be ‘mainstreaming the SDGs into its third Medium Term Plan (2018-2022)’, and has launched a [national roadmap](#) for SDG implementation. [Somalia’s National Development Plan](#) (NDP) 2017-2019 features a section on SDG16, explaining that the approach is ‘guided by Sustainable Development Goal 16... while enshrined in Somali reality’. Somaliland is finalising a second development plan – NDPII – which includes a section on governance, taking SDG16 as the framework. Although there is no mention of SDG16 in Ethiopia’s [Five Year Growth and Transformation Plan II](#) (2015-20), it does state that: “the SDGs related to women and youth empowerment will be fully implemented and aligned with... to ensure the benefit and participation of women and youth in economic, political and decision-making processes”. The plan also refers to ensuring good governance, and creating systems of transparency and accountability.

The appearance of the SDGs, and sometimes SDG16, in these development plans seems encouraging. Some civil society observers in the Horn of Africa, however, are more sceptical: they have heard this story before. In many cases they are still waiting for existing national policies to be implemented, so they are doubtful about the impact of new policies. In Kenya, civil society highlighted the 2010 constitution, which prioritised SDG16+ issues but has not yet been fully implemented. Sudanese laws address corruption in the health sector but the political will to enforce them is lacking. Given this gap between policies and practice, it is easy to see why some view SDG16+ and claims of its transformative potential with a healthy dose of scepticism. They suspect **the integration of the SDGs into national plans may simply be a way of satisfying donors**, and some refer to such plans as ‘donor-documents’.

The [New Deal](#) process – whose peacebuilding and statebuilding goals have much in common with SDG16+ – may offer lessons on how to ensure the SDGs don’t get stuck at the donor-government level. The New Deal was an important initiative to generate the political will to make progress on peace in some of the world’s most challenging contexts. The consensus it achieved was sometimes delicate, and for this reason it remained predominantly a conversation between international donors and the donor-facing ministries of national governments. It highlights **the importance of ensuring greater involvement of civil society, wider outreach across government, and downward accountability to local people**. A lesson for the 2030 Agenda is that the integration of the SDGs into development plans is a necessary step forward, but must be more than ‘window-dressing’. Any government policy or plan on SDG16+ issues – including national development plans – should result in swift practical action that responds to the needs of citizens and signals to the public a commitment to a new approach.

One way to support the uptake of SDG16+ at national level is to **find and support individuals or institutions that can become ‘SDG16+ champions’** – i.e. change-agents who are already working on issues such as peace, justice, inclusion and gender equality. Champions could be government ministries, particular officials pushing forward reforms, civil society groups or individuals. One illustration is in [Somaliland](#) where a justice system in urgent need of reform has been galvanised by new leadership that is working to turn the situation around. Concerted efforts to recruit and train new attorneys general – including a number of women – have raised hopes of a more effective and less corrupt justice system. As a result, public confidence in the system has increased, with citizens more likely to take their grievances to the formal courts.¹ Another example is the [Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa](#) (SIHA) which is playing an important role supporting women’s rights defenders to address barriers to women’s access to justice, security and decision-making. Identifying

¹ Saferworld Interviews, Hargeisa, Somaliland, May 2017

and supporting similar initiatives in the Horn of Africa under the banner of SDG16+ can help ensure the global framework speaks to local needs in CAFS.

Protecting civil society space – and strengthening its impact

The role of national and local civil society actors is crucial for achieving SDG16+ targets: by mobilising action for peaceful, just and inclusive societies, by monitoring progress, and by holding governments to account for SDG16+ commitments. Civil society interest in the 2030 Agenda is growing in the Horn of Africa. In Kenya, the [SDGs Kenya Forum](#) brings together a range of civil society organisations to contribute to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. In the run-up to Kenya's 2017 VNR, the Forum held a series of 'leave no-one behind dialogues' across the country. In Uganda, the [Uganda NGO Forum](#) has been taking a lead role on SDG issues. The Forum has a dedicated SDG working group, and has organised community and civil society meetings to gather citizens' perspectives on the SDGs – with the aim of establishing a unified position ahead of the HLPF in 2017. Both fora have focused on a variety of SDGs, from SDG1 to SDG17.

While the uptake of the 2030 Agenda by national civil society actors is a positive development, it takes place at a time when civil society space is being reduced by many governments in the Horn of Africa. In some cases, the introduction of new restrictive legislation has undermined civil society action. Even where legal and policy frameworks do not explicitly restrict their role, some governments in the region have imposed informal barriers, which include fostering mistrust of civil society organisations (CSOs) by portraying them as 'agents of external forces and corrupt entities'. **In this environment, it is not just that there may be little space or opportunity for CSOs to engage on SDG16+ - it is that doing so may actually increase their exposure and vulnerability.**

Even in contexts where CSOs are free to operate, there is a risk that bodies like SDG forums become more form than substance. One of the challenges is that with so many different stakeholders working on diverse issues (from health, to infrastructure, to climate change, etc.), the focus can shift to the obvious common denominator: group structure and functioning. **It is important that such fora look beyond process, and focus on using the 2030 Agenda to support change on the ground, monitor progress and hold governments to account.**

Overcoming donor disconnects

Some Western development ministries and donor agencies are engaging seriously with the 2030 Agenda and incorporating its commitment to peaceful, just and inclusive societies into their international, and in some cases [domestic, development plans](#). Nevertheless, thus far there appears to be relatively little buy-in to this agenda among in-country diplomats and development officials. Country offices tend to focus on shorter time horizons, often concerned primarily with mitigating security risks, for instance around elections or the threat of terrorism, or with promoting strategic interests.

Although unsurprising, this reflects both standard headquarter – country office dynamics and the challenge of translating a multi-sectoral agenda into sector-specific development funds and programmes. In response, donors should build greater awareness and support for the 2030 Agenda, and SDG16+ in particular, among in-country staff. Retro-fitting the SDGs into existing development programmes could undermine the process – whereas **using the SDG16+ commitments to catalyse fresh, multi-sectoral analysis, programme development and partnerships could generate far-reaching benefits.**

SDG16+ provides donors with a framework to promote a whole-of-government approach, which can help overcome disconnects between programmes addressing security, governance and development in the Horn of Africa. For example, the EU's intention to promote human rights, rule of law and good governance – outlined in its [Horn of Africa Regional Action Plan](#) (2015-20) – risks being undermined by its [partnerships with repressive regimes](#) and support to security forces as a means of stemming

migration from the region to Europe. **The SDG16+ agenda offers a long-term, developmental and holistic solution to tackling insecurity and marginalisation**, which can only work if not undermined by shorter-term securitised approaches.

Bursting the New York bubble

The HLPF presents a great opportunity to ensure that stakeholders from around the world are able to connect with the multilateral system in the context of reviewing SDG progress. In 2017, civil society representatives from countries undertaking VNRs are being sponsored by the [UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs](#) to attend the HLPF, while networks like [Together 2030](#), the [Transparency, Accountability and Participation \(TAP\) Network](#), and organisations like Saferworld will enable representatives from CAFS to contribute their perspectives, knowledge, and expertise to the review process. **Civil society in Kenya and Uganda, as in many other countries, have been working to produce 'shadow reports' that offer additional information and perspectives to government reviews of SDG progress.** Unfortunately, with no official mechanism to support shadow reporting, it is hard to assess the value of these contributions. Developing a way to collate, verify and access civil society reports and contributions should be a priority for the UN for future HLPFs.

Space for civil society to present a counterpoint to official narratives of SDG progress is critical if the HLPF is to serve as a meaningful accountability mechanism. However, there is a risk of civil society becoming sidelined. Saferworld and others [raised concerns](#) about the inclusivity of the first HLPF in 2016. UN procedures tend to reflect an anachronistic hierarchy in which states' perspectives are foregrounded, and civil society perspectives relegated to the margins. **A more dynamic approach is needed to ensure that the HLPF fosters genuine dialogue and promotes accountability.** An inclusive HLPF is therefore vital to live up to the 'leave no-one behind' mantra of the 2030 Agenda, and to model the accountability needed at the national level. If CSOs do not see the value of the SDGs as a lever for change at the global level, they are less likely to use the framework in practice, and political momentum will be subject to the law of diminishing returns.

Bridging the divide between global policy actors and communities experiencing the reality of under-development, conflict and injustice, will be crucial if the 2030 Agenda is to make a difference. **The HLPF is a prime opportunity to burst what is sometimes referred to as the 'New York bubble'.** If the HLPF can develop ways of accommodating and representing the diversity of civil society actors and voices, from community-driven initiatives to young people's and women's movements, it will help to push back against the shrinking space for civil society and the exclusion of their voices. Member States who support the participation of civil society in global policy processes should ensure not just that they can attend the HLPF, but that they have the space and opportunity to make a meaningful contribution.

Beyond the HLPF

The HLPF is an important opportunity for civil society to contribute to the global SDG process, but **windows of opportunity for engagement on SDG16+ are opening at national level as well.** Saferworld's experience in the Horn of Africa has begun to reveal opportunities for civil society to leverage the 2030 Agenda for national action on peace, governance and justice issues. For example, civil society actors are exploring how they can persuade electoral candidates to prioritise SDG targets, and those under SDG16+ in particular. Similarly, commitments to targets 16.7 on inclusive decision-making and 5.5 on women's participation can help civil society push for improved gender balance in future parliaments and legislatures.

The dynamics of SDG16+ implementation in the Horn of Africa are not unique to the region. They highlight both opportunities and challenges facing stakeholders around the world. There are many obstacles to implementing SDG16+ in conflict-affected and fragile contexts, and the scale of the task ahead is daunting. Simply raising awareness and understanding of the 2030 Agenda will take much time, effort and investment. Supporting the more technical aspects, such as strengthening data-gathering and statistical capacities in developing countries, will require even greater investment. But **governments and international partners must work together with civil society to address these challenges and to translate the promise of SDG16+ into positive change.** This is vital to close the gap between the aims of the HLPF and similar global processes, and the experiences of those, in the Horn of Africa and elsewhere, living under the shadow of conflict, injustice and exclusion.

About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. With programmes in nearly 20 countries and territories across Africa, Asia and Europe, we work with people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. We believe that everyone should be able to lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from insecurity and violent conflict.

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