

A Decade of Action for SDG16+

Where next after the SDG Summit?



Following the SDG Summit, this challenge paper explores next steps for accelerating the implementation of the SDG16+ targets. At the summit, world leaders called for a Decade of Action to deliver the SDGs by 2030. Partners should work together to mobilize more ambitious actions to build peaceful, just and inclusive societies, ahead of the Secretary-General's first action platform for the SDGs, which will be held as part of the UN's 75th anniversary summit in September 2020.

The Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies is a group of UN member states, international organizations, global partnerships, civil society, and the private sector. We work to accelerate the delivery of the SDG targets for peace, justice and inclusion (SDG16+). Pathfinders is hosted by the NYU Center on International Cooperation.

This paper draws on consultations with partners, including a Pathfinders' strategy retreat on justice, with Argentina, the Netherlands, Sierra Leone, and key justice partners including, HiiL, OECD, Open Government Partnership, and the World Justice Project; a retreat on preventing violence against children co-hosted with the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children and World Vision International; and a retreat on SDG16+ hosted by the UK Department for International Development. It also draws on a series of thought pieces published after the SDG Summit.

Introduction

This challenge paper:

- Reviews the impact of the first SDG Summit and contrasts it with the Climate Action Summit, which achieved considerably higher profile and a greater focus on transformational actions.
- Discusses opportunities for a strengthened mobilization in 2020 as the Secretary-General launches a Decade of Action for the SDGs and prepares to host an SDG Action Platform as part of the UN's 75th anniversary summit in September 2020.
- Makes recommendations for maximizing the impact of the Action Platform and the UN's global conversation on "bridging the gap" for the SDGs, which will be carried out throughout the 75th anniversary year.
- Reviews the impact of SDG16+ at the SDG Summit, finding encouraging signs of a greater focus on actions and results for the SDG targets for peaceful, just and inclusive societies.
- Proposes that SDG16+ partners should focus on the short-term objective of putting SDG16+ at the heart of the Decade of Action and the medium-term objective of demonstrating measurable results by 2023.
- Sets out a strategy that is based on building high ambition coalitions of SDG16+ champions, increasing the number and ambition of SDG16+ Acceleration Actions registered with the UN, and sustaining the push for results over the next four years.

Bringing the 2030 Agenda to Life

Every four years, world leaders attend an SDG Summit to “mobilize further actions to accelerate implementation” of the 2030 Agenda. The first summit took place in New York in September 2019, with the UN Secretary-General using his opening speech to argue that “the 2030 Agenda is coming to life.”¹

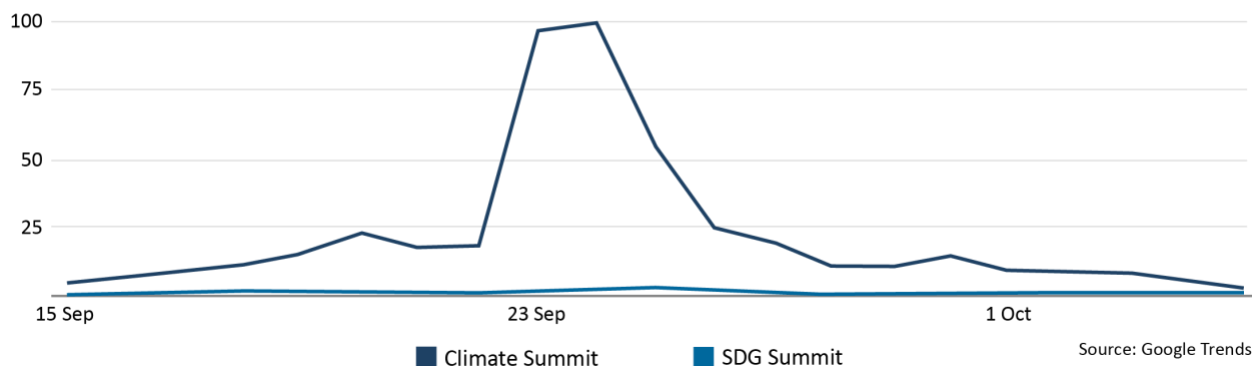
The summit’s key outputs were:

- A progress report demonstrating that the transformation needed to deliver the SDGs by 2030 “is not yet advancing at the speed or scale required.”²
- A political declaration from member states which expresses concern that progress against the SDGs is too slow and which calls for “a decade of action and delivery for sustainable development.”³
- A registry of SDG Acceleration Actions – “initiatives voluntarily undertaken by countries and other stakeholders to contribute to a speeded-up implementation of the 2030 Agenda” – which had 116 entries during the summit (rising to 133 at the time of publication).⁴
- As part of its 75th anniversary, a commitment from the UN to host a global conversation on the actions, solutions, and collaborations needed to bridge the gap between the aspirations of the SDGs and current trajectories.
- An announcement that the UN Secretary-General will host “an annual platform for driving the Decade of Action” with the first platform held as part of the UN’s 75th anniversary summit on 21 September 2020.⁵

The summit was held during an especially busy week for the UN, as one of five summits and high-level events that accompanied the opening of the 74th UN General Assembly.⁶ Many felt its impact was muted, with reports that energy was “flagging” during the formal sessions and “attendance in the stakeholder gallery was low.”⁷

The contrast was striking with the Climate Action Summit, which was held on the previous day. The Secretary-General had asked countries to present action plans on climate, rather than platitudes, with the ticket of entry “not a beautiful speech but concrete action.”⁸ The UN worked throughout the year to make sure that “only the boldest and most transformative actions [will] make the stage.”⁹ A mobilization – with Greta Thunberg at its head – gave the climate meeting a profile that eclipsed the SDG Summit (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 - Relative Popularity of the SDG and Climate Summits on Google



The press release for the Climate Summit included four pages of announcements and deliverables.¹⁰ The Climate Action Portal presented 28 transformational initiatives with the potential to drive an “upsurge” in mitigation and adaptation.¹¹ The President of Chile led a Climate Ambition Alliance of 59 countries who are prepared to commit to steeper targets to reduce emissions, through the formal process to increase the ambition of the Paris Agreement in 2020.¹²

Rather than see the SDG Summit as an end point (or as a failure), it is helpful to see it as a foundation that can be built upon. If efforts are sustained and intensified over the coming 12 months, the opportunity for the SDGs remains to match the transformational deliverables, action plans, and alliances that emerged from the Climate Summit.

The summit will have succeeded in bringing the 2030 Agenda to life, in other words, if it marks the beginning of a year for “mobilizing further actions to accelerate implementation” that culminates at the SDG Action Platform in September 2020.

Accelerating Action

Following the climate model, the challenge for those working to implement the 2030 Agenda is to build urgency, plan early to build commitment to transformational actions, and use the SDG Action Platform to begin the push towards measurable results in time for the second SDG summit in 2023.

Success requires:

- An early signal from the Secretary-General that all parts of the UN will engage vigorously in promoting the Decade of Action for the SDGs. As with the Climate Summit, the ticket for entry for the first SDG Action Platform should be a willingness to announce action plans and transformational initiatives.
- Effective use of the 75th anniversary global conversation on bridging the gap for the SDGs. Rather than a broad, but shallow, conversation with publics on what they want from the SDGs, the priority should be to engage decision makers, funders, and practitioners (including at the grassroots) in developing visionary strategies and concrete proposals for accelerating action.
- High ambition alliances that bring together member states, global partnerships, international organizations, civil society networks, the private sector, foundations, and other partners to catalyze the global conversation and drive preparations for the SDG Action Platform.
- Greater profile for the registry of Acceleration Actions, which the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs has confirmed will be kept open throughout the year. To increase visibility, the portal should be redesigned and relaunched, with the UN’s Department of Global Communications highlighting actions that have transformational potential.
- A broader mobilization for the Decade of Action, with campaigning groups such as the SDG Action Campaign, Global Citizen, and the One Campaign calling on governments and businesses to step up ahead of the SDG Action Platform. Global Citizen’s *The Possible Dream* campaign is an example of the campaigning needed to “get the world back on track to achieve the Global Goals for Sustainable Development.”

The High-level Political Forum in July 2020 can play an important role in building momentum for accelerated implementation of the SDGs. The Permanent Representative of New Zealand to the United Nations is facilitating a process to agree a theme for 2020 and has proposed “Accelerated Action and Transformative

Pathways: realizing the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development.”¹³ This is in line with the approach recommended in this paper.*

The President of ECOSOC – the Permanent Representative of Norway to the UN – has said that she will make financing for development a priority of her presidency.¹⁴ Under the proposed overall theme for the HLPF, a focus on financing an acceleration in action for the SDGs in July could set the stage for success in September. The ECOSOC Forum on Financing for Development could also be used for a practical discussion on the financing needed to starting closing the SDG implementation gap.

Forty-nine countries are registered to present Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) in 2020, including 26 first-time presenters.¹⁵ The revised guidelines note that VNRs are most effective “when they are followed by action and collaboration that drives SDG implementation.”¹⁶

The ECOSOC President has an opportunity to encourage countries presenting VNRs to use the process to explore Acceleration Actions that could be registered ahead of the SDG Action Platform. There is also likely to be more space for VNRs and spotlight reports from cities, business, and civil society, providing a platform for highlighting new commitments from these actors.

Future HLPFs could then be used for voluntary reporting on progress made in implementing the Acceleration Actions, answering the call for increased accountability through the VNRs and thematic SDG reviews, and creating a virtuous cycle where the annual Action Platform and HLPF support each other.

SDG16+ at the SDG Summit

The SDG16+ community began mobilizing for the SDG Summit in February 2018, when it agreed to use the summit to:

“Maximize the number of actionable and achievable commitments to implement SDG16+ in line with the 2030 Agenda’s call for “practicable, ambitious national responses” to implementation.”¹⁷

In a challenge paper prepared by the Pathfinders and two other umbrella initiatives – the Global Alliance for Reporting Progress on Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies and the 16+ Forum – partners called for the launch of a registry of voluntary national commitments.¹⁸ This early focus on accelerating action for the SDGs played a role in persuading the UN to put Acceleration Actions at the heart of the SDG Summit.¹⁹

In July 2019, the High-level Political Forum reviewed SDG16 for the first time, providing a springboard for mobilization at the summit.²⁰ At the HLPF, 36 member states launched a joint statement on SDG16+ in which they committed to redoubling their efforts to build more peaceful, just, and inclusive societies.²¹ During the HLPF, the report of the Task Force on Justice was launched, as the Secretary-General called for urgent action to meet the needs of 5 billion people who are deprived of justice.²² The Pathfinders also launched a grand challenge to tackle inequality and exclusion, with the announcement of the establishment of an advisory council bringing together member states and key partners. More than a hundred side events were registered in the guide to SDG16+ at the summit.

At the SDG Summit, there was recognition of the extent of the gap between aspirations expressed by the SDG16+ targets and current trajectories. The progress report presented by the Secretary-General noted that violence, injustice, weak institutions, and exclusion “deprive millions of their security, rights and opportunities, and undermine the delivery of public services and broader economic development.”²³ In their call to action, a group of member states noted that:²⁴

* The format of the HLPF in its second four-year cycle remains under review.

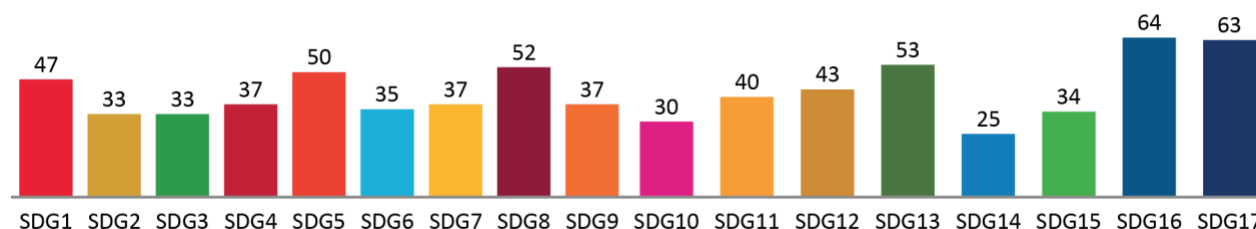
- More than half a million people die from violence each year, with women and children facing unacceptable levels of violence and insecurity a daily reality for many people both within and outside conflict zones.
- Justice systems are currently capable of only delivering justice to the few – 1.5 billion people have justice problems they cannot solve, a billion people lack legal identity, and “corruption and illicit financial and arms flows threaten societies and economies, undermining democracy and the rule of law.”
- Poor governance threatens delivery of all dimensions of the sustainable development agenda, while rising inequality and high levels of social, economic, cultural, and political exclusion undermine the basis for collective action needed to achieve all 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

There was strong leadership to address these challenges at the summit.

During the formal sessions, the President of Sierra Leone identified SDG16 and SDG4 (on education) as the most important accelerators of his country’s future development.²⁵ The King of The Netherlands called for countries to work together to close the justice gap. The President of Peru promised to lead action to tackle corruption through a special session of the General Assembly in 2021. Leaders and ministers from 11 countries, meanwhile, made a new commitment to taking collective action and implementing transformational solutions to promote inclusion and tackle inequality.²⁶

SDG16+ featured prominently among the Acceleration Actions that were agreed on at the summit. Fifty-two actions were registered with the UN ahead of the summit, by governments, global partnerships, civil society, and business. New actions continue to be registered, with 64 actions registered for SDG16, more than any other goal (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 – Acceleration Actions for each SDG



Source: Sustainable Development Action Platform, November 13, 2019

The summit also saw the launch of other new initiatives that aim to advance SDG16+. These include the Peace in our Cities campaign to halve urban violence;²⁷ the new Open Government Partnership coalition on justice which aims to catalyze commitments to people-centered justice services by OGP members;²⁸ and OECD’s Global Hub for the Governance of the SDGs, which supports countries to strengthen their public governance practices for effective SDG implementation.²⁹

Implications for the SDG16+ Community

The mobilization for the SDG Summit marked three positive shifts for those working on SDG16+.

First, member states and other partners demonstrated that SDG16 is now taken as seriously as the goals (poverty, education, health, etc.) that have their roots in the Millennium Development Goals. Despite its contentious birth in the 2030 Agenda negotiations, there is political leadership for building peace, justice,

and inclusion – in countries from all income groups (in line with the principle of universality), but also as urgent priorities for the people, communities, and countries at greatest risk of being left behind.

Second, the summit drew powerful links between SDG16+ and the rest of the 2030 Agenda. Connections to SDG5 (gender) and SDG10 (inequality) tap into issues that are central to the better future promised by the 2030 Agenda and resonate especially strongly with young people. Mary Robinson, the chair of the Elders, made it clear that “tackling climate change and providing access to justice for all are the critical agendas of our time.”³⁰ The summit also saw support for SDG16+ from cross-cutting campaigning groups such as the SDG Action Campaign and Oxfam.³¹

Third, the summit encouraged a growing focus on action and results for SDG16+. Among the Acceleration Actions submitted to the UN’s registry were ambitious commitments to tackle inequality and exclusion, and to expand access to people-centered justice. Actions were registered by governments, civil society, and the private sector, and came from countries from all income groups and regions. On aggregate, the commitments were far from matching the scale of the challenge posed by SDG16+, but they provide a basis for building momentum in 2020.

There are, however, significant obstacles to the implementation of SDG16+:

- **Closing political space.** The SDG16+ targets are politically challenging in all countries, especially where they relate to the need for peace, justice, and inclusion for communities that are at greatest risk of being left behind. The trend is negative on this dimension, as populism and repressive state action reduce the space for action in many countries.
- **Fatalism blocking ambitious action.** Many decision makers can be persuaded that violence, insecurity, injustice, corruption, poor governance, inequality, and exclusion are serious problems. But it is much more difficult to convince them that change is possible, and that results can be delivered within a political cycle that makes sense to them.
- **Fragmented partnerships for change.** SDG16+ targets can only be implemented through partnerships across sectors, by alliances that bring together governments, civil society, and the private sector, and increased engagement between institutions and the people they serve. This need for broad partnerships can translate into weak ownership within both governments and the international system.

To surmount these obstacles, a political strategy is needed that encourages and rewards leadership — whether this comes from politicians or other change makers, or from activists, businesses or foundations. A broader mobilization is urgently needed that draws on existing public demand for greater peace, justice, and inclusion.

To combat fatalism, decision makers must also be connected to evidence of what works to build peace, justice, and inclusion. The INSPIRE strategies, which have united partners behind an evidence-based approach to ending violence against children, provide one model for how to do this.³² A positive case for investment must be communicated to ministers of finance and of planning, to international donors, and to others who can invest in building peace, justice, and inclusion at scale.

Finally, space is urgently needed for dialogue at national and local levels to build consensus across sectors around shared strategies for implementing SDG16+. Effective action will usually require a radical change to policies, programs, and partnerships. This can only be achieved through investment in more inclusive planning processes, greater space for innovation, and sharing of knowledge and best practice between countries facing similar challenges.

Accelerating Action in 2020

As the 2030 Agenda moves into its second four-year cycle, SDG16+ partners should unite behind a short and medium-term objective:

- In 2020, build on the platform provided by the SDG Summit by placing accelerated action for SDG16+ at the heart of the Decade of Action for the SDGs.
- By 2023, turn commitments to accelerated action into measurable results for the second SDG Summit.

To meet these objectives, we need to make the case for an urgent acceleration in the delivery of SDG16+, build consensus about what it will take to close the SDG16+ implementation gap, seize political opportunities in 2020, mobilize to support accelerated action, and sustain and support implementation throughout the next four years.

Make the case for urgent action

It is easy to get lost in the complexity of goals, targets, indicators, and other SDG jargon, but SDG16+ is most compelling when partners focus on the challenges that matter most to countries, communities, and people. We are also most effective when we communicate a positive message that focuses on solutions not problems, while supporting the leadership of those prepared to step up and support transformational change.³³

The Pathfinders' experience is that four messages resonate with decision makers and broader audiences, while bringing together those working on the many issues covered by SDG16+:

- Significantly reduce all forms of violence everywhere, with the aim of halving global violence by 2030.
- Shift from a world where justice is only available to the privileged few to one that protects human rights and provides justice for all.
- Combat corruption and transform institutions so that they can meet people's aspirations.
- Tackle inequality and exclusion so that everyone gets to enjoy a fairer and more sustainable future.

Build consensus on bridging the gap

SDG16+ policymakers and practitioners should actively engage in the global conversation for the UN's 75th anniversary. To spur this conversation, the UN has asked three big questions: what kind of future do we want to create, are we on track, and what action is needed to bridge the gap?³⁴

The third question is of greatest importance for the SDG16+ community in 2020, given how far off track we are for the targets agreed in 2015. For very few of these targets do we have a clear vision of what could be achieved during the Decade of Action. To take one example, those working on violence against children (SDG16.2) have agreed the INSPIRE strategies and promoted their implementation in pathfinder countries.³⁵ They have also united behind campaigns such as *Safe to Learn*, which has developed a call to action which "sets out in high-level terms what needs to happen to end violence in schools."³⁶

Similarly, the *Justice for All* report sets out an agenda for action to provide equal access to justice for all (SDG16.3), with political leadership from countries combining with alignment of justice partners to accelerate action at the national level. However, the SDG16.1 community has yet to develop a strategy or roadmap for ending violence, setting out what needs to be done to achieve measurable change over the next ten years.

Throughout the next year, SDG16+ networks and events should feed into the bridging the gap conversation, with strong links to the UN75 campaign. We have an opportunity to ask for a target or cluster of targets:

- What evidence do we have of what works to accelerate action?
- What are the most immediate opportunities to “bend the curve” for current trajectories on peace, justice, and inclusion?
- How do we develop transformative strategies that will accelerate progress throughout the 2020s?
- And what finance, evidence and data, and partnerships are needed to support accelerated action?

Some of this work is underway. The Pathfinders is working with partners to develop a vision of what it would take to halve all forms of violence. An alliance of justice partners is developing a four-year strategy for promoting justice for all and is continuing to work to develop ambitious Acceleration Actions. Through the grand challenge on inequality and exclusion, a cross-regional alliance of countries is working to identify practical and politically viable solutions to accelerate progress towards more equitable and inclusive societies.

Seize 2020’s political opportunities

The SDG16+ community should unite to put SDG16+ at the heart of the Decade of Action. Based on the model proposed above, we should aim to:

- Build a high ambition coalition of member states and other partners for each of the main priorities under SDG16+.
- Work with each partner in these coalitions to develop Acceleration Actions with the potential to demonstrate measurable results by 2023.
- Explore opportunities to commit to Acceleration Actions that have transformative potential at global and regional levels.
- Develop financing strategies and commitments that will support accelerated progress towards peaceful, just and inclusive societies.
- Strengthen links between SDG16+ and other parts of the 2030 Agenda, with the aim of developing Acceleration Actions that link to emerging priorities for the Decade of Action such as inequality, gender, and a healthy planet.
- Take SDG16+ onto major campaigning platforms that support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, while drawing on the energy of grassroots campaigns on peace, justice, and inclusion.
- Amplify the voices of children and of young women and men, in line with the promise of the 2030 Agenda to provide the next generation with “a platform to channel their infinite capacities for activism into the creation of a better world.”³⁷

SDG16+ partners should already be planning for the 75th Anniversary Summit and the SDG Action Platform, with early communication from member states and other partners to the Secretary-General that they will be in a position to bring bold and transformative actions to New York in September 2020.

Sustained push for results

Success in 2020 will provide the basis for an ongoing mobilization to support measurable change and results.

Partners should:

- Use each of the Secretary-General's annual SDG Action Platforms to increase the number and ambition of Acceleration Actions for SDG16+, with the aim of ensuring that at least half of member states have registered one or more ambitious actions and that this is matched by a growing body of commitments from non-governmental partners.
- Support national implementation and the localization of the SDG16+ targets, recognizing the need for active participation of communities in building peace, justice, and inclusion.
- Monitor the implementation of Acceleration Actions, using Voluntary National Reviews and each High-level Political Forum to show that progress is being achieved.
- Begin preparing early for the second SDG Summit, focusing on developing the data needed to demonstrate measurable change by 2023.
- Systematically track results and celebrate successes, increasing the visibility of champions effectively implementing the SDG16+ targets.

Endnotes

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- ³⁶ End Violence Against Children, “Safe to Learn,” accessed October 31, 2019, <https://www.end-violence.org/safetolearn#call-to-action>.
- ³⁷ United Nations, *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. (New York: United Nations, 2015); accessed October 31, 2019, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf>.