



# **Restrictions on Civil Society Organizations: Strengthening Accountability and SDG16 amid the Pandemic**

*Webinar Report of the Stockholm Forum 2021*

## About the event

Civil society organizations play a vital role in overseeing the security sector. In particular, CSOs can contribute to security sector governance in five ways: awareness raising; advocacy; monitoring and public oversight; fact-finding, research and analysis; and service provision. However, during the Covid-19 pandemic, they have been faced with new and unprecedented restrictions. This session highlighted different ways in which civil society organizations working in the fields of peace, justice and security are able to continue carrying out their oversight role and provided practical examples of how they contribute to the achievement of the good governance targets of Sustainable Development Goal 16 on the national, regional and global level.

This webinar was made possible by the financial support of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

## Time and Date

6 May 2021

## Speakers

**Ms. Louise Edwards**, Director of Programmes and Research, African Policing Civilian Oversight Forum (APCOF)

**Ms. Teresita Quintos Deles**, President of the Board, International Center for Innovation, Transformation and Excellence in Governance (INCITEgov)

**Dr. Alejandro Ponce**, Chief Research Officer, World Justice Project

### *Moderator*

**Mr. William McDermott**, Project Coordinator, DCAF

**Watch the webinar online at:**

**<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ycKZ9haNdyk>**

## About the SSR & SDG16 Project

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 aims to develop peaceful and just societies by building strong institutions, through targets 16.6 and 16.7, which focus on good governance and accountability of public institutions. To achieve the ambitions envisaged under this goal, all states will need to redouble their efforts to ensure that their national security sector is both effective and accountable, and operates within a framework of democratic civilian oversight, rule of law and respect of human rights. However, there is currently limited guidance on how SSG/R policies can contribute to achieving SDG16, and in particular targets 16.6 and 16.7 which are crucial for legitimate stability, especially in fragile contexts.

This project focuses on three different oversight actors of the security sector and covers the role of parliaments, civil society and independent oversight institutions in promoting SSG/R and SDG16. Good practices and lessons learnt are examined and discussed with the aim to provide SDG16-specific guidance that supports states in implementing SSR in the context of the 2030 Agenda.

This project is funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

For more information, please visit the [website of the SDG16-Project](#).

## Linking SSG/R and SDG16

The 2030 Agenda is a plan of action for people, planet, prosperity, peace, and partnership, pledging that no one will be left behind. Within this agenda, Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 highlights the intrinsic recognition of security as an enabler of development and that good governance principles are imperative for the achievement of this goal. This goal is further divided into twelve sub-objectives, also known as “targets”. These twelve targets of SDG16 provide more concrete direction for states for a vision of what are peaceful, just and inclusive societies. Representing civil society organizations (CSOs) working on the national, regional, and global level, the three panelists shared their experiences in contributing to SDG16 and its targets in the context of security sector governance (SSG).

To begin the session, Ms. Teresita Quintos Deles, President of the Board, International Center for Innovation, Transformation and Excellence in Governance (INCITEgov), described the vital role CSOs can play in significantly reducing all forms of violence (SDG target 16.1) through their involvement in peace processes. Referring to her own experience in the Philippines, she explained how CSOs can become mediators between entrenched conflict parties and advocate on behalf of the civil populations for local ceasefires.

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*“We had fought against a dictatorship but without arms... we have the right to have a say in how peace is made.”*

- Ms. Teresita Quintos Deles, INCITEgov

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By representing a channel to voice the interests and needs of women, minorities, and vulnerable groups, CSOs also strengthen inclusive decision-making (SDG target 16.7) in conflict and post-conflict settings.

Ms. Quintos Deles also recounted that in her many years as a peace activist she has learned that one cannot achieve peace without working with the security sector, yet she also realized that CSOs are often hesitant to engage with security forces. In response, she created study groups for civil society actors to better understand how the security sector works and what are the principals of good SSG. The involvement of civil society actors in the oversight over the security sector is a crucial element of good SSG. This independent monitoring of government progress contributed to increased transparency, effectiveness, and accountability of public institutions (SDG target 16.6).

Another example of CSO's contribution to SDG16 was presented by Dr. Alejandro Ponce, Chief Research Officer, World Justice Project. He described his involvement in the addition of a new indicator on the rule of law (SDG target 16.3) to the global SDG indicator framework.

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*“The SDGs bring the possibility of rethinking access to justice as an enabler and component of development.”*

- Dr. Alejandro Ponce, World Justice Project

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The definition and adjustment of indicators is a crucial step in advancing and operationalizing the 2030 Agenda. While the two existing indicators looked at the number of victims of violence's that filed reports and the percentage of unsentenced detainees, the newly proposed SDG indicator 16.3.3 measures the proportion of the population who have experienced a dispute in the past two years and who accessed a formal or informal dispute resolution mechanism. This indicator adds towards the other two, as it can provide important information about the overall accessibility of civil justice institutions, including processes, barriers, and reasons for exclusion of some people. Describing the process to have an indicator added to the SDG framework, Dr. Ponce explained that in order to be heard at the international levels, the coalition that proposed the new indicator needed to ensure coherence in concepts of the new indicator as well as documentation to prove its necessity.

## Activities of CSO contributing to good SSG

**Awareness-raising:** CSOs seek to generate mass public interest in particular security issues by providing information to the general public.

**Advocacy:** CSOs can advocate for better security by presenting relevant decision-makers with solutions to specific security problems or the security concerns of a particular group.

**Monitoring and public oversight:** By systematically examining specific security issues or practices, CSOs can monitor and oversee the performance of the security sector. CSOs can also raise alarm where there is potential abuse or wrongdoing.

**Fact-finding, research, and analysis:** The expert knowledge and community insights of CSOs can complement government information and inform better policymaking.

**Service provision:** CSOs sometimes assist the state in the provision of security and justice services.

For more information of CSO's roles and responsibilities in good security sector governance, please refer to our [SSR Backgrounder on Civil Society](#).

## About DCAF

DCAF - Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance is dedicated to making states and people safer through more effective and accountable security and justice. Since 2000, the Centre has facilitated, driven and shaped security sector reform (SSR) policy and programming around the world.

Good security sector governance (SSG), based on the rule of law and respect for human rights, is a cornerstone of development and security. DCAF assists partner states in developing laws, institutions, policies, and practices to improve the governance of their security sector through inclusive and participatory reforms based on international norms and good practices. In everything we do, DCAF adheres to the principles of impartiality, local ownership, inclusive participation, and gender equality. DCAF also advises governments and international organizations in designing and implementing their own programmes for supporting states in developing their security sector governance.

The inclusion of indicators demonstrates three vital functions that CSOs fulfil with regard to security sector oversight. By advocating for a new indicator, they raise awareness for an issue or group. In the process of establishing the indicator they offer their analysis and research capabilities to governments and international organizations. In the follow-up, CSOs will use the new indicator as a reference in their monitoring activities.

CSOs cannot only advocate for new global indicators, but also assist national institutions to adjust indicators to the local context and by building local monitoring capacity. Ms. Louise Edwards, Director of Programmes and Research, African Policing Civilian Oversight Forum (APCOF), described her experience working on SDG indicators at the national and regional level. She explained that her organization felt encouraged by the inclusion of SDG16 in the 2030 Agenda, in particular by the indicator on pre-trial detention and the target around effective and accountable institutions (SDG target 16.6). However, they quickly realized a lack of awareness for SDG16 on the national and regional level. APCOF, therefore, supported UNDP in increasing technical capacity of national institutions and communities to measure the progress on SDG16. This endeavor included direct work with the national statistics office of South Africa and gave a voice to civil society to set priorities and influence the sustainable development implementation strategy of the country. APCOF also worked on the regional level to advocate for comprehensive policies in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, which align the SDG indicators to the African context and the ongoing SSR processes.

Ms. Edwards also highlighted that through their broad scope, the SDGs created an entry point for new coalitions across stakeholders. When asked, the panellists acknowledged, however, that the cooperation with parliaments to implement the SDGs could be improved in many countries. CSOs should aim to increase awareness about the SDGs among parliamentarians and offer their research and insights to inform better policymaking.

## Impact of COVID-19 on CSOs and SSG/R

The panel further discussed the impact of COVID-19 on CSOs and SSG/R. Through a militarized response, the COVID-19 has become a security rather than a health issue and further heightened authoritarian tendencies in governments. This has made the oversight role of CSOs even more important and required proactive engagement as well as innovative solutions, for instance in the use of social media and the creation of safe spaces for vulnerable groups. CSOs should aim to preserve these innovations beyond the pandemic and participate in data collection processes.

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*“The [COVID-19 response] measures are entrenching the marginalization of millions of peoples already struggling with the legacies of failed economic, social and legal policies.”*

- Ms. Louise Edwards, APCOF

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The panelists also highlighted the disproportional impact of the pandemic and its containment policy on poor and marginalized people or those that are otherwise criminalized because of their status, like people that are homeless, live in informal housing or work in the informal economy. Their situation should be given particular attention in the recovery plans.

With regard to the access of justice, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a variety of legal issues and put a pause to the momentum generated for the 2030 Agenda. It reduced oversight capacities, closed courts, and limited access to places of detention. On the other hand, it has accelerated reform processes in the justice sector and showed the importance to reduce pre-trial detention to avoid hazards of overcrowded prisons. It also heightened the importance of prevention and evidence-based decision-making. While many countries were not capable to collect data during the pandemic, CSOs should support stock-taking initiatives and engage with stakeholders through digital skills. CSOs should also push governments to reconsider policies that had caused struggle in the pandemic and advocate to continue reform processes beyond the pandemic.

## The Stockholm Forum on Peace and Development

Held annually, the Stockholm Forum is a dialogue-driven event that provides a neutral platform for interdisciplinary exchange among members of international communities in the development, humanitarian, peacebuilding and security spheres. The discussion-led roundtable sessions—which the Stockholm Forum is well-known for—are developed in collaboration with partner organizations and invite active participation from stakeholders at all levels.

Reflecting developments in the international policy agenda, each edition of the Stockholm Forum has had a different overarching theme, for 2021 the theme is ‘Promoting Peace in the Age of Compound Risk’.

The Stockholm Forum on Peace and Development has been jointly organized by the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs and SIPRI since 2014. DCAF has participated in the Forum as a formal partner since 2018.



## Key takeaways

- Civil society engagement in the oversight of the security sector is a key component of realizing SDG16 and can take many different forms in global, regional and local contexts.
- CSOs represent a channel to voice the interests and needs of women, minorities, and vulnerable groups. By advocating on their behalf to ensure that no one is left behind, they are essential in achieving the good governance ambitions of SDG16 - especially in times of crisis.
- The definition and adjustment of indicators is a crucial step in operationalizing the 2030 Agenda. CSOs (and their research) play a vital role in this process, whether they advocate for new global indicators or by assisting national institutions to adjust indicators to the local context.
- In the COVID-19 pandemic, the oversight role of CSOs has become even more important and requires proactive engagement as well as innovative solutions. CSOs should aim to preserve these innovations beyond the pandemic and participate in data collection processes.

