

2024



REPORT

REBUILDING TRUST FOR INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE

UNLOCKING **SDG 16** FOR PEACEFUL SOCIETIES

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FOREWORD

In 2015, the international community embarked on an ambitious journey with the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, setting forth 17 SDGs to create a world that is just, peaceful, and prosperous. **Central to this transformative agenda is SDG 16, which aims to promote peaceful and inclusive societies, ensure access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels.**



As we stand at the midpoint towards the 2030 deadline, the 2023 Special Edition of the SDG Progress Report presents a sobering reality. Progress on more than 50 percent of SDG targets is weak and insufficient, and for 30 percent, it has stalled or reversed. These stark figures serve as a clarion call for immediate and sustained action. In this context, the significance of SDG 16 has never been more pronounced. It serves not only as a standalone goal but as an enabler for the achievement of all other SDGs.

Inclusive governance is the bedrock upon which sustainable development rests. It ensures that the voices of all citizens, especially those from marginalised and vulnerable groups, are heard and integrated into the decision-making processes. This report, "Rebuilding Trust for Inclusive Governance – At the Core of Unlocking SDG 16," delves into the current state of inclusive governance globally. It highlights the critical role of transparency, accountability, participation, equity, and the rule of law in rebuilding trust between governments and their citizens.

The findings of this report underscore the urgent need for collective action to strengthen governance structures and create an environment where all individuals can participate freely and equally. By presenting a comprehensive analysis of the challenges and showcasing best practices and innovative initiatives, **this report aims to inspire stakeholders to enhance their efforts in promoting inclusive governance.**

Moving forward, the road to achieving SDG 16 and the broader 2030 Agenda is undeniably challenging, but the pathway is clear. **By committing to inclusive governance, stakeholders can drive significant progress towards a more just, peaceful, and inclusive world.**

This requires concerted efforts from governments, civil society organisations, and international institutions to enhance data systems, institutionalise inclusive practices, promote transparency, and leverage technology.

“We are concerned about the closure of civic spaces that are becoming stronger every day, but the search for alliances allows us to strengthen and recognize the important work of civil society, promoting sustainable development to build a more just and equitable society.”

Francisco Garcia of the national civil society platform in Honduras, ASONOG.





It is imperative that all stakeholders work collaboratively to address the structural barriers that hinder effective governance and participation. This includes ensuring that marginalised and vulnerable groups are not only included but are central to decision-making processes. By doing so, we can build resilient, responsive, and accountable institutions capable of delivering sustainable development outcomes for all.

The recommendations outlined in this report provide a roadmap for policymakers and stakeholders to advance inclusive governance. It is now upon the collective will and concerted action of the global community to transform these recommendations into tangible actions, ensuring that no one is left behind in the journey towards achieving the SDGs.

As we prepare for moments such as **the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) 2024 and the Summit of the Future**, we have a unique opportunity to reaffirm our commitments to SDG 16. These platforms will enable us to reinforce the importance of inclusive decision-making and robust institutions as essential components of sustainable development.

By creating spaces for collaboration and holding stakeholders accountable, we can leverage the power of SDG 16 to propel us back on track towards a more just, equitable, and sustainable future for all. The time to act is now, and with a unified commitment, we can create the conditions necessary for sustainable development and a brighter future for all.

Together, **let us renew our dedication to building peaceful, just, and inclusive societies**, and work tirelessly to unlock the full potential of SDG 16 for the benefit of all.





INTRODUCTION

We find ourselves at a crossroad. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, established in 2015, set forth a vision to create a world that is just, peaceful, and prosperous. Yet, the 2024 Special Edition of the SDG Progress report delivers a stark reality check. The world faces significant challenges in meeting the SDGs by the target year of 2030.

Progress has been alarmingly slow, with only 16% of the targets on track globally, while the remaining 84% have seen limited progress or even regression. This is especially concerning for critical goals such as promoting peace and justice (SDG 16), which is essential for the achievement of all other goals, serving both as a standalone goal and a catalyst for the entire 2030 Agenda. Eradicating hunger (SDG 2), building sustainable cities (SDG 11), protecting marine ecosystems (SDG 14), and preserving terrestrial ecosystems (SDG 15) also face significant challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated these challenges, causing additional setbacks, with financing remaining a major barrier to progress. Disparities between nations are stark, with Nordic countries leading the way, while the poorest countries continue to fall further behind in their efforts to achieve the SDGs.

Instability and resource constraints are increasingly hindering efforts to build inclusive and accountable societies. The regression, particularly evident in SDG 16 (promoting peace, justice, and strong institutions), highlights the growing importance of this goal in an era of escalating conflicts, deepening crisis, and diminishing trust in institutions. This goal reaffirms that peace, justice, inclusion, and sustainable development are profoundly connected and critical for global progress.



Presently, **there is a concerning stagnation or decline in key indicators of SDG 16**, notably in areas like violence reduction and access to justice, which disproportionately impact women and groups who have historically been marginalised. Moreover, public trust in institutions is waning, as citizens encounter unfulfilled expectations and unconstitutional shifts in power that erode the rule of law and the respect of human rights. These trends not only endanger SDG 16 but also threaten the integrity and coherence of the entire 2030 Agenda.

The present report, "**Rebuilding Trust for Inclusive Governance**" builds on **Forus's** previous work on the SDGs, enabling environment for civil society, financing sustainable development, digital governance and rights, promoting power shifts and localisation for SDG implementation, and strengthening the capacity of civil society organisations. The report leverages the insights gained from earlier reports and collective campaigns developed with Forus members and partners, particularly the **various editions of Progressing National SDGs Implementation**, **Enabling Stories**, and [Sustainable Development by Shifting the Power](#).

Our new collective report 'Rebuilding Trust for inclusive governance' identifies inclusive governance as a key factor to achieving SDG 16, offering a fresh perspective on this crucial goal.

WHAT DOES THE REPORT FOCUS ON?

Inclusive governance and the rule of law are essential for building resilient societies capable of withstanding shocks and achieving sustainable development. Trust, ownership, and diverse perspectives are necessary for inclusive governance and these factors combined lead to more effective - and representative - solutions to global challenges. When diverse voices are included in decision-making processes, solutions are more likely to address the root causes of conflict and injustice, not just the tip of the icebergs.

The report draws upon the experience of Forus members and critically evaluates the progress towards SDG 16, with a particular focus on various targets encompassing inclusive governance:

- **Target 16.3** - rule of law and equal access to justice for all
- **Target 16.5** - corruption and bribery,
- **Target 16.6** - effective, accountable and transparent institutions
- **Target 16.7** - responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making
- **Target 16.10** - public access to information and protection of fundamental freedoms



The report reviews the state of implementation of SDG 16 - where progress has been made, and where targets are still stagnating or regressing. The report presents good practices and successful case studies to inspire efforts to establish more just, transparent, and accountable institutions. In addition, **the report underscores the connection between inclusive governance and SDG 17 (SDG 17) - Partnership for the Goals**, particularly targets 17.16 and 17.17, which call for robust multi-stakeholder partnerships, including civil society and enhanced means of implementation, including capacity strengthening for achieving the SDGs. The research on the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) conducted by Forus since 2017 indicates modest improvement in Member States' reporting on civil society and stakeholder capacity strengthening efforts, and that further progress is necessary. With the report "Shifting the Power for Sustainable Development" (2023), over 14 Forus members looked at ways to reinforce SDG17 and at ways of strengthening the capacity of civil society for the implementation of the Agenda 2030 in a localised, decolonised, diverse and creative way, calling for power shifts and innovative, flexible funding mechanisms crucial for sustaining long-term support and enabling diverse forms of civic participation.

We recognize that no single approach to SDG implementation can solve all problems or be effective in every context. **With this report, we aim to bring forward innovative practices to inspire action.** While it cannot single-handedly reverse the setbacks in achieving the SDGs globally, it proposes actionable recommendations to address these challenges through a collaborative approach.

The report offers a representative sample of global trends and best practices in promoting inclusive governance for SDG 16. **Representing 69 National NGO Platforms and 7 Regional Coalitions spanning 5 continents, Forus is a growing and dynamic global network, founded in 2008.** Through working together, Forus members have enabled the network to become recognized and influential internationally in promoting inclusive governance and championing sustainable development policies to benefit the planet and its people.

Forus sees the 2024 High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) and the upcoming Summit of the Future as strategic opportunities to reinforce commitments to SDG 16, highlighting the importance of inclusive decision-making and strong institutions for sustainable development.

“Civil society organisations are essential throughout the world, providing humanitarian aid, supporting community resilience, fighting for human rights, justice, equity, democracy and peace.”

Mavalow Christelle Kalhoule, Forus Chair and President of SPONG, the Burkina Faso NGO network.





HOW WAS THE REPORT DEVELOPED?

OUR METHODOLOGY

The report builds upon previous Forus work and it employs a mixed-methods approach, combining secondary data from literature reviews with primary data from interviews with Forus members across various regions. The methodology bridges global narratives and local realities, offering a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities in promoting inclusive governance.

As a resource for policymakers, government officials, civil society organisations, international development agencies, and human rights advocates, the report provides case studies for evidence-based decision-making and strategic interventions.

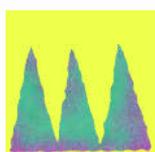
The report is divided into 3 sections:



SECTION 1

INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE: A MUST TO ACHIEVE SDG 16

This section looks at how systems and processes can ensure the active and meaningful participation and representation of all societal groups, leaving no one behind. **We will look at how inclusive governance is based on principles such as transparency, accountability, participation and the rule of law.** As we face several challenges and crises, these values in practice, ensure inclusive decision-making where everyone has a voice and fair access to opportunities and resources. This section also looks at how we can strengthen social cohesion and our democratic processes in a world that urgently needs it.



SECTION 2

OBSTACLES TO INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE

This section **examines the challenges in achieving peaceful, just, and inclusive societies under SDG 16.** It discusses how limited participation and barriers in decision-making lead to policies that inadequately address community needs, damaging trust between the population and decision-makers.



This trust deficit is exacerbated by corruption and escalating violence, which divert resources from addressing underlying issues at root causes. The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified these challenges, introducing new obstacles to inclusive governance. The section underscores how threats and violence silence crucial voices, while data gaps obscure challenges faced by historically marginalised groups, making it difficult to create inclusive policies. It also explores how weak rule of law perpetuates inequalities, with justice systems often favouring the privileged, further hindering the achievement of inclusive governance. Additionally, **it addresses restrictions on civil society's ability to operate freely, with limitations on freedoms of expression and assembly stifling civic engagement.**

Political instability and polarisation further disrupt governance, compounded by weak institutions and cultural norms that exclude certain groups. Lastly, the section examines how **the digital divide and new forms of digital human rights violations exclude many from participating in governance processes.** These issues are explored in the collective report the [State of Digital Inequity](#) and in various Forus initiatives - from the [#Let's Talk Digital campaign](#) to the [Civil Society Manifesto for Ethical AI](#) co-developed with a [global coalition of over 50 civil society and human rights organisations from over 30 countries](#). By highlighting these obstacles, this section highlights the parameters to focus on and the importance of SDG 16 targets to create inclusive governance and, consequently, the possibility of unlocking SDG 16 to drive the implementation of all SDGs.



SECTION 3

BEST PRACTICES AND NEW APPROACHES

This section looks at successful practices from around the world that demonstrate effective implementation of various elements of inclusive governance. These examples offer valuable lessons and recommendations for building peaceful, just, and inclusive societies, essential for achieving SDG 16 and, by extension, the broader SDG framework.



REBUILDING TRUST FOR INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE - KEY AREAS AND BEST PRACTICES FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SDG 16

MORE TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Establishing independent anti-corruption bodies and ombudsman offices is crucial for holding government officials accountable. Adopting open data portals, freedom of information laws, and e-governance systems promotes transparency and citizen engagement. Strengthening mechanisms for measuring corruption, such as population and business surveys, aligns with SDG Target 16.5 and promote accountability, thereby reinforcing inclusive governance.

COMBATING CORRUPTION AND STRENGTHENING THE RULE OF LAW

Implementing strong anti-corruption laws and enforcement mechanisms, coupled with whistleblower protection and robust reporting channels, is essential for combating corruption. Promoting transparency initiatives like the Infrastructure Transparency Initiative (CoST) reduces corruption risks in public infrastructure projects. Ensuring a strong, independent, and impartial judiciary that upholds the law fairly and consistently is vital for strengthening the rule of law. Integrating inclusive participation in peacebuilding efforts and democratic transitions, as demonstrated by Tunisia's National Dialogue Quartet, contributes to building just and peaceful societies, which are foundational to inclusive governance.



DATA-DRIVEN DECISION-MAKING AND PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY

Leveraging big data and analytics, as showcased in South Korea's Smart City initiatives, enables better decision-making and resource allocation. Adopting robust data systems and standardised data collection methodologies is crucial for monitoring progress towards SDG 16 and informing policy decisions. Implementing innovative public service delivery models, such as mobile health clinics and online education platforms, improves access to essential services. Promoting financial inclusion through initiatives like Kenya's M-PESA mobile money service and India's Unified Payments Interface (UPI) empowers citizens and drives economic growth, supporting inclusive governance.

PARTICIPATION, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION

Encouraging citizen participation in governance processes, particularly for groups who have historically been marginalised, through initiatives like participatory budgeting and citizen advisory councils, is vital for inclusive decision-making. Implementing measures to enhance gender equality and women's representation in decision-making processes, such as gender quotas in politics, for equitable governance and push for gender justice at all levels. Innovative feminist cooperation frameworks as proposed by Forus member La Coordinadora in Spain exemplify this approach. Ensuring the inclusion of persons with disabilities in governance through initiatives like India's Accessible India Campaign ensures that no one is left behind. Protecting indigenous peoples' rights and including their perspectives in sustainable development efforts promote cultural diversity and respect of people and planet, further supporting inclusive governance and enriched decision-making.

STRENGTHENING LOCAL INSTITUTIONS AND MAINSTREAMING SDG 16 COMMITMENTS

Supporting local communities and institutions through decentralisation programs and capacity-strengthening initiatives, as exemplified by Nepal's Local Governance and Community Development Programme, promotes grassroots development and ownership. Integrating SDG 16 commitments into national policy frameworks, strategies, and action plans, as demonstrated by Denmark's comprehensive integration of SDG 16 into domestic and international policies, ensures alignment with global goals and accountability.



A VIBRANT CIVIC SPACE AND INTERSECTORAL COLLABORATIONS

Protecting fundamental freedoms, including freedoms of expression, association, and assembly, is crucial for creating an enabling environment for civil society organisations and media freedom, thereby promoting transparency and accountability. Promoting intersectoral collaboration between government, civil society, the private sector, and other stakeholders through joint initiatives and partnerships for a collaborative approach to sustainable development. Facilitating knowledge-sharing and peer learning among stakeholders working on inclusive governance, as exemplified by the Open Government Partnership's Local program, drives new thinking and best practice sharing.



SECTION 4

RECOMMENDATIONS

To effectively implement SDG 16, the report shares several actions and initiatives from across the Forus network. You can find a short summary below.

To promote inclusive governance, **legal frameworks** must be developed that facilitate citizen participation, particularly for historically marginalised groups and civil society, in decision-making at all levels. **Strengthening partnerships** among government, civil society, the private sector, and international organisations, **as advocated by SDG 17**, can address governance challenges for achieving sustainable development.

This includes **creating an enabling environment for civil society** by ensuring fundamental freedoms, removing legal obstacles, and supporting flexible funding.

Prioritising **local decision-making and integrating local perspectives** into national and global policies are key to addressing specific community needs. **Equity and inclusion** should be ensured through targeted social programs, while **transparency and accountability** must be promoted via open data policies and anti-corruption measures.

Finally, upholding the rule of law and improving public services are fundamental, alongside **building effective institutions and utilizing data-driven decision-making** that respects digital rights and privacy to inform policies and improve service delivery.



SECTION 1



**INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE:
A MUST TO UNLOCK SDG 16
AND REBUILD TRUST FOR THE
IMPLEMENTATION OF THE
OVERALL 2030 AGENDA**



SECTION 1



SDG 16 seeks to promote peaceful and inclusive societies, to ensure access to justice for all, and to develop effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels.

SDG 16 encompasses targets related to peaceful and inclusive societies, the rule of law, access to justice, the fight against corruption and organised crime, and the establishment of effective, transparent, and accountable institutions. These components are not only critical on their own but are also fundamental to achieving all other SDGs. The inclusion of SDG 16 in the 2030 Agenda recognises that peace, justice, inclusion, and development are deeply interlinked and essential for creating the conditions necessary for sustainable development. SDG 16 is both an outcome and enabler of sustainable development, given its interlinkages with other SDGs.

Unlike the Millennium Development Goals, the 2030 Agenda takes a holistic approach, recognizing that lasting progress cannot be achieved in a silo. SDG 16 embodies this philosophy perfectly. It acknowledges that peace, justice, and inclusive institutions aren't just byproducts of development – they are fundamental building blocks. Without a foundation of peace, where violence and conflict are minimised, achieving goals like poverty reduction or quality education becomes incredibly difficult. Similarly, robust, responsive and accountable institutions that uphold the rule of law and ensure access to justice for all create an environment where individuals and communities can thrive. SDG 16, therefore, isn't an afterthought; it's the cornerstone upon which all other sustainable development efforts rest.

Inclusive governance isn't just a requirement for achieving SDG 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions), but a foundation for all 17 SDGs. Instead of being a specific target, it addresses the essential method for effective decision-making across all sectors. By involving diverse stakeholders, inclusive governance builds trust and broadens support for sustainable development initiatives, ultimately making the entire SDG agenda more achievable.



This becomes even more crucial when we consider the specific goals of SDG 16. As it aspires to create peaceful, just, and inclusive societies for sustainable development, achieving its 10 key targets – like violence reduction, child protection, and ensuring legal access for all – relies heavily on inclusive practices. SDG 16 emphasises the significance of universal legal identity, inclusive decision-making processes, public access to information, and participation in global governance [UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs]. These very elements are the hallmarks of inclusive governance, demonstrating how it strengthens the entire SDG framework, not just a single goal. [UN DESA], 2023).

SDG 16 is both an outcome and an enabler of sustainable development, recognizing that peace, justice, and strong institutions are not merely byproducts but fundamental building blocks for achieving all SDGs.

“Civil society organisations are essential throughout the world, providing humanitarian aid, supporting community resilience, fighting for human rights, justice, equity, democracy and peace.”

Mavalow Christelle Kalhoule, Forus Chair and President of SPONG, the Burkina Faso NGO network.





ELEMENTS OF INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE

Inclusive governance, a core component of SDG 16, ensures that all citizens, including groups who have historically been marginalised, have a voice and are actively supported in shaping their societies and communities. Inclusion in terms of both process (how decisions are made, who is included in that process, how and why) and outcomes (how wealth and prosperity are distributed and shared across a population and why) is a leading priority in international development, with the SDGs, especially SDG 16, as perhaps the most ambitious articulation of this. As the evidence overwhelmingly shows, over the long term, more open and inclusive states and societies tend to be more prosperous, effective and resilient.

By promoting transparency, accountability, participation, equity, and the rule of law, inclusive governance creates a stable and just environment conducive to sustainable development. It helps in building trust between the government and its citizens, ensuring that policies and decisions reflect the diverse needs of the population, and promoting social cohesion and justice. This foundational peace, where violence and conflict are minimised, is essential for achieving other development outcomes such as poverty reduction and quality education.

Moreover, robust, responsive, and accountable institutions that uphold the rule of law and ensure access to justice for all create an environment where individuals and communities can thrive. Inclusive governance is a prerequisite for addressing the multidimensional challenges of sustainable development, which often intersect and require coordinated efforts across various sectors and levels of governance. By creating an environment where collaboration, dialogue, and partnerships among government entities, civil society organisations, the private sector, and local communities, is possible, inclusive governance facilitates the integration of diverse perspectives and expertise, leading to more comprehensive and context-specific solutions. This, in turn, increases the likelihood of successful implementation, ownership, and long-term impact of development interventions, ultimately accelerating progress towards achieving the SDGs.

This comprehensive approach, referred to as SDG 16+, includes 24 targets from seven other SDGs linked to peaceful, just, and inclusive societies, illustrating the crucial role of SDG 16 upon which all other sustainable development efforts rest.



THE IMPORTANCE OF PARTICIPATION AND EQUITY FOR REPRESENTATIVE DECISION-MAKING

Participation from all citizens, especially marginalised groups, is essential for inclusive governance. Meaningful opportunities for people to voice their concerns and influence decisions, such as public consultations, citizen forums and social media engagement, empower citizens, create a sense of ownership, and lead to more responsive policies.

Equity and inclusion are fundamental principles for achieving SDG 16. As stated by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR, 2023), fair treatment and equal opportunities for all citizens, regardless of background, are essential. Targeted efforts to address the specific needs and rights of marginalised and vulnerable populations are crucial for reducing social inequalities and creating a more cohesive and just society.

Moving beyond a moral imperative, the inclusion of diverse voices in decision-making is a strategic necessity for effective governance and sustainable development. Inclusive governance ensures policies and programs reflect the population's needs, enhancing their effectiveness and legitimacy.

Despite making up 49.7% of the global population, women and girls are frequently overlooked in demographic discussions and face rights violations in population policies. Gender inequality persistently limits women's and girls' access to education, employment, and leadership roles.



It restricts their autonomy in health and reproductive decisions, while increasing their vulnerability to violence, harmful practices, and maternal mortality. A woman dies every two minutes due to pregnancy or childbirth-related causes. Excluding women from decision-making processes ignores the valuable skills, knowledge, and perspectives of half the population, hindering societal progress and development. As of May 2024, only 28 countries have women Heads of State or Government, and at the current rate, it will take another 130 years to reach parity. Women's representation in ministerial positions is also concerning, with a global average of only 22.8%. Women hold 36 percent of parliamentary seats in Latin America and the Caribbean and make up 33 percent of parliamentarians in Europe and Northern America. In sub-Saharan Africa, there are 27 per cent of women legislators, followed by Eastern and South-Eastern Asia with 23 per cent, Oceania with 20 percent, Central and Southern Asia and Northern Africa and Western Asia where, in both regions, women make up 18 percent of women Members of Parliament. At the current rate of progress, gender parity in national legislative bodies will not be achieved before 2063. Furthermore, according to several Forus reports and research, feminist and LGBTQ+ rights groups are among the most targeted civil society coalitions. They are often victims of attacks, and impunity reigns in many instances.

Every year, with #MarchWithUs the Forus network dedicates one full month to their experiences to show together how new practices of collaboration and innovative forms of mobilisation can lead us forward.

Similarly, youth offer innovative ideas and digital expertise crucial for navigating a rapidly changing world. Marginalised groups, including ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, and the LGBTQ+ community, possess invaluable insights into systemic barriers that hinder progress. Their participation is essential for crafting policies that address these challenges, leading to reduced inequality, stronger social cohesion, and conflict prevention – all crucial elements for sustainable development.





As explored in the Forus report [“Shifting the Power for Sustainable Development”](#), part of this conversation has to do with the need for transformative reform of the existing development system. This reform aims to shift power dynamics and move away from past and current realities where Global North actors are “decision-makers” and Global South - global majority- actors are “recipients”. Such a transformation is crucial for the people and places most affected by crisis and poverty. The capacity strengthening of civil society plays a vital role in this process. Strengthening civil society capacities also enhances their ability to collaborate between themselves, create joint initiatives with different stakeholders, gain visibility, and have a greater impact on development and democracy processes. Forus adopts a collective learning approach to capacity strengthening of civil society organisations. Rather than a top-down approach, Forus values the expertise and knowledge of its members and acts as an enabler to facilitate learning and collaboration within the network.

Part of this power shift involves supporting locally-led and locally-driven development. Localisation is a critical pillar of sustainable development, based on a recognition of the importance of communities having ownership over the development processes taking place in their own neighbourhoods. Localisation means fully recognizing the value of assets within the communities where development takes place and elevating the voices of community representatives. With the [Global Voices Rising podcast series](#) and the network’s work around Power Shifts, Forus aims at addressing systemic biases and leveraging failures and successes to reshape power dynamics to ensure genuine representation and participation in development processes and the Agenda 2030.





EXPERIENCES FROM THE FORUS NETWORK

THE FORUS BAREFOOT GUIDE

LET'S TALK ABOUT POWER!

Central to the pursuit of change is the question of power: who has the right and power to design, legitimise and operate the institutions which govern and organise our lives? Who has the power to determine which interests are built into the process? Who has the power to determine which outcomes are prioritised? The answer of course is those with “power”. In our world, power and its exercise continue much as it had before, from the top down, at the exclusion of the majority and through the institutions of elite decision-making, with little or no meaningful consultation or participation by those most affected. But history has shown time and again that people and communities have agency and a lot of power too and, in certain circumstances, can even change power dynamics that once seemed unmovable.

ABONG

BRAZIL: POLITICAL REFORM, COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND ANTI-RACISM CAMPAIGNS

Abong is part of the coordination team advocating for political reform in Brazil, bringing together unions, academia, social movements, and NGOs. They are acknowledged for their ability to work with these different actors and develop effective campaigns within the civil society sector, leveraging their knowledge and legitimacy. By participating in public hearings and debates in parliament, Abong represents these groups and defends their common interests.

During recent elections, Abong's anti-racism campaign successfully promoted the idea that white people must defend black positions to claim they are anti-racist. This led to significant numbers of black women being elected for the first time, many from independent civil society organisations.

Additionally, Abong played a crucial role in the campaign against the extension of the NAFTA free trade agreement to Latin America. By mobilising social movements and collaborating with organisations like Oxfam International, they successfully opposed the agreement, showing the power of collective action.

In its work, Abong emphasises the importance of active listening and community engagement. During the pandemic, they supported communities in defending themselves against the virus, stepping in where the state failed. By reconnecting with communities and humanising relationships, Abong learned that the answers often lie within the communities themselves. This approach highlights the power of listening and local engagement in driving change.

This collaborative effort demonstrates how civil society can influence political processes and drive reform.

CLIMAT 21

FRANCE: CLIMATE ACTION AND COALITION BUILDING

Leading up to COP 21 in Paris, a diverse coalition called Coalition Climat 21 was formed, facilitated mainly by local NGOs in France. This coalition brought together various groups, including climate organisations, trade unions, and social movements, to push for a binding climate agreement. Despite initial mistrust and differing strategies, the coalition successfully developed common narratives and coordinated actions, demonstrating how diverse actors can unite for a common cause.

The coalition's success was attributed to skilled facilitation, trust-building, and allowing space for disagreement. The "Engine Room," a group of dedicated individuals, ensured effective communication and coordination. This flexible and organic approach enabled the coalition to thrive and achieve its goals, illustrating the importance of adaptive and inclusive governance structures.

The donor community played a crucial role by providing financial resources to support coalition efforts. Despite challenges with loose governance structures, donors found ways to channel resources effectively, enabling the coalition to function. This highlights the need for process-oriented approaches and the importance of donor flexibility in supporting transformative civil society initiatives.

ABOUT THE FORUS BAREFOOT GUIDE

The Forus Barefoot Guide, co-written with over 30 Forus members, provides numerous examples of how people and communities are exercising their power to create meaningful change.



A CALL FOR AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

THE COLLECTIVE WORK OF THE FORUS NETWORK

Civil society's work is increasingly challenging worldwide which has serious impacts on inclusive governance. In a recent study by Forus: "[Forus International Scoping Study on the Experiences of National NGO Platforms in Promoting an Enabling Environment](#)" published in January 2021, only 7.5% of platforms surveyed indicated that their government effectively supported civil society organisations with capacity and resources. Many Forus platforms feel that the operating space for civil society is increasingly challenging and that the rights of citizens are facing new forms of obstacles - notably in the digital realm.

A vibrant civic space, where fundamental freedoms are protected, is crucial for inclusive governance. This includes freedoms of expression, association, and assembly. Beyond this, an enabling environment for civil society organisations ensures they can operate without undue restrictions and contribute effectively to governance. An important part of Forus's work is to advocate for an enabling environment for CSOs around the world. Increasingly, Forus receives support requests from national NGO platforms across the globe. The latest Forus evaluation highlights the network's crucial role in better structuring and strengthening civil society. In response to shrinking civic spaces and funding restrictions, Forus acts as a bulwark to protect and defend civil society and democracy.



Forus advocates for an enabling environment for CSOs at global level and supports its members for advocacy at regional and national levels. At global level, Forus played a key role in taking into account the global needs of civil society in the development of the [OECD DAC recommendation on the empowerment of civil society](#) (adopted in July 2021) and for the revision of the Rome Declaration on SDG 16 which calls for the development of new civic space indicators. Forus has also given particular importance to the development of collective campaigns such as #Let'sTalkDigital and #UNmute on the need for inclusive online and offline spaces for civil society. This global level work gives Forus members a supportive framework to carry out their own enabling environment campaigns.

To support members facing these challenges at national level, Forus shares tips and tools on Tactics and Practices in Shrinking Civic Spaces, to leverage the network's collective experience, share best practices, and provide practical resources to address legal, administrative, and other challenges. Forus also facilitates peer support and solidarity by connecting members for strategic advice, situational assessment, unified advocacy, and capacity-strengthening initiatives.

In collaboration with partners such as CIVICUS, Democracy Reporting International, the European Partnership for Democracy, Hivos and Transparency International, Forus is part of the EU SEE (System for an Enabling Environment) project that aims to bolster the capacity of civil society organisations (CSOs) to operate in safe and conducive environments. Led by civil society, this innovative mechanism unites national, regional, and global networks to monitor laws, administrative practices, and the digital and media environments that frame civil society operations. In countries where participating monitors issue alerts on restrictive actions, EU SEE provides funds and solidarity networks to local organisations, helping them mount campaigns or strengthen their internal systems to withstand operational threats. When restrictive actions are identified, EU SEE will aim to provide funds and solidarity networks to local organisations to support campaigns and strengthen internal systems. This innovative response addresses increasing civic space restrictions worldwide, helping civil society prevent and respond to legal and policy developments.

Forus also utilises narratives to mobilise, connect, and inspire collective action for positive change. Faced with shrinking civic space, many network members have begun to engage in building alternative narratives about civil society, showing the importance, and added value of CSOs in their local, national, and regional contexts, such as documenting the role of civil society during COVID in India and developing a post-COVID CSO recovery and sustainability plan in Botswana to reposition the sector and align its strategies with national development plans. Through its Enabling Environment Working Group, Forus works with its members to highlight civil society's contributions to shaping a sustainable and inclusive future, and counter 'Anti-CSO Statements'.

In partnership with the Permanent Missions of Costa Rica and Denmark to the UN and several CSOs, Forus calls for more inclusive processes at the UN through the UNMute initiative. As part of this work, the group of partners will soon publish manual recommendations for meaningful civil society participation at the United Nations.



As part of its work on an [enabling environment](#), the Forus network empowers members facing human rights abuses and limitations on civic participation worldwide. This includes advocating for digital rights and regulations for new technologies like AI, and creating solidarity networks in divided political environments. Forus collaborates with members to advocate for policy changes at local, national, regional, and international levels. Additionally, Forus creates platforms for discussion and opportunities to strengthen the capabilities of its members, enabling them to better navigate challenges and improve their ability to defend rights.

Initiatives such as the [CADE project](#) led by DiploFoundation of which Forus is one of the partners together with ECNL, Cipesa, KICTANet, Sarvodaya Fusion, SMEX, PICISOC and Fundación Karisma, aims to enhance the capacity of civil society organisations for effective advocacy in multilateral and multistakeholder internet governance (IG) processes. It will encourage inclusive participation, particularly from the Global South - or Global Majority - and promote a human-centric policy approach in shaping digital policies and standards.

As sketched out in Forus' report "[Enabling Stories](#)" and "[Towards and Enabling Digital Environment](#)", as well as in the work of the network to support civil society to shape digital policies and uphold rights, the accelerating global process of digitization has impacted civic space, rapidly transforming the operating space of citizens and civil society everywhere. Ensuring that Forus members and wider civil society have access to digital technologies, can shape policies and that rights are protected is a growing priority for Forus. Today more than ever, civil society needs to advocate for an inclusive, human- rights based and democratic form of digitalization that will empower and enable activists, rather than restrict and repress them. This is only possible with inclusive forms of governance that allow the exploration of the emancipatory potential of digital technology across the globe.

The role of digital technologies in enhancing civic participation is recognized, alongside the need to address challenges such as online surveillance, disinformation and both the potential and risks of emerging technologies such as AI. Leveraging data and trends to prevent human rights violations and respond to emerging challenges is critical. Additionally, as part of the [#KeptOn](#) coalition coordinated by Access Now, Forus is part of the fight against internet shutdowns.

In 2023, [Access Now and the #KeptOn coalition](#) recorded 283 internet shutdowns in 39 countries around the world, the highest number since the coalition started the Shutdown Tracker Optimization Project (STOP). For the first time, conflict was the leading trigger for shutdowns globally.

In the context of crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, maintaining and expanding civic space is emphasised, highlighting the need for resilient governance structures that uphold human rights during emergencies. All the stakeholders are expected to integrate these principles into their work, advocating for and supporting member states in creating an enabling environment for civil society, including capacity-building, technical assistance, and policy advocacy. It's also important to strengthen the resilience and effectiveness of governance systems globally, contributing to sustainable development and the realisation of human rights for all.



An enabling environment for civil society organisations to operate without undue restrictions, along with support for media freedom and protection of journalists and activists, creates open discourse and strengthens governance (OHCHR, 2020).

Development, peace, security, and human rights are interconnected and inclusive public and civil society participation is essential for achieving these goals. In this environment and for governance to work, transparency and access to information are crucial for informed civic participation. The UN Secretary General's Call to Action for Human Rights highlights these elements and encourages governments and institutions to provide clear, accessible, and timely information.

Intersectoral and intergenerational collaboration is key to addressing complex governance challenges. Cooperation between government, civil society, the private sector, and other stakeholders, facilitated through joint initiatives and partnerships and a collaborative approach to promoting sustainable development. This collaboration ensures that all sectors of society are involved in governance, making policies more comprehensive and effective (UN DESA, 2023).

By promoting and protecting rights both online and offline, Forus ensures CSOs promote an enabling environment at all levels. Through member-led initiatives and coordinated advocacy efforts, Forus supports CSOs in navigating challenges, creating solidarity networks, and pushing for policy changes that enable a healthy civic space.





TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY FOR INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE

Accountability mechanisms are vital for ensuring that government officials and institutions are responsible for their actions. Independent oversight bodies play a crucial role in monitoring government activities and ensuring compliance with laws and regulations. By holding officials accountable, these mechanisms help to reduce abuses of power and corruption for a fair and just society .

Transparency can help strengthen accountability for the implementation of policies. When coupled with mechanisms of participation, transparency can also help limit the degree to which policies are biased in favour of certain groups, firms or individuals. When working in concert, transparency and participation can help limit state capture. Thus transparency helps reduce corruption, a major impediment to achieving the targets of SDG 16, by making governmental processes visible and subject to public scrutiny (World Bank, 2021).

Transparency and accountability, together with participatory mechanisms, not only safeguard against unequal policy-making and access to justice but also nurture an environment where governance becomes more responsive to the needs and rights of all citizens. The enactment of laws ensuring public access to information, such as Kenya's Data Protection Bill and the Maldives' Right to Information Act, demonstrates global advancements in governmental transparency and accountability.



EXPERIENCES FROM THE FORUS NETWORK

NANGO

ZIMBABWE: THE ACTION TO PROTECT AND ENHANCE CIVIC SPACE IN ZIMBABWE (APECS)

A vibrant civil society is essential for Zimbabwe's development, and by extension, achieving SDG 16 (SDG 16) on a global scale. However, challenges like limited data on CSO activities and threats to civic space hinder their effectiveness. To address this, the National Association of Non-Governmental Organisations (NANGO) launched the Action to Protect and Enhance Civic Space in Zimbabwe - [APECS initiative](#).

APECS tackles these issues through a two-pronged approach: building a comprehensive CSO database to improve transparency and profiling, and monitoring threats like violence and media bias to advocate for a safer civic space. This initiative is further strengthened by NANGO's collaboration with various observer missions and media platforms, including the European Commission, COMESA, Africa Council of Churches, ECF-SADC, and the Commonwealth Observer Group.

ABOUT NANGO

Founded in 1962, Forus member the National Association of Non-Governmental Organisations (NANGO) is the official voluntary coordinating body for registered and diverse NGOs operating in Zimbabwe. NANGO is decentralised into five regional offices that coordinate the activities of CSOs in Zimbabwe's ten provinces. Aware of the diversity of its members, they are grouped into 10 thematic sectors in line with their programmatic objective, namely: media, arts and culture, children, disability, economy, health, human rights, humanitarian, land and environment, women and youth. At the same time, NANGO takes responsibility for unifying these different sectors by creating spaces for collaboration, networking, knowledge exchange, mutual support and the development of shared best practice. By June 2022, NANGO had a total of 1,270 affiliated NGOs.



COMBATING CORRUPTION AND STRENGTHENING THE RULE OF LAW TO REBUILD TRUST

Corruption undermines trust in public institutions, impedes economic and social development, and perpetuates inequality. Corruption thrives in environments where trust is low. When citizens perceive widespread graft, they become cynical of government initiatives and disengaged from the anti-corruption fight. This lack of trust creates a vicious cycle – a public unwilling to support reforms because they believe they'll be ineffective, and a government struggling to make progress without public backing. The most vulnerable members of society suffer most acutely under this corrupt system. Marginalised groups and those living in poverty face greater difficulty accessing essential services like healthcare and education, while essential infrastructure projects can become vehicles for exploitation.

Amidst growing mistrust and declining public confidence in governments, parliaments, and public institutions, it is crucial not only to expand access to data and opportunities for public participation, as discussed earlier, but also to prioritise rebuilding public trust, enhancing overall governance legitimacy and social cohesion. Achieving this requires a healthy rule of law, which is paramount for ensuring justice, fighting corruption, and protecting human rights. A strong, independent, and impartial judiciary that upholds the law fairly and consistently is essential. Legal frameworks that protect human rights and ensure justice for all citizens are fundamental to building a society where everyone feels safe and secure (OHCHR, 2023).



Effective accountability mechanisms are essential for combating corruption and ensuring that resources are used effectively and equitably. Transparent and accountable governance create an environment where citizens feel confident in their government's ability to manage public resources and uphold justice. Strong anti-corruption laws and enforcement mechanisms, coupled with whistleblower protection and robust reporting channels, are essential. By reducing corruption, governments can ensure that resources are used effectively and that all citizens have equal access to justice and services (UNODC, 2023).

The rule of law is also paramount for ensuring justice and protecting human rights. A strong, independent, and impartial judiciary that upholds the law fairly and consistently is essential. Legal frameworks that protect human rights and ensure justice for all citizens are fundamental to building a society where everyone feels safe and secure (OHCHR, 2023). The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with its core principles of equality, equity, inclusion, rights, and strong institutions, is fundamentally underpinned by the rule of law. This is further emphasised by SDG 16, which aspires to build peaceful and inclusive societies. **SDG 16 recognizes that access to justice and the rule of law are essential for conflict resolution, claiming rights, and obtaining remedies.** Without respect for the rule of law, progress on food security, gender equality, poverty eradication, and economic development remains elusive.

A SPACE FOR US

PODCAST

WITH ERNEST NYIMAI NANGO EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, ZIMBABWE

ENGLISH



LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND: PUBLIC INSTITUTION, SERVICES AND DATA-DRIVEN DECISION-MAKING

Effective institutions are the backbone of inclusive governance. SDG 16 emphasises building "effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels". Effective institutions enforce laws, hold others accountable, and are themselves accountable under the law. This focus on inclusivity and adherence to the law underpins sustainable development. This emphasis on good governance sets the SDGs apart from prior initiatives, highlighting the importance of effective institutions for reaching our collective and global goals.

Data-driven decision-making is vital to achieving accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. This requires the collection and use of disaggregated data to inform policy decisions and track progress. Utilising both official and citizen-led data sources offers a comprehensive view of governance and development challenges, ensuring that policies meet the needs of all citizens (UN DESA, 2023). **Furthermore, accurate and disaggregated data is crucial for monitoring progress towards the SDGs and informing policy decisions.**



Canada's approach to implementing SDG reporting mechanisms provides valuable lessons for inclusive governance, especially in terms of data-driven decision-making. The country emphasises the importance of reliable, timely, and disaggregated data to measure progress on the SDGs. Canada's national statistical agency, Statistics Canada, plays a role both domestically and internationally. Domestically, it explores new partnerships and data sources, and internationally, it contributes to the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators to ensure robust statistical reporting. The agency's efforts include tagging SDG-related publications and investing in open data initiatives to enhance transparency and facilitate evidence-based dialogue between governments and civil society. Canada's focus on open data and collaboration with various stakeholders underscores the critical role of data in driving sustainable development and inclusive governance.

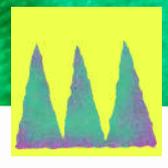
The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted global data collection efforts, affecting the tracking and analysis of SDGs. National Statistical Offices (NSOs) faced major challenges, including closures, halted face-to-face surveys, and insufficient data systems, particularly in lower-income countries. Despite these disruptions, NSOs adapted by employing innovative methods like online and telephone surveys and leveraging alternative data sources, including geospatial data and private partnerships. This period highlighted deficiencies in existing data systems but also spurred advancements in data collection and analysis. The pandemic underscored the critical importance of robust data systems for informed decision-making and the need for continued investment in improving data infrastructure globally.

According to the UNDP's Global Progress Report on SDG 16 significant progress has been made in closing the data gap on illicit activities, with collaborative efforts involving UN bodies like UNODC and UNCTAD yielding the Conceptual Framework for Statistical Measurement of Illicit Financial Flows. This framework has empowered nations to measure progress towards achieving SDG 16, especially in tracking illicit financial flows and firearms tracing.

Finally, effective and trustworthy governance necessitates responsive public services. These services should be efficient, effective, and responsive to the needs of all citizens. Inclusive policies ensuring access to essential services like healthcare, education, and social protection are vital for reducing inequalities and promoting sustainable development (UNDP, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated global poverty, making inclusive public service delivery more critical than ever. This means expanding service coverage to reach vulnerable populations who have been disproportionately impacted. Furthermore, ensuring fairness in both the quality and access to these services is essential. The range of services offered might also need to be broadened to address the pandemic's far-reaching consequences beyond healthcare. Responsive and timely delivery through digital solutions, along with early response planning and resilient institutions, are crucial for overcoming today's challenges and building a more equitable future. Forum members and civil society at large are increasingly involved in the defence and promotion of rights and common goods by formulating and monitoring public policies on Agenda 2030 and financing for sustainable development.



SECTION 2



OBSTACLES TO INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE



SECTION 2



Achieving inclusive governance is fraught with numerous challenges that hinder its realisation. This section reviews and analyses some of the obstacles that undermine efforts to create a just, equitable, and participatory society. From systemic issues like corruption and weak rule of law to socio-cultural barriers and limited institutional capacity, these challenges highlight the complexities and multifaceted nature of inclusive governance. Understanding and addressing these hurdles is crucial for advancing towards the goals of SDG 16 and ensuring that no one is left behind in the pursuit of sustainable development.

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 AND ONGOING GLOBAL CRISES

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly worsened challenges for civil society, leaving a trail of social and economic devastation that deeply impacts their work. For instance, the European Economic and Social Committee, with partners including the European Civic Forum and Civil Society Europe, produced a report on how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted civil society organisations across Europe. The report, based on surveys, expert interviews, and focus groups, found that while CSOs showed remarkable flexibility by quickly reorganising activities and accelerating digitalization, the pandemic also had significant negative effects. Many CSOs faced financial difficulties, particularly foundations and associations, as government support measures often did not meet their needs. Additionally, 82% of surveyed respondents reported a negative impact on the CSO sector in their countries. Despite these challenges, the increased visibility and adaptability of CSOs during the pandemic were seen as assets for future strengthening of their roles in society.



New obstacles have emerged in the wake of this global crisis. Today, more than 11045 armed conflicts are taking place throughout the Middle East and North Africa in territories including Cyprus, Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Syria, Turkey, Yemen, and Western Sahara. Additionally, the war in Ukraine has triggered a global spike in food and energy costs. This, coupled with high inflation and crippling national debts in many countries, fuels uncertainty and makes it increasingly difficult for people, especially those already struggling, to afford basic necessities. Climate change and biodiversity loss are causing unpredictable weather patterns, with extreme heat, droughts, and floods wreaking havoc on lives and livelihoods across the globe.

As these crises converge, we need public institutions stronger than ever to respond to these global challenges. In this complex landscape, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development's vision of peaceful and inclusive societies through universal access to justice feels more critical than ever.

In these uncertain times, it is more critical than ever to recall the universally recognized fundamental rights and freedoms as set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) over 70 years ago. As highlighted in a [statement released in 2023](#), Forus renewed its call to include, listen to, and work with civil society to address these pressing issues. Forus emphasises that everyone, especially those in power, has a responsibility to ensure that the rights set out in the UDHR and in humanitarian law are upheld and protected.

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Civil society has long organised to ensure the rights of all human beings are recognized and respected, striving for a better future for all. Time and time again, CSOs and CSO platforms have shown that they are at the forefront when crises hit, inspiring solidarity and building support networks. They respond to the needs of the most vulnerable when systems fail.



Therefore, it is crucial to ensure that civil society, particularly local civil society, is fully included in addressing these challenges, preventing looming ones, building resilience, and mending societal divisions. This can only be achieved if civil society is recognized as a development actor in its own right, is truly listened to, and can operate in an environment that allows it to deploy its full potential. Local NGOs, as well as the national and regional NGO platforms they organise in, are first-hand witnesses to situations, needs, and solutions on the ground.

Since its inception over 15 years ago, Forus has centred strong values and principles in its work, echoing those that the network's members embody. National and regional platforms provide an inclusive space to spur joint initiatives, voice demands towards decision-makers, hold them accountable, and ensure words are met with action. Forus as a network continues to call on all to respect universal rights and values, take all possible measures to achieve peace, and work hand in hand to build a safe, prosperous, and sustainable future for all.

EXPERIENCES FROM THE FORUS NETWORK

KCOC

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF KOREA: COVID RESPONSE FOCUSED ON RIGHTS AND AWARENESS

The Korea NGO Council For Overseas Development Cooperation (KCOC) shared their experience with the impact of COVID-19 on civic space and human rights as well as the role of civil society in promoting inclusive governance and joint action.

During COVID-19, KCOC actively supported communities by promoting digital access and advocating for privacy rights amid a global health crisis. They established a Special Committee to respond to COVID-19 and used digital platforms to communicate their impact on international development. KCOC conducted webinars with disease experts to educate members, making these available on YouTube. They emphasise creating diverse communication channels for different age groups, blending online and offline efforts for campaigns like World Humanitarian Day. Despite South Korea's advanced digitalization, the pandemic highlighted conflicts due to unequal digital access, leading to disparities in information, opportunities, income, and employment. To address these issues, KCOC's recommendations include improving the internet framework and enhancing civil society's role as a connector between communities and policymakers in digitalization efforts.

ABOUT KCOC

Forus member KCOC, the Korean NGOs network for international development cooperation, was established in 1999 and is a coalition of 140 NGOs engaged in international development cooperation and humanitarian assistance.



CIVIL SOCIETY UNDER PRESSURE

Over the past decade, the work of thousands of CSOs has been deeply affected by increasing restrictions on their creation and operations. CSOs are the target of systematic harassment, stigmatisation, and personal attacks in a climate of growing authoritarianism, fear, and intimidation. **Attacks on civic space and democratic freedoms have increased, with a direct impact on the formation and operations of CSOs.**

Global Findings from the 2023 CIVICUS Monitor report highlight that civic freedoms are being curtailed in a growing number of countries. Civil society is under severe attack in 118 of 198 countries and territories. In this year's report, there are civic space rating changes for 12 countries. Seven countries have been downgraded while five countries have been upgraded. Almost a third of the world's population now lives in countries with closed civic space, the highest percentage since 2018.

New legislation limits their ability to engage in online and offline advocacy. Civil society continues to face increasing restrictions with Southern stakeholders encountering more pronounced levels of restriction, involving extra-legal action and affecting a varied array of CSOs, particularly human rights defenders, environmentalists, and women's rights organisations. Institutional mechanisms are insufficient to ensure an enabling environment for civil society, whether in terms of addressing impunity and redress for attacks on civil society, ensuring implementation of laws and regulations supportive of civil society, or facilitating effective and inclusive policy dialogue. International collaboration between civil society networks, social movements, and activists is increasingly criticised, penalised, and criminalised.

Changes to, and transformations of civic space in different countries around the world have extremely important ramifications for societies everywhere. Shrinking civic spaces and curtailed civil society influence have severe consequences for effective governance.



If widely cited statistics are any indication, the global outlook for democracy appears unavoidably grim: VDem reports that 'the level of democracy experienced by the average global citizen has declined to 1986 levels,' and International IDEA reports that 'half of the world's democracies are in retreat.'

Forus members across the globe continue to push for an open and safe civic space so that the rights of all human beings are recognised and respected, and to thrive for a better future for all. This despite the increasing amount of challenges.

EXPERIENCES FROM THE FORUS NETWORK

EENGD - RED ENCUESTRO

ARGENTINA: AN URGENT CALL TO PROTECT RIGHTS

In recent months, Argentina has witnessed a significant shift under his new administration that threatens to undermine the very fabric of its civil society and democratic governance.

The treatment of the "Ley Bases" law in the Argentine Congress on June 12, 2024 for instance was marked by brutal repression from security forces against protesters outside the legislative palace. Forus member EENGD - Red Encuentro reported that Police used batons, rubber bullets, and tear gas in what is being called the "anti-protest protocol" implemented by former Security Minister Patricia Bullrich.

Dozens of protesters were arbitrarily detained and accused of "sedition" against the government, with 16 remaining in federal prisons in Marcos Paz and Ezeiza as of the article dates. The detainees reported being beaten, tear gassed, and stripped naked by federal prison officials after their arrests. The opposition Unión por la Patria bloc in Congress plans to file criminal charges over the "planned" repression against their members by security forces acting on orders from high levels of the Security Ministry. President Javier Milei accused protesters of being "terrorists" trying to stage a "coup d'état," justifying the violent crackdown. Human rights groups and families have called for the release of detainees and the preservation of protest rights. A UN official, Volkan Türk, denounced the loss of rights in Argentina under Milei's policies, including budget cuts, closing gender institutions, and withdrawing from the 2030 Agenda. The governor of La Rioja province warned that Milei's "repressive scheme" could lead to deaths, recalling the 2001 protests were police charged protesters on horseback.

ABOUT EENGD - RED ENCUESTRO

EENGD, founded in 1977, has the mission is to build democratic social and political power through public participation. The network addresses areas like urban and rural development, housing, education, communication, leadership training, microcredit, agroecology, health care, gender issues, and youth programs.



EXPERIENCES FROM THE FORUS NETWORK

PDA

THE PAKISTAN CIVIC SPACE MONITOR

Stricter regulations on civil society organisations in many Asian nations, including India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, are creating a concerning trend. These regulations are causing CSOs to disengage from political and civic spaces for fears of repression and attacks, hindering progress on achieving SDG 16.

Initiatives like the [Pakistan Civic Space Monitor](#) by the Pakistan Development Alliance, places the country in the "Repressed" category for civic space, highlight a broader decline across South and Southeast Asia.

Following Pakistan's 2024 elections, the opposition encountered restrictions and arrests. Tensions around the electoral process led to shutdowns of internet and mobile phone services. Media outlets faced censorship for reporting on opposition activities, while peaceful protests were met with crackdowns by authorities. Civil society organisations and activists are reporting a rapid decline in civic freedoms due to repression, censorship of journalists, and suppression of protests.

ABOUT PDA

Forus member, the Pakistan Development Alliance (PDA) has established itself uniquely within Pakistan's development sector. Emerging from diverse NGOs and networks, PDA focuses on governance, accountability, civil rights, gender equality and the SDGs - with a particular focus on civic space.



UNNGOF

UGANDA: THE REGULATORY BURDENS ON CIVIL SOCIETY

In Uganda, a major challenge for civil society is the resource imbalance within the government. High public expenditures are directed towards maintaining a large parliament, leaving limited funding for lower levels.

This "top-heavy" structure prioritises bureaucracy over grassroots initiatives. Furthermore, the government often views CSOs with suspicion, enacting a series of regulations framed as safeguards (Anti-Money Laundering Act, Counter-Terrorism Financing Act) but functioning more as control mechanisms.

These regulations, enforced by the under-resourced Financial Intelligence Authority, require reporting for transactions exceeding a relatively low threshold (500,000 shillings / USD 130).

This excessive reporting burden, coupled with the lack of effective monitoring capacity, creates a system ripe for selective enforcement, where authorities target specific organisations rather than ensuring overall compliance.

ABOUT UNNGOF

The Uganda National NGO Forum (UNNGOF) is an independent and inclusive national platform for NGOs in Uganda that was launched in 1997 to create space for NGOs to reflect, strategize and take action on matters of mutual interest. UNNGOF is a membership organisation with over 650 members across the country.

CILONG

CHAD: DEFENDING CIVIC FREEDOMS

A recent wave of ordinances in Chad (August 2023) severely restricts freedoms of assembly and expression. These measures, including establishing a state of emergency and imposing strict conditions for public gatherings, hinder democratic participation and civic space. Across the country civil society organisations fill crucial gaps in social services, disaster relief, and poverty alleviation, particularly in vulnerable areas. Cilong highlights the unprecedented insecurity faced by human rights defenders in Chad. They emphasise the stigma, manipulation, and even death threats faced by CSOs simply for expressing opinions and advocating for development activities. The introduction of new ordinances further impede a successful transition to civilian rule in Chad.

ABOUT CILONG

Forus member Cilong is a forum for exchange and reflection, a framework for consultation and pooling - exchange of experience, reflection on specific development issues, in-depth reflection on any action undertaken by NGOs across Tchad.



EXPERIENCES FROM THE FORUS NETWORK

ANC

PERU: PROPOSED BILLS THREATEN CIVIL SOCIETY AND INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

Peru's civil society organisations are facing increasing pressures. In Peru's Congress, approximately six bills are under committee debate, primarily aimed at modifying the law that created the Peruvian Agency for International Cooperation (APCI). These proposed changes would significantly impact the operations of non-governmental development organisations and institutions of international technical cooperation (ENIEX), as well as private non-profit institutions receiving international welfare or educational donations (IPREDA).

The Japiqay Association of Memory and Citizenship, in collaboration with Forus member the ANC, has prepared an analytical document examining these key legislative proposals. The document suggests that these initiatives seek to alter APCI's functions and role, intensifying supervision, oversight, and control of civil society organisations through regulatory and institutional changes designed to limit civil society's scope of action. Notably, there appears to be an effort to criminalise civil society's activities by restricting their ability to conduct, participate in, or support information campaigns and citizen activities focused on defending democracy and human rights. Furthermore, the proposals aim to politicise APCI's work by suggesting the inclusion of the President of the Congressional Foreign Relations Commission on its Board of Directors and by proposing to assign APCI's decentralised headquarters to Regional Governments where they are located.

Peruvian NGOs have disseminated a statement and a communication campaign under the slogan #CooperacionParaLaDemocracia, endorsed by the country's main NGO networks. They are also organising various debates and dialogues to counter the current situation.

ABOUT ANC

Forus member, the Asociación Nacional de Centros de Investigación, Promoción Social y Desarrollo (ANC), established in 1984, is a non-profit civil association uniting Peruvian NGOs. It aims to defend its members and provide services to enhance their effectiveness in promoting comprehensive development and advancing democracy in Peru, focusing on rights, gender equality, and interculturality.



POLITICAL INSTABILITY AND CONFLICT

Political instability and conflict disrupt governance structures and displace populations, making inclusive governance challenging. Fragmented and ineffective governance systems due to unrest and conflict hinder the implementation of policies that should ensure all societal segments are represented and included. This instability leads to social inequalities and marginalisation, preventing the achievement of SDGs, which are integral to inclusive governance. Political unrest and armed conflicts disrupt governance structures and displace populations, creating an environment where inclusive governance is difficult to achieve (UN DESA, 2023).

With increased polarisation, conflicts, and 2024 being dubbed the “election year” - looking at the Latin American context, a [recent article from Forus](#) revealed how political instability significantly impacts inclusive governance by eroding democratic principles, reducing civil society participation, undermining multilateral commitments, manipulating legal frameworks, exacerbating social and economic inequalities, and challenging the transparent implementation of policies.

For instance, in countries like Peru, political instability with the downfall of several presidents in recent years has led to disenchantment and lack of trust towards public institutions in the population, which has impacted deinstitutionalization and a shift towards authoritarianism, which undermines the democratic foundations necessary for inclusive governance. Authoritarian regimes tend to centralise power and control, limiting the participation of various stakeholders, including civil society, which is crucial for transparency, accountability, and inclusivity in governance.

Legal frameworks in politically unstable environments are often manipulated for anti-democratic purposes. In Peru, legislative changes have favoured particular interests, undermining democratic governance and the 2030 Agenda. Such manipulations erode trust in governance systems and impede the implementation of policies aimed at inclusive and sustainable development.



Instability often results in governments reducing or controlling civil society's role in governance. In Mexico, the electoral situation in 2024 has limited civil society's engagement in monitoring and promoting the 2030 Agenda. This restriction hinders progress towards inclusive governance as civil society plays a vital role in ensuring transparency and accountability.

Additionally, we have seen how geopolitical tensions and political instability leads to a declining faith in multilateralism, as seen in the rising scepticism towards international frameworks in Latin America. Countries such as Argentina and Colombia have shown reluctance to fully engage with international commitments like the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) for the SDGs, reflecting a broader trend of deprioritizing global agendas. This undermines the cooperative efforts needed for inclusive governance.

LIMITED PARTICIPATION AND REPRESENTATION

Limited participation and representation of certain groups in decision-making processes lead to policies that do not reflect the needs of all citizens, particularly marginalised communities. Excluding certain groups from decision-making processes results in policies that do not address the needs and rights of all citizens, which is detrimental to achieving inclusive governance (UNDP, 2023).

Inclusive governance involves popular control over decision making and equality between citizens in the exercise of that control. Inclusive political participation and representation in democratic institutions and processes in which each citizen has an equal right and opportunity to engage in and contribute to decision making, is thus crucial.

At national level we can see however how promoting and ensuring inclusive political participation and representation are still issues today. There are complex issues of intersectional discrimination against women, for example, in France, women with Senegalese-sounding names face significant job discrimination, and European countries where Muslim women are disproportionately targeted in Islamophobic attacks.

Socioeconomic inequalities, with disparities in income, education, and access to services, also prevent equal participation and perpetuate social divides, making it difficult to achieve inclusive governance (UNDP, 2023).

A world bank report declares South Africa's wealth gap, crowning it the world's most unequal nation.

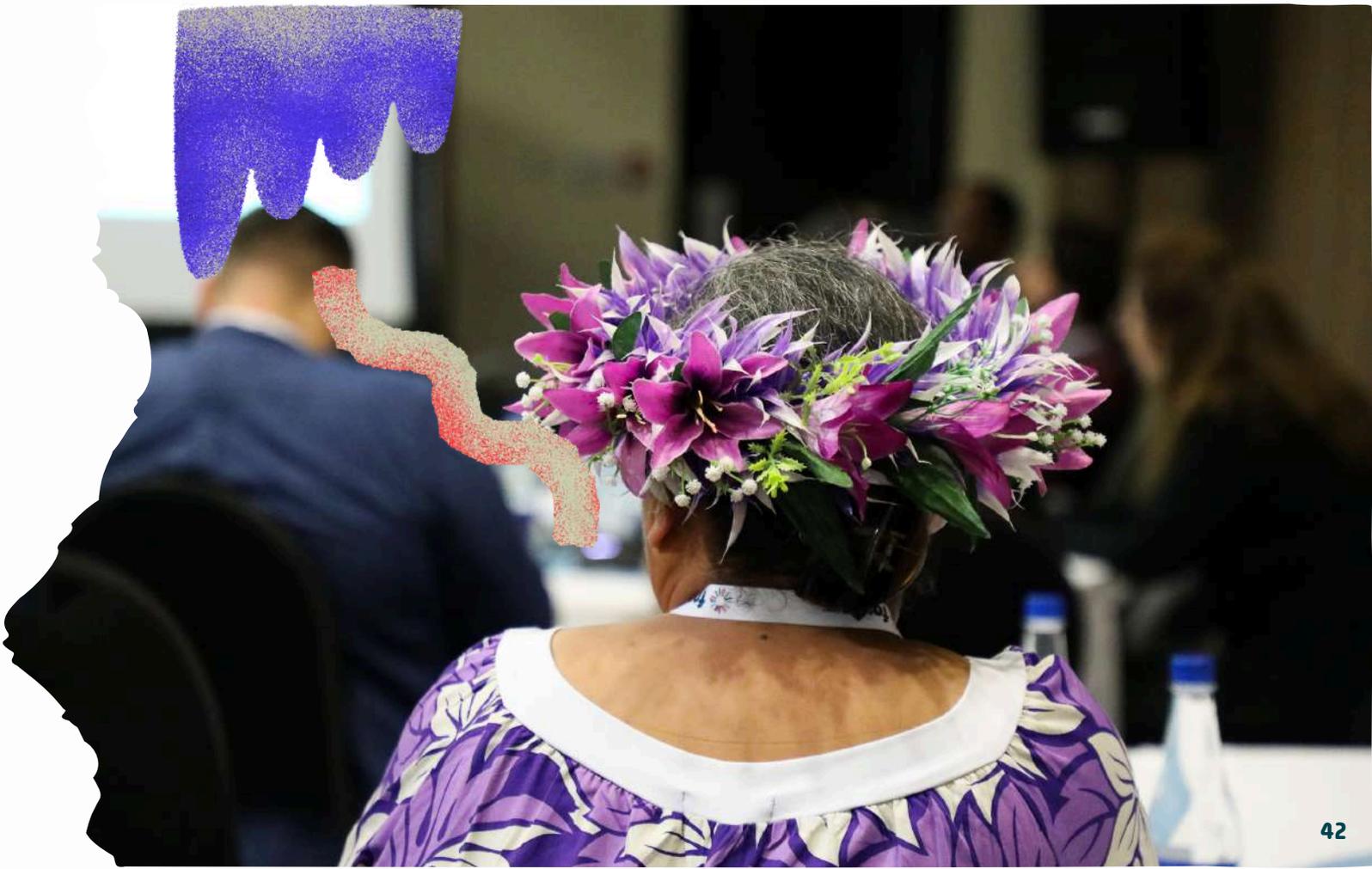


Race remains a deep-rooted cause, with the legacies of colonialism and apartheid leaving a stark divide. Just 10% of the population owns a staggering 80% of the wealth. This economic disparity is further amplified by unequal access to education and land ownership, heavily influenced by race.

When it comes to participation and representation in decision-making spaces, we also notice the worrying duo of intimidation and marginalisation. This is clearly linked to civic space issues as it further suppresses dissent and civic engagement, restricts public discourse, discouraging individuals and organisations from participating in governance and challenging authority.

Groups ranging from civil society organisations, activists, human rights defenders and other vulnerable communities are often denied access to resources, decision-making processes, and platforms for expressing their concerns, effectively rendering them invisible and powerless within the broader social and political landscape.

Certain communities continue to be more targeted than others - these include ethnic or religious minorities, land defenders, women and children, LGBTQ+ communities, or political dissidents - targets of intimidation campaigns aimed at suppressing their voices and restricting their ability to advocate for their rights and interests. Furthermore intimidation and marginalisation are often coupled with ineffective access to justice.





EXPERIENCES FROM THE FORUS NETWORK

COOPERATION CANADA

CANADA: CIVIL SOCIETY INVOLVEMENT IN THE AGENDA 2030

Canada has made significant strides in involving civil society and Canadians in the implementation of the SDGs. The consultation process for "Moving forward together: Canada's 2030 Agenda National Strategy" was notably robust in terms of engaging different stakeholders. Significant efforts were made to facilitate discussions involving various groups, with active participation from civil society organisations. Forus member, Cooperation Canada, received funding from the SDG Funding Unit to do some of the work (policy briefs), aiming to inform the strategy. The government made sincere attempts; however, there was a noticeable decline in stakeholder engagement between the initial phase and the implementation stage. This decline was partly attributed to inadequate funding for backbone organisations, resulting in a lack of coherence and coordinated efforts towards implementing the strategy. This decrease in engagement became particularly evident in the Voluntary National Review process. Consultations were held with very short notice, leaving little room for meaningful stakeholder participation. Some efforts were made to highlight actions taken by partners and stakeholders to localise the SDGs; however, the CSOs would have preferred a more collaborative approach with stakeholders co-authoring the chapters for a more inclusive process. But it is worth noting that the government has recognised this gap, given its decision to establish a 2030 advisory committee aimed at including non-state actors. This advisory committee represents a positive step towards broader engagement. But according to Cooperation Canada, it is evident that there is room for improvement in terms of engagement especially since the government has the capacity to enhance participation by providing more structured and inclusive mechanisms for civil society involvement.

ABOUT COOPERATION CANADA

Since 1968, Cooperation Canada has brought together civil society organisations working in the international development and humanitarian sector. They advocate for these groups by convening sector leaders, influencing policy and building capacity.



DIGITAL DIVIDE

The digital divide, characterised by unequal access to digital technologies and the internet, excludes significant portions of the population from participating in governance and accessing services. Unequal access to digital technologies and the internet can exclude significant portions of the population from participating in governance and accessing services, which is essential for inclusive governance (UN DESA, 2023).

The case of "adverse digital incorporation," which refers to the situation where more advantaged groups extract disproportionate value from the work or resources of less advantaged groups through their inclusion in digital systems in the report. This phenomenon is illustrated with an example from Africa: smallholder farmers in Kenya who join agricultural finance platforms are often pressured into unfavourable data-sharing agreements. The platform managers leverage their bargaining power to access valuable data from farmers, which is then shared with financial institutions. Consequently, farmers who default on loans end up being blacklisted by credit bureaus, hindering their future access to credit – an outcome that contradicts the supposed goal of financial inclusion. This case exemplifies how the incorporation of marginalised groups into digital systems can perpetuate and exacerbate existing inequalities, rather than promoting inclusive development as intended.

In its partnership with Connect Humanity and TechSoup, Forus has shared various recommendations to close the digital divide gap. To achieve full digital equity and address historical inequalities, it is crucial to ensure all communities have affordable internet access, necessary tools, and skills. Advocating for policies that support diverse internet providers and challenge anti-competitive rules will prevent communities from being overcharged and underserved. Universal Service Access Funds should be used to promote operator diversity, focusing on community-based networks for last-mile connectivity. Innovative funding mechanisms are needed to support these networks, requiring collaboration with specialised intermediaries to provide tailored financial solutions.



EROSION OF TRUST TOWARDS GOVERNANCE

CORRUPTION

Corruption significantly erodes public trust in institutions and hinders public participation in governance. When officials abuse their power for personal gain, citizens lose faith in the fairness and effectiveness of the legal system. This leads to alienation, disenfranchisement, and resentment towards authorities. A corrupt environment creates an uneven playing field where access to justice and social mobility are determined by wealth and connections rather than merit, directly opposing the principles of SDG 16 (UNODC, 2023).

From a global perspective, it is unsettling that according to estimates, hundreds of billions of Euros are paid in bribes every year and that corruption, bribery, theft and tax evasion cost developing countries some US \$1.26 trillion per year. This would be sufficient to lift the 1.4 billion people living on less than \$1.25 a day above the poverty threshold and keep them there for at least six years.

The 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) paints a concerning picture of the global fight against corruption. A staggering two-thirds (67%) of countries scored below 50 on the index's 0-100 scale, indicating a serious corruption problem. This stagnation is further highlighted by the global average score remaining unchanged at a meagre 43 for the tenth consecutive year. While efforts to criminalise corruption and establish dedicated anti-corruption institutions have been undertaken worldwide, these actions haven't translated into widespread improvement. The report reveals a stark reality: only 28 of the 180 countries evaluated have demonstrably improved their corruption levels over the past twelve years, while a concerning 34 have witnessed a significant decline, while 118 countries maintained status quo. These figures demonstrate a lack of significant progress, or even regression, in anti-corruption efforts across the vast majority of countries.



The index also identifies a clear divide between the most and least transparent nations. Denmark, Finland, and New Zealand remain at the forefront with scores of 90, 88, and 85, respectively. These countries consistently rank highly due to their robust justice systems, which play a crucial role in upholding transparency and accountability. Conversely, Somalia, Venezuela, Syria, South Sudan, and Yemen occupy the bottom positions with scores of 11 or 13. These nations are unfortunately mired in protracted crises, often involving armed conflict, which presents a significant obstacle to effective anti-corruption measures.

The global average remains stagnant at a mere 43, highlighting the lack of meaningful progress in combating corruption over the past decade. Furthermore, the report reveals that 23 countries have fallen to their lowest scores to date this year, signalling a worrying regression in anti-corruption efforts. In 2022 (on a scale of 0-100, with 0 being highly corrupt and 100 being very clean).

EXPERIENCES FROM THE FORUS NETWORK

LAPAS

LATVIA: ANTI-CORRUPTION EFFORTS

The project “Integrity Pacts – Civil Control Mechanism for Safeguarding EU Funds” is funded by European Commission, led by Transparency International Secretariat with headquarters in Berlin and implemented by 15 local partner organisations in Europe. The main aim of the project is to ensure that 17 major public contracts in 11 EU countries are “clean contracts” – - designed and implemented to the highest possible standards of transparency, accountability and efficiency, according to the public interest.

Transparency International Latvia (TI Latvia/Delna) implements the project in Latvia by monitoring the Riga City Traffic project’s “Riga Tram Infrastructure Development” public procurement process and project implementation.

ABOUT LAPAS

Forus member, the Latvian Platform for Development Cooperation (LAPAS) is a national platform that unites 42 non-governmental organisations to work for the sustainability of society and sustainable global development. LAPAS was founded on August 12, 2004. Since 31 October 2019, LAPAS has been the secretariat of the National Multistakeholder Coalition for the Implementation of SDGs.



WEAK RULE OF LAW

A weak rule of law, characterised by ineffective legal systems that hinder justice and perpetuate inequalities, reduces trust in government. Ineffective or biased legal systems hinder justice and perpetuate inequalities, reducing trust in government and undermining the principles of SDG 16 (OHCHR, 2023).

Data from the World Justice Project's (WJP) 2023 Rule of Law Index paints a concerning picture of a global decline in the functioning of justice systems. The WJP, an independent organisation dedicated to promoting global adherence to the rule of law, measures justice systems across several key dimensions. This comprehensive analysis is further broken down into 44 specific indicators.

A critical finding emerges when we compare the WJP's Rule of Law Index with the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI). Countries with the lowest scores in the Rule of Law Index, indicating weak justice systems, also consistently rank poorly on the CPI, signifying high levels of corruption. This strong correlation underscores the critical link between access to justice and effective anti-corruption efforts.

The rule of law situation has deteriorated in a majority of nations during the current year, as per the World Justice Project's [\(WJP\) Rule of Law Index 2023](#). Over 6 billion individuals reside in countries where the rule of law has weakened between 2022 and 2023.

Since authoritarian tendencies triggered a global rule of law recession in 2016, this downturn has impacted 78% of countries, as indicated by the latest Index. The rule of law factor that experienced the most significant decline between 2016 and 2023 is Fundamental Rights, which deteriorated in 77% of countries.

While these authoritarian trends persisted in 2023, they are slowing down, with fewer countries experiencing declines in 2022 and 2023 compared to previous years. However, the functioning of justice systems is now facing challenges, with more countries struggling to provide timely, affordable, and accessible justice. The Index factor measuring Civil Justice witnessed the most widespread decline across countries this year.

The countries with the most significant rule of law declines in the past year are Sudan, Mali, Iran, Nicaragua, and Afghanistan, while the countries that improved their rule of law score the most from 2022-2023 are Bulgaria, Honduras, Kenya, Slovenia, and Jordan. Honduras was also a top improver last year.

In the longer term, the countries that have bucked global trends and strengthened the rule of law the most since 2016 are Uzbekistan, Moldova, Zimbabwe, Kazakhstan, and Malaysia.



MISALLOCATION OF RESOURCES AND INADEQUATE BACK-UP OF INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY

Inadequate institutional capacity, characterised by weak institutions lacking the resources and capabilities to implement inclusive policies and effectively serve the public, poses a significant barrier. Weak institutions lack the resources and capabilities to implement inclusive policies and effectively serve the public, hindering the achievement of SDG 16 (World Bank, 2021).

EXPERIENCES FROM THE FORUS NETWORK

SINERGIA

VENEZUELA: THE 7TH MONITORING REPORT ON THE SDGS

The combined effect of limited resources and a shrinking civic space can be extremely challenging, as seen in the case of Venezuela.

The 7th monitoring report on SDGs developed by Sinergia and alliance for Development, indicates significant issues with budget and resource misallocation in Venezuela. Transparency Venezuela and Alianza Rebelde Investiga identified 316 cases of embezzlement of public patrimony starting from 2020, suggesting widespread misuse of public funds. A study counted 246 unfinished public works projects in 21 states, with 153 of these projects amounting to \$316 billion, indicating massive resource waste on incomplete initiatives. An evaluation of 150 municipalities revealed very low levels of transparency in budgeting and resource allocation, with 61% not conducting participatory budgeting and 96% not publishing procurement specifications.

The report also notes that criminal activities represent about 21% of the country's GDP, suggesting a significant diversion of resources into illegal activities. Additionally, difficulties in obtaining passports due to a lack of materials point to resource mismanagement in public services. While the report doesn't provide a detailed breakdown of the national budget, these points collectively indicate systemic issues with how public resources are managed and allocated in Venezuela, characterised by high levels of corruption and lack of transparency.

ABOUT SINERGIA

Forus member, Sinergia is a Venezuelan network of civil society organisations created in 1996 with 64 members. Serving as a democratic space for the articulation of civil society, Sinergia is a national reference for social fabric construction. As a network, the organization monitors the implementation of the 2030 Agenda since 2016.



LACK OF DISAGGREGATED DATA

While the vision of SDG 16 remains vital, our understanding and progress are critically hampered by significant data deficiencies. Recent evaluations indicate stagnation or regression in key areas such as violence reduction, access to justice, and inclusive governance. This regression is alarmingly evident in the escalated challenges faced by women, including increased sexual violence and barriers to equitable justice and representation.

As of 2023, none of the 12 SDG 16 targets are likely to be achieved by 2030. Only two of the SDG 16 targets— birth registration and national human rights institutions—are showing signs of progress, while a handful of indicators in other targets also show positive but inadequate progress. Five targets are regressing: on peace and violence; children; the rule of law and access to justice; fundamental freedoms; and discrimination. Of particular concern is the stalled progress on achieving peace-related objectives. The remaining five targets have changed little since their adoption.

The lack of disaggregated data complicates effective monitoring and evaluation, obscuring the nuanced challenges faced by marginalised groups and potentially exacerbating existing inequalities. Policy decisions based on aggregated data can overlook the specific challenges faced by marginalised groups, exacerbating existing inequalities. Without data disaggregated by gender, income level, geographic location, or other relevant factors, policies may overlook the unique challenges faced by marginalised groups, hindering their ability to participate fully in society (UN DESA, 2023).



A significant data investment gap still threatens the fulfilment of SDG 16. Accurate, disaggregated data is crucial for informing national policy decisions, prioritising needs, and ensuring transparency and accountability to citizens. The current data landscape paints a concerning picture. Apart from this, there has been backsliding on human rights commitments across nations. Widespread violence, insecurity, and corruption erode social contracts, leaving governments unresponsive and justice out of reach for the most marginalised. These deeply entrenched inequalities and exclusion, captured within SDG 16, pose a significant barrier to overall sustainable development progress.

EXPERIENCES FROM THE FORUS NETWORK

PIANGO

OVERCOMING DATA GAPS IN THE PACIFIC ISLANDS

PIANGO, Forus regional coalition in the Pacific Islands shares how data gaps hinder progress on SDGs and national development plans. This lack of data, including income distribution, education attainment, and environmental indicators, makes it difficult to track progress and target interventions in poverty, healthcare, and sustainability. Civil society organisations step in to bridge this gap by collecting their own data, advocating for transparency, and working with governments to develop evidence-based policies.

However, the Pacific region faces unique challenges due to its geography and demographics. Sparse populations spread across many islands make data collection expensive and logistically difficult. Additionally, cultural and linguistic diversity adds complexity. Even basic data like cause of death is often incomplete due to inadequate record-keeping.

This lack of data has excluded Pacific nations, including Fiji, from the Global SDG Index. The report "Measuring Peace in the Pacific" highlights these issues while acknowledging ongoing efforts to address them. While some data exists, it may be outdated or geographically limited. Proxy measures are sometimes used, but no Pacific country has data for all SDG 16 indicators. Despite these challenges, the report emphasises the need for new approaches and ongoing discussions to improve data collection and prioritise relevant indicators for the Pacific context.

ABOUT PIANGO

Forus regional coalition, PIANGO the Pacific Islands Association of Non-Governmental Organisations coordinates bodies known as National Liaison Units (NLUs) based in 25 Pacific Island countries and territories. PIANGO was formally established in 1991 to assist NGOs in the Pacific to initiate action, give voice to their concerns and work collaboratively with other development actors for just and sustainable human development.



CHALLENGES TO INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE: BEYOND THE NATIONAL LEVEL AND AT THE UN

Civil society's fight for inclusive governance has expanded beyond national borders. Even international spaces like the UN are experiencing a decline in engagement opportunities. To address this shrinking space, civil society organisations are working with Member States to call for more meaningful participation at the United Nations through the #Unmute initiative.

Launched in response to the challenges posed by restricted civil society engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic, the #Unmute initiative has evolved into a broad-based advocacy campaign aimed at enhancing the participation of civil society organisations in UN processes. This initiative focuses on overcoming barriers that prevent meaningful engagement and seeks to ensure that diverse voices are heard in international decision-making forums.

A first set of recommendations on how to improve engagement was published in 2021. Supported by 52 member states and over 327 civil society members, these recommendations emphasised the need for more structured and equitable participation mechanisms across all UN processes. More recently, faced with closed doors to participate in the negotiations of the Summit of the Future, UNMute released statements that captured specific issues and immediate actions needed in the wake of the ongoing global and institutional challenges. These statements were endorsed by over 440 civil society organisations, and shared with the Co-facilitators of the Summit of the Future, the UN Secretary General and President of the UN General Assembly, as well as with all the representatives of the Permanent Missions to the UN.



These statements were more targeted, focusing on urgent reforms such as addressing accessibility issues for CSOs and advocating for the institutionalisation of more inclusive practices.

To further refine these recommendations, the UNMute initiative is developing a "How to UNMute Manual" with concrete, practical and operational guidance tool for Member States who strive to deliver networked, inclusive and effective outcomes and approaches to participation at the United Nations. Building on both the original recommendations and insights gained from subsequent consultations and online survey, this manual is being developed to provide detailed guidance on improving civil society engagement at the UN. The manual aims to ensure that the advocacy for inclusive governance translates into practical, actionable policies and practices that can be implemented across different contexts.

Overcoming challenges to inclusive governance requires proactive outreach efforts, strengthening and protecting civil society and the space in which it operates, as well as the development of legal reforms that promote meaningful - and not tokenistic - participation and accountability for all.



#UNmute Civil Society

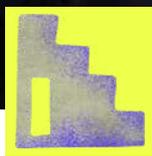
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SCHIØLER, GLOBALT
FOKUS, DENMARK

 **forus** CONNECT
SUPPORT
INFLUENCE



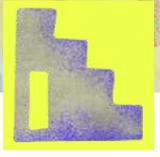
SECTION 3



BEST PRACTICES AND NEW APPROACHES



SECTION 3



To achieve the ambitious targets of SDG 16, it is essential to learn from successful practices and innovative initiatives worldwide from Forus members and literary review.

The examples that follow, highlight how various elements of inclusive governance can be effectively implemented for peaceful, just, and inclusive societies.

We'll begin by showcasing Forus' efforts to promote enabling environments globally. Then, we'll explore similar initiatives undertaken by our members, governments, and other stakeholders, all working towards inclusive governance.

PROMOTING AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

FORUS' WORK

A vibrant civic space, where fundamental freedoms are protected, is crucial for inclusive governance. This includes freedoms of expression, association, and assembly. Protecting fundamental freedoms and creating an enabling environment for CSOs are essential for inclusive governance.



An important part of Forus's work is to advocate for an enabling environment for CSOs around the world. Increasingly, Forus receives support requests from national NGO platforms across the globe. The latest Forus evaluation highlights the network's crucial role in better structuring and strengthening civil society. In response to shrinking civic spaces and funding restrictions, Forus acts as a bulwark to protect and defend civil society and democracy.

Forus, through its study "A Preliminary Study of Experiences of CSO Platforms in Promoting an Enabling Environment," worked with its members to identify best practices for promoting an enabling environment. This study emphasises the importance of collaborative efforts in enhancing civil society organisations. The Forus network is currently part of a consortium of 9 civil society organisations carrying out with support from the European union, the EU System for an Enabling Environment for Civil Society program which seeks to support civil society to thrive by preventing efforts to restrict civic space.

Forus's active involvement in international initiatives such as the development of an OECD-DAC recommendation on Enabling Environment. Forus played a key role in taking into account the global needs of civil society in the development of the OECD DAC recommendation on the empowerment of civil society (adopted in July 2021). Forus' role in this development was highly valued by partners, who praised its constructive proposals and ability to develop synergy among civil society actors. Forus' strong connections to the Global South is highlighted as a crucial element, given that the majority of working group participants were from donor countries. Forus' involvement ensured that global civil society needs were effectively represented in the recommendation.

Forus has also taken a centre stage in the launch of a global monitoring index and alert system on enabling environment with partners like Hivos, CIVICUS, Transparency International, the European Partnership for Democracy, and Democracy Reporting International. [The EU System for an Enabling Environment](#) begins its work in 2024 as an innovative response to the ever increasing restrictions on civic space. Across the world, in both authoritarian states and established democracies, citizens engaged collectively in policy, advocacy and community work frequently face diverse restrictions on their rights to form associations and organise, or are prevented from expressing their views freely. From repressive NGO laws aimed at cutting off civil society funding, to administrative red tape, civil society organisations find their knowledge and expertise is disregarded and doors closed to them as they are excluded from decision-making processes. Through a chain of actions encompassing monitoring at the national level, leading to the issue of early warnings, which in turn aims to provide timely support to groups in need, EU SEE aims to support civil society's response in preventing and proactively responding to legal and policy developments and other events that may impact their ability to operate.

Forus has also joined the launch of global initiatives like the SDG 16Now campaign with the TAP network, while actively advocating for a stronger focus on civic space within the UN's SDGs. Over the past three years, Forus has actively participated in initiatives coordinated by TAP Network and CIVICUS, specifically regarding the revision of the [Rome Declaration on SDG 16](#) with a primary aim to push for the development of new indicators that measure civic space, directly linked to target 16.10 of the Agenda 2030. These efforts have been instrumental in advocating for inclusive online and offline spaces and flexible funding mechanisms, which are critical components of an enabling environment.



Forus promotes inclusive online and offline spaces through campaigns such as #Let'sTalkDigital and #UNmute, providing a supportive framework for member campaigns. To assist members facing national-level challenges, Forus shares resources on best practices, facilitates peer support, and connects members for strategic advice and capacity-sharing initiatives.

Narratives are also a key focus, as Forus mobilises and inspires collective action to counter negative perceptions of civil society. The Enabling Environment Working Group works to highlight CSOs' contributions to sustainable and inclusive futures.

Additionally, Forus promotes digital rights and regulations, advocating for a human-centric approach to internet governance through projects like CADE. Forus emphasises the importance of digital technologies in civic participation, addressing issues like online surveillance, disinformation, and the potential and risks of AI. The network is part of the #KeepItOn coalition, fighting against internet shutdowns to ensure uninterrupted access to digital spaces for civil society.

The Forus report "Realising the Potential of Goal 16 to Promote and Protect Civic Space" (2020) argues that restricted civic space hinders civil society's role in achieving the the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Examining 18 case studies, it illustrates how Goal 16 can be a tool to expand civic space and strengthening civil society, thereby strengthening their contribution to the Agenda's goals. The report also advocates for the development of new indicators to measure countries' adherence to fundamental freedoms, ensuring progress aligns with human rights.

**UN ESPACE
POUR NOUS**

PODCAST

AVEC AHMED SEKOU
DIALLO, FECONG,
MALI

FRANÇAIS

 **forus**





EXPERIENCES FROM THE FORUS NETWORK

NATIONAL CIVIL SOCIETY PLATFORMS LEADING THE WAY

PIANGO

MONITORING CIVIC SPACE IN THE PACIFIC ISLANDS

Forus members across the globe are leading the way to protect and promote the space of civil society in national and regional contexts. We can find examples in the Pacific region, where organisations like PIANGO collaborate with CIVICUS to monitor civic freedoms using tools such as the Civic Space Monitor, to maintain accountability.

In Fiji, CSOs have raised concerns over restrictions on freedoms of expression and assembly, pushing for a more open and democratic society. Their resilience in the face of exclusion from decision-making spaces and repression from authorities underscores their commitment to maintaining an enabling environment for civil society.

PDA

PAKISTAN: SCORING CIVIC SPACE

The civil society sector in Pakistan plays a crucial role in development and disaster relief, but faces challenges due to restrictive laws, funding, and public image. To address shrinking civic space, the Pakistan Development Alliance launched the Pakistan Civic Space Monitor (PCSM) in 2022. This user-friendly tool provides a national and regional civic space score based on data from local CSO leaders, NGOs, and media.

The PCSM is updated annually and offers a comprehensive national and regional civic space score, which reflects detailed insights from a wide array of stakeholders including 431 CSOs, trade unions, humanitarian organisations, and media associations. These scores are visually represented through a traffic light system where only the positive outcomes (green lights) are considered in the scoring process, providing an at-a-glance understanding of civic space across different regions. The monitor not only tracks changes in civic space but also supports strategic advocacy and informs interventions at multiple levels



UNITAS

BOLIVIA: THE HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS OBSERVATORY

Similarly, in Bolivia, the Observatorio de Defensores de Derechos, managed by UNITAS, serves as a critical platform for monitoring and advocating for the protection of civil and political rights. This virtual platform provides vital information on the dynamics affecting CSOs and human rights defenders, aiming to expose and prevent violations. By offering real-time, interactive access to data on rights violations across democratic institutions, freedom of expression, assembly, and association, the Observatorio supports civil society in addressing local issues effectively. In 2022 alone, it tracked 768 violations, helping to inform and catalyse responses to oppressive situations faced by civil society colleagues, grassroots activists, and community leaders. Through its comprehensive database, the Observatorio generates a range of outputs, from digital newspapers (Sumando Voces) to quarterly reports, enhancing the visibility and understanding of challenges to fundamental freedoms in Bolivia. This systematic documentation and reporting by the Observatorio have been instrumental in enabling international bodies like the OHCHR to report accurately on the state of Bolivia's civic space and human rights violations.

Since its founding in 1976, the UNITAS Network has been a crucial force in the fight for democracy and human rights. In the last week of June UNITAS, comprising 21 civil society organisations, expressed deep concern and rejection of the events on June 26 in Bolivia.

The systematic erosion of democratic institutions, highlighted in UNITAS's 2023 Report on Fundamental Freedoms, coincides with a major attack: the military takeover of Plaza Murillo and the attempted assault on the Government Palace, sparking coup theories. UNITAS asserted that attacks on the rule of law threatened citizens' fundamental freedoms, created uncertainty, and undermined democratic institutions.

In a public statement, the organisation reaffirmed its commitment to democracy, development, and human rights, urging the executive, legislative, and judicial branches to clarify recent events and focus on proper governance. UNITAS emphasized the State's duty to avoid confrontation risks, maintain social peace, and uphold the rule of law by ensuring incidents were investigated with due process. It warned that the misuse of organisations and state institutions endangered democracy and undermined public trust. UNITAS committed to continuing its advocacy for rights and democratic values, calling on civil society to remain vigilant against rights violations.



NFN

NEPAL: STRENGTHENING CIVIL SOCIETY FOR INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE

A new initiative by NGO Federation of Nepal with support from the EU aims to support the civil society sector through a three-pronged approach. First, it will strengthen collaboration between civil society organisations and all levels of government to create policies that support a thriving CSO environment. Second, it will encourage the formation of umbrella organisations within the sector and creating partnerships with other stakeholders, creating a more unified civil society voice. Finally, the plan will focus on strengthening CSO capacity through sharing best practices, promoting good governance, and ensuring the long-term sustainability of these organisations. This comprehensive approach aims to support Nepal's civil society sector and enable it to play a more significant role in the country's development in line with inclusive governance.

A SPACE FOR US

PODCAST

WITH ARJUN BHATTARAI - SECRETARY GENERAL NGO FEDERATION OF NEPAL (NFN)

ENGLISH

forus

PIC: IOANNA GIMNOPOULOU





MORE PARTICIPATION AND INCLUSION

EXPERIENCES FROM THE FORUS NETWORK

LAPAS

LATVIA: PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN GOVERNANCE

Forus member in Latvia, LAPAS highlighted innovative initiatives from the country's government to adapt to the evolving nature of public participation in governance towards individual involvement, rather than through formal organisational participation. An online platform called "My Voice" has played an important role. This website allows citizens to create and sign petitions using legally recognized digital signatures. Upon reaching a predetermined signature threshold, these petitions are automatically forwarded to a parliamentary committee for review. MyVoice, founded in 2011, works in the field of digital democracy and public engagement for better civic participation in decision making processes. Behind this mission are essential elements, such as security and sustainability of humanity, inclusive power, and participatory society.

Education is highlighted as a key driver of change in Latvia, with a focus on constructive participation and civil discourse. Latvia's "Lampa" discussion festivals exemplify how diverse perspectives can be brought together in a non-confrontational setting despite today's polarised political landscape. Additionally, the country's recent educational reform integrates civic initiatives as mandatory alongside academic and entrepreneurial projects, solidifying its importance in shaping active and responsible citizens.



A SPACE FOR US

PODCAST

WITH INESE VAIVARE,
LAPAS, LATVIA.

ENGLISH

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LAPAS Latvijas Platforma
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EUROPEAN UNION

YOUTH PARTICIPATION

The YOULEAD project in Europe aims to engage European students in the democratic and civic life of the European Union by discussing EU-related topics through debate methodology, focusing particularly on addressing climate change. This project fosters active youth engagement and collaboration on pressing societal issues within the EU framework.

The Future We Want project addresses the challenges posed by the increasingly complex globalised world, particularly focusing on the threat of climate change and the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people. This project seeks to involve European youth in shaping the EU's political program on sustainable development and the 2030 Agenda by creating transnational networks and promoting inclusive democratic participation.

INDIA

ACCESSIBLE INDIA CAMPAIGN

India's Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016) has been important in promoting the inclusion of disabled individuals in governance. One notable initiative is the Accessible India Campaign (Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan) that aims to make India universally accessible for people with disabilities. Launched in 2015, it focuses on three key areas: buildings, transportation, and information & communication.

This includes making government buildings, airports, railway stations, and public transportation accessible. Additionally, the campaign promotes accessible websites, public documents, and sign language interpretation for public television programs.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' VISIONS

COLOMBIA: INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' VISIONS OF THE SDGS

The Akubadaura Community of Jurists Corporation developed [a booklet](#) reflecting the vision and participation of all groups that constitute the nation. Guided by the principle of 'Leaving No One Behind', this booklet serves as an approximation of the Indigenous Peoples of Colombia's perspective on the SDGs.

Women and men from different indigenous peoples worked on the analysis of the points of the SDGs in relation to the 2030 Agenda. The booklet constitutes an analysis and contribution to the construction of public policies from an indigenous perspective, with its launch coinciding with the completion of the final stage of the Binding Regional Dialogues developed by the Colombian Government for the elaboration of the National Development Plan 2022-2026.

The analysis is grounded in the Law of Origin, the Indigenous Peoples' Own Law, and the Major Law, as well as their cosmogonies, geographical, linguistic, and social realities. It addresses issues of the 2030 Agenda aligned with the thinking, mandate, and agenda of indigenous peoples, originating from the concept of 'Mother Earth' as our 'Common Home'. Emphasis is placed on the necessary protection and defence of Mother Earth to ensure humanity enjoys a prosperous and fulfilling life. Simultaneously, the booklet aims to disseminate information and knowledge relevant to sustainable development and lifestyles in harmony with nature to people worldwide.



SOUTH AFRICA

LGBT+ WORKPLACE RIGHTS

Launched in 2017, the South African LGBT+ Management Forum fights for LGBTQ+ inclusion in workplaces nationwide. Their two-pronged approach drives progress. The South African Workplace Equality Index (SAWEI), published every two years, benchmarks companies on LGBTQ+ inclusion, highlighting best practices and areas for improvement. This provides a roadmap for South African businesses to build more inclusive environments. The Forum's impact goes beyond measurement. They also offer educational programs and year-round advocacy, equipping companies with the tools to create welcoming and equitable workplaces. This approach is demonstrably successful, with most participating companies improving their SAWEI ratings.

UNNGOF EXPERIENCES FROM THE FORUS NETWORK

UGANDA'S TOPOWA FORUMS

Despite limitations in internet access, smartphone penetration, and bandwidth, Ugandan civil society organisations have developed new methods for community engagement. One such initiative is the "Topowa Forums," a series of community conversations led by civic mentors who travel directly to meet with residents.

This approach overcomes connectivity barriers and e open dialogue on important issues. Furthermore, Ugandan civil society plays a crucial role in supporting the government's Parish Development Model, a bottom-up development strategy that emphasises community mobilisation and mindset change. This collaboration between civil society and government exemplifies how such collaborations can effectively adapt to local contexts and contribute to national development goals.

ARGO EXPERIENCES FROM THE FORUS NETWORK

KAZAKHSTAN RURAL INCLUSION

From 2017 to 2020, ARGO Association led a €470,000 EU-funded project in East and Central Kazakhstan that aimed to support local communities through inclusive planning. The project trained 60 people, creating collaboration among 300 stakeholders to develop 10 rural plans, and provided entrepreneurship training to 50 representatives, with financial support granted to 11 entrepreneurs including vulnerable groups. The implemented plans benefitted 3,000 individuals, with a 40% completion rate, and a study tour to Bulgaria further enriched the knowledge exchange. Overall, the project supported sustainable development and socio-economic inclusion in rural Kazakhstan.



INTERSECTORAL COLLABORATION FOR INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE

Intersectoral collaboration is critical for inclusive governance because it brings together diverse stakeholders from various sectors—government, civil society, private sector, and academia among others—to address complex societal challenges. Below you can find examples from the Forus network - notably in terms of the development of Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs). These reviews provide an opportunity for countries to share their experiences, challenges, and successes in implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

EXPERIENCES FROM THE FORUS NETWORK

NFN

NEPAL: PRESENTING ITS VOLUNTARY NATIONAL REVIEW

The [NGO Federation of Nepal](#) organised a National Validation Workshop on the Voluntary National Review (VNR) in June 2024. The event featured the presentation of a CSO-led Spotlight Report with recommendations to complement the government's VNR. The report, along with key civil society perspectives, was submitted to relevant government bodies and the United Nations. Discussions focused on the VNR process, progress made towards the SDGs and remaining challenges for Nepal's achievement of the SDGs by 2030.

UNNGOF

UGANDA: CIVIL SOCIETY ON THE VOLUNTARY NATIONAL REVIEW PROCESS

As highlighted by Forus member the Uganda National NGO Forum (UNNGOF), civil society organisations chose a collaborative approach, contributing directly to the government's Voluntary National Review (VNR) report through the national advisory committee. This strategy reflects their established partnership with the SDGs secretariat. While the government acknowledges data limitations, their official report may not fully represent the multifaceted realities on the ground. However, a civil society national platform offers a space for some level of collaboration between the government and CSOs on the SDGs. This platform allows CSOs to maximise their impact and contribute diverse perspectives.

CCONG

COLOMBIA: SOCIAL MONITORING OF THE SDGS

For the past eight years, Forus member, the Colombian Confederation of NGOs (CCONG) has published an annual Social Monitoring Report to highlight the unique and significant contributions of social organisations to the SDGs. The report assesses the National Government's progress in meeting Sustainable Development Agenda commitments, with a focus on ensuring civil and political rights for CSOs, including access to public information, participation in planning, and social oversight. Through these reports, CCONG aims not only to provide the government and other stakeholders with recommendations for achieving the SDGs, but also to zoom into the work of CSOs to acknowledge their contributions to development through their activities, recognize themselves as development actors, and enhance their advocacy efforts, particularly in building relationships and exercising social oversight, ensuring that "no one is left behind."



BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

In recent years Forus and its members have directly experienced the multiple ways in which the accelerating global process of digitalization is rapidly transforming the ‘operating space’ of civil society everywhere. On the positive side, many digital innovations are enhancing and strengthening civic space at different levels. But while digital technologies provide civil society with new ways to exercise their freedoms of association, assembly, and expression, they are simultaneously providing governments and others with new ways of restricting those rights, raising questions about how technological advances will affect an already shrinking civic space. Much will depend on which technologies become dominant, who controls them and to what ends. The lack of adequate regulation and more democratic and inclusive governance of digitalization around the globe will significantly undermine rather than advance civic space, human welfare, freedom, dignity, and justice everywhere.

Initiatives such as the Danish-led Tech for Democracy have brought together representatives from governments, multilateral organisations, tech industry and civil society to make technology work for democracy and human rights, not against them, and are examples of forms of inclusive governance.

Forus as a network with several of its members contributed to the consultative process for the Global Digital Compact led by the U.N. Envoy for Technology and co-facilitated by Sweden and Rwanda ahead of the Summit of the Future. Furthermore, with the CADE project supported by the European Union, the Forus network as part of the consortium, will reinforce over the years the role of CSOs as pivotal actors in local and inclusive digital governance and accountability. The project also aims at reinforcing networks for active participation in multistakeholder digital governance. Finally there is an education and awareness component to ensure that communities are well-informed and supportive of digital development efforts.



The Forus report [“Towards a Civil Society-Friendly Digital Environment”](#) highlights the impacts of digitalization on CSOs, underscoring the necessity for inclusive digital policies. Today with the CADE project and other initiatives focusing on digital rights, inclusive governance and access, Forus supports its members and other civil society partners to meaningfully participate in digital governance.

Over the years, Forus has produced several key reports on this topic as well as the **#Let’s Talk Digital** campaign:

- **“The Civil Society Manifesto for Ethical AI” (2023)**: Developed with a global coalition of over 50 civil society and human rights organisations from over 30 countries the “Civil Society Manifesto for Ethical AI”, aims to steer AI policies towards safeguarding rights and decolonising AI discourse.
- **“Enabling Stories: How Civil Society Can Build New Narratives in a World Transformed by Digitalization and the COVID-19 Pandemic” (2022)**: This report investigates how the COVID-19 pandemic and the digital revolution are reshaping civic space, often with negative consequences for activists and CSOs, making it harder for them to operate effectively.
- **“Towards an Enabling Digital Environment for Civil Society” (2021)**: This report shares global experiences from Forus members on the impacts of digitalization on civil society work, highlighting the need for supportive digital environments.

EXPERIENCES FROM THE FORUS NETWORK

GLOBAL FOCUS

THE DIGITAL DEMOCRACY INITIATIVE

Forus member Global Focus (Denmark) alongside Access Now, CIVICUS, and Digital Defenders Partnership, have now partnered in the [Digital Democracy Initiative](#) (DDI) - an ambitious programme launched and funded by The Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the European Union aiming to strengthen and safeguard inclusive democracy under pressure in the digital age. The consortium is driving efforts to enable and amplify the use of digital technology among local civil society actors in restrictive contexts in the Global Majority, especially for those facing barriers and resource restrictions.

ABOUT GLOBAL FOCUS

Global Focus is a platform that brings together over 80 Danish non-governmental organisations engaged in global development, environmental and humanitarian activities. They are members of the cross-political network [The 2030-panel](#), which supports the Danish Parliament's 2030 network and the promotion of the UN's 17 SDGs.



ENHANCING TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY FOR RESPONSIVE INSTITUTIONS

Transparency and accountability are crucial for responsive institutions. By advocating for transparent and accountable governance, Forus supports the creation of an enabling environment that allows CSOs to thrive and contribute to sustainable development and the development of peaceful and inclusive societies.

Transparency initiatives such as open data portals and freedom of information laws have been pivotal in promoting accountability and citizen engagement.

ESTONIA

E-GOVERNANCE SYSTEMS

Countries like Estonia have successfully implemented e-governance systems that provide citizens with access to a wide range of government services and information, enhancing transparency and reducing corruption. Estonia's digital transformation is a continuous process that began in the early 2000s with a "digital-by-default" approach.

Nearly all (99%) public services are online, and 98% of Estonian citizens utilise digital IDs (eIDs) for over 10 million digital signatures annually. Their secure data exchange system, X-Road, saved the Estonian administration 804 years of working time compared to previous years.

SPAIN

PARTICIPATIVE BUDGETING

Another example is Leioia's City Hall in Spain, which promotes transparency and inclusivity in municipal budgeting. Each year, the City Hall publishes the complete budget report on its website, along with a simplified version to promote inclusivity and ease of understanding. This document outlines the various aspects and activities funded by the yearly budget and provides clear definitions of relevant concepts and explains the approval and calculation processes involved, ensuring that all citizens can understand and engage with the budgeting process.

TANZANIA

BUDGET TRANSPARENCY

In recent years, Tanzania has undertaken significant efforts to enhance government accountability through increased budget transparency. Tanzania's latest transparency score in the 2023 Open Budget Survey (OBS) conducted by the International Budget Partnership, which assesses public access to government budget information, is 41 out of 100, an increase from 21 in 2021. While this score still highlights the need for further progress to reach the 'sufficient' transparency level of 61, it shows huge progress from the country and places Tanzania 75th among the 125 countries surveyed, indicating a notable improvement. Tanzania's new government worked with civil society to improve budget presentation through a new user-friendly website, enhancing transparency (International Budget Partnership, 2023).



COMBATING CORRUPTION TO REBUILD TRUST

Combating corruption is critical for achieving SDG 16. Strong anti-corruption laws and enforcement mechanisms, coupled with whistleblower protection and robust reporting channels, are essential. By reducing corruption, governments can ensure that resources are used effectively and that all citizens have equal access to justice and services (UNODC, 2023).

RWANDA

ANTI-CORRUPTION EFFORTS

Rwanda's battle against corruption provides a significant example of how political will, legal frameworks, and civil society involvement can lead to substantial progress. Despite challenges, Rwanda stands out in sub-Saharan Africa for its efforts to combat corruption, reflecting both successes and ongoing struggles. Rwanda has shown notable performance on the Corruption Perception Index (CPI), remaining among the top five high-scoring countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Transparency International's surveys underscore the high public confidence in the government's anti-corruption efforts, with 72% of Rwandans believing in the effectiveness of these measures, compared to 34% across Africa. Rwanda was one of the first countries to sign and ratify the African Union Convention on Preventing and Combating Corruption (AUCPCC).



The country has made strides in implementing comprehensive anti-corruption laws. Despite these advancements, corruption persists, particularly in the private sector, traffic police, and local government. High-profile prosecutions remain rare, indicating areas needing further attention. Still, Rwanda has seen increased public awareness and legal protections against corruption, leading to more frequent reporting and enforcement of anti-corruption laws. Rwanda's experience demonstrates the importance of comprehensive legal frameworks, political will, and the active involvement of civil society and media in combating corruption. While challenges remain, the progress made offers valuable lessons for other countries in the region and beyond.

Coming to addressing the issue of corruption, CSOs push for transparency by advocating for open budgets and robust oversight mechanisms. Practices like Public Accounts Committees (PACs) – seen in Fiji - analyse government spending to ensure alignment with SDG objectives. Similarly, Supreme Audit Institutions (SAIs) in countries like Brazil and India conduct performance audits, monitoring and reviewing SDG implementation.

Civil society organisations are also crucial in promoting legal frameworks that protect human rights and ensure justice for all citizens - fundamental aspects to building a society where everyone feels safe and secure (OHCHR, 2023).

ARGENTINA

#JUSTLABS

Law impacts nearly every aspect of life, including health, employment, education, housing, and public safety. Yet opaque processes, unequal access, and discrimination create barriers. According to the World Justice Project, two thirds of the world's population face some justice problem with disproportionate impacts on the marginalized and poor.

Launched in Buenos Aires, Argentina, the Open Justice and Innovation Lab (JusLab) aimed to make the justice system more transparent and accessible. This collaborative effort between the city's Council of Magistrates and the Civil Association for Equality and Justice (ACIJ) focused on openness, information access, citizen participation, and accountability. Notably, JusLab tackled the issue of complex legal language by simplifying judicial texts used by judges. Their success in this area, with nearly 100 citizens contributing, underscores the value of citizen involvement and clear communication in achieving a more equitable justice system where everyone can understand their legal rights and navigate the court system effectively.



EXPERIENCES FROM THE FORUS NETWORK

INFID

INDONESIA: STRENGTHENING THE COUNTRY'S JUSTICE SYSTEM

As highlighted by Forus member INFID, the European Union, UNDP, and Indonesia's Supreme Court joined forces to conclude the five-year SUSTAIN project, which aimed to strengthen the country's justice system.

This collaboration provided crucial technical assistance to courts, including training over 6,000 judges and staff. A key achievement was the implementation of the Supreme Court's Whistleblowing System (SIWAS) to improve internal accountability and public trust. Efficiency was bolstered through the development of a case management and tracking system (SIPP), which integrates across courts and jurisdictions. Furthermore, a study visit by the Supreme Court leadership to European nations c partnerships and knowledge sharing on best practices. These combined efforts represent a significant step towards achieving UN SDG 16 on peace, justice, and strong institutions, with the ultimate goal of benefitting all Indonesian citizens, especially vulnerable groups.

ABOUT INFID

Forus member the International NGO Forum on Indonesian Development (INFID) was established in 1985. Its objective is to promote and protect democracy, equality, social justice and peace, and assured and fulfillment of human rights at the national level (Indonesia) and at the global level.



ON STRENGTHENING PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS AND PUBLIC SERVICES FOR ALL

Services should be readily available to all, with clear procedures and easy-to-understand information. Citizens should be able to hold institutions responsible for service quality. We also emphasise responsiveness, equity, and efficiency, advocating for services that adapt to citizen needs and are delivered fairly without wasting resources.

EXPERIENCES FROM THE FORUS NETWORK

VANI

INDIA: REACHING THE COUNTRY'S MOST VULNERABLE

As affirmed by [Voluntary Action Network India \(VANI\)](#) - India's Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (AB-PMJAY) aims to provide free, quality healthcare to the country's poorest and most vulnerable families. Launched in 2018, this scheme offers cashless coverage of up to ₹5 lakh per year for secondary and tertiary care hospitalisation. Over 10 crore families identified through a national socio economic caste census are eligible. Manipur, with over 14 lakh beneficiaries, has 25 hospitals (17 public, 8 private) empanelled for this program, overseen by the State Health Agency Manipur. This initiative, striving to be the world's largest government-funded health program, accelerates India's progress towards Universal Health Coverage (UHC) and SDG 3 (SDG 3).

INDONESIA

“COMPLAINT SYSTEM” & DATA-DRIVEN INITIATIVES

Indonesia established SP4N-LAPOR!, a national complaint handling system, to improve public service delivery through citizen participation. With over 1.5 million reports received by 2019, SP4N-LAPOR! offers a one-stop platform for complaints, information requests, and suggestions. This system increases government accountability and allows citizens to track the progress of their complaints. Data collected through SP4N-LAPOR! is used to inform policy changes and development programs.

The Indonesia One Data Policy aims to standardise data across various government sectors, leveraging data-driven decision-making while enhancing accountability and transparency, ultimately improving the Indonesian governance landscape. Launched by the Indonesian government, this policy ensures that data collected by different ministries and institutions adheres to a unified standard, is easily accessible, and can be easily shared.

Effective governance necessitates responsive public services. These services should be efficient, effective, and responsive to the needs of all citizens. This includes new approaches to citizens' support as well as new ways of using data to monitor inclusive governance.

FCOSS EXPERIENCES FROM THE FORUS NETWORK

FIJI: MICROFINANCE PROGRAMME FOR WOMEN

FCOSS, Forus' member in Fiji, has led a microfinance program for over 15 years. The program has a central role in addressing the gender gap in women's access to financial services. Indeed, traditional banking services were not conducive to small business start-ups, prompting the creation of the program to enhance women's financial literacy and basic business skills. This initiative not only improved women's self-confidence and business growth but also facilitated the formation of community groups that accessed additional resources and training.

SIGHTSAVERS

INCLUSIVE DATA CHARTER

Sightsavers is a co-founding organisation of the Inclusive Data Charter (IDC), a global initiative to mobilise political commitments and create meaningful actions that advance inclusive and disaggregated data. Inclusive data is data that is representative of all people, especially those who are marginalised or underrepresented. Collecting inclusive data enables to better understand who is being left behind and why. This allows to close the gaps that inadvertently facilitate discrimination and bias in design, monitoring, evaluation and decision-making.

In 2022, with support from Sightsavers and Forus member CONGAD, the government of Senegal developed its IDC action plan. Senegal's Inclusive Data Charter (IDC) Action Plan outlines specific measures for 2022-2025 to enhance SDG reporting and monitoring, emphasising inclusivity at all levels and themes, including gender, discrimination, and disability. With a total budget of CFAF 737.3 million, plus an additional CFAF 91.4 billion for the survey program, the plan aims to "leave no one behind" by utilising disaggregated data. Key priorities include localising SDGs through stronger communication and integration into municipal and departmental planning documents, and enhancing data disaggregation by improving data systems at both central and territorial levels, leveraging alternative data sources. Effective implementation requires coordinated efforts between national planning and statistical systems, with significant roles for civil society and multiple stakeholders to ensure citizen participation, monitoring and accountability.



**UN ESPACIO
PARA NOSOTRAS**

PODCAST

CON EQUIPO
PUEBLO, MEXICO

ESPAÑOL

 **forus**

FOTO: MELANIA TORRES/FORUS



SUPPORTING LOCAL INSTITUTIONS

Strengthening local institutions is fundamental for achieving inclusive governance as they serve as the closest layer of governance to the community, ensuring that local needs and aspirations are effectively addressed. Furthermore, strengthening local institutions supports communities in taking ownership of their development process, promotes participatory decision-making, and ensures that policies and programs are tailored to local needs and contexts.

Robust local institutions improve the efficiency of service delivery, directly impacting the quality of life and building trust between citizens and the government. Additionally, strong local institutions are key for local economic development, conflict resolution, and resilience building. They support local enterprises, manage resources sustainably, and create an enabling environment for economic activities.

By being well-versed in local dynamics, they are better equipped to mediate disputes and promote social cohesion. Moreover, their role in preparing for and responding to crises, such as natural disasters and health emergencies, significantly enhances community resilience. Investing in local institutions not only ensures the effective implementation of national policies at the grassroots level but also promotes innovation and localised solutions, ultimately leading to more equitable and sustainable governance.



NEPAL

LOCAL GOVERNANCE AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

Nepal's Local Governance and Community Development Programme (LGCDP) tackles poverty through improved local governance and community engagement. Funded by development partners, LGCDP empowers citizens through participation in local decision-making (over 771,000 engaged, including nearly half a million women) and social issue resolution. Local government accountability is enhanced with citizen forums involved in oversight and grievance redressal mechanisms established in nearly 90% of districts. LGCDP also strengthens local government capacity, with a 29% increase in revenue sources and improved infrastructure quality. Over 66,000 local government staff benefitted from capacity building, and key governance frameworks were integrated into local practices. The program further strengthens policy and institutions by proposing legislative reforms and promoting gender equality. Over 10,500 participants received training on gender-responsive budgeting, and over 80% of local bodies allocated targeted resources for disadvantaged groups. Overall, LGCDP demonstrates significant progress in improving local government responsiveness, and strengthening service delivery in Nepal, with a focus on ensuring equitable development.

KCOC EXPERIENCES FROM THE FORUS NETWORK

FROM GLOBAL TO LOCAL

Global Collaboration and Local Impact - KCOC Korea The WFK program, a partnership between KCOC, the International Development Cooperation NGO, and KOICA, deploys volunteers to support local development projects around the world. Since its inception in 2004 with 33 members, the program has grown to over 3,000 volunteers. These volunteers, with diverse skills and backgrounds, contribute to sustainable development in local communities, focusing on education (SDG 4) and health (SDG 3) – key areas for Korean NGOs. The WFK program supports locally led solutions and contributes to achieving SDG 17: Global Partnerships.

OPEN GOVERNMENT PARTNERSHIP

LOCAL GOVERNMENTS - CLOSER TO CITIZENS

The Open Government Partnership (OGP) Local program recognizes that many open government innovations originate at the local level where governments engage directly with citizens in delivering crucial public services.

The program, launched in 2016 as a pilot with 15 "pioneer" subnational governments, has since expanded to include over 90 local governments committed to developing action plans and partnering with civil society to make their administrations more open, accountable, and responsive to citizens. OGP aims to strategically integrate national and local open government efforts, enhance the scalability and inclusiveness of the Local program itself, and develop a collaborative platform for sharing knowledge and facilitating peer learning among those working on open local governance. By harnessing the resourcefulness and proximity to citizens of local governments, while aligning with national strategies and OGP principles, the Local program can drive impactful open government reforms tailored to community needs.



GLOBAL VOICES RISING
with Dr. Moses Isooba
Executive Director of the Uganda National NGO Forum (UNNGOF)

Shifting the Power

Looking into the **TRANSFORMATIVE** impact of the #ShiftThePower movement.
Analizando el impacto **transformador** del movimiento #ShiftThePower.
Un regard sur l'impact **TRANSFORMATEUR** du mouvement #ShiftThePower.
Analisar o impacto **transformador** do movimento #ShiftThePower.



MAINSTREAMING SDG 16 COMMITMENTS INTO NATIONAL POLICY FRAMEWORKS

Mainstreaming SDG 16 commitments into national policy frameworks is essential for inclusive governance. By integrating these commitments, governments can create safer environments, reduce violence, combat crime, and promote peace and stability, which are fundamental for sustainable development. Strengthening institutions through these commitments ensures effective service delivery, maintains the rule of law, and enhances public trust and legitimacy, which are crucial for inclusive governance.

EXPERIENCES FROM THE FORUS NETWORK

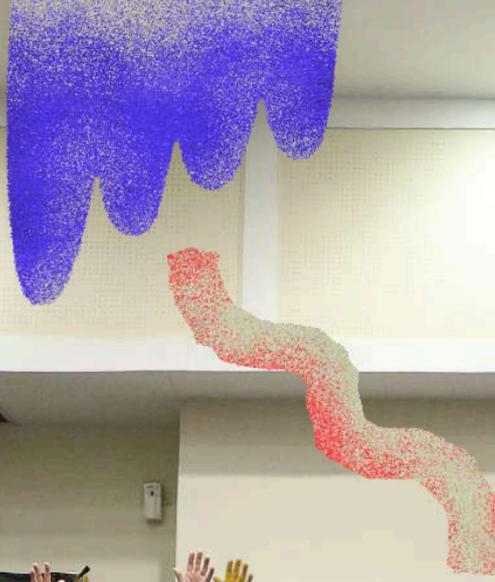
DENMARK

“MAINSTREAMING” SDG 16

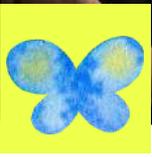
For instance, Denmark has effectively mainstreamed SDG 16 commitments into both domestic and international policies. Their foreign policy strategy, 'The World 2030,' and the domestic 2017 National Action Plan feature nine measurable indicators relevant to SDG 16. This comprehensive integration of SDG 16 into national strategies exemplifies how countries can align domestic policies with international development goals, promoting accountability and transparency.

FIJI: EMBEDDING SDG 16 INTO NATIONAL POLICIES

Additionally, in Fiji, as shared by [PIANGO](#), CSOs have actively promoted the incorporation of international human rights conventions like CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) into national laws, and advocated for establishing helplines for domestic violence and child welfare support, and expanding legal services, such as Fiji's First Hour Procedure Project, which ensures suspects receive prompt legal counsel, fair trials and reducing torture. These examples highlight the importance of embedding SDG 16 commitments into national policies, creating a stable and just environment where sustainable development can thrive, benefiting all citizens and facilitating effective international cooperation.



SECTION 4



RECOMMENDATIONS





- **Promote Inclusive Participation:** Develop legal frameworks and policies that facilitate citizen participation, particularly for groups who have been historically marginalised, as well as of civil society, in decision-making processes at all levels of government and decision-making spaces at local, national, regional and global levels.
- **Encourage Intersectoral Collaboration and Partnerships:** Strengthen partnerships as promoted in SDG17 between government, civil society, the private sector, and international organisations to address governance challenges and achieve sustainable development. Responsibility for ensuring the capacity strengthening of civil society everywhere should be shared between national, regional and global levels, particularly in the context of implementing the 2030 Agenda.
- **Ensure fundamental freedoms and cultivate an enabling environment for Civil society** where CSOs can operate freely, engage in advocacy, and contribute meaningfully to governance. This involves removing legal obstacles, promoting inclusive digital spaces, and supporting flexible funding mechanisms to empower civil society globally.
- **Prioritise Localization for Decision-Making:** Support local communities and institutions by promoting decentralisation and capacity-building initiatives. Encourage the integration of local perspectives into national and global policy frameworks to ensure that governance is responsive to the specific needs and priorities of local populations. Support initiatives that enhance local governance structures and community-driven development, ensuring that all voices are heard and represented in decision-making processes.
- **Ensure Equity and Inclusion:** Implement targeted social programs and affirmative action policies to address the specific needs of vulnerable populations, promoting social justice and cohesion to ensure that no one is left behind.



- **Enhance Transparency and Accountability:** Governments should adopt open data policies and establish robust freedom of information laws to promote transparency and citizen engagement. They should also establish independent anti-corruption bodies and ombudsman offices to hold government officials accountable and build public trust.
- **Uphold the Rule of Law:** Strengthen legal frameworks and ensure the independence of the judiciary to uphold the rule of law and protect human and civic rights.
- **Combat Corruption:** Enforce strong anti-corruption laws, protect whistleblowers, and promote public education on the harms of corruption to create a culture of integrity.
- **Improve Public Services:** Invest in innovative public service delivery models to ensure that essential services reach all citizens, particularly those in remote and underserved areas.
- **Build Effective Institutions:** Focus on capacity strengthening and continuous improvement of government institutions to ensure they are capable, well-resourced, and operate with integrity.
- **Utilise Data-Driven Decision Making:** Leverage big data and analytics to inform policy decisions and improve service delivery, ensuring that policies are responsive to the needs of all citizens while respecting their privacy and digital rights.



MOVING FORWARD

The comprehensive assessment presented in this report shows the crucial role of inclusive governance in advancing SDG 16 and the broader 2030 Agenda. Despite the challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, ongoing global conflicts, and economic uncertainties, the pathway to a more just, peaceful, and inclusive world remains clear: strengthening institutions, ensuring participatory decision-making, and nurturing transparent and accountable governance.

Current progress on SDG 16 is concerning, with none of the 12 targets on track to be achieved by 2030 and significant regressions in peace-related objectives. This situation highlights the urgent need for reinvigorated efforts towards inclusive governance. The importance of inclusive governance cannot be overstated, as it is recognized as both an individual goal and a critical enabler for other SDGs. Case studies from various Forus members and countries illustrate that inclusive governance can lead to better social cohesion, justice, and sustainable development outcomes. Effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions are essential for addressing complex, interrelated sustainable development challenges.

Governments, civil society organisations, and international institutions play distinct yet complementary roles in inclusive governance. Collaborative efforts and multi-stakeholder engagement are crucial for creating resilient and responsive governance frameworks. This tripartite approach is essential to ensure that all voices are heard and that governance structures are adaptable to the needs of diverse populations.

To this end, there is no "one size fits all" policy for inclusive governance and the implementation of SDG 16. Successful approaches often involve a mix of strategies tailored to local contexts and needs. This report acknowledges that while the recommendations are broadly applicable, they must be adapted to the specific circumstances of each country and community. By understanding and addressing local nuances, policymakers can develop more effective and sustainable solutions.



Additionally, while this report focuses on national-level governance, the findings are also relevant to the global context. The diminishing trust in the multilateral system and the need for its reform are critical issues that cannot be ignored. Rebuilding trust and inclusive governance at the national level can contribute to a more resilient and effective global governance system. This alignment is essential for addressing transnational challenges such as climate change, global health crises, and economic inequality.

The recommendations outlined in this report provide a roadmap for policymakers and stakeholders to advance inclusive governance. It is now upon the collective will and concerted action of the global community to transform these recommendations into tangible actions, ensuring that no one is left behind in the journey towards achieving the SDGs.

With more collaboration and by holding stakeholders accountable, we can leverage the power of SDG 16 to propel us back on track towards a more just, equitable, and sustainable future for all. The time to act is now, and with a unified commitment, we can create the conditions necessary for sustainable development and a brighter future for all.

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Find visuals, podcast episodes and social media messages for the report in our social media kit, as well as a 1-pager with key highlights.



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