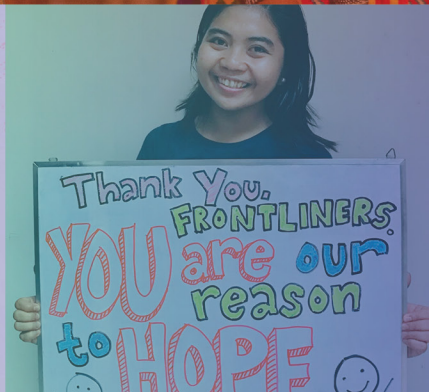


UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME



# The 16 x 16 Initiative

A white icon of a dove with an olive branch in its beak, perched on a gavel, symbolizing peace and justice. The background is a blue and purple abstract design with a map of the world.

**Shaping a new model for meaningful youth engagement in the implementation, monitoring and review of Sustainable Development Goal 16 on peaceful, just and inclusive societies**

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## Key reflections

The first phase of the 16 x 16 Initiative (2019–2021) has provided key reflections for future initiatives on meaningful youth engagement in the processes of implementing, monitoring and reviewing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):

**Recognize young people’s expertise:** Young people have the right to participate and also have a diversity of lived experiences, expertise and ideas to contribute to development efforts and decision-making processes.

**Ensure timing is strategic:** A well-planned initiative can complement formal mechanisms for SDG review and established youth engagement platforms in United Nations processes, thus enhancing the inclusion of a diversity of young people.

**Expand existing channels for youth engagement and open new ones:** By opening new channels and providing a conducive space for collaboration, youth organizations can take the lead in identifying development challenges and strategic priorities for peace.

**Link levels:** Initiatives should go beyond youth engagement in reviews, conferences and the development of policy documents by recognizing and supporting the work of youth organizations, movements and networks at the local level.

**Bridge dimensions:** By bringing together young people who are working on different aspects of the SDGs, with a particular focus on the most marginalized, vulnerable people, integrated youth-led advice can be brought to bear on the future of development.

**Foster co-creation:** Co-creation between the United Nations and youth makes the outcomes of the activities more relevant to the lived experience of young people and can facilitate greater uptake of recommendations.

**Do no harm:** It is critical to uphold the do no harm principle by being sensitive to the divides, inequalities and power imbalances between and among young people and their context. Equally essential is providing safe spaces for the inclusion of young people who are typically at risk of being left behind.

**Build trust:** Fostering an environment of trust and ownership that includes opportunities for mentoring and peer-to-peer exchange can enable effective activities.

**Make timelines and budgets flexible:** Ensuring that the timeline for the use of budget lines is relatively flexible means that new opportunities can be accommodated and that programmes can adapt to new situations.

**16 leaders of youth organizations, networks and movements** and partners in building peaceful, just and inclusive societies: 9 women and 7 men.

[Read more about them here.](#)

**100+ activities** (as of May 2021):

57 events

32 inputs to policy and programming

30 communication and advocacy efforts

# Background on the 16 x 16 Initiative

## Introduction

The 16 x 16 Initiative is supported by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and implemented through the [UNDP Youth Global Programme for Sustainable Development and Peace \(Youth-GPS\)](#). It recognizes, values and supports the positive role that young women and men play as leaders of **16 youth organizations, movements and networks** and as agents of change and partners in building peaceful, just and inclusive societies. The continuous collaboration between UNDP and youth-led organizations through the 16 x 16 Initiative has enabled young people’s leadership in conversations and activities at all levels within the framework of **SDG 16: Peace, justice and inclusion** and other related frameworks.

This paper presents highlights from the first phase of the 16 x 16 Initiative (2019–2021) and looks ahead by reflecting on how best to promote, support and facilitate **meaningful youth engagement** and multi-stakeholder collaboration for the implementation, monitoring and review of the SDGs, particularly SDG 16. In the [Insights, Impacts and Learnings](#) section, it introduces practices and strategies for engaging youth in implementing, monitoring and reviewing the SDGs and the achievements and activities of the 16 x 16 Initiative. This is followed by an overview of the key components of the 16 x 16 Initiative. The [Looking ahead](#) section includes reflections on challenges, key recommendations and models for meaningful youth engagement in implementing, monitoring and reviewing SDG 16 and the 2030 Agenda in general. The intended readership of the paper is development practitioners and advisers that are looking to support youth and multi-stakeholder engagement in national and international processes relating to sustainable development and peace.

**Why “16 x 16”?**  
The name of the 16 x 16 Initiative refers to 16 young leaders of youth organizations advancing SDG 16. It also reflects the notion of the multiplier effect, through which the 16 leaders engage with their own constituencies and networks and foster new SDG 16-focused partnerships that go beyond the initiative itself.

**Objectives of the 16 x 16 Initiative**

- Recognize and make visible young people’s agency and leadership through the “16x16 global campaign”, highlighting the work that 16 youth-led organizations accomplish to advance SDG 16;
- Expand existing channels and open new ones for meaningful youth participation in implementing, monitoring and reviewing SDGs, with a focus on SDG 16 and related frameworks;
- Enhance capacities and youth-inclusive policy and programming, working collaboratively with youth-led organizations.

**Facts**

**Implementer:** UNDP’s Youth Global Programme for Sustainable Development and Peace (Youth-GPS).

**Partners:** The 16 x 16 Initiative was made possible thanks to bilateral funding from the Government of Italy. It has also been supported by the Government of Denmark through the placement of a Junior Programme Officer as part of Youth-GPS.

**Timeline:** April 2019–ongoing (as of July 2021).

**Budget:** US\$200,000 for project activities.

The young participants in the 16 x 16 Initiative and UNDP's Youth Global Programme developed this paper jointly. It builds on the [16 x 16 Dialogue Series](#), which was launched in 2021 to provide space for deeper reflection at regional and global meetings. The paper also draws on best practices and strategies on youth engagement in sustaining peace and sustainable development, a mapping overview of 16 x 16 activities and UNDP's comprehensive approach to youth empowerment. See [annex 1](#) (page 30) for further information on the **framework of analysis**.

## Putting youth engagement at the heart of the United Nations

The [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) recognizes young people as **agents of change**. Likewise, [United Nations Security Council resolutions 2250 \(2015\), 2419 \(2018\) and 2535 \(2020\)](#) on youth, peace and security underline the **positive role that young people play** in sustaining peace. If young people are not able to influence or have a say in their own lives and societies, development will not benefit the whole of society, policymaking will overlook the needs of the affected people and peacebuilding initiatives will only bring short-term outcomes. However, young people are often portrayed as perpetrators or victims of violence and solely as beneficiaries of development. The 16 x 16 Initiative was launched to challenge the persistent negative narratives on the role of youth in peace and development and to amplify the positive contribution of youth-led organizations, movements and networks in building peaceful, just and inclusive societies. The **review of SDG 16** at the [High-Level Political Forum \(HLPF\)](#) in 2019 was a window of opportunity to strengthen youth engagement in a global policy process.

*Promoting inclusive societies also entails actively reaching out to young people, especially those who pertain to groups that have been historically left out of decision-making processes, giving them robust support to understand and (re)shape their realities.*

*Ana Carolina Paixão de Queiroz, 2019*



*Nature needs a seat at the table. If not now, when? If not us, who?*

*Elisha Bano and other young leaders address the audience at the [Equator Prize Ceremony](#) in New York in September 2019*

Credits: UNDP Equator Prize Initiative/Mike Arrison 2019

The 16 x 16 Initiative contributes to these processes, aiming to open new channels and provide a space that encourages **collaboration** between youth and the United Nations, benefiting **policy and programming support** and youth organizations themselves. This illustrates how the 16 x 16 Initiative aims to go beyond youth participation at conferences and meetings. The 16 x 16 Initiative views **youth empowerment** as “an attitudinal, structural and cultural process whereby young people gain the ability, authority and agency to make decisions and implement change in their own lives and in their societies”<sup>i</sup>. The Initiative aimed to leverage UNDP’s presence in around 170 countries and territories by bridging local, national, regional and international levels and bringing together multiple stakeholders, in line with the comprehensive approach put forward in the UNDP Youth Global Programme for Sustainable Development and Peace (see [annex 2](#), page 30).

Regions and countries

[Latin America and the Caribbean](#): Brazil, Honduras, Jamaica, Venezuela

[Eastern Europe and the CIS](#): Bosnia and Herzegovina & Moldova/Ukraine

[Africa](#): Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Togo

[Asia Pacific](#): Fiji, Nepal, the Philippines, Solomon Islands

[Arab States](#): Egypt, Tunisia

*For so long, young people have been excluded from fully representing their voices in any SDG. Doing this will reflect the inclusivity of SDG 16.*

*Phillip Subu Taungani, Malaita Youth Caucus, [interview](#) at the preparatory conference on SDG 16, Rome 2019*



Neville Charlton in a training session for youth on human rights, leadership, and effective advocacy.

Credits: Youth Inspiring Positive Change

## An initiative to support 16 young leaders advancing SDG 16

Youth is not a homogeneous group, and young people's various **identities**—such as their class, ethnicity, tribe and gender—may combine differently from culture to culture to shape young people's lived experiences. The 16 young leaders illustrate the many different youth efforts that are contributing to building more peaceful, just and inclusive societies. These efforts include fostering peace education, promoting the rights of women and marginalized groups and enhancing youth engagement in local governance. The inclusive but rigorous **selection process** for the 16 x 16 Initiative deliberately sought to reflect this diversity among the leaders chosen to participate. To do so, UNDP engaged a broad range of partnerships and support from various United Nations entities and youth constituencies and networks to ensure the call for applications reached and mobilized the widest possible audience of young people from across the world. While the 16 x 16 Initiative set out to support the ongoing work of the 16 women and men chosen to participate in it, it has not channelled funding to support youth organizations' activities. Instead, it has provided recognition and support for their work. The call for applications to participate in the 16 x 16 Initiative and preparatory meetings clearly stated the **type of support** that youth organizations would receive through it. This was a way of managing expectations and providing a common understanding of the possibilities and limitations of the 16 x 16 Initiative.

### Fostering collaboration, trust and ownership through an inclusive selection process

The 16 young women and men were selected from a pool of 453 longlisted candidates from a total of 1330 applicants.

#### SELECTION

The **call for application** was shared by United Nations entities and youth networks and launched at the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) Youth Forum 2019.

The **selection committee** consisted of the UNDP Youth Team, Global Policy Network and the Major Group for Children and Youth (MGCY), advised by UNDP regional youth focal points.

The **objectives** and **possibilities** of the 16 x 16 Initiative were expressed clearly to ensure that applicants' expectations were realistic.

The **selection criteria** included gender balance, geographical representation, special needs/marginalized groups, scope and representativity of the youth organization/movement/network, and sectors of work/dimensions of SDG 16.

Use of a detailed **scoring system**: experience, motivation, and acquaintance with the implementation of/follow-up on SDG 16.

#### POST-SELECTION

All **applicants** received a response.

Longlisted candidates were invited to participate in an **online consultation** on youth and SDG 16, which fed into the Rome Youth Call-to-Action led by the group of candidates who were selected to take part in the 16 x 16 Initiative as an input for the High-Level Political Forum process.



# 16 x 16 Initiative



## 2019

Selection of the 16 x 16 participants  
**Preparatory Conference on SDG16 in Rome**  
including youth pre-workshop, video, and campaign

**High-Level Political Forum 2019**

16 x 16 blog series

**Open debate of the Security Council**

on youth, peace and security

**SDG Summit 2019**

Collaboration on youth-inclusive policy and programming



## 2021

**16 x 16 Dialogue Series**

- Asia-Pacific: *The role of inclusive governance in sustaining the future of the planet and peace.*
- Latin America and the Caribbean: *Youth-inclusive policies and meaningful youth engagement that leaves no youth behind.*
- ECIS: *Meaningful youth participation in evaluation and decision-making processes at all levels.*
- Arab States: *Meaningful youth engagement in decision-making processes and the role of peace education.*
- Africa: *Strong partnerships for progress towards peaceful, just and inclusive societies.*
- Global: *Youth leadership for peaceful, just and inclusive societies*

16 x 16 Blog Series

Collaboration on youth-inclusive policy and programming

## 16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS



## 2020

**Online 16 x 16 meetings**

16 x 16 Blog Series

**Ambassadorial meeting: Peacebuilding Commission**

Human Rights Day: Photo Story: *Meet the 16 x 16: young people defending human rights and advancing SDG16!*

**CoP Chat: Youth Standing Up for Human Rights**

Participation in consultations on the future of governance, protection, inclusive political processes, civic space.

**Future of Development conversation**

with Amartya Sen and Achim Steiner  
Input to strategic plans of international organizations



## Why is a focus on SDG 16 so vital?

The 16 x 16 Initiative has provided support for the agency of young peacebuilders, human rights activists and development practitioners by bringing them together with decision makers, partners and stakeholders. It has created a space that enables young people's experience and expertise to inform policy and programming, thus promoting an enabling environment for youth engagement in the process of building peaceful, just and inclusive societies.

**SDG 16** commits Member States to promoting peaceful, inclusive societies for sustainable development, providing access to justice for all and building effective, accountable, inclusive institutions at all levels. SDG 16 represents a critical opportunity for advancing **youth empowerment** by guaranteeing fundamental freedoms, ensuring accountability and opening up decision-making processes to youth participation. Key areas of action for accelerating progress towards SDG 16 include a “whole of society” approach, a “whole of government” approach, investment in effective implementation by linking levels and dimensions, and measurement and monitoring that ensures no one is left behind<sup>ii</sup>. Youth peace work plays a role as the “**connecting tissue**”<sup>iii</sup> within and between communities and by bridging the local, national, regional and global levels.

SDG 16 is both a goal in itself and an enabler of the entire **2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**. This has given rise to the concept of SDG 16+, as a way of linking SDG 16 to the other SDGs<sup>iv</sup>. For instance, SDG 10 (reducing **inequalities**) relates to peaceful, just and inclusive societies through targets on social, economic and political inclusion, policies for equality and safe migration. Inequalities accumulate throughout life and persist across generations. The **climate crisis** and the **COVID-19 crisis** are further exacerbating existing inequalities, which impact the lives and agency of young people<sup>v</sup>. This is bringing youth to the centre of both SDG 16+ and efforts to prevent violent conflict and strengthen inclusive governance. **Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs)** represent an opportunity to transcend barriers to youth engagement by establishing new partnerships with young people and leveraging existing ones<sup>vi</sup>. It is also an opportunity to promote meaningful participation in national development planning and decision-making processes, which is key for the sustainability of partnerships and outcomes relating to peaceful, just and inclusive societies.

*For tomorrow, act today! We, young people, will have to take ownership of all the targets of SDG 16 in order to protect the future as a key player in the development and promotion of values of peace and justice. We must participate in the public and political life of our countries by working with institutions to make them more effective.*

*Alice Goza, 2019*

## Youth engagement in SDG 16 implementation, monitoring and review

The development of the 16 x 16 Initiative was guided by **principles, strategies** and **best practices** for meaningful youth engagement—see [annex 3](#) (page 32). These sought to ensure that it would substantially enhance the conversations on peace, justice and inclusion, spark collaboration and impact not only global policy discussions but also efforts towards creating peaceful, just and inclusive societies at the local and national levels. The 16 x 16 Initiative also aimed to build on **engagement mechanisms** that are already in place, enhance reach beyond established youth networks and complement formal processes for implementing, monitoring and reviewing SDGs. It also aimed to facilitate the **co-creation** of activities by the young leaders and UNDP.

Young people play a crucial role in achieving sustainable development<sup>vii</sup>, peace and security<sup>viii</sup>, and human rights<sup>x</sup>. Young people are contributing to **SDG implementation** as development practitioners, social workers, peacebuilders, researchers, public servants and human rights defenders, among other roles. They are engaging in **SDG reviews** as young evaluators and researchers, youth delegates, civil society representatives, through actions that include participating in delegations to the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF), organizing national accountability platforms, monitoring implementation, conducting research, providing input for Voluntary National Reviews and participating in national development planning.

However, there are still many **barriers** to youth engagement in implementing, monitoring and reviewing SDGs. Young people experience **exclusion**<sup>x</sup>, face **discrimination** and lack access to civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights<sup>xi</sup>. A consequence of these barriers is a system that is not youth-inclusive and limits countries' potential to achieve the SDGs by 2030. These barriers relate to the following issues:

- **Civic space** is critical for the meaningful participation of people and groups in decisions about their society, which helps prevent violence and increase resilience<sup>xii</sup>. However, civic space is shrinking in many societies, a trend that has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis<sup>xiii</sup>. The threats that young people face in civic space include sociocultural, financial, political, legal, digital and physical threats<sup>xiv</sup>.
- A lack of **participation** is recognized by youth as a major barrier to following up on the political commitment to concrete actions for SDG 16, as was made evident during the youth consultation hosted by the Major Group for Children and Youth and UNDP in 2019 (see table, page 13).

*Evaluation is the key to the engagement of youth in decision-making processes. Youth should be aware of ways to participate meaningfully. Evaluators should understand how to engage youth. Young and emerging evaluators are the liaison by supporting both.*  
Antonina Rishko-Porcescu, EvalYouth, 2019

- **Climate change** is further threatening the rights of future generations. Young people are demanding urgent climate action, but more spaces must be created for youth to have a voice in decisions about the future<sup>xv</sup>.
- Many **SDG 16 indicators** lack disaggregated data, which limits the available information about the specific situation of young people and youth perceptions<sup>xvi</sup>.
- The **diversity** of young people is often overlooked, limiting understandings of the roles of young people in society and their interaction with conflict dynamics<sup>xvii</sup>.
- Youth organizations, movements and initiatives have limited access to tailored, accessible and sustainable **funding**<sup>xviii</sup>.

## Insights, impacts and learnings

### The 16 x 16 Initiative—Phase 1 (2019–2021)

The following sections introduce the **components** of the 16 x 16 Initiative and reflect on the lessons learned in relation to meaningful youth engagement in implementing, monitoring and reviewing the SDGs, particularly as part of the SDG 16+ process. These sections show how the 16 x 16 Initiative was launched with the Government of Italy during the lead-up to the review of SDG 16 in 2019 with the primary goal of supporting young people’s participation in the conference. They track how the 16 x 16 Initiative then grew beyond those initial objectives to pilot a new **model** for youth engagement and contribute to accelerating progress towards SDG 16 with youth at the core. They also provide insight into how an initiative with a limited budget (\$200,000 for all project activities, in this case) can foster substantial achievements if it is implemented in a timely manner and complements and builds on what is already in place.



The 16 x 16 participants at the SDG 16 conference in Rome 2019. Credits: René Díaz

## Meaningful youth participation in SDG 16 review

In 2019, UNDP identified a need for increased participation of young people in the **review of SDG 16**, which was to take place at the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF). The 16 x 16 Initiative was designed to address that need, among other objectives, with generous support from the Government of Italy. UNDP partnered with the Major Group for Children and Youth, United Nations entities and other partners to fill the gap in the **direct participation** of young people in the SDG 16 review, increase **outreach** to youth organizations, movements and networks and **open a channel** for the inclusion of their expertise and experiences in the review of SDG 16.

The young leaders of youth organizations, movements and networks participating in the 16 x 16 Initiative attended a **conference** in preparation for the United Nations High-Level Political Forum 2019, [Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies: SDG 16 implementation and the path towards leaving no one behind](#), which was held in Rome on 27–29 May 2019 and included a preparatory **youth workshop**. Three of the young leaders also participated in the [HLPF in New York](#), July 2019, including a speaking engagement at the main SDG 16 side event, [SDG 16+ and the Future We Want](#). A further two young leaders attended the [74th General Session of the United Nations General Assembly](#), including the side event entitled Reconsidering the Role of Peacebuilding in Delivering SDG 16. In addition, some of the participants in the 16 x 16 Initiative took part in key

### Key findings from the online consultation on Youth and SDG 16 in 2019

Some 270 young people from 80 countries across all regions of the world responded to an online survey on youth and SDG 16. Most respondents were from youth organizations, movements or networks. The Major Group for Children and Youth and UNDP hosted the consultation in advance of the preparatory conference on SDG 16 that took place in Rome in 2019.

#### Key takeaways:

- The lack of participation (especially of youth) in decision-making is the main barrier to the implementation of the SDGs, particularly SDG 16.
- The main gaps and barriers to youth empowerment for peaceful, just and inclusive societies are exclusion from decision-making, development and peace processes and the lack of recognition of youth-specific needs.
- Support for young people can be improved through better, more accessible funding, capacity development and partnerships.
- Young people are taking the lead in implementing, monitoring and following up on SDG 16 by mobilizing and organizing youth, engaging in evaluation and monitoring, advocating, raising awareness and partnering with stakeholders.
- The unrestricted participation of women in politics and society must be supported and spaces to enable this must be fostered.
- Partnerships and spaces for dialogue with all stakeholders—particularly with local and national governments and grassroots organizations—are important for peaceful, inclusive societies.
- Support for young peacebuilders will increase trust and foster inclusivity.
- Civic space needs to be protected and promoted.
- Supporting accountability platforms and efforts led by civil society is important for building just societies.
- Inclusive policies should be prioritized, as should listening to the voices of the most vulnerable and marginalized.

Insights from this consultation process informed the Rome Youth Call-to-Action on SDG 16.

activities run by the [SDG 16+ community](#), such as the [SDG 16+ Forum Annual Showcase in Timor-Leste 2019](#) and the DFID-hosted workshop on the Global SDG 16+ Architecture in 2019. At these conferences, UNDP worked with the organizers of formal events and sessions to make space for the 16 x 16 participants to share their experiences and expertise alongside other participants. The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) and the Government of Italy were crucial in ensuring a seat for the 16 x 16 participants at the preparatory conference on SDG 16 in Rome. Together, they ensured the young leaders' **participation**, which led to the inclusion of their expertise in the reporting and review processes and the mechanisms on accountability, reintegration, informal peace education, dialogue and the prevention of violent extremism. In doing so, the 16 x 16 participants draw on local experiences to inform global conversations and showed how young people are often the **connecting tissue** that bridges different levels and groups. The 16 x 16 participants also met with senior leaders from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, the Assistant Secretary-General and Director for the UNDP Crisis Bureau, Asako Okai, and the Special Adviser of the Secretary-General on the Responsibility to Protect, Karen Smith, among others. Some participants also attended the civil society workshop in preparation for the conference. These meetings expanded the networks of the 16 x 16 participants and provided opportunities for them to inform key leaders directly about peace priorities and local conditions.

A **youth workshop** was held in advance of the preparatory conference on SDG 16 at the premises of the International Development Law Organization to create a space for the exchange of knowledge and experiences, spark collaboration and develop youth-led recommendations. This highly interactive workshop was co-facilitated by the young leaders and UNDP and also served as a space for trust-building. The young leaders have since noted that the workshop was fundamental to their continuing collaboration in the context of the 16 x 16 Initiative.

The 16 young leaders consulted their organizations and other young people to inform their **policy recommendations**. They led the development of the [Rome Youth Call-to-Action: Promoting and Supporting Youth-Inclusive and Youth-Led SDG 16 Implementation, Monitoring and Accountability](#) (see table, page 15), which urges all relevant stakeholders and partners to take bold, decisive action on SDG 16 and empower young people. The call-to-action was developed at the youth preparatory workshop in Rome and draws on relevant resources and the **online consultation** with young people on SDG 16 that was hosted by the Major Group for Children and Youth and the UNDP Youth Global Programme (see table, page 13). The call-to-action was presented during the closing segment of the preparatory conference on SDG 16 in Rome. It was mentioned in the outcome document of the preparatory conference and has since been drawn upon by the young leaders on other occasions, such as the main side event on SDG 16+ at the High-Level Political Forum 2019.

## Rome Youth Call-to-Action

Rome, Italy, 29 May 2019

The call-to-action urges all relevant stakeholders and partners to take bold, decisive action on SDG 16 and empower young people. It sets forward key recommendations on:

- Peaceful societies
- Just societies
- Inclusive societies
- Meaningful youth participation in monitoring, reviewing and following up on SDG 16 and accountability for this
- Equal partnerships and financing (linkages with SDG 17)

The 16 x 16 participants led the development of the call-to-action, with inputs from the Major Group for Children and Youth and a global survey on youth and SDG 16.

A few weeks after the SDG 16 conference in Rome, the majority of the 16 x 16 participants organized events in their **communities** and organizations on SDG 16, drawing upon the call-to-action. They were not asked to organize such events but did so on their own initiative to share their experience with their peers. These events explored key messages from the discussions and how these were relevant to their respective contexts. This is an example of how youth actively **localize SDG 16** and other global frameworks that they engage in at international meetings.

The preparatory conference on SDG 16 in Rome in 2019 was a timely opportunity for the 16 x 16 Initiative to expand the existing channels for youth participation in reviewing SDG 16. It achieved this by embedding the 16 x 16 Initiative within the **official review process** of SDG 16 and promoting collaboration with established youth constituencies and the Major Group for Children and Youth, which is a **formal mechanism** for young people to engage in United Nations processes. The 16 x 16 Initiative also opened **new channels** for youth participation in the review process as it included young leaders of organizations, movements and initiatives that were not yet part of these processes, created a space for collaboration, engaged a broader range of young people through an online consultation, facilitated the development of youth-led recommendations within the framework of SDG 16, and brought these recommendations to the attention of decision makers, partners and stakeholders. In this way, the 16 x 16 Initiative complemented existing mechanisms and connected formal and informal processes at multiple levels.

## Young people as bridge-builders

The 16 x 16 Initiative went beyond activities concerning the review of SDG 16 in 2019. It **connected** dimensions such as peace and security, the future of multilateralism and civic engagement in public affairs. The 16 x 16 participants engaged in other meetings, including workshops with the SDG 16+ community, meetings in preparation for celebrations of the [75th anniversary of the United Nations](#), an [Ambassadorial-Level Meeting of the Peacebuilding Commission on Youth](#),

[Peace and Security](#), and a [United Nations Security Council Open Debate on Youth, Peace and Security](#).

The 16 x 16 Initiative connected processes and platforms at different levels to further youth engagement in building peaceful, just and inclusive societies. It brought together insights from mechanisms such as the [ECOSOC Youth Forum 2019](#) with the formal review of SDG 16. It helped take youth-led recommendations to the broader SDG 16 community while also raising awareness of SDG 16 among youth constituencies. In 2019, the Major Group for Children and Youth institutionalized its own work on SDG 16 by launching a working group on this.



*We acknowledge the urgency in taking charge of our future. This is why UNSCR 2250 and 2419 on youth, peace and security – if fully implemented – have the power to transform the lives of young people and societies.*  
*Wevyn Muganda delivering [remarks](#) at the UN Security Council, 2019*

The 16 x 16 Initiative also contributed to multilevel policy advocacy and engagement. For instance, its young leaders engaged in regional events that included a United Nations consultation on [youth, peace and security in the Western Balkans](#), a conference on counter-terrorism in Africa, and an EU workshop on the role of women in transition processes. Young leaders also engaged in country-level activities, such as a workshop on youth, peace and security policies in Kenya. Likewise, UNDP Jamaica published a [blog entry](#) by Neville Charlton, founder of Youths Inspiring Positive Change, which described the experience of being a young participant in the preparatory conference on SDG 16. In addition, the [16 x 16 Dialogue Series](#) in 2021 brought together the 16 x 16 participants with partners and UNDP practitioners from country, regional and global offices for a conversation on youth leadership in building peaceful, just and inclusive societies, which gave rise to insights for youth-inclusive and youth-responsive policy and programming. The young leaders not only shared their own experiences and expertise but also managed to connect different policy debates.

### **A conducive space for youth leadership**

In conversations on lessons learned, the young leaders of the 16 x 16 Initiative shared how their participation has had an impact on both their organizations and them as individuals. Some young leaders saw their partnerships and networks expand, fostering new collaborations on peace, justice and inclusion at the national, regional or global levels. By participating in events and



conferences both online and offline, the young leaders connected with other young leaders and decision makers, partners and stakeholders and increased awareness of their work and organizations. For instance, Emmanuel Ametepey of Youth Advocates Ghana described how his organization benefited from greater visibility and an expanded network in the form of greater interest from partners and an increased perception of the organization’s credibility. Some young leaders highlighted the role of the 16 x 16 Initiative in providing access to relevant information that strengthened their development, peace and human rights work. Specifically, access to information—such as on policy developments or funding opportunities for local peacebuilding organizations—helped increase the capacity of the youth organizations, movements and networks that the young leaders had ties with.



Social impact workshop organized by René Díaz and Helping Honduras. Credits: Helping Honduras

Some of the young leaders described how being a part of the 16 x 16 Initiative encouraged them to continue youth-led activities despite facing challenges such as exclusion from decision-making processes, a lack of accessible funding and crisis situations in their country. Listening to the experiences of their peers—who were often facing similar challenges and identifying solutions to these—was an incentive for them to continue working towards peaceful, just and inclusive societies. At the individual level, some young leaders said their confidence had increased because other young people and the United Nations believed in their work.

Peer exchange and the coordination of activities are fostered through regular online meetings with the 16 x 16 participants and UNDP. At these meetings, the participants share updates on their work, which enables UNDP to connect them with relevant partners within and beyond the United Nations. The meetings primarily provide a platform for the young leaders to exchange information on the opportunities and challenges facing youth-led organizations. The young leaders come from different backgrounds but share the aspiration for a more peaceful, just and inclusive world. Some young leaders also described the continuous support they received from UNDP’s Youth Team in New York as a mentoring process that built their confidence in youth-led efforts and gave them renewed energy to work in their respective contexts.

During the COVID-19 crisis, the regular meetings of the 16 x 16 Initiative provided a space for participants to share challenges and contingency plans to enable them to continue their activities, along with insights into the impact of the COVID-19 crisis upon youth leadership. Raising awareness on the latter issue became the topic of a blog post they drafted with the UNDP Youth Team in New York, [Young people go the extra mile to advance SDG16 during the COVID-19 crisis](#).

The recognition of the 16 x 16 participants' work has had a positive impact on their organizations. The 16 x 16 Initiative seems to have fostered an environment of trust and ownership and brought opportunities for mentoring and peer-to-peer exchange, which has enabled other components of the initiative. Young people's trust in the United Nations is not a given: as the independent progress study on youth, peace and security (2018) shows, many young people do not trust governance systems. The 16 x 16 Initiative is testimony to how co-creation and trust-building can enable meaningful youth engagement.

*Peace is a culture and it needs a strong base to be built. Youth and education are the master keys to achieving a society in peace.*  
*Karim Habib, 2019*

### Recognition of young people as agents of change

The first United Nations Security Council resolution on youth, peace and security, [UNSCR 2250 \(2015\)](#), emphasized the importance of changing the narrative from seeing young people as perpetrators or victims of violence to seeing them as critical agents of change in the process of maintaining international peace and security. The [2030 Agenda](#) also recognizes the positive role that young people play as agents of change for sustainable development. One objective of the 16 x 16 Initiative was to support this change in the narrative by recognizing and making visible young people's agency and leadership through the **16 x 16 campaign**.



In the ensuing social media campaign and blog series, the 16 x 16 participants were featured on UNDP's social media channels, using #16x16 and highlighting the work that youth do to advance SDG 16. The primary channel was the [UNDP4Youth Twitter](#) account, which has 76K followers (as of May 2021) and featured regular posts on the 16 x 16 participants' activities as well as quote cards and videos. Videos were also shared through the [UNDP4Youth YouTube channel](#). UNDP

Administrator Achim Steiner and the leadership of UNDP's Global Policy Network also recognized the work of the young leaders and the 16 x 16 Initiative through their own social media channels. Some of the young leaders participated in other communication activities such as a [podcast](#) by UN DESA on youth action and political engagement at the local level in the Philippines, among others.

[The 16 x 16 blog series](#) recognizes and makes visible the leadership, agency and visions of the 16 young people in the different areas of SDG 16. It is hosted on the global knowledge platform [youth4peace.info](#) and shared on social media and through newsletters such as [SDG 16 digest](#). The blog series was complemented by a photo story, [Meet the 16 x 16: young people defending human rights and advancing SDG16!](#), which was published by UNDP in connection with International Human Rights Day 2019. Featuring the work of the 16 x 16 participants raised awareness of their stories and today's development challenges and solutions. It also highlighted the positive role that young people play in sustaining peace and leaving no one behind.

Not only did the campaign highlight the role of young people as agents of change, it also underlined some key challenges of our time and innovative approaches to addressing these. These include the role of young women in bridging divides within communities, how youth-led evaluation can lead to more accurate understandings of development challenges, the role of youth in pushing for transparency and anti-corruption, the centrality of the principle of leaving no one behind and the need to promote and protect civic space. In this way, the 16 x 16 Initiative contributed to keeping up the momentum for implementing SDG 16 and recognizing it as an enabler of the entire 2030 Agenda.

*The participation and inclusion of young women in peacebuilding must be a priority on the world agenda. Our role is fundamental, not only as young women but as citizens with equal rights and equal opportunities.*

*Dalia Francheska Márquez Añez, [When #YouthLead on Women, Peace and Security](#), campaign by the Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth, 2020*

## **A United Nations organization that leads by example**

Young people are often excluded from decision-making and peace processes<sup>xix</sup>. Generic, international expertise on peacebuilding is often prioritized at the expense of local knowledge on drivers of peace, development and conflict<sup>xx</sup>. The objectives of the 16 x 16 Initiative include expanding existing channels and opening new ones for youth to influence policy, programming and strategies. It set out to achieve this by leveraging the expertise and experience of the 16 x 16 participants to contribute to inclusive governance, promoting policy choices that consider the whole of society and development solutions that are locally driven and context-specific. As a group, the 16 x 16 participants embody local knowledge from across the world and have broad-reaching expertise in building peaceful, just and inclusive societies. Their work has ranged from

supporting the most marginalized people in rural areas of Honduras to advocating for accountable and transparent governance in Malawi, from fostering social cohesion through dealing with the past in Bosnia and Herzegovina to promoting inclusive peace and women’s participation in the Philippines, and from initiating peace education through the arts in Egypt to providing a space for SDG follow-up in Ghana.

Through the 16 x 16 Initiative, young people became part of global efforts to reimagine governance. In December 2019, three of the 16 x 16 participants attended a [Wilton Park Dialogue on Youth and the State](#), which aimed to identify promising practices for improving the relations between these two camps and analysed why these are often characterized by fear, mistrust and resentment as well as misleading assumptions. The 16 x 16 participants were also involved in formulating the strategic direction of the United Nations and other international organizations and took part in key discussions on the future of development and multilateralism. For instance, they contributed to discussions that fed into the strategic plans of UNDP (2022–2025) and the International Development Law Organization, took part in preparations for UN75, helped formulate the priorities of the SDG 16+ community and participated in a conversation with UNDP Administrator Achim Steiner and Professor Amartya Sen on the future of development. The young leaders called for inclusive governance, the prevention of violence and the tackling of inequalities and climate change. They also made recommendations based on the reality of life in different societies.



Future of development: Conversation between UNDP Administrator Achim Steiner, Professor Amartya Sen, Lynrose Jane D. Genon and Charles Kajoloweka.

The young leaders have also supported UNDP’s own organizational readiness to work with and for young people towards sustainable development by increasing understandings of the challenges faced by youth organizations working on peace, justice and inclusion. The group informed policy and programming support through activities such as reviewing the [Youth, Peace and Security Programming Handbook \(United Nations and Folke Bernadotte Academy, 2021\)](#) and a UNDP guidance note on youth and COVID-19. The 16 x 16 participants also engaged with UNDP practitioners and partners through communities of practice chats and e-discussions on topics

such as human rights, monitoring and reporting on SDG 16 and youth, peace and security. In 2021, the 16 x 16 Dialogue Series facilitated exchanges between UNDP and the young leaders on country-specific and regional trends for youth leadership in building peaceful, just and inclusive societies. A better understanding of the specific situation of young people and the nature of youth organizations can improve international organizations' ability to engage in genuine partnerships and support the protection and promotion of civic space.

*Witnessing the collective and individual journeys of the 16 x 16 young leaders has been fascinating and inspiring. The positive impact that these young women and men have made on development, human rights and peace at all levels, including in the context of the COVID-19 response has been power in action—from grassroots youth-led spaces to global peace dialogues, from VNR processes to youth-led anti-corruption campaigns, from the UN Security Council to schools, they have raised their voices, spoken truth to power, proposed tangible recommendations and solutions, built inclusive partnerships and taken action, and they have often gone the extra mile. Young people embody leadership and resilience.*

*Noëlla Richard, UNDP Youth Global Programme Manager, 2021*

Through the 16 x 16 Initiative, young people have also advised UNDP and partners on how policy and programming can be more youth-inclusive and youth-responsive, which in turn enhances the capacity to leave no one behind. Their engagement in events and activities have contributed to changing the conversation, placing the focus on the development challenges that communities face, along with context-specific solutions that put people at the centre. Collaborative work and co-creation have been at the core of the partnership between the 16 x 16 young leaders and UNDP, which has enabled mutual learning. In Kenya, UNDP has recently established the first Youth Sounding Board and Wevyn Muganda, the 16 x 16 young leader from Kenya, contributed to the inception workshop, bringing her experience on human rights, COVID-19 and youth empowerment to the table. In Jamaica, UNDP expanded collaboration with Youths Inspiring Positive Change Jamaica through the [Amplifying Youth Voice and Action](#) project, which aims to strengthen mechanisms to ensure youth participation in decision-making and policymaking to improve citizen security and safety.

## Key components of the 16 x 16 Initiative

INCLUDE	
<i>A mechanism to enhance youth participation</i>	A complementary mechanism increasing youth participation by connecting informal and formal processes, linking local grassroots organizations with national and global networks and engaging people who are often excluded from policy conversations.
<i>Cutting-edge youth-inclusive policy and programming advice</i>	Opening channels for youth-led advice to reach the strategic direction of international organizations to enhance youth-sensitive and youth-responsive policy and programming. An opportunity to include youth experts who bring knowledge about communities and context-specific solutions to development challenges but tend to be excluded from decision-making processes.
<i>Inclusive selection process</i>	Selection criteria that ensure diversity and facilitate forming a group with a broad range of expertise and experience, with a particular focus on young people with special needs and the most marginalized. Clear articulation of the purpose of the initiative to manage expectations. Collaboration with youth constituencies in the selection process.
INTEGRATE	
<i>Broader community</i>	Engagement of young people beyond the selected group through consultations, e-discussions and workshops to identify priorities and key issues. Qualified candidates that applied but were not selected for the 16 x 16 Initiative can be re-engaged through broader consultation. Broad engagement can increase the accountability of initiatives and the uptake of recommendations.
<i>Multilevel approach</i>	A multilevel approach can bridge the gap between the expertise and experience of local youth organizations, movements and networks and regional and international policy processes, contributing to inclusive approaches in sustaining peace and leaving no one behind in development.
INSPIRE	
<i>Global campaign to amplify stories and youth voices</i>	Communication products: 16 x 16 blog series, biographies, quote cards, videos, reports. Social media channels: Twitter, YouTube. Other channels: newsletters and networks related to governance and peacebuilding and a platform to host information.
IGNITE	
<i>Continuous exchange and collaboration</i>	Regular meetings (online or offline) help create a network and promote the co-creation of activities. Conference participation and in-person preparatory workshops are key, which could be further strengthened with follow-up workshops.
<i>Trust-building and nurturing the relationship</i>	Strengthen partnerships by prioritizing trust-building and ownership. Peer-to-peer exchange sparks new ideas and encourages the continuation of activities. Mentorship provides additional opportunities.
<i>Co-creation and exploration</i>	Young people co-creating activities with the United Nations makes outcomes more relevant to their lived experience and facilitates greater uptake of recommendations. Young people can co-design activities, facilitate meetings and identify key issues and indicators.

# Future directions

## Youth leadership for peaceful, just and inclusive societies

The Preparatory Conference on SDG 16 in Rome in May 2019 provided a timely opportunity to bring young people, United Nations entities, Member States and other stakeholders together. It was also a chance to:

- elevate the role of young people in leading progress on the implementation of SDG 16 on peaceful, just and inclusive societies;
- identify good examples of youth empowerment and participation;
- and address the challenges and barriers for meaningful youth participation caused by the exclusion of young agents of change and the violation of the human rights of youth.

The 16 x 16 Initiative connected United Nations processes and SDG review with youth-led activities at the local and national levels. By doing so, it connected formal and informal processes relating to building peaceful, just and inclusive societies at different levels, and its impact went beyond reviews and conferences.

The 16 x 16 Initiative contributed to the implementation of the [United Nations Youth2030 Strategy](#), particularly the thematic areas on engagement, participation and advocacy, youth and human rights and peace- and resilience-building. It also benefited the foundational areas of the strategy relating to United Nations Staff awareness and capacity on youth-related issues (see figure below).



Furthermore, the 16 x 16 Initiative has contributed to the implementation of the [United Nations Security Council resolutions 2250 \(2015\), 2419 \(2018\) and 2535 \(2020\)](#) on youth, peace and security by recognizing the critical role that young people play in sustaining peace. It also supported the institutionalization of the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda through activities seeking increased capacity for youth-sensitive and youth-responsive policy and programming relating to peace and justice.

## Challenges for meaningful youth engagement

The first phase of the 16 x 16 Initiative encountered some **challenges** for meaningful youth engagement, including limited awareness of youth-related issues among partners and stakeholders, insufficient investment in young people as agents of change, discrimination on the basis of age, and exclusion of young people from peace- and decision-making processes.

As outlined in the United Nations Youth2030 Strategy and the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda, the capacity to respond to youth needs and aspirations needs to be increased. While the 16 x 16 Initiative helped grow the **capacity for youth-responsive programming and policy**, it also reflected the ongoing need for this, as some youth-led recommendations could have had greater uptake if there had been a more enabling environment.

It takes **time** to foster a conducive space for meaningful youth engagement and facilitate the co-creation of activities. The 16 x 16 Initiative benefited from the work of staff within UNDP, including a Junior Professional Officer funded by the Government of Denmark to coordinate its daily activities, but a greater number of activities could have been conducted with more **resources**. This reflects a general trend: there is insufficient investment in youth, peace and security,<sup>xxi</sup> and youth organizations operate with small budgets<sup>xxii</sup>.

Some specific issues pertain to working with and for young people. Many social identities define young people, but the fact that by definition young people eventually transition out of the **youth group** can make it difficult to show the societal and institutional change originating from such initiatives. This also relates to how we **measure the impact** of peace and development projects and the lack of age-disaggregated data.



Samira Baručija delivered remarks to the Peacebuilding Commission and highlighted the consequences of a lack of reconciliation and dealing with the past. She urged Member States to support youth peace efforts and partner with youth groups and networks.

Ambassadorial Meeting of the Peacebuilding Commission on Youth, Peace and Security, February 2020.



Young people face multiple forms of **discrimination**, the practical consequences of which can jeopardize youth participation. For instance, the 16 x 16 Initiative encountered challenges relating to obtaining **visas**, which led to just 14 of the 16 young participants being able to attend the preparatory conference on SDG 16 in Rome in 2019. Barriers to the **legal registration** of youth organizations also limit opportunities. **Connectivity** and different **time zones** are other factors affecting participation in online meetings.

## **Key reflections: Shaping a new model for meaningful youth engagement?**

The 16 x 16 Initiative contributed to enhancing meaningful youth engagement in the review of SDG 16 in 2019. It functioned as an **informal, complementary mechanism** that connected youth organizations, movements and networks to existing youth engagement platforms and ensured greater representation of local voices within policy deliberations during the review of SDG 16.

The following key reflections were derived from the lessons learned from the first phase of the 16 x 16 Initiative:

**Recognize young people's expertise:** It is important to engage with young people not as a tokenistic move or because young people should be seen as a threat, but rather by acknowledging that they have the right to participate and have lived experiences, expertise and ideas to contribute. Moreover, young people are not just a special group that has to be involved: they are a heterogeneous group with a diversity of lived experiences and identities that have experienced certain common issues, such as interlocking forms of discrimination based on age, gender and systematic exclusion from decision-making.

**Ensure timing is strategic:** By planning timing appropriately, an initiative can complement formal mechanisms for SDG review and establish youth engagement platforms in United Nations processes. Even initiatives with limited resources can generate substantial achievements by opening new channels for youth participation, recognizing the agency of local actors and informing policy and programming towards more peaceful, just and inclusive societies.

**Expand existing channels for youth engagement and open new ones:** By opening new channels and providing a conducive space for collaboration, youth organizations can take the lead in identifying development challenges, strategic priorities for peace and solutions that foster social cohesion and leave no one behind. Initiatives that complement existing channels for youth engagement but are also embedded within these can enhance the inclusion of young people. This is particularly true for young people that are not usually part of formal processes but are actively contributing to building peaceful, just and inclusive societies at the grassroots level. Forging partnerships with established youth constituencies and getting buy-in from stakeholders are critical to the successful expansion of existing channels for youth engagement.

**Link levels:** Initiatives should go beyond youth engagement in reviews, conferences and the development of policy documents by recognizing and supporting the work of youth organizations, movements and networks. Subsequently, initiatives should leverage processes around SDG review to enhance the effectiveness of support for youth leadership towards building peaceful, just and inclusive societies. The recognition of youth organizations' work has a positive impact by increasing their opportunities for partnerships and resources.

**Bridge dimensions:** The composition of the group of the 16 young leaders enabled the 16 x 16 Initiative to bridge the different dimensions of SDG 16+ and provide integrated youth-led advice on the future of peaceful, just and inclusive societies. The principle of leaving no one behind must also take centre stage in the selection of participants to prioritize participants that are among the most marginalized and vulnerable in their communities or work to benefit these.

**Foster co-creation:** Co-creation between the United Nations and youth makes the outcomes of activities more relevant to the lived experience of young people. This can facilitate greater uptake of recommendations and make projects and initiatives more effective. Co-creation can happen throughout an initiative, starting by engaging existing youth constituencies at the design stage and in the selection process and thereafter co-creating activities with selected youth organizations, networks and movements.

**Do no harm:** It is critical to uphold the do no harm principle by being sensitive to the divides, inequalities and power imbalances between and among young people and their context. Equally essential is providing safe spaces and recognizing the diversity of young people's experiences by finding ways to systematically, sustainably and responsibly engage youth organizations, networks and movements that are typically left out of development projects and processes, in line with the 2030 Agenda principle of leaving no one behind.

**Build trust:** Trust is indispensable to creating strong, genuine partnerships. Fostering an environment of trust and ownership that includes opportunities for mentoring and peer-to-peer exchange can enable effective activities. It takes time to nurture relationships, but doing so is critical for the impact of an initiative.

**Make timelines and budgets flexible:** Ensuring that the timeline for the use of budget lines is relatively flexible means that new and additional opportunities can be accommodated in an ever-changing environment and new situations adapted to, not the least in the context of the COVID-19 crisis.

The **comprehensive approach** to the 16 x 16 Initiative led to achievements that were beyond its original scope. For instance, it contributed to building capacity on youth-related issues, raising the visibility of the critical role that young people play in sustainable development and peace and raising awareness of the importance of peaceful, just and inclusive societies.

The 16 x 16 Initiative can inform **future initiatives** on implementing, monitoring and reviewing the SDGs as an informal model for meaningful youth engagement. Whenever there is a window of opportunity for increased youth participation, initiatives of this sort can complement existing mechanisms and formal processes and add value by linking multiple levels and bridging different dimensions.

## **Possible future directions for youth engagement towards peaceful, just and inclusive societies**

The 16 x 16 Initiative has contributed insights to make the process of implementing, monitoring and reviewing the SDGs more youth-inclusive and to build partnerships for peaceful, just and inclusive societies. A recommendation from the conversations with the 16 x 16 participants on lessons learned is the value of further connecting initiatives of this type to efforts within communities, countries and regions. This was further explored in a [16 x 16 Dialogue Series](#), **Youth Leadership for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies**, which was co-created by the young leaders and UNDP and hosted between 3 and 16 March 2021, with the support of UNDP practitioners in regional hubs. Five regional dialogue meetings were held between 75 UNDP practitioners and young partners, and one global event brought together 160 youth, decision makers, United Nations entities and other partners. The dialogues provided an opportunity to identify the following:

- key initiatives for youth leadership in areas of SDG 16+
- priorities for strengthening capacities for youth-inclusive policy and programming support on governance and peacebuilding issues
- opportunities and challenges for meaningful youth engagement in building peaceful, just and inclusive societies

The dialogue series highlighted possible future directions for youth engagement towards peaceful, just and inclusive societies, including:

- **Leaving no youth behind:** Many initiatives of youth organizations, movements and networks and the United Nations are aiming to address the needs and aspirations of marginalized and vulnerable young people. For instance, Youth for Peace Bosnia and Herzegovina is using peer-to-peer methods to engage a diversity of young people in a culture of peace and dealing with the past; Young Women Leaders for Peace Philippines is reaching out to young people affected by conflict and displacement in the context of the COVID-19 crisis; Helping Honduras is providing opportunities for rural youth and children to engage in peacebuilding in their communities and UNDP teams from Ukraine to the Solomon Islands are engaging with young people in local communities. However, there is a need for more focused, context-specific efforts that reach the diversity of young people

in a meaningful way. This includes becoming more effective at reaching younger youth, rural youth, young women, young migrants, young people affected by conflict and violence, youth experiencing intersectional vulnerability and young diaspora.

- **Youth mainstreaming:** Decision makers are interested in engaging young people in implementing, monitoring and reviewing the SDGs, but lack knowledge on how to work with young people. Furthermore, there is a shortfall in dedicated capacities for institutions to respond to youth and invest in youth leadership for peaceful, just and inclusive societies. Youth mainstreaming can increase the capacities of decision makers and institutions to meaningfully engage young people in decision-making and development processes, including by advocating for dedicated capacities such as youth focal points and adequate resources to engage young people in conversations on peace priorities.
- **Safe, gender-responsive and enabling environments:** Young people are experiencing exclusion, civic spaces are closing and the COVID-19 crisis is disproportionately affecting girls and young women. There is a critical need for investment in safe, gender-responsive and enabling environments for young people to contribute to sustainable development and peace, including by protecting young people advocating for peace, justice and the environment.
- **Access to information, capacity development and funding:** Young people are positive agents of change but face barriers to contributing to development efforts. At all levels, but especially at the country-level, there is an opportunity to increase access to 1) tailored, agile and relevant funding that can strengthen youth peace efforts in communities, 2) capacity development for youth organizations, networks and movements and 3) information about opportunities to apply for funding and participate in development processes and initiatives.
- **Participatory peace and decision-making processes:** Although young people are leading major peace efforts, they are often excluded from peace and decision-making processes. There is a need to expand the avenues for youth participation in governance and peacebuilding and strengthen engagement mechanisms. Youth engagement in local governance is an opportunity for young people to engage with decision makers on development issues for their immediate society. Creative approaches can extend the reach to the young people, who often refrain from participating in traditional means of stakeholder engagement in policymaking.

Concretely, this could be supported through various approaches, projects, tools and initiatives that include but are not limited to:

- investing in accessible, agile and relevant **funding** for youth organizations;
- supporting youth-led **analysis** of sustainable development, youth-led **evaluation** of development projects and **studies** on youth perceptions of peace;

- increasing **dedicated capacities** for youth empowerment, such as the deployment of a cohort of United Nations Youth Volunteers to support SDG 16 implementation and reporting at the national level, including through strong partnerships with youth organizations, networks and movements;
- initiating **multi-country programmes** on youth civic engagement and political participation for enhanced youth engagement in peace- and decision-making processes;
- prioritizing youth **mainstreaming** and the **institutionalization** of the youth, peace and security agenda by developing guidance material and capacity development for institutions and decision makers, stakeholders and partners on working with and for young people in sustainable development;
- investing in youth, peace and security **roadmaps** at the country level to promote comprehensive, holistic approaches to support youth leadership for peaceful, just and inclusive societies; and
- facilitating the organization of **dialogue** between decision makers and youth on peace and development priorities.

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## Annex 1: Framework of analysis

This paper was developed within a framework of analysis drawing upon best practices, strategies and principles for meaningful youth engagement as well as trends relating to SDG 16+ and the youth, peace and security agenda. The data and information material consisted of an overview of activities and products from the 16 x 16 Initiative and debrief sessions with the young leaders who took part in the initiative after the preparatory conference on SDG 16, the High-Level Political Forum and general session of the United Nations General Assembly in 2019 and a brainstorming session on lessons learned in January 2021. The paper was also informed by a 16 x 16 Dialogue Series that took place in March 2021 and included regional and global meetings between UNDP practitioners, youth, decision makers, partners and stakeholders.

This paper was developed to spark discussion on how initiatives and platforms can contribute to strengthening informal processes and established mechanisms by reflecting upon the achievements and lessons learned from the 16 x 16 Initiative. It is not a systematic assessment and is thus not an evaluation.

UNDP staff engaged in the 16 x 16 Initiative drafted this paper with input from and review by the 16 x 16 young leaders.

## Annex 2: UNDP's Youth Global Programme on Sustainable Development and Peace

UNDP's approach to youth empowerment also informed the design of the 16 x 16 Initiative. Notably, youth empowerment is both a means and an end and can be fostered when at least four conditions are met:

1. Enabling legislative and policy environments for youth empowerment are in place.
2. Young people and youth organizations have the capacities to participate effectively in public life, and institutions are well-equipped to take initiative and respond to the needs of young people.
3. Solid and inclusive partnerships, spaces and networks have been established to foster youth engagement.
4. Gender equality and young women's empowerment are ensured.

UNDP's Youth Global Programme for Sustainable Development and Peace seeks to enable these four conditions through a comprehensive approach that uses a multilevel response (country, regional, global and gender equality) and a multidimensional approach (civic and political participation, economic empowerment, peace- and resilience-building and youth as partners in

the 2030 Agenda). The linkages between the 16 x 16 Initiative and the Youth Global Programme for Sustainable Development and Peace are illustrated in the figure below (page 31).



## Annex 3: Strategies, approaches and principles for meaningful youth engagement

Various strategies and approaches can be applied in addressing barriers and promoting youth engagement. A progress study on **youth, peace and security**, [The Missing Peace](#) (2018), recommends supporting young people's critical contribution to sustaining peace through three mutually reinforcing strategies:

- 1) **Investing** in young people's capacities, agency and leadership and an enabling environment
- 2) **Inclusion** through transforming the systems that reinforce exclusion to address the structural barriers limiting youth participation
- 3) Prioritizing **partnerships** and collaborative action in which young people are viewed as equal, essential partners

Likewise, [Believe in Better](#) (2020)<sup>xxiii</sup>, a working paper by ActionAid and the Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth on **young people's inclusion in national follow-up, review and accountability processes** for the 2030 Agenda suggests that approaches should be

- **embedded** (meaningful youth engagement in legislation, planning and budgeting processes)
- **localized** (local governments play a role in ensuring engagement of the diversity of young people and leaving no one behind)
- **transparent** (access to information, regular reviews and sufficient time for engagement)

Youth engagement must become **meaningful youth engagement**. The Major Group for Children and Youth has set out some general [principles for meaningful youth engagement](#) (2017)<sup>xxiv</sup>, which should be:

- **self-organized** (young people themselves decide upon their structure and ways of working)
- **based on legally mandated rights** (acknowledgement of young people having an equal say in decisions)
- **designated** (representation of young people should be guaranteed)
- **well-resourced** (avoiding young people spending out of pocket money)
- **accountable** (reporting and feedback mechanisms to youth constituencies should be part of the engagement process)

UNDP and Restless Development on behalf of the United Nations Inter-Agency Network for Youth Development (UN IANYD) have issued the [Guiding Principles for Supporting Young People as](#)



[Critical Agents of Change in the 2030 Agenda](#) (2017), which argue that **young people’s participation** is a priority because:

- 1) it is a **human rights imperative**, as the specific needs of young people in all their diversity must be addressed, and their right to participate in decisions about their own lives and societies recognized;
- 2) young people are key **SDG accelerators**, contributing fresh ideas, innovative solutions and ambition and know-how about their societies and communities;
- 3) it is a **demographic imperative**, as young people represent a large proportion of the population and timely investment in youth can enable the realization of a “demographic dividend”; and
- 4) **inaction** on excluding young people, especially young women, from development and decision-making processes can significantly slow development progress and jeopardize peace<sup>xxv</sup>.

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<sup>i</sup> UNDP (2016). UNDP Youth Global Programme for Sustainable Development and Peace (Youth-GPS)(2016–2020), [www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/democratic-governance/Youth-GPS.html](http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/democratic-governance/Youth-GPS.html).

<sup>ii</sup> The Global Alliance for Reporting Progress on Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies (2019). Enabling the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda Through SDG 16+: Anchoring Peace, Justice and Inclusion, [www.sdg16hub.org/content/global-alliance-enabling-implementation-2030-agenda-through-sdg-16-anchoring-peace-justice](http://www.sdg16hub.org/content/global-alliance-enabling-implementation-2030-agenda-through-sdg-16-anchoring-peace-justice).

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