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The '2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' needs a coherent focus on governance and peace

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The Current Column

of 12 October 2015

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Bonn, 12 October 2015. At the end of September the international community came together in New York City to discuss and decide upon the new '2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' based on the sustainable development goals (SDGs). One significant change compared to the previous Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is SDG 16, which stresses the relevance of peace, good governance and inclusive institutions for sustainable development. This is an important step forward, as the MDGs had carefully and deliberately avoided these issues. SDG 16 is effectively the key to the whole 2030 Agenda.

As a global agenda that all UN member states have now subscribed to, the SDGs should be inspiring calls to action. Unfortunately, SDG 16's targets fall short of this yardstick. What they lack is a convincing narrative and a clear logic that spells out how the goal's core elements – peace and good governance – could be achieved. While a degree of 'vagueness' in the formulation of SDG 16 was unavoidable in order to get agreement, its focus on various aspects of issues related to peace and good governance does not add up to a coherent strategy. Moreover, peace and good governance are intensely political, and questions about how to improve them cannot be reduced to the technical level of the effectiveness and efficiency of institutions.

Building a strong and coherent narrative into SDG 16 would mean designing indicators in a way that *all* of the goal's 10 targets' connection to peace and good governance becomes clear. Several of SDG 16's targets are related to the two main issues: rule-of-law, political freedoms, inclusive institutions and reducing corruption are governance issues, and prevention of violence and arms-flows are peace issues. However, other elements, such as combating organised crime, illicit financial flows or providing birth registration, are specific symptoms of the overarching failure to build functioning, inclusive public institutions. Without such institutions, lasting progress on the more specific targets will be unattainable.

Some of SDG 16's targets show either too much or too little ambition, thereby raising the risk that even well-intentioned efforts will be doomed from the beginning. Some are formulated so that it is practically impossible to *not* reach them, such as "promote the rule of law" or "strengthen relevant national

institutions (...) for preventing violence". Other targets set the bar way too high. For example, one target obliges countries to "ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels." Other targets call for the end of all types of violence against children or for governments to "ensure equal access to justice for all". Although all this is of course highly desirable, few, if any, countries could truthfully claim to have reached these targets.

Given the open-ended wording of the targets, choosing and defining indicators will inevitably have a major impact on the actual focus of efforts under SDG 16. Although many of the indicators currently under discussion represent a useful specification and focussing of the targets, others are in danger of tracking only a side aspect of what the actual target professes to be. It is important to acknowledge that SDG 16 tackles issues that are notoriously difficult to measure. But the difficulties around measurability should not result in the marginalisation of important but harder-to-measure targets, like effective, accountable and transparent institutions, in favour of more indirect but easily measurable ones like birth registration. Progress (or the lack thereof) will have to be understood in qualitative, as well as quantitative, terms.

SDG 16 is crucially important to the global 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Although many countries were reluctant to face up to the fact that poor governance fuels civil conflict and hinders development, the period from 2001–2015 proved that fragile states, characterised by weak state governance, have had the greatest difficulty in achieving the MDGs. By including SDG 16, the 2030 Agenda recognises that global sustainable development is not possible without progress in the realms of good governance and peace. Indeed, SDG 16 is both an important end in itself and an essential means of supporting the other goals. It is unfortunate that the sensitivity of SDG 16's subject-matter meant that it was not possible to formulate the goal in a concise, easy to communicate and action oriented way. Achieving SDG 16 will require a coherent strategy for addressing highly politically sensitive issues, for which there are no easy, technical solutions. In the years to come, influencing this strategy will be crucial if SDG 16's potential for unlocking the rest of the 2030 Agenda is to be realised.