

# Peace is the cure

How **SDG 16** can help salvage the **2030 Agenda** in the wake of COVID-19

November 2020



In partnership with





## International Alert

International Alert works with people directly affected by conflict to build lasting peace.

We focus on solving the root causes of conflict, bringing together people from across divides. From the grassroots to policy level, we all come together to build everyday peace, from the ground up.

Peace is just as much about communities living together, side by side, and resolving their differences without resorting to violence, as it is about people signing a treaty or laying down their arms.

[www.international-alert.org](http://www.international-alert.org)



## British Council

The British Council builds connections, understanding and trust between people in the UK and other countries through arts and culture, education and the English language.

We help young people to gain the skills, confidence and connections they are looking for to realise their potential and to participate in strong and inclusive communities. We support them to learn English, to get a high-quality education and to gain internationally recognised qualifications. Our work in arts and culture stimulates creative expression and exchange and nurtures creative enterprise.

[www.britishcouncil.org](http://www.britishcouncil.org)

# Peace is the cure

How **SDG 16** can help salvage the  
**2030 Agenda** in the wake of COVID-19

---

November 2020



# Contents

<b>Abbreviations</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Preface</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Executive summary</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>1. Why peace matters now more than ever</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>2. Fail better? Weaknesses and obstacles in integrating peacebuilding from the MDGs into the SDGs</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>2.1 A changing geopolitical landscape and security context before COVID-19</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>2.2 The intersection of politics and peacebuilding: Falling out of frame</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>2.3 Fragmented and overly technical: A barrier to integrating peace</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>2.4 The risk of repeating mistakes of the MDG era</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>2.5 A chapter break in history? The SDGs and COVID-19 in FCAS</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>3. Making peace count in salvaging the SDGs during COVID-19: First-cut conclusions</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>3.1 Commit to peacebuilding as an essential element of an effective global public health response in FCAS, and surge a conflict-sensitive, politically smart approach to salvage the SDGs</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>3.2 Double down on SDG 16 as the focal point for achieving the SDGs in FCAS</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>3.3 Leverage the rich diversity of actors for the 2030 Agenda</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>3.4 Do not strip out funding for SDG 16, mainstream peacebuilding as a core component of aid</b>	<b>29</b>

# Abbreviations

<b>2030 Agenda</b>	2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development
<b>COVID-19</b>	Coronavirus disease
<b>Crisis Group</b>	International Crisis Group
<b>CSO</b>	Civil society organisation
<b>DFID</b>	Department for International Development
<b>DRC</b>	Democratic Republic of Congo
<b>FCAS</b>	Fragile and conflict-affected states
<b>INCAF</b>	International Network on Conflict and Fragility
<b>IRC</b>	International Rescue Committee
<b>MDG</b>	Millennium Development Goal
<b>ODA</b>	Official development assistance
<b>ODI</b>	Overseas Development Institute
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
<b>PBF</b>	Peacebuilding Fund
<b>SDG</b>	Sustainable Development Goal
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNSG</b>	United Nations Secretary General
<b>VNR</b>	Voluntary national review

# Preface

This report is inspired by the 2018 Peace Perceptions Poll.<sup>1</sup> More than 100,000 people across 15 countries took part, including from conflict-affected states ranging from Colombia and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), to Lebanon and the Philippines.

A partnership between International Alert, the British Council and global polling company RIWI, the poll highlights the highly nuanced way in which people understand peace.

Findings illustrate that people's perceptions of peace go well beyond just security, or the absence of violence. The multiple dimensions that make up peace, for many people, are very much in line with the holistic framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Following the poll, we were keen to better understand the relationship between the implementation of the SDGs and peace (in particular, the role of SDG 16 in sustaining peaceful and inclusive societies).

Initially, this report focused on identifying lessons from the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) era as a basis for analysis. It has since

evolved to take into account the impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) on the SDG landscape, acknowledging that those living in fragile and conflict-affected contexts will more keenly feel the impacts of the pandemic.

The report's starting point was that the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda) was already in jeopardy, and our position is that this is at least partly due to the lacklustre performance globally on SDG 16. COVID-19 has upped the urgency around responding to this deficit, with the pandemic compounding existing conflict and threatening the erosion of fragile development gains.

Ultimately, this report is intended as a discussion prompt for stakeholders interested in a course correction to the 2030 Agenda that helps ensure that those living in fragile and conflict-affected contexts are not left behind, and in a way that reinforces responses and longer-term resilience to the COVID-19 pandemic.

---

<sup>1</sup> J. Egan, Peace Perceptions Poll 2018, London: International Alert, <https://www.international-alert.org/publications/peace-perceptions-poll-2018>

At the start of 2020, the 2030 Agenda – encapsulated in the United Nations (UN) member states’ commitment to the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – entered a ‘Decade of Action’ meant to accelerate progress towards sustainable development that would ‘leave no one behind’.

Yet it was already in deep trouble: the vast majority of the world’s extremely poor now live in fragile and conflict-affected states (FCAS). By 2030, approximately 80% of the most vulnerable people globally would be trapped in countries experiencing chronic instability, violence and conflict.<sup>2</sup> None of these states are on track to achieve a single Goal. The 2030 Agenda will succeed or fail globally based on its performance in those FCAS that seemed fated to be left behind.

The reasons behind this lack of progress are clear. Inherent weaknesses in global development efforts, during the time of the MDGs from 2000–2015 and implementation of the SDGs since 2015, bedevil efforts in fragile states. Conflict and related displacement of people have surged to a new high; forced displacement reached unprecedented levels; planet-shaping dynamics such as climate change and natural resource scarcity have accelerated; and deglobalisation and the weakening of multilateral norms have all exacerbated these trends.

Yet, even at this stark moment when the 2030 Agenda seems threatened, there is a ready solution that has been generating increased attention and acceptance: leveraging SDG 16 – the commitment to ‘peaceful, just and inclusive societies’ – not just as a stand-alone aim, but as the key to unlocking progress across the 2030 Agenda in FCAS.

In November 2019, the first signs of a virulent new viral infection surfaced in China. Into 2020, this virus, SARS-CoV-2, spread across the world, causing the first pandemic outbreak

of the 21st century. The disease it causes – COVID-19 – is highly infectious and much deadlier than seasonal influenza. It is already reshaping politics, societies and economies both domestically and globally. Given a lack of immunity within populations, it is likely to remain a global threat for a protracted period.

It also gravely impacts the 2030 Agenda – and nowhere more sharply than in FCAS. Countries where governance is often weak and contested; where violence can be pervasive even if not a product of overt war; where economies are brittle and riches can be captured by elites; where public services such as healthcare can be more marked by absence or access constraints; where large groups can suffer exclusion, discrimination, repression and poverty – all these are extremely vulnerable to deep impact resulting from COVID-19. In conflict-affected countries, this vulnerability is further exacerbated by one aspect of how the virus spreads: it tends to impact marginalised populations more heavily, and features such as overcrowded living conditions and a lack of access to good sanitation and healthcare represent ideal transmission grounds.

The grave threat to the 2030 Agenda is real and COVID-19 has multiplied it. Yet SDG 16 still represents the best strategy for delivering not only an effective public health response in FCAS, but also in ameliorating the pandemic’s lasting impact on their development and its potential to act as an incendiary driving even greater conflict. Indeed, the UN Secretary General (UNSG) and others have urged the international community to not lose sight of the SDGs, inclusive of SDG 16.

Peacebuilding – the approach at the heart of SDG 16 – ensures a more effective public health response rooted in trust and social cohesion. Governments or de facto authorities in fragile states suffering conflict or pervasive violence are unlikely to possess the degree of public trust needed to deliver effective

---

<sup>2</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), States of fragility 2018, Paris: OECD Publishing, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264302075-en>

outbreak control – as the Ebola crises in west Africa and DRC have demonstrated. Even well-resourced and good-faith public health interventions can generate more conflict unless they are sensitive to the social fractures and root causes that drive that conflict in the first place, and which make violence seem a ready solution. This is a core tenet of peacebuilding. The international community will not repair the damage done by COVID-19 to SDG 3 (aiming to ‘ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages’) by focusing on a narrowly technical approach to public health.

In this briefing, we argue that, if a leveraged focus on SDG 16 was necessary before COVID-19, it is imperative now – not just in salvaging the 2030 Agenda in the places where it matters most, but also in damping down the potential for far greater and more durable violent conflict.

In considering the obstacles to, and weaknesses in, global efforts for sustainable development prior to 2020 – and then overlaying the likely effects of the pandemic on those dynamics – we propose the following conclusions and recommendations as a way forward:

- 1** **SDG 16 and peacebuilding must be applied as an overarching framework for all 2030 Agenda interventions in FCAS, with accompanying national-level acceleration strategies.**
- 2** **International and national actors supporting and delivering COVID-19 public health responses in FCAS must embed peacebuilding approaches and expertise into all interventions, in order to mount an effective response and be responsive to root causes of pre-existing conflict.**
- 3** **Supporters of the 2030 Agenda must ensure that conflict-sensitive, adaptive policy and practice are infused into all frameworks and intervention models. Implementing agencies must embed and mainstream peacebuilding and conflict sensitivity expertise into programmes and outcomes across SDGs – seeking**

**to operationalise the ‘triple nexus’ of humanitarian, peacebuilding and development interventions.**

- 4** **Peacebuilding organisations should articulate in practical terms how SDG 16 and a peacebuilding lens contribute to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda as a whole, and provide guidance on effective integration into programming across the SDGs.**
- 5** **Donors should integrate peace objectives into their own indicators and performance frameworks for SDG sectors, and into the project designs intended to deliver them.**
- 6** **Aid donors and multilateral institutions should play a role in encouraging genuine integration of SDG 16 across all SDG sectors, through inclusion in bilateral partnership agreements, UN Partnership Frameworks or World Bank Country Partnership Frameworks.**
- 7** **Foreign ministries should invest in diplomatic strategies that take advantage of political, economic and security levers to ensure that partner governments treat SDG 16 as a package rather than a menu, to overcome instrumentalisation of the goal.**
- 8** **Governments and donors should support civil society organisations (CSOs) to play a greater role in shaping and holding governments accountable to deliver the SDGs, in conjunction with investing in clearer national-level baselines against which improvements in peace can be measured.**
- 9** **The global community should increase investment in peacebuilding to: ensure COVID-19 does not compound existing conflict; foster the conditions necessary to avoid aid orphans; and lay the foundations for the delivery of the SDGs on a sustainable basis.**





Students studying in a bombed-out school, Yemen.  
© anasalhajj/Shutterstock

# 1. Why peace matters now more than ever

The negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on progress towards the realisation of the SDGs by 2030 is clear. There will be a heavy hit to achieving SDG 3 (aiming to 'ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages'), alongside goals addressing clean water and hygienic sanitation, education and livelihoods, at a minimum.<sup>3</sup> This damage arrives as the world enters the last decade available to deliver the 2030 Agenda – the 'Decade of Action'<sup>4</sup> – at a juncture when our collective ability to meet the SDGs was already under increasing strain. Yet to date, most commentary and thinking ignores the one Goal which we argue is key to salvaging the 2030 Agenda: SDG 16 – striving to build 'peaceful, just and inclusive societies'.

This elision has a long history. While it is true that, even prior to the MDGs, the notion of the interconnection between development, human rights and peace was being championed within the UN system,<sup>5</sup> this connection was not factored into the MDGs agreed upon in 2000. The fact that the MDGs were, in essence, blind to the centrality of inclusive governance, justice and peace to development went against the grain of increasing recognition within the international system about the importance of understanding fragility and violence.

In 2011, the *World Development Report* sounded an alarm bell, highlighting that 1.5 billion people living in FCAS, along with countries with high rates of violent crime, were all at risk of being left behind.<sup>6</sup> Released a decade into the MDGs, the report revealed that no low-income fragile or conflict-affected country had achieved a single MDG, and further showed how violence posed the main constraint to progress.<sup>7</sup>

By the conclusion of the MDGs in 2015, FCAS were the lowest performers against MDG targets, with trends of violence increasing.<sup>8</sup> A clear consensus within the international community solidly aligned with the conclusion of the 2015 UN MDG report: conflict is the biggest threat to human development.<sup>9</sup>

In recognition of this, a concerted effort to address the 'peace deficit' was made in the formulation of the SDGs in 2015. The inclusion of SDG 16, a commitment to promoting 'peaceful, just and inclusive societies', as both a binding theme and specific goal represented a paradigm shift in the way that sustainable development was to be achieved.

SDG 16's foundational elements of good governance and functional social systems indicate a vision of positive peace that is at

3 For further information, see: E. Solberg and N.A.D. Akufo-Addo, Why we cannot lose sight of the Sustainable Development Goals during coronavirus, World Economic Forum, 23 April 2020, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/coronavirus-pandemic-effect-sdg-un-progress/>.

4 United Nations (UN), Decade of action: Ten years to transform our world, UN, 22 January 2020, <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/decade-of-action/>

5 For further information, see: B. Boutros-Ghali, An agenda for peace: Preventative diplomacy, peacemaking and peace-keeping, Report of the Secretary-General pursuant to the statement adopted by the Summit Meeting of the Security Council, UN: New York, 17 June 1992, [https://www.un.org/ruleoflaw/files/A\\_47\\_277.pdf](https://www.un.org/ruleoflaw/files/A_47_277.pdf).

6 World Bank, World development report 2011: Conflict, security, and development, Washington DC: World Bank, 2011, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/4389>

7 Ibid., p.62

8 For instance, according to the World Bank, while 49% of low-income countries met the target on halving extreme poverty, only 24% of FCAS made similar progress. For further information, see: MDG Progress Status, The World Bank, <http://datatopics.worldbank.org/mdgs/>, accessed December 2019. In addition, the 2015 UN MDG report states that by the end of 2014, conflicts had forced almost 60 million people to abandon their homes, which is the highest level recorded since the Second World War. For further information, see: UN, The Millennium Development Goals report 2015, New York: UN, 2015, p.8.

9 UN, 2015, Op. cit.

the heart of the 2030 Agenda.<sup>10</sup> While SDG 16 includes targets that are a direct measure of the absence of violence or fear of violence, it is based on a broader peacebuilding framework.<sup>11</sup> This is grounded in what is empirically known about why governance, inequalities and weak institutions are as relevant to the eradication of poverty as they are to peaceful societies.

However, five years in, and despite enormous attention to the critical importance of SDG 16 to achieving the 2030 Agenda, it has become apparent that a partial or misdirected focus on this goal threatens the achievement of the SDGs, even before COVID-19.<sup>12</sup> According to the Brookings Institution, by 2030, four-fifths of people living in extreme poverty will be in countries that it categorises as “severely off-track countries” when it comes to meeting the SDGs, with conflict and violence as one of four critical challenges that these countries face.<sup>13</sup> The Overseas Development Institute (ODI) forecasts that deprivation will increasingly be concentrated in FCAS, while estimating that as many as 82% of fragile countries are off-track to meet SDG targets.<sup>14</sup> The International Rescue Committee’s (IRC) report to the High-level Political Forum in July 2019 indicates that, “up to four in five fragile and conflict-affected states are off-track to achieve select SDG targets by 2030”.<sup>15</sup>

Regarding SDG 16, the 2019 UNSG report points to scant evidence of progress and even regression in certain areas (such as with homicide rates and an uptick in assassinations of human rights defenders, journalists and trade unionists).<sup>16</sup> In 2018, the ODI and the IRC published their third annual report on progress towards the SDGs. Their findings also showed limited progress against targets, along with rising deprivation increasingly concentrated in FCAS.<sup>17</sup>

Meanwhile, violent conflicts surged globally by two-thirds over the last decade, from an average of 93 between 2006 and 2008, to an average of 154 in 2016/17.<sup>18</sup> With this came soaring rates of human displacement, totalling 79.5 million people in 2019.<sup>19</sup> A combination of this increase in conflict and a failure during the MDG period to gain ground in FCAS means that the majority of the world’s poor now live in contexts affected by violence and conflict, a trend that looks set to be significantly exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic – with some projections estimating an additional 40 to 60 million people thrust back into extreme poverty.<sup>20</sup>

10 In 1964, conflict theorist Johan Galtung famously distinguished between what he called positive and negative peace, defining negative peace as a society in the absence of war, and positive peace as what can occur when the structural causes for war have been addressed. These terms first appeared in the editorial to the founding edition of the *Journal of Peace Research* in 1964. These basic definitions have informed decades of research and practice, and they continue to provide a common framework for understanding and addressing the barriers that conflict, violence, injustice and exclusion can pose to sustainable development.

11 The Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) progress report expanded the scope of coverage to include SDG 16+ targets. For further information, see: IEP, SDG16+ progress report 2019: A comprehensive global audit of progress on available SDG 16 indicators, Sydney: IEP, 2019, pp.10–12.

12 For further information, see: OECD, 2018, Op. cit.

13 G. Gertz and H. Kharas, Leave no country behind, Working Paper, Washington DC: Brookings Institution, 6 February 2018

14 E. Samman et al, SDG progress: Fragility, crisis and leaving no one behind, London: Overseas Development Institute (ODI), 2018, p.8, <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/12424.pdf>

15 International Rescue Committee (IRC), Sustainable development goals, in crisis, New York: IRC, 2019, [https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/28329Sara\\_Charles\\_document\\_2July\\_9Part2.pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/28329Sara_Charles_document_2July_9Part2.pdf)

16 Sustainable Development Goal 16, UN, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/SDG16>, accessed October 2019

17 E. Samman et al, 2018, Op. cit.

18 Ibid., p.13

19 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Statistics and Demographics Section, Global trends: Forced displacement in 2019, Copenhagen: UNHCR, 2020, <https://www.unhcr.org/5ee200e37.pdf>

20 A. Sumner, C. Hoy and E. Ortiz-Juarez, Estimates of the impact of COVID-19 on global poverty, WIDER Working Paper 43/2020, Helsinki: UNU-WIDER, April 2020

This is the backdrop against which the COVID-19 pandemic plays out. By late 2019, multiple actors recognised the urgent need to return SDG 16 to the heart of the 2030 Agenda.<sup>21</sup> The advent of a global pandemic requires not just to avoid the risk that SDG 16 is deprioritised, but the need to double down on its core commitments. The African Ebola crises taught us of the centrality of social cohesion, trust between citizen and state, and global solidarity in defeating a deadly pathogen. The international community will not repair the damage done by COVID-19 to SDG 3 by focusing on a narrow technical approach to public health – nor by overly securitised responses in states where the state-citizen bond is already frayed. Nothing less than the lives and livelihoods of billions of extremely poor people trapped in fragility and violence depend upon us finally learning that lesson.

This report presents an argument that SDG 16 can be leveraged, not only to salvage the SDGs in the wake of COVID-19, but that an acceleration strategy for FCAS – assuring no one is left behind – can be instrumental in the achievement of the 2030 Agenda, even in the backwash of the pandemic. It has a dual focus: first, summarising the key obstacles to progress prior to the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, and second, articulating a set of priorities for refocusing actions towards effective delivery in FCAS in the new reality of COVID-19, as well as building on the lessons learned during the MDG period, the first five years of the SDGs and previous viral epidemics.

---

21 This was the conclusion of a number of peacebuilding and development actors in the papers and reports produced in the lead up to the 2019 UN High-level Political Forum (HLPF) on Sustainable Development. The OECD's 2018 *States of Fragility* report asserts that progress on fragility will have to be accelerated to bring about the essential transformational change that is needed in the 58 states that met its criteria for fragility that year. For further information, see: OECD, 2018, Op. cit. The ODI and IRC's 2018 annual report on SDG progress states that concerted efforts will be required to address the needs of people caught in crisis to achieve the SDGs. For further information, see: E. Sammon et al, 2018, Op. cit., and also IEP, 2019, Op. cit.



People displaced by drought and conflict receive food aid, South Sudan.

© Paul Jeffrey/Alamy

# 2. Fail better?

## Weaknesses and obstacles in integrating peacebuilding from the MDGs into the SDGs

Peaceful, just and inclusive societies are placed at the heart of the 2030 Agenda, in recognition that conflict and instability are the main dynamics militating against sustainable development – and that people trapped in never-ending cycles of violence and fragility are likely to be left behind in any overarching global progress. Yet, despite this commitment, and notwithstanding other gains made during the MDG period, the last decade has witnessed a negative trend in FCAS. Reversing this – and salvaging the SDGs after the ravages of a pandemic – will require humanitarian, development and peacebuilding actors to first acknowledge the key obstacles inhibiting progress.

### 2.1 A CHANGING GEOPOLITICAL LANDSCAPE AND SECURITY CONTEXT BEFORE COVID-19

While the MDGs and related investments contributed a global point of focus and energy to drive progress on human development, MDG achievement was nevertheless greatly enabled by underlying patterns of economic growth during this period – despite the global downturn of 2008.<sup>22</sup> For instance, economic development and growth in China and India

contributed substantially to the net progress gains during this era, quite independent of multilateral system efforts.<sup>23</sup> In addition to broader global economic trends, the MDGs were also able to hitch a ride on the relative peacefulness of that era<sup>24</sup> – despite the seeds of rising instability planted by the September 11 attack and its consequences.<sup>25</sup>

Increasing evidence as to the changing nature of violence also began to emerge, as outlined by the 2011 *World Development Report*, which highlights changing patterns of poverty, violence and conflict, along with new threats, such as organised criminal violence, civil unrest due to global economic shocks and transnational terrorism. In light of this emergent understanding, it called for the international system to be “refitted” for the new century.<sup>26</sup>

Before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, other patterns of change very quickly reshaped the first decade of the new millennium, complicating the delivery of the 2030 Agenda. Significant among these were shifts in the distribution and contestation of geopolitical power, with an increasingly diverse set of

22 J. McArthur and K. Rasmussen, *Change of pace: Accelerations and advances during the Millennium Development Goal era*, Global Economy and Development Working Paper 98, Washington DC: Brookings Institution, January 2017, p.i.

23 Duncan Green succinctly summarises this argument in several of his ‘From poverty to power’ blogs, citing the synthesis paper from the *Power of Numbers Project*. For further information, see: D. Green, *The power of numbers: Why the MDGs were flawed (and post-2015 goals look set to go the same way)*, From poverty to power blog, Oxfam, 14 August 2014, <https://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/the-power-of-numbers-why-the-mdgs-were-flawed-and-post2015-goals-look-set-to-go-the-same-way/>.

24 J. McArthur and K. Rasmussen, 2017, Op. cit.

25 Human Security Report Project, *The decline in global violence: Evidence, explanation, and contestation*, Simon Fraser University, Canada: Human Security Report Project, 2013

26 World Bank, 2011, Op. cit., p.2

state and non-state actors having influence on the global stage,<sup>27</sup> generating heightened tension and unpredictability.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, the world began to experience a “retreat from multilateralism”, characterised by a profound breakdown of norms and confidence in widely shared conceptual frameworks around which actors formerly converged.<sup>29</sup> This trend – a degradation of post-Second World War multilateralism and an undertow of deglobalisation – has become only more marked over the last five years.

Deepening inequalities informed this malaise and deterioration. In 2016, 20% of the global income was held by the top 1%, against 10% for the bottom 50%.<sup>30</sup> The 2019 UN Development Programme *Human Development Report* highlights that, while 600 million people still live in extreme poverty, that category jumps to 1.3 billion when measured against indices that include deprivations in health, education and standard of living.<sup>31</sup> And global poverty is now expected to increase for the first time since 1990 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>32</sup>

The pre-pandemic global context in which the 2030 Agenda played out contained a number of additional problematic “megatrends”,<sup>33</sup> such as climate change<sup>34</sup> and its intimate relationships with conflict,<sup>35</sup> migration and displacement,<sup>36</sup> and a trend towards increased expenditure on securitised

approaches. Military expenditure outpaced that on international development assistance by a factor of more than 10.<sup>37</sup> Rather than preventing an accelerated concentration of wealth, liberal fiscal policies have been unintended enablers of mounting social and economic inequality, even in the face of a growing global middle class, which increased from 1.8 billion in 2009 to 3.5 billion in 2017.<sup>38</sup>

Meanwhile, persistent gender inequalities, driven by systemic discrimination, keep women marginalised from positions of power and disproportionately carrying the burdens of domestic and caregiving labour.<sup>39</sup>

These global drivers meant that delivering the 2030 Agenda in any meaningful sense for the billions living in FCAS was already a tall order as we entered 2020. The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic therefore poses both a ‘threat multiplier’ for the SDGs, and an opportunity to reset problematic approaches going forward.<sup>40</sup> This impact and its implications is considered further in section 2.5.

27 K. Eliasson, V. Wibeck and T. Nesit, Opportunities and challenges for meeting the UN 2030 Agenda in light of global change: A case study of Swedish perspectives, *Sustainability* 2019, 11(19), 5221, p.2

28 Some are hopeful that the emergence of a more flexible and multifaceted geopolitical environment will be better equipped to address transnational challenges. For further information, see: The Doha Forum, Reimagining governance in a multipolar world, Qatar: The Doha Forum/Stimson Center, 2019, [https://dohaforum.org/docs/default-source/default-document-library/reimagining-governance\\_doha\\_forum-for-print.pdf](https://dohaforum.org/docs/default-source/default-document-library/reimagining-governance_doha_forum-for-print.pdf).

29 Such as the “New World Order” and Washington Consensus thinking as cited in: World Economic Forum, Geopolitical power shifts, 2018, [https://reports.weforum.org/global-risks-2018/geopolitical-powershift/?doing\\_wp\\_cron=1592311134.6294910907745361328125](https://reports.weforum.org/global-risks-2018/geopolitical-powershift/?doing_wp_cron=1592311134.6294910907745361328125).

30 F. Alvaredo et al, *World inequality report 2018*, Paris: WID.world, 2018, p.13

31 UN Development Programme, *Human development report 2019: Beyond income, beyond averages, beyond today: Inequalities in human development in the 21st century*, New York: UN, 2019, p.7, <http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr2019.pdf>

32 A. Sumner, C. Hoy and E. Ortiz-Juarez, 2020, Op. cit.

33 This is the theme of a piece that ran in *The Guardian* for their Global Development Professionals Network in 2015. The seven megatrends are: 1. climate change and planetary boundaries; 2. demographic shifts; 3. urbanisation; 4. natural resource scarcity; 5. geopolitical shifts; 6. processes of technological transformation and innovation; and 7. inequality. For further information, see: B. Jackson, Tomorrow’s world: Seven development megatrends challenging NGOs, *The Guardian*, 26 February 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2015/feb/26/tomorrows-world-development-megatrends-challenging-ngos>.

34 J. Martens, Revisiting the hardware of sustainable development, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Spotlight on Sustainable Development, Stockholm: SIPRI, 2019, p.11

35 L. Mead, Human security and climate change, SDG Knowledge Hub, International Institute for Sustainable Development, 27 January 2015, <http://sdg.iisd.org/commentary/policy-briefs/human-security-and-climate-change/>

36 M. Foresti and J. Hagen-Zanker, with H. Dempster, Migration and development: How human mobility can help achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, ODI and Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation Briefing Note, September 2018

37 OECD, 2018, Op. cit.

38 European Commission, Developments and forecasts of growing consumerism, European Commission, 2019, [https://ec.europa.eu/knowledge4policy/foresight/topic/growing-consumerism/more-developments-relevant-growing-consumerism\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/knowledge4policy/foresight/topic/growing-consumerism/more-developments-relevant-growing-consumerism_en)

39 Ibid.

40 C. Monnier, Responding to COVID-19: The need for conflict sensitivity, New York University Center for International Cooperation, 7 April 2020, <https://cic.nyu.edu/publications/responding-covid-19-need-conflict-sensitivity>

## 2.2 THE INTERSECTION OF POLITICS AND PEACEBUILDING: FALLING OUT OF FRAME

SDG 16 was always highly politically sensitive in its pledge to tackle inequality, corruption and poor governance. At the same time, its sweeping ambition – peaceful, just and inclusive societies – is considered possibly the most transformative element of the 2030 Agenda. Its innate tendency to raise political hackles, combined with its scope, have made it one of the most challenging Goals to implement.

This tension was apparent from the start of the SDG negotiation process. As SDG 16 discussions encountered headwinds, an emphasis on peacebuilding and ‘positive peace’ was sidelined.<sup>41</sup> Resistance by member states largely centred on concerns about the potential intervention in their domestic affairs, under the bolder label of peacebuilding.<sup>42</sup> As a result, the usage of peace in SDG 16 leans towards the absence of violence more than in the direction of building or cultivating the conditions for positive peace.<sup>43</sup> Five years into implementation, the experience among SDG 16 stakeholders is that attention to the peacebuilding pillar is lacking.<sup>44</sup>

‘Sovereignist’ objections to an emphasis on peacebuilding in SDG 16 also arose at a time when the global policy context tipped towards ‘hard’ security and away from ‘human’ security. The dominance of militarised and securitised approaches to peace and conflict reshaped how even the fundamentals within the SDG 16 framework were understood – for example, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation

and Development’s (OECD) Development Assistance Committee changed its rules in 2016 to allow military expenditure, such as that involved in countering violent extremism or in mounting humanitarian operations, to be eligible within peace and security activities.<sup>45</sup>

These politics had not changed before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and indeed, support for SDG 16 is said to have declined. This reticence towards applying SDG 16 as a framework for peacebuilding is evidenced by government voluntary national reviews (VNRs)<sup>46</sup> of the SDGs. While a handful of FCAS appear to embrace SDG 16 for its intended purpose – Timor-Leste<sup>47</sup> being the prime example – others tend to follow one of three paths:

- 1 The first is for VNRs to simply ignore SDG 16, and conflict more broadly. Although Pakistan<sup>48</sup> acknowledges peace and governance as a national priority, it does not make any reference to the conflicts within its borders. Despite submitting its VNR in the year SDG 16 was under review, it failed to include it in its assessment. There are no efforts to link or integrate peace and conflict considerations into any of its other SDG reporting.**
- 2 The second is to cherry-pick targets nested within SDG 16. The advantage of SDG 16’s many targets is that they offer a holistic approach – however, this is also its greatest weakness, leaving it open to instrumentalisation. Nigeria’s VNR<sup>49</sup> illustrates the point:**

41 It is telling in this regard that the UN Security Resolution 70/1, which is the declaration of the 2030 Agenda, only contains the word ‘peacebuilding’ once.

42 D. Smith, Sustaining peace and sustainable development, SIPRI Spotlight on Sustainable Development, Stockholm: SIPRI, 2017, p.13

43 See footnote 10.

44 This is one of the broad conclusions in the Outcome Report from a Department for International Development (DFID)-hosted workshop (held 3–4 October 2019 in London) aimed at mapping and reviewing the latest stats of the global SDG 16+ community. This workshop was attended by 30 working-level representatives from multi-stakeholder initiatives, civil society, donors and other SDG 16+ coalitions and supporters.

45 For an expanded discussion of these issues and concerns, see: A. Möller-Loswick, Goal 16 is about peace, not hard security, Saferworld Comment & Analysis, 12 October 2017, <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/news-and-analysis/post/740-goal-16-is-about-peaceful-change-not-hard-security>.

46 As part of its follow-up and tracking of progress for the 2030 Agenda, the UN encourages member states to conduct regular reviews, which provide the basis for the UN HLPF. For further information, see: Voluntary national reviews, UN Sustainable Development Goals Knowledge Platform, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf/2019#vnrs>, accessed February 2019.

47 Government of Timor-Leste, Report on the implementation of the sustainable development goals: From ashes to reconciliation, reconstruction and sustainable development, Voluntary national review of Timor-Leste 2019, Dili: Government of Timor-Leste, 2019, [https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/23417TimorLeste\\_VNR\\_2019\\_FINAL.pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/23417TimorLeste_VNR_2019_FINAL.pdf)

48 Ministry of Planning, Development and Reforms, Government of Pakistan, Pakistan’s implementation of the 2030 agenda for sustainable development, Voluntary national review, Islamabad: Government of Pakistan, 2019, [https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/233812019\\_06\\_15\\_VNR\\_2019\\_Pakistan\\_latest\\_version.pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/233812019_06_15_VNR_2019_Pakistan_latest_version.pdf)

49 Federal Republic of Nigeria, Implementation of the SDGs: A national voluntary review, Office of the Senior Special Assistant to the President, Abuja: Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2019, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/16029Nigeria.pdf>



nearly 50% of its proposed actions are related to increasing the capability of the military and security forces, in line with sub-target 16A on counter-terrorism and crime. By contrast, there was no reporting on the sub-target on anti-corruption.<sup>50</sup> The report was also selective about which conflicts it considered worthy of inclusion: conflict in the Delta and northeast was acknowledged; the chronic, politically sensitive farmer-herder conflict across Nigeria's middle belt was not.

**3** The third entails making a commitment, but not following through. Afghanistan is a vocal supporter of the New Deal for fragile states, and the International Dialogue on Statebuilding and Peacebuilding.<sup>51</sup> Yet, in its 2017 VNR,<sup>52</sup> it limited its consideration of conflict to the report's context setting. The primary strategies it does link to – the Afghan National Development Strategy 2008–2013 and the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework 2017–2021<sup>53</sup> – do not effectively integrate peace considerations beyond security forces.

Apart from the challenges above, dropping peacebuilding from SDG 16 also set the scene for a technical approach to its achievement. SDG 16 relies heavily on driving forward progress on its individual targets and indicators, with its catalytic actions drawn from synergies between SDG sub-targets rather than a more holistic peacebuilding approach. This means SDG funding partners can gravitate to one or another specific category at the expense of others, often where there is an established 'community of practice'.

Justice is a ready example. The emphasis on justice among the many priorities of SDG 16 is undeniably needed. It is an area critical to peace that has been underfunded.

It is a challenge across a range of different conflict contexts. But is it the most important challenge across all contexts? Is it the key to more peaceful and inclusive societies? Not always, and never alone. Herein lies the problem of demoting a peacebuilding approach: during the MDG era, this approach skewed resourcing towards favoured sectors, undercutting a number of areas of expenditure critical to peace. The challenge is even greater when it comes to the SDGs.

## 2.3 FRAGMENTED AND OVERLY TECHNICAL: A BARRIER TO INTEGRATING PEACE

If more peaceful and inclusive societies are to be an outcome of the 2030 Agenda in the wake of a global infectious disease crisis, realisation of positive peace cannot be delegated to SDG 16 alone. Indeed, failure to integrate a conflict lens across all the Goals would undermine delivery, not just of SDG 16, but many of the discrete Goals. While the 2030 Agenda explicitly acknowledges this interdependence and intersectionality, the challenge remains that the aid architecture leans towards technocratic, siloed approaches that fragment impact.<sup>54</sup>

This can again be seen in the nascent international effort around the COVID-19 pandemic, in this case abetted by the current weakness of the established multilateral order. In straightforward terms, unless a peacebuilding approach is imbued into all efforts towards the SDGs, the sustainability of SDG 16 and all other Goals in FCAS is highly unlikely to be realised. This can only be achieved by design. There is no linear relationship between more development and more peace.<sup>55</sup> It must be deliberately engineered, project by project, but also at the strategic level. There are a number of factors that make this a challenge.

50 Nigeria is ranked 146/198 countries on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, dropping ten places since the SDGs were adopted. See: <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2015/results/nga> and <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2019/results/nga>, accessed July 2020.

51 For further information, see <https://www.pbsbdialogue.org/en/>.

52 Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Voluntary national review at the high level political forum: SDG's progress report, Kabul: Government of Afghanistan, 2017, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/16277Afghanistan.pdf>

53 While it does focus on some elements critical to peace, the National Peace and Development Framework, despite its name, overlooks things like grievance resolution and political inclusion, taking a rather technocratic approach to both its development and security priorities.

54 J. Volt, Fragmented, incoherent and chaotic – Global goals need better orchestration, POLITHEOR: European Policy Network, 12 December 2015, <https://politheor.net/fragmented-incoherent-chaotic-global-goals-need-better-orchestration/>

55 UN and World Bank, Pathways for peace report 2018: Inclusive approaches to preventing violent conflict, Washington DC: World Bank, 2018, p.xvii

Development institutions and actors are largely organised into sectors according to specialised disciplines, fields of research, agencies, ministries and organisations. While specialisation is necessary and useful for developing depth of knowledge on any one topic, its weakness is that it does not easily enable thinking and acting between and across sectors. This deep-rooted systemic challenge is compounded by the increasing number and diversity of actors in development.<sup>56</sup> These systemic limitations are further reinforced by the “instinctively technocratic outlooks” of aid organisations.<sup>57</sup> A propensity for isolating problems and working through a linear process towards a predefined solution is a deeply embedded feature of how the multilateral system has historically approached solving global problems.<sup>58</sup>

Peacebuilding, on the other hand, is grounded in holistic, integrated approaches. This does not always make for an easy fit with strong institutional preferences for technical solutions. This clash in approaches – technocratic versus adaptive – may offer an additional insight as to why peacebuilding has seen limited uptake within the context of commitments to SDG 16. Within the context of SDG 16, there is rhetorical commitment to integration, but very little about how peacebuilding may be effectively mainstreamed in practice.<sup>59</sup> For example, the Pathfinders roadmap states that its SDG16+ framework of targets (36 targets and sub-targets, drawn from all Goals that speak directly or indirectly to SDG 16 outcomes) can make contributions to peacebuilding – but should it be framed the other way around if the intention is to catalyse the integration of peace into the other goals?<sup>60</sup> Implicit in the Pathfinders framing is an assumption that

efforts to address any and all of the 36 targets will add up to peace.

This presumption is not alien to the peacebuilding community. Evidence collected from CDA's *Reflecting on Peace Practice Project* reveals how individual project efforts within a conflict setting – termed “peace writ littles” – do not necessarily have cumulative impact (delivering “peace writ large”), even when the projects themselves are successful in achieving their objectives and goal.<sup>61</sup>

Many have since built on the early work of CDA and others to apply systems thinking to peacebuilding, and this approach has been demonstrated to enable better analysis and more effective programming.<sup>62</sup>

These efforts contributed greatly to peacebuilding's potential to serve as a collective framework for trans-sectoral intervention. The need for more emphasis on peacebuilding was acknowledged in the UN's ‘Sustaining Peace’ agenda in 2015. This emerged amidst increasing calls for more coordinated, coherent and integrated efforts to support national actors to cement peace.<sup>63</sup> While it is encouraging that the concept espouses a more holistic approach that pushes beyond a narrow technical focus on project-based activities, new questions arise around the challenges of ‘working in new ways’. An independent review of UN capacities to sustain peace raised questions about whether there is sufficient staff capacity to translate existing conflict or context analysis into more conflict-sensitive, politically smart programming.<sup>64</sup>

56 To illustrate, the number of bilateral providers of development assistance has grown from around a dozen in 1960 to over 60. The number of multilateral donors is now well over 250. See: S. Klingebiel, T. Mahn and M. Nerge, *Fragmented development cooperation in the age of the 2030 Agenda*, *The Current Column*, German Development Institute, 11 July 2016.

57 T. Carothers and D. de Garment, *Development aid confronts politics: The almost revolution*, Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013, p.277

58 For well-researched historical accounts of this tendency, see: B. Ramalingam, *Aid on the edge of chaos*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014; and D. Burns and S. Worsley, *Navigating complexity in international development*, Rugby, Warwickshire: Practical Action Publishing, 2015.

59 An observation made from a review of the literature referenced in this report.

60 *Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies*, *The roadmap for peaceful, just and inclusive societies: A call to action to change our world*, New York: Center on International Cooperation, 2019, p.14

61 CDA, *Reflecting on Peace Practice (RPP) basics: A resource manual*, Cambridge, MA: CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, 2016

62 For further information, see: CDA, *Designing strategic initiatives to impact conflict systems: Systems approaches to peacebuilding – A resource manual*, Cambridge, MA: CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, 2016; R. Ricigliano, *Making peace last*, Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2012; and D. Burns and S. Worsley, 2015, *Op. cit.*

63 S. Pantuliano, V. Mecalf-Hough and A. McKechnie, *The capacities of UN agencies, funds and programmes to sustain peace: An independent review*, London: ODI, 2018, p.8, <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/12064.pdf>

64 *Ibid.*, p.9

Conflict sensitivity has gained the most traction – but with mixed results. Understanding both the successes and failures of conflict sensitivity, pre-pandemic, provides insight into the challenges of applying peacebuilding as an integrated approach to achieving SDG 16. Conflict sensitivity can be described as a specific form of analysis and practice that builds a conflict lens into all of an institution's considerations.<sup>65</sup> As such, it has been framed as an opportunity to overcome siloed thinking,<sup>66</sup> through enabling programming in all sectors to develop and work with an understanding of the interaction between the project and the conflict context. Over the past 20 years, the international community has made commitments to institutionalise it, through the creation of new units, networks, expert pools and adviser positions across many development partner and aid agencies.<sup>67</sup>

Despite this progress, the practice of conflict sensitivity on the ground in conflict countries has not changed much about *how* aid is delivered. Analysis seeking to explain this paradox pointed again to the systemic limitations of aid organisations and established approaches to aid delivery.<sup>68</sup> Political sensitivities can be seen as obstacles, with agencies favouring technocratic toolboxes and check lists.<sup>69</sup> One analyst contends that, by tagging conflict sensitivity as a “cross-cutting or mainstreaming issue”, development and peacebuilding actors had failed to consider the degree to which conflict sensitivity required nothing short of a transformation of the organisations that operate in conflict-affected and fragile contexts. By underestimating the magnitude of what was needed, efforts to mainstream conflict sensitivity were blindsided by resistance from organisational cultures, clinging to a worldview inherently adverse to the adaptability and flexibility that would be needed to allow conflict sensitivity to live up to its promise.<sup>70</sup>

65 Koff/SwissPeace, Factsheet: Conflict Sensitivity, [https://www.swisspeace.ch/fileadmin/user\\_upload/pdf/KOFF/KOFF\\_Documents/KOFF\\_Factsheet\\_Conflictsensitivity.pdf](https://www.swisspeace.ch/fileadmin/user_upload/pdf/KOFF/KOFF_Documents/KOFF_Factsheet_Conflictsensitivity.pdf)

66 G. Sidonia, Breaking silos: Conflict sensitivity as an opportunity to overcome silo-thinking, in S. Handschin, E. Abitbol and R. Allure (eds.), *Conflict sensitivity: Taking it to the next level*, Working Paper, Bern: SwissPeace, 16 February 2016

67 For a fairly detailed historical account of this institutional expansion, see: T. Paffenholz, *Conflict sensitivity – 20 years of practice: A critical reflection*, in S. Handschin, E. Abitbol and R. Allure (eds.), 2016, Op. cit.

68 Ibid.

69 One consequential reason that Paffenholz identifies is that the fragility debate assigned conflict sensitivity as a strategic focus, rather than making it a policy goal.

70 S. Handschin, *The institutionalization of conflict sensitivity: An organizational change management process*, in S. Handschin, E. Abitbol, R. Allure (eds.), 2016, Op. cit.

## 2.4 THE RISK OF REPEATING MISTAKES OF THE MDG ERA

One of the key lessons from the MDG era is that established norms for analysis and policy are inadequate in addressing complex realities.<sup>71</sup> A large corpus of work challenges this way of thinking and doing, focusing on why the MDGs have not delivered on most of their promises for a better world.<sup>72</sup> The World Bank's 2015 *World Development Report* – which focuses on the psychological, social and cultural influences on decision-making and human behaviour, and how these can have a significant impact on development outcomes – buttresses this critique.<sup>73</sup>

The well-known label ‘thinking and working politically’ is another fruit of the MDG era, underpinned by a growing emphasis on political economy analysis. This means the way we analyse, design, deliver and evaluate aid interventions must be infused with a political sensitivity alive to highly localised dynamics. A significant body of research demonstrates the ‘above the odds’ effectiveness of projects that adopt such politically smart, locally led approaches.<sup>74</sup> These ‘adaptive’ approaches direct attention and support to the agents of reform, apply iterative problem solving, emphasise continual adapting and learning, and actively broker key relationships.

In theory, the transformative character of SDG 16 should have lent itself to this sort of adaptive thinking and working. Nevertheless, aid actors found it difficult to translate ‘thinking politically’ into ‘working politically’. This was partly due to real political pressure to show value for money and quantitative results in

the near term, through aid that supported overarching foreign policy and security objectives. This reinforced a propensity to “make sense of a complex world in ways that are compatible with existing assumptions or ideological biases”.<sup>75</sup> This tendency was compounded by a propensity to isolate problems and pursue a linear process towards an (often predefined) solution.<sup>76</sup>

In 2017, the OECD International Network on Conflict and Fragility (INCAF) assessed the first five years of the Busan New Deal, concluding that donors continued to work with an incomplete and inadequate understanding of, and engagement with, the domestic policies of FCAS.<sup>77</sup> In particular, the INCAF noted that, “progress with more politically oriented development interventions [remained] more conceptual, experiential and/or gradual”.<sup>78</sup>

There is also a psychological dimension to working differently in conflict-affected contexts – a leap that many development professionals will find challenging. The UN and World Bank *Pathways for Peace* report summed up the challenge as thus: “in high-risk contexts, development planners should recognize that groups with grievances might not be the poorest and might not be in areas of high potential for economic growth, yet failing to make investments that could channel their grievances into productive contestation can lead to violent conflict, which can wipe out larger development gains”.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, the language of the SDGs is still deeply embedded in reaching the ‘most vulnerable’. Perhaps it should remain that way, but to do so exclusively in FCAS is a path to failure.

71 For further information, see: B. Ramalingam, 2013, Op. cit., p.55.

72 For further information, see: B. Ramalingam, 2013, Op. cit.; T. Carothers and D. de Garment, 2013, Op. cit.; and D. Burns and S. Worsley, 2015, Op. cit.

73 World Bank Group, *World Development Report 2015: Mind, society and behavior*, Washington DC: World Bank, 2015, <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/20597>

74 D. Booth and S. Unsworth, *Politically smart, locally led*, Discussion Paper, London: ODI, September 2014

75 S. Unsworth, *It's the politics! Can donors rise to the challenge?* in A. Whaites et al (eds.), *A governance practitioner's notebook: Alternative ideas and approaches*, Paris: OECD, November 2015, p.47, <https://www.oecd.org/dac/accountable-effective-institutions/Governance%20Notebook.pdf>

76 For well-researched historical accounts of this tendency, see: B. Ramalingam, 2013, Op. cit., and D. Burns and S. Worsley, 2015, Op. cit.

77 E. van Veen and V. Dudouet, *Hitting the target, but missing the point? Assessing donor support for inclusive and legitimate politics in fragile societies: A publication of the International Network on Conflict and Fragility (INCAF)*, Paris: OECD Publishing, 2017

78 *Ibid.*, p.33

79 UN and World Bank, 2018, Op. cit., p.281

In addition, there remains a historic underinvestment in peacebuilding. In the SDGs' first year, an OECD analysis showed a heavy emphasis on funding for basic services and infrastructure in FCAS, rather than in areas that would directly address the root causes of fragility and violence.<sup>80</sup> In particular, just 4% of the official development assistance (ODA) to fragile states was allocated to the Peacebuilding and Statebuilding Goals for legitimate politics, 2% for security and 3% for justice. While some donors did extend assistance to these areas, this was fragmented across sectoral interests – thus weakening overall impact.

During the MDG period, there was also a tendency for donors to invest in places that were more likely to deliver on the goals, creating what was pejoratively termed 'aid orphans'. Half the ODA destined for 48 identified FCAS benefited just five countries in 2007.<sup>81</sup> Between 2005 and 2010, 15 FCAS saw a decrease in ODA. A 2018 Development Initiatives report noted that there was a similar trajectory for the SDG period: ODA to countries the report labels as "being left behind" fell by 6% since 2010, while ODA to all other recipients rose by 32%. Some 30 out of 32 'left behind' countries were FCAS. The report also stated that, "by 2030, the average country being left behind by the SDGs will have 23% of their people living in extreme poverty, compared with 3% in other developing countries".<sup>82</sup> This tendency was exacerbated by an overly state-centric approach: as the 2018 World Bank and UN *Pathways for Peace* report noted, "prevention efforts should focus on strengthening the capacity of society for prevention – not just the state".<sup>83</sup>

## 2.5 A CHAPTER BREAK IN HISTORY? THE SDGs AND COVID-19 IN FCAS

The emerging analysis and literature around how the COVID-19 pandemic will impact the 2030 Agenda largely calls for the international community to not 'lose sight of the SDGs'. For example, the Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg and Ghanaian President Nana Akufo-Addo, both stewards of the SDGs within the international system, assert that the "response to the pandemic cannot be de-linked from the SDGs".<sup>84</sup> In launching the global humanitarian appeal for the COVID-19 response in April 2020, the UNSG António Guterres noted the potential "catastrophic consequences" of the pandemic for sustainable development.<sup>85</sup> Other commentators have pointed to the implicit global solidarity and universality of the 2030 Agenda as an indicator that it will continue to be central to post-pandemic recovery. The overwhelming message is: stay the course.

Assessment of the pandemic's likely impact on conflict trends has also been tentative: the International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) has noted that, "if the pandemic is likely to worsen some crises, it may also create windows to improve others".<sup>86</sup> UNSG Guterres made a call early in the pandemic for a global ceasefire, urging rival parties to concentrate on defeating the real enemy. An update on progress towards the global ceasefire at the start of April noted that governments and/or combatants in Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Colombia, Libya, Myanmar, the Philippines, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine and Yemen had expressed interest in observing such a ceasefire during the height of the pandemic.<sup>87</sup>

Yet, the reality of how COVID-19 is already changing the dynamics of peace and conflict may tend, on balance, towards a darker picture. The UNSG, in his update noting progress on the global ceasefire, also needed to state that, while it was heartening to see

80 OECD, *States of fragility: Meeting post-2015 ambitions*, Paris: OECD Publishing, 2015

81 Iraq (23%), Afghanistan (9.9%), Ethiopia, Pakistan and Sudan, and around a fifth was in the form of debt relief.

82 Development Initiatives, *Countries being left behind: Tackling uneven progress to meet the SDGs*, Bristol: Development Initiatives, 2018

83 UN and World Bank, 2018, Op. cit., p.280

84 E. Solberg and N. Akufo-Addo, 2020, Op. cit.

85 A. Guterres, UN Secretary General (UNSG), Launch of the global humanitarian response plan (HRP) for COVID-19, 25 March 2020, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/press-encounter/2020-03-25/launch-of-global-humanitarian-response-plan-for-covid-19>

86 International Crisis Group (Crisis Group), *COVID-19 and conflict: Seven trends to watch*, Special Briefing No. 4, 24 March 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/sb4-covid-19-and-conflict-seven-trends-watch>

87 A. Guterres, UNSG statement on global ceasefire, 3 April 2020

the interest expressed by parties to conflicts, there remained a “huge distance between declarations and deeds ... in many of the most critical situations, we have seen no let-up in fighting, and some conflicts have even intensified”.<sup>88</sup> Of the seven trends the Crisis Group proposed, five were negative, highlighting: the heightened vulnerability of conflict-affected populations; that international crisis management and conflict-resolution mechanisms had been weakened; that COVID-19 posed grave risks to ‘social order’; that the pandemic was already showing signs of vulnerability to political manipulation to strengthen authoritarian tendencies; and that it appeared to alter the balance of major power relations.<sup>89</sup> An analysis by the Brookings Institution, focused on conflicts in the Middle East, concludes that, “the COVID-19 pandemic will most likely be a conflict multiplier ... intensifying contestation”.<sup>90</sup>

This darker picture deepens when the nature of COVID-19 and its spread is considered. Across countries hardest hit by COVID-19, mortality is highest among minority, marginalised and/or excluded populations. It spreads most quickly among populations characterised by close multigenerational and communal ties, in contexts where population density is high and access to clean water and hygienic sanitation low. At the time of writing, it has just reached the world’s largest internally displaced persons camp in Cox’s Bazar. Its consequences include sharp rises in gender-based violence, severe disruptions to the supply of key commodities and market price spikes, and ‘othering’ of groups and then blaming them for the outbreak. Mortality caused by other conditions may also rise due to fear of accessing health services during a pandemic. In mounting a counter-

pandemic response, governing authorities may reach for authoritarian, populist and heavily securitised solutions. Public health interventions may be subject to elite capture or discriminatory access constraints. As has been noted, “violent conflict does not happen spontaneously but rather has roots in social fractures ... if [containment and suppression measures] are not undertaken with awareness of and sensitivity to pre-existing risks ... the cure [may be] worse than the disease”.<sup>91</sup>

This speaks directly to this briefing’s core contention: that, perversely, the COVID-19 pandemic may be a “burning platform” for necessary change – enabling key global actors to “use the crisis as an opportunity for peacebuilding” and thereby ensure that “the 2030 Agenda [is] also leveraged to ... address SDG 3 and SDG 16 jointly by using the response to promote peace, justice, and strong institutions, and leave no one behind”.<sup>92</sup> In thinking and talking about how the pandemic might impact the ‘Decade of Action’ on the SDGs, there is also a quieter undertow positing that, while the SDGs remain highly relevant in a post-pandemic world and do not require renegotiation, they may benefit from ‘recalibration’. This may include, for example, less of an emphasis on specific targets and sub-targets, and more on the overarching Goals themselves; broadening constituencies of support to the 2030 Agenda; and giving SDG 16 a “central focus”.<sup>93</sup>

The final section proposes some first-cut conclusions and recommendations for how international system actors may begin to optimise SDG 16 as a driver in salvaging and delivering key SDGs in FCAS.

88 Ibid.

89 Crisis Group, 2020, Op. cit.

90 R. Alaaldin, COVID-19 will prolong conflict in the Middle East, Brookings Institution blog, 24 April 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/04/24/covid-19-will-prolong-conflict-in-the-middle-east/>

91 C. Monnier, 2020, Op. cit.

92 Ibid.

93 S. Mendelson, The virus and the global goals: What could COVID-19 mean for sustainable development?, Global Dashboard, 7 April 2020, <https://www.globaldashboard.org/2020/04/07/the-virus-and-the-global-goals-what-could-covid-19-mean-for-sustainable-development/>



A soldier wears a protective mask and gloves at a COVID-19 traffic checkpoint in Manila, the Philippines.  
© SOPA Images Ltd/Alamy

# 3. Making peace count in salvaging the SDGs during COVID-19: First-cut conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic has recast the race to deliver the SDGs by 2030. As the disease sweeps through every human population and society, it will obviously be experienced in different ways, including in scope, severity and duration. But its impact, although varied and contextually specific, will be profound, its dominance protracted, and its potential to disrupt political settlements, economies and social cohesion enormous.

The analysis in this brief argues for the realisation of SDG 16 not just in and of itself, but as a critical enabler for all the other SDGs. The 2030 Agenda succeeds or fails in its promise to leave no one behind based most significantly on its performance in FCAS. The pandemic will likely impact FCAS disproportionately: ripping away at social cohesion and state-citizen ties that were already attenuated, roiling markets and devastating supply chains in weak economies, and driving many back into extreme poverty. COVID-19's recognised tendency to disproportionately impact socially excluded marginal and/or minority populations will exacerbate this. While its true impact is still evolving – and there are some glimmers that the pandemic may tip some conflicts towards fragile ceasefires<sup>94</sup> – it will most likely act as an accelerant, fuelling even greater levels of civil unrest, mass violence, conflict and fragility.<sup>95</sup>

The four main obstacles to leveraging SDG 16 for the 2030 Agenda in the pre-pandemic world – a changing political and security landscape; the intersection of domestic and international politics with SDG implementation; a fragmented and overly technocratic approach; and the failure to apply lessons from the MDG era – are thrown into even starker relief in the light of COVID-19.

Additionally, all the actors engaged with delivering the 2030 Agenda need to accept a dominant change in the aid paradigm. Today the majority of people living in extreme poverty live in FCAS. This figure is estimated to climb as high as 80% by 2030.<sup>96</sup> Working in conflict is the new norm for aid delivery<sup>97</sup> – and FCAS are the crucible where the success or failure of the 2030 Agenda will be realised. As the UN and World Bank *Pathways for Peace* report concludes, “failing to make investments [in FCAS] that could channel ... grievances into productive contestation can lead to violent conflict, which can wipe out larger development gains”.<sup>98</sup> As the COVID-19 pandemic burns through fragile, violent and contested societies, this will only become more evident.

If, at the opening of 2020, it was necessary to reframe and recommit to SDG 16 as the real key to the 2030 Agenda, as we enter the second quarter facing the first global pandemic of this new century, it has become imperative in assuring no one is left behind.

94 Crisis Group, 2020, Op. cit.

95 R. Alaladin, 2020, Op. cit.

96 OECD, 2018, Op. cit.

97 S.D. Kaplan, Fragility the main hurdle to implementing SDGs, IPI Global Observatory, 17 September 2015, <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2015/09/sustainable-development-goals-united-nations-fragile-states/>

98 UN and World Bank, 2018, Op. cit., p.281



We can neither effectively fight this virus, nor salvage the SDGs, without accelerating SDG 16 and its interconnection with the other Goals.

Here are some first, tentative conclusions for how the international community may begin to realise that.

### **3.1 COMMIT TO PEACEBUILDING AS AN ESSENTIAL ELEMENT OF AN EFFECTIVE GLOBAL PUBLIC HEALTH RESPONSE IN FCAS, AND SURGE A CONFLICT-SENSITIVE, POLITICALLY SMART APPROACH TO SALVAGE THE SDGs**

Any effective public health response to COVID-19 in FCAS needs to be inherently conflict-sensitive and adaptive to the ‘social fractures’ that are the root causes of conflict and violence predating the pandemic. This lesson is most starkly illustrated in evaluations of the international response to the outbreaks of Ebola virus disease in west Africa and, more recently, in DRC.

Marginalised and conflict-affected populations are the most vulnerable to COVID-19. People who already have limited access to good healthcare, who struggle with social and economic exclusion, who live in overcrowded communities poorly served with water and sanitation, and who may be directly targeted by discriminatory actions and violence will suffer greater mortality rates from infection.<sup>99</sup> In addition, these marginalised, excluded and oppressed groups will lack trust in any government response – especially if that response is delivered via, or protected by, security forces associated with violent oppression and discrimination, making any measures to contain or suppress the virus’ spread more complicated and less effective.<sup>100</sup>

Not only will marginalised and excluded groups carry the burden of the long-lasting social and economic harm the pandemic will inflict on

FCAS, they will also carry burdens of anger and disaffection that may further inflame conflict dynamics. International Alert’s own research into post-Ebola Liberia found that, as well as the poorest Liberians reporting sustained loss of income and post-crisis trauma, they felt anger and a lack of trust towards government authorities over their response.<sup>101</sup>

In DRC, as of April 2020 – with the latest Ebola outbreak thought to be subsiding, now perhaps witnessing a new rash of infections – International Alert has already observed a tangible impact on conflict dynamics, with suspension of mediation threatening a fragile ceasefire in the east, and populations growing increasingly angry at authorities over the consequences of the COVID-19 response (including a lack of access to services, acute price spikes for key commodities on the market and hits to livelihoods), along with increasing tension towards ‘outsiders’ and humanitarian workers because of the ‘*muzungu*’ (white person) virus.<sup>102</sup>

The keys to mitigating these tensions are trust and an emphasis on authentic locally-led interventions – inclusive of both healthcare delivery and behaviour change messaging. International Alert’s research found that grassroots interventions were the most effective in reaching communities, changing behaviour, easing access to medical services and beating back the worst-case scenario for the outbreak.<sup>103</sup> A palpable shift among Liberia’s Ebola taskforce, away from top-down, authoritarian approaches and towards community-based interventions led by trusted local figures, is credited with being the tipping point in getting the outbreak under control. As another peacebuilding organisation, Search for Common Ground, states: “effective healthcare takes trust”.<sup>104</sup>

99 For further information, see the statement by the World Health Organization (WHO) Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus regarding the launch of the global HRP for COVID-19 on 25 March 2020.

100 M. Jobbins, COVID-19: Peacebuilders aren’t the side dish, we’re the delivery service, Search for Common Ground, Medium post, 3 April 2020

101 A. Mukpo, Surviving Ebola: Public perceptions of governance and the outbreak response in Liberia, London: International Alert, June 2015, <https://www.international-alert.org/publications/surviving-ebola-public-perceptions-governance-outbreak-response-liberia>

102 C. Buesser, DRC Country Director, International Alert, interview, 23 April 2020

103 Ibid.

104 M. Jobbins, 2020, Op. cit.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**International and national actors supporting and delivering public health responses in FCAS must embed peacebuilding approaches and expertise into all interventions, in order to mount an effective response and be responsive to root causes of pre-existing conflict dynamics.**

Both an effective global response to COVID-19 in FCAS and realisation of the SDGs in a post-pandemic world depend on leveraging the norms and approaches inherent in SDG 16. This conflict-sensitive adaptive practice includes granular context analysis; 'thinking and working politically' imbued by a systems approach; and an emphasis on iteration and non-linearity, which understands change as non-linear. These elements form a proven, overarching doctrine of engagement that seeks to best affect change in complex, fluid environments.

These efforts to make peace count in delivering the 2030 Agenda, even in a post-COVID world, have been facilitated by changing aid and donor policies over the last 15 years. Conflict and fragility are now core political priorities for all bilateral and multilateral donors. Similar changes and efforts to adapt practice can be observed among international non-governmental organisations. For example, Mercy Corps has adopted a Peace and Conflict Approach that has as its core elements "preventing, managing and reducing actor participation in conflict".<sup>105</sup> The organisation has taken an integrated approach to tackling the root causes of conflict, and is developing a variety of frameworks and tools to support country teams. Similarly, Christian Aid has framed Tackling Violence, Building Peace as their core strategic priority. It is also in the early phase of adopting a programmatic approach that is conflict sensitive and context specific, while also adopting adaptive programme management.<sup>106</sup>

Yet the reality is that, despite the rising tide of strategy and practice in favour of working more effectively in FCAS, this is not happening fast enough, or evenly. As illustrated earlier, the institutional challenges to the effective use of

conflict sensitivity remain. Thus, there is a need for a closer review of how policy directives are impacting the design and implementation of programmes in FCAS. More broadly, there is a need to ensure that robust organisational frameworks, such as the Department for International Development's (DFID) Building Stability Framework and the World Bank's new Fragility Conflict and Violence strategy, shape and inform all operations in FCAS.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**Supporters of the 2030 Agenda must ensure that conflict-sensitive, adaptive policy and practice are infused into all frameworks and intervention models. Overarching policies such as the World Bank's Fragility, Conflict and Violence strategy shape and inform interventions in FCAS. Implementing agencies must embed and mainstream peacebuilding and conflict sensitivity expertise into programmes and outcomes across SDGs, seeking to operationalise the 'triple nexus' of humanitarian, peacebuilding and development interventions.**

### 3.2 DOUBLE DOWN ON SDG 16 AS THE FOCAL POINT FOR ACHIEVING THE SDGs IN FCAS

COVID-19 has only made the case for optimising SDG 16 as the way to salvage and deliver the SDGs in FCAS stronger. A shift towards a 'bigger picture' positive peace focus on the Goals and selected targets, and away from multiple sub-targets and indicators, can militate against a tendency for technocratic, siloed and top-down approaches, and facilitate a shift towards contextually responsive, adaptive, tailored programmes within each FCAS – vital both in enabling sensitivity to, and action on, the root causes of conflict and violence, and in delivering sustainable development outcomes.

We must invest in what integration of, and with, SDG 16 actually looks like in practice. There is already a base to build off in some sectors: for example, the community supporting SDG 4 on education is probably the most advanced. The Supporting Education 2030 Framework for Action, which guides the

<sup>105</sup> Mercy Corps, Peace and conflict: Sector approach, Portland, OR: Mercy Corps, April 2016, <https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/PeaceAndConflictSectorApproach.pdf>

<sup>106</sup> Christian Aid, Tackling violence, building peace global strategy, Dublin: Christian Aid, 2016, <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2016-12/tvbp-tackling-violence-building-peace-report-2016.pdf>

international community towards achieving SDG 4, considers education in crises.<sup>107</sup> Further advice comes in the form of the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies Minimum Standards, which offers guidance on, among other things, conflict-sensitive education. Donors such as DFID<sup>108</sup> have also made explicit commitments to, for example, conflict-sensitive education in their own education strategies.

And while donors will continue to grapple at the policy level with frameworks such as the ‘triple nexus’, the operational aspects of an integrated humanitarian-peacebuilding-development practice can provide a way in. For example, donors can integrate peace objectives into their own indicators and performance frameworks for SDG sectors, and into the project designs intended to deliver them. At the more strategic level, countries do not create their national development and SDG sectoral plans in a vacuum. International donors and multilateral institutions can play an important role in encouraging genuine integration of SDG 16 across all SDG sectors, including through inclusion in bilateral partnership agreements, UN Partnership Frameworks or World Bank Country Partnership Frameworks.

This discourse on policy and practice is usefully framed by the UN and World Bank’s *Pathways for Peace* report. It recommends actors should: “target action and resources to arenas of contestation: power, resources, security and services. As the spaces where access to livelihoods and wellbeing are determined, and where power imbalances manifest most clearly, these arenas present both risks and opportunities.” Governments, and donors, can help to ensure that contestation is

productive (non-violent) instead of destructive (violent). The two institutions go on to call for development strategies to “provide support to national and regional prevention agendas”,<sup>109</sup> and for these agendas to be integrated into development policies and efforts.

The pandemic powerfully illustrates how interconnected and complex the challenges we face at the global level are. Rather than inducing paralysis, this can present opportunities and generate new incentives for collaborating and working in more integrated ways. For example, the global threat of climate change has been instrumental in pushing integrated thinking to the fore. Evidence shows that climate change adaptation interventions can contribute to peacebuilding, and that peacebuilding can have significant adaptation benefits.<sup>110</sup>

Climate change poses complex risks to building and sustaining peace.<sup>111</sup> To highlight the interconnection, more than half the people affected by disasters between the years of 2005 and 2009 lived in FCAS.<sup>112</sup> Humanitarian need is increasing, especially in fragile contexts that are less able to cope when disasters, extreme weather events and external shocks come together.<sup>113</sup> Where architectures for dealing with conflict, climate and environment have traditionally operated parallel to one another, donors are increasingly prioritising an integrated approach.<sup>114</sup>

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**SDG 16 and peacebuilding must be applied as an overarching framework for all the 2030 Agenda interventions in FCAS, translated into action through accompanying national-level acceleration strategies.**

107 The framework indicates that, “education sector plans and policies should anticipate risks and include measures to respond to the educational needs of children in crisis situations; they should also promote safety, resilience and social cohesion, with the aim of reducing the risks of conflict”. It goes on to call for the strengthening of the ability of governments to deliver, among other things, peace education. See: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Education 2030: Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4, Paris: UNESCO, 2016, [http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/education-2030-incheon-framework-for-action-implementation-of-sdg4-2016-en\\_2.pdf](http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/education-2030-incheon-framework-for-action-implementation-of-sdg4-2016-en_2.pdf).

108 DFID, DFID education policy 2018: Get children learning, London: DFID, February 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dfid-education-policy-2018-get-children-learning>

109 UN and World Bank, 2018, Op. cit. p.279

110 B. Mosello and L. Rüttinger, Linking adaptation and peacebuilding: Lessons learned and the way forward, Climate-Fragility Research Paper, Climate Security Expert Network, Berlin: Adelphi Research, December 2019, [https://climate-security-expert-network.org/sites/climate-security-expert-network.com/files/documents/csen\\_research\\_paper\\_-\\_linking\\_adaptation\\_and\\_peacebuilding\\_lessons\\_learned\\_v3.pdf](https://climate-security-expert-network.org/sites/climate-security-expert-network.com/files/documents/csen_research_paper_-_linking_adaptation_and_peacebuilding_lessons_learned_v3.pdf)

111 Ibid.

112 S. Wolfmaier, J. Vivekananda and L. Rüttinger, Climate change, conflict and humanitarian action, Climate Diplomacy, Berlin: Adelphi Research, 2019

113 Ibid.

114 Ibid.

### 3.3 LEVERAGE THE RICH DIVERSITY OF ACTORS FOR THE 2030 AGENDA

A diversity of multilateral, state and non-state actors have become invested in delivering the 2030 Agenda. Policy should focus on creating enhanced and more cooperative linkages between these different sets of actors. This requirement is only accentuated by the advent of a pandemic at a time of weakened multilateralism.<sup>115</sup>

Regional organisations are increasingly contributing to global problem-solving, and specifically playing a greater role in peace and security affairs.<sup>116</sup> One way to help strengthen these developments is to encourage regional organisations to engage with civil society. There is further opportunity to empower these actors to play constructive roles in addressing COVID-19 and conflict issues by increasing inter-regional cooperation and exchange among CSOs.

A different challenge requires reaching out to new actors. For aid agencies, ‘working and thinking politically’ is about being aware and responding to the political context, rather than ‘being political’. There are, however, instances when ‘working and thinking politically’ needs to be literally interpreted. Technical aid interventions in governance are unlikely to have an impact on political exclusion in highly polarised societies, affected by conflict and inflamed by COVID-19 and pandemic responses, where inclusion is actively contested by groups with highly vested interests in the status quo, often including political leaders and national governments. International political and diplomatic strategies that draw on levers such as trade and security cooperation will be as important as any aid intervention. Aid can be an enabler or incentive, but is unlikely to be a catalyst in a number of contexts. This is especially true for contexts such as Mali, Yemen, Pakistan, Myanmar and other conflict hotspots.

In addition, the politics around peacebuilding

related to the SDGs is not easily overcome. There are, however, a number of entry points where progress can be made, which again draw on a variety of key actors. First, civil society can be a critical player in realising the potential of SDG 16 in a post-pandemic context. It can serve three functions. It can play a role in holding governments to account for commitments related to pandemic response and equitable development. Civil society, and particularly the elements of it focused on peace, is often latent or newly emerging in many conflict-affected contexts. With capacity support, it can play a much larger role. States and international actors can also partner with civil society to pursue efforts aligned with SDG 16 that promote a more effective public health response, and/or influence conflict mitigation measures such as intercommunity reconciliation or local conflict resolution. Finally, civil society could be better drawn on to mobilise public understanding and demand around COVID-19 healthcare interventions and the SDGs. Inclusive and trusted state institutions will be critical in pandemic response, both during acute episodes and post-outbreak recovery.

Second, supporting deeper analysis and better baselines against which progress in building peace can be measured in each country is critical. This will assist both civil society and donors alike to hold governments accountable. For example, an independent assessment of VNR reports<sup>117</sup> in 2018 gave both Nigeria and Afghanistan a ‘green’ rating on integrating the SDGs into national policies and plans. This study did not actually review those plans – only the VNRs. Had it done so, it would have found that, with respect to SDG 16, this was far from accurate. Understanding the perceptions of critical actors will also empower citizens, civil society, champions within government<sup>118</sup> and donors.

Third, where states are instrumentalising SDG 16, it will be important to have more frank and honest political conversations. It is difficult

115 S. Smiles Persinger, *Regional organizations and peacebuilding: The role of civil society*, Policy Brief, Notre Dame, IN: Kroc Institute, October 2014, [https://kroc.nd.edu/assets/237284/rigos\\_and\\_peacebuilding\\_the\\_role\\_of\\_civil\\_society.pdf](https://kroc.nd.edu/assets/237284/rigos_and_peacebuilding_the_role_of_civil_society.pdf)

116 Ibid.

117 S. Kindornay, J. Suasky and N. Risse, *Progressing national SDGs implementation: An independent assessment of the voluntary national review reports submitted to the United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development*, Ottawa, ON: Canadian Council for International Co-operation, March 2018

118 To this end, in 2017 AisData surveyed nearly 3,500 leaders from 126 countries, working in 22 different areas of development policy. The findings and analysis provide valuable insights about how to leverage existing opportunities to build effective partnerships that support local ownership and progress on SDG 16. For further information, see: S. Custer et al, *Listening to leaders 2018: Is development cooperation tuned-in or tone-deaf?* Williamsburg, VA: AidData at the College of William & Mary, 31 May 2018.

to do this when donor policies can work at cross-purposes. In countries and regions most adversely affected by conflict – and likely to be heavily impacted by COVID-19, such as Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, Nigeria and Mali – the common overriding narrative has been counter-terrorism. When counter-terror approaches are the top priority, this subsequently feeds through to the SDG 16 agenda. The problem is that this very narrow security agenda is crowding out the more sophisticated effort needed to deal with underlying drivers of conflict, at the same time as mounting an effective outbreak control programme. A continuing absence of genuine plans for peacebuilding, focused through a SDG 16 lens, will only worsen the impact of COVID-19 in devastating development indicators, driving them below even what was achieved in the MDG era, rather than fulfilling expectations that they will meet 2030 targets.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Support CSOs to play a greater role in shaping and holding governments accountable for the delivery of the SDGs, in conjunction with investing in clearer national-level baselines against which improvements in peace can be measured. Donors should invest in diplomatic strategies and leverage development planning partnerships to ensure that partner governments treat SDG 16 as a package, rather than a menu.**

### **3.4 DO NOT STRIP OUT FUNDING FOR SDG 16, MAINSTREAM PEACEBUILDING AS A CORE COMPONENT OF AID**

In the pandemic era, the international community risks repeating an unfortunate history of engendering more ‘aid orphans’ – this time even more bereft as they struggle with the consequences of COVID-19. Thus, the international community needs to ensure that skewed aid flows and a lack of conflict sensitivity do not imperil the ability to salvage the core of the 2030 Agenda in this final decade.

The 2015 Addis Ababa Action Agenda on Financing for Development highlighted that, “countries in conflict and post-conflict situations need special attention”.<sup>119</sup> It went on to note that states “recognize[d] the peacebuilding financing gap and importance of the Peacebuilding Fund (PBF)” and noted the “principles set out in the New Deal by the Group of Seven Plus”. A commitment was made to “strengthen ... efforts to address financing gaps and low levels of direct investment faced by ... countries in conflict and post-conflict situations”. Just one year later, the PBF conference managed to secure just 50% of the US\$ 300 million it sought.<sup>120</sup> The PBF’s 2020–2024 investment plan sets even more ambitious targets. These commitments are now threatened by a massive diversion of aid resources into focused public health responses to the pandemic, as well as the inevitable pressure on global aid spending by the ‘top ten’ donors, given that the bills for unprecedented spending on domestic counter-pandemic responses in 2020 will be due when economies are experiencing recession or depression due to COVID-19.

While, prior to the pandemic, aid spending on conflict prevention and peacebuilding remained low – averaging around 2% of total ODA<sup>121</sup> – and flows to FCAS less than 10%,<sup>122</sup> according to the *States of Fragility* reports, efforts to remedy this had been building in key institutions such as the World Bank, the International Finance Corporation, and many bilateral and multilateral donors. This now risks

119 UN, Addis Ababa Action Agenda on Financing for Development, New York: UN, 2015, pp.4–5, p.32

120 UN, Twenty-six member states pledge \$151 million to United Nations peacebuilding fund, Press release, UN, 21 September 2016, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2016/pbc118.doc.htm>

121 S. Batmanglich, What are different methods to measure aid flows for preventing fragility, conflict and violence and for sustaining peace?, in OECD, *States of Fragility* 2018, Paris: OECD Publishing, 2018, p.144

122 Ibid., p.149

derailment in the backwash of the pandemic. Given how fundamental SDG 16 is to both an effective global pandemic response and in assuring that retrograde movement from any existing peace and development gains in FCAS is not overwhelmingly impacted by COVID-19, there is a need for a major intergovernmental effort, underpinned by strong analysis, to mobilise funders around guaranteeing support for a recalibrated version of the 2030 Agenda. Importantly, it must be centred on SDG 16 and identify the main vehicles and channels for investment in FCAS – and delineate not only the scale of *what* is spent but, more importantly, *how*.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Increase investment in peacebuilding to ensure COVID-19 does not compound existing conflict or create new violence, and promote resilience against future pandemics (this will also help create the conditions to avoid aid orphans). Ensure that assistance for public health responses in FCAS are integrated with conflict-sensitive practice to ensure immediate impact, while contributing to more inclusive societies in the long term.**

Ultimately, in FCAS, what is good for COVID-19 is good for the SDGs. A return to peacebuilding as a lens for implementing both SDG 16 and the broader suite of SDGs – in concert with the technical and political approaches needed to effectively advance the 2030 Agenda – is the only way to avert a situation whereby a significant proportion of the world's population is left behind.

The 10-year window to 2030 is relatively short in peacebuilding terms. The reality is that some states will not achieve the stability and positive peace necessary for sustainable development to flourish. But those states that do show potential will need a supercharged effort on the peace and conflict front – acceleration strategies that recognise and respond to the unique challenges of conflict, and the pandemic which is compounding it.

## **Acknowledgements**

This report was developed with contributions from consultant Marie Pace. From among Alert staff, Jessica Banfield (Director of Programmes, International Alert), Julian Egan (Director of Advocacy and Communications, International Alert) and Mike Young (CEO, International Alert) were closely involved in its drafting.

International Alert would like to thank the following people for reviewing the paper: James Perkins (Senior Research Advisor, British Council) and Christine Wilson (Head of Research, British Council).

This paper was funded by the British Council as an extension of our collaboration on the 2018 Peace Perceptions Poll.

International Alert is also grateful for the continuing support from our other key funding partners: the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs; the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade; and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency.

The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of International Alert's donors.

Layout, design and cover: Nick Wilmot Creative

© International Alert and British Council 2020.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without full attribution.

