

# Decent Work & Democratic Values: Labor Rights in the SDG Framework for Peace

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the interconnected nature of SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions), arguing that labor rights serve as a critical nexus between democratic governance and sustainable peace. Through different case studies, this analysis demonstrates how failures in ensuring decent work contribute to social unrest and threaten peace-building efforts. The paper concludes that integrated approaches to implementing SDG 8 and SDG 16 are essential for achieving the broader objectives of Agenda 2030.

**Keywords:** Decent work, sustainable peace, SDG 8, SDG 16

## 1. Introduction

The adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development by the United Nations General Assembly in September 2015 marked a transformative moment in global development discourse. Unlike its predecessor, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs),<sup>1)</sup> the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) explicitly recognize the interdependent nature of economic, social, and environmental challenges facing humanity. This holistic framework acknowledges that sustainable development cannot be achieved through siloed interventions but requires integrated approaches that address the complex relationships between different development dimensions.

The seventeen SDGs and their 169 targets constitute an ambitious blueprint for addressing poverty, inequality, environmental degradation, and injustice while promoting prosperity and peace for all people and the planet. Central to this framework is the recognition that “there can be no sustainable development without peace and no peace without sustainable development.”<sup>2)</sup> This axiom underscores the fundamental interconnect-

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1) Millennium Development Goals, UNITED NATIONS, <https://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/> (last visited Jan. 12, 2026).

2) United Nations General Assembly, *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, U.N. Doc. A/RES/70/1 (Sept. 25, 2015).

edness of the goals and the necessity of understanding how progress in one area enables or constrains advancement in others.

Among the seventeen SDGs, the relationship between SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) represents a particularly crucial nexus for understanding how economic rights, political governance, and social stability intersect. Decent work, situated at the heart of SDG 8, constitute fundamental human rights that shape not only economic outcomes but also the quality of democratic governance and the prospects for sustainable peace. When workers are denied fair wages, safe working conditions, freedom of association, or protection from exploitation, the resulting grievances often manifest in broader social conflicts that undermine institutional stability and threaten peaceful coexistence.

This paper explores the theoretical and empirical dimensions of this relationship, examining how decent work serves as both an outcome of good governance and a prerequisite for sustainable peace. The analysis proceeds in several stages. First, it provides an overview of the SDG framework and its philosophical foundations. Second, it examines SDG 8 and SDG 16 in detail, analyzing their key concepts, targets, and indicators. Third, it presents the current deficits in both decent work and peace. Fourth, it develops a theoretical framework for understanding the interconnections between decent work, democratic governance, and sustainable peace. Fifth, it presents case studies examining recent instances where governmental failures to ensure decent work have contributed to social unrest and peace deficits. Finally, it concludes by arguing for integrated approaches to implementing these goals as essential for achieving Agenda 2030.

## 2. The Sustainable Development Goals: Context and Framework

### 2.1 From MDGs to SDGs: Evolution of the Development Agenda

The SDGs emerged from a comprehensive review of the MDGs, which guided international development efforts from 2000 to 2015. While the MDGs achieved significant successes in reducing extreme poverty, improving access to education, and combating certain diseases, they were also criticized for their narrow focus, top-down design process, and insufficient attention to inequality, environmental sustainability, and the structural causes of poverty.<sup>3)</sup> The post-2015 development agenda sought to address these limitations through a more inclusive consultative process involving governments, civil society, the

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3) Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, *From the Millennium Development Goals to the Sustainable Development Goals: Shifts in Purpose, Concept, and Politics of Global Goal Setting for Development*, 24 GENDER & DEV. 43 (2016); Jeffrey D. Sachs, *From Millennium Development Goals to Sustainable Development Goals*, 379 THE LANCET 2206-2011 (2012); ERIKA TECHERA, *THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN INTERNATIONAL LAW AND POLICY* (Routledge 2025); David Griggs et al., *Sustainable Development Goals for People and Planet*, 495 NATURE 305 (2013).

private sector, and affected communities.

The SDGs represent a fundamental paradigm shift from the MDGs in their purpose, scope, and formulation process.<sup>4)</sup> First, while the MDGs constituted a North-South aid agenda driven by development ministers seeking to justify aid in the post-Cold War era—with goals like universal primary education relevant primarily to developing countries and sometimes labeled “Minimum Development Goals”—the SDGs are a universal agenda for sustainable development, setting targets for all countries regardless of income level, equally applicable to the USA and Liberia, and emerging from the 2012 Rio+20 Conference driven by environment ministers from both North and South, particularly middle-income countries like Brazil and Colombia.<sup>5)</sup> Second, whereas the MDGs narrowly reconceptualized development as poverty alleviation focused on meeting basic needs through eight goals and 21 targets—a departure from decades of development discourse centered on expanding productive economic capacity—the SDGs embrace a comprehensive vision of sustainable development encompassing environmental, social, and economic sustainability through 17 goals and 169 targets that include but extend far beyond poverty eradication.<sup>6)</sup> Third, the MDGs were drafted by a small group of technocrats in a closed process with limited consultations, failing to build upon the rich debates and international agendas negotiated at landmark 1990s UN conferences on population, women, and development, whereas the SDGs emerged from an extensive participatory process involving the UN Secretary-General’s High Level Task Force of Eminent Persons, a UN Task Team, and crucially an inter-governmental Open Working Group of the General Assembly that incorporated diverse expertise and stakeholder input, addressing a widely acknowledged weakness of the MDG formulation process.<sup>7)8)</sup>

## 2.2 The Architecture of Agenda 2030

The 2030 Agenda rests on several foundational principles that inform its architecture and implementation. The principle of universality acknowledges that sustainable development challenges transcend national boundaries and income categories. The principle of integration requires coherent policies that address trade-offs and maximize synergies across different goals.<sup>9)</sup> The principle of transformation calls for fundamental changes in production and consumption patterns, governance structures, and social relationships rather than incremental adjustments. The principle of inclusiveness demands that all people, particularly the most marginalized, participate in and benefit from development processes.<sup>10)</sup>

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4) Fukuda-Parr, *supra* note 3, at 44-45.

5) *Id.*

6) *Id.*

7) *Id.*

8) Sachs, *supra* note 3, at 2206-2211.

9) Sustainable Development Goals, UNITED NATIONS, <http://sdgs.un.org/goals> (last visited Jan. 12, 2026).

10) Griggs et al., *supra* note 3.

These principles find expression in the seventeen goals, which cover poverty eradication, food security, health, education, gender equality, water and sanitation, energy, economic growth and employment, infrastructure and industrialization, inequality reduction, sustainable cities, sustainable consumption and production, climate action, marine and terrestrial ecosystems, peace and justice, and partnerships for implementation. Each goal contains specific targets and indicators designed to translate broad aspirations into measurable outcomes.<sup>11)</sup>

### 2.3 Interlinkages and Synergies

A defining feature of the SDG framework is the recognition that the goals are interconnected and mutually reinforcing.<sup>12)</sup> Progress toward one goal often enables advancement toward others, while setbacks in one area can undermine achievements elsewhere. Recent research has sought to map these interlinkages systematically, revealing complex networks of relationships that defy simple linear causality.<sup>13)</sup>

Understanding these interlinkages is crucial for effective implementation. Policies designed to advance one goal without considering impacts on others may produce unintended consequences that undermine overall progress. Conversely, integrated approaches that deliberately leverage synergies can generate multiplier effects, accelerating advancement across multiple dimensions simultaneously. The relationship between SDG 8 and SDG 16 exemplifies this dynamic, as decent work and good governance reinforce each other in ways that create virtuous cycles of development.

## 3. SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth

### 3.1 Conceptual Foundations

SDG 8 calls on nations to “promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.” This goal synthesizes several decades of evolving thinking about the relationship between economic growth and human development. It moves beyond narrow conceptions of development as GDP growth to embrace broader notions of economic well-being that prioritize employment quality, labor rights, and social protection.<sup>14)</sup>

The concept of “decent work” originated with the International Labour Organization (ILO) and has become central to contemporary development discourse. The ILO regards decent work as (1) promoting employment; (2) enhancing social protection; (3) promoting

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11) Sustainable Development Goals, *supra* note 9.

12) Griggs et al., *supra* note 3.

13) Måns Nilsson et al., *Policy: Map the Interactions Between Sustainable Development Goals*, 534 NATURE 320 (2016).

14) TECHERA, *supra* note 3, at 66-67.

social dialogue and tripartism; and (4) respecting, promoting, and realizing the fundamental principles and rights at work.<sup>15)</sup> This multidimensional concept recognizes that work serves purposes beyond income generation. It shapes individual dignity, social identity, political voice, and community cohesion. Decent work enables people to meet their basic needs while building capabilities and participating meaningfully in society. Conversely, work characterized by exploitation, insecurity, discrimination, or unsafe conditions undermines human dignity and perpetuates cycles of poverty and marginalization.

Three of the four fundamental principles and rights at work—designated as “core labour standards” by the ILO—are explicitly incorporated within SDG 8’s target framework.<sup>16)</sup> The fourth core labour standard, freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining, is addressed through indicator 8.8.2, adopted in 2017. Beyond these foundational labour rights, SDG 8 encompasses additional protective dimensions including the prohibition of human trafficking and modern slavery<sup>17)</sup> and safeguards for migrant workers.<sup>18)</sup> This expanded scope suggests that SDG 8 articulates a broader normative framework than the ILO’s conventional decent work agenda, extending protections to particularly vulnerable and marginalized segments of the global workforce who have historically remained at the periphery of international labour standards discourse.<sup>19)</sup>

However, the integration of worker protection within the framework of the SDG—conceptualized as “integrated and indivisible”—introduces novel complexities concerning potential trade-offs between competing objectives.<sup>20)</sup> SDG 8 exemplifies both the synergies and tensions inherent in reconciling the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. The realization of SDG 8’s objectives necessitates enhanced deference by international economic and financial institutions to the findings and recommendations of the ILO and United Nations human rights mechanisms.<sup>21)</sup> Furthermore, effective implementation may require more robust institutional arrangements ensuring meaningful worker representation across multiple governance levels to facilitate substantive transformation.

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15) International Labour Organization, *ILO Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization*, art. I(A) (June 10, 2008); INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANIZATION, *DECENT WORK: REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL*, International Labour Conference, 87th Sess. (1999); INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANIZATION, *DECENT WORK: REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL*, International Labour Conference, 91st Sess. (2001).

16) The eradication of forced labour, the elimination of child labour, and the elimination of discrimination in employment and occupation.

17) Target 8.7.

18) Target 8.8.

19) Tonia Novitz, *SDG 8: Promote Sustained, Inclusive and Sustainable Economic Growth, Full and Productive Employment and Decent Work for All*, in *THE CAMBRIDGE HANDBOOK OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS AND INTERNATIONAL LAW* 213 (Jonas Ebbesson & Ellen Hey eds., 2022).

20) *Id.* at 209.

21) *Id.*

The dual—and ostensibly divergent—objectives embedded within SDG 8 suggest that this goal does not address a singular, clearly delineated problem. Consequently, the operationalization of decent work under SDG 8 cannot simply replicate the definitional framework established by the ILO.<sup>22)</sup> Rather, it demands a more nuanced analytical approach that examines the dynamic relationship between decent work imperatives and economic objectives, investigating how these potentially competing concerns can be configured to achieve mutual reinforcement rather than zero-sum trade-offs. This interpretive challenge reflects broader tensions within sustainable development discourse regarding the reconciliation of social protection with economic growth paradigms, requiring normative frameworks that can accommodate both labour rights imperatives and developmental objectives without subordinating one to the other.

### 3.2 Key Targets and Indicators

SDG 8 contains twelve targets addressing various dimensions of economic growth and employment. Several targets are particularly relevant to understanding the relationship between decent work and peace:

**Target 8.3** calls for promoting development-oriented policies that support productive activities, decent job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation, and encourage the formalization and growth of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises, including through access to financial services. This target recognizes that sustainable employment depends on vibrant, diversified economies that create opportunities across the skills spectrum.

**Target 8.5** aims to achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value by 2030. This target addresses both the quantitative challenge of creating sufficient employment opportunities and the qualitative imperative of ensuring that work meets decent work standards. The emphasis on youth employment acknowledges the particular challenges facing young people in many labor markets and the destabilizing potential of youth unemployment.

**Target 8.7** calls for taking immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labor, end modern slavery and human trafficking, and secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labor, including recruitment and use of child soldiers, and by 2025 end child labor in all its forms. This target recognizes that certain forms of work constitute fundamental violations of human rights that demand urgent action.

**Target 8.8** seeks to protect labor rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrant workers, in particular women migrants, and those in precarious employment. This target encompasses freedom of association, collective bargaining rights, occupational safety and health protections, and measures against discrimi-

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22) *Id.*

nation and harassment in the workplace.

The indicators associated with these targets provide metrics for measuring progress. Indicator 8.3.1 tracks proportion of informal employment in total employment by sector and sex. Indicator 8.5.1 tracks average hourly earnings of female and male employees by occupation, age, and disability status. Indicator 8.5.2 measures unemployment rates by sex, age, and disability status. Indicator 8.7.1 tracks proportion and number of children aged 5-17 years engaged in child labor, by sex and age. Indicator 8.8.1 assesses fatal and non-fatal occupational injuries per 100,000 workers by sex and migrant status. Indicator 8.8.2 examines the level of national compliance with labor rights (freedom of association and collective bargaining) based on ILO conventions and national legislation, by sex and migrant status.<sup>23)</sup>

## 4. SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions

### 4.1 Conceptual Foundations

SDG 16 commits nations to “promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.” This goal represents a significant innovation in international development frameworks by explicitly incorporating peace, justice, and governance as development objectives rather than treating them merely as enabling conditions.<sup>24)</sup> The inclusion of SDG 16 reflected growing recognition that sustainable development requires not only economic and social progress but also political systems capable of managing conflicts peacefully, ensuring equal access to justice, protecting human rights, and maintaining public trust through accountable governance.

The concept of “peaceful and inclusive societies” encompasses both negative peace (the absence of violence and armed conflict) and positive peace (the presence of conditions that support human flourishing, including social justice, equality, and responsive institutions). This broader conception acknowledges that formal cessation of hostilities does not automatically produce sustainable peace if underlying grievances and structural inequalities remain unaddressed.<sup>25)</sup> Similarly, the emphasis on “effective, accountable and inclusive

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23) INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANIZATION, RESOLUTION CONCERNING THE METHODOLOGY OF THE SDG INDICATOR 8.8.2 ON LABOUR RIGHTS 5 (2018), (The key premises on which the indicators are based are: (i) definitional validity – the extent to which the evaluation criteria and their corresponding definitions accurately reflect the phenomena they are meant to measure; (ii) transparency – how readily a coded violation can be traced back to any given textual source; and (iii) inter-coder reliability – the extent to which different evaluators working independently are able to consistently arrive at the same results.)

24) Pål Wrangé, *SDG 16: Promote Peaceful and Inclusive Societies for Sustainable Development, Provide Access to Justice for All and Build Effective, Accountable and Inclusive Institutions at All Levels*, in THE CAMBRIDGE HANDBOOK OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS AND INTERNATIONAL LAW 401 (Jonas Ebbesson & Ellen Hey eds., 2022).

25) Johan Galtung, *Violence, Peace, and Peace Research*, 6 J. PEACE RES. 167, 183 (1969).

institutions” reflects understanding that institutional quality matters as much as institutional existence. Institutions must not only perform their designated functions but do so in ways that are responsive to citizen needs, transparent in their operations, accountable for their actions, and inclusive of diverse voices and perspectives. Weak or predatory institutions, even when formally democratic, can perpetuate injustice and fuel conflict.

## 4.2 Key Targets and Indicators

SDG 16 contains twelve targets addressing various dimensions of peace, justice, and governance. Several are particularly relevant to understanding the relationship with decent work:

**Target 16.1** aims to significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere. This target addresses direct violence, including homicide, armed conflict, terrorism, and other forms of intentional harm. While not explicitly mentioning labor-related violence, it encompasses workplace violence, violence against labor organizers, and broader social violence that may stem from labor disputes or economic grievances.

**Target 16.2** seeks to end abuse, exploitation, trafficking, and all forms of violence and torture against children. This target is intrinsically linked to the elimination of forced labor and child labor, as addressing trafficking, abuse, and exploitation would substantially reduce the prevalence of these exploitative practices.

**Target 16.3** seeks to promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all. This target is crucial for labor rights, as effective legal frameworks and accessible justice mechanisms are essential for enforcing labor standards, adjudicating disputes, and holding violators accountable. Where workers cannot access justice, labor rights remain theoretical rather than practical.

**Target 16.6** calls for developing effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels. This target encompasses labor inspectorates, dispute resolution mechanisms, regulatory agencies, and other institutions responsible for implementing and enforcing labor standards. Institutional effectiveness directly impacts workers’ ability to secure their rights.

**Target 16.7** aims to ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels. This target should be read broadly to include *the workplace* as well as different levels of governance, locally, nationally, regionally, internationally, and transnationally.<sup>26)</sup> This target, thus, relates to workers’ voice and representation in policy processes affecting their interests. Inclusive decision-making requires meaningful participation by workers and management as the ‘multi-stakeholder partnerships’ in designing and implementing labor policies.<sup>27)</sup>

**Target 16.10** seeks to ensure public access to information and protect fundamental

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26) Novitz, *supra* note 19, at 215.

27) Novitz, *supra* note 19, at 228.

freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements. Freedom of information and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of association and expression, are prerequisites for workers to organize, advocate for their interests, and hold employers and governments accountable. While this target does not explicitly reference trade unions, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of association has asserted that trade union rights, including the right to strike, are implicitly encompassed within target 16.10's guarantee of "fundamental rights."<sup>28)</sup> The ILO emphasizes that social dialogue and collective bargaining are essential not only for SDG 8 but for Agenda 2030 as a whole,<sup>29)</sup> ensuring coherence between wage growth and productivity while strengthening democratic governance through the involvement of independent employers' and workers' organizations. The ILO further recognizes collective voice as critical for protecting migrant and precarious workers, consistent with indicator 8.8.2, which mandates compilation of statistics on compliance with labour rights, including freedom of association and collective bargaining.<sup>30)</sup>

The indicators for these targets provide metrics for assessment. Indicator 16.1.1 tracks the number of victims of intentional homicide per 100,000 population by sex and age. Indicator 16.2.2 tracks the number of victims of human trafficking per 100,000 population by sex, age, and form of exploitation. Indicator 16.3.1 measures the proportion of victims of violence who reported their victimization to competent authorities. Indicator 16.6.2 examines the proportion of the population satisfied with their last experience of public services. Indicator 16.7.1 assesses the proportions of positions in national and local institutions, including legislatures, public services, and judiciaries, compared to national distributions by sex, age, disability, and population groups. Indicator 16.10.2 tracks the number of countries that adopt and implement constitutional and statutory and/ or policy guarantees for public access to information.

## 5. Deficits in Decent Work and Peace

According to the SDG report 2025,<sup>31)</sup> it shows the progress assessment for the 17 Goals based on assessed targets as well as a detailed breakdown of progress by target.

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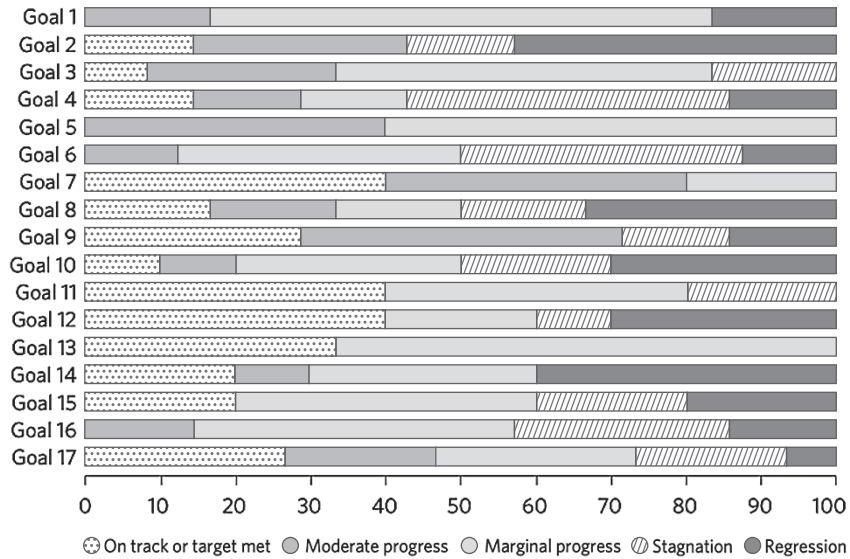
28) Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association, *Rep. of the Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association*, ¶¶ 6, 58, 87-89, U.N. Doc. A/73/279 (Aug. 7, 2018).

29) INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANIZATION, TIME TO ACT FOR SDG 8: INTEGRATING DECENT WORK, SUSTAINED GROWTH AND ENVIRONMENTAL INTEGRITY 33-34, 70-75 (2019), [https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS\\_712685/lang-en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS_712685/lang-en/index.htm).

30) Novitz, *supra* note 19, at 215.

31) UNITED NATIONS, THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS REPORT 2025 (2025), <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2025/>.

**Progress assessment for the 17 Goals based on assessed targets, by Goal (percentage)**



**8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH**

- 8.1 Economic growth ●
- 8.2 Economic productivity ●
- 8.3 Formalization of SMEs ●
- 8.4 Material resource efficiency ☉
- 8.5 Full employment and decent work ☉
- 8.6 Youth NEET ☉
- 8.7 Child and forced labour ○
- 8.8 Labour rights and safe working environment ●
- 8.9 Sustainable tourism ☉
- 8.10 Access to financial services ●
- 8.a Aid for Trade ●
- 8.b Strategy for youth employment ○

**16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS**

- 16.1 Reduction of violence and related deaths ○
- 16.2 Human trafficking □
- 16.3 Justice for all ☉
- 16.4 Illicit financial and arms flows □
- 16.5 Corruption and bribery □
- 16.6 Effective institutions □
- 16.7 Inclusive decision-making ○
- 16.8 Inclusive global governance ☉
- 16.9 Legal identity □
- 16.10 Public access to information ●
- 16.a National human rights institutions ○
- 16.b Non-discriminatory laws ●

**Legend**

- ☉ On track or target met
- Moderate progress, but acceleration needed
- Marginal progress, and significant acceleration needed
- ☉ Stagnation
- Regression
- Insufficient data

Source: The Sustainable Development Report 2025

The 2025 SDG Report reveals a paradox in global employment: while unemployment fell to a historic low of 5.0 percent in 2024—down from 6.0 percent in 2015—nearly 58 percent of workers remained in informal employment, lacking social security, legal protections, and workplace safety measures.<sup>32)</sup>

*Informal Employment:* Since 2015, informal employment has increased to 57.8 percent of the global workforce by 2024, pushing over 34 million additional workers into precarious arrangements in just one year. Projections offer little relief, with rates expected to decline only marginally to 57.7 percent by 2026 while another 38 million workers enter informal employment.<sup>33)</sup>

*Regional and Gender Disparities:* Geographic inequalities are stark. Nearly nine in ten workers in sub-Saharan Africa and least developed countries (LDCs) were informally employed in 2024, with Northern Africa, Western Asia, and Small Island Developing States experiencing increasing informality since 2015. Gender disparities compound this crisis—93.8 percent of women in LDCs and 91.4 percent in sub-Saharan Africa worked informally, significantly exceeding male rates of 86.4 and 86.0 percent respectively.<sup>34)</sup>

*Youth Employment:* While youth unemployment improved to 12.9 percent in 2024, this remains triple the adult rate of 3.7 percent. More concerning, one in five young people globally (259 million youth aged 15-24) were NEET (not in education, employment, or training) in 2024—only 0.9 percentage points lower than 2015. Young women are twice as likely as young men to be NEET, with the disparity most extreme in Central and Southern Asia (41.9 percent versus 11.5 percent).<sup>35)</sup>

*Labor Rights:* Freedom of association and collective bargaining rights deteriorated globally between 2015 and 2023, with average national compliance scores declining 7 percent (from 4.54 to 4.86 on a 0-10 scale where 0 is best). LDCs experienced a 45.5 percent compliance decline, while even developed economies fell 16.5 percent. This erosion—driven by restrictions on freedom of association, union suppression, and persecution of labor organizers—undermines both decent work and democratic governance, as independent workers' organizations are essential to democracy.<sup>36)</sup>

*Child Labor:* Child labor declined to 138 million children in 2024 (including 54 million in hazardous work), down from 160 million four years earlier. Since 2000, over 100 million fewer children are in child labor despite global child population growth of 230 million, demonstrating that progress is achievable even amid demographic expansion.<sup>37)</sup>

The 2025 SDG Report on SDG 16 reveals persistent challenges alongside modest

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32) *Id.* at 24.

33) *Id.* at 25.

34) *Id.*

35) *Id.*

36) *Id.*

37) *Id.* at 24.

progress in peace, justice, and governance. Violence and conflict continue driving displacement, while access to justice remains elusive for many. Although budget reliability has improved, access-to-information laws have expanded, and more countries now have compliant human rights institutions, significant gaps remain in building effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions.<sup>38)</sup>

*Institutional Effectiveness and Fiscal Management:* Global budget deviations improved from 12.6 percent in 2020 to 9.6 percent in 2023 as countries recovered from the pandemic, yet low and lower-middle-income countries experienced higher volatility, with budget deviations in low-income countries exceeding 15 percent three times between 2015-2023 and peaking at 22.4 percent in 2020.<sup>39)</sup>

*Access to Information:* By 2024, 140 countries had adopted access-to-information laws—up from just 14 in 1990—with 95 percent of 125 surveyed countries having legal guarantees. However, enforcement remains uneven: countries with dedicated oversight bodies scored 7.5 out of 9 on compliance compared to 3.7 for those without them, and only 35 percent of these bodies can mediate disputes.<sup>40)</sup>

*Human Rights Institutions:* By 2024, 89 countries had fully compliant independent national human rights institutions (Paris Principles status A)—up from 70 in 2015—serving 55 percent of the global population, with an additional 25 countries having partially compliant institutions (status B).<sup>41)</sup>

*Public Service Satisfaction and Political Voice:* Globally, satisfaction with administrative services reached 64 percent, followed by education (58 percent) and healthcare (57 percent), though healthcare showed the widest cross-country variation (9-93 percent). Only 44 percent of people in 83 surveyed countries believe their political systems are responsive and their voices matter in decision-making, with women reporting lower political efficacy than men, revealing fragile trust in governance.<sup>42)</sup>

*Human Trafficking:* Detected trafficking victims increased 25 percent in 2022 compared to pre-pandemic levels and 43 percent compared to 2020, driven primarily by a 31 percent rise in child victims since 2019. Children accounted for 38 percent of all detected trafficking victims in 2022—up from 13 percent in 2004—with girls primarily trafficked for sexual exploitation (60 percent) and boys for forced labor (45 percent) and forced criminality or begging (47 percent). Central America, the Caribbean, sub-Saharan Africa, and Northern Africa recorded the highest shares of child victims at around 60 percent of those detected.<sup>43)</sup>

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38) *Id.* at 40.

39) *Id.* at 41.

40) *Id.*

41) *Id.*

42) *Id.*

43) *Id.*

*Violence Against Rights Defenders:* At least 502 killings of human rights defenders, journalists, and trade unionists were documented across 44 countries in 2024, along with 123 disappearances across 37 countries. Journalist killings increased 11 percent to 82 deaths, with over 60 percent occurring in conflict zones—the highest share in over a decade. Northern Africa and Western Asia saw a 24 percent rise in killings and remains the most fatal region for journalists, while Latin America and the Caribbean is the deadliest for human rights defenders. Detentions of defenders surged, with at least 31 countries recording 10 or more new cases in 2024, concentrated particularly in Central and Southern Asia and Northern Africa and Western Asia.<sup>44)</sup>

The 2025 SDG Report exposes a troubling disconnect between headline employment statistics and the actual quality of work and governance experienced by billions globally, revealing that surface-level progress masks deepening structural inequalities and eroding fundamental rights. While unemployment reached a historic low in 2024, this achievement is fundamentally undermined by the reality that nearly 58 percent of the global workforce remains trapped in informal employment without social security, legal protections, or workplace safety—a figure that has actually increased since 2015 and is projected to persist through 2026, absorbing another 38 million workers into precarious arrangements. The crisis is most acute in the Global South, where geographic and gender inequalities intersect devastatingly: in sub-Saharan Africa and least developed countries, nearly nine in ten workers labor informally, with women bearing a disproportionate burden, while youth face unemployment rates triple that of adults and one in five young people globally remain entirely disconnected from education, employment, or training. Perhaps most alarming is the 7 percent global deterioration in compliance with freedom of association and collective bargaining rights between 2015 and 2023—with least developed countries experiencing a catastrophic 45.5 percent decline—signaling not merely an economic failure but a democratic crisis, as the suppression of independent workers’ organizations undermines both decent work and democratic governance itself.

The simultaneity of rising informal employment, collapsing labor rights, persistent youth exclusion, increasing human trafficking, and systematic violence against those who defend rights reveals a coherent pattern: global economic systems are generating employment without dignity, governance without accountability, and development without justice, creating what amounts to a profound crisis of social sustainability where the very institutions and rights necessary to build inclusive, equitable societies are being systematically weakened even as governments claim progress toward sustainable development goals.

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44) *Id.*

## 6. The Interconnected Relationship: Decent Work, Democratic Governance, and Sustainable Peace

### 6.1 Theoretical Framework

Understanding the relationship between decent work, democratic governance, and sustainable peace requires synthesizing insights from multiple theoretical traditions. Development economics emphasizes the role of employment in poverty reduction and economic growth. Political economy examines how labor markets and class relations shape political systems and power distributions. Peace studies analyze the structural conditions that enable or prevent violent conflict. Democratic theory explores the institutional arrangements and civic practices that sustain accountable governance.

These perspectives converge in recognizing that decent work, democratic governance, and sustainable peace are mutually constitutive rather than merely correlated. They form a triangular relationship in which each element both depends upon and reinforces the others.



*Decent work* contributes to democratic governance through multiple pathways. Economically secure workers are better positioned to participate in civic life, as they have the time, resources, and confidence to engage in political activities beyond the struggle for survival. Employment in the formal economy brings workers into contact with institutions and regulatory frameworks, fostering awareness of rights and responsibilities.

Freedom of association and collective bargaining, core elements of decent work, constitute important democratic practices in their own right. Collective bargaining is essential not only for providing coherence between real wage growth and shared productiv-

ity growth,<sup>45)</sup> but also for advancing broader governance objectives. The full involvement of free, independent, strong, and representative employers' and workers' organizations in policy-making and implementation serves as a powerful governance instrument for sustainable development, reinforcing democratic ownership, inclusiveness, and accountability.<sup>46)</sup> Workers who exercise these rights develop organizational capacity, leadership skills, and collective efficacy that transfer to other domains of civic engagement. Trade unions have historically played pivotal roles in democratization movements, mobilizing workers to demand political reforms and resist authoritarian rule, demonstrating that labor rights and democratic rights are fundamentally intertwined rather than separate spheres of governance.

Conversely, deficits in decent work undermine democratic governance. Economic insecurity and workplace exploitation generate grievances that may find expression through anti-democratic movements promising radical change. Vast inequalities in economic power translate into political inequalities, as wealthy elites capture policy processes to advance their interests at the expense of broader populations. Suppression of labor rights signals broader intolerance of dissent and collective action, often presaging or accompanying erosion of other democratic freedoms.

*Democratic governance* creates conditions conducive to decent work through institutional mechanisms and normative frameworks. Democratic accountability gives workers voice in selecting leaders and influencing policies affecting labor markets. Elected officials facing periodic reelection have incentives to respond to worker concerns about wages, safety, and employment opportunities. Freedom of expression and association enables workers to organize, advocate for their interests, and expose abuses without fear of retaliation.

Rule of law and access to justice provide essential protections for labor rights. Independent judiciaries can enforce labor standards, adjudicate disputes fairly, and hold violators accountable regardless of their power or status. Transparent regulatory frameworks reduce arbitrary discretion and create predictable environments for employment relationships. Inclusive decision-making ensures that labor policies reflect worker interests rather than exclusively serving employer or government preferences.

Democratic governance also fosters the social norms and institutions that support decent work. Democratic political cultures typically emphasize human dignity, equality, and rights, creating normative pressures for humane treatment of workers. Civil society organizations in democratic contexts can monitor labor practices, advocate for reforms, and support workers in asserting their rights. Media freedom enables exposure of labor abuses and amplification of worker voices.

Conversely, authoritarian or poorly governed states often suppress labor rights as part

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45) INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANIZATION, *supra* note 29, at 55, 60-61.

46) *Id.* at 74.

of broader patterns of political control. Unaccountable governments may align with capital against labor, using coercion to suppress organizing and strikes while offering lax regulation to attract investment. Weak institutions lack capacity or political will to enforce labor standards. Corruption enables employers to evade compliance through bribes. Exclusion from decision-making leaves workers unable to influence policies determining their working conditions.

*Sustainable peace* provides the foundation upon which both decent work and democratic governance can flourish. Armed conflicts destroy economic infrastructure, disrupt production, and divert resources from productive investment to military expenditures. Violence creates insecurity that prevents workers from reaching workplaces or businesses from operating normally. Forced displacement separates people from livelihoods and social networks. The breakdown of governance during conflicts eliminates institutional protections for workers and enables egregious exploitation.

Peace also creates the trust and social cohesion necessary for democratic governance and collective action. In conflict-affected societies, ethnic, religious, or regional divisions may be so deep that cooperation across these lines becomes impossible. Violence erodes trust in institutions and other citizens, undermining the civic culture that sustains democracy. Post-conflict transitions often involve authoritarian arrangements or elite pacts that limit democratic participation in the name of stability.

Positive peace, characterized by social justice and responsive institutions, creates particularly favorable conditions for decent work and democratic governance. Societies marked by low inequality, effective conflict resolution mechanisms, and broad participation in decision-making can address labor issues constructively before they escalate to violence. Inclusive political settlements ensure that all groups have stakes in maintaining peaceful cooperation. Strong institutions can manage disputes through established procedures rather than allowing them to fester or explode.

*Decent work* contributes to peace by addressing grievances that might otherwise fuel conflict. Fair wages and employment opportunities reduce economic desperation that makes recruitment by armed groups appealing. Safe working conditions and labor protections demonstrate government concern for citizen welfare, building legitimacy and trust. Equal employment opportunities across ethnic, religious, or regional lines can promote integration and reduce identity-based tensions.

Collective bargaining and social dialogue create institutional channels for managing conflicts between labor and capital peacefully. Rather than allowing workplace disputes to escalate to violence or broader social unrest, these mechanisms enable negotiated resolutions that address underlying concerns. The habits of negotiation and compromise developed through labor relations can spill over into other domains, strengthening overall conflict management capacity.

Conversely, decent work deficits contribute to conflict through multiple mechanisms.

Unemployment and underemployment, particularly among youth, create large populations with grievances, time, and energy to devote to disruptive activities. Dangerous or exploitative working conditions generate anger and resentment that may find violent expression. Discrimination in employment along identity lines reinforces group boundaries and provides mobilizing grievances for conflict entrepreneurs. Suppression of labor organizing removes peaceful channels for expressing grievances, potentially leading workers toward more radical alternatives.

## 6.2 Evidence of Interconnections

Some research has documented these interconnections across various contexts. Cross-national studies have found positive correlations between labor rights and democratic governance, with freedom of association associated with broader civil and political freedoms.<sup>47)</sup> Countries with stronger labor protections tend to have more effective institutions, less corruption, and greater government accountability.<sup>48)</sup>

Research on conflict and peace has identified economic grievances, including those related to employment and working conditions, as important factors in the outbreak and persistence of violence. Youth unemployment, in particular, has been linked to increased risk of civil conflict, as idle young men are readily available for recruitment by armed groups and may view participation in violence as offering better prospects than available alternatives.<sup>49)</sup> Studies of specific conflicts frequently identify labor disputes, unemployment, or economic inequality as contributing factors.

The triangular relationship between decent work, democratic governance, and sustainable peace creates virtuous cycles when all elements are present and vicious cycles when deficits exist. Societies achieving progress across all three dimensions experience mutually reinforcing dynamics that accelerate development. Societies failing in one dimension often see negative spillovers that undermine the others, creating downward spirals of decline.

## 6.3 Case Studies

The connection between labor rights suppression and democratic instability manifests vividly across global contexts. The Arab Spring demonstrates how authoritarian regimes' closure of peaceful avenues for change—including the suppression of independent labor organizations—ultimately precipitated violent upheaval, with the region continuing to bear

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47) André Sapir, *The Interaction Between Labour Standards and International Trade Policy*, 18 WORLD ECON. 791-803 (1995); Keith E. Maskus, *Trade and Competitiveness Aspects of Environmental and Labor Standards in East Asia*, in EAST ASIA INTEGRATES 115-134 (Homi Kharas & Kathie Krumm eds., 2003).

48) Eric Neumayer & Indra de Soysa, *Globalization and the Right to Free Association and Collective Bargaining: An Empirical Analysis*, 34 WORLD DEV. 31-49 (2006).

49) Patricia Justino, *Poverty and Violent Conflict: A Micro-Level Perspective on the Causes and Duration of Warfare*, 46 J. PEACE RES. 315-333 (2009).

costs through persistent conflicts and fragility. Conversely, successful democratic transitions have consistently recognized the integral relationship between workers' rights and democratic consolidation. South Africa's post-apartheid constitution deliberately embedded robust labor protections as foundational to its democratic framework, while Poland's Solidarity movement—originating as a trade union—catalyzed the country's transition from authoritarian rule, illustrating that labor rights and democratic rights constitute mutually reinforcing elements of governance rather than separable domains.

Recent developments in Asia further illuminate this relationship. In Indonesia, the 2025 platform worker protests exemplify how the exclusion of gig economy workers from formal labor protections generates acute social tensions and challenges democratic legitimacy. On May 20, 2025, over 25,000 motorcycle taxi (ojol) and delivery drivers from platforms such as Gojek and Grab staged coordinated nationwide strikes and mass demonstrations in Jakarta and other major cities, logging off their platforms for 24 hours in what was dubbed "Action 205." The protests, organized primarily by Garda Indonesia—representing 500,000 members among Indonesia's approximately 4 million gig workers—demanded a 10 percent cap on platform commissions, removal of discounted ride programs, regulated pricing for delivery services, and government sanctions against companies violating existing transport rules.<sup>50)</sup> The demonstrations intensified following the August 28, 2025 death of 21-year-old delivery driver Affan Kurniawan, who was fatally struck by a police vehicle during protests,<sup>51)</sup> galvanizing broader anger over economic inequality and government indifference to gig workers' plight.<sup>52)</sup> Garda chairman Raden Igun Wicaksono warned of "greater and greater escalation," describing the movement as the "Ojol Revolution" and promising that millions of drivers were prepared to continue protests until their demands were met.<sup>53)</sup> The crisis reflects fundamental structural failures in Indonesia's digital labor ecosystem: drivers earn an average of just \$163 per month in Jakarta<sup>54)</sup>—only half the city's minimum wage—while lacking basic job security, social insurance, collective bargaining rights, or legal recourse against algorithmic management and unilateral platform decisions. The protests, which forced lawmakers to scale back official perks and oust some

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50) *Massive Nationwide Strike: 500,000 Online Drivers to Protest and Disable Apps on 20 May*, SOC. EXPAT (May 19, 2025), <https://www.socialexpat.net/massive-nationwide-strike-500000-online-drivers-to-protest-and-disable-apps-on-20-may/>.

51) *Indonesia Protests: At Least 10 Killed, Thousands Arrested Amid Police Crackdown*, DEMOCRACY NOW! (Sept. 5, 2025), <https://www.democracynow.org/2025/9/5/indonesia>.

52) *Protests Resume in Indonesia's Jakarta After Ride-Share Driver Killed*, AL JAZEERA (Aug. 29, 2025), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/8/29/protests-resume-in-jakarta-after-ride-share-driver-killed-by-police>.

53) *More Protests Planned as Anger Sweeps Indonesia's Gig Drivers*, BLOOMBERG (Sept. 15, 2025), <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-09-15/more-protests-planned-as-anger-sweeps-indonesia-s-gig-drivers>.

54) *Gig Workers Fuel a New Uprising*, THE STAR (Sept. 17, 2025), <https://www.thestar.com.my/aseanplus/aseanplus-news/2025/09/17/gig-workers-fuel-a-new-uprising>.

politicians from parliament in September 2025, revealed how platform economy exclusions from labor protections can destabilize social cohesion even within democratic systems, particularly when workers lack institutional mechanisms to voice economic grievances through peaceful channels.

Similarly, Nepal's September 2025 protests, catalyzed by viral TikTok and Instagram videos of the so-called “#NepoKids”—children of wealthy political and business families flaunting luxury vacations, designer goods, and imported cars—rapidly evolved into a broader uprising against corruption, inequality, and youth marginalization.<sup>55)</sup> One particularly incendiary image showed the son of a provincial minister posing beside a Christmas tree constructed from luxury brand boxes including Louis Vuitton, Cartier, and Gucci, provoking widespread outrage.<sup>56)</sup> The viral campaign, using hashtags like #PoliticiansNepoBabyNepal, #NepoKids, and #NoMoreCorruption, contrasted these displays of elite privilege with the harsh realities facing ordinary Nepali youth: over 20 percent youth unemployment, approximately 82 percent of the workforce trapped in informal employment without social protections, and limited economic opportunities forcing many young people to seek work abroad.<sup>57)</sup> When Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli's government responded by banning 26 social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and X on September 4, 2025, thousands of young protesters took to the streets.<sup>58)</sup> The demonstrations turned deadly on September 8 when police opened fire on crowds outside parliament in Kathmandu, killing 19 students that day and ultimately resulting in 72 deaths by the end of the protests.<sup>59)</sup> Protesters stormed and burned the parliament building, Supreme Court, and numerous government offices, while riots spread to cities including Pokhara, Itahari, Biratnagar, and Janakpur. The violence forced Prime Minister Oli's resignation on September 9, and following negotiations between Gen Z protest leaders and Army Chief General Ashok Raj Sigdel, former Chief Justice Sushila Karki was appointed Nepal's first female interim prime minister on September 12, with elections scheduled for March 2026.<sup>60)</sup>

While the protests appeared on the surface to be driven by wealth inequality alone,

55) ‘Nepo Baby’ Trend Goes Viral in Nepal: TikTok and Reddit Users Expose Lavish Lives of Politicians’ Children, TECHPANA (Sept. 7, 2025), <https://www.techpana.com/2025/152938/nepo-baby-trend-goes-viral-in-nepal-tiktok-and-reddit-user-expose-lavish-lives-of-politician-children>.

56) Pratikshya Bhatta, *How Nepo Babies Triggered Gen Z to Demand Fairness*, NEPAL CONNECT (Sept. 24, 2025), <https://nepalconnect.world/how-nepo-babies-triggered-gen-z-to-demand-fairness/>.

57) David Sislen et al., *Toward Job-Creating Growth in Nepal*, WORLD BANK BLOGS (Aug. 11, 2025), <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/endpovertyinsouthasia/toward-job-creating-growth-in-nepal>.

58) ‘Nepo Kid’ Trend Sparks Anti-Corruption Campaign in Nepal, KATHMANDU POST (Sept. 6, 2025), <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2025/09/06/nepo-kid-trend-sparks-anti-corruption-campaign-in-nepal>.

59) *Gen Z Protests Brought About Change in Nepal via the Powers — and Perils — of Social Media*, CONVERSATION (Sept. 25, 2025), <https://theconversation.com/gen-z-protests-brought-about-change-in-nepal-via-the-powers-and-perils-of-social-media-265365>.

60) *Gen Z-Led Anti-Corruption Protests in Nepal Put Its First Female Prime Minister in Power*, NPR (Sept. 14, 2025), <https://www.npr.org/2025/09/14/nx-s1-5538411/gen-z-led-anti-corruption-protests-in-nepal-put-its-first-female-prime-minister-in-power>.

deeper examination of Nepal's employment conditions reveals that the wealth gap itself is a symptom of systemic decent work deficits. The uprising revealed the explosive potential of elite privilege displayed against a backdrop of labor market precarity. When political leaders flaunt wealth amid widespread informal employment and blocked economic opportunities, democratic legitimacy erodes—especially when young workers lack institutional mechanisms such as independent unions and meaningful collective bargaining to voice grievances peacefully. The viral images of Nepal's "nepo kids," however, exposed more than wealth inequality. They revealed systemic corruption rooted in decent work deficits. With approximately 80 percent of Nepal's workforce trapped in informal employment without social protections, collective bargaining rights, or legal recourse, workers face a double bind: they lack both economic security and the institutional voice to demand it. The crisis thus illustrates a self-perpetuating system in which the absence of decent work creates wealth gaps while simultaneously enabling corruption, as workers without legal protections remain powerless to challenge the extractive practices of political and economic elites who profit from maintaining precarious employment conditions.

## 7. Conclusion

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development represents an ambitious vision of a world without poverty, inequality, or injustice, where economic prosperity is environmentally sustainable and broadly shared, and where peace and effective governance enable all people to realize their potential. Achieving this vision requires recognizing and acting on the interconnections among the goals.

The relationship between SDG 8 and SDG 16 is fundamental. Decent work provides the economic foundation for dignified lives, the social cohesion necessary for peace, and the conditions enabling democratic participation. Democratic governance creates the institutional frameworks for enforcing labor rights, the accountability mechanisms ensuring responsive policies, and the inclusive processes giving workers voice. Sustainable peace provides the stability necessary for economic activity, the trust enabling cooperation, and the security allowing people to build futures.

When all three elements are present, they create virtuous cycles of development that accelerate progress across multiple dimensions. When deficits exist in any element, vicious cycles emerge that undermine overall development. The cases examined in this paper demonstrate both possibilities. They show how decent work deficits contribute to governance failures and peace challenges. They also show moments where worker mobilization, policy reforms, or cross-ethnic solidarity created openings for positive change.

The path forward requires sustained commitment to integrated approaches that address decent work, democratic governance, and sustainable peace together. It requires recognizing workers as rights-holders and active agents rather than passive beneficiaries or mere

factors of production. It requires building institutions capable of enforcing rights and ensuring accountability. It requires promoting social dialogue and inclusive decision-making. It requires addressing structural inequalities and power imbalances. It requires international cooperation and solidarity.

As the international community reflects on progress toward Agenda 2030 and considers what comes after, the imperative of integration should guide future development frameworks. The SDGs have demonstrated the value of comprehensive, interconnected approaches to global challenges. Future agendas should build on this foundation, deepening understanding of relationships among goals and strengthening mechanisms for integrated implementation.

The world envisioned in the 2030 Agenda, where all people enjoy decent work in peaceful, just, and well-governed societies, remains possible. Achieving it requires commitment, resources, political will, and strategic action. Most fundamentally, it requires recognizing that economic development, democratic governance, and sustainable peace are not separate pursuits but different dimensions of a unified project: building a world fit for human dignity. The interconnections between SDG 8 and SDG 16 illuminate this fundamental truth and point the way toward the integrated approaches essential for success.