



SDG 16 CONFERENCE

Peace, Justice & Inclusive Societies



Transforming Governance for a more Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Future: SDG 16 as the roadmap to respond to COVID-19 and build back better

Organized by

the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA)

and the International Development Law Organization (IDLO)

with the Government of Italy

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Outcome: key messages and recommendations

The 2021 global SDG 16 Conference – Transforming Governance for a more Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Future: SDG 16 as the roadmap to respond to COVID-19 and build back better – came to a successful conclusion on Friday, 30 April 2021, following six high-level plenary sessions and nine parallel thematic sessions, all held in a virtual format.

Co-organized by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), the International Development Law Organization (IDLO), and the Government of Italy, the SDG 16 Conference provided a timely global platform to address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the transformative contribution SDG 16 can make in promoting inclusive and sustainable recovery and in accelerating progress on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

One hundred and one high-level speakers, including ministers, officials, judges, human rights scholars and advocates, youth leaders, representatives of supreme audit institutions, as well as experts on gender, public institutions, anticorruption, and governance, among others, engaged in broad-ranging discussions on how to address our shared fragility, renew the social contract to build trust between people and the state, and turn challenges into opportunities to rebuild and transform governance with SDG 16 at its center. Several executive heads of UN entities led discussions, and more were represented through their deputies at Assistant Secretary-General level.

The Conference was attended by over 500 participants from government, civil society, the UN system, stakeholder groups, academia, and intergovernmental organizations.

Day 1 – There was overwhelming consensus that SDG 16 is a key objective of sustainable development and also plays an essential enabling role in achieving all of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

COVID-19 has negatively impacted many dimensions of SDG 16, threatening to derail progress on the 2030 Agenda more broadly. It has impacted most those who were already at risk of being left behind, including women and girls, older people, youth, people with disabilities, and groups in marginalized and vulnerable situations. Pre-existing challenges to peace, justice and inclusion have been both exposed and magnified by the impact of the pandemic. The functioning of public institutions at all levels has been hampered. Yet, governments, citizens, civil society, and other actors have joined forces to design and implement effective and innovative practices to enhance governance during the pandemic. These practices provide invaluable lessons not only for the next phase of recovery, but also for building more resilient societies, addressing inequalities and vulnerabilities, and supporting the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development agreed by world leaders in 2019.

Day 2 – Renewing the social contract and re-building trust between people and governments has emerged as a major challenge and is key to making progress on all of the Sustainable Development Goals. The Conference explored some of the root causes of lack of trust in public institutions. The discussions emphasized the importance of policies and measures at the national level, sustained by international cooperation, to ensure equity in distribution of public goods and delivery of services, with a focus on those most at risk of being left behind; to strengthen transparency, accountability and oversight; to open space for participation and stakeholder engagement; to support adherence to constitutional frameworks and the independence of judicial institutions; and to reinforce action to fight corruption.

Day 3 – While the pandemic has created major challenges, it also provides an opportunity to rethink governance, with SDG 16 as a central pillar and lever for transformation. The transformative actions that the COVID-19 crisis is compelling governments to take, if rooted in multilateralism and global solidarity, can bring about renewed, sustained progress in achieving the 2030 Agenda. Governance, institutional, and policy innovations at local, national, regional, and international levels can accelerate the implementation of SDG 16 and promote integrated, “whole-of-society” approaches needed to tackle complex, interrelated challenges such as entrenched conflict, increasing inequalities, gender inequality, social and economic insecurity, climate change and rapid technological disruption.

Among the **key messages** that resonated during the three days:

- The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the world’s fragility. 2020 was meant to be the beginning of the Decade of Action towards the realization of the 2030 Agenda. Now, at a critical moment in history when human development is set to decline in 2021 for the first time since 1990, backsliding on SDG 16 threatens to reverse hard-won gains in the pursuit to leave no one behind. As countries race to rebound from the immediate shocks of the pandemic, the international community faces a collective critical juncture on the road to recovery.
- Governance capacity at all levels has not only proven critical for timely, just and inclusive responses to the pandemic, but has also influenced the level of public confidence in public institutions.
- Despite the enormous challenges it has posed, the crisis can provide an opportunity to reimagine the role of laws, institutions, and policymaking, and transform governance with SDG 16 at its center.
- Attaining sustainable development in the wake of the COVID-19 requires a comprehensive and coordinated effort to make governance more people-centered and reflective of the voices and needs of women, men, girls, boys, and all those at risk of being marginalized. Governments need to institutionalize spaces and mechanisms for public participation, engage women, civil society and social groups in decision-making and rebuild the social contract. Public institutions, including parliaments, need to be inclusive and have appropriate representation from all social groups.
- Shared experiences from policy actors in the international community highlighted how SDG 16 and inclusive governance can build resilience to shocks. Resilience to shocks and crises cannot be achieved

without policy coordination and whole-of-society approaches that address discriminatory norms and social practices, and that aim to reduce inequalities. Civil society has played a key role in reaching out to all groups in society, providing information, and developing innovative and effective solutions to fight the pandemic and address its impacts. Civic space should be preserved now and during recovery.

- The rule of law is key to tackling the multiple intersecting and overlapping layers of discrimination, and empowering people to claim their rights. Particularly in times of crisis, it is important to ensure the functioning of justice systems, including independent judiciaries, to ensure that people in conditions of marginalization and vulnerability who most need the protection of the law are able to enforce their rights and access remedies.
- If justice problems are not resolved, costs will be incurred in other sectors, will impact the social and psychological well-being of communities, and ultimately further erode the social contract. The justice gap can only be narrowed if legal systems are reoriented towards justice for all, and not just a select few. A people-centered approach is needed to empower justice seekers and to promote fairer and more satisfactory outcomes. The independence of judges and the ability of justice departments to provide legislative oversight must be maintained.
- When the pandemic hit, governments around the world were faced with the challenge of balancing public safety and human rights as they implemented lockdowns and restrictions. Some national responses, however, infringed on rights and shattered the trust placed in institutions, while the most successful responses reflected higher levels of public participation and higher levels of trust.
- Corruption is a growing driver of discontent and a challenge to sustainable development. We need to combat it through improved prevention, detection, and prosecution to increase effectiveness. Coordination among different anti-corruption actors is critical to restoring trust.
- Strengthening transparency and accountability and addressing corruption risks through an integrated and whole-of-society approach will be paramount to ensuring the effectiveness of response and recovery plans to address the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 and to avoid further marginalization of the most vulnerable segments of society.
- Promoting gender equality and the participation, representation and leadership of women and girls in policy spaces and decision-making at all levels, including in recovery plans from the pandemic, is key to building back better.
- Ensuring that no one is left behind in the recovery requires a rights-based approach to social protection and access to public services. Equitable, timely, and effective delivery of public services, including health, education, and social services, is essential to building greater public confidence and trust in government. It will also help accelerate progress on all of the Sustainable Development Goals.
- The governance gap will not be closed until the gap in people-centered data is also addressed. Evidence-based strategies that can help advance SDG 16 and properly address people's lived realities were cited as powerful antidotes to disinformation and the politicization of information. As the SDG 16 community remains data-poor, efforts to enhance the quality of information and data should be a priority.
- Governments have successfully used digital platforms and digital tools to keep the wheels of government turning and continue to deliver essential public services during the pandemic.
- Accelerated action is needed to address digital divides and make digital government a positive force for inclusion. Governments need to improve their understanding of the needs of people living in conditions of vulnerability and exclusion, ensure equitable access to technology and promote digital literacy and skills to avoid further widening digital divides.

- Multi-stakeholder partnerships at local, national, and international levels have a key role to play in supporting good governance and long-term transformation. Discussants called for a “whole-of-society” approach to meet multi-faceted and interrelated challenges such as entrenched conflict, increasing inequalities, gender inequality, social and economic insecurity, climate change, and rapid technological disruption.
- Success in recovering from the pandemic will require transformation of governance and a new social contract, renewing the basis for trust between governments and their citizens. It must be rooted in justice for all, accountability and participation, inclusive and sustainable societies, investments in social cohesion and an end to all forms of exclusion. It must guarantee social protection, provide access to education for all, and harness digital technology. It must guarantee equal rights and opportunities for women and girls, and human rights must be central to it.
- The 2030 Agenda represents both humanity’s highest aspiration and best hope for success. SDG 16 remains an essential enabler of transformative change. The principles of peace, rule of law, human rights, and effective institutions that form the core of SDG 16 and cut across the 2030 Agenda must guide our efforts to build back better.

Key recommendations

The discussion produced the following key recommendations for action by governments, the United Nations system, civil society, the private sector, the scientific community, and others:

I. Build resilience to shocks and crises

Accelerate action to promote:

i. Peace

- Conflict management during COVID-19 should adopt a people-centered approach that acknowledges or seeks to address root causes. Only once pre-existing problems are identified can national and international responses be effectively targeted.
- Support to peacebuilding efforts is essential during the COVID-19 pandemic. More investment is needed in conflict prevention and the establishment of early warning systems.

ii. Justice

- Emergency responses should focus on strengthening accessible and fair justice solutions, especially at the local level; they must meet the requirements of legality, necessity, and proportionality, and be non-discriminatory.
- People-centered justice systems should be promoted through investment in technological innovation and engagement with customary and informal justice systems to enhance the effectiveness of legal proceedings and the timely and equitable delivery of justice.

iii. Effective institutions

- Public institutions need to be more agile, responsive, and equipped with adequate resources and the capacity to respond to public demand in times of crisis. Enhancing institutional and human resource

capacity in public services, investing in innovative recruitment systems and training, and transforming public servants' mindsets are key.

- There is a need to strengthen the independence and legal competencies of audit institutions, prosecutors, law enforcement agencies, and the judiciary.
- The embedding of sustainability principles into constitutional frameworks is a way to ensure inter-generational justice.
- Governments need to enhance policy coherence and cross-sectoral coordination during the pandemic and beyond, to ensure that policy interventions are comprehensive and address complex sustainable development challenges, while reaching their intended beneficiaries.
- Public institutions should be inclusive and have appropriate representation of all groups in society, including women and youth.

iv. Include those most at risk of being left behind

- Governments should put renewed emphasis on a people-centered approach, which empowers the voices and actions of all, including marginalized groups and young people, and ensures they have a meaningful input in public policies.
- Action must be taken to eradicate discrimination of any kind, including on the bases of race, sex, and disability.
- To address COVID-19's disproportionate impact on women and girls, institutions should adopt laws and policies to ensure their protection and empowerment. Governments should strengthen women's leadership roles in political decision-making processes and promote a holistic agenda for gender equality, including by addressing inequalities in access to public services, and making public institutions, including justice systems, more responsive to women's needs.
- It is important to establish and enforce legal and regulatory frameworks to address the surge of violence against women and girls that has occurred during the pandemic. Effective allocation of legal aid to ensure women's access to justice is critical, as emergency restrictions have often resulted in the closure of courts, social services, medical centers, and women's shelters.
- To respect the rights of indigenous peoples, legislators should consult traditional and customary governance mechanisms.
- Institutions should make better use of disaggregated data and digital innovation to provide targeted policies and measures that address the specific experiences of people living in poverty, minorities and marginalized groups.

II. Renew the social contract to build trust between people and state

i. Implement policies and measures at the national level to ensure equity in the delivery of public goods and services

- Governments need to ensure equitable and timely access to public services - including healthcare, education and social protection systems that address unpaid care work - for vulnerable groups, including persons with disabilities.
- There is a need to engage and ensure adequate investments at the level of regions and municipalities, not only at the national government level. The international community should engage local and national actors at an earlier stage to better respond to crises.
- Efforts by governments to implement social protection systems during the pandemic should not remain ad hoc. Universal social protection systems should be institutionalized in order to effectively reduce social and political exclusion.
- Countries should develop resilient health systems. They should consistently apply public health measures, including the equitable distribution of vaccines.
- Public institutions should invest in equitable digital innovation to increase public access to services and information.

ii. Strengthen accountability, transparency, and oversight, and reinforce actions to fight corruption

- The international community should sustain its commitment to deter and tackle corruption in all forms, including in the health sector.
- The use of digital technology such as audio-video recording tools can increase institutional transparency and oversight.
- Anti-corruption efforts should not only focus on sanctions, but be seen as a way to promote economic recovery and make it more resilient, in accordance with the rule of law and mindful of national compliance cultures.
- Institutional checks and balances should be preserved during the pandemic. Parliaments should have the means to scrutinize laws and policies, especially when there is a risk that measures adopted in times of emergency become permanent.
- The independence and resources of supreme audit institutions should be preserved, as they play a key role in ensuring the right balance between urgency of response and need for verification during the pandemic. When in a position to do so, they should be encouraged to undertake agile data collection, analysis and reporting, including on the use of public funds during the pandemic.
- To prosecute corruption cases, criminal justice institutions should develop anti-corruption frameworks, collaborate with international partners, build institutional and human resource capacity in public service units, invest in digital technology, and identify and closely monitor high-risk sectors such as tourism, health, transportation, and e-commerce.

- At the international level, governments and institutions should work towards an inclusive and equitable global financial architecture and tax regime, and an end to illicit financial flows from developing countries and the return of stolen assets.

iii. Open space for participation and stakeholder engagement

- Representative, participatory decision-making is needed to ensure the credibility, transparency and accountability of recovery efforts.
- Civic space should be protected during the pandemic and beyond. Governments should formalize spaces and mechanisms for public participation and dialogue, including through digital means.
- Governments should establish and enforce the right to information, which plays a crucial role in building public trust in institutions and in empowering citizens to hold institutions accountable.
- Transparent communication is key to building trust between governments and their citizens. Free and independent media should be supported. Efforts should be made to combat misinformation on COVID-19-related public policies and their impacts.
- When developing policies, governments should engage in stakeholder consultations, including with civil society, journalists, and other actors, in order to identify and understand community needs and expectations.
- More can be done to enhance better business conduct in the private sector and promote trust in the private sector, for example by working on corporate governance principles linked with sustainability and climate change.

III. Rethink governance with SDG 16 at its center

i. Promote innovations in governance at the national level to accelerate the implementation of SDG 16

- Effective laws and policies can help to promote a sustainable recovery, build resilience to future shocks and crises, and help the transition to a more climate-resilient development model.
- Whole-of-society approaches are key to a resilient recovery. Better policies and more transparent governance require a strong commitment to stakeholder engagement. Collaborative governance should include not only public administration, non-governmental organizations, and the private sector, but also innovative science-policy interfaces.
- Governments should strive to ensure access to digital technology and digital services to all, especially vulnerable populations and marginalized groups.
- In light of the rapid move to digital education and distance learning during the pandemic, there is a need to rethink education systems and to make them more inclusive, resilient, open, and innovative.
- The power of technology should be harnessed to empower young men and women and emerging entrepreneurs, including through private-public technology partnerships.

ii. Promote a renewed spirit of international cooperation in support of SDG 16 and the 2030 Agenda.

- International cooperation and partnerships among all actors are essential to advance SDG 16 and the 2030 Agenda. Civil society, responsible business, the UN system and other actors can partner with governments in this endeavor.
- Mechanisms for peer learning among governments on lessons learned from the pandemic, including from countries with greater gender equality, should be encouraged.
- The development of a Framework Convention on Pandemic Preparedness and Response should be prioritized by all countries and multilateral institutions.
- Multilateral entities should work together to address data gaps in SDG 16.
- Legal and institutional frameworks must be used to accelerate progress on SDG 13 and ensure delivery on international agreements on climate change.

Key points from sessions

THEME 1 – OUR SHARED FRAGILITY: THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON SDG 16

a. Plenary sessions

1.1 - Peaceful, just and inclusive societies in the time of COVID-19 and beyond

Despite consensus that the symbiotic relationship between peace, justice and good governance embodied in SDG 16 is essential for achieving sustainable development, progress across SDG 16's various dimensions has been uneven since the 2030 Agenda was adopted. The COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated many of these negative trends and represents a profound challenge to humanity's shared aspirations for a better future expressed in the Sustainable Development Goals.

Key messages

- SDG 16 is one of the main enablers of the 2030 Agenda. It is the principle that shapes the social pact between people and institutions, and is essential to creating an environment where justice, rule of law and human rights can thrive.
- COVID-19 has hindered progress towards the 2030 Agenda and exacerbated underlying vulnerabilities such as inequality, corruption, erosion of social contract, and diminished public trust.
- Progress made in good governance and the rule of law has been lost during the pandemic, and we have witnessed an increase in violence, injustice, political instability, and radicalization.
- SDG 16 is central to sustainable and inclusive economic recovery and development through transparent, equitable, and participatory approaches.
- The Kyoto Declaration underlines the strong linkage between crime prevention, criminal justice, and the rule of law in relation to SDG 16 and recognizes the latter as a prerequisite for peaceful, just and inclusive societies.

- While LLDCs, LDCs, and SIDs have not suffered the highest casualties from the pandemic, they have been disproportionately affected financially – through decreases in trade, tourism, foreign direct investment, exports, and government revenues. Their structural vulnerabilities have been further exacerbated by the pandemic.
- Climate change and environmental security are crucial for peace and stability as more people struggle to access limited resources, especially in LLDCs, LDCs, and SIDs. Climate change is a key factor in maintaining peace and security.
- 5.1 billion people lack meaningful access to justice. Failure to provide justice leads to grievances, conflict, deteriorates health, and erodes the social contract.
- The existing justice gap has been exacerbated during the pandemic. There is a need for accessible, affordable, and fair solutions.
- The pandemic has pushed 85 to 100 million more people into extreme poverty. Rule of law-based recovery is especially important for people in poverty to ensure that response measures are rights-based.
- Greater utilization of technology is important for enhanced access to justice.
- Rule of law and access to justice are central not only to COVID-19 recovery but also for pursuing sustainable development.
- The Secretary-General of the United Nations has highlighted that “putting people at the center is key to reviving the bonds that hold our societies together, and to re-establishing trust between people and communities, and governments.”
- Multi-stakeholder partnerships at local, national and international levels have a key role to play in supporting good governance and long-term transformation.
- Although technological innovations have enabled positive developments in the context of the pandemic, digital tools have also been exploited by criminals to commit fraud, promote violent extremism, and exploit children and other vulnerable groups.
- The pandemic forces us to conceive of justice in a new way, as part of a global response that seeks to build stronger societies going forward, and that focuses on accessible, accountable and fair solutions, often delivered at the local level.

Key recommendations for action

- Resilient recovery rooted in a whole-of-government approach is important. Member States are encouraged to maintain the tailored and consistent application of public health and social measures, including vaccine distribution.
- Countries should aim to enhance mechanisms for joint planning, sustainable financing, and the strengthening of donor coordination to improve future pandemic preparedness and response.
- Countries are encouraged to increase investment in resilient health care systems based on strong primary healthcare and develop strong public health capacities. National health systems need to be flexible and adapt to emergencies in an inclusive and participatory way.
- For crime prevention, criminal justice, and the rule of law, the Kyoto Declaration calls for strengthened partnerships with the private sector, enhanced IT skills for law enforcement, and international cooperation and capacity building on law enforcement and criminal justice. It recognizes the need to review the criminal justice system for a more accountable response through digitalization.
- Countries should strengthen governance and focus their efforts on sustainable and inclusive economic development at all levels.
- Civil society participation, especially that of young people, should be encouraged in the peace and security agenda.
- Participants in the Conference were invited to join the Justice Action Coalition, a platform for collaboration to further the justice agenda.

- Countries are encouraged to ensure that the social protection measures put in place during COVID-19 are not arbitrary, ad hoc, or only short-term. It is important to have a rule of law-based response to make sure it benefits everyone, especially those living in poverty.
- Countries are encouraged to acknowledge, prioritize, and fund activities related to the rule of law, access to justice, and good governance to address the crisis in democracy, human rights, climate, and health.

1.2 - Enhancing resilience to shocks and crises: lessons learned from the pandemic

The pandemic has exposed structural weaknesses, including a lack of government preparedness to handle such society-wide shocks; it has also revealed fault lines and entrenched inequalities that have wider implications for the realization of the 2030 Agenda. The response to the crisis has illustrated how key principles of SDG 16 such as transparency, accountability, participation and engagement can strengthen the capacity of communities and societies to withstand shocks and recover.

Key messages

- The pandemic has compounded the worldwide decline of the democratic and rule of law principles embodied in SDG 16 and has exposed governance fragilities, including a shrinking civic space, erosion of public trust, gender-based violence, attacks on free and independent media, corruption, and human rights violations.
- Enhancing resilience to crises such as COVID-19 and ensuring sustainable development for all requires investing in responsible, transparent, inclusive, and accountable institutions and stronger social contracts and human rights frameworks.
- Coordinated global and regional responses to COVID-19, such as the African Union's continental strategy, are critical for providing clear guidance to inform national responses to the pandemic, while recognizing countries' diversity in terms of service delivery and institutional capacities.
- In many countries, inequality, pre-existing governance gaps and the weight of the informal economy have undermined the effectiveness of social responses to the pandemic.
- The early call from the Secretary-General of the United Nations for a global cease fire has had mixed results, with increased violence in some conflict-affected States and rising instability in relatively stable contexts, often fueled by misinformation and increased political polarization.
- The peace and security environment is likely to deteriorate with respect to several threats: violent conflicts have become more fragmented, involving more non-state actors, and calling into question the effectiveness of traditional conflict mitigation tools. The climate emergency and technological disruption are shaping political upheaval and conflicts across the world. Inequality is an important risk factor, which is exacerbated by the pandemic. Women and girls have been disproportionately affected, with the increase in gender-based violence.
- The pandemic has exacerbated international and national drivers of conflict, including inequality, technological disruption, misinformation, and mistrust of public institutions, outpacing traditional conflict management approaches and highlighting the need to strengthen early warning and conflict prevention systems.
- In the context of the pandemic, the accelerated concentration of the food supply chain and consumers' constraints to access food, especially vulnerable groups, have undermined food security. However, innovative responses, including multi-stakeholder collaboration, have emerged in many countries and at the local level.
- Digital technologies have enabled the continuous operation of services, institutions, and economies during the COVID-19 pandemic, but have also revealed existing structural gaps and inequalities in digital infrastructure, connectivity, and access to digital devices, particularly in rural areas and among those working in informal sectors.

- COVID-19 has negatively affected access to justice and reduced the capacity of institutional systems to conduct investigations and respond to rising cases of gender-based violence and corruption. Technology-based solutions have facilitated the delivery of justice in many countries but have also created new challenges due to limitations in their use for judicial processes.
- There is a need for gender-sensitive policy-making to address the gender implications of the pandemic, such as domestic violence and exploitation, and to correct for existing gaps in women's participation in COVID-19 responses.
- Improving data, evidence, policy coherence and cross-sectoral coordination is fundamental to targeting policy interventions, reaching intended beneficiaries, and addressing complex sustainable development challenges in the response to and recovery from the pandemic.
- Inter-generational dialogue and the engagement of young people, particularly young women, in peace building is a priority to ensure inclusiveness in responses to COVID-19, rebuild young people's confidence in institutions, and foster democratic and resilient societies.
- The Food Systems Summit (September 2021) will draw lessons from international innovative experiences regarding food security in the context of the pandemic, putting rural areas at the center.

Key recommendations for action

- The UN system should continue to provide support to Member States through the integrated COVID-19 response framework and to collaborate with partners (IMF, World Bank, International financial institutions) to address the socioeconomic challenges of the crisis and the recovery.
- The UN System and development partners should work with Member States to strengthen rule of law and justice institutions in order to ensure effective enforcement of human rights frameworks and accountability for human rights violations.
- Informal public awareness campaigns are vital tools, even in contexts where there are weak formal structures, and should be promoted.
- UN entities and other custodians of SDG 16 global indicators should work together to address data gaps in SDG 16 and to ensure available, reliable, timely and disaggregated data to drive better policymaking.
- The UN system and UN Member States should increase financing for conflict prevention and expand analytical work to better understand the multidimensional nature of conflict and peacebuilding.
- The UN system should create a dedicated mechanism to address security implications across its work programme.
- Innovation, youth, and security should be put at the center of UN work, including the UNDP-DPPA conflict programme, to address the gap between peace and development in responses to the pandemic.
- Countries should recognize the administration of justice as an essential public service and improve and guarantee victims' access to justice institutions without fear of retaliation.
- Member States should disseminate information to ensure the continuity of free legal aid services in the context of an emergency such as the global pandemic.
- Member States should adopt measures to improve the use of technology in the justice system to ensure that technological solutions comply with international standards of due process.
- International organizations should provide funding to grassroots and local actors, especially youth peace builders, and to support mechanisms for protection against state intimidation.
- If the digital divide is not addressed, there is a risk of increasing the already-compounding vulnerabilities of youth. There is a need to rethink education, scale-up distance learning and make education systems more resilient, open and innovative.
- The power of technology and private-public technology partnerships should be harnessed to empower young people and emerging entrepreneurs.
- Four areas are crucial to building back better: accountability (including checks and balances), institution building, a free and independent media, and access to digital technologies.

- Misinformation must be addressed to prevent polarization and intolerance, particularly in fragile contexts where disinformation can result in losses of livelihoods and lives, political tension, and conflict.

b. Parallel sessions

1.1. - Impact of the pandemic on peace and conflict

Conflict and fragility pose one of the most significant challenges to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda. Despite initial positive responses around the Secretary General’s call for a ceasefire at the outset of the pandemic, many conflicts have continued unabated. COVID-19 is generating further grievances and exacerbating existing fault lines in societies. Misinformation, stigmatization and hate speech in many countries have contributed to a growing sense of insecurity and have compounded the effects of the pandemic. Senior UN officials have warned that the crisis is hindering diplomatic action, has complicated peace-making efforts, and is disproportionately impacting women, youth, and other marginalized groups.

Key messages

- The pandemic has in many instances served as an enabler of corruption and unjust restrictions on citizens.
- Throughout the pandemic, the work of legal aid workers has been further restricted and deemed non-essential by governments. Effective legal aid institutions are key to holding governance institutions accountable and to curbing corruption.
- COVID-19 has been used as a justification by security forces to create exclusive spaces, especially within the justice sector, often limiting access to justice and the inclusivity of public conflict management processes.
- As peace processes are being convened digitally, a crucial issue to monitor and address in these contexts is the accessibility of tech infrastructure to all stakeholders.
- A lack of electrical and digital infrastructure isolates rural areas from government-led discussions and creates obstacles toward resource and public-service provisions.
- Ensuring fair and equal access to services requires a closer analysis of prioritization and sequencing processes, as many issues are not directly tied to resource shortages but rather to methods of allocation.
- Early assessments highlight how radicalization has been exacerbated by pandemic-related feelings of uncertainty and anxiety, lack of purpose, and social exclusion.

Key recommendations for action

- International commitments toward social compacts must be strongly recalled and upheld by States and organizations.
- Governments should consider legal aid providers as essential workers and be held increasingly accountable for discrimination, threats and mistreatment toward justice service providers.
- Youth empowerment programmes are key in areas of conflict and growing extremism in order to limit root causes of radicalisation.
- Data should be collected regarding the stages at which military and security forces are included within vaccination plans as to better monitor individual country priorities.
- Institutional resources must be dedicated to monitoring the ways in which terrorist and extremist groups are leveraging online platforms to ignite radicalization.
- Conflict management during COVID-19 cannot abandon a people-centered approach that acknowledges root causes. Only when pre-existing problems are identified can national and international responses be effectively targeted.
- Artificial intelligence data can better predict shifts in social phenomena if used with a holistic and interdisciplinary approach.

1.2 - Lessons from the response of public institutions to the pandemic

The pandemic has abruptly disrupted the regular functioning of public institutions such as parliaments and justice systems, and affected key government functions and processes, undermining the effectiveness of government action at the national and sub-national levels. The need to respond quickly and with drastic measures to manage the crisis has created an added burden of responsibility on public institutions and created additional risks for institutional processes and organizations. The capacity of public institutions to promote policy integration and policy coherence across all levels of government and engage with stakeholders in society has also been put to the test. Beyond individual institutions, the pandemic has affected whole institutional systems and the way public institutions interact with people, including by reshaping public participation and communication. Yet, public institutions and civil servants have responded forcefully to the crisis. They have adopted innovative ways of working and shown resilience and flexibility.

Key messages

- The pandemic has generated new demands on public institutions; it has tested their capacities to respond effectively and impacted the way public services are delivered, particularly at the local level where governments are the frontline of response and recovery.
- The interrelated public health, economic and social crises risk further weakening public institutions and further erode peoples' trust.
- Responses to the pandemic have generated new governance arrangements, including collaboration among public administration, NGOs and the private sector. In some countries, trends towards centralization have been predominant, while in others, decentralization has prevailed, depending on countries' institutions, culture, and experiences.
- Innovative ways of working, tools, and practices have been put in place by public institutions for institutional change and resilience. Institutional innovations during the pandemic went beyond technology and included mutual aid and volunteers, partnerships with different actors, and collaboration between religious entities and health services, e.g., to deliver vaccines.
- A reduction in public policy decision cycles, lack of participation of citizens and civil society in policy-making processes as well as lack of accountability and oversight mechanisms in crisis response and recovery have significantly increased mistrust and corruption risks.
- New capabilities and mindsets are needed to respond to COVID-19 and enhance resilience. The ability to learn from others, to interface with different actors and networks at different levels, and to use data for informing decision-making are needed to respond to the crisis.
- Analytical frameworks enable governments, stakeholders, and development partners to examine and strengthen the quality of their stakeholder engagement practices, also considering the impact of COVID-19.
- COVID-19 has also shed light on the importance of the role of the public sector to fight the crisis as well as of viable public service delivery and institutions across all levels of government.
- The crisis presents an opportunity for governance reforms to establish a new social contract by i) investing in universal social protection systems, ii) creating space for dialogue and participation, and iii) tackling drivers of mistrust in public institutions.
- Institutional innovation works best when it is embedded in existing principles, such as the ECOSOC-endorsed principles of effective governance for sustainable development.

Key recommendations for action

- Public institutions need to be more agile and responsive and have innovative recruitment and training systems. To regain attractiveness, the public sector needs to invest more in updating recruitment systems and training. More innovative training for civil servants, especially for younger generations, is an important element of resilience.

- Stakeholder engagement and whole-of-society approaches are required to respond to the pandemic.
- Governments need to have a people-centered approach. The crisis could be an opportunity for governments to institutionalize models that facilitate increased participation, allowing people to play a part in decision-making and rebuild the social contract.
- Fighting corruption and promoting transparency, accountability, open government and participation are critical. Innovative tools are critical to promoting transparency, accountability, and integrity at all levels and across all sectors of society.
- Anti-corruption institutions and parliaments play an essential role in assessing the performance of public administrations.
- Adequate investments at the local level are crucial for strong and tailored responses.
- Greater gender equality in public administration and women's participation in decision-making are particularly critical in the context of COVID-19 responses.
- The crisis is an opportunity for governments to institutionalize people-centered approaches and promote models of multi-stakeholder engagement in decision-making.
- Preserving the integrity of information and fighting misinformation are fundamental, as are data privacy and protection.
- Rethinking the support to be provided for effective social protection systems is key to rebuilding the social contract and to promoting social equity policy in the long term.

1.3 - Assessing and mitigating the impact of the pandemic on justice systems and justice seekers

Even before COVID-19, approximately two-thirds of the world's population lacked the ability to meaningfully access justice. While the business case for investing in justice is clear and compelling, allocations to the justice sector have declined in both national and development assistance budgets. Justice systems have been hard hit by the pandemic, as new restrictions on physical access to courts and tribunals have coincided with a sharp rise in the need for legal protection and services.

Key messages

- Adaptations in the justice sector can mitigate the impact of the pandemic by commuting sentences for less severe crimes, making use of alternative sentencing, and alleviating the burden on prison systems. For many States, such measures were already provided for in the law, raising the question of why they were not used more frequently in non-crisis settings.
- Courts have experienced reductions in cases handled per day and compulsory leave has been mandated in several judiciaries, impacting access to justice for ordinary citizens.
- Divergent interpretations of what is deemed urgent has created confusion and challenges for courts and unequal applications of justice.
- During COVID-19, constitutional rights, such as the right to a jury trial, have been curtailed.
- During the pandemic, closings of courts and legal services have further endangered women in need of protection from gender-based violence.

Key recommendations for action

- Alternative sentencing should be emphasized in criminal justice policy to mitigate issues associated with overcrowding and human rights violations.
- As demonstrated during the pandemic, sentence commutation for petty offenders can help to address backlogs in criminal justice institutions and should be considered increasingly by courts.
- The rights of the accused and convicted must be upheld in times of crisis and beyond. COVID-19 and other crises cannot be used to justify human rights abuses.

THEME 2 – RENEWING THE SOCIAL CONTRACT TO BUILD TRUST BETWEEN PEOPLE AND STATE

a. Plenary sessions

2.1 - Implications of the pandemic for the relationship between citizens and States

Rebuilding peoples' confidence in government was highlighted as a major challenge by global leaders in the UN 75th Anniversary Declaration. Discussions in this session addressed some of the root causes of lack of trust in public institutions. They encompass policies and measures at the national level, sustained by international cooperation, to ensure equity in distribution of public goods and delivery of services, with a focus on those most at risk of being left behind; to open space for participation and stakeholder engagement; to support adherence to constitutional frameworks and independence of judicial institutions; and to reinforce action to fight corruption.

Key messages

- COVID-19 has undermined public trust in institutions, access to information, and civic participation, and has exacerbated inequalities. However, the pandemic has also renewed the urgency to advance SDG 16.
- Effective, accountable, transparent, and participatory institutions are essential to delivering on a new social contract that respects the human rights and freedoms of all, and to meeting the SDGs and other international commitments.
- The need to focus on a renewed social contract is urgent. The right to participation is crucial to building trust.
- The ability to provide justice for all will be crucial to overcoming the pandemic and to ensuring a peaceful, sustainable, and resilient society in the future.
- It is essential that States accelerate efforts to advance institutions and policies that are inclusive and just. The way in which our governance systems provide justice for all, especially for those furthest behind, is crucial in overcoming this crisis and ensuring more peaceful, sustainable and resilient societies in the future.
- Eliminating discrimination and corruption, and ensuring rights to participation and justice for all are central not only for recovery but for peaceful and sustainable development in the long term.
- Tackling corruption should be seen as a way to advance human rights. Misuse of public goods and funds is a profound violation of public trust. It violates the core principles of rule of law, transparency, accountability, and non-discrimination, exacerbates inequalities and undermines the provision of services and the rule of law.
- Corruption betrays social trust and undermines the legitimacy of public institutions. However, no meaningful progress has been made in the fight against corruption in recent decades. Stronger political will is necessary to achieve progress.
- Human rights provide a framework to understand people's mistrust and measures to take corrective actions.
- Inequalities in society have exacerbated the gap between 'the have and have nots'; many people are being left behind, especially the vulnerable groups.
- Innovative social protection measures experienced during the pandemic include: (i) introducing new cash transfer for informal workers, and others excluded from the social protection systems; (ii) easing eligibility requirements to widen coverage and include undocumented migrants amongst others; (iii) increasing the amount of benefits to ensure beneficiaries can access basic goods and services.
- Public institutions and parliaments are not as inclusive as they should be. Inclusiveness in terms of representation is crucial, as is inclusiveness in terms of how issues are articulated into relevant policies.

It is important to empower women and young people and to ensure that they have a meaningful input into policies.

- There is a recognition of the effects of weak investment in healthcare. Good practices are to sustain fiscal robustness and responsibility, improve the quality of public administration and strengthen trust in public institutions.
- Public institutions need to provide effective, responsive, and timely services to restore public trust. They also need to be the protectors of people.
- Public institutions, including elected offices such as parliaments, need to be inclusive and have appropriate representation of various social groups, including women and youth.
- Parliaments could play a more robust role and provide oversight to governments' actions during the emergency to protect people's rights.
- Protecting civic spaces and the right to participation are important to foster dialogue and design more tailored and responsive policies.
- The right to information plays a crucial role in accountability. When citizens have information, they are empowered to hold institutions accountable, which helps to consolidate the trust relationship. Access to information and the right of expression need to be protected.
- Free and independent media should be supported, especially as the pandemic has affected the media industry, and as journalists have been detained and prosecuted for exposing government failings in handling the health crisis.
- More than 5 billion people have unmet justice needs. A focus should be on addressing the gap at the local and community levels, to ensure that rights are realized where people live, work and communicate with others, and to be impactful and meaningful. Judicial independence is crucial in the fight against corruption. We need to not only build back better, but cleaner. Discrimination on the bases of race, sex, or disability is deeply unjust and damaging. Discrimination against women and girls hampers the equal enjoyment of their human rights and participation, and results in lower level of trust amongst women.
- More data is needed to design responsive and cost-effective programmes. Gathering and use of people-centered data are important to identify the governance gap and close it.
- Disaggregated data is needed to design programmes, and track and measure progress on SDG 16. Strategies that ensure that no one is left behind require disaggregated data that reveal specific experiences of people living in poverty, minorities, and marginalized populations.
- Technology is a useful tool for building more resilient and effective services. The transformative effect of technology can help States to meet citizens' governance needs. While the challenges that come with it are acknowledged, its potential should be fully mobilized.

Key recommendations for action

- Universal and comprehensive social protection systems should be institutionalized to avoid future shocks and restore trust and the social contract.
- The eradication of discrimination of all kinds and the protection of human rights are critical building blocks for peaceful and just societies.
- Public institutions need to be equipped with adequate resources and the capacity to respond to public demands in times of crisis. Mechanisms for peer-to-peer learning and the sharing of good practices are encouraged.
- The social contract should be revisited and renewed in light of the pandemic to have a more equitable distribution of resources and burdens between different social groups.
- A new social contract needs to address inequality and ensure justice and access to social security. It needs to encourage dialogues and the formation of coalitions not only between individuals but also among organizations. It must reflect the urgency of the present situation and an intention to act.

- Social and political dialogue is needed. The political system alone is not enough. Alternative venues such as social and economic councils or equivalents should be engaged whenever possible.
- Countries should be encouraged to adopt Access to Information Acts and to proactively disclose and disseminate information through ICT, open data, social media platforms, and local languages.
- Freedom of expression, and the rights of journalists and the press should be upheld. It is important to fight misinformation.
- More people-centered data, evidence and the utilization of technology are needed to design more responsive and cost-effective programs and public service delivery to meet people's needs and to strengthen governance and accountability.

2.2 - Strengthening transparency accountability and engagement during and beyond the pandemic

Restrictions on movement and assembly around the world have limited access to the political space, working methods and processes of institutions such as parliaments and courts, potentially undermining legislative oversight and law-making. Public institutions have experimented with innovative methods to overcome these challenges. Research found that COVID-19 response plans have paid “little attention to governance- and corruption-related matters.” However, oversight bodies such as supreme audit institutions have innovated in order to increase the transparency and accountability of governmental emergency responses as well as of rescue and recovery packages, which can pose risks to integrity and create opportunities for fraud and corruption. Transparency at all levels, from the local to the national, has emerged as a critical condition for successful responses to the pandemic.

Key messages

- Supporting effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels is key to fighting the pandemic. Institutions that promote transparency and accountability are more relevant than ever before.
- Transparency at all levels is a key driver of effective institutions and a critical condition for successful responses during the pandemic and beyond. Transparent communication is key to building trust between governments and their citizens.
- Respect for the rule of law cannot be taken for granted. The European Union has developed a range of mechanisms to ensure that its Member States uphold it.
- As public funds are used for economic recovery goals, appropriate safeguards and mechanisms to monitor and control that funds are spent correctly are needed.
- Weaknesses in accountability systems have exposed risks to integrity and have created opportunities for fraud and corruption during emergency responses, including on recovery packages.
- Corruption is also a global pandemic that takes new forms with time. It jeopardizes development, distorts market competition, undermines social justice and the rule of law, reduces trust in public institutions and hampers economies.
- Before the pandemic, corruption was already a severe impediment to building prosperity and security. In times of emergencies and crises, the risk of corruption is heightened and undermines recovery efforts. Corruption related to COVID-19 responses was observed both in rich and poor countries (e.g., conflicts of interest, corruption in vaccination campaigns). The health sector is one of the most prone to corruption.
- Corruption also supports organized crime that no longer uses violence but infiltrates the economy, offers illicit services, and thrives on financial secrecy. COVID-19 has provided additional opportunities to organized criminal groups, which penetrate legal businesses, especially where there is lack of transparency and where specialized legal frameworks and institutional capacity are lacking. The introduction of new methods of payment – virtual currencies such as bitcoins with transactions that are hard to monitor – can exacerbate corruption.

- Transparency plays a crucial role in fighting corruption. During the pandemic, institutions that promote accountability and transparency were often bypassed under the pretext of emergency. Manipulation of statistics and data was also observed.
- UNODC surveys show that recovery programmes were often designed without the involvement of anti-corruption authorities, making them vulnerable to corruption.
- Integrity and anti-corruption are pillars of the recovery agenda. They need to be an integral part of efforts to build back better. G20 countries have developed a compendium of good practices in combating corruption in response to COVID-19 and a call to action that identifies concrete anti-corruption measures during the pandemic and in preparation for future crises.
- The fight against corruption must not be seen as a repressive factor only, but as a driver of economy, in accordance with the rule of law culture.
- Transparency is essential for governance and the management of public funds. It implies full access to information to help public authorities and civil societies make informed decisions.
- Supreme Audit Institutions (SAIs), as independent oversight bodies, have had a critical role worldwide in ensuring transparency and accountability during and after the pandemic. They have adapted their working methods and audit programs to respond to the pandemic and developed tools to enhance accountability and transparency on public expenditures related to COVID-19. They have provided critical data collection and reporting for executive and parliamentary branches to consider and address.
- Focusing on agility, openness, prevention and increasing coordination, participation and interaction with all stakeholders helps to ensure that public institutions are in a position to anticipate future needs.
- The first-ever General Assembly special session against corruption will be held in June 2021. UNODC will launch a global operational network of anti-corruption law enforcement authorities.

Key recommendations for action

- Governments should strive to strengthen integrity, transparency, and accountability in anti-corruption systems at the national and international levels and adapt to shocks to minimize the social and economic impact of future crises.
- Clear, simple transparency frameworks can inspire confidence among the general public (e.g., a database created to monitor the distribution of medical equipment and supplies in real-time).
- Countries need to ensure adequate levels of transparency on public procurement processes, particularly in the health care sector, for instance by disclosing information on all bidding companies for public contracts.
- The international community must sustain its commitment to deter and tackle corruption in all forms, including in the public health sector and throughout economic recovery responses to the crisis.
- Prevention as well as response strategies are needed. Databases are essential for prevention of criminal activities. The sharing of information is important to track financial channels utilized by criminal groups.
- Supreme audit institutions and anti-corruption agencies have a key role in ensuring the right balance between urgency of response and need for verification.
- To perform their functions effectively, supreme audit institutions need to be independent and to be able to publish their audit reports.
- Governments need to enhance cooperation to curb global illicit financial flows. The sharing of information and the use of databases of national and international institutions is critical in order to expose illicit financial transactions.
- Countries should turn the lessons from the pandemic into an opportunity to lead by example. They should foster collective preparedness for future crises, and promote the role of non-government stakeholders while maintaining high integrity and transparency standards.

- Resources for recovery will be allocated to different sectors, including education, health and public procurement. It is important to assess fiscal measures so that they benefit the people most affected by the pandemic.
- There is a need to strengthen the independence, legal competencies, and budgetary independence of audit institutions, prosecutors and the judiciary.

b. Parallel sessions

2.1 - The role of stakeholder engagement in responding to the pandemic and how to secure engagement in the future

During the COVID-19 crisis the operations of representative institutions, especially parliaments, have been challenged. Opportunities for public consultation and engagement were initially limited by the pandemic and the response measures adopted by governments to fight it. At the same time, in many countries, governments, civil society, citizens and the private sector are experimenting with innovative open government approaches to the pandemic. Participatory response strategies and engaging people in the co-creation of tools and solutions are some of the approaches used in different countries, both at national and local levels. Civil society around the world has mobilized and self-organized to provide a range of services and actions, with or without support from governments.

Key messages

- The pandemic has aggravated existing institutional weaknesses, exacerbated inherent inequities, and lowered opportunities to push for inclusive, effective, accountable, and transparent institutions.
- Estimates show that, before the pandemic, 1.5 billion people had legal conflicts that could not be solved by the formal justice system. The pandemic has aggravated this situation, and citizens' trust in judicial institutions has declined.
- The pandemic has worsened conditions for civic space through misinformation and disinformation, censorship and crackdowns on peaceful assembly, association and expression; increased risks to privacy and other rights through surveillance; as well as emergency and coercive powers to enforce lockdowns.
- The pandemic has exacerbated an existing crisis of exclusion. Yet civil society organizations have shifted the focus of their work towards strengthening the capacity of sectoral systems to meet immediate needs. Their responses were most impactful in environments that respected freedoms of assembly, association, and expression.
- The establishment of science-policy interfaces such as committees of experts to guide and assess government decision-making on pandemic responses illustrates the value of multi-stakeholder engagement.
- There are successful examples during the pandemic. Civil society has been called upon to provide input to decision-making processes, and stimulus packages have made allocations for civil society.
- Where health-oriented institutional systems, services, and partnerships were already in place, the pandemic provided an opportunity to enhance them.
The digital transformation required by the pandemic has depended on institutional maturity, preparedness, integration, and responsiveness to needs, and well as technical tools.

Key recommendations for action

- Maintaining assembly spaces during the pandemic, including through equal digital means is critical. To enable their sustainability, it is necessary to formalize spaces and mechanisms for public participation, and to have a clear framework for their operation.

- Trust is the framework for guaranteeing access to services and justice for all and participation by all actors.
- Society as a whole needs to be listened to and engaged through different channels and platforms. It is important to ensure that the rights of everyone, including to health care, justice, employment, safety and security, are safeguarded.
- Working with the scientific community and community-based organizations contributes to a shared understanding of needs and priorities of local communities.
- The process that leads to civic engagement is also a key to sustainability. The provision of truthful information and data to all, particularly to disadvantaged groups, is a foundational pillar for participation.
- It is necessary to institutionalize space for civil society. Formalization, as well as trust, are essential and fundamental. Local ownership, funding, protection, and capacity are also important.
- To address the justice gap and build trust, there must be open justice systems rooted in transparency and participation. Co-creation with civil society, journalists, and other actors facilitates understanding of legal needs by judiciaries and their ability to meet them.
- Investments in the rule of law will be critical to creating equal, sustainable, democratic, and just societies as promised in the 2030 Agenda.

2.2 - Addressing corruption during and after COVID-19

Corruption has hindered progress towards achieving the SDGs and has affected people's trust in government long before the pandemic. During the pandemic, health systems have proved vulnerable to COVID-19-related corruption. Emergency responses as well as measures adopted by governments to limit the economic and social impacts of the pandemic, such as stimulus packages, have increased opportunities for fraud and corruption. Corruption risks have also increased at the local level. The mismanagement of public funds and other forms of corruption, particularly related to emergency spending, may further derail implementation of the Goals. During the 2020 United Nations General Assembly, world leaders included rampant corruption among the multiple crises exposed by the pandemic.

Key messages

- Corruption is a multi-dimensional and complex phenomenon that undermines citizens' trust in government, which in turn results in the ineffective implementation of government policies during crises. Corruption is also a key obstacle to an effective and coordinated international response to the pandemic.
- Corruption risks were exacerbated during COVID-19. Corruption cases have been reported across the world. The pandemic has also presented opportunities to enhance transparency, accountability and anti-corruption, including at the global level.
- Supreme Audit Institutions (SAIs) are part of the anti-corruption framework in many countries.
- Challenges related to the lack of accountability and transparency that many countries have been facing during the pandemic stem from the need for speedy budget reallocations due to unforeseen purchases (vaccines, test sets, etc.); quick utilization of additional extra-budgetary funding allocations; and movement restrictions that affected SAIs, parliaments, and other public sector institutions. Innovative approaches are key to address these challenges (e.g., new financial tracking mechanisms; the creation of funds with robust accounting; and making financial information available to the public).
- Digital and technological tools are critical to enhancing transparency. This leads to more effective policy implementation, the establishment of operational checks and balances, and increases in public participation. Sharing good practices between various countries is no less important.

- The measurement of corruption in all its forms is still a vexed issue. Achieving progress in this area is critical to more effective action.
- There are examples where monitoring systems have been adjusted or created.
- It is important to identify and closely monitor high-risk sectors such as tourism, health, transportation, e-commerce, etc. Anti-corruption strategies should also acknowledge that some groups are more prone to corruption. For instance, in one country, women police officers were found to engage five times less than men in corrupt activities.
- Approaches that helped various countries to counterbalance the negative impacts of COVID-19 and reduce corruption include enhanced citizen participation in decision-making processes in addressing the pandemic, new social contract instruments, availability of cogent COVID-19-related information to the general public, strong state-level control over public procurement and distribution, forging anti-corruption alliances by several institutional stakeholders, creation of new monitoring mechanisms, use of data and data analyses in corruption risk assessment, presence of strong independent audit institutions, etc.

Key recommendations for action

- Stronger and wider international cooperation is needed to curb corruption. It is important to identify and closely monitor high-risk sectors such as tourism, health, transportation, e-commerce, etc.
- Mainstreaming of anti-corruption policies in government functions, citizens' engagement in policy and decision-making, and extensive cooperation of institutional stakeholders can help curtail corruption.
- More efforts are needed to capture good anti-pandemic and anti-corruption practices and to promote them among countries.
- Measuring corruption, including during COVID-19, is important and should become a prevalent and continuous practice.
- There is an urgent need to build institutional and human resource capacity to promote integrity and fight corruption in public service and transform public servants' mindsets.

2.3 Building trust in governance through rule of law-based policymaking

Respect for the rule of law and policymaking based in the rule of law plays a crucial role in reinforcing public trust in governance. Effective rule of law frameworks ensure that the poor and marginalized can enjoy equal rights and are given space to participate in planning processes. They promote accountability by ensuring that individual actors and institutions execute agreed-upon processes and actions that lead to development gains. Adherence to the rule of law requires clear and publicly available laws that serve as checks and balances to ensure that emergency powers are exercised within the remits of law and not used arbitrarily or unfairly. Emergency responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have often suspended constitutional frameworks, amended administrative procedures, restricted public movement, and limited opportunities for public participation in decision-making processes and for government oversight, which at times has contributed to lack of confidence in governance at all levels. In some countries, elections have been postponed or disrupted.

Key messages

- The central element of the idea of the rule of law is that the state is not free from the law.
- In modern times, notions of accountability, openness, and transparency were introduced to the concept of the rule of law.
- A rule of law-based approach should hold governance structures and systems accountable for upholding the rights of women and minority groups and ensuring that even during a crisis, everyone can continue to access important social services such as maternal health services and healthcare.
- Emergency measures should only be exceptional and exercised within the limits of legality, necessity, proportionality, and non-discrimination. Whenever there are exceptions to full compliance, action should be taken to make sure they remain proportionate.
- Rule of law is about equality before the law and therefore it is a critical factor in maintaining solidarity, social cohesion and resilience during crisis.
- COVID-19 lockdowns have shown that digital procurement is a crucial component of the public governance.

Key recommendations for action

- Policymakers should recognize the varying needs of the groups they serve. For example, in expanding access to digital education, actions should be taken to ensure the inclusion of rural communities.
- Inclusive COVID-19 policy responses need to be grounded in respect for labor rights and local ownership.
- Social dialogue mechanisms should be put in place to ensure the full participation of marginalized groups, including those working in informal economy, migrant workers, indigenous peoples, domestic workers, and women.
- Emergency preparedness and response laws should be part of countries' emergency response plans.
- Stakeholders should be able to actively participate in policy and law-making processes that ensure the availability and accessibility of healthy and nutritious food in line with States' international obligations to guarantee the fundamental right to be free from hunger and ensure the realization of the right to adequate food, especially for vulnerable groups.
- Cybersecurity laws and policies, as well as digital literacy, must be addressed as the use of technology increases worldwide.
- To respect the rights of indigenous peoples, legislators should consult traditional governance mechanisms in emergency responses.

THEME 3 – TURNING CHALLENGES INTO OPPORTUNITIES: RETHINKING GOVERNANCE WITH SDG 16 AT ITS CENTER

a. Plenary sessions

3.1 - Transforming governance through inclusive processes and whole-of-society approaches

Innovations in governance can be supported by “whole of government” and “whole-of-society” approaches. Governance innovations have emerged during the pandemic that have the potential to support longer-term transformations. Strategies to ensure the preservation and expansion of civic space and to create an enabling environment for civil society to participate freely and safely in public governance and decision-making are critical. Multi-stakeholder partnerships at local, national and international levels can enable transformative governance to address complex, interrelated challenges such as entrenched conflict, increasing inequalities, gender inequality, social and economic insecurity, climate change and rapid technological disruption.

Key messages

- Ambitious health and social policy frameworks can help governments to respond effectively to crises and enhance the resilience of societies.
- The most successful governance responses to the threat of the pandemic have been characterized by inclusive, open, and whole-of-society approaches.
- Governments with effective governance systems were best prepared and reacted quickly to the threat of the pandemic. They were able to recognize that the pandemic was a real threat and could put in place responses to the pandemic very quickly.
- Effective governments were those capable of quickly pivoting their systems to respond to the crisis by listening to advice from experts in different sectors.
- The most successful responses have involved inclusive approaches that have ensured services for all, resulting in an enhanced level of trust in government.
- Access to services (such as healthcare, housing, and social protection) has become fundamental during the pandemic. However, there is also a strong need for access to information and data, which are critical to promoting accountability.
- More citizen-centered public administration is key. The use of internet and digital resources provide opportunities for citizen engagement, and to accelerate public services that meet the needs of citizens.
- There is strong evidence that women's leadership in political decision-making processes can improve them. Without an equal representation of women in all decision-making, the SDGs cannot be achieved.
- COVID-19 has introduced challenges to the private sector. However, it has also opened an opportunity for businesses to engage with other stakeholders.
- Promoting accountability, integrity and transparency in business is critical. Businesses play a key role in promoting good practices and ethical leadership and in building trust between private and public institutions and civil society.
- Digital solutions and digital governance have played a critical role during the pandemic. However, technology and increasing connectivity have also fueled an escalation of crimes, especially in terms of the sexual exploitation of children. Emerging technologies, and in particular artificial intelligence, could help prevent and counter these crimes.
- Innovation is not only about ICTs. Essential innovations are also needed in social and environmental fields, among others.
- The pandemic has exacerbated inequalities and injustices across societies and governments. Policies to deal with inequality must be embraced.
- During the pandemic there was a steep increase in violence against women. Grassroots organizations played a central role in documenting cases, paired with data collection at the international level.
- Sustainability should be considered as the only way out of the pandemic and so needs to be built into our consumption model, our organization of public administration, and our governance approach.
- There is a need to engage at the level of regions and municipalities, not only at the national government level. There is a need to involve the public and to inform public opinion to raise awareness of social, economic, and environmental issues through a bottom-up approach. Sustainability embedded in constitutional frameworks is a key way to ensure inter-generational justice.
- The pandemic put institutions and the relations between them under threat. It has highlighted a lack of preparation in our social and economic models. It has shown how a social crisis can become an economic crisis and an institutional crisis.

Key recommendations for action

- More than ever, governments need to accelerate the implementation of SDG 16, which is a cross-cutting enabler. Effective, inclusive, and accountable governance is the most successful response to the pandemic to build back better and implement the SDG 16.
- Governments must take all efforts possible to ensure that information is equally and fairly accessible to all.
- Universal health coverage should be truly universal, meaning that it covers the most marginalized, such as displaced migrants, refugees and informal workers.
- Countries should strengthen women's decision-making and leadership roles.
- Recovery from the pandemic requires a whole-of-governance and society approach. All stakeholders (young people, academia, and private and public sectors) need to be engaged, which requires the sharing of knowledge and information.
- A strong dialogue with younger generations and all stakeholders is essential to building a more sustainable future and the only way out of this historical crisis.
- Institutions, laws, and systems at the national and international levels need to be strengthened to better align governments, civil society and business towards the common agenda and to leave no one behind.
- Businesses should continue to exercise greater accountability, integrity, and transparency to promote responsible business conduct.
- Trust in business is high, but more can be done, for example by expanding beyond current corporate governance principles to climate governance and sustainable governance. Business must provide greater accountability, integrity and transparency.
- Responsible business can advance SDG 16 in partnership with governments, civil society and the UN system.
- A new kind of global governance is needed. Building better policies and more transparent forms of governance require a strong commitment to multi-stakeholder engagement.
- Business cooperation, as well as international cooperation, must be mobilized across borders, sectors and generations to adapt to fast-changing circumstances.
- Regulatory frameworks, law enforcement, and related authorities are needed to prevent a wide range of forms of violence and prosecute new forms of large-scale digital abuse.
- Addressing gender-based violence requires the engagement of a wider group of stakeholders, including civil society, private and public sectors, academia, and young people. Grassroot organizations working on protecting women's rights that collect information and provide data to inform decision-making need to be strengthened.
- Investing in prevention is critical to detect and deter violence against women. The surge of violence against women and girls during the pandemic calls for more protection of civic space. Despite the vital role played by women's organizations, many have been deprived of funding since the outbreak of the pandemic. It is essential to build sustainable streams of financing for women's organizations, even in times of crisis.
- Governments need to put health and wellbeing first. They to guarantee universal health coverage, which must reach those most vulnerable. They also need to ensure universal basic social protection.
- The Ten Principles of the UN Global Compact in the areas of human rights, labor, environment, and anti-corruption can guide a response from the private sector to the crisis that is aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals.

3.2 - SDG 16 as a framework for moving the 2030 Agenda forward: key national and international actions needed to tackle global challenges

Underlying all 17 goals of the 2030 Agenda is a vision that no person should be left behind, but the gap between rich and poor both within and between nations has only grown since their adoption. Growing inequality and exclusion, identified as a major source of distrust in government by global leaders in the Declaration commemorating the United Nations' 75th Anniversary, have been further exposed and exacerbated by COVID-19. There is a concern that emergency measures taken by governments during the pandemic as well as domestic and aid budgets in the short and medium term could further worsen inequalities. Ensuring inclusive and equitable access to public services during and after COVID-19 will be key to building greater public confidence and trust in government, as will be efforts to address discrimination towards vulnerable groups in society.

Key messages

- The pandemic impacted progress towards the achievement of SDG 16. Around the world, there have been increases in violence, corruption, and social tensions due to widespread disruptions to public services, and limits placed on political activity.
- In times of crisis and beyond, the provision of online social services improves transparency, increases the efficiency of public functions, and helps to prevent corruption at all levels of government.
- During the pandemic, many States began to align domestic laws with international standards, developing e-governance programs and human rights-based social protection schemes.
- Despite some instances of fruitful scientific cooperation on vaccine production, the international community demonstrated a lack of understanding of the fact that no country will be safe if the pandemic is not eradicated in all countries.
- During the pandemic, there was a renewed and heightened awareness that climate change can only be addressed by joint efforts of all countries and the international community.
- The critical role of oversight bodies increases in times of crisis, as executive offices enact emergency measures. Oversight actors include parliaments that issue appropriate legislation and ensure effective control over government spending during an emergency; civil society organizations (CSOs), which through their access to communities and vulnerable groups are uniquely positioned to provide oversight during crises; and Ombuds institutions that can quickly address citizen complaints and ensure that security providers abide by the law and respect human rights.
- As many countries do not have enough resources for emergency funding, in such contexts international cooperation plays a very important role in crisis mitigation.

Key recommendations for action

- Resilience to shocks and crises cannot be achieved without policy coordination and whole-of-society approaches that address discriminatory norms and inequalities.
- To recover from the pandemic and achieve the SDGs by 2030, the international community needs to intensify and better coordinate its support to recovery measures in developing countries.
- Indicators elaborated by the UN Statistical Commission are effective, but international cooperation is needed to assist developing countries in strengthening their statistical capacities.
- Promoting gender equality by revising labor laws and supporting the participation, representation, and leadership of women in policy formulation and decision-making at all levels is key to building back better.
- International organizations must prioritize accurate and timely measurements of progress on SDG 16's implementation.
- Governance and institutional innovations at all levels can accelerate the implementation of SDG 16 and promote integrated, whole-of-society approaches needed to tackle complex challenges such as

conflict, increasing inequalities, social and economic insecurity, climate change and rapid technological disruption.

- States should ensure that emerging technologies are accessible, used ethically, and protect people's data privacy. South-South and North-South cooperation should be promoted to help bridge the digital divide.
- An integrated e-development platform for planning and management can help to ensure that public services are provided to all citizens, including vulnerable and marginalized groups, effectively and equitably.
- While promoting climate resilient development in countries, States should be mindful of individual countries' needs and capacities.
- Climate justice must be pursued to ensure that developed countries respond equitably to growing emissions as a product of economic development and poverty reduction.

b. Parallel sessions

3.1 - The gender dimension of the pandemic: lessons learned and implications for the future

The pandemic has further exacerbated discrimination and increased inequalities and risks of backsliding on gender equality. Analyses show a widening of the poverty gap between women and men, pushing 47 million more women and girls into poverty by the end of the current year. This will increase the total number of women and girls living in extreme poverty to 435 million, with projections showing that this number will not revert to pre-pandemic levels until 2030. During the pandemic, women, more likely to be employed in sectors hardest hit by lockdowns, have lost their jobs at a faster rate than men. They have seen an increase in their unpaid care responsibilities, experienced increased gender-based violence, among others.

Key messages

- The pandemic has demonstrated the high costs of exclusion.
- The pandemic can be described as “having a woman's face”, having exacerbated existing gender inequalities. Responses to the virus must also have a woman's face.
- The vulnerabilities, gaps, structural bottlenecks, and stereotypes that affected women before the pandemic left them unprepared for its impacts. Women have been over-represented among those living in poverty and precarious conditions and working in the informal sector, and receive less in social protection. The distribution of responsibilities in the home has also been skewed to women's disadvantage.
- Much of the time, women are the shock absorbers of society. Home schooling for children during the pandemic has been a significant added burden on women. Many women with jobs in the formal sector are leaving the labor market due to such pressure. Women are also over-represented in the sectors hit hardest by the pandemic. Many women in the informal economy do not have the requisite tools or capacity to adapt to e-commerce. An increase in violence against women since the pandemic is another significant impact.
- Women are also actively fighting against the pandemic. In addition to providing unpaid care, for instance, women comprise around 70 per cent of nurses globally.
- Policy responses to the pandemic are not responsive to the needs and rights of women and girls. The COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker created by UNDP and UN Women has screened more than 3,000 policy measures in more than 200 countries and territories. Just 13 per cent of all fiscal, economic, labor and social protection measures address women's economic security. Just 11 per cent of all social protection and labor market measures targeted unpaid care work. Around 15 per cent of all countries analysed had no gender-sensitive policy responses at all. Women are mostly absent from relevant leadership and decision-making. Among 225 COVID-19 task forces with membership data

that were analysed, women comprised just 24 per cent of members; 12 per cent of task forces had no women members.

- A gender lens is needed in pandemic responses. Some of the adverse effects of the pandemic on women, such as a rise in gender-based violence, should have been anticipated and planned for by governments. A gender lens applied to financial assistance to women, for example, would aim to ensure that assistance reaches women directly, with minimal risk of diversion to husbands or others. Some pandemic measures have been exclusionary, especially for persons who are LGBTI. There has also been differential access to vaccines.
- Parliamentary responses to the crisis have not been gender sensitive. Little legislation has been gender-targeted or mainstreamed. There is some evidence however, that parliaments have acknowledged gender-based violence. It has mainly been women parliamentarians raising women's voices, and it appears that responsibility for gender-sensitive measures rests largely with them. It also appears that, during crises, gender equality is not among criteria by which the work of parliaments is assessed. A gender-sensitive parliamentary response to crises is more likely when mechanisms and infrastructure for gender equality are already present.
- Some examples of gender-sensitive parliamentary measures include soliciting the experiences and needs of diverse women, questioning the effectiveness of measures, identifying and allocating more resources to those who need them most, utilizing gender mainstreaming tools in scrutiny, and monitoring and ensuring the participation of women in parliamentary debates.
- Several hundred feminist advocates from more than 70 countries issued key principles to promote a feminist response to COVID-19. However, governments have been paying little attention.
- There are, however, some encouraging signs. At least 149 countries have implemented at least one policy measure to address violence against women and girls. At least 42 countries have implemented a holistic response to the crisis, integrating gender-based violence, economic security, and the care crisis.
- The care economy has entered the development narrative and can no longer be ignored as a part of the economy.
- Some policy measures adopted in response to the pandemic, such as programmes to formalize informal economic activities, may drive long term change.
- The pandemic has shown that inclusive public administration is fundamental.
- Nothing has been more effective than quotas for achieving women's representation. However, during the pandemic, having women in decision-making spaces without addressing inequality in caregiving, in particular with regard to home schooling, would have limited effectiveness. This highlights the importance of holistic approaches.

Key recommendations for action

- Adopt a holistic agenda for gender equality both during and beyond the pandemic. In addition to addressing the immediate impacts of the pandemic on women, we must also pursue medium- and long-term measures to achieve gender equality, which requires dismantling patriarchy.
- To build back better, responses must have a bottom-up, holistic approach with women at the center, and differentiated interventions that promote secure livelihoods.
- Women need to have leadership positions and influence the spaces that determine pandemic responses to enable them to, with intentionality, be aligned with women's voices.
- Adopt quotas and other temporary special measures; conduct reviews of discrimination in laws, constitutions, budgets and plans; and address discriminatory social gender norms.
- Pandemic recovery plans must earmark budget allocations and include measures such as affirmative action for women and gender equality
- It is important for girls to return to school.

- Greater attention is needed to address all forms of discrimination, including in artificial intelligence. We must avoid reproducing real-world gaps and biases in the digital world.
- Upscale efforts to open and expand services for women experiencing violence.
- Measure and analyze the differentiated impacts of crises with more rigor. More granular information than that provided by general indicators is needed to inform policies. Attention must also be given to data manipulation.
- Parliamentarians and other decision-makers need stronger capacity to question some of the data they are given in conducting analyses. Parliaments should improve their capacity to conduct broad gender-sensitive analysis.
- Better understand who the “no one” is in the “leave no one behind” framework to ensure that people are not missed as crisis response systems are not always set up to be inclusive.
- Learn from countries with greater gender equality, which are more resilient to crises.
- Include the care economy in national accounting systems, and in infrastructure and services, as part of crisis responses.
- Strengthen and invest in women’s organizations for their meaningful participation and enhanced impact.
- Explore the barriers to women’s engagement in order to realize a conducive environment for their active participation and influence.
- Safeguard civil society space.
- Gender equality should be a fundamental and recognized goal of parliaments, mainstreamed in their work.
- Partnerships among all actors working towards gender equality are essential to strengthen their push for change.

3.2 - Promoting inclusive and equitable access to public services

Underlying all 17 goals of the 2030 Agenda is a vision that no person should be left behind, but the gap between rich and poor both within and between nations has only grown since their adoption. Growing inequality and exclusion, identified as a major source of lack of trust in government by global leaders in the Declaration of commemorate the United Nations’ 75th Anniversary, have been further exposed and exacerbated by COVID-19. There is a concern that emergency measures taken by governments during the pandemic as well as domestic and aid budgets in the short and medium term could further exacerbate inequalities. Ensuring inclusive and equitable access to public services during and after COVID-19 will be key to building greater public confidence and trust in government, as will be efforts to address discrimination towards vulnerable groups.

Key messages

- The pandemic has slowed down economic activity. Increases in unemployment and informal employment mean that fewer people are contributing to payrolls and therefore providing less support to social security plans.
- Hospitals’ focus on COVID-19 has led to a decrease in surgery uptake and more delays in routine and emergency surgeries.
- Centralized health care systems can result in a more efficient emergency response, often allowing for the quick reallocation of resources to areas with high need, and for health officials to monitor supply and demand changes in hospital and medical services.
- WHO guidelines on protection measures and social distancing were particularly challenging to apply in some areas, such as slums and refugee camps.
- Discrimination, not disabilities themselves, place people with disabilities in vulnerable positions.

- Emergency plans for COVID-19 often did not account for the challenges faced by people with disabilities.
- As hospitals and service providers were closed or experienced reductions in service, care became the sole responsibility of families. Many people were put in insufficient long-term care centers.
- Pandemic-related changes in education often did not address the needs of mentally or behaviourally challenged students. People with disabilities faced limitations on access to public services, especially relating to educational attainment and distance learning plans.
- Government strategies often do not include inclusive communication plans that account for people who are deaf or people with disabilities.
- Significant learning loss can already be seen in students who did not attend classroom schooling through the pandemic.

Key recommendations for action

- The capacities of primary healthcare workers should be expanded in order to facilitate home visits and the provision of healthcare to elderly and vulnerable people.
- Centralized health record systems should be promoted as they allow for more efficient monitoring of citizens and effective resource allocation.
- Long-term healthcare plans need to be developed to account for long-term side effects of COVID-19 experienced by some patients.
- Distance learning plans should account for people living with disabilities by providing materials suitable to people who are deaf or hearing-impaired. Those facing learning deficiencies should have access to service personnel at the home.
- Data should be collected on how many people with disabilities died during the crisis to measure how unequal access to services has impacted people with disabilities.
- More extensive research should be conducted worldwide pertaining to how people with disabilities are accounted for within educational services and the types of instruction they receive.
- Youth should be engaged in health care policy discussions to assess whether new or existing policies are sustainable in the long run.

3.3 - Digital governance in a post-pandemic world

The pandemic has witnessed expanded use of digital technologies in public service delivery. Digital government tools have kept governments and people connected during the pandemic, through information sharing and online services. They have helped governments to make rapid policy decisions based on real-time data and analytics. They have enhanced the capacity of local authorities for better coordination and deployment of needs-based services to residents. During the pandemic, whole education systems shifted to the digital format. Governments with robust digital platforms and digital tools have been better equipped to sustain public service delivery during the crisis. However, the pandemic has also highlighted the reality of digital divides, as vulnerable groups have not benefited equally from digital services.

Key messages

- The pandemic has presented a major challenge for governments, including governments in digitally advanced countries, requiring a very quick response and policy actions, and the pace of digitalization has increased.
- Due to the pandemic, there was increased interest in how to make digital government work and how to make it inclusive for all including through the introduction of digital currency for underserved communities.

- The pandemic has underscored the importance of digital government in our society, but it has also exacerbated the important connectivity issues, revealing digital barriers in certain countries. There is still a part of population that remains digitally excluded due to connectivity problems.
- A key condition for successful digitization is capability both in the government and the private sector. In this regard, it is important to highlight the role of trust in establishing digital capabilities. There is a strong relationship between digital capabilities, performance and trust between citizens and government. The best-performing countries in e-government enjoy citizens' trust in using technology. Overall, digital government has become a critical element of citizens' trust in governments.
- The pandemic has highlighted the importance of data, including leveraging data to drive policymaking in real time. Data is a key ingredient for successful digitization, but in many cases, data remains siloed as data sharing arrangements are not in place, especially in decentralized countries.
- Data sharing is needed to achieve "digital by default". However, during the pandemic, data privacy may not always have been upheld due to time pressures of the crisis.
- In response to the pandemic, various e-government services were initiated and expanded (e.g., collaboration websites for government for document sharing, digital payments, virtual call centers; telemedicine services and usage of chat applications such as WhatsApp).
- In some cases, the pandemic had positive side effects, for example, by expediting parliamentary approval for digitization of government services that had been stalled for many years.
- For many governments, digital practices and tools such as dashboards and decision support systems were key to their ability to respond to the pandemic.
- Building the right capacity to respond to the pandemic means increased digitization of the government itself, investing in digital literacy of the population, and providing digital access to ensure inclusiveness. It also means governments embracing a more entrepreneurial spirit, including allowing for innovation and risk-taking.

Key recommendations for action

- It is important to make digital government work and to make it inclusive for all.
- Capability, both in the government and the so-called commercial community, is a key condition for successful digital government. Increased digitization requires investing in digital literacy and providing inclusive digital access.
- Policy is a prerequisite to enable digitization in a responsible, effective and managed way.
- Connectivity issues need to be addressed to eliminate digital barriers and make digital government inclusive for all.
- The role of people's trust for digital capabilities warrants particular attention.
- Data sharing is critical to achieve "digital by default". Data privacy should not be set aside because of time pressures of the crisis.
- Partnerships are key, e.g., with the private sector and academia. Collaboration with innovators is also useful. Overall, a multi-stakeholder approach is recommended.
- It is recommended that governments do not embark on mega-projects but rather start with demonstration products or prototypes. It is important to achieve small successes in order to gain citizens' trust.