



It's Time for the United States to Reengage with the SDGs, Starting with SDG 16

By Kristen Cordell and Christine Li

APRIL 2021

THE ISSUE

- **The Biden-Harris administration is prioritizing the United States' reemergence on the international stage in their early work.** The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represent a foundation for shared action to achieve U.S. strategic objectives, aligning closely with the administrations' early goals on democracy, good governance, and the creation of peaceful and inclusive societies.
- **SDG 16, focused on peace, justice, and strong institutions, is an ambitious, comprehensive, and catalytic goal whose targets have suffered greatly during the Covid-19 pandemic.** The United States is well-positioned to strengthen it and, in doing so, align the administration's priorities around its development approaches to justice, governance, and fragile states.

SDG 16: THE WHAT AND THE WHY

Building on the **eight UN Millennium Development Goals** from the early 2000s, the SDGs are a multilateral framework of **17 goals and 169 targets** intended to guide policymakers in implementing effective economic, social, and environmental development. They were adopted in 2015 by all 193 UN member states under the **2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development** and have since served as both a reference and rallying point for politicians, community leaders, and the private sector alike.

SDG 16 is focused on promoting peaceful and inclusive societies; providing access to justice for all; and building effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels. This manifests itself through a broad range of subgoals and subthemes, including anticorruption, peacebuilding, the rule of law, and equal representation in local institutions. SDG 16 also offers a shared construct for measuring progress through indicators on good governance, rule of law, and institutions at all levels of governance. Compared to other

institution-focused development initiatives, such as SDG 4 on education targets, SDG 16 stands apart for its emphasis on the **inherently political nature of institutions** and for its potential to **catalyze** success in the other SDGs. Simultaneously, this political nature made the SDG 16 negotiation process a challenging one, with many member states seeking to preemptively manage the impact of the goal on national institutional autonomy.

The Obama administration was heavily involved in the SDG 16 negotiation process, while also calling for a uniquely multilateral approach to advancing shared development objectives in other settings. Comparatively, the Trump administration, inheriting the relatively young platform, **largely neglected** both the framework and its individual targets. The Trump administration erroneously claimed potential limitations of the SDGs on sovereignty, choosing instead to wither relationships with implementing bodies responsible for respective SDG targets (such as departing the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization

(UNESCO), which is responsible for SDG 4), creating a parallel yet unlinked **measuring system**, and opening a sizable opportunity for **China to increase its influence** over the platform. None of the Trump administration's overarching policy documents—the 2017 National Security Strategy, the 2018 Joint Strategic Plan, or the 2019 USAID Policy Framework—mentioned the SDGs.

The Biden administration has pledged to reengage in international systems and standards, which one hopes will include the SDG framework broadly. Beyond SDG 16, reengaging with the larger overarching framework offers the U.S. government the opportunity to reinforce shared norms and practices. While the administration has not revealed many clues about their thinking on the SDGs specifically, there is reason to be hopeful: in January 2021, Biden **nominated** Samantha Power, an Obama administration alumna who was deeply engaged in the development of the SDGs, to head the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Previously the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations while the goals were under construction, Power was a major advocate for their **importance**, and she even cited the SDGs as an achievement during her **March 23, 2021 confirmation hearing**.

SDG 16 stands apart for its emphasis on the inherently political nature of institutions and for its potential to catalyze success in the other SDGs.

Despite a lack of U.S. engagement, a number of bilateral donors and civil society groups, such as the **Transparency, Accountability, & Participation for 2030 Agenda (TAP) Network** and the **Pathfinders** and their affiliated member states, stepped in to fill the gap from 2017 to 2020. Many of these groups have also led the nascent process to ensure SDG 16 responds directly to the challenges created by the Covid-19 pandemic. These ongoing efforts represent an important opportunity for the new administration to reengage.

Building on the successes of partners and allies will also be key. The United Kingdom has worked to integrate SDG 16 commitments on democracy into important international fora, including the **Community of Democracies** and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) Development Assistance Committee. Denmark has impressively mainstreamed domestic and international

CANADA: A BEST PRACTICE CASE STUDY FOR COUNTRY REPORTING

As the United States reenters the global environment on SDG 16, learning from Canada in implementing domestic SDG reporting mechanisms would be a strategic way to humbly reengage as an SDG leader. Published in February 2021, *Moving Forward Together: Canada's 2030 Agenda National Strategy* provides valuable lessons. Shaped through more than **44,000 public consultations**, Canada's efforts embody proper engagement with citizens and civil society. Furthermore, Statistics Canada is a leader on reporting through its **Sustainable Development Goals Data Hub** and efforts to explore data sources on traditionally difficult indicators, such as **16.5.1** on bribery with public officials. Canada also provides an important lesson on devoting domestic staff to the SDGs. Within Employment and Social Development Canada, there is a **Sustainable Development Goals Unit**, which is devoted to delivering commitments through coordinating strategy and various **funding programs** for both subnational governments and civil society.

progress monitoring and policy creation around SDG 16 both in the overarching foreign policy strategy titled **The World 2030** and the domestic 2017 National Action Plan featuring **nine measurable indicators** relevant to SDG 16. Canada has also instituted exemplary efforts to improve data collection on SDG 16 indicators and support domestic partners.

Engaging with SDG 16 is also timely. While the onset of Covid-19 and subsequent responses have taxed the international system, the SDG platform, and SDG 16 in particular, offers the administration the opportunity for quick wins and efficiency. They will not need to risk precious political capital that is more suited for the international Covid-19 response to work toward consensus of the international community; it already exists, remarkably, on complex issues like governance, justice, and conflict through SDG 16.

Looking more broadly, SDG 16 subgoals are imperative for their catalytic and transformative nature. Achieving the other SDGs relies on significant and sustained progress on SDG 16. Without addressing high levels of corruption, limited justice institutions, or lingering fragility, developing countries are unlikely to reach aspirational targets for development. Therefore, by building on existing

consensus and international commitment to objectives, the Biden-Harris administration can bolster systems for improved development outcomes and push back on **autocratic or disruptive forces** that may have become emboldened by the pandemic.

While the onset of Covid-19 and subsequent responses have taxed the international system, the SDG platform, and SDG 16 in particular, offers the administration the opportunity for quick wins and efficiency.

SDG 16: THE HOW

As U.S. policymakers think through how to reengage in the SDG platform, they should pursue partnerships with bilateral actors, civil society, and multilateral organizations. Furthermore, it will be important to prioritize those goals that are most aligned with their policy priorities as well as those that offer “quick wins” toward shared global challenges, such as recovering from the Covid-19 pandemic. A good starting point will be assessing the current alignment between their own policy priorities and the components of these frameworks that can act as a force multiplier. Our analysis identifies three main categories for the current administration's alignment with the priorities of SDG 16:

1. Governance that is accountable to democratic values;
2. Systems that are resilient to corrupting forces; and
3. Peaceful and inclusive societies.

This section will present framing, examples, and potential shared activities that each category offers.

GOVERNANCE ACCOUNTABLE TO DEMOCRATIC VALUES

The administration has called for a **Democracy Summit** and group of democracies (possibly similar to the United Kingdom's vision of a “**D-10**”) to lead a response to the receding tide of democracy across the world. While most of the conversations in these forums will likely focus on high level values around democratic systems, the infrastructure of democratic systems is just as important. In promoting democratic values in developing nations, the U.S. government should be prepared to help build stronger democratic institutions that can push back on corruption,

political coercion, and misinformation. This will rest on collecting improved data on where those values are being threatened, including by **competitive models**.

Price of entry to the Democracy Summit itself should include accounting for country progress on SDG 16 governance aspects. Though democracy is not explicit within SDG 16 language, the term is less important than key democratic principles contained within SDG 16 targets: participatory decision making, accountable institutions, and inclusive governance. Finally, emerging in the democratic and governance aspects of SDG 16 means thinking through further engagement with supportive institutions—such as the Human Rights Council and the Special Commission on Human Rights—to weave in a rights-based development approach to forthcoming priorities.

In addition to high level overtures and commitments at the U.S. government-led Democracy Summit, it is critical that the U.S. government also pursue more diffuse activities to implement democracy and governance norms, in keeping with SDG 16. One practical example might be aligning with partners to push back on the **more corrosive transactions** associated with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). BRI's low cost, high debt projects often show overt preference to the political elite, worsening social divides and sowing distrust among the local population. One example is a series of 2019 **anti-China protests** that broke out in Kazakhstan in response to the opening of Chinese factories. In **nearby Uzbekistan**, public trust in China's ability to bring jobs is dropping while concern of debt and land purchases is increasing. The application of SDG 16 standards for accountability will help push back on this effort and instead institute fair and open systems.

A second example of practical alignment would be efforts to bring transparency to instances of misinformation and disinformation, especially around elections and governance. Covid-19 has increased the proliferation of disinformation, misinformation, and censorship in the name of national security and the discrediting of state institutions. SDG 16 target 16.10 calls for “ensuring public access to information and protecting fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements.” This means SDG 16 is uniquely poised to address information issues in relation to both rising authoritarianism led by states and weakening democracy led by malign actors. According to the **OECD analysis** of this challenge, the effort to improve public education must be part of a robust open government approach.

Finally, national institutions must address the challenge of justice for all. The tragic death of George Floyd and the subsequent U.S.-wide response in 2020 have further exposed the deep roots of racial inequality in U.S. law enforcement and governance institutions. Biden has made addressing this issue a priority, including in his **inaugural speech**, saying, “the dream of justice for all will be deferred no longer.” Grounding domestic reform with SDG 16 provides distinct advantages to address the often-neglected ties between politics and justice, in addition to emphasizing fair, international standards that provide an accountability mechanism. Globally, access to justice and the rule of law have only deteriorated with the onset of Covid-19, and SDG 16 provides a beneficial framework to both address the immediate crisis and offer a blueprint for a just recovery.

RESILIENT SYSTEMS THROUGH COMBATING CORRUPTION

Covid-19 has shown the international community that existing systems—from supply chains to electoral systems—are not as resilient as once thought. SDG 16’s target of encouraging capable institutions at all levels and roles to support the achievement of other SDGs provides an opportunity for the administration to fast-track efforts to strengthen systems in support of high-level development goals. Core to increasing the resilience of systems is a complete understanding of the ongoing stressors, including long-standing corruption and limitations to justice systems, both of which are key SDG 16 provisions.

Samantha Power's calls for a development response to corruption highlighted opportunities to increase trust in governing institutions and to return wealth to citizens. The impact of corruption cannot be underestimated. A 2019 **CSIS report**, *Fighting Corruption for U.S. Economic and National Security Interests*, called corruption the major obstacle for the international development system, given its ability to “divert funding away from the intended parties,” leaving critical resources for education, health care, and infrastructure captured by powerful leaders. According to the World Economic Forum, some **two trillion dollars** are lost to corruption a year, with developing countries bearing the brunt of the costs. These trends have only worsened with the onset of the pandemic.

Power's solutions, grounded in good development practice, include the need for **robust national institutions** that have the resources and autonomy to enforce change. SDG 16’s explicit focus on improving systems through reducing corruption and addressing illicit financial flows provides

a key entry point to align priorities. Beyond increasing resilience, addressing corruption also supports U.S. **national security priorities** and can bring financial returns to U.S. citizens. The reduction of corruption has powerful **potential impacts** to improve foreign direct investments, enhance potential markets for the U.S. private sector, and open up new space for U.S. businesses to thrive.

Authoritarian countries are also more likely to engage in corruption, as concentration of executive power with less oversight brings more temptations, which we see spread across the developing world. This includes influencing **global supply chains** through local impediments on moving goods and services. The September 2020 CSIS report *Recovery with Resilience: Diversifying Supply Chains to Reduce Risk in the Global Economy* drew attention to the coordination and cohesion necessary to **diversify supply chains** in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. By extension, an all-of-U.S. government comprehensive approach to the SDGs could serve to connect the anticorruption effort to build standards and improve governance with trade facilitation through improved export control functions. The cumulative impact will be a strong Covid-19 response in the developing world.

Empowering local actors to directly challenge corruption will also be one of the most powerful means for pushing back on corrosive foreign influence in the developing world. In **Malaysia**, Chinese officials inflated costs of infrastructure in a shadowy attempt to bail out the national development fund. Chinese companies, including those active in Belt and Road contracts, are often responsible for **increasing levels of corruption**, and this trend should push the international community toward improved standard setting and accountability mechanisms. As noted in *Fighting Corruption for U.S. Economic and National Security Interests*, “good governance, strong rule of law, and low corruption are not high priorities for China.” Engaging in the anticorruption space offers the Biden-Harris administration a chance to reinforce existing multilateral systems, while also contrasting the stark difference in approaches between the United States and its competitors.

The June 2021 United Nations General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) will be the first to consider a political agreement on corruption—providing another opportunity to align with SDG 16. Originally advanced by Colombia and Peru through **resolution 73/191**, the meeting will focus on “challenges and measures to prevent and combat corruption and strengthen international cooperation,” and will build on the 2016 **United Nations Convention**

Against Corruption (UNCAC). If successful, the resulting political declaration could be the foundation for additional attention to corruption from the G7 and G20, which will meet later in the summer.

In complement to early **public contributions** on the UNGASS process, the U.S. government should use the UNGASS to advance an affirmative vision for taking on the full lifecycle of corruption and for incorporating development-oriented responses, including enhancing strategic commitments to build national capacity to take on corruption. A number of key civil society actors, such as the Open Contracting Partnership, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, and Transparency International, have made strong recommendations on how to do so in their **UNGASS public contributions**. Based on those recommendations, the U.S. government should deepen development investments to counter corruption and build accountable governance systems. There are many examples to draw from, such as programs to strengthen **citizen-led municipal governance** and **encouraging judicial transparency** in Kyrgyzstan.

PEACEFUL AND INCLUSIVE SOCIETIES

As the new U.S. government **Global Fragility Strategy** (GFS) moves toward implementation and international coordination on enhancing stability, alignment with SDG 16 will be key. The December 2020 strategy does not mention SDG 16, nor other internationally agreed upon mechanisms to address fragility, which is a missed opportunity. The Biden-Harris administration has signaled an interest in focusing on reviewing the strategy, providing an opportunity for alignment with SDG 16 on both the policy and its implementation at the national level.

In doing so, the administration may consider building on the progress of the 2018 **USG Stabilization Assistance Review (2018) (SAR)** which piloted a number of implementation efforts across focus countries. The SAR was unique in its attention to U.S. government roles and responsibilities across efforts in stabilization contexts—clear lanes where the various U.S. interagency actors would operate. There is a similar effort within the GFS that can act as an organizing construct to ensure optimal coordination at the country level.

Another way to mainstream SDG 16 into the U.S. government fragility portfolio is to **elevate the role of civil society** at all levels of decisionmaking in conflict and post-conflict spaces. Fragility is fundamentally a political problem and the **Global Fragility Act (GFA)** in large part

OPEN GOVERNMENT PARTNERSHIP NATIONAL ACTION PLANS: BRIDGING THE LOCAL AND THE GLOBAL

Open Government Partnership (OGP) provides a prime example of effective civil society and government coordination in domestically delivering on SDG commitments. Formed in 2011, OGP works bilaterally with countries to create two-year action plans with distinct commitments to improve transparency, government performance, and civic protections. With these issue areas, action plans often align with SDG 16 priorities and provide public commitments to increase accountability and help other civil society organizations advocate for change. In fact, OGP is not new to working with the SDGs and on the occasion of their adoption, issued a **Joint Declaration on Open Government for the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**—recognizing the importance of SDG 16 in promoting the rule of law. OGP has also supported countries in **their implementation of SDG 16** and launched a **Coalition of Justice** involving 43 countries. Within the U.S. 2015–2017 National Action Plan, **Commitment 41**, titled “Open and Accountable Implementation of the SDGs,” called for improved data collection and reporting.

Most of the recent national action plan is set to expire at the end of 2021, prompting the administration to consider renewing its investment in the platform as a means for supporting SDG 16. This would provide an opportunity to align preexisting local government achievements and find new partners. The **OGP Local Initiative** helps subnational governments develop their own action plans, and already Austin, Texas and Los Angeles, California are participating. Austin’s commitments to enhancing public participation and inclusion in court contracting mirror key principles of SDG 16, and looking forward, it may be possible to also push localities to include SDGs considerations in their commitments or even link local commitments to the national plan through the SDGs. Even if that is not possible, the federal government should still encourage and provide incentives for localities to join OGP. Ideally, the federal government would be able to better highlight local achievements on SDG 16 priorities internationally and more effectively shape national strategy.

views it through this lens, listing “Stabilization - Achieve Locally Driven Political Solution to Violent Conflict and Large-Scale Violence” as one of its four priority goals. As the Alliance for Peacebuilding **highlights**, this emphasis on involving local actors in the process will require engaging with local peacebuilders and community members early in the process. It will also require actively listening to marginalized groups to build credibility on the ground.

Another aspect of the GFA that is relevant to SDG 16 is its focus on strengthening state-society relationships. This type of inclusion, as **Mercy Corps highlights**, is vital in addressing fragility. Fragility must be at the heart of discussions around building democratic systems and norms. SDG 16 offers the **critical and inherent connection** between state stability and the promotion of democracy. By using the GFS to commit to stronger local institutions, development practitioners can address the resilience of complicated systems by diagnosing and responding to particular components in reference to agreed-upon international targets.

This may also require new ways of approaching development financing in conflict zones. SDG 16 can be a catalyst for private sector cooperation if both public and private actors are willing to engage early and substantively. Research from the **Center for International Cooperation** indicates that private sector coalitions can be impactful in technical sectors. For example, the model of the National Legal Aid & Defender Association’s (NLADA) longstanding partnership with the corporate community and its more recent collaboration around advancing **access to justice policy reform named for SDG 16** detailed in the **Business Advancing Justice toolkit**, created in October 2020 by the NLADA, offers a number of highly transferable recommendations to support this effort, including creating opportunities for training and alliance building in areas of shared interests.

Multi-donor trust funds with different donors paying into different sector accounts have proven effective in Iraq. The United Nations Development Program’s (**UNDP**) **thematic funding windows** allow donors to tag funding to specific sector efforts, which can be particularly impactful in challenging operating environments where they might not have access. One can imagine a private sector alliance on fragility to lower the barriers to entry for private companies in fragile environments that could be emerging markets or efforts to improve private sector buy-in on core anticorruption legislation at the national level. While the startup cost and barriers to entry for those markets

may remain high, galvanizing the U.S. private sector to promote the objectives of SDG 16 broadly presents a first step forward.

Finally, in support of the three main technical priorities here, there is also a unique crosscutting opportunity for the U.S. government to support improved data collection systems on SDG 16 indicators to accelerate the ability to measure progress. Without institutional mechanisms to access progress on SDG 16, advocates often struggle to make the case for progress and continued support for the framework. Given the three technical priorities, the U.S. government may consider targeted investments to improve measurement on SDG 16 targets which are aligned with the Biden administration’s indicated approach to development, including:

- 16.3: Promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all.
- 16.5: Substantially reduce corruption and bribery in all their forms.
- 16.6: Develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels.
- 16.8: Broaden and strengthen the participation of developing countries in the institutions of global governance.

The U.S. government should also consider modifying existing U.S. reporting mechanisms to align with the SDGs. Much of the data from the **Self-Reliance Roadmap** database can be tagged against the SDG targets, creating a new line of reporting that prevents wasting resources on fully recreating monitoring systems.

DOMESTIC IMPLICATIONS

2021 offers an important inflection point for the global goals, including SDG 16. The UN High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) in June 2021 will offer a chance to take stock of progress, specifically the impact of Covid-19 response and recovery efforts. While a handful of **thinking** and **analysis** has been done about the link between Covid-19 and SDG 16, there is considerable space for U.S. policymakers to lead the conversation about the Covid-19 related implications, challenges, and appropriate responses within the SDG 16 framework. However, this action will depend first on the U.S. government’s full support of the underlying objectives around SDG 16, including the implications within our own domestic context.

DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL ALIGNMENT

The upcoming HLPF is a backdrop for member states to report on their progress on the 2030 agenda through a series of **voluntary national reviews (VNRs)**. These reviews capture institutionalization of the SDGs at the domestic level and subsequently highlight country progress at the international level. To date, the United States has not completed a VNR. It will be critical that policymakers use the upcoming HLPF to secure commitments to a future VNR—one that documents both the progress that the United States has made on the goals, notably progress on SDG 16, and its own challenges in good governance of governance and justice. A VNR will require necessary bureaucratic organization to ensure fulsome reporting across the bureaucracy. Considering current critiques of the fractures in the U.S. democratic experiment, this accountability process is critical to send an international signal and build positive consensus on democratic strengthening as a path to prosperity at home.

Over the last four years, several major cities, including **New York City, Los Angeles, and Pittsburgh**, have sought to fill the void left by the U.S. government on SDGs by submitting voluntary local reviews (VLRs) on SDG progress to the United Nations. For example, on reducing racial inequality, Pittsburgh has already detailed its new **racial equity toolkit** in the 2020 VLR and New York has laid foundations for **more representative city leadership** under 16.7 in its 2019 VLR. The progress of these cities offers a remarkable baseline on which the federal government can build. Doing so will require excellent engagement between the Domestic Policy Council and the National Security Council through an established policy process that draws data from diverse agencies, including the Department of Education, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Department of Health and Human Services, and others. Beneficially, though **Susan Rice**, current director of the Domestic Policy Council, was not present at the United Nations during SDG negotiations, she likely understands the value and mechanisms of the United Nations from her time as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations from 2009 to 2013.

There is considerable space for U.S. policymakers to lead the conversation about the Covid-19 related implications, challenges, and appropriate responses within the SDG 16 framework.

DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE (DOJ) AND SDG 16: A BEST PRACTICE CASE STUDY

When pursuing synergies between SDG 16 and domestic priorities, the U.S. government should turn to lessons learned from the former Obama-era DOJ Office for Access to Justice and the White House Legal Aid Interagency Roundtable (LAIR), tasked with **“assist[ing] the United States with implementation of SDG 16 of the United Nation’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.”** In designing a holistic U.S. strategy on SDG 16 reengagement, the experience of the office emphasizes the need for interagency coordination, civil society engagement, and executive oversight in the domestic arena.

Founded in 2010, the **DOJ Office for Access to Justice** was initially charged with improving justice systems for underserved U.S. communities. The office uniquely **took advantage of international levers**, such as SDG 16, the UN Crime Commission, OGP, and the UN Human Rights Council to amplify its work in international fora and institutionalize U.S. engagement on civil legal aid and public defense. A 2015 **Presidential Memorandum** formally established the LAIR and assigned the office staff. Once resourced, the office cemented SDG 16 ideas in domestic justice initiatives, advanced **domestic data collection initiatives**, and strengthened federal civil society participation. The office was closed in 2018, but considerable **congressional and civil society support** has prompted plans to reopen it.

The federal government should also consider new ways to use the VLRs to **empower additional communities** to invest in data-driven development and engage in citizen-driven change. Currently, the **United States also lacks** a national standard and official guidance for cities to submit the VLRs. The administration might look into the **European Union’s approach** to creating a framework for sub-national governments to submit VLRs.

In advance of any VNR created or VLR supported, U.S. policymakers should think strategically about alignment behind bilateral and civil society partners who have “carried the water” on SDG 16. They should also engage the National Economic Council on thinking through

the domestic implications of SDG 16, including through engagement with the private sector. Already, recent research and advocacy to make the SDG framework relevant for a **domestic audience** have important implications for its relevance to the Biden agenda.

THE RISK OF INACTION

While the United States has yet to publish a report assessing SDG implementation at the annual HLPF, other countries, including **China**, have stepped up to fill the void. China reports on both domestic and international progress, but clearly sees itself as a donor working to further SDG outcomes in developing countries. A **2019 progress report** from China's Ministry of Commerce cited China's progress on SDG 16 as including support to African countries working on "capacity building in such areas as national defense, counter-terrorism, riot control, customs control, and immigration control."

As China presents its most recent VNR **this year**, the VNR process should be used to highlight China's uneven record on SDG 16 in discourse and in practice. While China has sought the political cover that the SDG brand brings, it has not actually supported the underlying tenets of the goal. China's 2016 VNR centers primarily on progress in advancing women's empowerment, sustainability, and ending poverty, leaving out the corrosive implications of debt burden and domestic attempts to oppress minorities. China's lending is often linked to **local political patronage** with many development projects concentrated in **political leadership hometowns**, contributing to misinformation and disinformation about the pandemic, and exacerbating instability and conflict—including, notably, along **ethnic lines**. This directly contrasts the SDG approach for cohesion and inclusion.

In addition to publishing its own assessment of progress on the SDGs, the U.S. government should work to empower developing nations to report on the implications of Chinese lending, including declines in democratic governance, increases in corruption, and recessions in trust. This means, in some cases, bringing visibility to the impact of corrosive capital in the country, including the impact of BRI lending on rising autocratic trends.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Moving forward, the Biden-Harris administration can take action in several areas to support SDG 16 as an international consensus agreement through which to advance domestic and international objectives on peace, justice, and strong institutions.

Harness the collective power of SDG 16 in country level responses to Covid-19, building on the initial work of the **#JustRecovery movement** specifically, by ensuring that some **20 trillion dollars** worldwide in Covid-19 assistance do not circumvent but directly address the ability of governments and nongovernmental bodies to operate with transparency, inclusivity, and suitability.

- Create a plan of action to influence any forthcoming international standards on anticorruption to ensure accountability during the Covid-19 response era, as well as beyond.
- Ensure that any political declaration reached at the UN Special Session on Anticorruption in June aligns with SDG 16 and directly addresses any efforts by U.S. strategic competitors who may seek to push a corrosive model.
- USAID and the State Department should create a process to ensure that Covid-19 assistance packages are synced with international standards on debt financing and transparent public procurement processes, in the spirit of SDG 16.

Begin plans for a U.S. government commitment to a VNR that emphasizes SDG 16 (to be released at HLPF 2022) and an internal review to build internal sensitization to the SDGs across the U.S. government.

- Assemble previous experiences, mechanisms, and lessons from UN-affiliated reviews, such as the most recent **2020 OHCHR Universal Periodic Review (UPR)**.
- Build a coalition of likeminded donors who are equally committed to using the upcoming HLPF to call for accountability to SDG 16 commitments, especially with recent revelations on the engagement of UN member states in misinformation, opaque governance, and corrupt deals affiliated with the Belt and Road Initiative.
- Seek out lessons learned from bilateral partners in creating monitoring systems and aligning domestic policy with international priorities.
- Emphasize SDG 16 when messaging on domestic reform priorities or achievements related to SDG 16 priorities, such as governance, democracy, and anticorruption, to avoid silos between domestic and international applications.
- Provide tangible support and incentives for local governments to incorporate the SDGs into policy or to participate in international levers, such as submitting a VLR for a future HLPF.

Seek out new opportunities to feed into a larger global system for organizing to achieve the goals inherit to SDG 16.

- Identify funding opportunities to support developing country capacity to implement and report on the various components of SDG 16, specifically through tested entry points, such as OGP, for SDG 16 implementation. Already, OGP has supported **Colombia, Paraguay, Sri Lanka, and others** in following through on their SDG 16 commitments.
- Create a longer-term vision and process to support data collection on the goals. USAID should map its **Self-Reliance Country Roadmaps** database against the SDG 16 targets and tag relevant data sources, allowing the international community to take advantage of the U.S. government data sources.
- Encourage agencies like the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) to engage with the **private sector** to follow the model created by the United Nations Fund (UNF) of building private sector alliances on specific SDG 16 subgoals, including new alliances on fragility related objectives.

Engage Congressional appropriators to support activities clustered around SDG 16. While **sector-driven appropriations** have become more confining for executive branch policymakers over the last several years, a more flexible “clustering” of funds might be able to support SDG 16 activities in democracy, justice, resilience, and stability. The President’s Budget might cross-reference funding requests to SDG targets.

- Ensure linkages between the respective National Security and National Economic Councils policy processes and the framework that SDG 16 provides, specifically with respect to alignment between the National Security Strategy and potential **Global Development Strategy** objectives and SDG 16.
- Highlight leadership of U.S. cities and citizens on SDG 16 by integrating efforts, such as Pittsburgh's **Marshall Plan for Middle America**, into ongoing federal strategy.

- Following the reestablishment of the Department of Justice Office for Access to Justice, ensure that policy processes run by the National Economic Council and National Security Council are reporting on domestic progress on SDG 16.
- Ensure that the upcoming Summit of Democracies harnesses the collective power and cohesive platform that engages the **SDG 16 framework** by referring its language on accountable institutions and inclusive governance within any declarations or resulting agreements.
- Align the GFS and its implementation plan with SDG 16 targets and look for creative shared financing facilities for fragile and conflict-affected spaces, such as **UNDP’s thematic funding windows**.

Reengagement on SDG 16 offers tremendous opportunities for quick wins on the most pressing development objectives of the Biden-Harris administration, while simultaneously addressing critical domestic issues. However, inclusivity and humility must be the underpinning values of any U.S. approach on SDG 16 and are enshrined in the recommendations above. The Biden-Harris administration will have to address significant debates about the civic standing of the United States and whether working on democracy abroad is still appropriate given our own fractured system. The SDG framework offers ready-made international consensus on pressing challenges and offers the opportunity to avoid relitigating and instead focus on implementation. If global engagement with SDG 16 is pursued intentionally and strategically, it has the potential to catalyze solutions to many of today’s most pressing global challenges. ■

Kristen Cordell is a Council on Foreign Relations international affairs fellow with the Project on Prosperity and Development (PPD) at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, D.C. Christine Li is an intern with PPD at CSIS.

This brief is made possible by the generous support of the Royal Embassy of Denmark in Washington, D.C.

CSIS BRIEFS are produced by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s). © 2021 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. All rights reserved.

Cover Photo: Adobe Stock