

Peace Governance and SDG 16 in Somalia

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Abstract

Somalia's progress toward sustainable development depends heavily on peace governance and the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 16. This brief report examines how weak institutions, fragmented justice systems, corruption, clan-based politics, insecurity, and limited public trust constrain peacebuilding and institutional legitimacy. It argues that narrow stabilization approaches are insufficient unless combined with accountability, inclusion, access to justice, and locally grounded governance. Drawing on Somali and comparative evidence, the report identifies three priorities: integrating formal, customary, and religious justice mechanisms; strengthening oversight, transparency, and citizen participation in security and justice institutions; and expanding the roles of universities, civil society, and public systems. A locally legitimate SDG 16 framework can help Somalia transform fragile recovery into sustainable peace and inclusive national development.

Main text

Somalia offers one of the clearest tests of whether SDG 16 can function as the “strategic lever” it is often claimed to be in fragile and conflict-affected settings (Baranyi et al., 2021). In such contexts, peace, justice, and effective institutions are not peripheral governance aspirations; they are preconditions for progress across health, poverty reduction, and resilience (Hope, 2020). Recent Somali evidence strengthens this point by showing that SDG 16 exerts the largest positive influence on progress across the country's other SDGs, with especially strong effects on health and broader sustainable development **A(Adem et al., 2024)**. For Somalia, therefore, the question is not whether SDG 16 matters, but how peace governance can move beyond formal commitment toward locally legitimate implementation.

The problem is that Somalia's governance deficits are structural, historically layered, and only partly addressed by current reform efforts. Across fragile states, SDG 16 implementation has shown an overall pattern of uneven effort and superficial compliance, shaped not merely by low capacity but by the willingness of elites to enable or block meaningful institutional consolidation . Somalia reflects this wider pattern. Its justice order has long been marked by coexistence between customary *xeer*, Sharia-based adjudication, and weak formal institutions, producing a legally plural but fragmented system of authority (Yusuf Adan, n.d.). More recent analysis indicates that UN-backed interventions have expanded legal aid, mobile courts, and professionalization, yet progress remains uneven, politically contested, and constrained by clan politics, corruption, and insecurity . Even outside the justice sector, Somali evidence links corruption to breakdowns in trust and worsening inequities, underscoring how weak institutions directly undermine service delivery.

This institutional fragility has several interacting drivers. First, SDG 16 is itself politically demanding. Its targets extend beyond violence reduction to corruption control, accountable institutions, inclusive decision-making, access to information, and equal access to justice (Dursun-Özkanca, 2021a). Those targets are contentious because serious implementation can cut against elite interests in patrimonial or opaque political systems (Arugay & Baquisal, 2024). Second, peace and governance are often pulled into securitized framings that privilege order over inclusion, even though SDG 16 was designed to encompass both negative peace and positive peace through institutional reform (Milton, 2020). Third, in Somalia specifically, conflict drivers

extend beyond state capacity gaps to deeper issues of kinship-based politics, exclusion, and contested civic identity, which technical programs alone cannot resolve.

Comparative evidence helps clarify what Somalia should avoid and what it can build on. Research on security sector governance argues that SDG 16 and security sector reform are most effective when they combine oversight, accountability, participation, and local ownership rather than treating security as a narrow technical domain (Dursun-Özkanca, 2021b). This is especially relevant in Somalia, where the legitimacy of justice and security institutions depends on whether they match state capacity to citizen expectations and provide fair access to law, safety, and information. Evidence from Somaliland is instructive, albeit not fully generalizable to southern and central Somalia: peace there was built through grassroots conferences involving elders, chiefs, and politicians, followed by the reconstruction of executive, legislative, and judicial structures and later electoral processes (Mohamed, 2025). Parallel work on Somaliland also emphasizes accountability, transparency, rule of law, and citizen involvement as core elements of state-building (Mohamed, 2024). The lesson is not simple replication, but recognition that locally grounded bargains and inclusive institutional development can produce more resilient orders than externally scripted blueprints.

Somalia also needs to treat peace governance as broader than courts and security agencies alone. Evidence from Somali SDG interactions suggests that institution-building efforts such as government-led social protection can strengthen resilience while building trust in public systems. Wider SDG 16 literature similarly shows that conflict prevention depends on people-centered governance of scarce resources and on blending formal and informal mechanisms with community involvement from the outset (Patel & Lucey, 2024). Civil society also matters. Work engaging Somalia within broader SSG/R debates argues that civil society can support accountability, discourse, and people-oriented security, although its contribution is limited where broader power relations, exclusion, and “projectized” reforms are left untouched.

Three priorities follow. First, Somali authorities and partners should prioritize hybrid justice reform that links formal institutions with customary and religious mechanisms under a clearer rights-respecting framework, because evidence suggests that legal access improves when reform is contextually grounded rather than purely imported. Second, security and justice assistance should be judged less by short-term outputs and more by whether it improves transparency, oversight, inclusion, and public trust, which are repeatedly identified as central to SDG 16 and security-sector legitimacy. Third, investment in universities, civil society, and cross-sector public systems should be treated as part of peace governance, not as secondary add-ons, because higher education and civic actors can widen the social base for rule of law, anti-corruption, and nonviolent problem-solving in fragile settings, including Somalia (Singh & Singh, n.d.).

Somalia’s experience shows that SDG 16 is neither a rhetorical accessory nor a stand-alone governance goal. It is the architecture through which conflict-affected societies can build a workable social compact, restore trust, and unlock progress across the rest of the development agenda (Singh & Singh, n.d.). If peace governance in Somalia continues to emphasize narrow stabilization without equally investing in justice, accountability, and inclusion, implementation will remain shallow. If, however, SDG 16 is pursued as a locally rooted project of institutional legitimacy, Somalia has stronger grounds to convert fragile recovery into durable peace.

Declarations

Author Contributions

B.H.W. conceptualized the study, developed its scope and methodology, conducted the analysis, and drafted the original manuscript. A.A.M. contributed to the literature review, interpretation of findings, and critical revision of the manuscript. A.D.S. contributed to the research design, literature review, and supervision of the work. M.A.M. contributed to data interpretation, manuscript editing, and critical review. Z.M.Y. contributed to the literature search, policy implications, and manuscript review. All authors read and approved the final manuscript and agreed to be accountable for the integrity of the work.

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This study did not involve any human or animal subjects, and thus, did not require review by an Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Conflicts of Interest

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