

**Remarks of UNODC Executive Director Ghada Waly
Global Conference on SDG 16
Session 2.2: Strengthening transparency,
accountability and engagement during and beyond the
pandemic
Thursday, 29 April 2021**

Thank you, I am very pleased to participate in this important panel discussion on transparency, accountability, and engagement towards SDG 16.

Rule of law and sustainable development are mutually reinforcing, and this is exactly what SDG 16 embodies.

True to the theme of today's discussion, the heart of SDG 16 is trust: the public's trust that the rule of law in fact applies to all, equally; that institutions are working to help and protect them; and that these institutions will work for all of them and leave no one behind.

At the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, our mandates to support Member States against the challenges of crime, drugs, corruption and terrorism are inherently linked to strengthening the rule of law, which in turn can foster people's trust in institutions.

The upcoming thematic review of SDG 16 at the High-Level Political Forum comes at a critical time, with development progress stalled, and in some cases even reversed, by the COVID-19 pandemic.

More than 100 million people are being pushed into poverty. Half of the global population remains without social protection, while social and economic disparities grow.

More people than ever have found themselves vulnerable to violence, crime and exploitation.

Trust is earned. It is impossible to ask people to trust when they find themselves without help, especially in times when they need that help more than ever.

Meanwhile, corruption is draining the wealth of countries around the world, and existing gaps in transparency and accountability provide new opportunities for the corrupt to siphon away much-needed resources.

A series of UNODC surveys revealed that state responses to the pandemic were too often designed with little involvement from anti-corruption authorities.

This increases corruption and fraud risks to procurement processes, as well as to the management and delivery of public funds and services.

In response, UNODC has issued policy guidance to help governments ensure that emergency relief funds go to the people and businesses who need them most.

Clear and objective criteria must be established, and oversight is needed every step of the way. Delivery must go hand-in-hand with early risk assessment. Corruption-prone aspects of the disbursement process should be identified and flagged, to be handled with particular vigilance.

Public procurement must also be protected from corruption, especially in the healthcare sector. Clear, simple, and transparent frameworks can ensure competitiveness and innovation, producing results and inspiring confidence among the general public.

Supreme audit institutions and national anti-corruption agencies have a central role to play in this process. They must be engaged to conduct real-time audits and provide ongoing feedback on the integrity and success of emergency spending, to find the right balance between urgent delivery and robust verification.

Expanding their roles, and making them clear to everyone, can serve as a potent deterrent to corruption. It can also show the public how their resources are being overseen and protected from diversion.

Furthermore, technologies such as open contracting policies, open data portals, and digital payment platforms can be powerful tools in managing large amounts of financial resources with both agility and integrity.

Likewise, we should put our faith in people to protect the integrity of relief efforts. Whistleblowers should be protected and empowered to report corrupt or suspicious practices.

Beyond the emergency response, long-term recovery from the crisis will only succeed if we learn its lessons and carry them forward, sustainably. Efficiency and transparency must extend to all public spending, and governments must close down any space for diversion.

International action is vital to instill integrity and accountability as global values. 2021 is a seminal year for international anti-corruption efforts.

The first-ever UN General Assembly Special Session on Corruption will be held in June and will provide key entry points for collaboration on critical anti-corruption issues.

At the Special Session, UNODC will also launch a global operational network of anti-corruption law enforcement authorities, which was first announced during the Saudi G20 Presidency last year, when the group held its first-ever Ministerial meeting on anti-corruption.

The new GlobE network, which has been generously funded by Saudi Arabia, will greatly facilitate direct and informal cooperation to combat cross-border corruption and recover stolen proceeds.

At the end of the year, we have the opportunity to consolidate and follow up on these developments, at the ninth session of the Conference of States Parties to the UN Convention against Corruption, the UNCAC, which will be held in Egypt in December.

The UNCAC remains the only international framework to combat corruption. It is a cornerstone of our aspirations to realize SDG 16.

Our Office supports Member States to implement the Convention. From January 2019 to June 2020, we assisted 87 countries in reviewing legislation and policies, and helped more than 20 countries establish anti-corruption institutions. We trained more than 1,000 officials from over 70 countries to prevent, investigate, and prosecute corruption.

We have also developed a Strategic Vision for Africa that prioritizes building effective, transparent, and accountable institutions across the continent, and focuses on stemming the illicit financial flows that are costing Africa's people almost 90 billion dollars every year. We are now developing a strategic vision for Latin America and the Caribbean.

In addition to combating corruption and bribery, and recovering stolen proceeds, SDG 16 targets organized crime and different forms of trafficking.

Our Office has extensive experience in supporting sustainable and comprehensive responses to organized crime threats.

The UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, together with its supplementing protocols against human trafficking, migrant smuggling and illicit firearms, are the most effective international tools against these threats.

Last year, together with two of the co-conveners of this conference, IDLO and the government of Italy, as well as the Mexican Institute for Justice, UNODC conducted a series of webinars to celebrate 20 years of the Palermo Convention.

Going forward, we are incorporating the lessons learned from the pandemic, and the vulnerabilities it has exposed, into UNODC support for implementation of the Convention.

In parallel with implementation, it remains necessary to measure our success in achieving SDG 16, guided by the official indicators.

UNODC is the custodian of key SDG indicators, including those on illicit financial flows, trafficking in persons and firearms, corruption, homicide, and access to justice.

We have developed new methodologies to support countries in measuring these indicators, and we are working together with our partners at UNDP and OHCHR to build capacities in this regard in different regions of the world.

In striving to achieve SDG 16 and assess our efforts, engagement with all members of society, as well as with the private sector and civil society, will be crucial to preserve the integrity, transparency, and accountability of our institutions. Through their meaningful involvement, governments can ensure that no one is left behind.

The story of SDG 16 and its targets is ultimately a story of addressing gaps and vulnerabilities. It is a commitment to stand up for the poor who cannot afford to pay bribes; the children being exploited for gain; the marginalized who are denied access to justice.

Fair, just, and inclusive institutions must, by definition, protect and respect the dignity of everyone and provide justice for all.

Our Office is providing assistance across different regions to promote fair criminal justice institutions and equal access to justice, and we have teamed up with UNDP to produce technical guidance to practitioners on this issue.

A special word on youth and their engagement; their faith in institutions of governance will have an enormous bearing on the future.

Last year, UNODC organized a live session for youth in Brazil to discuss the impact of COVID-19 on SDGs 11 and 16. More than 1,000 young people participated in the session, and the network reached over 8,000 more via social media platforms.

Following this example, I hope that we can continue to bring young people into the conversation on their own terms.

The rule of law, and the institutions that uphold it, are as strong as people's trust in them.

With the support of the UN system, governments need to build institutions that work with and for everyone, in order to earn that trust, and get back on track to achieving the SDGs.

Our sustainable recovery from the pandemic will depend on it.

Thank you, and I look forward to our discussion.