

SDG 16—The Role of the OSCE

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1. Introduction

The implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is necessary for our survival. That is what Heads of State and Government of all 193 member states of the United Nations declared at the 75th anniversary of the United Nations on 21 September 2020. Therefore, it is in the interest of all peoples and states to implement those seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the year 2030.¹ While the main responsibility lies with states, regional organizations can be supportive. The OSCE, with its comprehensive approach to security, can particularly help in relation to Goal 16, which is designed to promote peaceful and inclusive societies, access to justice for all, and to build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels. The OSCE has been doing this in the region from Vancouver to Vladivostok since the early 1990s, so it is well-positioned and well-equipped to help its participating States reach many of the targets that are part of this goal. Indeed, as a regional arrangement of the United Nations under Chapter VIII, it makes perfect sense that the OSCE should take action within its region to contribute to the maintenance of international peace and security. Building effective institutions and inclusive societies is one of the best forms of conflict prevention—a key activity of the OSCE. Therefore, the SDGs help position the OSCE’s work in a more global framework, while the OSCE’s operational activities help states reach targets and demonstrate good practices that could be transferred to other parts of the world.

This article will outline the role of the OSCE in supporting the implementation of SDG 16, considering the particular challenges relating to this goal. It will also discuss the lessons learned concerning the OSCE’s role as a regional arrangement of the UN in the implementation of the SDGs.

2. The OSCE: Ahead of Its Time

Since the Helsinki Final Act of 1975,² a comprehensive approach to security based on peace, justice, and development has been part of the DNA of the OSCE.

¹ A/RES/70/1, Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

² Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, Helsinki 1975.

Since the beginning of the OSCE (when it was known as the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe), the organization has focused on the following “three complementary dimensions (initially “three baskets”)” of security, all of which are viewed as being of equal importance: the politico-military, the economic and environmental, and the human dimension.

More concretely, work in the three dimensions includes the OSCE supporting its participating States in the following:

1. Military matters by managing a regime of arms control and confidence-building measures and by combating transnational threats (terrorism, violent extremism, cyber, human trafficking, etc.);
2. Economic and environmental issues by promoting good governance, preventing and combating corruption, strengthening co-operation in addressing environmental and security challenges, and promoting sustainable energy and strengthening energy security;
3. The human dimension by helping build democratic institutions, hold genuine and transparent elections, and ensure respect for human rights.

This is carried out through field operations, specialized units within the OSCE Secretariat, and the following three institutions: the Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM), and the Representative on the Freedom of the Media (RFoM).

The merits of a comprehensive approach to security have been recognized in the New Agenda for Peace that warns that responses to violence that rely solely on securitized or militarized responses have limited effectiveness.³

This comprehensive approach to security is complemented by a co-operative approach to security, considering security as indivisible; co-operation is beneficial to all participating States, while the insecurity in and/or of one State can affect all of them. Hence, “no participating State should” boost its own “security at the expense of the security” of others.

The interconnected and interdependent concepts of comprehensive, multidimensional, and co-operative security, having been reaffirmed in major documents and decisions taken since the Helsinki Final Act, were certainly revolutionary at the time and remain highly relevant today. The idea of comprehensive security bears a close resemblance to the concept of “human security”

³ Agenda for Peace, July 2023, p. 13.

that emerged decades later within the international development context,⁴ as well as the recognition of the interrelated nature of security, development, and justice.⁵

While prevention is now a buzzword in the United Nations, the OSCE has been practicing it since the early 1990s, particularly through the work of its High Commissioner on National Minorities, whose mandate is to provide early action and early warning on inter-ethnic tensions that could lead to conflict; a Conflict Prevention Centre; a well-stocked toolbox of risk reduction and confidence-building measures; and structural prevention through supporting democratic institutions and human rights.

These approaches and tools were developed in the context of promoting security and preventing conflict, but they also relate to sustainable development. This is evident by the explicit and implicit references to sustainable development in a number of key documents. The 1975 Helsinki Final Act, the organization's founding document, contained references to the linkages between economic development and environmental and social issues and their interactions with security and stability.⁶ The OSCE Strategy Document for the Economic and Environmental Dimension, which was adopted by the OSCE Ministerial Council in Maastricht in 2003 and is seen as a milestone document in shaping the OSCE's Second Dimension, has a dedicated section on "sustainable development" and defines specific actions and co-operation areas for the organization.⁷ Another important document is Ministerial Council Decision No. 3/11 on Elements of the Conflict Cycle,⁸ which states that "impediments to economic welfare and social development as well as threats to environmental security, including environmental degradation, natural and man-made disasters and their possible impact on migratory pressures, could be

⁴ A/RES/66/290: "human security is an approach to assist Member States in identifying and addressing widespread and cross-cutting challenges to the survival, livelihood and dignity of their people." It calls for "people-centered, comprehensive, context-specific and prevention-oriented responses that strengthen the protection and empowerment of all people". I have also written extensively on the link between the human security concept and the OSCE in (?).

⁵ Whereas the latter was clearly recognized for instance in the World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security, and Development.

⁶ In addition, the linkage between security and development has been reaffirmed at least in the following political commitments, endorsed at OSCE Summits and Ministerial Councils: 1994 CSCE Budapest Document, 2002 Porto Ministerial Declaration on Responding to Change, and the 2002 Porto Ministerial Decision No. 5, Enhancing the Role of the OSCE Economic and Environmental Dimension.

⁷ MC(11).JOUR/2, OSCE Strategy Document for the Economic and Environmental Dimension, 2 December 2003.

⁸ Decision No. 3/11 on elements of the conflict cycle, related to enhancing the OSCE's capabilities in early warning, early action, dialogue facilitation and mediation support, and post-conflict rehabilitation.

potential contributors to conflict". It goes on to mention that "conflict prevention, conflict resolution, post-conflict rehabilitation and peace-building must involve efforts to address violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as intolerance and discrimination, and the absence of strong democratic institutions and the rule of law". So, the OSCE was ahead of its time. Following the adoption of the 2030 Agenda in 2015, several OSCE decisions and declarations have made an explicit reference to the SDGs.⁹

3. The OSCE as a Regional Arrangement

The OSCE is considered a regional arrangement of the United Nations (UN) Security Council under Chapter VIII of the UN Charter. Indeed, with its 57 participating States, the OSCE is the world's largest regional security arrangement. The concept of regional arrangements in the UN Charter recognizes the role of regional organizations in the "Maintenance of international peace and security, provided their activities are consistent with the purposes and principles of the UN".¹⁰ The relationship was formalized within the Framework for Co-operation and Co-ordination between the two institutions in 1993.¹¹

The New Agenda for Peace calls for robust regional frameworks and organizations to promote trust-building, transparency, and détente.¹² This concerns a wide range of issues, including the implementation of the SDGs.

The role of regional organizations or bodies is a critical aspect of the SDG implementation process as they are positioned between the global and national levels. A trend of increased UN focus on the role of regional organizations began at the 2005 World Summit, where the UN was requested to expand consultation

⁹ At least in 2016 Ministerial Council Decision No. 4/16 Strengthening Good Governance and Promoting Connectivity, 2016 Ministerial Declaration on OSCE Assistance Projects in the Field of Small Arms and Light Weapons and Stockpiles of conventional ammunition, 2017 Ministerial Council Decision 8/17 on promoting economic participation in the OSCE Area, Ministerial Council Decision No. 6/17 Strengthening Efforts to Prevent Trafficking in Human Beings, 2018 Ministerial Council Declaration on the Digital Economy as a Driver for Promoting Co-operation, Security and Growth, 2018 Ministerial Council Declaration on OSCE Efforts in the Field of Norms and Best Practices on Small Arms And Light Weapons and Stockpiles of Conventional Ammunition, Ministerial Council Decision No. 3/18 Safety of Journalists, 2018 Ministerial Council Decision No. 4/18 Preventing and Combating Violence against Women, and 2018 Ministerial Council Decision No. 5/18 Human Capital Development in the Digital Era.

¹⁰ Art. 52, UN Charter.

¹¹ 1993 Framework for Co-operation and Co-ordination between the United Nations Secretariat and the CSCE. The reinforced document was endorsed on 10 December 2019.

¹² New Agenda for Peace, July 2023, p. 12.

and co-operation with regional organizations.¹³ This was then followed by a UN Security Council resolution, which further enhanced co-operation between regional organizations and the Security Council.¹⁴

While the importance of regional co-operation and the role of regional organizations in sustainable development were recognized as early as 1992 through the adoption of the Agenda 21 at the Rio Summit,¹⁵ their role in coordinating the implementation, follow-up, and review process was reaffirmed, for instance, in the outcome document of the Rio+20 summit.¹⁶ This emphasized that “regional and sub-regional organizations, including UN regional commissions and their sub-regional offices, have a significant role to play in promoting balanced integration of the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development”.

The 2030 Agenda takes a step further by acknowledging “the importance of the regional and subregional dimensions”. It emphasizes that “regional and subregional frameworks can facilitate the effective translation of sustainable development policies into concrete action at the national level”. In addition, it underlines the benefits of “regional level” follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda implementation. In this context, while recognizing that governments have the primary responsibility for follow-up and review of the SDGs’ implementation, the 2030 Agenda encourages “all member states to identify the most suitable regional forum in which to engage” to ensure an inclusive regional follow-up and review process.

After all, several of the challenges addressed by the SDGs transcend borders. Regional co-operation can have a multiplier effect to help countries, both individually and collectively, move closer to reaching the goals and targets that they have set for themselves. Regional organizations, such as the OSCE, can therefore act as a valuable catalyst to promote co-operation.

Also relevant in this respect is SDG 17, in which states committed themselves to “strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development”. SDG 17 calls for increased international co-operation to achieve each of the 16 previous SDG with Target 17.9 specifically requesting “enhance[d] international support for implementing effective and targeted

¹³ A/RES/60/1, 2005 World Summit Outcome.

¹⁴ S/RES/1631 (2005) UN cooperation with regional organizations in maintaining international peace and security.

¹⁵ AGENDA 21, United Nations Conference on Environment & Development, Rio de Janerio, Brazil, 3–14 June 1992.

¹⁶ A/RES/66/288, The Future We Want.

capacity-building in developing countries to support national plans to implement all the sustainable development goals”.

4. The OSCE and 2030 Agenda

The OSCE’s work relates not only to all 17 SDGs and to many of their individual targets, but notably also to the five major themes that group some of the goals—people, planet, prosperity, peace, and partnerships.

Of these five themes, “peace” is of particular importance for the OSCE. Within the current polarized security environment in the European context, the OSCE remains the only platform for inclusive East–West dialogue and co-operation on multiple hard and soft security issues. Many aspects of the OSCE’s work contribute to peace, primarily through conflict prevention and resolution, crisis management, as well as post-conflict rehabilitation and peacebuilding. In terms of “people”, the Helsinki Final Act was not only centered on interstate relations but also on people. This is evident through the OSCE’s “human dimension” and in its efforts to focus on the lives of people affected by conflict. For example, OSCE field operations often implement confidence-building measures designed to help the lives of people affected by violent conflict. In eastern Ukraine, for example, between 2014 and 2021, the OSCE’s Special Monitoring Mission regularly brokered so-called “windows of silence” to facilitate the repair of critical civilian infrastructure such as water, electricity, and gas distribution systems disrupted by the fighting. “Prosperity” is strongly linked to the OSCE’s Second Dimension of security that seeks to enhance good governance and fight corruption. In relation to the “planet”, the OSCE helps states address environmental challenges that are threatening livelihoods and affecting security worldwide. The last major high-level OSCE decision taken by consensus—at the Ministerial meeting in Stockholm in December 2021—was on strengthening co-operation to address the challenges of climate change. Moving forward, this could be a rare island of co-operation on which participating States may be able to find some common ground on which to work together. If the OSCE could develop more capacity in this field, it could help participating States reduce the impact of climate change on security and contribute to global efforts to strengthen capacity and knowledge-sharing, for example, through regional hubs on climate, peace, and security, as recommended in the New Agenda for Peace.¹⁷ Finally, “partnerships” is covered by the OSCE’s work with the UN and many other

¹⁷ A New Agenda for Peace, July 2023, p. 21

partner organizations—like the European Union and the Council of Europe—to forge effective responses to traditional and emerging challenges.

As a regional organization supporting its participating States in the implementation of the SDGs, the OSCE has been contributing to the annual UNECE Regional Fora on Sustainable Development in Geneva and to the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) that meets in New York each year to review the implementation of the SDGs.

Regular OSCE meetings have also discussed various aspects of the SDGs. The Economic and Environmental Committee on 12 June 2019 held a thematic meeting on “promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development” that featured a high-level official of the UN Secretariat’s Department of Economic and Social Affairs that supports the HLPF process. The OSCE’s role in supporting the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the primacy to SDG 16 was also discussed and supported at a Security Days event in Vienna on 4 June 2019. The event generated a number of recommendations, particularly highlighting the OSCE’s role as a catalyst supporting the work of its participating States in “assessing and addressing the repercussions of climate change on security” and as a facilitator and platform to bridge global and national implementation to enhance regional co-operation in the implementation of the SDGs.¹⁸

4.1. The OSCE and SDG 16

While the OSCE’s activities are directly or indirectly linked to all 17 SDGs, as a security organization, practically all of its work is of immediate relevance to SDG 16. With this close link between SDG 16 (today better addressed as SDG 16+ because it is considered an enabler or catalyst for the successful implementation of all the other goals) and its core activities, notably prevention,¹⁹ SDG 16 goes to the heart of the OSCE’s *raison d’être*. All the different parts of the OSCE—field operations, institutions, and the programmatic departments at the Secretariat—contribute through their activities to the implementation of SDG 16 in a complementary manner. This is done, for instance, by the promotion of peaceful, inclusive, and resilient

¹⁸ Summary Report: The OSCE and the Sustainable Development Goals, Vienna, 4 June 2019.

¹⁹ It has to be borne in mind while the SDG 16+ concept is not an UN-sanctioned label, it does support the argument of the universality of SDG 16. Indeed, from the OSCE’s perspective, SDG 16+ overlooks at least two other SDGs, which are closely linked to security, namely SDG 6 on clean water and sanitation, and SDG 13 on climate action. Hence, for the OSCE, there are at least nine (instead of seven) other SDGs which are directly linked to security.

societies; equal access to justice for all; and building effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels.

Broadly speaking, the OSCE promotes prevention at the following three levels:

1. Operational prevention (e.g., through early warning and early action, confidence-building, preventive diplomacy, or dialogue facilitation and mediation);
2. Structural prevention (e.g., rule of law and good governance support, tackling organized crime and corruption, and promoting political inclusion);
3. Systemic prevention (e.g., promoting normative frameworks, dialogue, and partnerships).

To illustrate this more concretely, the OSCE’s role in helping participating States reach specific targets under Goal 16 will be highlighted. The list is illustrative, not comprehensive.

4.2. Significantly Reduce All Forms of Violence and Related Death Rates Everywhere

Target 16.1 calls for significantly reducing all forms of violence and the related death rates everywhere. To this end, the OSCE works across the “conflict cycle” to prevent conflicts from arising, to engage in crisis management when needed, and to facilitate lasting political settlements of existing conflicts. It also promotes post-conflict rehabilitation and long-term peacebuilding. OSCE participating States engage in regular political negotiations on security issues. They develop and implement confidence-building measures, mandate OSCE involvement in mediation processes, and establish field operations with mandates involving specific conflict cycle-related tasks. In times of growing political or socio-economic tensions, the OSCE’s field operations can take on an important role in efforts to promote dialogue and defuse tensions.

The work of field operations is supported by the Conflict Prevention Centre, established by the 1990 Charter of Paris.²⁰ It facilitates political dialogue among participating States in the first dimension, assisting with the implementation of confidence- and security-building measures, providing advice on and the analysis of matters related to the conflict cycle, as well as by supporting negotiation, mediation, and dialogue facilitation efforts and processes to prevent and resolve crises and conflicts.

²⁰ Charter of Paris for a New Europe, 1990.

The OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities is a unique instrument of conflict prevention. This work is based on the understanding that tensions between different communities, as well as between states, are often based on struggles over identity issues. Divisions and the further escalation of tensions are often triggered by the politicization of issues such as the use of language, education, and other matters closely linked to identity. The High Commissioner is an important prevention tool of the OSCE for this type of conflict, supporting the implementation of policies for the integration of diverse and multi-ethnic societies with sustainable integration and resilience to conflict.

The problem with such quiet preventive diplomacy is that it is hard to measure success, but critics are quick to lay blame. For example, it is possible—but hard to prove—that the OSCE has helped to prevent certain inter-ethnic tensions from boiling over into violent conflicts. But when fighting does break out in the OSCE area, for example, between Armenia and Azerbaijan or between Russia and Ukraine, the OSCE is considered a failure. One lesson learned is the need for “frozen” or protracted conflicts not to be forgotten simply because there are low levels of violence. Mediators need to stay the course, and leaders need to invest political capital at an early stage in a sustained way in order to reduce the risks of tensions erupting into violence. The costs of prevention are considerably lower than the costs of rebuilding lives, infrastructure, communities, and trust after a conflict.

Another concrete example of the OSCE’s role in supporting the implementation of target 16.1 is its work on small arms and light weapons (SALW), which are recognized as a major cause of death and of human rights abuses. Reflecting the OSCE’s concept of comprehensive security and working in co-operation with other international fora, OSCE participating States have developed norms, principles, and measures covering all aspects of SALW control. For example, in the 2012 OSCE Document on Small Arms and Light Weapons,²¹ they agreed to regulate the production, transfer, storage, collection, and destruction of such weapons, and to control their exports. Such work is crucial in preventing the spread of weapons into or out of conflict zones, for example, into the hands of insurgents, terrorists, or criminal groups.

²¹ Adopted at the 308th Plenary Meeting of the OSCE Forum for Security Co-operation on 24 November 2000, reissued pursuant to FSC Decision No. 3/12 on the reissuing of the OSCE Document on Small Arms and Light Weapons adopted at the 686th Plenary Meeting of the Forum for Security Co-operation on 20 June 2012.

One of the SDG 16.1 indicators concerns the population feeling safe walking alone around the area they live in. In line with the OSCE's comprehensive view of security, the OSCE focuses on making communities safer, including through "community policing", for example, with many projects in the Western Balkans. Recognizing the responsibility of the police not only to detect crime but also to prevent it, supporting this role contributes to reducing the fear of crime and can improve the quality of life in communities. By establishing police-public partnerships, where the police body, government agencies, and all segments of society are actively co-operating in problem solving, the OSCE aims to achieve a shared commitment to crime prevention among both the police and public.

To address the indicators on violence against young women (both 16.1.3 and 16.2.3), the OSCE led a major survey on the well-being and safety of women, which was implemented in 2018 in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Moldova, and Ukraine.²² One of the main findings was that 70% of women had experienced some form of sexual harassment, stalking, intimate partner violence, or non-partner violence (including sexual violence) since the age of 15. To address this, the OSCE's field operations carry out activities to help prevent and combat gender-based violence, including technical expertise for legislative reform processes; support for victims' access to justice; training for police officers, medical authorities, judges, prosecutors, and lawyers; and assistance for telephone hotlines and women's resource centers that provide legal and psychosocial support to victims.

4.3. End Abuse, Exploitation, Trafficking, and All Forms of Violence Against and Torture of Children

The OSCE has been active in preventing and combatting the trafficking of human beings since the mid-1990s. To help states reach target 16.2, the OSCE works through its field operations, the Office of the Special Representative and Co-ordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings and international partner organizations, to provide specialized training and expert advice to law enforcement agencies (often applying the community policing approach outlined in the section above) and NGOs, whose co-operation is considered to be crucial in combating human trafficking. The approach is victim-oriented and very much focused on children sexually abused on the internet.

²² Report available on <https://www.osce.org/secretariat/413237> (accessed on 10 March 2019).

On the topic of trafficking, the OSCE is also closely working with the UN. It co-chairs, together with UN Women, the Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons (ICAT), which is a policy forum mandated by the UN General Assembly to improve coordination among UN agencies and other relevant international organizations to facilitate a holistic and comprehensive approach to preventing and combating human trafficking.

4.4. Promote the Rule of Law at the National and International Levels and Ensure Equal Access to Justice for All

The rule of law has been a cornerstone of the OSCE since the Helsinki Final Act. Indeed, that document's ten principles provide the basis for peaceful relations between states. History has shown the dire consequences of what happens when those principles are violated.

One of the novelties of the Helsinki Final Act is that respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms (principle VII) is recognized as a guiding principle for security and co-operation within and between states. The OSCE even created an institution with a mandate to promote democratic institutions and human rights—the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR).

To ensure the quality and effectiveness of laws related to the human dimension, ODIHR supports participating States by reviewing their law-making systems and relevant legislation. It supports judicial and legislative reforms to ensure that judiciaries operate free from undue influence and promotes institutional reforms to enable key actors in the criminal justice chain to perform their duties transparently and in compliance with human rights obligations.

Another focus of the ODIHR is to provide civil society with the skills and methodology to observe trials and analyze their findings, which is done, in part, through the yearly Human Dimension Implementation Meetings (HDIM). It also observes more closely the gender aspects of fair trials and processes for the selection, evaluation, and promotion of judges, and it assists participating States in meeting OSCE commitments relating to the independence and accountability of judges. This is a good example of how regional organizations can collect and share good practices and help states put their commitments into action.

4.5. By 2030, Significantly Reduce Illicit Financial and Arms Flows, Strengthen the Recovery and Return of Stolen Assets and Combat All Forms of Organized Crime

Transnational organized crime poses a serious threat to security in the OSCE area. Therefore, there is much work to be done in reducing illicit financial and arms flows and combatting all forms of organized crime.

For example, part of the OSCE's work on Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) includes providing assistance for controlling the cross-border trafficking of SALW; the destruction of surplus SALW and stockpiles of conventional ammunition, physical security and stockpile management; and SALW collection programs.

With regard to the indicator on illicit financial flows, the OSCE supports participating States in anti-money laundering and countering the financing of terrorism, for example, by exchanging information to more effectively identify, trace, and suppress money laundering and the financing of terrorism, to promoting stolen asset recovery initiatives, strengthening international co-operation and financial investigation techniques, conducting national risk assessments, and supporting the implementation of relevant international standards.

The OSCE has done pioneering work in South-Eastern Europe on asset seizure, confiscation, and management, as well as the social re-use of assets.

4.6. Substantially Reduce Corruption and Bribery in All Their Forms

Corruption is a threat in itself, not least to governance and the effective use of public resources, as well as by diverting badly needed resources away from public services into private pockets. To combat this threat, the organization—particularly through the Office of the Coordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities—provides advice on preventing corruption and conflicts of interest, improving national anti-corruption regulatory frameworks and introducing fair and transparent public procurement procedures. The OSCE works closely with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) to promote the ratification and full implementation of the relevant international instruments to combat corruption, in particular, the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) and the Recommendations of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF).

In addition, through its field operations, the OSCE facilitates the exchange of good practices and organizes regional training activities for representatives of governments, the private sector, and civil society.

4.7. Develop Effective, Accountable, and Transparent Institutions at All Levels

Strengthening both the effectiveness and accountability (and with this the legitimacy) of national institutions is a key contribution of the OSCE in conflict prevention and peacebuilding. The ODIHR plays an important role in this regard with its good governance support in security sector institutions by engaging them and their oversight mechanisms, such as National Human Rights Institutions, Ombuds institutions, and civil society organizations. The ODIHR also supports the integration of a gender perspective into security policy making and in the implementation of the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda.

The OSCE's work on Security Sector Governance and Reform further helps states to implement Target 16.6. Profound and systematic reforms in the security sector can ensure that institutions are equipped with sufficient expertise, resources, and tools to carry out their mandate and are capable of responding to the security needs of local populations. Importantly, such reforms should also strive to strengthen transparency, accountability, and corruption prevention efforts, including through independent oversight mechanisms, participation, and consultative processes.

The OSCE has also been involved in trial monitoring, for example, for cases involving serious corruption and organized crime in the Western Balkans.

Many of the OSCE field activities offer cross-dimensional and long-term support for good and democratic governance and effective and accountable institutions, for example, by fostering sound transparency and integrity measures, effective safeguards for judicial independence, and human rights compliance, as well as by introducing e-governance solutions. This is a good example of structural prevention, very much in the spirit of SDG 16.

4.8. Ensure Responsive, Inclusive, Participatory, and Representative Decision-Making at All Levels

While the OSCE is an inter-state body, since the 1970s its principles and commitments have been an inspiration and rallying point for civil society. In the 1970s, civil society organizations in communist countries cited the commitments made in the Helsinki Final Act to hold their autocratic leaders accountable to the promises that they had made to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms. This also continued in the process of post-communist transition.

Through the work of its institutions and field activities, the OSCE works to promote responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making at all levels. This includes underscoring the importance of involving women and youth in decision-making, as well as specific recommendations on the Effective Participation of National Minorities in Public Life, also known as the Lund Recommendations.²³

The Helsinki Document of 1992²⁴ called for increased openness in OSCE activities and for expanding the role of NGOs. In particular, in paragraph 15 of Chapter IV, the participating States agreed to facilitate informal discussions between representatives of governments and NGOs during OSCE meetings. Unfortunately, the space for civil society in the OSCE—like elsewhere—is shrinking. There have been crackdowns on NGOs in OSCE states (including through the use of digital tools, lawfare, and threats), and it is being made increasingly difficult for some NGOs to take part in some OSCE meetings, such as the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting. Such backsliding is dangerous in itself, but it also hampers the ability of civil society to assist in the implementation of the SDGs.

4.9. Ensure Public Access to Information and Protect Fundamental Freedoms, in Accordance with National Legislation and International Agreements

Although the support to this target may be hard to measure and quantify, the work of the OSCE on human rights and the safety of journalists clearly contributes to reaching this target. The ODIHR, working closely with OSCE field operations, provides participating States with advice and assistance, and it supports individuals and civil society with targeted training and education. It covers a broad spectrum of issues, ranging from the fundamental freedoms of religion or belief, movement, assembly, and association to reporting on the use of the death penalty, monitoring trials, and preventing torture and other forms of ill-treatment.

In addition, the Representative on Freedom of the Media has an early warning function and provides rapid response to serious non-compliance with OSCE commitments on free media and the freedom of expression. The Representative monitors the safety of journalists, particularly in cases of physical attacks, incarceration, and harassment, and responds quickly and directly with the state in question through diplomatic channels and public statements.

²³ The Lund Recommendations on the Effective Participation of National Minorities in Public Life, OSCE. 1 September 1999.

²⁴ CSCE Helsinki Document, 1992.

Furthermore, the OSCE has been supporting the implementation of the Aarhus Convention²⁵ since its adoption in 1998 and has supported the establishment of a wide network of Aarhus Centres in 15 countries. These centers raise public awareness on environmental issues, facilitate citizens' access to environmental information, and promote transparency and public participation in decision-making and access to justice in environmental matters. The OSCE continues to support the activities and networking of the Aarhus Centres and strengthens their capacities in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda at local level.

4.10. Strengthen Relevant National Institutions, Including Through International Cooperation, for Building Capacity at All Levels, in Particular in Developing Countries, to Prevent Violence and Combat Terrorism and Crime²⁶

In recent years, as the security environment has evolved, participating States have established mandates for the OSCE to work on security challenges that are “cross-dimensional” and transnational, such as preventing and countering violent extremism and radicalization that leads to terrorism, organized crime, trafficking in human beings, and cyber/ICT security. This work directly relates to target 16.A, which has direct relevance for the OSCE as a regional organization.

The OSCE supports “International efforts against terrorism” led by the UN, “addressing the manifestations of terrorism, as well as the various social, economic, political and other factors, which might engender conditions in which terrorist organizations could engage in recruitment and win support”. It “promotes a co-operative and coordinated approach to countering terrorism at all levels, including co-ordination among national authorities, co-operation among states, co-operation with relevant international and regional organizations and, where appropriate, establishment of public-private partnerships between state authorities, the private sector, civil society and the media”.

An increasingly important part of this work is its efforts to prevent violent extremism and radicalization that lead to terrorism. The OSCE “works with government officials, counter-terrorism practitioners, researchers and civil society to build up strategies, policies and good practices to prevent and counter terrorist radicalization, while upholding human rights and the rule of law”.

²⁵ Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters, adopted on 25 June 1998 in Aarhus.

²⁶ Considering the OSCE’s extensive contribution within this field, one “Means of Implementation” target has been included in this list.

At the Ministerial Council in 2020, under Albania’s Chairmanship, a declaration was agreed by consensus on Strengthening Cooperation in Countering Organized Crime.²⁷ It has been hard to find traction on this issue within the OSCE because of a fundamental lack of trust between Russia and the West as a result of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine. However, the Secretariat and field activities have increased support to participating States, particularly in building capacity to fight cybercrime.

5. Conclusions

With less than five years to go until 2030, there is a growing sense of urgency and pressure on all stakeholders to accelerate the implementation of the SDGs. Regional organizations, such as the OSCE, are playing an increasingly important role in supporting their members in the implementation of the SDGs. With its inclusive membership, geographical reach, comprehensive approach to security, convening power and depth of expertise on multiple security issues, and with its institutions, field operations, and programmatic activities, the OSCE has significant capacity and potential to help implement a number of SDGs, particularly Goal 16. The OSCE’s contribution is undeniably prominent in the case of SDG 16, where it plays an important role with its strong focus on prevention, co-operation, human rights, and transparent, participatory, and inclusive governance. In addition, it preceded many others in actively breaking down silos and recognizing the interrelated nature of security, development, and justice. It has a proven track record on prevention, not least through supporting the development of effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions.

Having the OSCE help its participating States implement the SDGs contributes to global, regional, and national efforts to important these important goals. This helps the UN, it helps member states, and it could also raise the OSCE’s profile as a regional organization. It can also contribute to regional and cross-border co-operation to implement goals that address transboundary threats and challenges such as water management and tackling climate change.

While the implementation of the SDGs is primarily a shared responsibility of all UN Member States, even in the absence of a specific OSCE mandate and recognizing that the organization was created as a security and not a development organization, there are sufficient commitments, including in Ministerial Council decisions, that

²⁷ OSCE MC.DOC/1/20, 4 December 2020.

explicitly link the OSCE to the 2030 Agenda. Furthermore, in most cases, the OSCE's work in implementing the SDGs does not require new mandates or resources, it is more a question of highlighting how existing activities contribute to reaching specific SDGs.

It should be emphasized that at a time of deep polarization within the OSCE, the SDGs provide a common unifying agenda that all OSCE states have endorsed at the highest level. Galvanizing joint action around the implementation of some of the SDGs, such as Goal 16, could provide a rare entry point for co-operation among OSCE states in the current difficult political environment which is hampering the organization's work.

In short, while the OSCE is a security rather than a development organization, its comprehensive approach to security and practical efforts to help states in ways that also relate to the implementation of the SDGs make the organization a useful service provider, transborder facilitator, and clearing house of good practices. It should use these advantages to continue supporting structural prevention (particularly through national infrastructures for peace), tackling all forms of violence, and preventing conflicts. The OSCE should also consider how it could explore one of the recommendations of the New Agenda for Peace, namely, developing prevention strategies with cross-regional dimensions to address transboundary threats. While this could be difficult at the pan-OSCE level because of deep divisions between Russia and the West, it could be attempted in sub-regions such as the Western Balkans, South Caucasus, or Central Asia. Pursuant to its new mandate (from 2021) on climate change and security, it could also develop regional co-operation and technical advice on climate, peace, and security, including disaster risk reduction. Dealing with more extreme weather events is something that all OSCE states have a shared interest in working together for.

In conclusion, helping states reach the SDGs is very much at the core of the OSCE's approach to security. The OSCE has positively contributed to helping its members, and its work in this area strengthens its profile as a regional arrangement of the UN. The SDGs provide a relatively uncontroversial and commonly agreed shared set of goals that can provide a forward-looking agenda for the organization as it struggles to foster co-operation at a time of deep divisions in its region.

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