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Opinion Piece

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South Africa's G20 and the Sustainable Development Goal 16



G20

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Introduction

South Africa's historic G20 presidency in 2025 provides a unique opportunity to prioritise African perspectives on sustainable development, notably Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16.¹ This paper builds on prior Civil 20 (C20) engagements from Global South presidencies and African regional organisations to make concrete submissions that aim to grow civic space, address corruption, and improve access to justice throughout the continent. The C20 Brazil brief identified three key pillars — civic space, access to justice, and anti-corruption — as crucial for achieving SDG 16 worldwide. SDG 16 aims to *"promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable institutions at all levels"*.² The 2025 G20 presidency strategically positions South Africa to incorporate African experiences and ambitions into the G20 agenda, ensuring that global governance developments are responsive to the continent's demands.

Executive Summary

As the first African nation to lead the G20, South Africa's presidency in 2025 marks a watershed moment in addressing governance concerns through the lens of the continent's distinct experiences and innovations.³ This paper presents an African perspective on SDG 16, emphasising the continent's long-standing leadership in governance frameworks – notably the Accelerated Industrial Development for Africa, the African Mining Vision, and the Science, Technology and Innovation Strategy for Africa – while acknowledging ongoing concerns.⁴ Building on South Africa's presidential themes of *"Solidarity, Equality, and Sustainability"*, this paper provides concrete proposals for the G20 to safeguard civic space, combat corruption, and improve access to justice. These ideas are based on earlier C20 interactions and African regional frameworks, emphasising the crucial link between greater civic space and meeting the larger sustainable development goal. This paper calls for transformational methods that acknowledge Africa's contribution to global governance innovation while addressing the continent's unique institutional difficulties and potential.

South Africa's G20 leadership represents a historic moment. This rare opportunity elevates Africa to the centre of discussions on global governance and demonstrates the continent's growing importance in influencing the international development agenda. The

¹ Foundations 20. 2025. *South African G20 Presidency 2025*. Available at: <https://foundations-20.org/home/g20-presidency/south-african-g20-presidency-2025/> [25 April 2025].

² United Nations: Department of Economic and Social Affairs. 2025. *The 17 Goals | Sustainable Development*. Available at: <https://sdgs.un.org/goals> [25 April 2025].

³ Laberge, M. 2019. *Is Africa Measuring Up to Its Goal 16 Commitments? The Road to HLPF 2019 and Beyond*. March. United Nations Development Programme & South African Institute of International Affairs. Available: https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/oslo_governance_centre/SAIIA-UNDP-SDG-16-Africa-Report.pdf [25 April 2025].

⁴ African Union. n.d. *Continental Frameworks*. Available at: <https://au.int/en/agenda2063/continental-frameworks> [25 April 2025].

South African presidency should re-imagine and grow the African perspective on a global platform. It represents the collective goals of a continent that has previously been under-represented in global governance forums.

Context

SDG 16 is both a standalone target and an important facilitator for reaching all other sustainable development goals in Africa. Many African leaders recognise that *"it takes strong institutions to raise a nation"*, and that successful governance underlies everything from healthcare and education to equitable employment opportunities and community safety.⁵ This viewpoint is consistent with traditional African wisdom on community governance and modern development thinking, which places institutions at the heart of sustainable growth. For Africa, extending civic space, eliminating corruption, and improving access to justice are not only technical goals but also necessary for correcting past injustices and realising the continent's enormous potential.

Building on the suggestions of the C20 of previous Global South presidencies (Indonesia, India, and Brazil), South Africa's G20 presidency should prioritise real measures to reverse declining civic space trends. The following are key areas where South Africa's G20 may work to promote development for the Global South.

Civic Space

- Form a G20 working group on civic space protection with significant civil society involvement and a mandate to create standardised monitoring methods for civic spaces across all G20 member states.
- Create G20 standards for the fair use of digital technology that encourage rather than limit civic involvement (internet shutdowns), address rising digital surveillance issues, and promote creative digital engagement strategies.
- Launch a "G20-Africa cooperation initiative" to support civil society organisations on the continent through targeted capacity-building and Global South knowledge-exchange, and create a dedicated finance mechanism that limits reliance or dependency on foreign resources.
- Encourage all G20 members to issue standing invitations to entities such as the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association, demonstrating their commitment to the international responsibility for civic space protection.

⁵ Laberge, M. 2019. *Is Africa Measuring Up to Its Goal 16 Commitments? The Road to HLPF 2019 and Beyond*. March. United Nations Development Programme & South African Institute of International Affairs. Available: https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/oslo_governance_centre/SAIIA-UNDP-SDG-16-Africa-Report.pdf [25 April 2025].

Access to Justice

- Create a G20 Justice Innovation Fund to encourage sustainable access to justice solutions established in African contexts, such as paralegal programs and alternative dispute resolution procedures.
- Create G20 principles for recognising and strengthening complementary justice systems, including the importance of traditional, religious, and community-based justice mechanisms throughout Africa (Lugono, Ubuntu, and Baraza), while adhering to international human rights standards.
- Establish a G20 commitment to legal empowerment by increasing funding for civil society-led legal awareness campaigns, particularly those aimed at women, youth, and marginalised communities.
- Launch a specific G20 project on justice needs measuring, drawing on African experiences; with justice surveys to provide standardised methodologies for identifying and addressing priority justice needs in various circumstances.

Anti-Corruption

- Create a G20 Asset Recovery Initiative to expedite the return of stolen assets to African countries by reducing legal barriers, simplifying procedures, and ensuring the transparent management of recovered assets.
- Enforce mandatory beneficial ownership transparency regulations among G20 nations to counteract anonymous shell companies that facilitate illicit financial flows in Africa.
- Establish universal G20 whistle-blower protection guidelines that involve security measures against corruption in high-risk sectors such as infrastructure development, public procurement, and the mining industry.
- Enforce country-by-country and project-by-project reporting requirements for multinational corporations, committing G20 nations to greater transparency in the mining sector. This will address a major vulnerability to corruption in many African economies.

Conclusion

The successful implementation of these proposals requires a strong institutional architecture within the G20 framework. South Africa should form a dedicated SDG 16 Implementation Task Force comprising G20 members, relevant international organisations, African regional organisations, and civil society. The task force should collaborate closely with existing G20 working groups, notably the Anti-Corruption Working

Group, to maintain consistency and prevent duplication. In addition, an Advisory Panel of governance specialists from various African settings should be formed to give specialised advice on implementation difficulties and possibilities. Given the compilation of the G20, each continent establishing similar arrangements in governance will ensure a holistic G20 impact.

South Africa's G20 presidency presents a significant opportunity for African leadership in global politics. By prioritising SDG 16 on its presidential agenda, South Africa can take advantage of this chance to address and find solutions to governance concerns that have long challenged sustainable development across the continent. The proposals in this paper provide realistic steps for conserving civic space, overcoming corruption, and improving access to justice. By advocating these proposals, South Africa can guarantee that its G20 presidency leaves a lasting legacy of more civic involvement, decreased corruption, and improved justice systems throughout Africa and the G20 community. This would be a fitting culmination of Africa's pivotal contributions to the development of SDG 16 and a clear sign of the continent's continued leadership in sustainable development and governance innovation.