



Statement by H.E. Bob Rae (Canada)

President of the Economic and Social Council

SDG 16 Conference: Advancing Peace, Justice, and Institutions for
Sustainable Development

12 May 2025

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, my dear friend Maurizio.

President of the General Assembly,

My colleague, Li Junhua, from UN DESA,

Madame Beagle, who is with us from Rome, the Director-General of
IDLO,

Those who have joined us online, thank you all very much.

It's good to be with everyone at a day of some considerable
importance in the life of the world and in the life of our beloved
United Nations.

I want to start by joining everyone in thanking our Italian friends for
not just moderating this discussion but for playing such an important
leadership role in stressing the critical importance of Sustainable
Development Goal 16.



I really think it's important that we fully appreciate the significance of the rule of law, the significance of creating strong institutions, and as an inheritor of Roman institutions, you will know the importance of both these things.

I remember from my experiences as a young student of juris prudence learning of Roman law. I'm sure that other lawyers have done the same. And also, fully appreciating on all of our visits to Rome, the enduring value of the institutional structures which we associate with that great city.

This is a very critical platform for us how investing in SDG 16 on peace, justice, and strong institutions delivers measurable dividends for governments and as well as for all of us as people.

This is no ordinary moment in which we are having these meetings. We have to remember that as we're having these meetings, conflict continues to rage across every continent; there is no continent right now that is free of violence and free of conflict. These conflicts continue to tear families, communities, and whole societies apart. We know that discrimination and lack of access to justice continue to erode trust in public institutions. We know that broader governance systems are under immense stress from challenges from all over, including our own system. And we know that in many, many countries, social contracts are under severe strain.



We shouldn't have to remind ourselves but let us say that we are also in the middle of an international trade war and trade crisis – and there's no other way to describe it – that is taking place outside all of the boundaries of existing trade agreements and trade treaties. We have signed treaties. We have made agreements. And these agreements are being breached and thrown apart by those who think they have the power to make unilateral decisions, which leave the rest of us in the lurch, unable to make decisions about our economic and social future in confidence because some of the most powerful countries in the world have chosen to ignore completely and entirely the international rule of law.

And we know that when this happens, something very concrete and practical happens, and that is, that development comes to a halt.

I would remind you all of the words of the great English philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, who was writing in the middle of the English Civil War when the entire structure of England seemed to fall apart in the 17th century. And he reminded us that without the rule of a sovereign and the rule of law, life becomes nasty, it becomes brutal, and it becomes short. And here we are, several hundred years later, experiencing exactly the same thing. What Hobbes described as "the war of all against all" is to a considerable extent the chaos which has taken over in many, many parts of the world.

Needless to say, it is our obligation to first of all describe this reality. Without fear, without fear of somebody saying "well, you can't say



that.” I just did say it. And I’ll say it again: we are living in a world where chaos has been created by people who should know better and governments who should know better.

We know, as the great English conservative, Edmond Burke, said “there is nothing more dangerous than governing in the name of a theory. You destroy institutional structures and confidence at your peril.”

And we’re experiencing that peril today. So we have to stop this trend in its tracks, and we have to recommit to move forward. At the UN, we are left with nothing better than to simply say we have to stop what is happening from happening and we have to start again on a basis of trust and on a basis of confidence and on a basis of respect for our institutions that we have created.

The reason we have SDG 16 is because it provides the foundation for supporting human rights, promoting resilient societies, and restoring trust between people and their institutions. We need a reinvigorated commitment to invest in inclusive institutions that deliver for all people, especially those who have been uprooted, who have been marginalized, or left behind.

There are over 130 million people today in the world who are displaced either internally or are wandering the world as refugees.



This crisis of displacement is bigger than at any time since 1945. And it is not getting better; it is getting worse.

So, here we are, this institution, this frail challenged institution that has to be at a moment of recommitment to these goals and principles. At a time when the multilateral system's capacity to deliver is being actively undermined and deliberately undermined, we need a new renewed United Nations – one that streamlines operations, embraces digital transformation, and enhances transparency – but does not abandon its history and does not pretend its structure is not there. We know that this is all going to be crucial to remaining effective, efficient, and responsive to the people who have sent us here.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We cannot pursue our efforts in silos. Advancing peace, justice, and effective institutions must be central to every policy choice that we make—from climate action to social protection, from gender equality to digital governance.

I hope we will all see this discussion today as more than just a technical exchange. Sometimes we feel tied to our notes. We are lashed to the structures that we've created so our dialogues become too formal and are not sufficiently engaged to address the crisis that we face. This meeting is a chance, to agree and to disagree. Nothing is more important in the creation of laws than to argue about what they



should be and how they should function. But it is important for us to know that the goal we call SDG 16, which is all about justice and institutions, is also the way in which we need to conduct our meetings ourselves and to understand that above all lies dialogue, conversation, engagement, real discussion.

I wish you a productive and impactful conference.

Thank you very much.