



Global Implications of the Gen Z protest (SDG 16)

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the rise of Gen Z-led protests in Nepal as a part of broader trend of youth mobilization across South and Southeast Asia. It examines how these protests connect to Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16), which focuses on peace, justice, and strong institutions. The paper places Nepal's 2025 digital-era uprising, triggered by state censorship and corruption scandals, in the context of similar movements in Bangladesh, Indonesia, and the Philippines. This comparison highlights shared regional issues of accountability, inclusivity, and transparency. Using comparative literature and recent case evidence, the study illustrates how digitally connected youth activism is turning SDG 16 from a policy framework into a real political demand.

The paper delves deeply into the institutional responses prompted by the leaderless and digitally synchronized protests occurring in Nepal and throughout the broader region. It reveals that state institutions have exhibited a fluctuating approach, swinging between oppressive measures, extensive surveillance, and targeted digital crackdowns, contrasted with attempts at reform, dialogue, and strategies for co-optation. This dichotomy reveals a complex tension: on one hand, authorities strive to maintain political control in the face of societal unrest, while on the other hand, they grapple with genuine demands for accountability and reform from the populace.

Furthermore, the study meticulously examines how these varying governmental reactions influence public trust in institutions, the perceived legitimacy of democratic governance, and the overall long-term outlook for inclusive political processes. By placing the Nepal 2025 uprising within this wider comparative context, the analysis emphasizes a pressing question: do the adaptations made by these institutions ultimately foster stronger mechanisms for accountability, or do they simply entrench existing authoritarian practices?

Ultimately, the paper posits that the mobilization of Generation Z transcends mere temporary dissatisfaction; it represents a profound political force driving change. This demographic is urging governments to move beyond mere rhetoric and actively implement the principles enshrined in Sustainable Development Goal 16 encompassing ideals of peace, justice, and the establishment of robust institutions transforming these principles into tangible realities that improve everyday life and governance.



INTRODUCTION

Framing the Problem: SDG 16 and Youth Protests

Sustainable Development Goal 16, one among 17 other SDGs, was adopted in 2015 as a part of UN's 2030 Agenda and Goals. It stood for peace, justice and advocated for strong institutions under the foundations of sustainable development.

SDG 16 is fundamentally different from other SDGs which focus on sectoral goals such as health, education or infrastructure.

SDG 16 is structural in nature as it calls for reducing corruption, ensuring transparency and fair representation, and other themes under SDG 16. And now we see SDG 16 at the forefront especially in the global South with more instances of corruption, democratic backsliding, thus forming a framework for demand for change.

Amongst this, Generation Z also referred to Gen Z in popular media (born in mid 1990s to early 2010s) has emerged as an important/decisive factor. A generation which is highly fluent in digital media and known for their distrust of political elites and especially for their trust for justice and inclusivity. Gen Z has been in the news in recent days, especially in Asia, be it the Trillion Peso March organized in the Philippines against corruption in flood related infrastructure or the Bangladesh protests in 2024 against unjust quota reservations. Protests are. It was also seen in Nepal, Sri Lanka and Indonesia. While the media might portray that the only thing that is common in these protests is the age group, it is important to note that all of these protests strive for and embody the spirit of SDG 16. The themes and their co-relation to these protests will be discussed further in the paper.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND CONTRIBUTION

This paper extends this literature by considering four cases in South and Southeast Asia – the Philippines, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Nepal – where Gen Z protests in 2024–2025 collide head on with the normative aspirations of SDG 16. It asks:

1. How do Gen Z protests articulate demands for accountability, inclusivity, and transparency as outlined in SDG 16?
2. What role does digital mobilization play in shaping the scale, character, and impact of these protests?
3. How do states respond to these protests and influence long-term progress toward peace, justice, and strong institutions?

By grounding the analysis of contemporary youth movements in relation to SDG 16, the study contributes to three bodies of the scholarship:

1. youth and digital activism
 2. governance and anti-corruption studies,
 3. the politics of sustainable development.
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THEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

1) Historical Context

Youth mobilization over the past decade has developed within a broader history of high-visibility protest cycles, including the Arab Spring (2010–2011), the global “Fridays for Future” climate strikes (2018–2019), and the worldwide racial justice protests following George Floyd’s murder in 2020. These movements established organizational templates showing how digitally connected youth can articulate grievances, coordinate action, and challenge political authority.

Protests in 2024–2025 reflect both continuity and change. Led by digitally fluent cohorts born in the late 1990s and early 2000s, they rely heavily on platforms such as TikTok, Discord, and Telegram, which lower coordination costs and enable rapid, loosely networked mobilization. Their grievances span corruption, inequality, public service failures, environmental degradation, and digital censorship. In several cases, such protests have coincided with political crises and episodes of institutional disruption or reform, suggesting a significant—though complex—relationship between youth mobilization and institutional change.

Analytically, these developments align with social movement theory, particularly political opportunity structures, digital repertoires of contention, and leaderless networked organization. They also intersect closely with SDG 16, positioning youth protests as both indicators of accountability deficits and civic efforts to reshape institutions. While outcomes vary, such movements have the potential to influence access to justice and inclusive participation in governance.

2) Summary of Key Studies and Literature

Recent empirical and policy literature highlights several key insights into contemporary youth-led protests. Digital platforms accelerate mobilization and reduce organizational barriers, while simultaneously introducing vulnerabilities such as misinformation, expanded surveillance, and algorithmic moderation, aligning with theories of digital repertoires of contention.

Research on leaderless and networked movements emphasizes decentralized, horizontal organization, which enhances flexibility and resilience but complicates long-term coordination and post-protest institutional engagement. This reflects scholarship on networked social movements and organizational minimalism. Studies on narratives and moral authority show that youth activists use storytelling, visual media, and meme culture to claim legitimacy and build transnational solidarity, situating local grievances within broader frames of climate justice, inequality, and anti-corruption.

Surveys on Gen Z attitudes toward democracy reveal ambivalence: strong support for democratic ideals alongside skepticism toward institutional performance. This tension shapes whether protests contribute to institutional reform or erosion under SDG 16.

Finally, policy and development literature situates youth protests within a wider “polycrisis” of climate, economic, and governance challenges, advocating inclusive and responsive institutions as essential for addressing unrest and advancing SDG 16.



3) Identified Gaps in Current Research

Despite expanding scholarship, several gaps remain:

- **Limited Comparative and Longitudinal Analysis:** Systematic studies tracing protest lifecycles—from emergence to outcomes—across regime types remain scarce. Current evidence is insufficient to determine whether Gen-Z protests more commonly yield durable reforms, short-term concessions, or heightened repression. Much existing work remains cross-sectional or single-case focused.
- **Geographical and Language Bias:** Research output is disproportionately concentrated in the Global North, with comparatively fewer peer-reviewed studies on Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. This unevenness constrains the generalizability of existing conclusions and obscures regional specificities.
- **Overreliance on Social Media Traces:** Many studies depend heavily on Twitter, TikTok, or similar data without parallel fieldwork or qualitative validation. This reliance risks underestimating offline organizing, missing outcomes experienced by participants, and overlooking the effects of censorship and digital exclusion.
- **Underdeveloped Analysis of State Repression:** There is limited systematic examination of repression dynamics, legal responses, and institutional strategies for protest management. Closer attention to these processes is essential for understanding how youth mobilization interacts with institutional integrity and the realization of SDG 16.

METHODOLOGY AND CASE SELECTION

This study adopts a qualitative comparative case-study approach. Four cases—Nepal, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and the Philippines were selected based on three criteria:

- High youth participation in protests (2024–2025),
- Explicit links to SDG 16 themes (corruption, accountability, digital rights, inclusion),
- Divergent state responses, enabling comparative analysis.

Data sources include secondary materials such as international news reports, NGO and human-rights documentation, policy briefs, and academic literature. While the study does not rely on original fieldwork, triangulation across multiple sources was used to reduce bias. A limitation of this approach is reliance on publicly available data, which may underrepresent offline organizing and internal state deliberations.



SDG 16 AND GEN Z PROTESTS: YOUTH DEMANDS FOR ACCOUNTABLE AND INCLUSIVE INSTITUTIONS

Introduction to SDG 16

Sustainable Development Goal 16 is part of the Seventeen Development Goals adopted under the United Nations 2030 Agenda in 2015. It is officially stated as the goal to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels. This goal addresses structural issues of governance, institutional quality, and justice.

Under which there are 10 targets and 2 sub targets, which are as follows:

- Target 16.1 Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere
- Target 16.2 End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children
- Target 16.3 Promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all
- Target 16.4 By 2030, significantly reduce illicit financial and arms flows, strengthen the recovery and return of stolen assets and combat all forms of organized crime
- Target 16.5: Substantially reduce corruption and bribery in all their forms
- Target 16.6: Develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels
- Target 16.7 Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels
- Target 16.8 Broaden and strengthen the participation of developing countries in the institutions of global governance
- Target 16.9 By 2030, provide legal identity for all, including birth registration
- Target 16.10: Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements
- Target 16. a 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 crime
- Target 16.b Promote and enforce non-discriminatory laws and policies for sustainable development.

Many of these themes have become central to contemporary youth protests, often described as Gen Z mobilization. These protests are marked by high participation of young people and by the strategic use of digital technology and social media for organisation and communication. This paper focuses on movements in South Asia and South East Asia with case studies from the Philippines, Indonesia, Nepal, and Bangladesh. The following subsections describe these cases, followed by an analytical interpretation that links them to SDG 16.



Philippines

The Philippines has a long tradition of civic activism. However, democratic institutions have repeatedly faced stress due to corruption, weak implementation of laws, and populist political practices.

In September 2025 large scale protests emerged in response to widespread flooding and alleged irregularities in flood control projects. Investigations suggested that development work had often been incomplete or of poor quality, contributing to severe losses. Youth participants, particularly from Gen Z, were highly visible in online advocacy and coordination through social media. The protests were referred to as “Baha sa Luneta: Aksyon na Laban sa Korapsyon” and were concentrated primarily in Manila.

Bulacan province experienced the most severe impact. A senate inquiry indicated that a substantial proportion of funds had allegedly been lost through bribery involving officials. Failures of dykes and retaining walls intensified flooding in urban and semi urban areas. A viral social media campaign that highlighted the lavish lifestyles of political families further shaped public opinion. These posts questioned the legitimacy of sudden wealth accumulation and transformed the protests into a broader anti corruption movement.

Analytical link to SDG 16

The case of the Philippines indicates connections with several components of SDG 16.

- First, the central grievance concerned corruption and misuse of public funds which relates to Target 16.5 on substantially reducing corruption and bribery.
- Second, demands for independent oversight and transparent expenditure link to Target 16.6 on developing effective, accountable, and transparent institutions.
- Third, online campaigns that exposed hidden information strengthened public access to knowledge which relates to Target 16.10 on access to information and protection of fundamental freedoms.

The Philippines case illustrates how environmental vulnerability and weak public infrastructure can interact with governance concerns. Youth mobilization in this context reflects digital accountability practices and civic pressure for transparency. At the same time, it raises questions regarding emerging trends of digital regulation and censorship which is taken up in the Nepal case.

Indonesia

Indonesia also witnessed major youth led protests over perceived corruption, inequality, and rising costs of living. A particular trigger was public disclosure regarding high benefits and privileges enjoyed by lawmakers which relied on taxpayer resources. In a period of high inflation, these revelations were widely perceived as unjust.

Protests began in Jakarta and rapidly spread across the country. Students played a central role in organizing marches toward parliament. Cultural symbols became important in this movement. One of the most visible was the pirate flag from the anime One Piece which protesters interpreted as representing resistance against an elitist and unaccountable governing structure. Worker unions later joined the mobilization and voiced concerns about corruption in the Ministry of Manpower.



The Indonesian protests can be related to SDG 16 in several ways.

- Target 16.5 is relevant because activists demanded action against corruption across multiple institutions.
- Target 16.6 is reflected in calls for transparency and accountability within key ministries, including those connected with labor regulation.
- Target 16.7 is relevant in the engagement of youth and student groups in public dialogue, including interactions with national leadership that indicated greater participation in decision making.

The Indonesian protests suggest how youth mobilization can reinforce claims for accountability, participation, and transparency that are central to SDG 16. Digital activism facilitated rapid coordination and created shared symbols of resistance. However, strong state responses, restrictions on protest symbols, and incidents of violence also revealed risks of repression. These developments indicate that progress toward SDG 16 can occur alongside practices that undermine peaceful and inclusive political processes.

Bangladesh

Bangladesh experienced major student unrest in 2024 following the reinstatement by the High Court of a government job quota that reserved 30 percent of positions for descendants of freedom fighters from 1971. Many students perceived this as nepotistic and contrary to principles of merit based recruitment in an already difficult employment context.

The movement began in Dhaka and Chittagong universities and soon spread nationwide. Protesters organized sit ins, blockades, and significant online campaigns. Violent confrontations occurred between police, pro government groups, and students. Several protesters were killed, many were injured, and arrests were reported. Internet shutdowns added further frustration among youth. The Supreme Court subsequently reduced the quota to five percent, which was seen as a partial success, although demands for justice and deeper reform persisted.

Analytical link to SDG 16

- Target 16.6 is reflected in calls to reform opaque recruitment practices in the public sector.
- Target 16.7 applies because students demanded meaningful participation in policy decisions that shape employment opportunities.
- Target 16.5 is relevant where protesters associated quota policies with patronage networks and clientelism.
- Target 16.3 relates to concerns about rule of law and justice following violent crackdowns.

The Bangladesh case demonstrates how contestation around meritocracy, fairness, and public sector access can mobilize youth. It also indicates how state repression and internet restriction may undermine institutional trust, even when partial policy concessions are achieved.



Nepal

In 2025 Nepal experienced large youth led protests after the government imposed a comprehensive ban on major social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. Authorities presented this as a regulatory measure, while young citizens interpreted it as a restriction on freedom of expression and a means to limit dissent. The ban interacted with wider frustrations related to corruption and elite dominance.

Protests began in Kathmandu and spread to other urban centers such as Pokhara and Biratnagar. Digital culture played a central role. Memes, hashtags, and short videos were used to mobilize participants and signal shared grievances. The movement called for transparency, fairness, and inclusion.

State responses became increasingly coercive. Tear gas, water cannons, rubber bullets, and live ammunition were reported. There were numerous injuries and deaths among protesters. Political resignations followed, including the resignation of the Prime Minister, which suggests that youth mobilization can at times contribute to significant political change.

Analytical link to SDG 16

- Target 16.10 is clearly implicated because the protests originated from restrictions on access to information and freedom of expression.
- Target 16.5 applies to the widespread criticism of nepotism and corruption among political elites.
- Target 16.7 is reflected in demands for youth participation in political decision making.
- Target 16.1 is connected to the use of violence during state responses which challenges the objective of peaceful and inclusive societies.

The Nepal case illustrates how digital censorship, corruption concerns, and limited avenues for participation can quickly galvanize youth movements. The coexistence of political concessions and severe repression reveals deep institutional contradictions. These dynamics demonstrate both the power of Gen Z activism and the continuing challenges for achieving SDG 16.

COMPARITIVE SYNTHESIS

Dimension	Philippines	Indonesia	Bangladesh	Nepal
Trigger	Infrastructure corruption	Elite privilege	Job quotas	Digital censorship
Protest Form	Digital + street	Symbolic + student	Campus-based	Mass digital-street
State Response	Inquiries	Policing + bans	Violent repression	Lethal force
SDG 16 Impact	Accountability demands	Participation debate	Rule of law crisis	Democratic legitimacy



Why Accountability and Inclusivity?

Youth protests across diverse contexts reveal how this generation interprets SDG 16 not merely as a developmental blueprint but as an immediate lived demand for accountability and inclusivity.

· Youth as Drivers of Accountability

Gen Z-led protests highlight a growing impatience with traditional governance structures that often fail to uphold transparency and justice. Research shows that young people are more likely than older generations to distrust political elites and to demand institutional accountability (Inglehart & Norris, 2017). Movements such as the #EndSARS protests in Nigeria and global climate strikes illustrate how Gen Z leverages both physical and digital spaces to challenge corruption, state violence, and inaction on existential issues (Amnesty International, 2020; Pickard, 2019). These mobilizations bring SDG 16's call for "effective, accountable, and transparent institutions" into sharp focus.

· Inclusivity as a Non-Negotiable Demand

For Gen Z, the notion of "strong institutions" extends beyond structural efficiency to encompass equity, representation, and inclusivity. Scholars note that young activists are particularly concerned with intersectional justice, advocating for the rights of marginalized groups that include women, LGBTQ+ communities, ethnic minorities, and people with disabilities in political and social decision-making (Taft & Gordon, 2013). This inclusive approach reflects a broader reinterpretation of SDG 16: peace and justice are not achievable unless all voices are recognized and empowered.

· Global Digital Solidarity

Unlike previous youth movements, Gen Z's activism is digitally networked and transnational. Social media platforms have amplified youth voices, enabling a protest in one region to gain traction worldwide (Jenkins et al., 2016). This interconnectedness aligns with SDG 16's emphasis on global cooperation and underscores how youth demands are reshaping accountability and inclusivity from the ground up.

· Reframing SDG 16 Through Gen Z Protests

Ultimately, Gen Z protests demonstrate that SDG 16 is not only a developmental goal but also a political claim being made in streets, schools, and digital forums. Their activism challenges policymakers to rethink "strong institutions" as spaces that are not just efficient but also transparent, inclusive, and just. As such, youth mobilization is both a critique of institutional shortcomings and a living embodiment of SDG 16 in action.

DIGITAL MOBILIZATION AND TRANSNATIONAL TACTICS: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN PROTEST NETWORKS

Digital Mobilization

The youth-led protests in Nepal in 2025 revealed a far more mature grasp of technology as a pillar of political dissent. When authorities attempted to suppress opposition by blocking twenty-six social media applications, young organizers did not retreat. Instead, the ban triggered more adaptive technological responses. Digital activism not only continued — it accelerated.

Online spaces became arenas of civic voice, tactical coordination, and public witnessing of state behavior. The occupation of the digital commons emerged as a practical illustration of SDG 16 (Carnegie Endowment, 2025).



Platform Tactics and Networked Mobilization

Different social platforms were deployed with intentional and differentiated functions, allowing the movement to expand and recalibrate in real time.

Twitter/X served as a rapid-fire communication channel that shaped narratives and coordinated agendas. Hashtags like #HamiNepal, #LetUsSpeak, and #NepoKidsDown fused scattered frustrations into unified messages, drawing journalists and members of the Nepali diaspora into the conversation. Facebook and Instagram were leveraged for extended political storytelling, where visual explainers, infographics, and serialized posts clarified grievances and campaign planning (Cambridge Engage, 2025).

TikTok evolved into a participatory outlet for dissent because of its algorithmic reach and remix culture. Millions interacted with edits exposing corruption, viral protest chants, and satirical meme content, transforming individual outrage into mass-circulating emotional pressure (TIME, 2025).

Meanwhile, platforms such as Discord and Telegram functioned as secure organizational hubs. Encrypted groups disseminated legal resources, medical-aid instructions, and security guidance. These protected communication channels provided operational depth when mainstream networks were censored (Le Monde, 2025).

Hashtags, Viral Narratives, and Livestreaming as Protest Tools

Hashtags operated as identity markers and organizational shorthand. Repeated, emotionally charged phrases such as #HamiNepal invited geographically dispersed groups into a common rhetorical space. Viral clips juxtaposing images of corruption alongside statistics on youth unemployment or scenes of police aggression produced emotionally potent narratives that crossed linguistic and socioeconomic divides (TechPolicy Press, 2025).

Livestreaming on Instagram, Facebook, and occasionally YouTube delivered unfiltered visual testimony to counter the state's official messaging. These real-time broadcasts documented police violence and demonstrated peaceful assembly, thereby challenging propaganda. They also served an instrumental purpose by directing movement participants toward safe routes, giving first-aid guidance, and recording abuses. This visual documentation directly advanced SDG 16.10 by strengthening the public's right to information (Le Monde, 2025).

Digital Literacy and the Tactical Sophistication of Gen Z

Gen Z's command over digital architectures was crucial to counter-censorship. As digital natives comfortable with VPNs, algorithmic behavior, and platform dynamics, activists redirected state restrictions into tactical experimentation — employing proxy networks, mirrored accounts, and QR-based tutorials for bypassing surveillance (Cambridge Engage, 2025).

Participants with existing creative skills — ranging from vloggers to illustrators standardized visual protest material through recurring color palettes, iconography, and typography to reinforce legitimacy. This designed discipline underscored the durability of online-born activism and its capacity to maintain momentum inside hostile information ecosystems (Carnegie Endowment, 2025).

Online Petitions, Forums, and Citizen Journalism

Digital mobilization expanded into formal advocacy mechanisms, including petitions, investigative appeals, and online signature drives demanding resignations and inquiries. Parallel to this, citizen journalism flourished — producing verified recordings, timestamp-matched testimonies, and geolocated documentation. The resulting decentralized verification increased public trust and supplied human-rights organizations with primary evidence (Carnegie Endowment, 2025).

Online forums widened the protest's intellectual horizon. These discussion venues encouraged collaborative authorship of reform proposals, exchanges on constitutional change, and crowd-sourced political interpretation. This participatory ethic reinforces SDG 16.7 by embedding inclusive decision-making norms (Cambridge Engage, 2025).



Transnational Tactics and Global Solidarity

Global Solidarity: A Unified Response

1. International Support and Advocacy

The retaliatory mobilization spearheaded by Nepal's Gen Z captured substantial global attention. Youth organizations, diaspora groups, and international rights-based institutions amplified the protests through digital campaigns, joint petitions, and virtual demonstrations (Eco-Business, 2025). Such cross-border solidarity elevated demands and placed diplomatic pressure on governments and multilateral actors.

2. Similar Youth-led Movements

Gen Z organizers borrowed strategies from other prominent digital protest movements — including the Fridays for Future environmental strikes and the Hong Kong pro-democracy actions (Atlantic Council, 2025). These global precedents offered templates for digital planning, mass turnout, rapid communication, and narrative control — offering a shared tactical lineage among youth movements worldwide.

Role of SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions

1. Promoting Peaceful and Inclusive Societies (Target 16.1)

- Although grounded in non-violence, the protests eventually witnessed escalation and lethal responses — illustrating the state's failure to prevent excessive force, the core concern of SDG 16.1 (OHCHR, 2025; Amnesty International, 2025).
- A movement intended to be civic and peaceful became vulnerable to state brutality, exposing the persistent divergence between formal commitments to SDG 16.1 and actual policing practices (Human Rights Watch, 2025; Reuters, 2025).

2. Providing Access to Justice for All (Target 16.3)

- Demands for transparent investigation, legal accountability, and prosecutorial action aligned precisely with SDG 16.3, which prioritizes rule of law and justice accessibility (Amnesty International, 2025).

When domestic remedies stalled, advocacy from OHCHR, HRW, and other institutions reinforced pressure for impartial investigations — demonstrating how international oversight compensates for weak accountability structures (OHCHR, 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2025).



3. Building Effective, Accountable, and Inclusive Institutions (Target 16.6)

- The protests effectively functioned as institutional stress-tests, exposing deficiencies in governance, operational discipline, and security oversight — all focal areas under SDG 16.6 (Kathmandu Post, 2025; Reuters, 2025).
- Transnational scrutiny from media, rights networks, and diaspora advocates escalated calls for institutional restructuring, a prerequisite for meaningful accountability envisioned in SDG 16.6.

Digital Mobilization and the SDGs

The digital movement positively and negatively affected numerous Sustainable Development Goals.

Positive Impacts:

- Increased Transparency (SDG 16.10): Resources available to citizen journalists helped people counter censorship and provide livestreams and reports to debunk misinformation.
- Accountability (SDG 16.5 & 16.6): Instances of corruption going viral and being livestreamed to the public caused resignations and government misconduct investigations.
- Participation (SDG 16.7): The digital space helped the politically engaged elite to incorporate the politically disengaged youth, previously silenced, into the online and offline discourse.
- Global Outreach: Digital networks internationalized Nepal's protest narrative, aligning local activism with global movements for justice and accountability (Carnegie Endowment, 2025).

Negative Impacts:

- Censorship and Internet Blackouts (SDG 16.10): The government's temporary shutdowns restricted communication and contradicted its transparency commitments.
- Digital Inequality (SDG 10 & SDG 4): Limited internet access in rural areas excluded marginalized communities from full participation.
- Misinformation and Virality Risks: Unverified posts circulated rapidly, and in some cases, damaged credibility and accuracy.
- Surveillance and Privacy Risks: Collection of metadata and observation of activists' online behavior put their lives in danger and exposed them to retaliation from the state (TechPolicy Press, 2025).

Still, Nepal's Gen Z protests demonstrated to the world the attainment of SDG 16's ideals. Digital mobilization can promote the vision of peace, justice, and strong institutions (Cambridge Engage, 2025).

INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES AND GLOBAL LESSONS: LONG-TERM IMPLICATIONS FOR POLITICAL STABILITY AND GOVERNANCE

RQ 1. How institutions respond to leaderless, digitally coordinated youth movements?

Institutions respond to leaderless, digitally coordinated youth movements through a combination of repression/control, co-optation/appeasement, and adaptation/engagement. The decentralized and rapid nature of these movements—often driven by social media and a “logic of connective action”—poses challenges to hierarchical governance structures.

1. Repression and Control

Institutions frequently attempt to suppress mobilization using traditional and digital tools:

- Internet and social media restrictions: shutdowns, bans, and censorship aimed at disrupting coordination, often with counterproductive effects.
- Surveillance and intimidation: digital monitoring to identify activists, even within leaderless movements, alongside online harassment.
- Criminalization and policing: arrests, excessive force, disciplinary action in universities, and deployment of security forces.
- Disinformation and delegitimization: counter-narratives portraying activists as naïve, foreign-influenced, or destabilizing.



2. Co-optation and Appeasement

Institutions may absorb dissent without addressing structural causes:

- Symbolic concessions: short-term or non-substantive gestures that appear responsive but block deeper reform.
- Narrative co-optation: reframing movement demands within institutional agendas while excluding activists.
- Nonprofitization/taming: channeling radical demands into bureaucratic or fundable programs.
- Strategic negotiation: engaging select voices to delay or fragment momentum.

3. Adaptation and Engagement

Less commonly, institutions pursue genuine inclusion:

- Constructive dialogue: formal engagement with youth perspectives.
- Policy integration: translating mobilization into structural reform.
- Digital governance tools: transparency platforms and feedback mechanisms.
- Power-sharing partnerships: shared decision-making authority, though rare and difficult.

Institutions often mix these strategies. While digital movements excel at rapid mobilization and resisting co-optation, they face challenges in sustaining momentum and achieving durable institutional change.

RQ 2. Do Institutional adaptations lead to improved accountability or increased repression?

1. Context: SDG 16 and Gen Z Protests

SDG 16 emphasizes inclusive institutions, accountability, and reduced violence. Gen Z protests—focused on climate justice, anti-corruption, and rights—pressure states to adapt through digital, transnational mobilization.

2. Institutional Adaptations → Improved Accountability

- Legal and policy reforms: police reform, climate commitments, and governance amendments.
- Youth inclusion: youth councils, participatory budgeting, and consultative mechanisms.
- Digital governance: e-transparency tools, grievance portals, and open data.
- Global diffusion: youth influence in international governance frameworks.

3. Institutional Adaptations → Increased Repression

- **Expanded surveillance:** AI-based monitoring and data collection.
- **Restrictive laws:** censorship and anti-protest legislation.
- **Tokenistic co-optation:** symbolic inclusion that undermines genuine participation.
- **Global normalization:** repression framed as “law and order.”

4. The Global Paradox

States often pursue dual strategies—signaling reform while tightening control—simultaneously advancing and undermining SDG 16.

5. Critical Global Implications

- **Democracy vs. authoritarianism:** divergent institutional trajectories.
- **Youth trust:** repression erodes legitimacy and risks radicalization.
- **Global governance pressure:** international scrutiny alongside backlash.
- **Long-term trajectory:** outcomes depend on whether reforms empower or silence youth.

Thesis Statement:

In the context of SDG 16, institutional adaptations to Gen Z protests produce contradictory outcomes, simultaneously advancing accountability and reinforcing repression.



RQ 3. What are the medium and long term implications for political stability and democratic governance?

Medium-Term Implications (5–10 years)

1. Political Stability

- Positive: inclusive reforms and digital engagement can reduce unrest and enhance institutional resilience.
- Negative: repression drives protests underground, increases polarization, and sustains instability.

2. Democratic Governance

- Positive: youth participation strengthens legitimacy and transparency mechanisms.
- Negative: symbolic reforms and restrictive laws generate disillusionment and democratic regression.

Long-Term Implications (10–25 years)

1. Political Stability

- Accountability path: strengthened social contracts and reduced corruption.
- Repression path: postponed instability, authoritarian entrenchment, and potential violent mobilization.

2. Democratic Governance

- Democratic advancement: participatory governance and human-rights adherence.
- Democratic decline: managed democracy, weakened institutions, and hollow checks and balances.

Synthesis / Critical Insight

In the medium term, adaptations may temporarily stabilize or destabilize systems. In the long term, present institutional choices determine whether governance evolves toward democratic inclusion or authoritarian consolidation.

NEPAL 2025

1. Overview

Youth-led protests erupted following social media shutdowns and corruption concerns, spreading nationwide. Violent repression triggered resignations, an interim government, and promises of investigations and elections.

2. Initial Institutional Responses

Emergency powers, internet shutdowns, and policing constrained civic freedoms, while political resignations and reform promises aimed to restore legitimacy. Human-rights groups demanded accountability.

3. Medium-Term Effects (1–5 years)

- Stabilizing path: genuine accountability, digital freedoms, and youth inclusion rebuild trust.
- Repressive path: superficial reforms deepen polarization and risk continued unrest.

4. Long-Term Effects (5–20 years)

- Optimistic: strengthened democratic institutions and youth representation.
- Pessimistic: normalized surveillance, weakened accountability, and controlled democracy.

5. Regional and Global Significance

Nepal's trajectory may shape South Asian governance norms, influencing both repression and accountability models.

MOROCCO 2025

Youth-led protests against healthcare failures, corruption, and spending priorities spread nationwide. The state responded with arrests and policing alongside reform rhetoric. Medium-term outcomes hinge on whether reforms are substantive or repression persists. Long-term paths range from democratic renewal through youth engagement to managed democracy marked by surveillance and restricted civic space.



RQ 4. Whether protest intensity predicts future decline or improvements in governance indicators controlling for economic shock and pre-existing trends?

High-intensity protests often produce immediate political change, including leadership resignations and policy reversals. However, long-term governance improvements are uncertain and mediated by economic shocks, youth unemployment, corruption, and institutional capacity. Protests reflect deeper systemic weaknesses; sustainable reform requires combining mobilization with institutional engagement.

RQ 5 - Heterogeneity by regime type (authoritarian vs democratic), youth unemployment rates, and internet penetration.

Regime type: illiberal practices increasingly appear across both democratic and semi-democratic systems, often through digital repression.

Youth unemployment and internet penetration: high unemployment generates grievance pools, while digital connectivity enables rapid, transnational mobilization and tactical diffusion.

Theoretical Framework	Implications for Gen-Z Protest Movements
Social Movement Theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Political Opportunity Structures: West sees trigger events (banning of social media accounts; grand displays of wealth by the elite like "nepo babies") are potential windows of opportunity for mobilization.• Resource Mobilization: Digital resources have supplanted traditional resources. Protestors have used AI to create content; VPNs to circumvent bans; and rapidly organize through social media without formal organizations.
Digital Activism & Networked Leaderless Movements	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Strengths: The "leaderless" nature inspires resilience, flexibility, and difficulty in decapitation - drawing on the "be water" analogy from Hong Kong.• Weaknesses: A lack of formal structure means little strategy for things to pay off in the long run; movements can be marked by factionalism, and movements are vulnerable to outrage created by algorithms, and visual content rather than maintaining a consistent political vision.



ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS

Across these youth movements, one message stands out clearly: Generation Z is not only demanding justice but redefining what justice and inclusivity mean in practice. Their protests show how deeply the principles of SDG 16—peace, accountability, and inclusiveness—have become lived realities rather than distant global goals.

1. Redefining Accountability and Inclusivity

For Gen Z, accountability extends beyond investigations or punishment. It entails honesty, openness, and institutional accessibility. They expect transparent communication, public disclosure of information, and swift action against wrongdoing.

Inclusivity is not symbolic representation but substantive participation. It demands fairness across class, gender, and region, and a genuine seat at the table rather than token consultation.

2. The Digital Generation and New Political Language

Gen Z's activism differs from traditional forms due to its digital upbringing:

- Memes, hashtags, and digital storytelling convert anger into collective action.
- Pop culture symbols, such as Indonesia's pirate flag or Nepal's viral campaigns, communicate complex critiques accessibly.
- Humor and critique coexist, broadening engagement beyond traditional activists.

This reflects a generation fluent in emotional expression and political awareness, redefining political participation.

3. Technology: Empowerment and Control

Digital platforms empower Gen Z by enabling rapid organization, fact-checking, and documentation of state failures while amplifying local struggles globally.

Simultaneously, these tools enable surveillance, censorship, and algorithmic suppression, as seen in Nepal and Bangladesh. This paradox highlights why SDG 16.10—public access to information—is central to digital freedom and civic dignity.

4. Regional Parallels and Shared Challenges

Despite varied triggers, these protests share a core issue: erosion of trust in institutions.

- Philippines: corruption in flood infrastructure.
- Indonesia: elite privilege and inequality.
- Bangladesh: nepotism in job quotas.
- Nepal: censorship and repression.

These cases affirm that democracy cannot function without accountability-driven trust.

5. From Protest to Co-Creation

Gen Z activism extends beyond resistance:

- Youth collectives build open-data portals, fact-checking networks, and transparency initiatives.
- Civic engagement becomes continuous "everyday accountability."

This shows SDG 16 can be advanced through citizen participation, not only state action.

6. Hope as a Political Force

What sustains these movements is hope. Facing repression, Gen Z mobilizes not only out of dissent but a belief in institutions that listen and include. Their message is clear: peace and justice are present obligations, not future promises.



7. Digital Mobilization Across Borders

The Nepal protests demonstrate how digital mobilization has evolved into a global accountability tool. Shared tactics from Hong Kong and Fridays for Future show digital resistance functioning as a common civic algorithm, reshaping legitimacy and participation globally.

8. Global Solidarity in the Age of Fragmented Trust

While global solidarity strengthened protest demands, it revealed a paradox: trust in local institutions declines as global youth networks gain moral authority. This “trust inversion” has lasting implications for SDG 16 and institutional legitimacy.

9. Rethinking SDG 16 in a Digital Context

Peace, justice, and strong institutions now extend beyond formal governance. Memes, encrypted platforms, and digital tools act as informal accountability mechanisms, suggesting digital resilience as a new indicator of institutional strength under SDG 16.

10. The Paradox of Peaceful Resistance

Though rooted in non-violence, state crackdowns reveal how “peace” is redefined through coercion. Digital protests function as diagnostic tools, exposing fractures between civic expression and state power.

11. The Role of Cultural Symbols in Political Mobilization

The transnational spread of the Straw Hat Pirates’ flag represents a new cultural language of resistance. Popular culture enables non-violent solidarity, reinforcing SDG 16’s inclusivity through shared meaning rather than ideology.

12. Institutional Learning and Policy Translation

The Nepal crisis offers lessons for youth-led digital governance: digital ethics, inclusive policymaking, and protected online spaces. Translating these lessons into global policy frameworks could strengthen SDG 16’s preventive capacity.

13. A New Definition of Accountability

Protests signal a shift from institutional to collective accountability. Livestreams, open-source investigations, and crowdsourced evidence turn citizens into continuous auditors of power, redefining strong institutions as open, monitored networks.

Leaderless, digitally organized youth movements challenge traditional institutions. Their impact depends not on protest intensity alone but on institutional responses—repression, co-optation, or genuine adaptation.

Medium- and Long-Term Implications

Medium Term (5–10 years): Inclusive reforms enhance resilience and stability; repression deepens alienation and dissent.

Long Term (10–25 years): Accountability strengthens democracy and advances SDG 16, while repression risks entrenched authoritarianism and loss of legitimacy.

Global Lessons

- Mechanisms Matter: Structural reforms sustain legitimacy; symbolic reforms delay unrest.
- Digital Paradox: Mobilization and surveillance coexist.
- Context Matters: Outcomes vary by regime type, youth unemployment, and internet access.

Transnational Diffusion: Protest and repression tactics spread across borders.

Protest Intensity and Outcomes

High-intensity protests can trigger rapid political change, but lasting governance improvement requires accountability, elite fragmentation, and structural reform. Without these, cycles of repression and managed democracy persist.

Institutional Responses

1. Repression and Control: Shutdowns, arrests, and surveillance suppress dissent temporarily but erode trust.
2. Co-optation and Appeasement: Symbolic gestures ease tensions briefly without addressing root causes.
3. Adaptation and Engagement: Transparency, reform, and youth inclusion offer the most durable outcomes.



Policy Recommendations & Critical Insights

Transforming protest into democratic progress requires independent investigations, meaningful youth participation, digital rights protections, and investment in public services. Gen Z protests test institutional legitimacy; future stability depends on whether states treat youth movements as threats or opportunities for power-sharing.

CONCLUSION

The recent Gen Z protests in Nepal, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and the Philippines represent one of the most significant contemporary waves of youth mobilization connected to the objectives of SDG 16. These protests illustrate how digitally literate and politically engaged young people are reframing civic resistance as part of a broader project of democratic renewal. They also show how the language of the Sustainable Development Goals is increasingly being incorporated into domestic political claims, making development discourse part of everyday political practice.

The cases analyzed here indicate that Gen Z activism is closely linked to perceptions of prolonged governance failure. The four cases highlight recurring governance challenges such as institutional opacity, elite domination of political and economic resources, patronage networks, and weakened systems of public accountability. Examples include anger over suspected corruption in flood control projects in the Philippines, opposition to job quota systems in Bangladesh, concerns about elite privilege in Indonesia, and resistance to censorship and social media restrictions in Nepal.

Digital mobilization played a strategic role. The use of platforms such as TikTok, Discord, and encrypted communication tools facilitated decentralized coordination and rapid information sharing. These tools supported new forms of organization that did not rely on traditional leadership hierarchies. At the same time, they exposed activists to surveillance, misinformation, and algorithmic control, illustrating the contested nature of digital civic space.

A central paradox emerges from these protests. Governments sometimes offered symbolic concessions such as resignations or limited reforms. However, many responses relied on repression, including censorship, internet shutdowns, and the use of force. This pattern suggests a disjunction between official commitments to peace, justice, and inclusion and the continued use of coercive strategies in practice.

The protests also indicate that SDG 16 cannot be achieved through technical policy measures alone. Youth engagement and broader transformations in state–society relations appear essential. For many young activists, accountability is viewed not simply as an administrative process but as a core element of the social contract between citizens and the state.

Future research should examine whether digitally enabled protests translate into durable institutional change or primarily generate cyclical unrest. Comparative and longitudinal approaches would be especially valuable. Further work is also needed on cross-regional solidarity networks and on the psychological, social, and policy consequences of sustained youth mobilization.

Overall, the Gen Z protest wave signals an important shift in political agency in an increasingly interconnected digital environment. These movements express demands for more transparent governance, stronger inclusion, and more credible accountability mechanisms. The trajectory of SDG 16, and to some extent the perceived legitimacy of global governance frameworks, will depend in part on how these demands are addressed.



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