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Ethical Leadership and Transparent Governance: Key to achieving SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) in South African Local Municipalities

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Abstract: Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16) aims to foster peaceful and inclusive societies, guarantee access to justice for everyone, and establish effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions. Peace and justice are vital components of sustainable development. The purpose of this article is to investigate how ethical leadership affects the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 16. Specifically, it will look at how leaders in the public, corporate, and civil society sectors may foster environments that support justice, peace, and robust institutions. Data was collected form expansive literature which include peer - reviewed journals, reports from the United Nations reports, and organisational case studies that particularly address ethical leadership in connection to Sustainable Development Goal 16. The study was led by Ethical Leadership Theory, which is predicated on the idea that leaders should potray normatively acceptable behaviour through their interactions and actions. They should also encourage followers to do the same through decision-making, communication, and reinforcement. The results demonstrated that there are situations in which South African municipalities fail to meet Sustainable Development Goal 16, but there is also hope that some municipalities will be capable of achieving it through the introduction of the Public Procurement Bill of 2023 and other measures that improve accountability and transparency. Political instability, widespread corruption, lax obedience to the law, and a lack of openness in governance are all barriers to reaching Sustainable Development Goal 16. These challenges impede development programs and erode public trust in institutions. Municipalities are recommended to set up regular monitoring procedures that evaluate the impact and changes of anti-corruption measures in order to understand how effective they are in reducing the risk of corruption. Based on the findings, policies and institutional structures can be adjusted. It is advised that municipalities use ethical leadership as a catalyst to build societies that are just, peaceful, and run by strong, responsible institutions.

Keywords: Ethical leadership; Transparent governance; Local Municipalities, sustainable development; strong institutions

Introduction

Transparent governance and ethical leadership have emerged as key pillars in the global advancement of sustainable development and efficient public administration. Sustainable Development Goal 16 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) focuses on the development of inclusive and peaceful societies, universal access to justice, and the establishment of inclusive and responsible institutions at all levels (Zhou, 2023). As the unit of government closest to the people in South Africa, local municipalities are crucial in providing basic services and promoting socioeconomic growth. However, persisting problems including corruption, poor

management, a lack of accountability, and inadequate institutional capacity still threaten public confidence and outcomes of service delivery (Zuiderwijk etal., 2021).

Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16) seeks to create inclusive and peaceful societies, ensure that everyone has access to justice, and create institutions that are inclusive, efficient, and accountable. Peace and justice are vital components of sustainable development (Ahmadjonov, 2023). The absence of peaceful and inclusive societies makes it unfeasible to attain economic growth, environmental sustainability, and human well-being (Manyika & Marima, 2024). SDG 16 tackles issues such as violence reduction, upholding the rule of law, fighting corruption, and ensuring inclusive governance (Manyika & Marima, 2024). Corruption poses a significant global challenge as it diverts resources from crucial public services, undermines institutions, and exacerbates inequality (Makalela, 2023). In numerous countries, vulnerable groups, including women, children, and marginalized communities, encounter obstacles in accessing justice and legal protections (Manyika & Marima, 2024). This situation arises from the presence of weak institutions across various nations at all levels. The reality is that weak, ineffective, or non-inclusive institutions contribute to instability and obstruct progress towards peace and justice (Manyika & Marima, 2024). Therefore, enhancing governance structures is crucial for the establishment of equitable and peaceful societies.

To promote sustainable development, institutions and organisations must place a high priority on the influence of stability, the sanctity of human rights, and the rule of law. According to Mngomezulu (2020) societies that embrace inclusive economic structures, respect human rights, and adhere to democratic ideals have prospered over the previous three centuries. Justice is undermined in governments where societal reconciliation and peace are unachievable, which makes conflict and fear more common. (Zuiderwijk etal., 2021). In regions characterized by weak institutions and justice systems, high rates of violence and crime are common, along with frequent occurrences of abuse, exploitation, corruption, and bribery (Manyika & Marima, 2024). This issue is prevalent in numerous locations worldwide and requires resolution. In an increasingly globalized world, conflict and instability in one area can have repercussions across many regions (Marcelline etal., 2021). In a similar vein, SDG 16 aims to establish social harmony and sustainable development by promoting a strong corporate culture and improving justice. Important components of SDG-16 include strengthening the representation of poor countries in global governance organisations, maintaining the rule of law, and significantly decreasing crime and violence via justice and robust institutions (United Nations, 2021).

According to Makalela (2023). ethical leadership is characterised by the demonstration of normatively appropriate behaviour through one's own actions and interpersonal interactions, as well as the promotion of such behaviour among followers through communication, reinforcement, and decision-making. Furthermore, it includes principles such as honesty, justice, accountability, openness, and respect for human rights, all of which are critical for building legitimacy and trust in institutions (Zuiderwijk et al., 2021). According to Masegare and Ngoepe (2018), leaders who exhibit ethical behaviour have a big influence on the culture of their organisations, encourage moral behaviour in their staff, and set the foundation for governance procedures. Their leadership style is essential for combating corruption, ensuring fair justice, and building institutions that the public can rely on.

Regarding SDG 16, ethical leadership is more than just a managerial strategy; it is a transformative force that may bolster institutions and encourage structural changes (Makalela, 2023). According to Zhou (2023), it is strongly related to the goals of decreasing violence, protecting basic liberties, maintaining the rule of law, and enhancing public administration openness. The ethical values upheld by their leaders are crucial for robust institutions, which are characterised by efficacy, inclusivity, and accountability (Marcelline et al., 2021). On the other hand, poor leadership or unethical actions can cause long-lasting institutional flaws, erode public confidence, and exacerbate social tensions, all of which impede sustainable development (Zhou, 2023). Therefore, ethical leadership is a transformative force that goes beyond a simple managerial strategy.

This study examines at how ethical leadership affects achieving SDG 16, emphasising how leaders in the public, business, and civil society sectors can foster environments that support justice, peace, and robust institutions. It also focuses into how ethical leadership contributes to strengthening legal frameworks, promoting human rights, decreasing corruption, and enhancing institutional openness. The study also examines the challenges leaders face when attempting to incorporate moral values into complex organisational and sociopolitical contexts. This research aims to elucidate the ways in which ethical leadership might accelerate the achievement of SDG 16 by analysing theoretical frameworks and actual data. Policymakers, organisational leaders, and development practitioners who want to create interventions that improve leadership must understand this relationship. This study was guided by three objectives outlined as below;

- To assess the role of ethical leadership in promoting accountability, integrity, and responsible decision-making within South African municipalities.
- To identify the key challenges that hinder the implementation of ethical leadership and transparent governance in local municipalities in South Africa.
- To propose practical strategies and recommendations for strengthening ethical leadership and transparent governance to advance SDG 16 in South African municipalities.

Literature Review

To achieve sustainable development, South African institutions and organisations must place a high priority on the rule of law, the sanctity of human rights, and the effects of stability (Marcelline et al., 2021). Municipalities are required under the Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000 to create their Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) through a thorough integrated development planning process. The Service Delivery and Budget Implementation Plans of municipalities, which function as the mechanisms to implement their particular IDPs, are meant to achieve the objectives of the IDPs (Woodside etal., 2017). In order to achieve sustainable development and social peace, the SDG-16 focuses on Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions to improve justice and cultivate a strong corporate culture (Manyika & Marima, 2024).

However, political instability, widespread corruption, lax obedience to the law, and a lack of openness in government are barriers to SDG 16 in South Africa (Kaufmann, 2018). South Africa's state capital, the City of Tshwane, was recently placed into administration due to instability, exposing management flaws and a lack of adequate and qualified human resources (Shongwe & Meyer, 2023). These challenges undermine public trust in South African institutions and impede development endeavours. In light of this, this essay aims to investigate the role that moral leadership and open governance play in helping South African local governments achieve SDG 16.

Defining Concepts

Ethical Leadership

The demonstration of normatively appropriate behaviour through one's own actions and interpersonal interactions, as well as the promotion of such behaviour among followers through communication, reinforcement, and decision-making, are characteristics of ethical leadership (Ruijer & Martinius, 2017). According to Mavhenyengwa (2026), it includes principles like honesty, justice, accountability, openness, and respect for human rights, all of which are critical for building legitimacy and trust in institutions. Leaders that act morally have a big influence on company culture, encourage moral behaviour among staff members, and set the stage for governance procedures (Ahmadjonov, 2023). Their leadership style is essential for combating corruption, ensuring fair justice, and building institutions that the public can rely on. Ethical leadership is recognised locally in South Africa as a leadership approach that prioritises moral values in behaviour and decision-making (Neves etal., 2024). As a result, it is linked to improved stakeholder trust, a decline in unethical behaviour, and an increase in organisational citizenship behaviour.

Ethical leadership in South African municipalities

Ethical leadership is a term used to describe a style of leadership that incorporates moral principles, integrity, and justice in decision-making and action (Susha etal., 2015). In relation to South Africa, ethical leaders are those individuals in the public sector who are committed to the welfare and interests of their followers, while at the same time taking into consideration the interests of society in general (Manyika & Marima, 2024). The most daunting challenge facing the local government in South Africa, as well as the public sector in general, is ethical leadership (Sebola etal., 2024). Unethical leadership has been identified as a contributing factor to many public protests in South Africa. The residents of many municipalities in South Africa have taken to the streets to express their grievances over corruption, which has led to a decline in services in areas such as housing, health, infrastructure, and electricity (Shongwe & Meyer, 2023). Ethical leadership in South Africa is most likely to comprise attributes such as accountability, transparency, honesty, integrity, and selflessness. Therefore, a situation where there is a lack of ethical leadership is most likely to negatively influence the provision of goods and services to the public.

Transparent Governance

As part of the significant transformation in South Africa's state-owned enterprises, it is vital to ensure that there is a focus on transparency and accountability. The need for transparent governance in South Africa has been vital in promoting accountability, ethical leadership, and trust among the South African population (Sharmin & Chowdhury, 2025). However, there have been challenges in the implementation of transparent governance in South Africa.

According to Sindelo (2024), transparent governance has been vital in the South African context because it has helped in monitoring institutions of governance. Begany and Martin (2020) noted that parliamentary inquiries, such as those carried out by MP Liam Jacobs, have helped in promoting transparent governance in South Africa. Thus, the promotion of ethical leadership is vital in promoting transparent governance in South Africa.

Theoretical framework- Ethical Leadership Theory

The study utilizes the Ethical Leadership Theory. The Ethical Leadership Theory was officially established by Brown, Treviño, and Harrison in 2005. This theory is based on the premise that leaders should exhibit normatively appropriate behavior through their actions and interactions, while also encouraging such conduct among their followers via communication, reinforcement, and decision-making (Bwalya, 2018; Wilson & Cong, 2021). Its foundational beliefs include the notion that leaders act as moral exemplars, that trust and fairness are crucial for legitimacy, and that ethical behavior must be consistently reinforced to influence organizational culture. Furthermore, ethical leadership posits that transparency and accountability are integral to effective governance, as leaders are required to embody integrity and guarantee fair treatment of all stakeholders (Kufeoglu, 2022). This theory holds significant relevance to the subject matter, as ethical leadership lays the moral groundwork for SDG 16. In the context of South African municipalities, where corruption, inadequate accountability, and subpar service delivery have eroded public trust, ethical leadership can help restore legitimacy by ensuring transparent procurement practices, equitable resource distribution, and authentic community engagement. Ultimately, ethical leadership serves not only as a theoretical construct but also as a practical instrument for transforming governance in local municipalities into systems that are transparent, equitable, and trusted by the communities they serve.

Methodology

A qualitative semi-systematic literature review was adopted for the study with the aim to gain an in-depth understanding the on the impact of ethical leadership on the attainment of SDG 16 in South African Municipalities.This article reviewed current literature on how ethical leadership affects achieving SDG 16, emphasising how leaders in the public, business, and civil society sectors can foster environments that support justice, peace, and robust institutions.This study used Scopus, Google Scholar, Sabinet, and Web of Science databases to search for relevant articles ensuring comprehensive coverage. Additionally, a systematic search strategy was developed to search for the relevant articles using keywords and phrases such as “Ethical leadership and SDG 16” in South African Municipalities. The documents selected were then screened for inclusion in the study based on their titles and abstracts date of publication which were subsequently subjected to a full-text review to assess their relevance in the study.

Table 1: Article retrieval limits

Retrieval Limit	Explanation
Database	Scopus, Google Scholar; Sabinet, and Web of Science databases
Search field	Title, abstract, keywords
Keywords	“Ethical leadership AND SDG 16.”
Open access	All
Years	2015-2025
Author names	Exclude unidentified names
Publication stage	All
Document Type	All
Affiliation	All
Country	South Africa
Source type	All
Language	English

Researchers’ Construction, 2026

As shown in Table 1, the search keywords were as “Ethical leadership and SDG 16” in South African Municipalities. In the initial search which used the first three principles in Table1 where 400 articles were identified. However, when the last 8 principles were applied, 200 articles were eliminated to remain with 200 articles. This number was still

considered large for a qualitative study. The search was narrowed down to select articles that has the term "as "Ethical leadership and SDG 16" in South African Municipalities." This led to the exclusion of 80 articles to remain with 120 articles. The exclusion and inclusion criteria were then applied as shown table 2 to determine whether they were in South Africa. An additional 50 articles were eliminated to remain with 70 articles.

Table 2: The inclusion and exclusion criteria for documents used in the study

Criteria	***Inclusion***	***Exclusion***
Date	Government Documents must have been published between 2015 and 2025. Journal Articles and books must have been published between 2015 and 2025	Any government document published before 2010 was considered irrelevant. Journal articles that did not fall within the last 10 years. Books were published more than 10 years ago.
Topic	Documents regarding the impact of ethical leadership on the attainment of SDG 16 in South African Municipalities	Documents not include the impact of ethical leadership on the attainment of SDG 16 in South African Municipalities.
Language	Sources written in English.	Non-English sources.
Publication	Peer-reviewed journal articles and conference proceedings Grey literature, i.e. reports Published books regarding the impact of ethical leadership on the attainment of SDG 16 in South African Municipalities	Non-peer-reviewed journals and conference proceedings

Source: Researchers' Own Construction, 2026

The documents selected were then screened for inclusion in the study based on their titles and abstracts date of publication which were subsequently subjected to a full-text review to assess their relevance in the study. Documents that met the study's inclusion criteria were reviewed, and relevant information was extracted to support the presented arguments. Articles that used multi-case studies that included other countries outside South Africa were excluded. Furthermore, the author left out all the articles that could not be downloaded. These additional measures resulted in the elimination of 36 articles remaining with a sample of 34 which were then considered in the final analysis. The selected articles were then subjected to content analysis whereby the presence of themes was determined from the sampled articles (Creswell & Poth, 2023).

Table 3: Reliability and credibility of secondary sources

Secondary data collection method	**Reliability and credibility of the sources**
Published Printed Sources	The researcher only used documents published by reliable and well-known publishers in 2015.
Books	These are the most authentic secondary sources.
Journals and Conference proceedings	These are reliable and up-to-date, providing data about a specific subject. The researcher utilised accredited journals as sources
eJournals	These were more readily available than printed journals. They are deemed credible as they are peer-reviewed.

Researchers' Own Construction, 2026

Findings

The following were the findings emanating from the review of literature on the impact of ethical leadership on the attainment of SDG 16 in South African Municipalities.

Transparent codes of conduct and integrity frameworks for municipal leaders and personnel

The findings indicate that transparent codes of conduct and integrity frameworks constitute an important contribution of ethical leadership toward the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16), which emphasizes the development of effective, accountable, and transparent institutions. The widespread maladministration observed across South African municipalities demonstrates the urgent need for ethical leadership interventions that strengthen governance and institutional accountability (David-Barrett, 2015). Cases of municipalities being placed under administration due to financial mismanagement, service delivery failures, and governance instability reveal that the absence of ethical leadership undermines institutional effectiveness and weakens public trust in government (Moti, 2021).

The South African Code for Ethical Leadership in Local Government (2023) provides an important framework for promoting ethical behaviour, accountability, and responsible decision-making among municipal leaders. From an SDG 16 perspective, the code contributes to strengthening institutions by encouraging leaders to act with integrity, transparency, and commitment to public service (Davhana, 2025). Ethical leadership therefore serves as a mechanism for reducing corruption, enhancing accountability, and fostering citizen confidence in local government institutions (Mavhenyengwa, 2026). These outcomes are directly aligned with SDG 16 targets that seek to reduce corruption and develop responsive and inclusive governance systems.

However, the findings also reveal significant challenges that limit the effectiveness of ethical leadership initiatives. Although South Africa possesses comprehensive legislative and policy frameworks, implementation remains inconsistent. The apparent disconnect between the Municipal Systems Act (N0. 32 of 2000) and electoral processes often results in the election of leaders whose qualifications, ethical standards, and governance competencies are not adequately assessed (Davhana, 2025). Consequently, municipalities may be led by individuals who lack the capacity or commitment to uphold ethical governance principles (Kufeoglu, 2022). This implementation gap highlights a critical obstacle to achieving SDG 16, as strong governance frameworks alone cannot guarantee ethical conduct without effective enforcement and accountability mechanisms.

The case of the City of Johannesburg provides valuable insight into how ethical leadership can advance sustainable development objectives. The signing of Integrity pledges by councillors and senior officials demonstrates a proactive approach to institutionalizing accountability and combating corruption (Mavhenyengwa, 2026). By clearly defining responsibilities, identifying governance risks, and promoting compliance with regulations, the initiative strengthens transparency and responsible leadership. Such practices contribute to improved governance outcomes, protection of public resources, and enhanced service delivery, all of which are essential components of sustainable development and SDG 16 (Ahmadjonov, 2023).

Open-data platforms and digital governance tools that offer immediate access to budgets, procurement, and service delivery.

The findings reveal that ethical leadership plays a significant role in promoting the adoption of open-data platforms and digital governance tools, which are increasingly recognized as essential mechanisms for achieving Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16). Ethical leaders promote transparency, accountability, and responsible governance by ensuring that citizens have immediate access to information relating to municipal budgets, procurement processes, and service delivery performance (Anderson, 2019; Begany & Gil-Garcia, 2024). Such access empowers citizens to monitor government activities, participate in decision-making processes, and hold public officials accountable for the use of public resources. Consequently, digital governance tools contribute directly to SDG 16 targets that seek to develop effective, accountable, and transparent institutions (Aderoju, 2025).

The analysis demonstrates that digital technologies such as e-governance systems, artificial intelligence, and blockchain technology have the potential to strengthen ethical leadership by improving oversight, reducing opportunities for corruption, and enhancing the efficiency of municipal operations (Zindi, 2024). The experiences of countries such as Estonia illustrate how ethical and innovative leadership can utilize digital platforms to create transparent governance systems that enhance citizen trust and institutional legitimacy (Mngomezulu, 2020, Mamokhere, 2022). Similarly, the increasing use of digital technologies in public administration provides South

African municipalities with opportunities to improve service delivery, strengthen public participation, and promote sustainable development outcomes (Sharmin & Chowdhury, 2025).

However, the findings also identify several challenges that hinder the realization of these benefits. Unethical leadership practices, political interference, weak accountability mechanisms, ineffective internal controls, and inadequate sanctions for misconduct continue to undermine governance reforms in many South African municipalities (Aderoju, 2025). These governance weaknesses limit the successful implementation of open-data initiatives and reduce the effectiveness of digital oversight systems. Furthermore, widespread corruption, financial mismanagement, and ineffective Municipal Public Accounts Committees (MPACs) contribute to declining public trust and weaken institutional capacity to achieve SDG 16 (Ndebele & Enaifoghe 2024).

The analysis further highlights blockchain technology as a promising tool for strengthening transparency and accountability. Its immutable and decentralized nature can improve record-keeping, reduce opportunities for manipulation, and enhance public confidence in municipal transactions (Zindi, 2024). By supporting transparent procurement processes and financial management systems, blockchain technology can assist municipalities in combating corruption and improving governance performance.

The findings advance understanding of SDG 16 by demonstrating that ethical leadership extends beyond individual behaviour to include the strategic use of digital innovations that strengthen institutional accountability and public participation (Khatoon, 2020; Zuiderwijk etal., 2021). Nevertheless, the persistence of corruption, inadequate technical capacity, political instability, and weak governance structures continue to impede the full realization of SDG 16 (Munzhedzi, 2020; Aderoju, 2025). Therefore, achieving sustainable development requires not only the adoption of advanced digital technologies but also ethical leaders who possess the commitment, competence, and integrity necessary to ensure their effective implementation and governance

Adding to the above, rural municipalities encounter numerous obstacles, including insufficient capacity to deliver essential services and ineffective oversight, which results in a lack of accountability (Mabizela & Matsiliza, 2020). Effective service delivery has also been consistently hampered by problems like corruption, backlogs in service delivery, insufficient technical expertise, deficiencies in leadership and management skills, financial mismanagement, and political meddling (Mngomezulu, 2020; Makalela & Moloto, 2023).The replication of human intelligence by machines or computers to carry out tasks that normally need human cognitive capacities is known as artificial intelligence (Aderibigbe et al., 2023). As a result, many local governments have made improving public sector service delivery a top priority, which has expanded the use of cutting-edge technology like Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the delivery of municipal services.

South Africa progress towards SDG 16

The findings indicate that South Africa has made significant progress towards achieving SDG 16 since the advent of democracy in 1994. Ethical leadership has played an important role in strengthening democratic institutions, promoting transparency, and enhancing accountability within the public sector (Munzhedzi, 2020). The restructuring of state institutions in accordance with the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 and the establishment of Chapter 9 institutions demonstrate a commitment to ethical governance and the protection of democratic values (Mabizela & Matsiliza, 2020). Furthermore, legislative instruments such as the Promotion of Access to Information Act have expanded citizens' access to public information, thereby promoting transparency and supporting the development of accountable institutions (Ndebele & Enaifoghe, 2024). These initiatives reflect the contribution of ethical leadership to SDG 16 by fostering openness, inclusivity, and institutional integrity.

The findings further reveal that ethical leadership has been instrumental in advancing anti-corruption initiatives. The Judicial Commission of Inquiry into State Capture exposed extensive governance failures and corruption networks that threatened democratic institutions and sustainable development (Mngomezulu, 2020). The subsequent recommendations, criminal investigations, and introduction of the Public Procurement Bill of 2023 demonstrate efforts by public leaders to restore accountability, strengthen procurement oversight, and rebuild public trust. Similarly, proposed reforms to protect whistle-blowers and enhance oversight within state-owned enterprises illustrate how ethical leadership can create governance systems that encourage transparency and discourage corruption (Moloto et al., 2020; Moti, 2021). These measures directly support SDG 16 targets related to reducing corruption, strengthening institutions, and ensuring access to justice. Despite these achievements, the findings reveal significant challenges that continue to impede the realization of SDG 16. Persistent corruption, weak institutional capacity, poor governance practices, and service delivery failures remain widespread across local government structures (Mngomezulu, 2020). Auditor-General reports continue to identify governance weaknesses, financial mismanagement, and inadequate

accountability mechanisms, indicating that the existence of legislative frameworks alone is insufficient to ensure ethical governance. Furthermore, citizen dissatisfaction with municipal service delivery highlights the gap between policy intentions and implementation outcomes (Ahmadjonov, 2023). The continued demand for basic services such as water, electricity, sanitation, and housing suggests that many municipalities struggle to translate governance reforms into tangible developmental outcomes.

The findings also advance understanding of sustainable development by demonstrating that ethical leadership is not merely a moral requirement but a strategic governance resource for achieving SDG 16. Sustainable development depends on institutions that are transparent, accountable, responsive, and capable of delivering services effectively. While South Africa has established a strong legal and institutional foundation, the persistence of corruption, implementation deficits, and governance instability illustrates that achieving SDG 16 requires more than policy development (Sindelo, 2024). It requires ethical leaders who are committed to enforcing accountability, strengthening institutional performance, protecting whistle-blowers, and ensuring that governance reforms translate into improved service delivery and citizen well-being (Begany & Martin, 2020). Therefore, the study concludes that ethical leadership remains a critical determinant of sustainable development and the successful realization of SDG 16 in South Africa.

Challenges hindering the achievement of SDG 16

The findings reveal that although SDG 16 seeks to promote peaceful, just, and inclusive societies through effective, accountable, and transparent institutions, several governance challenges continue to undermine its realization within South African municipalities (Shongwe & Meyer, 2023). The analysis demonstrates that political instability, pervasive corruption, weak adherence to the rule of law, and lack of transparency in governance are not only institutional weaknesses but also indicators of deficiencies in ethical leadership. These challenges undermine public trust, weaken institutional effectiveness, and constrain sustainable development efforts (Begany & Gil-Garcia, 2024).

Political instability

Political instability emerged as a significant obstacle to the achievement of SDG 16. Despite the existence of comprehensive legislative frameworks such as the Municipal Systems Act (No. 32 of 2000), Municipal Structures Act (No. 117 of 1998), and Municipal Finance Management Act (No 56 of 2003, many municipalities continue to experience governance failures and administrative dysfunctionality (Sebola etal., 2024). The findings suggest that ethical leadership is compromised when political loyalty is prioritized over competence and integrity in leadership appointments. Frequent leadership changes resulting from political factionalism and unstable coalitions disrupt policy continuity, weaken institutional memory, and hinder effective service delivery (Sharmin & Chowdhury, 2025). Consequently, municipalities struggle to establish the stable and accountable governance structures required for sustainable development.

Pervasive Corruption

Corruption misallocates resources meant for the infrastructure development of municipalities and services, causing a decline in citizens' trust towards municipalities. The study further identifies corruption as one of the most significant barriers to SDG 16. Corruption diverts resources away from essential infrastructure and public services, thereby undermining developmental objectives and reducing public confidence in local government (Ahmadjonov, 2024). The prevalence of unfunded budgets, poor audit outcomes, and procurement irregularities demonstrates how weak ethical leadership contributes to financial mismanagement and governance failure (Moti, 2021). Cases such as tender-related scandals and "ghost projects" illustrate how corruption prevents municipalities from delivering services effectively and achieving inclusive development outcomes (Ndebele & Enaifoghe, 2024). Ethical leadership is therefore essential in promoting integrity, accountability, and responsible stewardship of public resources.

Weak adherence to the rule of law

Weak adherence to the rule of law also emerged as a major challenge. Although legislative mechanisms exist to regulate municipal governance, enforcement remains inconsistent, allowing misconduct and financial irregularities to persist without meaningful consequences (Anderson, 2019). The findings indicate that ethical leadership is critical for fostering a culture of accountability where laws and regulations are applied fairly and consistently. The continued existence of municipalities with poor audit outcomes and recurring governance failures demonstrates the negative consequences of inadequate accountability systems (Sebola etal., 2024). Without ethical leaders committed to enforcing governance standards, progress towards SDG 16 remains limited.

Lack of transparency in governance

The lack of adequate information about municipal budgets, procurement, and audits creates barriers to holding officials accountable for their actions. Furthermore, the lack of transparency in governance significantly undermines public trust and citizen participation. Limited access to information regarding municipal budgets, procurement processes, and audit outcomes restricts citizens' ability to hold public officials accountable (Xaba & Bambo, 2025). This lack of transparency contributes to widespread service delivery protests and declining confidence in local government institutions. Ethical leadership promotes openness, responsiveness, and stakeholder engagement, all of which are fundamental requirements for achieving SDG 16. Transparent governance systems enable citizens to participate meaningfully in decision-making processes and strengthen the legitimacy of public institutions.

Recommendations

Establishing regular monitoring methods that evaluate the impact and changes is crucial to understanding the efficacy of anti-corruption measures in reducing the risk of corruption. Based on the findings, policies and institutional frameworks can be modified. The creation of the anti-corruption strategy, program, or action plan should ideally coincide with the development of these mechanisms. This means that the government or agency must think about the kind of review system it wants to use.

The South African government can learn one or two from the Moldova in dealing with corruption cases. Currently, the National Anti-Corruption Center of Moldova plays a critical role in guaranteeing that state representatives and institutions successfully implement risk assessment systems through training, consultation, monitoring, and analysis (Ahmadjonov, 2024). The center provides education to those responsible for identifying corruption risks and facilitates meetings for assessment groups (Ahmadjonov, 2023). This ensures that, SA public leaders are held responsible for mitigating corruption risks thereby upholding ethical leadership while achieving SDG 16.

South Africa can also learn from South Korea when it comes to eradicating corruption and mismanagement of public funds. South Korea has established itself as one of the world's industrialised nations by successfully implementing steps to eradicate corruption threats and combat corruption (Ahmadjonov, 2024). Three separate phases can be used to analyse the development of South Korea's corruption risk assessment system: the program's necessity and beginnings, its legal definitions and underpinnings, and its scope and procedure (Woodside etal., 2017). Therefore, the main focus of the nation's approach to evaluating the risks of corruption is to find and close any legal loopholes that could lead to corruption in general.

Tackling corruption within local municipalities in Zimbabwe necessitates a comprehensive approach, as corruption in these institutions can significantly affect the economy, governance, and public trust (Manyika & Marima, 2024). Establishing an institutional framework to combat corruption, particularly in a resource-limited nation, begins with effective strategies aimed at enhancing transparency and accountability, which must be continuously monitored and assessed for their efficacy (Chiparo etal., 2022). This strong framework includes public disclosure and transparency, independent audits, and safeguards for whistleblowers (Zhou, 2023). The Government must take further action to foster a supportive environment for whistle-blowing, given the absence of a policy and legal framework in this regard (Manyika & Marima, 2024). Such a framework would empower witnesses of corruption to confidently come forward and testify against corrupt individuals, thereby reducing corrupt practices in local municipalities in South Africa.

Based on the results, it is suggested that SDG 16, which focuses on fostering justice, peace, and robust institutions, strives to promote both development and peace (Howe, 2024). However, there have been three main obstacles to the goals of peace and development under global government. In order to overcome these obstacles, South Africa, like other countries, areas, and groups that are seen as being excluded from the "universal" narrative, must be forced to play a subordinate role in relation to the major powers within the frameworks of global governance or come from different epistemological perspectives, which will cause it to be ignored by the dominant discourse (Howe, 2024). This context elucidates the challenges faced in achieving peace, justice, and robust institutions.

Local municipalities must appoint leaders based on thorough assessment and suitable standards which are established in line with the designated deadlines for execution. When hiring leaders, a risk register that includes identified and confirmed risks, standards, priorities, responsible parties, and execution timelines must be made. In addition, it is imperative that local leaders are made aware of the details of the transparency plan of the organisation. There is also need to encourage and protect the whistleblower rights in South Africa as witnessed in Slovenia. This is due to the fact that individuals who come forward to alert the relevant state body about the possibility of corruption or the premeditated actions of state officials who abuse their special powers for personal gain can act as a catalyst to achieve significant advancements through proactive measures. This is due to the fact that individuals who come forward to

alert the relevant state body about the possibility of corruption or the premeditated actions of state officials who abuse their special powers for personal gain can act as a catalyst to achieve significant advancements through proactive measures.

Conclusion

The promotion of Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions is vital for fostering peaceful, just, and inclusive societies. Thus, by diminishing violence, guaranteeing access to justice, fighting corruption, and establishing accountable institutions, SDG 16 aims to develop a world where every individual can exist in safety and equity. Realizing this objective necessitates collaborative efforts from governments, civil society, and international organizations to ensure that institutions are transparent, inclusive, and efficient in administering justice and safeguarding human rights.

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the study, several measures were implemented to mitigate internal biases during data collection, analysis, and interpretation. First, the systematic literature review followed a predefined protocol that established clear inclusion and exclusion criteria, thereby reducing the risk of selectively including studies that supported predetermined assumptions. The review incorporated evidence from diverse sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, United Nations publications, and documented case studies on ethical leadership and SDG 16. This triangulation of sources enabled the validation of findings across different contexts and reduced the influence of individual study biases. Furthermore, thematic analysis was conducted using a structured coding framework that focused on recurring themes such as transparency, accountability, integrity, anti-corruption measures, and institutional effectiveness. Contradictory findings were not excluded but were critically examined to ensure a balanced interpretation of the evidence. The conclusions were derived from patterns consistently observed across the reviewed literature rather than from isolated case examples. In addition, reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process by continuously assessing potential researcher assumptions and ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in the evidence.

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