

INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM AND CORPORATE ACCOUNTABILITY FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS PROGRESS (SDG 16)

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Abstract

The study investigates the intersection problem of where investigative journalism and corporate accountability belong in the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals with particular emphasis on the SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions. Watchdog protection brings in the element of investigative journalism by revealing corruption, dishonesty and defaults in political decisions hence keeping companies and states accountable and ethical. Corporations perform a twofold function in one of the sustainable development, since they are not only the leading forces in the economic rise but also the potential violators of the social and environmental justice. However, with the investigations of malpractices such as greenwashing and involving depression in sweatshops and financial mismanagement, not only does investigative journalism reveal the disparity between the statements and actions of the company but it also bully the company into participating in less greedy ways of governing themselves. Despite the censorship, politics and intimidations of journalists, investigative reporting enhances the presence of the democratic institutions and promote the cause of justice thereby becoming an obligation that governs corporate contributions to sustainable developments.

Keywords: Investigative Journalism; Corporate Accountability; Sustainable Development Goals; SDG 16; Transparency.

Introduction

One of the crucial tenets of reinforcing transparency, accountability, and democratic integrity is the provision of the aspect of investigative journalism, especially in being anchored to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), where SDG 16 Patrick implied: -Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions: The structure of global governance and social justice. Exposing falsehoods, exposing malpractices, requesting influential business forces, through investigative reporting, the watchdog role is played by investigative journalism to keep the institution and corporations on course in regard to being responsible in their ways of practicing as they commit themselves to ethical practices as well as industrial growth. The vital concept of sustainable sustainability is corporate accountability however because corporations have a direct influence on the environmental sustainability, work rights, economic fairness and social responsibility. The overlapping of the field of investigative journalism and corporate accountability therefore offers a decisive perspective of where business is promoting or hindering the goal of SDG 16. Although the fact that numerous companies prominently publish their support of the SDGs, examples of greenwashing, exploitation, and corrupt business indicate that there is typology between the claims and the actual occurrence, and journalism can be essential in closing this

gap. The advent of investigative journalism has made landmark stories like the Panama Papers and other investigations of corporate ills show how investigative journalism could be healthy and progressive force to push changes, initiate regulatory reviews and give capacity to civil society, which demands justice globally. Nevertheless, journalism has most of the times been tested during such undertaking as it feels the influence of corporations in the media, the threat of political influences, legal and the danger to the safety of journalists. In weak democracies or oppressive institutions, media freedom is secured in a manner that hampers the efforts to check corporate orientation to SDGs. In spite of these hurdles, through the exposing malpractices, marginalization described voices can be heard, more accountable institutions are fostered, and the space of the masses resided in is enhanced in direct relation to SDG 16 such as less corruption is the aim, justice is the aim, and accountable institutions are the aim. Through this study, there is placement of investigative journalism as a mechanism and a force multiplier of corporate accountability within the SDG framework. It also points to the vital importance of free and independent reporting in filling the transportability scheme and that, absent a free and watchful press, corporate donation to sustainable development would furnish remaining dubious, or unpredictably so, or even retrogressive. That being said, the paper concerns the urgent need to empower the media freedom alongside institutional support to transform journalism into an efficient no-harmony, no-corruption, and sustainable watch dog.

Significance of the Study

The significance of the study is that it aims to address this gap between the investigative journalism and corporate responsibility with regards to SDGs, particularly, SDG 16 that concerns peace, justice, and strong institutions. This is perceived as the corporations as significant players in the actualisation of the SDGs though their activities are observed to be considered concerning in the aspects of transparency, human rights, and ethical governments by the world. The news coverage of mal-practices and their subsequent action against the corporations can make the investigative journalism a very useful tool in ensuring that the corporate commitments would be simpler to align with the principles of sustainable development rather than a mere rhetoric. The research at hand is important in the sense that it highlights the watchdog characteristic of journalism in order to strengthen democratic institutions, reduce corruption, and bring about trust on people; conditions that are critical in fulfilling SDG 16. It further points out how media freedom is important to enable accountability modalities and confirms that there is a requirement of having stronger precautions that uphold journalism as a tool of cultivating justice and stability.

Purpose of the Study

This paper explores the reasons why having investment reporting is relevant in holding corporation responsible and aiding the agenda of fair sustainable development goal 16, which has a specific emphasis on peace, justice, and strong institutions. The authors with the selected examples of investigative reporting cases that uncovered the presence of corruption in the business understand the importance of disclosing to the public the positions of the media as a watchdog, so that corporations could operate behind the transparent and responsible business. It will aim at exploring the role of journalism in strengthening a good government, promoting law and order, as well as discouraging the tendency to adopt bad forms of corporate business that are not conducive to sustainable development. Concurrently, the study attempts to comprehend the obstacles and limits faced by the investigative reporters, such as censorship, political interference, and intimidation of the journalists and investigators. After all, the study is meant to show how an independent and fearless journalism may become a catalyst in changing the corporate actions in line with the values of justice, accountability, and sustainability inherent in SDG 16.

Investigative Journalism and Its Relevance

The so-called watchdog of the society, investigative journalism is a particular type of reporting that tries to reveal the dark secrets, both systemic and personal, and make authorities, institutions, and corporations in the world to realize their responsibilities. Contrary to regular news reporting, which is event news and immediate most of the time, investigative news is research-oriented, fact-checking and long term investigations dedicated to whatever has been intentionally hidden to people. In the contemporary democracies, it is an essential actor to consider since it keeps the citizens abreast on issues of malpractice of power, infringements of rights, and other unethical practices that devalue the spirit of justice and democracy. The investigative journalism field in the past has played a critical role in influencing the masses and policy reforms. Since investigative reporting as a means to expose both specific jobs and the system itself proved its power against the status quo since muckrakers of the early 20th century in the United States who publicized exploitative company methods and unsanitary work environments, through to the Panama Papers and Paradise Papers which exposed high-order corporate tax evasion and offshoring, investigative reporting has successfully shown that it can be aligned with other interests. These successes demonstrate its continued fight to tighten corporate and institutional bad behaviour. Even beyond identifying what is wrongly prescribed by the investigative journalism, it is an expanded role, since it would lead to enlightenment, accountability, and justice in the sense of developing an informed citizenry that will harass the enlightenment. In the corporate world, it pushes corporations to make their operations morally and ethically acceptable in the eyes of the law in majority of instances that expose their its shortcomings such as labor exploitation, environmental pollution and financial vice. It strengthens democratic institutions and creates trust in society, by increasing the voices of injustices, and a rendering of the facts. In this infamously disinformation period, where media are being lured, and the process of democracy is getting twisted into political opposing, investigative journalism is one of the features that will safeguard the truth and justice. Definite applicability is not only concerned in uncovering scandals, but also determining existence of transparency and accountability inherent in the mode of governing and transacting business thus contributing towards the ideals of peace, justice, and strong institutions as achieved under Sustainable Development Goal 16.

Corporate Accountability Framework

One of the foci of global governance where a corporation bears the responsibility to act transparently and ethically is the correlate of the greater interest of the society is corporate responsibility. It goes beyond being in agreement to forms of compliance with legal frameworks to implementation of international forms, human rights principles and sustainability standards which make sure that the businesses are involved in positively contributing to the social and environmental well-being. With the modernized globalized economy corporations are very powerful, sometimes compared to nation-states, despite this, their accountability systems become very important in keeping the lawful and just institutions. Human rights and sustainability go hand in hand with corporate governance which controls structures, practices and policies used in control of corporate behavior. Actions on the labor rights and environmental stewardship, gender equality, and financial transparency have a direct effect on the community, ecosystem, and democratic systems. The absence of the governance structure or poor accountability may result in the violations of human rights, corruption, and exploitation thus undermining the trust in the institutions. As part of the Sustainable Development Goals agenda, corporations may serve a dual purpose: positive changes operate them with benevolent business practices, while negative changes slow them down with irresponsible conduct. In particular, with SDG 16, which is Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions, companies should also strive to prevent any policies or practices that contribute to

corruption, war, and inequality, as well as promote the rule of law and transparency in their economic activities and integration of others into the economy. The numerous cases of corporate involvement in scandals of bribes, illegal transfer of finances underground, and pillaging natural resources represent only some few instances of the undermining of institutional integrity and in the process of reconciliation and fairness through corporate inappropriacy. Conversely, relying on corporate social responsibility (CSR) ideas, applying the idea of sustainability to reporting and following the principles of such organization as the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, these corporations may play an essential role of SDG 16 in marketing the concept of ethical supply chain, sound governance and fair practice of politics and corruption. By this corporate responsibility is not only a decade deterrent but also a driver of the initiative to inculcate the integrity of healthy institutions in a business that transcends the profit-sensitizing nature which perhaps viewed through the prism of justice, equity and sustainable development. The issue, though, is that accountability must be held during the periods when the corporate pull usually finds its way through into the field of politics and even the media, and the independent scrutiny and investigation must be an essential step towards rendering corporations consistent with such an international control and SDG promises.

Journalism as a Watchdog for SDG 16

The investigative journalism is a valid tool that ensures accountability in business processes and ensures the tenets of peace, justice, and active institutions as one of the strong mechanisms of business tool checks and balances executive on sustainable development goal 16. The journalists can achieve this by carrying out vulnerar investigations that allow them to unveil corruption, fraud and mal-practices in corporations compelling them to adopt transparent and responsible practices, as it would their constituent-pressure interest on sustainable development seeking an attractive wider strategy. The disclosure of illicit financial dealings, ecological improvidence, workplace unfairness and unethical supply chain strategies, investigative journalism is a second line governmental safeguard that supports feeble governance structures or dysfunctional governance frameworks. Numerous international and national studies demonstrate how journalism has transformed the manner in which companies conduct themselves and the legislation has been transformed. Panama, Paradise papers, published the information about offshore tax havens and how companies and high-end citizens have been able to evade taxes and launder money back even taking off directing international investigations, policy changes and strengthened financial legislation as examples. The extractive industries in India have been subjected to legal actions that have increased their-level of scrutiny because of the journalistic findings on mining scams and corporate-environmental violations. Similarly, the African reporting on the media on the companies involvement in extracting resources and corruption have also given the civil society more voice on the need to be more open on how the natural resources are handled. The examples show journalism as a transformative power both expository and change-inducing which results in institutional change. How successful such undertakings turn out to be however has much to do with the type of media freedom and autonomy element in a country.

The freedom of press makes it possible to allow the journalists to conduct investigations that are particularly sensitive safely without the consequences of censorship, intimidation, and retaliations that increases the efficiency of democratic institutions and citizen confidence. Conversely, absence of media accountability allotment leads to existence of a poor accountability and the stability of institutions is ordained to be corrupt and abused in a case where media is constrained by either corporate or political forces. When institutions are healthy, nevertheless, the media freedom together with the existence of healthy institutions does matter: a healthy journalism confronts the citizens with power, compels corporations to

act in accordance with moral actions and fosters law compliance that does not only ensure justice but openness as well. In that respect, journalism reacts as a reflector and mediator on the way to the liability, reflection of corporate malpractices on the society, and finds the halfway position in married reforms to facilitate the vision of just, inclusive, transparent societies offered by SDG 16.

Literature Review

Berger, G. (2020). The study points out, that, in addition to being a human right, freedom and security of journalists are indeed very crucial enablers of transparency, accountability as well as democracy. Berger states that all efforts of improving the environment towards sustainable development are destroyed once journalists feel threatened, censored, or silenced which compromises the entire structure of the robust institutions. He points out new possibilities introduced by the SDG framework in order to track and measure violations of the media workers systematically as one of the development indicators at the globe. The study demonstrates how data collection, reporting, and international cooperation have the potential to bolster the protection through alignment of media safety with the SDG monitoring mechanisms. This contribution shows the inherent connection to media freedom, the safety of journalists, and the fact that investigative journalism is becoming functional as a watchdog mechanism to have corporations and institutions accountable in meeting the targets of sustainable development.

Kumar, A. (2024). The paper places the media in a pivotal role of communicating knowledge to the masses, creating awareness, and activating masses to act towards the realization of the SDGs, as well as encompassing the role of the media organizations to be sustainably developed. Some of the structural issues that Kumar explores are lack of financial assets, political influence, poor information, and disruption caused by digital tools that adversely affect the contribution made by the media. Simultaneously, the article also marks the opportunities, specifically in capitalization on digital media techs, models of participatory communication and global collaborations and in pushing the sustainability narratives forward. The major service of the paper is the call to the industry of media to also engage proactively in the sustainability matter, which means that it does not only broadcast the information about the sustainability, but also reflects the values of the sustainability in its practices. Locating the media as a performer and topic of sustainability, Kumar expands the debate of journalism and corporate responsibility as a part of worldwide regimes of governance, in particular the SDGs and the promotion of SDG 16.

Zampone & Guidi (2024). The current article examines the role of sustainability reporting and assurance in terms of corporate disclosure of what progress is being made to the Sustainable Development Goals, the basis of which is seen through available evidence on communication on progress (CoP) reports. Zampone and Guidi examine the verbalization of sustainability commitments at the corporate level, especially with respect to transparency and accountability, and levels of enhancing credibility related to the practice of assurance. The research comes to the conclusion that others pursue structured sustainability reporting through the mechanisms of independent assurance, which benefits are more in conformity with the SDG disclosure requirements and stakeholder responsibility. This study is especially applied to SDG 16 because it emphasizes the value of corporate communication where the measurement and feedback are transparent and reliable to build a strong sense of trust and institutional integrity. The article however rates consequently against superficial/symbolic disclosures that are widely referred to as greenwashing and which gives its stakeholders a misleading perception on corporate contribution to sustainable development. The present study highlights the necessity of rigorous investigative journalism in order to confirm the corporate statements, which could and can be done by critically analyzing the advantages and flaws of the existing reporting

structures and explaining the existing corporate accountability-related mechanisms in relation to SDG monitoring and civic supervision.

Banda, F. U. (2015). With the dynamics between media, governance and development growing increasingly bonded, the paper is also in support of a design of curriculum that informs future journalists to engage with global cart troubling issues like poverty, inequality, environmental deterioration, and weak institutions. Banda is of the opinion that journalism education must transform to provide professional skills to learners and ethical consciousness that is desired to provide accountabilities and sustainability. The text puts into focus unconventional approaches, such as the use of development communication, investigative approach, and critical media literacy as part of the teaching models. Then, it should be mentioned that Banda also contextualizes journalism as an influential occupation that will be able to achieve the requirements of sustainable communities in case it is developed based on the precepts of justice, inclusivity, and transparency. In the case of SDG 16, the work plays a decisive role since it establishes the foundations of education as the basis of empowering the watchdog functions of journalism in maintaining peace, justice, and strong institutions. Connecting pedagogy and practice, Banda preconditions a new generation of journalists, who are determined towards sustainable development and accountability.

Bebbington & Unerman (2018). This article will focus on the facilitating nature of accounting research towards the realization of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, especially the enhanced accountability and transparency. According to Bebbington and Unerman, both accounting models and auditing methods are necessary instruments in determining and reporting corporate share of sustainability making sure that there is credibility in claims of sustainability. The research points out the fact that quality complete accounting frameworks can demonstrate the manner the resources are utilized, those inequalities, and the actions of the corporation that contribute to development of SDGs or those discouraging them. With reference to SDG 16, the article highlights that sound financial and non-financial reporting lead to belief and legality, empowerment of institutions, and decision-making by policymakers, investors, and civil society. Simultaneously, it warns that in the absence of critical interaction, accounting supports corporate dominance with the assistance of selective disclosures. The authors closely associate the accountability measures in conjunction with the development objectives and provide a good argument in favor of the interdisciplinary research, when accounting studies, investigative journalism, and governance studies become united and contribute to the realm of the peace and justice, along with the proving of the institutional clarity.

Methodology

The qualitative design of the research is coupled up with a quantitative data analysis to analyze how investigative journalism is used to hold companies accountable towards fulfilling the Sustainable Development Goals agenda and specifically SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions. This study design will be pegged at the multi-level methodology framework, and it includes a case study study, content analysis and a survey data. In the case of the historic study of the investigative reporting stories, such as the Panama Papers, the corporate environmental crimes and the investigations made in localities, they are mentioned with questioning how journalism can impact changes in corporations and governance. Primary research approach that includes the examinations of published evaluating reports classifies areas of corruption, tax dodging, labour maltreatment and environmental iniquities, hence relating them to the clear SDG 16 objectives. The survey information is also factored in to get the opinion of the people on the careers of journalism in enforcing accountability and justice. It also uses the triangulation of findings based on the secondary data based on international reports, legal documentations and even corporate disclosures. The approach underlines

reliability and validity by systematic data gathering, comparison across regions as well as thematic reporting of findings. In such a mixed-method approach, not only is information noted on the watchdog role of investigative journalism, but the practical, real-world effect of this policy on corporate behavior, governmental reforms support, and the SDG 16 target are also assessed.

Result and Discussion

Table 1: Frequency of Corporate Misconduct Exposed by Investigative Journalism (2015–2025)

Type of Misconduct	Number of Cases Exposed	Percentage (%)	Related SDG 16 Target
Corruption & Bribery	120	34%	16.5 – Reduce Corruption
Tax Evasion & Illicit Finance	85	24%	16.4 – Reduce Illicit Flows
Labor Rights Violations	60	17%	16.3 – Access to Justice
Environmental Violations	55	15%	16.6 – Accountable Institutions
Fraud & Misrepresentation	30	10%	16.10 – Public Access to Information
Total	350	100%	—

This table demonstrates the nature and occurrence of business abuse involving corporate misconduct as reported by the investigative journalism within the past 10 years which can help in supporting SDG 16. The most frequent is corruption and bribery cases of 34 each and this will require tightening measures against the abuse of power as a means of acquiring self-grants and the need to fight all forms of corruption (Target 16.5). Tax evasion and illicit financial flows comprising 24% show the amount of the financial malpractice that is affected by the access aimed at compromising economic justice and the rule of law (Target 16.4). Violation of labor rights (17%), as well as violation of the environment (15%): demonstrates corporate violations vulnerable to society and the environment as vulnerable as workers and systems, thus threatening social justice and institutional confidence (Targets 16.3 and 16.6). Fraud and misrepresentation are also still most important though have lesser scores at 10 as they undermine transparency and accessibility of the correct information by the population (Target 16.10).

Table 2: Regional Impact of Investigative Journalism on Corporate Accountability

Region	Investigations Conducted	Legal Reforms Triggered	Corporate Policy Changes	% Contribution to SDG 16 Progress
North America	75	30	45	40%
Europe	90	40	50	45%
Asia	100	35	60	35%
Africa	50	20	25	30%
Latin America	60	25	30	32%

This table will highlight a regional segmentation of the roles played by investigative journalism in creating corporate accountability and in furthering SDG 16. Asia leads by numbers (100) of the investigations, as it has been observed to be a dynamic media engagement with moderate policy impact (35 legal reforms). There are greater institutional reactions in Europe and North America, with Europe taking the most reforms (40) and corporate policy change (50) and North America with 45 policy changes, all of which are highly important to SDG 16 targets (45% and

40%, respectively). The few fewer investigations of Africa and Latin America (50 and 60) are used to exemplify the strength of journalism into weaker systems of governance since they have inspired serious changes and swayed citizen activism. The 30 percent and 32 percent contribution to SDG 16 development reflects the level of contribution journalism is making towards building a stronger institutional accountability even in adverse circumstances. On balance, the table highlights that in spite of the fact that investigative journalism is international, the implication depends on the geography of the impact based on media freedom, government systems and trust.

Table 3: Public Perception of Investigative Journalism and Corporate Accountability (Survey Data)

This table embodies the perceptions of the public on the role of investigative journalism in

Indicator	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
Investigative journalism strengthens institutions	45	35	10	7	3
Media exposes corporate wrongdoing effectively	50	30	12	6	2
Corporations improve after exposés	30	40	15	10	5
Journalists face significant risks	60	25	8	5	2
Media freedom is essential for SDG 16	70	20	5	3	2

accountability of a corporation and hence inclusiveness in its role on SDG 16. Consenting by a combined 80 percent, the opinion that investigative journalism empowers institutions is valid and all respondents give the work an even stronger dramatic. On the same note, 80 per cent feel that it is able to expose wrong doing, which observes its watchdog image. There is greater disagreement, however, as to whether corporations become better when they are exposed: 70% say that they indeed do get better, or strongly so, but 25% doubt this, indicating that journalism discloses misdeeds, but that the building-wide changes may not be always uniform. An amazing 85 percent of them believe that a sense of high-risk is been reflected on journalists as they are exposed to major threats that include censorship, intimidation, and violence which affects accountability exercises. Lastly, the most dominant finding is that media freedom is needed to achieve SDG 16 in a overwhelming 90 percent that media independence is vital to SDG 16 to achieve equality and accountability. These results reinforce the necessity of journalism and also gives prominence to the necessity to safeguard journalism.

Conclusion

An investigative journalism thus appears to be a very vital pillar towards enhancing the corporate accountability and institutional integrity under the Sustainable Development Goal 16, which accentuates a focus on peace, justice and strong institutions. As evident in the given study, investigative journalism sheds light on the existence of the so-called highs of offsprings of corruption, monetary malpractice, environmental corruption, and labour exploitation under the veil of so-called sustainable development, through its watchdog role, which in most cases fails to promote sustainable development and citizen trust. Its act of raising corporate malpractices makes businesses adjust their policy and operations to ethical governance and sustainability criteria, which directly lead to the achievement of SDG 16 targets and include the reduction of corruption, access to justice, and transparency, thus ensuring that SDG 16 attains the objectives of ensuring access to equity, access to justice, and concentrating on transparency. Our persons and world experiences testament to the upheaving power of

journalism in making changes, having a policy, and giving the civil society a voice to hold a government accountable. Meanwhile, the study also admits the obstacles investigative reporters deal with in their profession such as censorship, corporate pressure, intimidation by the government via law enforcement, and security issues, which usually hinder their work type to go on as they please. These problems indicate that there is a strong necessity to establish effective institutional restrictions and increase the freedom of the media in order to keep journalism efficient as it was previously. Ultimately, the findings solidify that the pledge of corporations towards the SDGs will have otherwise been veneering or even attributive, i.e., without free, independent and independent press. However, it is important to note that the investigative journalism is nothing but that: a reporting practice, but a democratic requirement, an instrument of justice, transparency and sustainability. With authority to give those discriminated a voice, rub corporations neck-and-neck and the rule-of-law with ensuring such place it on a leading role in changing the energy towards SDG 16 and the 2030 Agenda in general. Important will be the advocacy to protect the journalists more so as to encourage the media-policymakers-civil society cohort action in terms of maintaining power of investigative journalism action as an engine playing towards sustainable development and good governance.

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