



Ombudsman and Public Protector institutions are a cornerstone of accountable, transparent, and citizen-centred governance

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1. Executive Summary

Across Africa, and the world over, these institutions play a critical role in promoting administrative justice, addressing maladministration, and restoring public trust—functions that align directly with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 on effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions.

Despite their constitutional and statutory mandates, the contribution of many Ombudsman institutions to national development and SDG implementation remains sub-optimal. Persistent challenges—most notably political interference, inadequate resourcing, weak enforcement of recommendations, and limited integration into national planning and SDG monitoring frameworks—continue to undermine their effectiveness. At a time of increasing service-delivery pressures, fiscal constraints, and declining trust in public institutions, these weaknesses have become more urgent.

This policy brief argues that strengthening the independence of Ombudsman institutions and systematically integrating their work into SDG implementation and monitoring systems can significantly improve governance outcomes. Through leveraging citizen complaints and investigations as policy-relevant evidence, and investing in digital transformation and regional cooperation, governments can unlock the full potential of Ombudsman institutions to accelerate sustainable development and ensure that no one is left behind.

2. Problem Statement

Despite being constitutionally or statutorily mandated to promote accountability and address maladministration, Ombudsman and Public Protector institutions in many African countries face significant structural and operational challenges that undermine their effectiveness. These challenges include insufficient institutional independence, political interference, inadequate financial and human resources, and limited enforcement capacity. Furthermore, there is often weak integration of Ombudsman-generated data into national planning and SDG monitoring systems, resulting in the underutilisation of valuable citizen-generated insights. Complaints received by these

institutions frequently reflect real and pressing service delivery failures across sectors such as health, education, water, and administrative justice, yet this information is not systematically harnessed to inform policy decisions. Consequently, opportunities to strengthen governance, improve service delivery, and advance inclusive development are missed, thereby slowing progress toward the achievement of the SDGs.

The central policy problem facing Ombudsman and Public Protector institutions in many African countries is not the absence of legal mandates, but the gap between mandate and operational effectiveness. Although these institutions are established to promote accountability and administrative justice, their ability to influence governance outcomes is frequently constrained by limited institutional independence, political interference, inadequate financial and human resources, and weak mechanisms for enforcing recommendations.

This problem matters now because countries are under growing pressure to improve service delivery and demonstrate progress toward the SDGs ahead of the 2030 deadline. Ombudsman institutions receive large volumes of complaints that expose recurring failures in sectors such as health, education, water provision, social protection, and public administration. These complaints constitute a rich source of citizen-generated data on systemic governance weaknesses. Yet, in most cases, this evidence is not integrated into national planning, budgeting, or SDG monitoring and reporting systems.

The result is a missed opportunity to address governance failures early, improve service delivery outcomes, and rebuild public trust. Communities—particularly women, youth, and marginalised groups—remain disproportionately affected by unresolved maladministration, while governments lose a practical tool for evidence-based policymaking. Without deliberate policy action to strengthen and integrate Ombudsman institutions, progress toward SDG 16 and related goals will remain slow and uneven.

3. The concept of and foundations of Ombudsman

Globally, the legitimacy and importance of Ombudsman institutions are affirmed by key normative frameworks. The United Nations General Assembly Resolution A/RES/75/186 (2020) highlights their contribution to good governance, the rule of law, and human rights, affirming their independence, transparency, and fairness. It underscores the value of Ombudsman institutions in resolving systemic grievances, strengthening public accountability, and mediating between citizens and state institutions. The resolution also endorses the Venice Principles (2019), which constitute 25 standards governing the protection and promotion of Ombudsman institutions. These principles call for legal entrenchment, functional and financial independence, secure tenure, and adequate investigative powers—structural conditions necessary for effective oversight.

Within the African context, the OR Tambo Minimum Standards provide a continental benchmark tailored to local governance realities. Adopted at the African Ombudsman

Summit, these standards emphasize constitutional protections, autonomy, sufficient resources, broad mandates, accountability, and impartiality as prerequisites for effective Ombudsman functions. Combined with Africa-specific mechanisms such as the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM)—which offers governance assessment and peer-learning platforms—these standards elevate Ombudsman institutions as essential actors in national and regional governance processes linked to Agenda 2063 and the SDGs.

4. Policy Context

The importance of Ombudsman institutions in promoting good governance and accountability is well established in both global and regional normative frameworks. The United Nations General Assembly Resolution A/RES/75/186 (2020) recognises their role in advancing human rights, transparency, and the rule of law, while the Venice Principles (2019) provide internationally accepted standards for ensuring their independence, effectiveness, and operational integrity. Within the African context, the OR Tambo Minimum Standards offer region-specific benchmarks that emphasise autonomy, adequate resourcing, and broad investigative mandates. In addition, mechanisms such as the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) promote governance monitoring and peer learning across the continent. These frameworks collectively position Ombudsman institutions as essential actors in advancing the SDGs, particularly SDG 16. Their direct engagement with citizens enables them to capture lived experiences and identify systemic governance challenges, making them valuable contributors to national development processes.

5. The SDG and the Accountability nexus

The case for integrating Ombudsman functions with SDG implementation is compelling. Ombudsman institutions receive complaints that often highlight the everyday failures of service delivery—delays in accessing healthcare (SDG 3), inequities in education (SDG 4), gender-based discrimination (SDG 5), water service interruptions (SDG 6), and administrative injustices (SDG 16). When categorised systematically, these complaints become rich, citizen-generated datasets that can inform national SDG indicators, Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), and policy reforms. The AORC training programme explicitly recognises this potential and outlines approaches for linking Ombudsman mandates to SDG monitoring, identifying systemic gaps, and leveraging investigations as tools for oversight.

Despite their potential, Ombudsman and Public Protector institutions often operate in contexts characterised by political interference, limited budgets, administrative resistance, and institutional weaknesses and fragilities. These undermine their ability to conduct systemic investigations, publish critical findings, and ensure implementation of their recommendations. Politically dynamic environments, as highlighted during the

Africa Ombudsman Research Centre (AORC) training programme, present legal, fiscal, and administrative challenges that require intentional strategies to safeguard institutional independence and legitimacy. The normative frameworks such as the Venice Principles and the OR Tambo Minimum Standards exist to reinforce institutional resilience and protect Ombudsman institutions from these pressures.

Ombudsman offices are part of the good governance and accountability ecosystem, and as such, they are part of the state governance architecture. Their findings elevate the public's lived experiences, and as such should influence policy directions and options that result in policy changes to ensure no one is left behind in accessing services. Independence and autonomy must be safeguarded at all material times. Autonomous mandates enable impartial reviews of government performance, strengthening democratic governance and citizen confidence. Ombudsmen probe administrative fairness and service failures, adding qualitative depth to oversight, and complement the work of other oversight bodies.

Digital transformation offers new avenues for strengthening Ombudsman contributions to the SDGs. Emerging tools—including AI-assisted complaint categorisation, digital case-management systems, and real-time analytics dashboards—can enhance the efficiency, transparency, and responsiveness of Ombudsman operations. The AORC programme highlights how digitalisation and innovation can support SDG monitoring, enable predictive insights, and facilitate shared investigative capabilities across jurisdictions, for example through a regional “Virtual Facility.” IOI guidance further reinforces the importance of Ombudsman participation in the global SDG agenda and encourages institutions to articulate their contribution more explicitly.

6. What Is to Be Done

To maximise the contribution of Ombudsman and Public Protector institutions to the SDGs, several practical steps are needed:

- Formulate and pass legislative and constitutional reforms (within 2–3 years). National governments and parliaments should strengthen or amend constitutional and statutory frameworks, to the extent possible, in line with the Venice Principles and OR Tambo Minimum Standards, to guarantee financial and operational independence, secure tenure, and protection from political interference.
- Institutionalise integration into national SDG processes (immediate to medium term). Planning ministries, national statistics offices, and SDG coordination mechanisms should formally integrate Ombudsman findings into national development plans and Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs). Ombudsman

institutions should be recognised as active contributors to VNR processes, given their direct access to citizen-generated evidence.

- Align complaints management with SDG targets (within 18 months). Ombudsman offices should adopt standardised SDG taxonomies for categorising complaints and investigations within their case-management systems. This will enable the production of SDG-aligned analytics and periodic reports that inform policy reform and resource allocation.
- Invest in digital transformation and skills development (ongoing). Governments and development partners should support the rollout of modern case-management systems, AI-assisted complaint analysis, and secure data-sharing platforms. Targeted investment in youth skills development should be prioritised to build sustainable institutional capacity.
- Strengthen follow-up and accountability mechanisms (ongoing). Structured collaboration between Ombudsman institutions, parliaments, supreme audit institutions, anti-corruption agencies, and civil society should be formalised to ensure timely implementation of recommendations and improved accountability outcomes.
- Enhance regional cooperation and peer learning (ongoing). Regional platforms such as AORC, AOMA, IOI, and the APRM should be leveraged for joint research, peer learning, and coordinated investigations on cross-border governance challenges relevant to the SDGs.

7. Key Recommendations

To realise the full potential of Ombudsman and Public Protector institutions, governments should prioritise strengthening their independence through constitutional and legislative safeguards aligned with international standards such as the Venice Principles. Ensuring secure tenure, adequate funding, and protection from political interference is essential for maintaining institutional credibility and effectiveness. In addition, Ombudsman-generated data should be systematically integrated into national SDG monitoring and reporting processes, including Voluntary National Reviews, to ensure that citizen experiences inform policy decisions. Institutions should also develop SDG-aligned frameworks for categorising complaints, enabling the generation of meaningful data and insights that support evidence-based governance. Investment in digital transformation is equally critical, as modern case management systems, artificial intelligence tools, and real-time data analytics can enhance efficiency, transparency, and responsiveness. Furthermore, strengthening collaboration between Ombudsman institutions and key stakeholders, including parliament, audit institutions, anti-corruption bodies, and civil society, will improve follow-up on recommendations and reinforce accountability. Finally, regional cooperation and knowledge sharing through

platforms such as the Africa Ombudsman Research Centre and the African Ombudsman and Mediators Association should be enhanced to facilitate the exchange of best practices and address cross-border governance challenges.

8. Conclusion

Ombudsman and Public Protector institutions are central to Africa's ambition to build peaceful, just, and inclusive societies. Their roles in receiving citizen complaints, conducting investigations, identifying systemic failures, promoting administrative justice, and holding institutions accountable make them uniquely suited to support and accelerate SDG implementation. South Africa, at the dawn of democracy, and given its painful past, deliberately established the office as Public Protector, an institution mandated to be the protector of the public.

With the 2030 deadline on the horizon, weak accountability is a barrier to sustainable development. Ombudsman and Public Protector institutions are repositories of real-time evidence on how governance failures affect citizens' daily lives. Failure to strengthen and integrate these institutions into national SDG mechanisms will be a missed opportunity to restore public trust.

Governments, parliaments, and regional bodies must now act decisively to safeguard the independence of Ombudsman institutions, embed their findings in national SDG monitoring systems, and invest in the digital and human capacities required for oversight in changing times. Strengthened Ombudsman institutions are not merely oversight bodies; they are strategic partners in development. Their contributions and recognition is essential for translating governance commitments into measurable development outcomes.

9. References

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