



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
18 November 2024

English only

Commission for Social Development

Sixty-Third Session

10-14 February 2025

Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly: Priority Theme: “Strengthening solidarity, social inclusion and social cohesion to accelerate the delivery of the commitments of the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development and Programme of Action of the World Summit for Social Development as well as the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

Statement submitted by << Please provide the name of your organization here. >>, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.



Statement

The *Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development* insists that the only true development is that which is both people-centered and sustainable. In other words, it calls for the construction of an economy that exists to serve people and that operates within the constraints of our ecosystems and their capacities for regeneration. We hear this definition of “development” powerfully reiterated in the framework of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which integrates social, economic, and environmental objectives and understands them as interdependent elements of progress.

As members of the Justice Coalition of Religious (23 non-governmental organisations representing Catholic Sisters, Brothers, priests and their partners with a collective presence in over 100 countries), our perspective on development is rooted in Catholic Social Teaching’s principles of “preferential option for the poor,” “stewardship of creation,” and “subsidiarity.” We share a commitment to the holistic approach to development that was envisioned by the Copenhagen Declaration and the Sustainable Development Goals. Nearly every congregation in our coalition has established one or more internal bodies, offices, networks, and/or personnel-formation programmes dedicated to “Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation.” These myriad structures and programmes within our institutions are a reflection of our shared perspective that humanity’s potential to enjoy right relations among ourselves requires that we also establish right relations with the rest of the living community with whom we share planet Earth. We therefore view any project that pits the environmental, social, and economic elements of progress against one another as a *hindrance* to genuine development.

Despite States’ resounding agreement to this tripartite understanding of development, our members around the world have identified a deeply concerning pattern of so-called “development projects” that create or permit grave environmental destruction in the name of economic growth, which is justified by its purported aims of reducing unemployment and poverty. Unfortunately, as our members have witnessed in settings as varied as India, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Uganda, the United States, and across Latin America, this sustained-economic-growth-at-any-environmental-cost approach to “development” is, at its core, a land and resource grab under the convenient guise of a poverty-reduction measure. It has taken the form of rapid urbanization projects in many countries and the form of deforestation to fuel wood-burning factories or timber export-operations in Uganda and Zambia. A superabundance of examples have emerged across Latin America:

- The Marina and Tourism Project in the Southern Zone (Marina Golfito) of Costa Rica intended to promote tourism and job creation but destroyed mangroves, generated coastal pollution due to the construction of tourist infrastructure, altered marine ecosystems, and actually caused unemployment among fishermen and farmers who could not all be absorbed into the tourism sector.
- In Honduras, Zones of Employment and Economic Development have incentivised transnational corporations to appropriate Honduran lands and displace their residents by offering tax exemptions to foreign companies. In the case of open-pit mining companies, Honduran labourers who were theoretically meant to be aided by an employment opportunity instead developed cancers and skin diseases due to toxic exposure.
- Similarly disastrous cases of multinational corporations’ mining activities have been reported in Venezuela, Brazil, Guatemala, and Costa Rica, often in the absence of adequate environmental impact studies; popular consultation; and/or the free, prior, and informed consent of Indigenous Peoples on whose territories they encroached.
- The invitation of foreign mining companies to operate freely in Colombia has also resulted in the assassinations and threats on the lives of Central American environmental defenders.
- In Cuba, State resources have been so disproportionately allocated to economic development in the tourism sector and organizing of non-governmental development projects has been so legally impeded, that social-development programmes for food security, education, healthcare, and energy access have been utterly hollowed out and environmental concerns have been neglected entirely in the country’s development agenda.

In each of these cases, we have found these environmentally sacrificial “development” regimes to be much more effective at bolstering the assets of those (within and beyond the country) who already hold the most resources and power rather than buoying the socioeconomic cause of the poor and marginalized inside the country.

Conversely, our members have also observed the enactment of projects that claim to achieve environmental aspects of development via the displacement, impoverishment, and further marginalization of the social groups that already face significant social exclusion, geographic isolation, and/or economic disadvantage. Specific examples of such “development” projects include the following:

- In India:
 - Narmada Project displaced tribals in Madhya Pradesh;
 - Double tracking railway line across Western Ghats (UNESCO Heritage), Goa, and Karnataka destroyed forests and living system in forests;
 - Bhutani Project among many others has been grabbing land of the locals for the benefit of investors and business people in Delhi;
 - Projects being planned in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands are driving Tribal Peoples away from their homes.
- In Kenya, the Ongiek tribe that lives in the Mau Forests were evicted from their ancestral land under a State policy intended to protect forests. Because their culture and livelihoods depend on forests and they were not compensated or provided with a viable alternative land, many members of the tribe now live as squatters and struggle to meet their basic needs.
- In Zambia, the government's refusal to put an electric fence at the borders of game parks and reserves causes people with farms in the adjacent land to lose their entire yield to wandering animals and face both an income and food shortage for their households.
- In Costa Rica, the El Diquís Hydroelectric Project, which is currently in suspension due to community opposition, aims to increase the generation of renewable energy, but would flood indigenous territories of the Brörán and Térraba peoples and destroyed the natural habitats and essential resources for the life of these communities.

When these projects are introduced to the public, the governmental entity leading their implementation often misrepresents environmental, social, and economic progress as being in conflict with one another rather than mutually reinforcing. The public is presented with a false choice between the eradication of poverty and the conservation of ecosystems (i.e. between the well-being of people and that of the planet). The widespread nature of this phenomenon speaks to either a fundamental misunderstanding of the spirit of the Copenhagen Declaration and the Sustainable Development Goals and/or to Member States' fatal lack of commitment to them. In response to the alarming trend, we recommend the following actions by the Member States of the UN:

- Designate meaningful leadership roles for local Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in the design process (and the potential implementation and evaluation processes) for any project aimed at environmental protection of their home ecosystem to ensure proper accounting for the long-standing, traditional contributions of their Peoples to the sustained health of that ecosystem and integration of their Peoples' hard-earned wisdom about that ecosystem
- Insist on the enlistment of local labour and a system of community or worker ownership in any private entity that is issued a permit for a job-creation or economic-development project
- Adhere to ILO Convention 169 by following all UN-REDD guidance on obtaining free, prior, informed consent from populations who stand to be displaced or otherwise negatively impacted by a potential development project
- Comply with the UN Environment Programme's guidance on "conducting integrated environmental assessments" prior to signing contracts or breaking ground on a development project
- Establish "firewalls" that prohibit any government official with a mandate to assess permits for or oversee extractive activities or economic development from simultaneously holding shares of ownership of any extractive corporation
- Empower marginalized communities through (a) citizen training for their participation in the election of authorities such as mayors and deputies, judges and prosecutors and through (b) the provision of *independent* legal counsel to facilitate their access to justice in the event that their rights are violated
- Establish stronger protocols for accountability to the public for utilisation of taxes and of loans from foreign governments and International Financial Institutions in the public interest, including a mechanism for expulsion and banning from office any official found unable to account for public funds placed in their custody

In the interest of realizing livable social protection floors for all people and reversing the trend of skyrocketing social inequalities, we implore all UN Member States to enact these measures and to partner as much as possible with faith leaders and other people of good will. We stand ready to build a just and peaceful world through an integral vision of development that is people-centered and environmentally sustainable.