



Joint Statement at the High Level Political Forum 2017

The 2017 High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development 10-19 July 2017 counted with the participation of almost 2,500 representatives from civil society around the world, an increase of 1,000 from 2016. This is a clear sign of the engagement and commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals on the part of civil society. Action for Sustainable Development includes over 1,700 members in over 150 countries who share a clear enthusiasm and determination to make a strong contribution to this agenda and to share our expertise with decision-makers. However we are concerned that the spaces for dialogue remain too limited.

1. Responding to the 2017 theme: "*Eradicating poverty and promoting prosperity in a changing world*"

The theme of this year's HLPF recognises the central need for poverty eradication as a vital step to guarantee a sustainable future for all. We note the reference to 'transformative efforts' and the need to reach those furthest behind first.

Although we welcome the stated aim of UN member states to end poverty and combat inequalities, we remain concerned that what has been presented in Voluntary National Reviews this year demonstrates that the pace of change is still too slow, and the reality remains that the scale of inequality globally is rising. Information provided by CSO groups, through their Civil Society Reports¹ also indicates that wealth concentration is continuing at a ferocious pace, while economic weakness is met with even greater 'austerity' by governments.

These are universal challenges. Governments in North and South continue to reduce investment in public services, accelerating the process of dismantling social protection and labor legislation, with long-term underfunding of essential health, education, gender, innovation and environmental programs. Simultaneously there are increasing investments in the private sector and reductions in corporate taxation. If these worrying trends remain unaddressed, they will undermine the universal commitment to eradicate poverty, and will instead contribute to its exacerbation.

2. The central role of peaceful, just and inclusive societies

Action for Sustainable Development notes the reference to the importance of peaceful, just and inclusive societies in the Ministerial Declaration, in particular the need for good governance and the effective rule of law. It is our view that shared principles of freedom of assembly and association, coupled with freedom of expression provide the underlying bedrock for healthy inclusive societies. Member States must recognise that we will not realize the targets in Agenda 2030 if communities continue to be excluded from decision-making processes.

¹ <http://action4sd.org/tools-resources/>

In this context the degree of openness of civic space in the countries under review at the HLPF 2017 is also concerning. In 2017, of 44 countries under review, only 10 are considered 'open', while a further 12 are perceived as 'narrowed', including Italy, Slovenia, Japan, Chile and India. What is most concerning is that the other half of countries under review are evaluated to be 'obstructed' including Brazil and Kenya; 'repressed' including Zimbabwe and Bangladesh; or 'closed', including Belarus and Azerbaijan².

It is particularly concerning to witness the rise of national populist tendencies in traditional democracies, such as the US, and UK, where leaders are perceived to be inflaming an already difficult situation for minorities, through the use of language which contributes to their exclusion. While at the same time many newer democracies are also backsliding on key indicators of good governance. This analysis suggests that the commitment to open inclusive societies is not felt on the ground in a wide range of countries and that there is an urgent need for governments to work in partnership with other stakeholders to ensure that this commitment, which they agreed, is delivered in practice.

3. National level implementation of the Voluntary National Reviews

Now, in the second year of implementation of Agenda 2030, it is critically important to ensure that the HLPF VNR process provides a real mechanism for accountability of the delivery by member state of their commitments, including meaningful engagement with citizens. The HLPF has the potential to be a much needed moment for reflection, review, in order to identify good practice and jointly address challenges.

In order to understand how far the review process has engaged citizens and civil society, we have carried out national reports in 20 of the 44 VNR countries on the participation of civil society in the reviews³, there are several notable trends:

- At least 10 countries have established high level governmental committees or parliamentary groups to lead the delivery of Agenda 2030,
- In a few cases there is still a lack of specific implementation plans
- In many cases although there is a sense that the SDGs are included in existing national plans, the 'transformational' aspect of the agenda has been significantly diluted or lost
- Reporting on the inter-connected dimension of the agenda and its synergies across different thematic areas is limited due to budget constraints- each government department has a limited remit. Intersectionality, climate change and the pledge to *leave no one behind*, are the areas that have the most potential for transformational change but are inadequately represented in the reports.
- The local level of government is still not very aware or engaged with Agenda 2030
- Engagement with civil society and broader stakeholders remains patchy

We also would like to stress that the implementation of the SDGs should be part of an integrated approach with the Paris Climate Agreement. One of the tools which could promote an integrated

² According to the CIVICUS Monitor: <https://monitor.civicus.org/>

³ <http://action4sd.org/tools-resources/>

implementation approach is precisely national reporting. We urge member states to do their best to include climate change in their planning, delivery and consequently in the formulation of their Voluntary National Reviews.

It is vital that governments consider different climate scenarios and how these might impact on the delivery of the SDGs. Reflecting the agreement to implement the goals as a whole package, member states need to identify how climate change intersects with the pledge to Leave No One Behind, for example by identifying which groups are most vulnerable to climate impacts and how this relates to issues of marginalisation and discrimination.

4. Role of the UN

We note that the UN is providing an increasing amount of information and documentation on the UN DESA HLPF website, which provides a useful entry point for engagement. **However we are very concerned that there is still no space to feature the national Civil Society Reports on the UN website.**

It is essential for UN country level teams to engage more directly in ensuring specific national plans are delivered which provide support to citizens, particularly those who have been left behind. It is clear that more work should be done by the UNDP and other delivery agencies to contribute towards ensuring that SDG implementation is delivered in an inclusive way and that they are able to work with civil society and key stakeholders at a national level to drive a truly transformational agenda.

We would welcome a full response on the UN's position and its expectation relating to citizen and civil society participation in the implementation and reporting.

5. Role and capacities of CSOs

Our country reports, demonstrate that civil society is mobilising. There are a number of active national coalitions of civil society around the world, such as in Kenya, Brazil, India, Nepal, including in so-called 'developed' countries such as Italy, Sweden and Japan, which have been very active in working together to ensure all voices are heard at the national level and to enable a broad inclusive process of dialogue.

However, the opportunities for engagement for CSOs are still limited, even though Agenda 2030 foresees meaningful participation of civil society. We therefore urge Member States and the United Nations to take the following recommendations into account:

- To ensure the success of Agenda 2030, civil society's role in monitoring and implementation of the agenda must be more than just an informal one.
- CSOs must be given access to formal roles, guaranteeing their participation in
 - (i) clear consultation processes on government implementation plans and measures,
 - (ii) formal representation mechanisms which oversee implementation efforts,
 - (iii) channels for participation in accountability processes, amongst others.

- The international community should support and fully resource a coordinated approach to the capacity development of civil society to enable implementation and effective monitoring of the Agenda across the globe.

Finally, we reaffirm our call for the development and adequate resourcing of structured and meaningful engagement of CSOs, in Agenda 2030 implementation and monitoring at all levels.

About Action for Sustainable Development

Action for Sustainable Development is a civil society platform with over 1,700 members in over 150 countries, we work collaboratively to create space and facilitate citizens and civil society organisations at local, national, regional and global levels to organise, mobilise, advocate and act collectively in pursuit of sustainable development.

We came together to inspire and to commit to actions that empower all peoples, especially those who have been marginalised, and in order to collectively tackle the root causes of inequalities, injustice, human rights violations, poverty, environmental degradation and climate change. We seek to be part of creating a world where social, environmental and development justice is assured and all people are able to live in a prosperous, healthy, secure and peaceful environment.