



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
11 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”

Statement submitted by Casa Generalizia della Societa del Sacro Cuore; Company of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul; Congregation of the Mission; Congregations of St. Joseph; Dominican Leadership Conference; Edmund Rice International; Fondazione Proclade Internazionale-Onlus; Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary-Loreto Generalate; International Presentation Association; Loretto Community (Sisters of Loretto); Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers; Maryknoll Sisters of St. Dominic, Inc.; Passionists International; Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary; Salesian Missions, Inc.; Sisters of Charity Federation; Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur; Society of Catholic Medical Missionaries; UNANIMA International; VIVAT International, 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.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

The *Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development* insists that the only true development is that which is both people-centered and sustainable. 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 (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 offices 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 of 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. Governments justify the environmental cost with the purported aims of reducing unemployment and poverty. Unfortunately, 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. These grabs have taken countless forms:

- Rapid urbanization projects displaced informal-sector workers in settings as varied as Ethiopia, Nigeria, and the United States.
- Deforestation fuels wood-burning factories and timber-export operations in Uganda and Zambia, respectively.
- Railway lines destroy forest ecosystems across India’s Western Ghats (biodiversity hotspot with UNESCO Heritage designation), Goa, and Karnataka.
- The Marina and Tourism Project in the Southern Zone of Costa Rica intended to promote tourism and job creation, but tourist-infrastructure construction destroyed mangroves and marine ecosystems, actually *causing* unemployment among fishermen and farmers who could not all be absorbed into the tourism sector.
- Zones of Employment and Economic Development offer transnational corporations financial incentives to operate in Honduras, often appropriating land and displacing its residents in the process. Open-pit mining companies, theoretically aiding Honduran labourers with an employment opportunity, exposed them to skin-disease- and cancer-causing toxins.
- Similarly disastrous cases of multinational corporations’ mining activities were reported from Venezuela, Brazil, Guatemala, and Costa Rica, often featuring failures to study environmental impact; conduct popular consultation; and/or

obtain free, prior, and informed consent of Indigenous Peoples on whom the project encroached.

- Allowance of mining companies to operate freely in Colombia has also resulted in assassinations of and threats to Central American environmental defenders who resist them.
- In Cuba, the national development agenda has completely neglected environmental concerns and allocated public resources disproportionately to economic development in the tourism sector. Together with legal impediments to non-governmental organisation of social-development projects, it has hollowed out social-development programmes for nutrition, education, healthcare, employment, and energy.

In each of these cases, environmentally sacrificial “development” regimes have proven much more effective at bolstering the assets of those (within and beyond the country) who already hold the most resources and power rather than raising the socioeconomic condition of the poor and marginalized.

Conversely, our members have also observed the enactment of projects that claim to achieve environmental-development objectives via the displacement, impoverishment, and further marginalization of social groups that already facing social exclusion, isolation, and/or disadvantage:

- In India, the Narmada Valley Development Project, a complex of hydroelectric dams constructed without a proper Environmental Impact Assessment, has displaced thousands of upstream Tribal People in Madhya Pradesh and reduced downstream flow dramatically enough to destroy fisheries, subsistence farming prospects, biodiversity, and sources of potable groundwater. Meanwhile, the Great Nicobar Island Development Project plans to clear forest areas reserved for the Nicobarese Tribal People in addition to threatening coral colonies and turtle habitats in order to set up a solar energy plant along with air- and seaports.
- In Kenya, the Ongiek tribe were evicted from their ancestral land (the Mau Forests) under a State forest-conservation policy. 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, State refusal to install electric fences around game parks threatens neighboring farmers with crop-yield losses to wandering animals followed by income and food shortages for their households.
- In Costa Rica, the El Diquís Hydroelectric Project aims to increase the generation of renewable energy, but it would flood the territories of the Brörán and Térraba Peoples and destroy the natural habitats and essential resources on which these communities rely.

When such 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 Member States’ fundamental misunderstanding of the spirit of the *Copenhagen Declaration* and the Sustainable Development Goals or to States’ fatal lack of commitment to those frameworks. In response to this alarming trend, we urge UN Member States to take the following actions:

- Designate meaningful leadership roles for local Indigenous/Tribal Peoples in the design process (and potential implementation and evaluation) for any project aimed at environmental protection of their home ecosystem to ensure proper accounting for the long-standing, traditional contributions of their People to the sustained health of that ecosystem and integration of their People’s hard-earned wisdom about it
- Insist on the enlistment of local labour and a system of 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 impacted by a 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 oversee or assess permits for economic development from simultaneously holding shares of ownership of any extractive corporation or real-estate developer
- Empower marginalized communities through citizen training for participation in the election of authorities (e.g. mayors, deputies, judges, and prosecutors) and through provision of *independent* legal counsel to guarantee their access to justice in the event of rights violations
- Establish stronger protocols for State accountability to the public for utilisation of taxes and loans from foreign governments and International Financial Institutions, including a mechanism for expulsion and barring from office any official found unable to account for public funds placed in their custody.

In the interest of realizing liveable 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, peaceful world through an integral vision of development that is people-centered and environmentally sustainable.