

Joint Declaration on SDG Summit adopted by the 29th Annual Meeting of Special Rapporteurs, Independent Experts, and Chairpersons of the Working Groups of the Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council

Geneva, 16 June 2023

This declaration has been adopted at the 29th Annual Meeting of Special Rapporteurs, Independent Experts, and Chairpersons of the Working Groups of the Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council, Geneva, Switzerland. It is aimed to contribute to the SDG Summit process. This contribution aims to reflect on the critical role of the summit halfway to the 2030 Agenda deadline. It underscores the critical role of human rights as a tool for transformative change that is urgently needed to meet all the goals by 2030.

I. Our shared resolve

1. We - the Special Rapporteurs, Independent Experts and Chairpersons of Working Groups of the Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council - met in Geneva from 13 to 16 June 2023 at our 29th Annual Meeting. This declaration marks our call to the Heads of State and Government who will meet at the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development under the auspices of the General Assembly or “the SDG Summit” in September 2023.
2. We call on all Governments to fully implement the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development for the people, planet, prosperity, peace, and partnership, and prioritizing those furthest behind in the process including those historically excluded and in situations of vulnerability. To truly leave no one behind, international human rights obligations and recommendations stemming from Treaty Bodies, universal periodic review and the Special Procedures should be integrated into national action plans and domestic implementation mechanisms.
3. This half-way point of the 2030 Agenda coincides with the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which we will mark in December 2023, and the 30th anniversary of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action. We call on all Governments to follow the vision of the UDHR and put human rights at the front and centre of all the processes related to the 2030 Agenda, keeping in mind that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights” and that the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs seek to realize the human rights of all. The Goals are built on a robust foundation of international human rights law and thus constitute obligations for States.¹
4. We stress that all human rights are universal, indivisible, interdependent, and interrelated and that sustainable development and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. We recall that the principle of progressive attainment of economic social and cultural rights require states to maximise resources for this purpose and that the right to non-discrimination is subject to immediate realization while rights are progressively realized. We are concerned that the right to self-

¹ A/77/284

determination, which is the right of people to exist and develop as a people, is gravely misunderstood. We are further concerned that the right to development, cultural rights, and access to information are not given attention as they are an integral part of sustainable development and the 2030 Agenda.

5. We believe in a multilateral world based on international law and we remind States of their duty to cooperate to realize human rights. We therefore call on Governments, business, and civil society to work together through international cooperation and solidarity to achieve human rights and inclusive sustainable development for all. We remain resolute against all forms of colonialism including ongoing forms of settler-colonialism. We stand ready to engage constructively with all stakeholders to reach those goals, including through technical cooperation and assistance.

II. Our changed world – Progress and remaining gaps and challenges

6. We agree with the UNSG's statement in the [SDG Progress Report 2023](#) that “the SDGs are in deep trouble.”
7. Since the last SDG Summit in 2019, many countries have experienced social and economic crises, and extreme poverty in countries across all the regions has become more severe; as a result, the enjoyment of civil, economic, political, social, and cultural rights is in decline.
8. COVID-19 exacerbated inequalities within and across nations, including extreme poverty, and triggered the largest economic crisis in more than a century. Emerging economies have experienced severe impacts as a consequence of the pandemic, and now require more time to recover from the loss of lives, incomes and livelihoods. Furthermore, we have seen the lowering of standards around the rule of law which has facilitated the commission of human rights violations by states and private actors. Enforced disappearances and attacks on human rights defenders and journalists increased, and we saw a multiplication of scourges such as racism, violence against women, xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia, intolerance, and discrimination based on religion or belief. We are alarmed at the decline of respect for civil and political rights in many parts of the world and increased restrictions on the rights to freedom of opinion and expression and association and peaceful assembly to the detriment of inclusive, participatory development, exacerbated by a weakening of justice and respect for the rule of law.
9. COVID-19 also reminded the global community that achieving the SDGs requires more effective international cooperation and solidarity, including with and from the private sector, in accessing essential medicines and sharing scientific knowledge widely.
10. COVID-19 affected more than 1.5 billion students with the most vulnerable learners hit hardest. Coping and response mechanisms often relied on promoting digital technology and hybrid models that risk further disadvantaging those already disadvantaged; usage also raised serious questions about data mining and undermining the right to privacy. States should ensure that the introduction of digital technologies does not introduce hidden costs for education, hence jeopardizing the right to free primary and secondary education, as well as the progressive realization of free higher education.
11. The world we are living in now is facing additional challenges related to the climate emergency, biodiversity collapse and pervasive toxic pollution, economic and energy crises, environmental degradation, pollution, forced migration, declining democracy and growing autocracy, all of which are jeopardizing the path towards the full enjoyment of

human rights and sustainable development. The recent recognition of the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment requires concrete and tangible action to be taken by Governments, including through due diligence regarding the practices of the private sector, to protect the environment, phase out fossil fuels, end deforestation, eliminate pollution, and curtail biodiversity loss before it is too late.

12. The proliferation of protracted and new international and non-international armed conflicts around the world jeopardizes the path towards the full enjoyment of human rights and sustainable development. Atrocities, including war crimes and crimes against humanity are being committed by States and non-State actors, including mercenaries and related actors, at a scale never seen, and the involvement of such actors is prolonging conflicts globally.
13. We are concerned that the 2030 Agenda, including actions and measures taken by the UN system, continues to be implemented from a top-down approach which has had little impact on the ground. Two billion people still lack access to safely managed drinking water, while 3.6 billion people lack access to safe managed sanitation. The lack of clean drinking water causes an unacceptable number of deaths annually, with women and girls particularly impacted. The recent Water Conference in New York should mark a turning point in the attention paid by the UN and all States to the implementation of SDG 6.
14. Many countries, particularly in cities and urban settings, are facing a worsening housing crisis, where housing simply does not exist for all. At the same time, housing affordability is also plummeting under the pressures of financialization, the cost-of-living crisis, and energy poverty. While more housing is needed to ensure the right to adequate housing for all, it is more important than ever to ensure that the building and construction industries do not contribute further to the climate crisis and promote green architecture.
15. An estimated 5.1 billion people around the world—two-thirds of the population on earth—lack meaningful access to justice. This estimate includes communities that cannot resolve everyday justice problems, people left out of the protection of the law, and people who live in extreme conditions of injustice like modern slavery or trafficking situations.
16. The central promise of the 2030 Agenda is that “no one will be left behind”, but it is still too often used as a popular phrase rather than a policy imperative that leads to concrete transformative action. We are concerned that people in vulnerable or marginalized situations, due to discrimination and inequalities and location, are not only being left behind but are being pushed even further behind. Rapid advances in new technologies are creating new inequalities. Around 2.7 billion people have no access to the Internet and many others have no meaningful connectivity. More concerted efforts are needed to intentionally center people in the most vulnerable situations and countries in planned transformative interventions.
17. We recall that individuals and peoples must be the primary beneficiaries of sustainable development processes and affirm that sustainable development processes necessitate meaningful participation and should be inclusive, culturally sensitive and appropriate, contextualised to specific cultural environments and seek to fully align themselves with the aspirations, customs, traditions, systems and world views of the individuals and groups most likely to be affected, with full respect of all human rights.

18. More efforts are needed to gather disaggregated data to ensure that the needs of people who face disproportionate risk of violence and discrimination, including people of African descent, persons with albinism, persons with disabilities, Indigenous Peoples, internally displaced persons, persons affected by leprosy and their families, migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, ethnic, linguistic and religious or belief minorities, older persons, children, intersex, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and other gender diverse persons and women and girls, do not continue to be invisible in the eyes of policy makers and private actors. Existing monitoring and assessment mechanisms and data collection/disaggregation practices are inadequate to ensure that these populations are fully involved and will benefit from the 2030 Agenda.

III. Call to action – turning our world towards 2030

19. We call on Governments to turn the tide and accelerate the national implementation of the 2030 Agenda at all levels and support the populations and regions within countries that are left behind. Monitoring and follow-up at the national levels is critical.

20. All countries should take part in voluntary national reviews (VNRs) by submitting progress reports on all sustainable development goals and targets, by integrating recommendations from UN human rights mechanisms in the processes and the follow-up. The role of civil society, including artists, scientists, and academics, as well as human rights and environmental rights defenders, should be strengthened. Particular attention must be given to reporting on SDG 16, including access to justice, protection of fundamental freedom and public access to information. Human rights should be integrated in the nationally determined contributions, national action plans, and climate change plans. National SDG plans should include specific indicators against targets so these can be periodically reviewed. The VNRs should be conducted in close consultation with marginalized and vulnerable populations and with full respect of all human rights. As a matter of priority, Governments should invest in the implementation, following up, and the review of the 2030 Agenda notably in those transformative areas that accelerate the SDGs and fulfilling all human rights for all. Peoples who are still not free from regimes of foreign domination and control, should be enabled to meaningfully contribute to the VNRs.

21. We call on Governments to integrate international human rights standards and obligations to promote a human rights economy that ensures equality, justice, and SDGs for all without exception. Governments should invest in reducing the carbon footprint of all sectors, and especially in the construction sector by increasing the energy efficiency of buildings and other infrastructure, and in the development of new carbon-neutral, climate-resilient social housing that is affordable to all.

22. It is critical to recommit to gender equality ensuring that it is mainstreamed in all goals, to ending all forms of gender-based discrimination including violence, to promoting women and girls' participation in all spheres of life, and to recognize, reduce, and redistribute their disproportionate share of unpaid care and support work. The gendered impact of lack of access to education and livelihoods, particularly hinders the achievement of equality for women and girls. It is impossible to fulfil Goal 5 on gender equality if the root causes of gender-based discrimination are not properly tackled.

23. Governments should invest in building comprehensive social protection systems which are based on human rights to eradicate poverty and reduce inequalities, in line with their human rights obligations to allocate maximum available resources to the enjoyment of economic,

social, and cultural rights. Governments shall refrain from using any unilateral measures not in conformity with international law, human rights law, humanitarian, and refugee law.

24. Governments should expand social protection and investments in public services consistent with ILO Social Protection Floors Recommendation, including by providing basic universal health care to all, expanding public spending on health, and reviewing health financing policies periodically to ensure that the specific needs of women and girls, as well as different groups facing disproportionate risk of discrimination and violence, such as indigenous people, racialized persons, minority groups and persons with disabilities, intersex, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and other gender diverse persons are adequately addressed.
25. Our rapidly changing world requires a renewed social contract for education anchored in human rights, as called for by the United Nations Secretary General Common Agenda,² and the UNESCO-led International Commission on the Futures of Education. The right to education must be seen as a right to life-long learning, with free, quality, and inclusive education based on human rights assured for all, with special attention paid to cultural contexts and relevancy, language, accessibility, and adaptability. Governments must maximize local resources for this.
26. Governments need to ensure the meaningful participation of rights holders in economic, social, and cultural development and protect and widen civic space to allow meaningful participation, including in multilateral processes. Civil and political rights should be respected to ensure transparency, accountability, and participation of affected individuals, groups, and communities as well as their rights to express grievances and ensure their access to remedy. Governments must also address the alarming increase in intimidation and reprisals against those who cooperate with the UN, including in online spaces, and ensure protections more generally for human rights defenders and journalists.
27. Governments should invest in solutions to the justice problems that harm human rights. Access to justice for all requires that everyone be protected equally by the law, and that those whose rights are violated can access a right to remedy.
28. Governments should adopt mandatory measures and encourage voluntary measures to ensure the implementation of the corporate responsibility to respect human rights, including the right to a clean and healthy environment, to advance sustainable, inclusive and just development.
29. Governments should revise tax policies to increase the fiscal space for low- and middle-income countries by eliminating tax havens, ending over-reliance on indirect taxes like sales tax and value added tax, and increasing rates of direct taxes on the incomes of high earners and businesses. Governments should ensure that state budgeting processes are conducted in a participatory manner, including participatory gender-responsive budgeting and reviews of usage.
30. Government should increase investment in economic, social and cultural rights by aligning budget and public revenue generation strategies with human rights obligations. Governments should introduce greater fiscal transparency and utilize tax revenues to

² Chapter II. Para. 29.

finance crucial social, health and educational programmes for all members of their populations, to reduce inequalities, poverty, and exclusions.

31. We recognize that cultural diversity is crucial for the human ecosystem and for the sustainability and resilience of the wider ecosystems, together with biodiversity, to which it is interlinked; and that it opens avenues towards implementation that recognizes the value of both traditional and modern knowledge and encourages their synergy. Cultural rights are at the core of sustainable development processes.
32. We support the recognition of culture as the fourth pillar of sustainable development, and recognize the need for a stronger place for culture throughout the implementation of the 2030 Agenda; the adoption of a stand-alone goal on culture in the post-2030 development agenda and the adoption of a global agenda for culture.
33. States, the private sector and international organizations should redouble their efforts to ensure universal and meaningful connectivity to an open, free, interoperable and secure Internet for all by 2030. Particular attention should be given to closing the gender digital divide. Information, media and digital literacy should be included in all national school curricula and adult learning programmes and monitored as an indicator of the equality and education Goals of the 2030 Agenda.
34. All Governments should enhance efforts to operationalize the right to development at all levels so that everyone can participate in decision-making, contribute to, and enjoy the benefit of development in an inclusive, equitable, and sustainable manner.
35. Governments should be committed to prioritizing and maximizing investment in people that are furthest behind and to combating multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination by applying international human rights standards of equality, equity, and non-discrimination. Specific and targeted actions related to Leave No One Behind should be taken to include in the processes surrounding the 2030 Agenda groups and populations that may be particularly exposed to discrimination, including people of African descent, persons with albinism, persons with disabilities, Indigenous Peoples, internally displaced persons, persons affected by leprosy and their families, migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, ethnic, linguistic, and religious or belief minorities, older persons, children, intersex, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and other gender diverse persons, and women and girls, and the human rights defenders who protect their rights.
36. Governments should increase investments to ensure adequate data is gathered, disaggregated by race, colour, sex, sexual orientation and gender identity, language, religion, political or other opinion, nationality, social origin, property, birth and disability including albinism, religion or belief, or other status, to identify those furthest behind. These data can create evidence-based policies to those most in need and to monitor the implementation and evaluation of response and recovery policies and programmes. Monitoring mechanisms integrating SDG indicators and recommendations from UN human rights mechanisms should be strengthened.
37. There is a need to mobilize support for low-income and least developed countries. In addition, Governments should provide low-income countries and the least developed countries, as well as those most at risk of climate change impact, with adequate development financing to ensure that the SDGs are not sacrificed in the name of austerity.

38. Commitments to SDGs should include concrete steps to make the right to a healthy environment a reality for all people, with particular attention to the needs of countries disproportionately affected by environmental degradation and climate change. Governments should also ensure that everyone has the right to participate in decision-making, access information, and justice in environmental issues.
39. Armed conflict and displacement, prolonged occupation induced displacement, climate related displacement and disasters increases risks of exploitation, including trafficking in persons for all purposes of exploitation, including forced labour, child marriage, sexual exploitation. These hinder the achievement of the SDGs.
40. We need to recognize that human rights violations undermine the achievement of lasting peace, security and development. Achieving peace and security, and justice institutions, is essential to achieving the SDGs.
41. In conclusion, Special Procedures, as a system, are ready to support and assist Governments in delivering on the above commitments and look forward to more engagement related to transformative change to accelerate achieving the 2030 Agenda in the manner that leaves no one behind.