

EUROPEAN AND CENTRAL ASIAN SEMINAR

**“THE CONTRIBUTION OF DEVELOPMENT  
TO THE ENJOYMENT OF ALL HUMAN RIGHTS”**  
In accordance to Human Rights Council resolution [47/11](#)  
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**Statement of Mr. Olivier De Schutter,  
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On 25 September 2015, the Heads of State and governments present at the UN General Assembly adopted the 2030 Development Agenda, pledging to ensure that "no one will be left behind". "We resolve", they stated, by 2030, "to end poverty and hunger everywhere; to combat inequalities within and among countries; to build peaceful, just and inclusive societies; to protect human rights and promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls; and to ensure the lasting protection of the planet and its natural resources. We resolve also to create conditions for sustainable, inclusive and sustained economic growth, shared prosperity and decent work for all, taking into account different levels of national development and capacities".

This is a call to redefine development. If it is truly to contribute to human rights, development should be non-violent, rather than extractive and treating both humans and nature as resources to be exploited; it should be a form of development that promotes well-being for all, rather than more wealth for the few; it should place the poor and the marginalized communities in the driver's seat, rather than seeing them merely as a development "challenge". The empowerment of the poor is essential both to shape this new development paradigm, and to make it become reality.

I would like to propose four key messages.

**1. Unless guided by human rights, the development process will continue to prioritize GDP growth, the creation of monetary value, as a precondition for everything else. We may call this the "gravitational force" of GDP increase as a measure of progress.**

This is not only because of the weight of that metric, the GDP per capita, in the political debate. It is also because in what has been called the "Fordist compromise", GDP growth has provided a substitute for wealth redistribution. In that sense, growth has the unique virtue of bridging views from across the political spectrum. Progressive politicians can accept renouncing the radical vision of redistribution on a large scale against the promise of a steady improvement of the living conditions of low-income groups, made possible thanks to growth; if the size of the pie expands and if part of that expansion benefits those groups, never mind if the slices going to them are much smaller than those going to the wealthiest parts of society. Conservatives are also ready to compromise: they too see sharing the benefits of

growth as a substitute to broader social transformations based on redistribution that would threaten the vested economic interests on which they depend.

Yet, in rich countries, the pursuance of growth at all costs is unsustainable. The planet cannot infinitely continue to provide resources, nor can it continue to absorb the waste and pollution resulting from human activity. We need a different model of development: a model of development that respects planetary boundaries, and that does not confuse essential needs with infinite wants.

We should be suspicious in this regard of any universal prescription. Growth is sometimes said to be the remedy for all, as if the needs of rich countries were the same as those of poor countries; as if those of countries with a stagnant or even a declining population were similar to those of countries with a fast-growing population; and as if growth in highly unequal countries meant the same thing as growth in more equal countries.

But shouldn't we care whether growth – the increase in economic output, measured in monetary terms – will allow already rich populations to buy more cars, or to fly more frequently, or whether it will allow poor populations to eat more diverse diets and send their children to school, rather than condemning them to work in the field with their parents? Shouldn't we care whether growth will simply allow wealthy populations to grow wealthier in places where the size of the population remains the same, or whether it will instead allow individuals to maintain their existing standard of living, by allowing the economy to absorb the growing workforce that results from fast population growth? Shouldn't we care whether growth will serve primarily to further enrich the richest groups within the population, or whether it will benefit primarily those at the bottom?

Both the nature of economic growth and its desirability itself should depend on the circumstances of each country. As a universal recipe for poverty reduction, it is barely plausible.

Such universalistic approaches also hide important questions of equity. We cannot ignore, for instance, that while most of the population growth since the 1950s has been in non-OECD countries, the rise in consumption is still largely dominated by OECD countries. In other words, growth in relatively poor countries can be plausibly presented as a means to provide opportunities for a fast-growing workforce and to allow households to achieve standards of living that bring them closer to those of the richer populations of the global North; but neither of these justifications hold for countries that are already rich.

The only excuse for speaking of growth as the remedy for all world regions is that, in a strongly interconnected world economy, how one region fares has a significant impact on the other regions with which it trades. Stagnation or recession in advanced economies, in particular, mean fewer opportunities for economies in poorer regions to make progress, where this progress relies on the possibility of exporting to consumers of rich countries who have a superior ability to pay. The proper answer to this predicament, however, is not to entertain a false sense of universality as regards development pathways. It is instead to promote more regional integration and South-South trade, rather than to insist on global integration and on long supply chains. And to encourage achieving progress by stimulating domestic demand and by raising standards of living for people in poverty in the global South, rather than by pushing

for producers from less developed regions to serve the high-value markets of the global North.

**2. Unless combined with strong accountability mechanisms and with effective participation of people in poverty, the development process will not contribute its full potential to the realization of human rights.**

As underlined by the Advisory Committee of the Human Rights Council in its 2019 study, the right to development would be of little added value if it were defined "merely as the sum total of [existing human] rights". Rather, the Advisory Committee noted: "Looking at the right to development as a process brings out the added value clearly: the right to development is not merely the realization of those rights individually, but their realization together in a manner that takes into account their effects on each other, both at a particular time and over a period of time".

In other terms, the right to development calls, for its realization, for multiyear strategies, together with the choice of relevant indicators to measure progress and benchmarks associated with timelines. If such strategies are developed through participatory processes, involving social partners and civil society, as well as people in poverty themselves, there will be pressure on governments to deliver on their promises. The right to development in that sense is not only about a vision, of a world in which all human rights will be realized. It is also about a pathway. It is not just about architecture; it is about music.

The participation of people in poverty in the design, implementation and monitoring of such multiyear strategies is essential. The Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, which the Human Rights Council endorsed in 2012, refer to participation in Principle E on the agency and autonomy of persons living in extreme poverty (emphasizing that all policies affiliated with poverty need to have the object of empowering people in poverty), and Principle F on the participation and empowerment of people living in poverty emphasizes that "States must ensure the active, free, informed and meaningful participation of persons living in poverty at all stages of the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of decisions and policies affecting them". This is important not only to ensure that the promises are kept -- that States remain on track of their commitments --, but also because of the unique expertise of people in poverty when it comes to identifying the causes of poverty and its perpetuation from one generation to the next. We simply cannot credibly pretend to fight poverty without building on this expertise.

In other terms, the new development agenda aims to help the poor. But it is now time to ask how the poor can help the new development agenda.

**3. While development can (and indeed must) contribute to the realization of all human rights, it should not be seen as a pre-condition for such realization. Rather, human rights should be seen as essential ingredients of development, not a sort of end prize which are relevant only at the end of the process of development.**

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights commits the States parties to "take steps, individually and through international assistance and co-operation, especially economic and technical, to the maximum of [their] available resources, with a view to achieving progressively the full realization of the rights

recognized in the present Covenant by all appropriate means, including particularly the adoption of legislative measures" (article 2, para. 1).

This "progressive realization" clause is typically seen as a weakness -- as an indication that economic, social and cultural rights are still undervalued in the international human rights regime in comparison to the more "classical" civil and political rights. I believe that it can instead be a strength. With this provision, how States mobilize resources and how they define their spending priorities become human rights issues. Such decisions cannot be left to the arbitrary and capricious choices of States : they can and must be subject to a searching inquiry by courts and other bodies in charge of enforcing the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, including NHRIs.

This remains an unfinished task. We need to make progress towards defining a methodology through which the budgetary choices of the State and their macroeconomic policies (as reflected, for instance, in the levels of social transfers or in the attention paid in public budgets to the health and education sectors), can be assessed in the light of the norms of the Covenant.

**4. We will fail to ensure development contributes to the realization of human rights unless we also address the international dimension -- the international environment, under the regimes of international trade and investment law, in which States pursue their development efforts.** "Lasting progress towards the implementation of the right to development", the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action stated in 1993, "requires effective development policies at the national level, as well as equitable economic relations and a favourable economic environment at the international level".

Economic globalization as it has been shaped in the past fifty years is ill-suited to the task. Globalization is the result both of technological advances lowering the costs of exchanges and communication, and of political choices, facilitating trade across borders and the free flow of investment. Its spectacular acceleration over the past thirty years has improved mutual understanding between different parts of the world, and has generally expanded the choices open to the individual.

At the same time, globalization has presented one particular lifestyle, based on overconsumption and waste, as a model to be pursued by all. It has led to extend the reach of intellectual property rights, although this can result in putting medicines and seeds beyond the reach of the poor in developing countries, and despite the obstacle such rights constitute for technology transfers, including "clean" technologies that can help mitigate climate change. Globalization has encouraged a global form of competition, in which corporations may choose to segment the production process to put people at work where employment is cheap, to pollute where the environmental regulations are weak, and to declare profits where the taxes are low. As a result of these various forms of social, environmental and fiscal dumping, governments have entered into a fierce and self-destructive form of regulatory competition: in their anxiety to attract investors or to retain them, they have renounced imposing that workers are paid decent wages, that resources are not overexploited and that taxes are paid where the economic activity is located. In the end, all lose, except the handful of global corporations that are best equipped to benefit from the race to the bottom that globalization has encouraged.

We are struck by the fact that the proclamation of the Sustainable Development Goals has not led to rethink the current shape of economic globalization. At domestic level, governments are asked to achieve policy coherence for sustainable development. It is now high time that the same requirement is imposed on global institutions. This is why, at the request of the Working Group on the right to development, I presented a report on the international dimensions of the right to development, showing how the current interpretation of human rights (including the rise of extraterritorial human rights obligations of States and the agenda on business and human rights, including the imposition of due diligence obligations on transnational corporations in global supply chains) can form the basis for a revitalisation of the role of the right to development in shaping international regimes ("The international dimensions of the right to development: a fresh start towards improving accountability" (A/HRC/WG.2/19/CRP.1)).

Let me conclude.

The mainstream concept of development sees wealth creation as a condition for everything else. Trade and investment, in particular, are justified in the name of economic growth. Speculation is tolerated in the hope that resources shall be exploited by the actors who are best equipped to maximize production. Support goes to large corporations, especially transnational corporations, in the name of their ability to achieve economies of scale and thus to satisfy mass consumption, and in the hope that they will design technologies that shall reduce the ecological footprint of the very sort of consumption they support. Both inequalities and environmental degradation are justified as a temporary price to be paid for this process of growth: once higher levels of wealth shall be attained, we are told, it will be possible to finance both redistributive policies and environmental measures, to reduce inequalities and to compensate for the ecological damages caused.

We challenge this logic. What we see is that the means are now prevailing over the ends. Increased trade and investment flows, higher levels of resource extraction, the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the largest corporations, while still presented as instrumental in the process of development, as temporary, and as reversible, have become the ends: it is these objectives that public policies, in all world regions, have been seeking to achieve. Governments have pursued wealth creation, not poverty reduction; economic growth, not better well-being; the quantitative, not the qualitative: the figures, not the people. Human rights are there to remind us that we can and should do better.