

OWG proposals risk sidelining consensus on human rights-centered sustainable development

CESR STATEMENT

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As the interactive dialogues of the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals (OWG on SDGs) drew to a close, a consensus emerged from the initial [stock-taking exercise](#) that the post-2015 framework should mainstream a human rights-based approach encompassing all human rights, including the right to development.

This was consistent with the Rio+20 agreement that any new SDGs should be based on existing international law, including human rights standards, and with the UN Secretary General's [call](#) last September for a new development framework "firmly anchored in human rights". Nonetheless, as the talks enter a more political phase, the OWG Co-Chairs' proposals set out in their recent '[focal area document](#)' raise serious doubts as to whether these aspirations will be fulfilled.

The 'focal areas' included in the document cover key issues such as poverty eradication, food, health, education, water and sanitation, the environment, decent work, social protection, promoting a welcome focus on quality as well as access to services in many of these areas. The Co-Chairs also acknowledge that human rights are essential to creating inclusive and equitable societies, and include a number of laudable commitments on ensuring equality, transparency, participation, accountability and access to justice.

However, there is a significant gap between the Co-Chairs' proposals and the affirmations included in the OWG's summary of its debates. Reference to the pre-existing human rights obligations of States in each SDG area is largely absent. Indeed, with the exception of education, none of the socio-economic issues outlined above are recognized as matters of human rights. Nor do the proposals mention the human rights responsibilities of business, international organizations and other key development actors. Regarding the question of global governance, the Co-Chairs' proposals do not reflect the OWG summary document's recognition of the "need to strengthen policy coherence between development policies and human rights and to ensure that business globally respects fundamental human rights, in line with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights." (para. 145). Rather than mainstreaming human rights across all SDG focal areas, the Co-Chairs' proposals risk marginalizing the emerging consensus over a human rights-centered sustainable development framework.

CESR therefore calls on member states in the OWG to act on their stated commitment to making human rights central to the post-2015 agenda. In line with the SG's recommendations to the General Assembly last September, and with the '[Human Rights For All Post-2015](#)' statement endorsed by over 350 civil society organizations worldwide in December, CESR calls on the OWG to:

1. **Ensure the full range of human rights standards form the non-negotiable normative basis of the new sustainable development framework.** The respect, protection and fulfillment of human rights should be explicitly recognized as both the overall goal of sustainable development and the means for achieving it. All goals, targets and indicators should be aligned with relevant human rights standards.
2. **Frame goals and targets in line with their economic and social rights obligations.** The immediate obligation to ensure at least essential levels of these rights, without discrimination or retrogression, requires 'universal' or 'zero targets' for all sectors wherever possible and, where this is not practicable, strong equality benchmarking. The duty to use the maximum available resources to fulfil these rights progressively requires monitoring of both the policy and fiscal and budgetary efforts of governments, alongside sustainable development outcomes.
3. **Include more robust commitments to tackle gender and socio-economic inequality, as well as other forms of discrimination.** The new framework should include stronger provisions to protect decent work and reduce unfair wage disparities in order to reduce socio-economic inequality both within and between countries. It should also include more comprehensive commitments to ensure women's substantive equality across all spheres of life, including in the socio-economic sphere, and ensuring access to sexual and reproductive health and rights.
4. **Ensure measureable and actionable commitments to guarantee the rights to freedom of information, expression and association** and to protect the space for civil society organizations and human rights defenders to carry out their work to ensure transparency, accountability and participation in development processes.
5. **Recognize the common but differentiated human rights responsibilities of all development actors as the foundation for global partnership for development.** Ensuring 'policy coherence' requires that governments, business and international institutions assess the human rights impacts of their policies and agreements, both within and beyond their borders, in areas such as environment, trade, investment, aid, tax, migration, intellectual property, debt, monetary policies and financial regulation. Governments should adopt more robust measures to ensure meaningful private sector accountability, including mandatory human rights impact reporting as a condition for private sector engagement in any global development partnership.
6. **Provide for full transparency, participation, oversight and accountability in the generation and allocation of public resources.** In order to increase public financing for development, governments should commit to increasing their tax bases through progressive and equitable forms of revenue generation. The SDGs should reflect a zero-tolerance approach to tax evasion, and commitments to tackle illicit financial flows and prevent tax competition, as major obstacles to realizing human rights and sustainable development.

CESR is an international NGO working to ensure human rights are properly integrated into the post-2015 sustainable development agenda. CESR is the human rights focal point of the global [Beyond 2015 campaign](#) and co-convenes the Human Rights Post-2015 Civil Society Caucus.