



Women's
Major Group

REFLECTIONS

After HLPF, towards UNGA

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The Women's Major Group expresses our disappointment in the discussions and outcome of the 2022 High Level Political Forum (HLPF) on Sustainable Development that convened from 5-15 July in New York. With the theme 'Building back better from COVID-19 while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,' the HLPF 2022 Ministerial Declaration once again fell short in not reflecting the systemic and structural barriers that lead to poverty and exclusion, thus failing yet again in providing necessary political leadership to move those commitments made in 2015 into concrete actions.

Instead of renewed political commitment towards sustainable development, we watched member states go back and forth on language around gender, multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, foreign occupation, climate justice, SRHR, and more, and arrive at an impasse. This is all the more disappointing in the context of ongoing threats to people and planet and in the midst of the multidimensional crises compounded by COVID-19. For these reasons, as feminist and women's rights organizations around the world engaging with the sustainable development agenda and the review process, we raise red flags about the lack of accountability, political will and meaningful partnerships that are hindering progress towards achieving the 2030 Agenda. Given the current pace of implementation, we have serious concerns about the very real possibility that the [SDGs will not be achieved until 2065](#).

The reflections below highlight our feminist analysis of the crises facing the sustainable development space and broader landscape of multilateralism. We hope these critical reflections and recommendations will inform greater ambition and commitments from member states and the UN. We also aspire to a stronger, cross-movement civil society strategy moving forward toward the 77th session of the UN General Assembly (UNGA 77), which will take place from 13-27 September.

UN still dreaming of private financing

Even while member states and UN representatives noted the lack of enthusiasm by the private sector in financing the 2030 Agenda, at this HLPF we observed with concern the continued undue

focus on how member states can entice and incentivize the private sector to invest in implementing the 2030 Agenda for the next eight years. Despite a lack of substantial private financing, we continue to see the corporate capture of the 2030 Agenda that also threatens the multilateral arena more broadly, including seats for business and private sector and platforms for business and private sector to shape the discussions. The power dynamics in these spaces will continue to be harmful and imbalanced for as long as there are no mechanisms for corporate accountability and extraterritorial jurisdiction for human rights violations, tax evasions, environmental and climate degradation, and beyond.

We also note that while some member states raised the ongoing and emerging debt crises that are fundamentally impacting the achievement of sustainable development, the responses to the debt crisis that emerged from the Global North and various experts focused on debt restructuring and not on debt cancellation. HLPF must move beyond romanticizing a narrative of resilience around recovery and ensure that multilateral cooperation recognizes and addresses the colonial and neo-colonial roots of the debt crisis.

It is also clear that corporate capture extends beyond Agenda 2030 and threatens the entire UN system. The WMG, and other stakeholders such as the Civil Society group on Financing for Development, have already [called out the Secretary General's Our Common Agenda report](#) for its alarming phrasing of “networked multilateralism” and emphasis on the private sector as “a key actor,” without ever explicitly demanding this mandatory accountability and respect for human rights.

Most recently, UN Women announced that they were entering a [partnership with BlackRock](#) to promote “gender lens investing.” Feminist organizations and activists, many of them WMG members, responded with a [campaign demanding that UN Women #BlockBlackRock](#) and rescind the partnership. The campaign's [letter to UN Women](#), signed by over 700 organizations and individuals, cited BlackRock's terrible track record on environmental, climate, labor rights and corporate accountability matters, including huge investments in fossil fuels and military and civilian arms manufacturing. The company is also one of the largest holders of external private debt in the global South, refusing requests from Zambia, for instance, to suspend payments during the pandemic.

The #BlockBlackRock letter further illustrates the power imbalances inherent to any sort of “networked multilateralism” that places civil society, governments, and private sector as equals:

“Corporations, unlike governments, are accountable to their shareholders with a view to increase profit. This, in many cases, is directly in conflict with the transformation needed to protect people and the planet ... The UN should not need to be reminded of its mandate by observers. Its governance systems should incorporate civil society leaders to help prevent these mistakes. For this reason, we recommend that feminist organizations should have formal seats in UN's advisory groups and leadership (including to its Executive Board).”

As a part of broader global feminist and social movements demanding an end to corporate capture and a move towards systems change, accountability, and adherence to human rights, WMG is in full agreement with the issues and recommendations that the #BlockBlackRock campaign brings to light. We celebrate that the efforts of the campaign resulted in UN Women [officially ending](#) its partnership with BlackRock, and we hope this sets an example that reverberates across the UN. The UN must realize that the private sector can never be a real and equal stakeholder without real accountability and effective adherence to human rights principles. Otherwise the UN and these partnerships will only further the inequalities and crises we face.

States barely holding the line on agreed language

As South Africa said at the closing of the 2022 HLPF, “the rights of women and girls should cease to be a divisive issue.” Even as language of “multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination” made it to the final draft of the Ministerial Declaration, we were disturbed and disappointed by the relentless resistance from certain member states in addressing issues around gender, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), climate action, financing the 2030 Agenda, vaccine injustice, foreign occupation, and extraterritorial obligations, among others. In 2015, member states agreed that gender is cross cutting across all SDGs and not just SDG 5, and that the social, economic and environmental pillars of sustainable development are intertwined—but their actions each year show a disregard for this.

These rollbacks on agreed language and commitments go hand in hand with the increasing infiltration and influence of anti-gender and anti-rights movements and discourse in intergovernmental processes and outcomes. Even as pushback against SRHR, abortion and comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) continues as expected, we see compounding pushback against gender as a term and concept, making it contentious in ways that derail negotiations and also deny, invisibilize and harm the lived realities of women, girls, trans and gender-expansive people. While we commend the political position articulated by 16 member states who wrote a letter in support of gender equality, distinguishing themselves from the position of G77 members and China, it is a red flag that it must come to this at all.

Accountability

The lack of accountability in the 2030 Agenda framework, both substantially and procedurally, has been an ongoing issue ever since the [Open Working Group process](#) that led to the creation of the SDGs. As predicted by civil society at the adoption of the agenda in 2015, the lack of a strong and binding accountability framework has only diluted the commitment and progress toward achieving sustainable development. As we enter the seventh year of this development agenda, there is no more time to waste in trying to manufacture accountability out of a voluntary and loosely defined monitoring and review process that doesn't take into account state obligation under the human rights framework nor agreements and outcomes in other ECOSOC processes.

As feminists and activists, we were appalled to witness member states continue to delegitimize the multilaterally negotiated Agreed Language from the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), Commission on Population and Development (CPD) and other ECOSOC commissions and world conference outcomes. If the outcomes and conclusions of ECOSOC commissions do not mutually reinforce each other as recalled in article 85 of the 2030 Agenda, and do not push us towards more progress for the most marginalized among us, then there are serious questions to be raised. This is something civil society, the UN and allied member states must continue to condemn, especially ahead of UNGA 77. Processes that are merely a checkbox to be ticked will never result in building political consensus and political and financial commitments towards human rights and justice-centered sustainable development. Rather than framing this as a lack of policy coherence, we see it as a lack of political will by member states as well as ECOSOC and the entire UN system to take us beyond barely holding the line on commitments made in 2015.

What urgent changes are needed in the HLPF process to drive robust accountability in the next eight years? These and further recommendations are also reflected in the WMG's [position paper on HLPF / ECOSOC review](#).

- ❖ The HLPF should not be seen merely as a 2-week-long process in the UN Headquarters in New York, but as a **sustained and connected year-long process of follow up and review, with equally important mechanisms at the national, regional and global levels.**
 - Reviews at the national level should happen annually regardless of Voluntary National Review (VNR) status, and they need to be strengthened and resourced.
 - The role of the Regional Forums on Sustainable Development (RFSDs) must also be significantly strengthened. We must recognise and maximize the role of regional forums in the preparation of and complementing the process at the HLPF.
- ❖ Agenda 2030 review processes at all levels need **meaningful civil society participation**, especially from marginalized communities, and civil society's analyses must be listened to and engaged with in official and structured ways. This means, for instance, that civil society shadow/parallel reports must be treated equally and published on the UN website.
 - This includes affirming, strengthening and expanding the mandate and voice of the [Major Groups and other Stakeholders](#) and coordination mechanism.
 - In the context of the pandemic, rising war and conflict, and unjust visa policies, the UN and states must make sure that civil society can also engage in all consultations and forums meaningfully through a **virtual or hybrid participation** option.
- ❖ **The UN must demand policy coherence from member states.** The concluding observations from human rights review processes need to be integrated into countries' VNRs and into follow up processes. The HLPF should build on the agreed-upon work/documents completed at ECOSOC commissions, forums as well as the agreements/resolutions forged during the GA committees. The Secretariat must therefore enforce the legitimacy and importance of agreed language from other ECOSOC processes, so that we are not reinventing the same ancient wheel each time.

- Just as importantly, especially for the global North, states' [extraterritorial obligations](#), which are often willfully ignored within human rights obligations, must be required as part of their VNRs.
- ❖ Lastly, we need **corporate accountability**. Business and private sector, especially multinational corporations, cannot continue to be considered equal stakeholders to civil society in any UN process.

In conclusion, we wish to emphasize that this is not a time to maintain the status quo. This is a time to build back transformatively: to move beyond postcard and tourism-ad representations of our countries. HLPF must become a space for honest and constructive dialogue on historical and contemporary challenges being faced within and between countries; a space to drive accountability for the various means of implementation and follow up and review of the 2030 Agenda; and break the cycle it's been stuck in for the last seven years so that the next eight years can bring hope and transformation to everyone being left behind as it is.