

Reclaim our future. Oppose the corporate “development” agenda

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In the face of overwhelming evidence of persistent poverty, deepening inequality, ecological destruction, unprecedented loss of biodiversity and climate change accelerating under neoliberal capitalist development, governments have set 2015 as the year when they chart a new course for humanity – a path toward “sustainable development” that “leaves no one behind” and protects the planet.

In September of this year, Heads of States and Governments will gather at the United Nations (UN) headquarters in New York City to agree on a new set of “Sustainable Development Goals” (SDGs) and a “global plan of action for people, planet and prosperity”. This new “Post-2015 development agenda” succeeds the Millennium Development Goals, which are supposed to have been achieved by 2015. This new agenda promises to “transform our world” by 2030.

However, many of these same governments, particularly the more powerful ones among them, are also currently negotiating new “free trade” deals across regions such as the Transpacific Partnership Agreement, Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, Trade-in-Services-Agreement and Economic Partnership Agreements, among many others that will have far-reaching implications for peoples in both the global North and South and for the future of the world economy. Like the World Trade Organization, these new trade agreements promise prosperity for all as a result of greater trade and investments across borders.

And yet all indications suggest that these agreements as they are currently framed and when adopted side-by-side, will not usher a new dawn for humanity. Instead they are likely to further concentrate power and wealth in the hands of the 1% on the one hand, and deepen the dispossession, exploitation and oppression of peoples and environmental plunder on the other.

The emerging elite consensus on “development” for the post-2015 era aims for more business than usual. Not only does it hold up the private sector as the driver of growth and innovation, it promotes private finance as the fuel of development.

Governments are aggressively promoting Public Private Partnerships which shift the risks associated with large investments to the public while ensuring huge profits for large corporate investors through various forms of government guarantees and subsidies. Infrastructure development alone—in energy, transport, water and sanitation, agriculture, ICT, and so on—offer up to \$1 trillion worth of investment opportunities per year.

Allowing and encouraging private finance to “invest” in development projects such as large infrastructure projects or social services bundled up as new “asset classes” would also intensify pressures for “cost-recovery” and greater commercialization, if not downright privatization of public services. More projects likely would be directed at

profitable sectors and facilitating the global production and trading of multinational corporations (MNCs) instead of prioritizing the needs of impoverished and marginalized sectors. We can expect a more aggressive implementation of mega-infrastructure projects that are often associated with landgrabbing, gentrification, forced evictions, massive displacements and other human rights violations affecting indigenous peoples, campesinos, rural and urban communities, especially but not only in the global South.

Yet, by claiming to contribute to the achievement of “sustainable development goals,” large corporations seek to enhance their public image even as many of them continue to violate workers’ rights, the environment and the public interest with impunity.

Indeed, the so-called 21st century trade agreements, secretly being negotiated by governments worldwide, would erect a global legal framework that strengthens corporate rights over people’s rights and the environment. Not only do they strengthen MNC’s control over production and trade of goods and services within and across borders, they also hamper governments from regulating the operations of MNCs, and prevent underdeveloped countries from actively promoting industrialization and sustainable development. Indeed they would empower MNCs to sue governments for implementing policies that would potentially harm investors’ “rights” to profit even when they are intended to promote the public interest. This would belie governments’ commitment to the realization of human rights and the attainment of the new SDGs.

If these agreements shape the policy agenda for sustainable development for the coming decades, then we can expect a new wave of privatization and financialisation with even more dire consequences than the old Washington consensus.

Therefore, we demand that governments:

1. **Uphold the primacy of human rights.** States must acknowledge that they bear the primary responsibility to ensure that both their agents and other nonstate actors—whether corporations or multilateral institutions—adhere to human rights norms and standards in their conduct affecting people and communities. The new development agenda must be clear and explicit about, and faithfully monitor states’ extraterritorial human rights obligations, especially in the field of economic, social and cultural rights, as well as the right to development. International agreements that exact obligations that run contrary to states’ duty to respect, protect, and fulfill human rights must be declared illegitimate, immoral and therefore invalid. No international agreement should be negotiated in secret and without public participation or support. Indeed there should be strong support and enabling environment for the participation of people and their organizations in decisions that affect their lives and future generations.
2. **Tackle inequality and the overconcentration of wealth.** Governments must implement redistributive measures to address inequality, going beyond the rhetoric of leaving no one behind. Governments must commit to clear targets for achieving more equality in the distribution of incomes and ownership of

productive resources including land, finance, technology, services, and industries. Governments should commit to promoting and scaling up solidarity-based, traditional, collective and public forms of ownership, especially for women and other marginalized groups in society. The international community should cancel all illegitimate debts of countries, remedy unfair trade and taxation regimes that rob poorer countries of trillions of dollars a year, and stop the unsustainable extraction of resources from underdeveloped countries.

3. **Rein in corporate power.** Governments should adopt a strong independent regulatory framework for business and the financial sector to ensure that they respect human rights and are held accountable when they do not. Rather than rely on corporate self-regulation and voluntarism, governments must enforce right-to-know provisions and mandatory public disclosure for multinational corporations; require independent accounting of their production and commercial operations as well as independent technology assessments; require participatory human rights impact assessments; free prior and informed consent for indigenous peoples; establish mechanisms for redress; and penalties for corporate infractions and violations of human rights and nature.
4. **Address the climate crisis.** Governments should commit to limit global temperature rise to 1.5C through drastic emission cuts and fair-sharing of the global carbon budget that takes into account per capita historical emissions, without resorting to carbon trading or offsets. This must be accompanied by clear commitments on the delivery of adequate and appropriate climate finance and technology for mitigation actions in the South. The burden of this transition must be borne by the advanced industrialized countries, the biggest corporations and the wealthiest classes globally and within each country who have exploited people and the planet the most.

Without these minimum transformative reforms, the development agenda for the post-2015 era will not make a dent on the structural conditions that breed poverty, inequality, environmental degradation, violence and multiple crises. Even worse, it may serve as a veil for further strengthening corporate power and reinforcing neocolonial relations between rich and poor countries.

Therefore we are ever ready to mobilize, to hold our governments to account, to stimulate public debate and engagement, and promote development justice for all. Above all, we affirm our commitment to fight poverty, inequality and injustice by bringing an end to all structures of exploitation and oppression, by asserting our inalienable right not simply to live but to live with dignity, solidarity and care for people and nature.

Signed

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Global People Surge
Habitat International Coalition (HIC)
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Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), Nigeria
National Fisheries Solidarity Movement, Sri Lanka
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