**The 20th session of the Working Group on the Right to Development**

**Interactive dialogue with experts on the implementation and realization of the right to development, including the implications of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**

**Session “Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality”**

***Global inequality, the Achilles’ heel of the right to development***

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**SUMMARY**

*Inequality, and in particular rising and extreme economic inequality is a threat to the implementation and achievement to the Right to Development. Yet, economic inequality does not have a clear conceptual anchoring in human rights and their legal and institutional framework.* *The inclusion of Goal 10 (reducing inequality between and within countries) in the Sustainable Development Agenda has been a remarkable achievement in this sense. However, there are several technical and conceptual limitations that prevent Goal 10 from triggering and enabling action on the drivers of inequality and the structures that reproduce and reinforce it, including implementing those global redistributive mechanisms that would be necessary to achieve it. Turning Goal 10 into an effective tool for tackling extreme inequality and contributing to the right to development is compelling and possible introducing changes in its indicators and, more substantially, reinforcing the international institutional framework in its support. Doing this would not only accelerate process in achieving Goal 10 and tackling extreme economic inequality more broadly, it would also contribute to the implementation and realization of the Right to Development*.

1. **Inequality, and in particular rising and extreme economic inequality, is a threat to the implementation and achievement to the Right to Development.**
   1. **Extreme economic inequality is on the rise.**

While global progress in extreme poverty reduction is undeniable, there is still 3.4 billion people worldwide subsisting on less than $5.50 a day, and even with double the current rates of economic growth, about 3.7 percent of the global population will be living in extreme poverty (on less than $1.90 a day) in 2030 unless inequality is reduced.[[1]](#endnote-1) The pace of poverty reduction globally halved between 2013 and 2015, and the number of people living in extreme poverty in sub-Saharan Africa has been increasing.[[2]](#endnote-2) This contrasts with the unfaltering wealth accumulation at the top: in 2018 alone, the wealth of the world’s 1,900 billionaires increased by $2.5bn a day.[[3]](#endnote-3) The gap between the richest and the poorest people continues to widen: between 1980 and 2016, the poorest 50 percent of humanity captured only 12 cents in every dollar of global income growth. By contrast, the top 1 percent captured 27 cents of every dollar.[[4]](#endnote-4)

* 1. **We are not on track to achieve Goal 10 (reducing inequality between and within countries)**

Available evidence shows poor performance globally in achieving Goal 10, with progress being undermined by some national and international economic policies which are leading to a race to the bottom in workers’ rights and in corporate taxation and too slow progress – when not a reverse, in providing good quality universal, gender responsive public services free at the point of use and universal social protection.

Between countries inequality has been on a declining trend in recent decades[[5]](#endnote-5) but it remains a powerful determinant of a person’s position in the global distribution: more than 50 per cent of one’s income depends on the average income of the country where she was born[[6]](#endnote-6).

Global progress in Goal 10 as measured by Target 10.1 [*by 2030, progressively achieve and sustain income growth of the bottom 40 per cent of the population at a rate higher than the national average*] has been weak. According to the World Bank,[[7]](#endnote-7) for 91 countries with available data, in only 51 was growth of income or consumption of the bottom 40 faster than the average (between 2010-2015 circa) and in most cases only marginally so. In all others, growth was slower for the bottom 40 percent, suggesting a worsening in the distribution. Data are available for only a quarter of low-income economies, for example only 12 of 45 Sub-Saharan countries are included, and neither are India and Nigeria, which host the majority of people living in extreme poverty. This means that we know little about progress in the very bottom of the distribution. In addition, existing evidence shows that the absolute income gap between people in the poorest 20% of the global population (the P20) and the rest of the world’s population is growing and is on track to continue to widen.[[8]](#endnote-8)

* 1. **Besides undermining poverty reduction, inequality is also bad for economic growth,[[9]](#endnote-9) undermines a country’s social contract, fosters instability and violence and hampers progress in a number of other areas, especially health.[[10]](#endnote-10)**
  2. **Extreme economic inequality is undermining our ability to cope with the big challenges of the 21st century.**
     1. **The gender equality challenge, as there will be no solution to poverty without gender equality, and there will be no gender equality without a fairer and more equal economic system**.

Persistent gender economic inequality is a major drawback to reducing economic inequality and achieving Goal10. The world over, women are more likely to be poorer than men while the richest people in the world are overwhelmingly men.[[11]](#endnote-11) They work consistently longer hours than men when paid and unpaid work is combined, earn less than men and are concentrated in the lowest-paid and least secure forms of work. Many emerging and developing economies – as well as developed ones – are pursuing development paths that prioritise cheap and precarious work, the majority of which is done by women. Growth everywhere is made possible by the unpaid care work of women, which is worth an estimated $10 trillion per year[[12]](#endnote-12) and yet still fails to be recognised and valued for its contribution to the economy. Simultaneously the amount of unpaid work is increasing as a result of policies which have undermined investment in infrastructure and public services such as education, healthcare and social protection.[[13]](#endnote-13) Less understood but equally alarming is the gender wealth gap, which along with earnings includes assets, savings and investments. Most of the world’s richest people are men.[[14]](#endnote-14) Globally, women earn 23% less than men.[[15]](#endnote-15) This gender pay gap is raising serious concern worldwide. Credit Suisse has this year estimated women’s share of global wealth at 40%, but with very significant differences regionally and for different groups of women. For example, in Africa and in countries like India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, women account for somewhere between 20–30% of wealth.[[16]](#endnote-16)

* + 1. **The climate change challenge, as the growth model that has led to the explosion of economic inequality is also environmentally unsustainable, and climate change most impacts the poorest.**

It is the emissions of the ‘haves’ which are driving a crisis that is hitting the ‘have nots’ the hardest. Poor people are the most vulnerable to climate change, but the poorest half of the global population is responsible for only around 10 percent of total global emissions, while the richest 10 percent are responsible for around 50 percent.[[17]](#endnote-17)

Inequality and climate change reinforce each other. The policies needed to reduce and adapt to climate change demand collective action and decision making for the greater good, which are difficult to achieve in very unequal societies,[[18]](#endnote-18) where those who are most affected have less influence on decision making on climate policies than those who have vested interests in the economic status quo yet are most insulated from its impacts. At the same time, highly unequal power over decision making is more likely to result in climate change ‘solutions’ where the costs and benefits are not fairly shared.[[19]](#endnote-19) Without public policies and investment to make carbon taxes progressive and to make electric cars, energy-efficient homes, solar panels, and other alternative sources of low-cost, renewable energy for rural households affordable by all, the costs and benefits will favour the wealthy while penalizing the poor.

* + 1. **The democracy challenge, as open societies are essential in the fight against poverty and an active civic base is more likely to challenge elite power and privilege,[[20]](#endnote-20) but space for civic action is shrinking worldwide.**

According to the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, since 2015 more than 64 different laws have been passed by governments that restrict the ability of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to register, to operate and to receive foreign funding.[[21]](#endnote-21) Meanwhile, the CIVICUS Monitor shows that more than 3.2 billion people live in countries in which civic space is either closed or repressed.[[22]](#endnote-22)

In principle, a country’s economy and its political system are separate, but in reality they are intrinsically linked.[[23]](#endnote-23) The relationship between economic and political power and inequality creates a cycle which affects the design of institutions established to govern economies.[[24]](#endnote-24) Wealth has the potential to capture government policy making and to bend the rules in favour of the rich, often to the detriment of everyone else. The consequences of this include the erosion of democratic governance, the diminution of social cohesion and the reduction of equal opportunities for all. A political consensus in support of deregulation and privatization, combined with the advent of the information age and globalization, has created new opportunities. But it has also allowed sectors, companies and individuals to capture a disproportionate amount of economic power and for hostile actors to spread misinformation and undermine democracies.

* + 1. **The technology challenge as automation is disrupting labour markets and making working conditions even more precarious for poor, low-skilled and female workers.**

Technological progress has been identified as one of the driving factors behind the increase in economic inequality.[[25]](#endnote-25) Increasing automation will continue to disrupt labour markets, creating winners and losers, with significant distributional consequences.[[26]](#endnote-26) Gains from higher levels of productivity will be captured by the owners of new technology, while workers displaced by it will lose out, thus widening the gap between the share of national income accruing to workers and that going to the owners of capital. In other words, growth driven by automation risks to be less inclusive and less able at creating jobs that lift people out of poverty. The rising trend in automation also generates concerns with regards to its impact on economic and gender inequality: research suggests that female workers, which tend to perform more routine tasks than their male counterparts, are at greater risk of automation.[[27]](#endnote-27)

The impact of automation on developing countries is expected to be particularly severe, where high levels of poverty and inequality (especially affecting women, who face the excessive burden of unpaid care work) already prevent people from acquiring the skills and education necessary to succeed amidst existing trends of premature deindustrialization and tertiarization.[[28]](#endnote-28) Jobs that are common in developing countries, such as routine agricultural work, are susceptible to automation where the impact is likely be felt strongly by poor rural workers. At a time when many emerging and developing economies are competing to participate in fragmented global value chains, automation may be given preference over the creation of low-skilled jobs, potentially reversing the reductions in poverty and inequality between countries that have been observed in the past few decades.

* 1. **Accumulation of income, wealth, power, opportunities and privilege at the top undermines the principles of equitable sharing of the fruits of growth and of opportunities, as well as the rights of all people to self-determination and to full sovereignty over all their natural wealth and resources.**

Concentration of wealth at the top - and its intersection with elite power is the defining aspect of the economic inequality crisis. Extreme wealth is often used for political capture – to buy elections, to buy media, to influence tax laws and laws that constrict civic space – making sure that wealth begets more wealth in a cycle that further deepens inequality. In some countries policies fail to tackle inequality because they are captured by the wealthy elite that bends policy making in their favour to the detriment of everyone else.[[29]](#endnote-29)

In many countries, the richest people and the companies they own are largely undertaxed. Governments in developed countries have been reducing both the top rate of personal income tax and the rate of corporate income tax in the past decades. The top rate of personal income tax in the US was 94% in 1945, and as recently as 1980 it was 70%. Today it is almost half that, at 37%.[[30]](#endnote-30) In developing countries, the average top rate of personal income tax is even lower, at 28%, and for corporate tax it is 25%.[[31]](#endnote-31)

Under-taxation is often accompanied by harmful tax practices which make it easier for some very rich individuals and multinational companies to dodge and avoid taxes. For example, some super-rich people are hiding at least $7.6 trillion from the tax authorities,[[32]](#endnote-32) avoiding an estimated $200bn in tax revenues.[[33]](#endnote-33) For Africa alone, as much as 30% of private wealth may be held offshore, denying African governments an estimated $15bn in tax revenues.[[34]](#endnote-34) Multinational companies are able to exploit loopholes in tax codes to shift profits to tax havens and to avoid taxes, costing developing countries an additional estimated $100bn of lost corporate income tax (UNCTAD, 2015).[[35]](#endnote-35) A recent piece of IMF research on corporate taxation shows that non-OECD countries lose about $200 billion in revenue per year, or about 1.3% of GDP due to companies shifting profits to low-tax locations[[36]](#endnote-36). Taxes on wealth, like inheritance taxes, have been cut by many countries in recent decades or are simply not being implemented, while property taxation is almost non-existent in many developing countries.

Under-taxing of extreme income and wealth and harmful tax practices prevent people from fully enjoying their right to full sovereignty because they deprive countries’ governments of valuable tax revenues that could be used for public spending in health, education, social protection and infrastructure which are critical for the achievement of the Right to Development. For example, getting the richest to pay just 0.5% extra tax on their wealth could raise more money than it would cost to educate all 262 million children out of school and provide healthcare that would save the lives of 3.3 million people.[[37]](#endnote-37)

1. **Economic inequality does not have a clear conceptual anchoring in human rights and their legal and institutional framework.**

This has prevented the recognition of extreme inequality as a threat to human rights (including to the right to development), if not a violation of human rights itself.In turn, this has prevented the creation within the UN system of strong mechanisms and instruments that would compel countries to implement policies to reduce inequality, keep international institutions accountable for their contribution to tackle inequality and enable a systematic and transparent monitoring of economic inequality.

The inclusion of Goal 10 in the Sustainable Development Goals agenda has been a remarkable achievement in this sense. However, unlike most other Goals (e.g Goal 1 is championed by the World Bank, Goal 2 by FAO, Goal 3 by WHO, Goal 5 by UN Women), Goal 10 does not have a dedicated institution within the UN System with the mandate of looking after its monitoring and implementation, and overall the multilateral process in support of Goal 10 has been insufficient and inadequate.

The UN Systems SDGs Action Database[[38]](#endnote-38) reveals that the UN system has undertaken very few meaningful activities in pursuit of SDG10. Notable exceptions are ECLAC, which has been exploring different aspects of the evolution of inequality in Latin America, and the IMF, which has implemented several pilots to start integrating considerations on economic and gender inequality in its country policy advice.[[39]](#endnote-39)

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights is a champion against discriminations or “horizontal inequalities” (Targets 10.2 and 10.3), but is less focused on “vertical inequality” (inequality between rich and poor), which is the more politically charged aspect of Goal10.

Important contributions to the analysis between inequality, human rights, the SDGS and economic reforms have come from the [UN Special Rapporteurs on human rights and extreme poverty](https://www.ohchr.org/en/issues/poverty/pages/srextremepovertyindex.aspx) Philip Alston and the Independent Expert on the effects of foreign debt on human rights [Juan Pablo Bohoslavsky](https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Development/IEDebt/Pages/CVJuanPabloBohoslavsky.aspx). Notable has been the recent [resolution](http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/40/L.13)[[40]](#endnote-40) of the Human Rights Council  on the effects of foreign debt on the enjoyment of human rights and the related [UN Guiding Principles on human rights impact assessments of economic reforms](https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G18/443/52/PDF/G1844352.pdf?OpenElement)[[41]](#endnote-41), designed to help states and international financial institutions (IFIs) meet the challenging task of balancing the aims of fiscal sustainability and macroeconomic stability with the protection and fulfilment of universal human rights. Yet, no institutions is ready to be held accountable for advancing the multilateral discussion on the human rights impact assessment of economic reforms,[[42]](#endnote-42) so as no institution seems to be accountable for the achievement of Goal 10. In practice this implies that even when an institution such as the IMF acknowledges the importance of tackling extreme inequality, it only feels compelled to take it into account into its policy advice and lending work only when inequality is found to be ‘macrocritical’, meaning that it affects stability and growth.[[43]](#endnote-43) Inequality as a violation of human rights is not contemplated in this assessment framework – and Goal 10 does not offer the conceptual and technical tools to fill this gap and create a stronger and clearer link between extreme economic inequality and human rights.

1. **For its realisation, Goal 10 requires the profound, lasting and politically charge changes to the business as usual economic and development model. However, there are several technical and conceptual limitations that prevent Goal 10 from triggering and enabling action on the drivers of inequality and the structures that reproduce and reinforce it, including implementing those global redistributive mechanisms that would be necessary to achieve it.** 
   1. **Technical limitations: an inadequate monitoring system**

The existing monitoring system for Goal 10 is not sufficient to capture important aspects of the evolution of economic inequality and of its intersections with gender inequality.

Target 10.1 can fail to capture increase in economic inequality, because it only measures mean income growth and it only compares the bottom 40 percent with the average, instead of comparing the tails of the distribution. This means that the indicator would fail to capture a decline in the income share of the bottom 40 percent to the advantage of the top of the distribution, or a better performance of the bottom 40 percent due to average negative income growth.[[44]](#endnote-44) Finally, the bottom 40% is a very homogeneous group which would include different proportions of people living in poverty in different countries. This means that the indicator provides little information on the extent to which the poorest are capturing the benefits of economic growth. Even less we know on the extent to which the most vulnerable groups – including women, ethnic minorities, people with disability are actually doing with respect to the rest of the distribution.

Other Goal 10’s targets are endowed with weak and insufficient indicators which fail to measure real progress. Most notably, the indicator for target 10.4 (labor share of GDP) is a very poor measure of the extent to which countries are implementing progressive policies. Other targets also have similarly inadequate indicators and there is no indicator assessing inequalities between countries.

* 1. **Conceptual limitations: inequality as exclusion and neglect of wealth inequality**

Inequality concerns those left behind as well as runaway wealth and incomes at the top of the distribution. However, Goal 10 has no indicator to capture concentration of inequality or wealth at the top and it also fails to capture other important dimensions of economic inequality. In fact, it is built on the principle of leaving no one behind, meaning that the stated goal of reducing inequality is turned into targets and indicators that measure reduction in poverty and exclusion, focusing exclusively on the bottom of the distribution and neglecting what happens at the top of the distribution. The most contentious and politically charged issues – distribution and redistribution, wealth and power concentration at the top, are left out of Goal 10 and more broadly of the SDGs framework.

In this sense, the LNOB agenda is used to ‘sanitise’ and neutralise the issue of inequality and more generally the SDGs, turning it into a problem of the poor and of the marginalised, something the rich don’t need to be concerned about.

1. **Turning Goal 10 into an effective tool for tackling extreme inequality and contributing to the right to development is compelling and possible introducing changes in its indicators and, more substantially, reinforcing the international institutional framework in its support.** 
   1. **Accelerating progress in Goal 10 requires a comprehensive monitoring system that includes indicators that compare the tails of the distribution and measure trends in the income share of different sections of the population.**

Recommended indicators for this are the Palma ratio[[45]](#endnote-45) (comparing income of the bottom 40% with income of the top 10%), the post-tax income of the top 10 percent, the top 1% and the top 0.1%, the post-transfer income of the bottom 40% as well as indicators of wealth concentration and of social mobility.

With regards to Target 10.4, a new indicator should be added, measuring the difference between the Gini of the income distribution before and after taxes and transfers, according to the methodology developed by Commitment to Equity.[[46]](#endnote-46) Beyond this, there is need of better and more disaggregated data which can capture the intersection between economic inequality and inequality due to gender, ethnic, religious or disability discrimination.

* 1. **Beyond monitoring its targets, achieving Goal 10 requires endowing it with the necessary institutional support to guarantee its implementation at the domestic, multilateral and international level.**

An initiative in this sense could be the creation of a permanent global forum with the mandate of fighting inequality and achieving Goal 10. This could either be an intergovernmental forum operating within the UN system like the Financing for Development forum), or a multi-stakeholder forum linked to but independent from the UN system, in which governments, civil society, international institutions (including the UN itself) and other stakeholders participate on equal footing (the Open Government Partnership or the Addis Tax Initiative).

In both cases, the forum would focus on SDG10 and the gap between rich and poor, but also examine its relationship with other inequalities and Sustainable Development Goals (e.g., SDG5 on gender, SDG13 on climate change). The Forum would discuss the global policies that hinder the fight against inequality, and make recommendations to relevant intergovernmental organizations to tackle them. Civil society, the private sector and academics would be consulted. The forum would also serve as a learning platform and peer accountability mechanism to monitor progress in the fight against inequality at national level and take stock of the latest research on inequality. To this end, the forum would host an annual meeting at Ministerial or Heads of State level, where countries would report on their progress in tackling the gap between rich and poor, share experiences of successful policies to tackle inequality, and make commitments for further progress.

Existing international institutions must also exercise leadership in fighting inequality, close the gap between words and action and help countries build the political will to make the right policy choices. The World Bank should more rigorously adhere to its Shared Prosperity Goal throughout its operations and advice in the public and private sector, making sure all efforts are coherently contributing to reducing inequality and not undermining those efforts in any way, (eg should stop any direct or indirect support of health user fees or securing wasteful tax incentives). The IMF must ramp up the operationalisation of its inequality agenda ensuring all its policy advice and loan programmes include the policy solutions we know help to reduce inequality rather than exacerbate it. The OECD should ensure inclusion of all countries on equal footing in BEPS’ second round of international tax forum negotiations.

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38. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/unsurvey/index.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. For a discussion of strengths and limitations of this approach, see C. Mariotti., N. Galasso and N. Daar (2017*) Great Expectations: Is the IMF turning words into action on inequality?.* Oxfam Briefing Paper. https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/great-expectations-is-the-imf-turning-words-into-action-on-inequality-620349 [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/LTD/G19/070/21/PDF/G1907021.pdf?OpenElement> [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G18/443/52/PDF/G1844352.pdf?OpenElement> [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. <https://www.publicfinanceinternational.org/opinion/2019/04/eu-leadership-needs-embed-human-rights-economic-policy-making> [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/Policy-Papers/Issues/2018/06/13/pp060118howto-note-on-inequality> [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. N., Galasso (2015) “The World Bank is Getting ‘Shared Prosperity’ Wrong: The Bank Should Measure the Tails, Not the Average”. *Global Policy* doi: 10.1111/1758-5899.12240 [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. For a discussion of the advantages of using the Palma ratio to measure inequality see:

    M., Doyle and Stiglitz, J. (2014) “Eliminating extreme inequality a sustainable development goal.” *Ethics and International Affairs*, <http://www.ethicsandinternationalaffairs.org/2014/eliminating-extreme-inequality-a-sustainable-development-goal-2015-2030/>

    Cobham, A., Sumner, A. (2013) ”It’s all about the tails, the Plama measure of income inequality.” <http://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/it-all-about-tails-palma-measure-income-inequality.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. http://commitmentoequity.org/ [↑](#endnote-ref-46)