The UN Secretary General has released the long-awaited Synthesis Report on the Post-2015 framework for the global development agenda for the next 15 years. Titled “The Road to Dignity by 2030: Ending Poverty, Transforming All Lives and Protecting the Planet,” the report is the culmination of the many in-depth dialogue and consultations that have gone into crafting the post-2015 agenda.

The report endorses the 17 goals and the 169 targets of the Open Working Group (OWG) on Sustainable Development Goals and establishes the links between economic growth, human rights, and the protection of ecosystems. It makes us of the six essential elements of Dignity, People, Prosperity, Planet, Justice, and Partnership to help frame and reinforce the integrated, universal, and transformative nature of a sustainable development agenda and to ensure that the ambition expressed by Member states in the outcome of the OWG translates, communicates, and is delivered at the country level.

The UN SG Synthesis Report stands as the distillation of the key messages from other major post-2015 reports listed in paragraph 37. The Campaign for Peoples Goals welcomes elements of the SG synthesis report, particularly its reaffirmation of the broader international human rights framework at the heart of the agenda, including economic, social, cultural, civil, and political rights, as well as the right to development and future generations’ wellbeing. It correctly identifies the problem of deepening inequalities and gnawing deprivation amid a world of plenty and argues the case for more inclusive economies.

It begs asking however why the SG Report chose to ignore the UN-NGLS report entitled, “Advancing Regional Recommendations on the Post-2015 Development Agenda” which goes farther than the other reports in terms of progressive proposals especially in the areas of reforming the international economic architecture. Indeed, the Peoples Goals Campaign is deeply disappointed that, like the reports upon which it is based, the SG report falls far short of proposing a truly just and democratic development model beyond the dominant framework of neoliberalism.

The report seems more concerned in seeking a happy medium where each and every “stakeholder’s” demands are articulated even when civil society organizations and movements have long contended that for the post-2015 agenda to be truly transformative, it needs to put people, especially the poor and marginalized, at front and center of development. It obscures the hard reality that entrenched interests, especially corporate interests, are behind unsustainable and unjust patterns of extraction,
We believe that the framework of Development Justice is an alternative framework that comprehensively captures the demands of the majority of the poor and marginalized – workers, poor and landless farmers, women, the homeless, refugees, migrants, displaced and evicted people, slum dwellers, to name but a few – around five foundations of redistributive justice, economic justice, social and gender justice, ecological justice, and accountability to people.

On Redistribution

Around half of the global wealth is now concentrated in the hands of just one percent of the population, and seven out of ten people live in countries where economic inequality has increased in the last 30 years. Economic inequality, according to The World Economic Forum presents a serious threat to human progress and impacting social stability and peace and security worldwide.

The report mentions the yawning gap in access to wealth, power, and productive assets between countries, between men and women and social groups. Closing the income gap was identified as one of the most important tasks that the world must address.

And yet it is clear that these references do not exhaustively cover the urgent issues concerning inequalities in societies today. Wealth, power, and resource redistribution remains unaddressed. Critically missing are proposals by civil society organizations, production, consumption and waste that are driving poverty, hunger and climate change in the world today.

We at the People’s Goals affirm our conviction that unjust and unequal power relations are at the root of multidimensional poverty and inequalities, social exclusion and ecological destruction, and place the principle of justice at the heart of the alternative development process. We reiterate our demand for concrete and meaningful actions towards eliminating the structural roots of inequalities in wealth, power, and resources between countries, between rich and poor, between men and women, and between different social groups and territories within countries.¹ We believe that the framework of Development Justice is an alternative framework that comprehensively captures the demands of the majority of the poor and marginalized – workers, poor and landless farmers, women, the homeless, refugees, migrants, displaced and evicted people, slum dwellers, to name but a few – around five foundations of redistributive justice, economic justice, social and gender justice, ecological justice, and accountability to people.

¹ See http://peoplesgoals.org/bangkok-civil-society-declaration-from-inclusive-to-just-development/
including the People’s Goals, such as: implementing a redistributive agrarian and urban land reform; elimination of monopolies and oligopolies over land, finance, technology, services and strategic industries; implementing progressive taxation including steep taxes on capital gains and net wealth; and expanding public and community ownership and management of productive assets and key sectors of the economy, countering the trend toward privatization of public services and goods. It is therefore a major omission of the report to neglect elaborating on targets and indicators for the goal on addressing inequality, despite its pressing importance for sustainable development.

Redistributive justice is also necessary to address historical inequities between countries. Indeed the report advocates for a more equitable multilateral trading system and the fair representation of emerging and developing countries in international financial and economic decision making. The report urges developed countries to meet the 0.7% target and agree to concrete timetables to meet ODA commitments and ensure the progressive increase of ODA proportion going to LDCs.

However, we do not see how this proposal differs in any significant way from those already agreed in many previous internationally-agreed development goals. The 0.7 per cent target will be having its 45th anniversary of non-fulfillment and is currently more symbolical than an indicator of solidarity. There is a need to adjust the normative framework of financial transfers from an aid-based approach to a rights-based approach. This would involve eliminating any form of conditionalities to ODA and should be binding governments to meet their obligations.

A step in the right direction is the recuperation of the concept of Global Partnership as it was originally conceived in the Millennium Declaration and the Monterrey and Johannesburg declarations as a form of cooperation between states and international organizations based on the principles of international solidarity and common but differentiated responsibilities around key development priorities such as aid, trade, debt, finance, and transfer of technology and knowledge, and the special needs of LDCs, LLDCs, and SIDS. However, we deem problematic the uncritical endorsement of multistakeholder partnerships which obscure the power relations between actors. Moreover, multistakeholder partnerships can be exploited by governments who wish to avoid accountability for the management of sustainable development and environmental issues, transferring responsibility for such issues to private actors who are less accountable to the needs of those affected by the problem in question.
On Economic Justice

We are glad that the Synthesis Report’s renewed emphasis on the need to translate economic growth to shared prosperity and to come up with alternative measures of progress from GDP to one that adequately accounts for human wellbeing, justice, social progress, sustainability, and equity. The need to develop alternative indicators of sustainable development is long overdue and we would have greatly appreciated it if the synthesis report spelled out concrete ways to achieve this.

The report mentions the need to generate inclusive and decent employment as a hallmark of economic success. However, we feel that this is a step-back from the broader, more balanced and internationally-recognized framework of ILO’s Decent Work agenda that not only aims at creating jobs, but also securing workers’ rights and welfare, promoting universal social protection, and guaranteeing the freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men.

The synthesis report proposes the need to tap into private resources and facilitate foreign direct investments (FDI) in developing countries, especially in the areas of infrastructure and transport, communication, and energy. This is alarming given that as per the experience of many nations in the Global South, FDI liberalization has greatly sapped the resources and weakened their economies, while it has definitely favored wealthy countries and their transnational companies and banks. FDI-led growth has been used to justify the warrantless policies of deregulation of industries, subverting critical checks and balances frameworks that big corporations claimed hindered the free movement of capital. This, we fear will further justify the liberalization of investment in land and resources, promoting large-scale land purchases or leases, escalating land grabbing and violence, and further impoverishing rural and urban populations including small-scale farmers, indigenous peoples, slum dwellers and other groups already marginalized, particularly women. The Report's support for free, prior, and informed consent may not be enough to protect indigenous peoples' rights and mitigate the risk of social conflict around natural resource projects.

Rather than focus on promoting FDI, we would like to see greater efforts in increasing public investments in social and physical infrastructure to boost job creation, increase the purchasing power of working families, as well as help bring about the structural transformation of economies needed to counter climate change. The task of providing employment opportunities should be the primary responsibility of governments which,
following the tenets of social and solidarity economy, should be investing in social and public work programs for the unemployed and excluded, as well as serving social needs.

The report correctly points out the need for better regulation in the international financial and monetary system, and sustainable debt solutions. Moreover, the report recognizes the need to address policy incoherence between trade, finance, and investment on the one hand, and norms and standards for labor, the environment, human rights, equality, and sustainability on the other. This is especially important for developing countries where most trade agreements and investments treaties have been found to curtail their capacity to handle crises, protect their economies, deliver services to their people, and ensure sustainable development. The report, as with most of its stated ambitions, however, falls short in providing concrete recommendations.

We view as positive the proposal to put up an intergovernmental body on tax cooperation under the auspices of the United Nations, an idea that was introduced in the earlier sessions of the ICESDF but was omitted in the final report. Additionally valuable are the suggestions for a levy on financial transactions the proceeds from which should finance sustainable development, systematic issuance of Special Drawing Rights, and the reform of financial regulation and the financial sector. Unfortunately, the Synthesis Report did not mention any concrete proposals, targets and indicators for their implementation.

Gender and Social Justice

The synthesis report positively pushes for the accommodation of the voices of women, youth and minorities, and the indigenous peoples with regard to combatting poverty and inequality. Likewise, it stresses the importance of the free, active and meaningful engagement of civil society and advocates reflecting the voices of women. However, it lags behind the recommendations already included in the OWG Outcome Document that clearly demand equal opportunities for leadership and effective participation of women at all levels of governance.

The report delineates the need to realize women’s reproductive health and rights, but fails to guarantee universal sexual and reproductive rights, in addition to sexual health and the importance of universal access to sexual and reproductive health services, information and education. Clear identification of adolescents and young people’s sexual and reproductive health and rights as a group is crucial as this sector has specific sexual and reproductive health needs and are exposed to vulnerabilities and violations of their rights. The report also lacks proposals for countering the negative impact of inheritance,
succession, customary and/or family laws and marriage related-practices to women's rights, particularly their equal right to land.

The report rightfully recognizes the rights of migrants. However, the reference to the rights of migrants is superficial and misleading for as long as labor import-export is adopted as de facto policy of governments to increase the supply of precarious and vulnerable workers in host countries, and maximize migrants' remittances to offset government cut backs on social spending and development in origin countries. Indeed, the Report offers nothing concrete to reverse the current trend towards more repressive measures against migrants and refugees in host and transit countries while it calls for reducing costs associated with the transfer of remittances.

We reiterate our call for governments to ensure the systematic implementation of affirmative action to combat the marginalization and discrimination of women and other excluded groups and sectors in society. All governments must commit to promote a universal social protection agenda in the new development paradigm.

**On Environmental Justice**

The Synthesis Report puts prime importance on the issue of climate change as one of the biggest risks to sustainability and points to human activities as its primary cause. To be exact, climate change is the result of a particular type of historically and socially determined human activity within the context of a capitalist mode of development pushed by Northern governments, corporations, and their client states and elites in the Global South. The ecological crisis is a historic crisis of the relationship between humanity and its environment. Its primary cause is over-production which leads to overconsumption on the one hand and growing poverty and under-consumption on the other.

From such an understanding, it becomes clear that nothing less than a shift away from unsustainable production and consumption patterns is needed to halt the impending environmental catastrophe and commit to building a new system based on the rational, collective, and democratic management and use of resources in the interest of the people and the wellbeing of the planet. Striving for human development means a more conscious and collective effort to balance quantitative with qualitative targets based on material as well as cultural, social and spiritual aspects of well-being. As it is not based on striving for limitless economic growth, this fundamentally different approach imposes less demand on the planet's
carrying capacity; at the same time, it provides a more profound and sustainable basis for human fulfillment and development.

On the urgent matter of climate change, the report identifies fossil fuels usage as one of the two largest contributing factors to greenhouse gas emissions (the other being deforestation). However its proposed targets and indicators are far from ambitious. According to the recommendations of climate science, governments, but particularly of the Global North, must commit to limiting global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius rather than the proposed 2 degrees Celsius, through drastic emission cuts and fair-sharing of the global carbon budget that takes into account per capita historical emissions and without resorting to carbon trading or offsets. Additionally, these countries must commit to quantifiable and time bound goals that will keep 80% of known fossil fuel reserves to remain in the ground and rapidly shift energy systems towards sustainable, clean, efficient renewable sources with greater emphasis on public and community ownership and management of energy.

This must also be accompanied by the delivery of adequate and appropriate climate finance and technology for mitigation actions in the South. While the rhetoric of “shared responsibility” used by the Secretary General may sound appealing, the principle of climate justice demands that the burden of this transition must be borne by the biggest corporations and wealthiest classes globally and within each country.

The Secretary General appeals to substantially progress in the development, transfer, and dissemination of clean and environmentally sound technology to remedy negative environmental trends. However, we also believe that there is a need for the creation of an independent technology assessment mechanism at international, regional and national levels to assess the social, economic, environmental, cultural, and health impacts of new technologies based on the precautionary principle. The need for technology assessment was recognized already 20 years ago in Rio’s action plan on environment and development (Agenda 21, Chapter 34), and this still holds true for today given that the pace of scientific and technological development has accelerated with far reaching implications for sustainable development and that a small number of transnational corporations control both technologies and resources, protected by intellectual property rights laws.

Finally, we are disappointed about the report’s lack of an in-depth analysis as to the role that transnational corporations play in food insecurity and ecological imbalance through their promotion of genetically modified crops and seed patenting. With seeds concentrated in the hands of transnational agro-corporations, natural seeds disappear and are taken over by GMO seeds. This poses a serious threat, not only to our food sovereignty but also to our ecological diversity as GM crops affect the fitness of other species, population dynamics, and ecological roles leading to local extinctions, population explosions, and changes in community structure and function inside and outside agroecosystems.²

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Accountability to People

Accountability in the Post-2015 agenda means promoting a conducive environment where development and rights are enjoyed, particularly by the most marginalized. We welcome the Secretary General’s reaffirmation of current political commitments and existing obligations under international law. We are pleased that it cites the UN’s Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, core labour standards of the ILO, and the UN’s environmental standards as the terms of reference for the conduct of investment policies. However, we are disappointed with the report’s promotion of “public-private-people partnerships” and the notion of “mutual accountability” which obscures the relationship between people as rights-holders and States as duty-bearers. The current hype about multistakeholder cooperation echoed by the report also dilutes the historical responsibility of the North and ignores the unequal relations of power and conflicting goals among actors.

To gauge, monitor, and evaluate progress in the achievement of the new goals, the report favors a “voluntary, state-led, participatory, evidence-based and multi-tiered process” that has been identified in previous UN consultations. We believe that a voluntary review process will not be effective as compared to a mandatory and universal process as this can lead to governments neglecting to implement their existing human rights responsibilities both at the national and global levels and the operative regulation of the private sector.

We are also disappointed that the Secretary General failed to elaborate on a regulatory framework compelling corporations to report on, and be liable for the social and environmental impacts and effects to human rights of their activities. As current 21st century free trade agreements facilitate the enlargement of “corporate rights” that enable them to circumvent national laws through the establishment of investor-state dispute settlement instruments that act as both the prosecutor and judge for corporations, we demand the creation of international legal mechanisms to address corporate human rights abuses similar to that of the International Criminal Court.

One of the governance reforms that deserves emphasis in the post-2015 development agenda but is missing in the report relates to the need to shift towards effective decentralization of authority and processes and local and participatory democracy. This has already been reaffirmed in the Rio+20 outcome document which highlighted the role of local governance and local development processes in promoting inclusiveness, efficiency, and innovation in the decision-making, planning, and the implementation of the sustainable development policies. This scores the need for an effective decentralization processes which allow for the reasonable transfer of political, administrative and fiscal authority and responsibility to lower levels of government,
accompanied by an unwavering commitment to support subnational entities to develop requisite governance capacity.

A major hindrance to world peace today is foreign occupation which is primarily driven by countries’ quest for new resources and markets. Rich and powerful states repeatedly violate with impunity UN resolutions and declarations against foreign subjugation, domination and occupation. Multinational corporations loot on colonized nations’ natural wealth, resources, and labor power as spoils of neocolonial wars. Entire populations are displaced and women and children of colonized countries are subjected to gross violations of human rights.

It will be recalled that The Group of 77 developing countries and China repeatedly urged a specific target on ending foreign occupation in the Outcome Document of the OWG. However, this was vehemently resisted by developed countries and was immediately nixed. The Secretary General could have taken the opportunity to at least acknowledge the perils posed by foreign occupation to peace, security and sustainability in the world today.

We are disappointed to see no reference to the urgent need to reduce militarism and the arms trade globally. Military spending is only mentioned once in the document in the section on technology, and only to be compared to spending on research. There is no recognition of the considerable impact of human rights violations due to militarism.

* With contributions and feedback from IBON International, Asia-Pacific Forum on Women, Law, and Development (APWLD), Habitat International Coalition (HIC), People’s Coalition on Food Sovereignty (PCFS), Center for Environmental Concerns (CEC), Roots for Equity, Eastern & Southern Africa Farmers’ Forum (ESAFF), Action Group on Governance and Environmental Management (AGGEM), Fundación Red Nicaragüense de Comercio Comunitario/Red Latinoamericano sobre Deuda, Desarrollo y Derechos (RENNIC/LATINDADD), South Africa National NGO Coalition (SANGOC) and Agenda for Change (A4C)