

Civil Society Statement to the UNCTAD16 Quadrennial Conference Geneva, Switzerland, 20-23 October 2025

The sixteenth session of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD16) will soon convene in Geneva, Switzerland, from 20-23 October 2025 under the theme, “Shaping the future: Driving economic transformation for equitable, inclusive and sustainable development.” The conference comes at a time when the fabric of the global political and economic system is tearing at the seams and multilateral consensus towards a just and liveable future is urgent.

The crises in the world today encompass a nearly two-year-long genocide in Palestine fueled and financed by Western arms and capital; to widespread debt crises, with some developing countries spending as much as 38% of their export revenue on debt servicing; to the imminent collapse of ecological systems and the looming extinction of a million species; to a global ‘race to the bottom’ for bilateral trade concessions triggered by the use of tariffs as unilateral coercive measures. These interlinked ecological, economic, and social crises are fueled by the global expansion of right-wing extremism and fascism and based on the same hierarchies of humanity and logics of militarization and interventionism which justified colonial and imperial projects. As a result, the little progress made towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has been reversed, throwing peoples’ lives and the economic and ecological systems upon which they depend into deepening disarray.

These crises have not emerged suddenly. They are the result of decades, and in some cases centuries, of systemic inequality in the global political and economic system. This backdrop is precisely why the establishment of UNCTAD in 1964 was such a hard-fought win. UNCTAD’s founding mandate reflects both the struggle for justice in the global economy and the political context of decolonization across the Global South following centuries of plunder and accumulation. It is this significance, and the unique positionality of UNCTAD as a voice for developing countries within the UN system, that places UNCTAD and the current UNCTAD16 process under threat today. Developed countries’ proposals to the UNCTAD16 Outcome Document would hollow out UNCTAD’s work and role within the UN system, effectively recasting it as an ad hoc technical assistance agency.

While technical cooperation is an important element of UNCTAD’s work, UNCTAD’s strength lies in the integrated approach of its three pillars: research and analysis, consensus-building, and technical cooperation. Developed countries’ proposed language in various parts of the Outcome Document would, if adopted, weaken UNCTAD’s research and consensus-building functions as the UN’s focal point for the integrated treatment of trade and development issues, and reduce UNCTAD to yet another UN agency that seeks to provide implementation support for frameworks negotiated elsewhere (e.g., the SDGs, the Pact for the Future, etc.). This framing risks converting UNCTAD into a service delivery arm rather than an independent, pro-development policy multilateral body. Developing countries have long insisted that UNCTAD’s importance rests on the equal weight of all three pillars, and that technical cooperation cannot replace policy research and intergovernmental dialogue.

If UNCTAD is gutted as these developed countries propose, the Global South loses a vital platform for advancing an integrated and justice-centered vision of trade and development. There are also arguments being put forward that gutting UNCTAD is justified in light of the liquidity crisis facing the UN system

and the impending UN80 reforms. This would unilaterally decide the fate of UNCTAD before the process runs its course. It is crucial to rally behind UNCTAD and protect its three-pillared work. The stakes at UNCTAD16 are not only institutional but existential for the prospects of equitable global development.

As in all previous UNCTAD quadrennials, developing countries have distilled proposals that reflect these stakes. Civil society celebrates these countries' attention to ensuring sovereignty over their natural resources, even as developed countries make proposals aiming to secure their own predatory access to these resources. We also affirm developing countries' proposal for UNCTAD to foster cooperation among borrowers, building on the proposals from the Financing for Development (FfD4) process for an official Borrowers' Forum. Such a Forum is a longstanding call by civil society and grassroots movements globally, and there is no better UN agency to operationalize it. An additional proposal worth celebrating from developing countries is for UNCTAD to assess net international financial flows from North-South and South-North. This responds to arguments from civil society and grassroots movements, as well as an increasing body of research, that in fact the broader macroeconomic picture is one in which there is a net transfer of resources from the South to the North. Finally, we welcome developing countries' various proposals towards ending commodity dependence through economic diversification and structural transformation, continuing their rich tradition of work on this. Each of these areas represents progress and should be fiercely protected against the pushback they are receiving from developed countries.

A long-standing strength of UNCTAD's work has been its defense of policy space for developing countries. For example, it was UNCTAD11 in 2004 where a clear articulation of the concept of policy space was agreed upon at the multilateral level. Thus, it is heartening to see language proposed by developing countries on unilateral coercive and trade-related environmental measures (TREMs), including language taken directly from UNFCCC, that takes forward this tradition. Despite claiming to be champions of equity and multilateralism, this language is being fought by the developed countries, as they are the primary users of such tools. Developing countries must push back and ensure that the Outcome Document reflects just how detrimental these tools are to autonomous development in the South. There are also welcome mentions in various Global South proposals calling for the reaffirmation of the related principles of special and differential treatment (SDT) and common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities (CBDR-RC), which remain sidelined in discussions in other multilateral fora, including the WTO. This stands in stark contrast to the additions by developed countries which seek to ensure their own continuing access and control of critical minerals located in the South, all the while discriminating against these very same goods through TREMs, including the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM). UNCTAD itself does vital work on TREMs, and published one of the landmark studies on the estimated effects of the implementation of the CBAM. The study showed that a 44 dollar per ton carbon tax would result in a 2.5 billion dollar increase in developed country incomes and a 5.9 billion dollar decrease in developing country incomes. This estimate has proven conservative, as the CBAM's carbon tax ranged between 50 and 80 euros per ton in the first half of 2025.

It is no surprise that given these factors it would be developed countries standing in opposition to language in the Outcome Document which would protect against such a situation repeating itself, and which would continue UNCTAD's work on unilateral trade-related environmental measures. Without UNCTAD's analysis, developing countries lose a key UN platform to document the developmental impacts of all kinds of unilateral measures and to build collective responses on the basis of empirical data

and scientific analysis. Such a situation could hence make international cooperation on, for example, climate finance (another subject of UNCTAD's vital work) more complex as countries lose trust and good faith is diminished. As such, the inclusion of these paragraphs should be strongly defended. UNCTAD should undoubtedly be tasked to study and provide evidence on the impacts of unilateral measures, and to build the capacity of developing country negotiators to respond to them effectively.

Meanwhile, developed countries proposed a replacement package of eight paragraphs in the Financing for Development cluster which elevated private investment, domestic resource mobilization, and "enabling environments" as the main sources of finance; reduced emphasis on Official Development Assistance (ODA) and North-South obligations; eviscerated the commitment to progressive taxation to tackle inequalities and eliminated the recognition of the critical importance of developing the United Nations Framework Convention on International Tax Cooperation to make international tax cooperation fully inclusive and effective; and omitted debt cancellation, systemic financial architecture reform, and the principle of equity. While developing countries have successfully defended against many of these proposals, some of their proposals for systemic reforms have now been removed from the text: notably, these include debt cancellation and support for the United Nations Framework Convention on International Tax Cooperation. The remaining proposed replacement paragraphs are still very problematic and, if they were agreed, would further entrench the same market-oriented solutions that have stunted economies across the South. It is crucial these proposals are rejected and the Outcome Document reflects the systemic reforms already proposed by developing countries: inclusive and effective international tax rules to bolster progressive taxation, including of multinational companies and wealthy individuals; debt relief and cancellation, including reforms to the international debt architecture; and the democratization of global financial governance to increase the voice and participation of the Global South.

Investment cluster paragraphs and text proposed by developed countries has shown a strong push to promote enabling environments for global capital through "good governance," transparency, anti-corruption measures, and the rule of law. This framing suggests that developing countries' domestic shortcomings are the primary barriers to investment, rather than global systemic asymmetries in finance and trade rules and relationships. In practice, adherence to this framing has created constraints to regulatory policy space that developing countries need in order to ensure that foreign investment provides developmental and global public good benefits. Effectively, this proposed language would have sanitized the goal of all private investment to be developmental rather than profit-oriented, when the record strongly suggests otherwise. Developing countries have countered these proposals with a more measured view of the connection between investment and sustainable development, and only one of the proposed paragraphs remains. We support developing countries' position and attention to systemic reform of the international investment regime.

To conclude, civil society would like to remind UNCTAD that we are your allies. We have historically defended the role of UNCTAD and invested a significant amount of our own time and resources in supporting and being involved in the work of UNCTAD, both during and in between quadrennials. To our surprise and disappointment, this institutional memory seems to have been lost, and we have been largely excluded from the UNCTAD16 quadrennial process. Our historical support for UNCTAD does not constitute a blank check, and UNCTAD must prove to us and all its allies in civil society that our faith has not been misplaced.

To ensure this situation is not repeated in future UNCTAD processes and conferences, we strongly urge Member States to include in the “intergovernmental machinery” section of the UNCTAD16 Outcome Document a clear and explicit paragraph committing UNCTAD to civil society inclusion and participation. This should cover all UNCTAD processes and conferences, ensuring that CSO engagement by UNCTAD goes beyond tokenism to effective and substantive participation. A specific proposal from us for such a paragraph would be:

“Member States reaffirm the importance of meaningful, transparent, and inclusive engagement of civil society organizations in all UNCTAD processes and conferences, consistent with UN principles of participation and accountability. The secretariat shall establish effective modalities no later than 31 December 2026 to ensure timely access to documentation, including negotiating texts, and structured opportunities for civil society to provide substantive inputs into UNCTAD intergovernmental deliberations. Such modalities should go beyond symbolic participation and ensure that civil society perspectives are integrated into the work of UNCTAD across its three pillars of research and analysis, consensus-building, and technical cooperation.”

We stand ready to support Global South Member States in making the most of the remaining time in this process, and carrying UNCTAD’s work forward.

Initial signatories (21 October)

Global Networks

1. Apostolic Ministerial International Network
2. Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID)
3. Civil Society Financing for Development Mechanism
4. Financial Transparency Coalition (FTC)
5. Public Services International (PSI)
6. Regions Refocus
7. RIPESS: Intercontinental Network for the Promotion of Social Solidarity Economy
8. Society for International Development (SID)
9. Third World Network
10. Tax Justice Network
11. World Chaplain Federation

Africa

12. African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET) - Regional
13. African Youth Employment Initiatives - Regional
14. Afrihealth Optonet Association - Regional
15. Association de Développement Agricole Éducatif et Sanitaire de Manono - Democratic Republic of the Congo
16. Association du Développement et de la Promotion des Droits de l’Homme - Mauritania

17. Association de Lutte contre les Violences faites aux Femmes et aux Filles Extrême Nord Cameroun - Cameroon
18. Association Nigérienne des Scouts de l'Environnement - Niger
19. Association pour la Conservation et la Protection des Écosystèmes des Lacs et l'Agriculture Durable - Democratic Republic of the Congo
20. Carbone Guinée - Guinea
21. Child's Destiny and Development Organisation - South Sudan
22. Club Unesco du Centre d'Action Femme et Enfant en sigle - Democratic Republic of the Congo
23. Conseil pour l'Education et le Développement - Burundi
24. Daayyaa Generation Network - Ethiopia
25. Elles Cameroun - Cameroon
26. Development Impact Pathfinders Initiative - Nigeria
27. Dr Uzo Adirieje Foundation - Nigeria
28. Initiative Africaine pour le Développement Durable - Chad
29. Initiatives for Safe Migration and Social Justice - Nigeria
30. Echoes of Women in Africa Initiatives - Nigeria
31. Forum International des Femmes de l'Espace Francophone - Democratic Republic of the Congo
32. Femme au Cœur du Développement Africain - Côte d'Ivoire
33. HATOF Foundation - Ghana
34. Human Rights and Grassroots Development Society - Nigeria
35. Nawi Afrifem Macroeconomics Collective - Regional
36. Okogun Odigie Safewomb International Foundation - Nigeria
37. Olabode Youth and Women Initiatives - Nigeria
38. Organisation d'appui aux Jeunes Opérateurs Économiques pour la Gouvernance Locale - Senegal
39. Plateforme Dette et Développement - Regional
40. Purple Royale: Trans Voices Amplified - Zimbabwe
41. Resource Link Foundation - Ghana
42. Sinatsisa Lubombo Women and Girls Empowerment Organisation - Eswatini
43. Slum Child Foundation - Kenya
44. Société Civile Copagode - Democratic Republic of the Congo
45. Society for Conservation and Sustainability of Energy and Environment in Nigeria - Nigeria
46. Southern and Eastern Africa Trade Information and Negotiations Institute (SEATINI) - Regional
47. Survivor Aid - South Sudan
48. Syndicat Chrétien des Travailleurs du Congo - Democratic Republic of the Congo
49. Third World Network–Africa - Regional
50. WAVE Foundation Africa - Nigeria
51. Women & Girls Capabilities & Empowerment Organization - Nigeria
52. Women for a Change - Cameroon
53. Village Farmers Initiative - Nigeria
54. Youth Path Organisation - Ghana

Asia and the Pacific

55. Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) - Regional

56. Association for Promotion Sustainable Development - India
57. Beyond Beijing Committee (BBC) - Nepal
58. Centre for Environment, Human Rights & Development Forum - Bangladesh
59. Free Trade Union Development Centre - Sri Lanka
60. GIRLxGIRL - Thailand
61. Lanka Fundamental Rights Organization - Sri Lanka
62. IT for Change - Regional
63. Nagorik Uddyog - Bangladesh
64. Nepal Transportation and Development Research Centre - Nepal
65. Noor - Pakistan
66. Pacific Network on Globalisation (PANG) - Regional
67. SERAC-Bangladesh - Bangladesh
68. Sukaar Welfare Organization - Pakistan
69. Vajpayee Research Foundation - India
70. Youth Alliance for Development - Nepal
71. Young Women's Christian Association India - India

Europe

72. ALGA - Kyrgyzstan
73. Alliance Sud - Switzerland
74. Asociación Migración y Cooperación Internacional Araguaney - Spain
75. BALT Global Group - France
76. Center for Ecology and Sustainable Development - Serbia
77. Consortium for Intersectional Justice - United Kingdom
78. Creación Positiva - Spain
79. European Network on Debt and Development (EURODAD) - Regional
80. Friends of the Earth Hungary - Hungary
81. Nash Vek Public Foundation - Kyrgyzstan
82. The People's Fund for Global Health and Development - Denmark
83. Women and Modern World Social Charitable Center - Azerbaijan
84. Women in Development Europe+ (WIDE+) - Regional

Latin America and the Caribbean

85. Asociación por los Derechos de las Mujeres (ADEM) - Argentina
86. Candid Concepts Development Agencies - Bahamas
87. Campaña Latinoamericana por el Derecho a la Educación - Regional
88. Climate Action Network Latin America (CANLA) - Regional
89. Foro Internacional de Inversión en Juventud - Regional
90. Fundación Arcoíris por el Respeto a la Diversidad Sexual - Regional
91. Humanity For The World - Martinique
92. Instituto Equit - Brazil
93. Medical Impact - Mexico

- 94. Mujer MRKH · Ninfas de Rokitansky - Chile
- 95. Red de Mujeres Indígenas sobre Biodiversidad de América Latina y el Caribe (RMIB-LAC) - Regional
- 96. Rede Nacional de Mulheres Negras no Combate à Violência - Brazil
- 97. Servicio de Extensión y Desarrollo Agrícola con perspectiva género (SEDRA) - Regional

North America

- 98. TRIPPINZ CARE INC - USA
- 99. Extended Arms Diamond Inc - USA