



**Civil Society Financing For
Development (FfD) Group
Response To SG's "Our
Common Agenda" Report**

January 2022

BACKGROUND AND SUMMARY

On 10 September 2021, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres released the “Our Common Agenda” (OCA) report. This report was in response to a request from UN member states to “report back before the end of the seventy-fifth session of the General Assembly with recommendations to advance our common agenda and to respond to current and future challenges.”¹

The Civil Society FfD Group is extremely concerned with the new global governance recommendations proposed in the OCA report in relation to the global economic and financial architecture, the larger implications on democratic global governance, as well as the Financing for Development (FfD) agenda and its inter-related domains. Rather than reaffirming the role of universal and democratic intergovernmental processes, the proposals rely on new multi-stakeholder approaches, termed ‘networked multilateralism’ in the SG report, that bring to the decision-making table the global corporate monopolies and international financial actors. The same actors have concentrated wealth and power, subsumed regions into debt and austerity, eroded environmental integrity, exacerbated poverty and human rights violations, actively undermined equal and just access to vaccines, and profited from disasters. This modality of operation would only undermine the United Nations’ role in international decision-making as well as the related accountability and transparency that is central to its legitimacy. Further than that, it would embed the UN in extreme conflict of interests, with the risk of undermining its integrity and autonomy.

The Civil Society FfD Group is convinced that the way to comprehensively address the challenges that humanity and the planet are

facing right now, is through a **4th Financing for Development (FfD) conference** under the auspices of the UN, as it remains the only place where developing countries are at the table with an equal voice and vote for global economic governance matters that profoundly shape their economies and societies. The CS FfD Group has been calling for such an FfD conference to take place in the form of an “International Economic Reconstruction and Systemic Reform Summit” that should work towards reaching consensus on a new global economic governance architecture that could foster systemic reforms while ensuring, protecting and promoting human rights, gender equality, social equity and environmental justice. Under this new global architecture, the UN human rights system is strengthened, with effective compliance, non-regression and progressive realisation of human rights, by both non-State actors and State actors alike. What the UNSG is proposing is precisely the opposite: the undermining of the UN, promoting an undemocratic, colonial and elitist approach.

Why is the UNSG’s proposal the opposite of what the Civil Society FfD Group has been calling for? The FfD conference is a decision-making space where the final Heads of State Summit is preceded by several rounds of preparatory negotiations towards

¹ <https://www.un.org/pga/74/wp-content/uploads/sites/99/2020/07/UN75-FINAL-DRAFT-DECLARATION.pdf>

an outcome document. This is in contrast to the notion of a Summit consisting of a theatrical performance of speeches and multi-stakeholder approaches where it is unclear who makes decisions. The UN cannot afford to continually invent new ‘talk-shops’ and performative summits that dangerously conflate duty-bearers (governments), rights holders (people) and corporate interests as equal stakeholders while rendering invisible the historical asymmetries of power and voice between nations.

Such multi-stakeholder approaches have already been extensively criticised. See for instance the existing critique within civil society, most recently the mobilisation by food groups against the SG’s UN Food Systems Summit: foodsystems4people.org

Some of the negative impacts are:

- **Multistakeholderism conflates duty-bearers (governments), rights holders (people) and corporations as equal stakeholders, under the illusion that all stakeholders are equal in their rights, responsibilities, and capacities. Under the guise of promoting cooperation and partnership, this strategy covers up long-standing injustices, power imbalances and abuses of rights and responsibilities and legitimises profound power inequalities.**
- **Multi-stakeholder processes are rife with conflicts of interest: those who commit and/or enable offences and make huge profits from destructive, abusive activities and practises, set standards and criteria for sustainability, due diligence, and accountability.**
- **Multistakeholderism normalises corporate involvement in all aspects of our lives — society, culture, health, environment, economy, governance, democracy, justice etc., and in the end, it validates the corporate capture of global governance spaces.**

The extent to which the OCA report and its “solutions” rely on multi-stakeholder approaches, reinforcing the role of problematic exclusive membership clubs and colonial undemocratic forums and giving a seat at the table to those who have preyed on disaster, is worrisome. The UN should be the normative space for making decisions on critical global challenges which has increasingly been captured by spaces such as the OECD and G20 instead. The UN should indeed be addressing all those substantive issues included in the agenda. But it should be done through strengthening inclusive multilateralism. Not by surrendering to the corporate capture and annihilating even more the possibility to regain global democracy.

Let’s make it clear: Multilateralism is not “networked” multistakeholderism. The role of multilateralism and the UN is not about creating multi-stakeholder forums or networks for discussion. It is about **decision-making** among all governments to overcome the urgent and life-threatening challenges we face ahead. Furthermore, we need inclusive multilateralism that ensures intergovernmental negotiations on key global challenges are transparent to citizens who can then hold their respective governments accountable to ensure ambitious decisions. On the following pages, we highlight specific examples of the misleading focus of the OCA report. Civil society and social movements engaged in the UN to hold it accountable, will strive to focus on the structural paradigm shift that is needed, not on siloed and unarticulated measures.

THE OCA REPORT AND THE UNDERMINING OF MULTILATERAL ACTION

On global economic governance, here's what we were expecting:

- **4th Financing for Development (FfD) conference:**
There is an urgent need for a new global consensus on an economic system that works for people and the planet. The UN's FfD process already has the mandate to convene such a conference to address urgent global systemic challenges on debt, international tax, private finance, ODA, trade, technology and financial regulation. The modalities of the FfD process already recognise civil society and the private sector as stakeholders for inputs while ensuring that negotiations are clearly intergovernmental with member states as decision-makers. We need leadership from UN member states and the SG to reinforce these existing multilateral processes rather than inventing new forums and summits that only delay decision-making.
- **Democratising global economic governance:**
Multilateral reforms are urgently needed to ensure the democratisation of global economic governance such as the need for a global debt workout mechanism at the UN, establishing a universal UN intergovernmental tax commission and a global technology assessment mechanism at the UN. We need leadership from the SG to call out developed countries that continue to be obstinate gatekeepers of undemocratic, secretive forums instead of engaging in the United Nations and uphold the UN's democratic potential.

The UNSG instead calls for a High-level Advisory Board and Summit of Future:

What the OCA report says: "I will ask a **High-level Advisory Board** led by former Heads of State and/ or Government to build on the ideas I have shared here. Notably, I will ask the Advisory Board to identify global public goods and potentially other areas of common interest where governance improvements are most needed and propose options for how this could be achieved. "...The Advisory Board could also take into account the proposals made throughout this report, including the repurposing of the Trusteeship Council and the creation of an Emergency Platform."... "Once the Advisory Board has reported its findings, it will be important to hold a high-level, multi-stakeholder **"Summit of the Future"** to advance ideas for governance arrangements in

the areas of international concern mentioned in this report, and potentially others, where governance arrangements are nascent or require updating."

"This is a form of multilateralism that is more networked, more inclusive and more effective in addressing twenty-first century challenges."

Our concerns: This High-level Advisory Board will be vested with extreme power across processes, not just around the Summit of the Future, but including proposals on the repurposing of the Trusteeship Council. It would work like a supra-body under the UNSG with unclear accountability to the UNGA. This means that the OCA report is not only calling for specific steps on isolated issues: **the end result is a de facto downgrading of the governance structure of the United Nations.**

OUR KEY CONCERNS REGARDING STRUCTURAL AGENDAS

1 Proposals to convene a “Biennial Summit” and “Emergency Platform”

Biennial Summit between the members of the G20 and of the Economic and Social Council, the Secretary-General and the heads of the international financial institutions:

What the OCA report says: “This would allow us to combine more systematically the respective strengths of relevant bodies and to make fuller use of the follow-up to the intergovernmental process on financing for sustainable development. Immediate matters this biennial gathering could promote include ultra-long-term and innovative financing for sustainable development and a Sustainable Development Goals “investment boost” for a green and just transition for all countries in need, more flexible research and development incentives to foster innovation and a process to resolve longstanding weaknesses in the international debt architecture”

Our concerns: It is extremely concerning that the proposal undermines the existing Financing for Development (FfD) process that is already mandated to address issues of private finance, debt architecture, innovative financing, international tax and illicit financial flows, ODA and technology and financial regulation in a universal, intergovernmental process with a legitimacy spanning 20 years. IFIs, in addition to the WTO and UNCTAD, are already stakeholders

in the FfD process. We find it unacceptable for the United Nations to promote structures that privilege a handful of member states (such as the G20) instead of reaffirming existing universal, inclusive processes.

The SG states in his report “Economic governance is driven disproportionately by a small number of States and financial actors and is siloed from other areas of international agenda-setting and decision-making”. Instead of addressing this concerning dynamic, he proposes a Biennial Summit that reinforces both the lack of inclusiveness and the isolation of existing economic governance dynamics.

As noted earlier, we have been calling for UN member states to urgently agree on the next FfD Conference to respond to the multiple crises we face and move towards a new global economic architecture that works for the people and planet.

Emergency Platform to respond in the event of a global economic crisis:

What the OCA report says: “Finally, we still lack pre-negotiated ways to convene relevant actors in the event of a global economic crisis. As with future pandemics, the proposed emergency crisis response platform (see chap. IV.B below) could be available in the event of future economic crises and shocks of sufficient scale and magnitude”

“The platform would not be a new permanent or standing body or institution. It would be triggered automatically in crises of sufficient scale and magnitude, regardless of the type or nature of the crisis involved. Once activated, it would bring together leaders from Member

States, the United Nations system, key country groupings, international financial institutions, regional bodies, civil society, the private sector, subject-specific industries or research bodies and other experts.”

Our concerns: Again, a pre-negotiated way to convene and make decisions in the event of a global economic crisis, i.e. the FfD process already exists. Such an [FfD crisis conference](#) titled “UN conference on the world economic crisis and its effects on developing countries” was in fact convened in 2009 in direct response to the global economic crisis. The challenge is not the lack of existing processes to convene but the need to overcome the obstinate blocking from a handful of member states in the UN who prefer such decision-making to happen in undemocratic forums rather than the UN. Establishing multi-stakeholder initiatives will not resolve this and will only further delay decision-making by strengthening the status quo.

2

Democratising global economic governance and negotiating normative policy guidelines

International tax architecture:

What the OCA report says: “I also propose stronger international cooperation to tackle tax evasion and aggressive tax avoidance, money-laundering and illicit financial flows, including through a [new joint structure on financial integrity and tackling illicit financial flows](#), with membership centred around the United Nations, international financial institutions, OECD, major financial centres and expert civil society organizations. Its role could include promotion of transparency and accountability through the provision of data and other information, as well as fostering agreements to address illicit financial flows”.

Our concerns: This is deeply concerning especially in a context where G77 (grouping of over 130 developing countries) have called for a universal, intergovernmental tax negotiation process at the UN for years. The key governance gap on addressing IFFs remains the issue of tax-related IFFs as universal forums such as UN Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) and the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) already exist for corruption and crime-related IFFs. While the existing UN Tax Committee is doing important work, it is only an expert body, not intergovernmental, with experts serving in their individual capacity. International tax standards are instead currently being decided through intergovernmental processes in exclusive OECD forums that are opaque and biased. CSOs from around the world recently [rejected](#) the OECD/G20/G7 tax deal, expressing concerns that it would only benefit a handful of OECD countries.

A new joint UN structure that reinforces the role of OECD member states (who are also members of the UN) is unacceptable. We call on the leadership of the SG and member states to instead focus on the clear call by G77 and CSOs to establish a universal, intergovernmental UN tax body and negotiate a UN tax convention.

Debt Architecture:

What the OCA report says: “A process to resolve long-standing weaknesses in the international debt architecture” through the Biennial Summit between the G20 and the ECOSOC, SG and Heads of IFIs.

Our concerns: The shortcoming of the G20 DSSI and Common Framework for debt treatment to deliver on a timely, comprehensive and fair debt resolution for countries in debt distress is a striking example of how leaving debt architecture discussions in the hands of a reduced number of countries (mainly lenders), where the global south (mainly borrowers) are in a clear minority, is a guarantee for

failure to address the profound reform of the international financial architecture that the world needs.

We do not need a process that further reinforces the role of lender-dominated forums. Instead, the United Nations, which is not a creditor itself, is the only forum that provides an inclusive and democratic space to provide a lasting multilateral solution to the debt crisis. We call on governments to establish a Debt Workout Mechanism at the UN, i.e. a transparent, binding, and multilateral framework for debt crisis prevention and resolution. Again, the FfD process is already mandated to address these challenges on sovereign debt without looking at these issues in silos but as interconnected with other systemic issues in the FfD agenda and comprehensively addressing issues of tax, trade, regulation of the financial sector, including actors such as credit rating agencies, to ensure developing countries have the fiscal and policy space to address their development challenges.

Care economy:

What the OCA report says: “In rethinking GDP, we must also find ways to validate the care and informal economy. Specifically, most of the care work around the world is unpaid and done by women and girls, perpetuating economic inequality between genders. COVID-19 also had deeply gendered economic and job impacts that highlighted and exacerbated the trillions of dollars that are lost owing to billions of hours of unpaid care work performed every year. Rethinking the care economy means valuing unpaid care work in economic models but also investing in quality paid care as part of essential public

services and social protection arrangements, including by improved pay and working conditions (target 5.4 of the Sustainable Development Goals). More broadly, we also need to find new ways to account for and value the vast informal economy.”

Our concerns: The feminist movement rejects this commodification of women and their work. Women’s human rights are human rights and valuable per se, not because the economy needs the value they produce through their work. Furthermore, the proposal focuses on valuing care work in existing economic models (as if we were monetizing unpaid care work), not about changing completely those extractive and exploitative economic models which are denying women and girls equitable access to quality public services and goods, and in turn violating economic and social rights. These models are subsidised by the exploitation of women’s labour, time and mental and physical well-being. It’s not about counting unpaid care work and informal economy in a GDP v2.0, but about the structural transformation of how economy and growth are understood. It is not just about changing an indicator, it is about leaving behind perspectives that value the wealth of a few and measure growth in macro indicators, over and above the well-being of the many and putting profits over people. It is about policy responses that look at redistributing unpaid and paid domestic work, and investing in the strengthening of the care economy. This implies providing sufficient financing for gender-responsive public services, including qualitative care work, and for universal social protection programs.

Private sector:

What the OCA report says: “Achieving this new dynamic for the global economy means changing business models to better connect businesses, markets and society. Strong and sustainable businesses are built on global values, including human and labour rights, environmental sustainability and fighting corruption, all of which are embodied in the [United Nations Global Compact](#). Coordinated action by the business community to align their business practices with global goals, including the Sustainable Development Goals, is crucial.”

Our concern: Realigning the business models to the imperatives of sustainable development will not come through voluntary approaches. It requires a new set of bold public norms, policies, and investments. It requires the reaffirmation, rather than the abdication, of the role of the State in defining a new set of global rules. It requires the courage to stop unsustainable investments and predatory practises. It calls for upholding the centrality of human rights — the foundation of the United Nations — as the overarching frame of our common action.

Recognizing that voluntary principles are insufficient, we need the leadership of the SG to call on governments to regulate businesses, including engaging constructively in the ongoing development in the Human Rights Council towards an international, legally binding instrument on Transnational Corporations and other Business Enterprises.

3 Global digital compact:

What the OCA report says: Furthermore, building on the recommendations of the road map for digital cooperation (see A/74/821), the United Nations, Governments, the private sector and civil society could come together as a multi-stakeholder digital technology track in preparation for a Summit of the Future to agree on a Global Digital Compact.

Our concerns: The proposal echoes the recommendation of the UNSG’s High Level Panel of Experts on Digital Cooperation which was co-chaired by key personalities in global technology platforms (Big Tech). The Panel’s recommendations, fully adopted by the UNSG in his Road Map for Digital Cooperation published in June 2020, revolve around the central role of the private sector in addressing the digital divide and harnessing the potentials of digital technologies. Instead of enabling the self-serving push from Big Tech, the UN should support inclusive multilateral processes to address the development divide that underpins the digital divide, to regulate and curb the growing powers and wealth of Big Tech and ensure that human rights are respected. To protect the integrity of decision making on the global governance of digitalization, measures against conflict of interest should be adopted similar to the ones at the WHO. To address the adverse consequences of digital technologies on society, the environment and people, the UN should establish a transparent and participatory global mechanism to evaluate new technologies.

Call to Action and Next Steps

Though international economic cooperation is part of the core responsibilities of the United Nations, it has been systematically marginalised over the years and we are deeply concerned with the UNSG's proposals to establish multi-stakeholder approaches instead of calling for leadership from member states to strengthen the existing multilateral processes.

We call on UN member states to reject these proposals and to instead uphold inclusive multilateralism and the democratic potential of the United Nations.

We call on civil society and social movements to reject the undermining of the United Nations through corporate capture and political elites. Furthermore, we call on them to mobilise and advocate at all levels to promote the paradigmatic transformation the world needs at these times of emergency and threat to the wellbeing of people and the health of the Planet.

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