



## United Nations Conference on Trade and Development

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### Sixteenth session

Geneva

20–23 October 2025

## Statement of civil society to the sixteenth session of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development

1. The sixteenth session of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD XVI) was held in Geneva, Switzerland, from 20 to 23 October 2025, with 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.

2. The crises in the world today encompass a nearly two-year-long genocide in the Occupied Palestinian Territory fuelled and financed by Western arms and capital; widespread debt crises, with some developing countries spending as much as 38 per cent of their export revenue on debt servicing; the imminent collapse of ecological systems and the looming extinction of 1 million species; and 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 fuelled by the global expansion of right-wing extremism and fascism and based on the same hierarchies of humanity and logics of militarization and interventionism that justified colonial and imperial projects. As a result, the little progress made towards the Sustainable Development Goals has been reversed, throwing people’s lives and the economic and ecological systems upon which they depend into deepening disarray.

3. 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. The founding mandate of UNCTAD 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 United Nations system, that places UNCTAD and the current UNCTAD XVI process under threat today. Developed countries’ proposals to the UNCTAD XVI outcome document would hollow out the work and role of UNCTAD within the United Nations system, effectively recasting it as an ad hoc technical assistance agency.

4. While technical cooperation is an important element of UNCTAD work, the strength of UNCTAD lies in the integrated approach of its three pillars of research and analysis, consensus-building and technical cooperation. Developed countries’ proposed language in various parts of the outcome document would, if adopted, weaken UNCTAD research and consensus-building functions as the United Nations focal point for the integrated treatment of trade and development issues, and reduce UNCTAD to yet another United Nations



agency that seeks to provide implementation support for frameworks negotiated elsewhere (e.g. the Sustainable Development Goals, 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 the importance of UNCTAD rests on the equal weight of all three pillars, and that technical cooperation cannot replace policy research and intergovernmental dialogue.

5. If UNCTAD is gutted as these developed countries propose, the Global South loses a vital platform for advancing an integrated and justice-centred vision of trade and development. 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 UNCTAD XVI are not only institutional but existential for the prospects of equitable global development.

6. As at 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 during the Financing for Development process for an official borrowers' forum. Such a forum is a long-standing call by civil society and grass-roots movements globally, and there is no better United Nations agency to operationalize it. An additional proposal worth celebrating from developing countries is for UNCTAD to assess net international financial flows, both North–South and South–North. This responds to arguments from civil society and grass-roots 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.

7. A long-standing strength of UNCTAD work has been its defence of policy space for developing countries. For example, it was at UNCTAD XI in 2004 that 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, including language taken directly from the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 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 and common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities, which remain sidelined in discussions in other multilateral forums, including the World Trade Organization. This stands in stark contrast to the additions by developed countries that seek to ensure their own continuing access to and control of critical minerals located in the South, all the while discriminating against these very same goods through trade-related environmental measures, including the carbon border adjustment mechanism. UNCTAD itself does vital work on trade-related environmental measures, and published one of the landmark studies on the estimated effects of the implementation of the carbon border adjustment mechanism. The study showed that a carbon tax of \$44 per ton would result in an increase of \$2.5 billion in developed country incomes and a decrease of \$5.9 billion in developing country incomes. This estimate has proven conservative, as the carbon border adjustment mechanism carbon tax ranged between €50 and €80 per ton in the first half of 2025.

8. It is no surprise that, given these factors, it would be developed countries standing in opposition to language in the outcome document that would protect against such a situation repeating itself and that would continue UNCTAD work on unilateral trade-related environmental measures. Without UNCTAD analysis, developing countries lose a key

United Nations 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 make international cooperation on, for example, climate finance (another subject of vital UNCTAD 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.

9. Meanwhile, developed countries proposed a replacement package of eight paragraphs in the financing for development cluster that elevated private investment, domestic resource mobilization and “enabling environments” as the main sources of finance; reduced emphasis on official development assistance 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 that these proposals be rejected and that the outcome document reflect the systemic reforms already proposed by developing countries, namely, 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.

10. 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 the systemic reform of the international investment regime.

11. 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 UNCTAD XVI quadrennial process. Our historical support for UNCTAD does not constitute a blank cheque, and UNCTAD must prove to us and all its allies in civil society that our faith has not been misplaced.

12. 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 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 civil society engagement by UNCTAD goes beyond tokenism, to effective and substantive participation. A proposal from us for such a paragraph is as follows:

*Member States reaffirm the importance of the meaningful, transparent and inclusive engagement of civil society organizations in all UNCTAD processes and conferences, consistent with the United Nations 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.*

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

## Initial signatories, 21 October 2025

### Global networks

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

### Africa

12. African Women's Development and Communication Network (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 (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 Organization (South Sudan)
22. Club United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization du centre d'action femme et enfant (Democratic Republic of the Congo)
23. Conseil pour l'éducation 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 Initiative (Nigeria)
31. Femme au cœur du développement Africain (Côte d'Ivoire)
32. Forum international des femmes de l'espace francophone (Democratic Republic of the Congo)

33. Hatof Foundation (Ghana)
34. Human Rights and Grass Roots 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 Organization (Eswatini)
43. Slum Child Foundation (Kenya)
44. Société civile Copagode [Coalition pastorale pour la bonne gouvernance, droit de l'homme et développement] (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 (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. Village Farmers Initiative (Nigeria)
51. Women Against Violence and Exploitation Foundation Africa (Nigeria)
52. Women and Girls Capabilities and Empowerment Organization (Nigeria)
53. Women for a Change (Cameroon)
54. Youth Path Organization (Ghana)

**Asia and the Pacific**

55. Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (regional)
56. Association for Promotion Sustainable Development (India)
57. Beyond Beijing Committee (Nepal)
58. Centre for Environment, Human Rights and Development Forum (Bangladesh)
59. Free Trade Union Development Centre (Sri Lanka)
60. Fundamental Rights Organization (Sri Lanka)
61. GIRL x GIRL (Thailand)
62. IT for Change (regional)
63. Nagorik Uddyog (Bangladesh)
64. Noor (Pakistan)
65. Pacific Network on Globalization (regional)
66. SERAC (Bangladesh)
67. Sukaar Welfare Organization (Pakistan)
68. Transportation and Development Research Centre (Nepal)

69. Vajpayee Research Foundation (India)
70. Young Women's Christian Association (India)
71. Youth Alliance for Development (Nepal)

### **Europe**

72. Alga (Kyrgyzstan)
73. Alliance Sud (Switzerland)
74. Asociación Araguaney Migración y Cooperación Internacional (Spain)
75. Balt Global Group (France)
76. Centre for Ecology and Sustainability (Serbia)
77. Consortium for Intersectional Justice (United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland)
78. Creación Positiva (Spain)
79. European Network on Debt and Development (regional)
80. Friends of the Earth (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 Centre (Azerbaijan)
84. Women in Development Europe+ (regional)

### **Latin America and the Caribbean**

85. Asociación por los Derechos de las Mujeres (Argentina)
86. Campaña Latinoamericana por el Derecho a la Educación (regional)
87. Candid Concepts Development Agencies (The Bahamas)
88. Climate Action Network Latin America (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. Red de Mujeres Indígenas sobre Biodiversidad de América Latina y el Caribe (regional)
95. Rede Nacional de Mulheres Negras no Combate à Violência (Brazil)
96. Servicio de Extensión y Desarrollo Agrícola con Perspectiva Género (SEDRA; regional)

### **North America: United States of America**

97. Extended Arms Diamond
98. Trippinz Care