

## **Non-Governmental Organizations Major Group: Position Paper High Level Political Forum 2020**

### **Introduction**

The COVID-19 global pandemic intensifies the need for accelerated and united action from all stakeholders. In this unique moment in history, we clearly see how nations, livelihoods, health and safety are intrinsically and inevitably interconnected. We also see what is possible when people unite, and we see the dire consequences when profit or nationalism is put before people and planet. To achieve Agenda 2030, we must prioritize transformative pathways as we work together to save lives and forge inclusive paths forward.

In examining how NGOs are accelerating action and forging pathways for transformation to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, we see a multitude of examples of inclusion and stakeholder engagement. Within the vibrant ecosystems of local, national, regional and international NGOs, lessons can be learned about programming, context, impact, and mutually beneficial outcomes. It is furthermore essential that emergency measures should not stifle independent voices, but instead must enable communities to raise their concerns and identify their own solutions.

Through the lens of the GSDR entry points, NGOs provided inputs from their unique perspectives. While that work can be identified within each of the multi-target pathways of the GSDR, more often the work and impact of NGOs cross the lines and show again the interlinked nature of sustainable development. An action that might begin in a pathway of strengthening human well-being and capabilities may positively impact the global environmental commons. A program that supports shifting to sustainable and just economies may be built on a theory of change that involves sustainable food systems. Indeed, the most impactful actions were multidisciplinary and interlinked, blurring the boundaries of sectors and silo-ed strategies.

Acceleration of the SDGs is accomplished not only through the type of entry point selected, but also, and equally important, through the processes by which we work. Therefore, the NGO-MG calls for a global commitment to

- Include all stakeholders in the process of sustainable development that impacts their lives, valuing and empowering local capacity, wisdom, culture and contextualizing/localizing action;
- Empower local communities with education, training, knowledge and skills strengthening, as well the right and opportunity to lead their own sustainable development;
- Prioritize action that is holistic, multi-sectoral and cross-disciplinary;
- Ensure, in our actions, that all life — human, animal, and biosphere — thrives;
- Make systems of support flexible and adaptable to meet complex and evolving situations and needs;
- Use transparency, open access to information and data, and improve communication across sectors and actors;
- Cooperate and collaborate across and within national borders, with all sectors and on all levels, to create long term solutions and resiliency while still supporting immediate needs.

At this time, we face not only a pandemic but also ongoing challenges to the achievement of truly sustainable development. For NGOs, the greatest barriers to accelerated action and transformation are the

economic barriers of poverty, lack of funding for the work of sustainable development, the need for awareness, gaps and lack of access to quality education, the absence of effective governmental policies, and the lack of political will for action and accountability (see Appendix 1).

Transformative pathways and accelerated action are built with input from engaged and informed stakeholders and fueled by the potent combination of local context, expertise, appropriate funding mechanisms, and the scaling of effective programming. If we use *inclusivity and local participation* as the first step of any transformative pathway, collaborative effort in our actions, and truth, compassion, equity and justice as our accelerators, we will not only achieve Agenda 2030 but also address goals across complementary international agreements, frameworks and agendas.

In the sections that follow, NGOs bring together their experiences, the challenges they have faced, and the solutions they have found in our shared work to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. Driven by the model of the GSDR, the sections are as follows:

Section 1. Strengthening Human Well-Being and Capabilities and Ending Poverty in all its Forms and Dimensions

Section 2. Responding to the Economic Shock of COVID 19, Relaunching Growth, Sharing Economic Benefits and Addressing Developing Countries' Financing Challenges

Section 3. Building Sustainable Food Systems and Healthy Nutrition Patterns: Ending Hunger and Achieving Food Security for All

Section 4. Achieving Energy Decarbonization and Universal Access to Energy

Section 5. Promoting Sustainable Urban and Peri-Urban Development and Bolstering Local Action to Accelerate Implementation

Section 6. Securing the Global Environmental Commons

Section 7. Financing for Transformative pathways and Accelerated Action

Section 8. Progress and Challenges as We Strive to Leave No One Behind

## **Section 1. Strengthening Human Well-Being and Capabilities and Ending Poverty in all its Forms and Dimensions**

### **Overview**

The COVID-19 pandemic underscores how underlying conditions and poverty exacerbate issues associated with achieving the SDGs. These contexts include entrenched poverty, food instability, lack of access to healthcare, clean water, sanitation, energy, and housing, inequitable education and work opportunities, climate change, poor air quality, discrimination, conflict, and institutionalized and casual infringements of human rights. At the heart of these overlapping and intertwined issues are human lives, the natural world and our interconnected ecosystem.

NGOs working toward strengthening human well-being and the reduction of poverty brought forward examples of interrelated systems rather than single sector entry-points. An initiative that electrifies rural medical clinics in Uganda and provides at-home solar lights for new mothers (SDG7), for instance, is improving attended birth rates and maternal and infant health outcomes (SDG3) as well as measurements of women's empowerment (SDG5), educational impacts (SDG4), indoor air pollution (SDG13) and indicators of economic stability (SDG1) (Let There Be Light International). Nature-based solutions are strengthening the wellbeing of those living in Eco-Villages worldwide. In the process of restoring ecosystems and producing sustainably farmed agriculture, people are living healthier more resilient lives (The Global Eco-Village Network). In Haiti, programs that began with an aim of the empowerment of women girls are using multi-sector support and partnerships to address not just the education of adolescent girls but also the aspects of her well-being including physical health, emotional resilience, cognitive growth and community engagement (LIDE Foundation). Women also were at the center of an initiative that not only improved education for refugees but also improved livelihoods in a green economy (NET Africa). We also see several examples of the uniting of civil society organizations in advocacy and in action that improves human lives by protecting the environment, opening access to information, advocating for more sustainable and circular economies, or giving collective voice to people too often left out of the decisions that determine their lives (Gestos, Commons Cluster, UGENCI, RIPPSS, African Climate Policy Center, and Bridge 47).

As NGOs work to “strengthen capabilities”, what we see is a broadening of traditional definitions of education or even capacity building to a more expansive and holistic process of empowerment. Improved access to information and data improved human rights while also creating a means of monitoring transparency, corruption and progress toward the SDGs (Global Forum for Media Development, Gestos). By teaching traditional ways of living, marginalized people not only found a voice, but also were able to share traditional knowledge to promote environmental protection and climate resilience (Silambam Asia). Cultural knowledge and respect also were shown to play a role in achieving progress toward the SDGs as a whole (ICOMOS). Strengthening technical skills for migrants and refugees brought about empowerment as well as improving relationships with local authorities (Association Nationale des Partenaires Migrants). And education for global citizenship and the sustainable development goals in several examples took place in informal settings, collectives, communities, or youth organizations thus not only serving as skill or knowledge building but also as transformative actions leading to more sustainable and resilient lives (The Millennials Movement, Salesians Missions, Bridge 47).

### **Characteristics of Transformation and Accelerated Action in Strengthening Human Well-being**

Central to the transformative actions shared by NGOs was the principle of people strengthening their own wellbeing. Most initiatives were community centered and/or locally partnered if not locally driven. Local actors were thereby included in decision-making, planning and implementation of projects. Capacity strengthening was characterized by locally driven and people-centered actions and merged local or traditional knowledge with sustainable and innovative practices or skills. Overall, the global issues that impact local lives are being brought into context, and conversely, the local wisdom that can bring about a more sustainable world is being shared at a global level. And this was achieved through the following:

1. Input, participation, and leadership from local communities and the people who have been left out of systems that ensure wellbeing and opportunities to demonstrate capacity;
2. Transferring the work of strengthening human wellbeing and reducing poverty into the hands of local community members, and where skill needs to be strengthened in order to do so, providing the education, training, or skills that strengthen their ability to improve their own lives and their communities
3. Holistic, cross-disciplinary approaches; partnerships; and multilateral cooperation;
4. Flexibility/Adaptability of systems of support to match changing situations and changing needs;
5. Aiming to create long term solutions and strengthen skills and capabilities, while supporting immediate needs;
6. Having disaggregated data that reflects the diversity of society and its needs;
7. Contextualization of actions to local cultures and settings with respect for cultures, traditional knowledge and environments;
8. Balancing the wellbeing of people with the thriving of the environments around them.

### **Challenges and Barriers to Strengthen Human Well-being and Ending Poverty**

The challenges faced by NGOs in the work of strengthening human well-being and capacity, and reducing poverty fell into three overriding categories: lack of basic needs, barriers to or absence of education; and lack of support or cooperation. The needs most often cited as presenting gaps or barriers through their *absence* were clean water and sanitation; access to clean energy sources (or any energy source at all); adequate and sustainable food sources; safety and security; and basic human rights. Where education was inaccessible or limited to primary school, it presented as a challenge in achieving well-being and ending poverty. Cooperation as a thematic challenge manifested as lack of cooperation between governments and civil society; non-inclusive policy making; insufficient support for community based or multi-disciplinary/cross-sector initiatives; short-term gains being prioritized over long-term sustainability; and global disunity.

### **Questions We Continue to Ask**

These challenges to human wellbeing lead NGOs to ask

1. How do we better unite to break down the barriers to inclusion, cross-sector collaboration, and multilateral cooperation?
2. And yet, in that process, whose voices are we still not hearing?
3. How can we better ensure that they (indeed all people) are reflected in the data that determines actions?
4. How can those voices be brought into decision making and their hands into implementation?

## **Recommendations**

If a central barrier to progress in reducing poverty and strengthening human well-being is lack of inclusion, and the cause stems from exclusion or leaving too many too far behind, then it follows that the calls to action hinge upon putting in place the systems and policies that will allow people to raise their voices and leverage their inherent strengths and contextual knowledge to address poverty and enhance well-being. Therefore, NGOs commit to and invite the UN System and Member States to

1. Ensure human rights for all, and in particular eliminate all forms of discrimination, xenophobia, and intolerance.
2. Recognize the work being done at local levels and create opportunities for local communities and marginalized persons to identify their own needs and priorities, participate in decision-making, planning, implementation and monitoring of actions toward the SDGs.
3. Make available and disaggregate data that can be used by stakeholders to inform decision making and enhance programming.
4. In educational policies and competencies, acknowledge formal and non-formal means of learning throughout the lifespan, ensuring national financing and structures for adult education including upskilling and reskilling, and supporting education for sustainable development and global citizenship.
5. Partner with science and academia in seeking sustainable solutions, and at the same consider the indigenous wisdom present in communities.
6. In short-term responses to the crises that face humanity, integrate long-term, locally driven development that strengthens resilience.
7. Improve mechanisms of sharing information across sectors and connecting resources across sectors; and increase funding to projects and initiatives that impact multiple SDGs through a cross-sector approach;
8. Ensure transparency and access to information and data;
9. Meet the financial commitments promised for the adequate financing of sustainable development, and prioritize human and environmental well-being long-term and sustainable recovery from the pandemic or debt repayment;
10. Continue in and complete the work of identifying the synergies and interlinkages across the agendas (Agenda 2030, Paris Agreement, Beijing Platform, Safe Schools Declaration, Sendai Framework, Global Compact for Migration, etc) and systematically address them whenever making decisions or setting policies;
11. Unite in strengthening the well-being of all peoples.

## **Section 2. Responding to the Economic Shock of COVID 19, Relaunching Growth, Sharing Economic Benefits and Addressing Developing Countries' Financing Challenges**

### **Overview**

In 2020, the world is facing previously unimaginable challenges, due to the sudden and devastating impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. The impacts are still not fully understood but beyond the immediate healthcare emergency, the long-term consequences of this crisis have left all governments and institutions in a state of fundamental re-evaluation of the very basis of their economic models.

However, the pandemic is not an equalizer, in fact it has thrown into sharp contrast the underlying inequalities and fragility of the current economic model and has hit those furthest behind the hardest. In effect, the global response to the pandemic must be a renewed commitment to leave no one behind. We call on the UN and Member State governments to lead a multilateral process to ensure sufficient funds are available through the WHO and national governments to ensure the provision of free universal healthcare, social care and support to those who are directly affected in all parts of the world. This must be done equally regardless of individuals' legal status, age, gender, disability or identity, without fear of deportation or detention, criminalization, exploitation or abuse and the process must be transparent, inclusive, equitable and accountable.

Furthermore, there are deeper questions to be addressed regarding the economic model of the last 40 years. While there has been progress in lifting many people out of absolute poverty, levels of inequality for the vast majority of the population around the globe have steadily risen. A number of recent studies have highlighted how inequality undermines development and reducing opportunity slows innovation. Economic power has become ever more concentrated in fewer hands and the benefits of technological advances have been unfairly distributed. Furthermore, the natural world has continued to be exploited while humanity seems addicted to the mantra of growth at any social or environmental cost.

The world has reached a significant turning point. There is now a recognized need to move towards a different way of quantifying success and healthy societies that is separate to economic growth; and instead focuses on social and environmental well-being. There is a crucial window of opportunity to re-think our approach and consider a model which emphasizes resilience and longer-term planning to ensure a healthier future for humanity and a flourishing planet.

This re-thinking will require a process that engages all members of the community in planning and implementation processes; respecting cultural, social and environmental norms and practices; finding ways of living in harmony with nature; supporting nature based solutions; adopting a permaculture based approach to development where all aspects of community are integrated in a holistic manner.

Alternative models have been observed to demonstrate feasible and more sustainable drivers of the future economy. Approaches built on low carbon short value chains enable localization of the economy, which will lead to climate and employment benefits. At the same time, the solidarity economy model enables a human-rights-based approach that breaks with over-production and consumption, loss and waste and financialization/commodification of resources. Much of this is applicable to many other sectors of the

economy to ensure that the wider social and environmental impacts are included in a longer-term planning cycle.

Small-scale, locally based financing to enable biodiversity has been seen by NGOs to promote wider prosperity for people and the planet. One specific example is directing funds towards a project for restoring mangrove trees in East Africa. The sustainable use of the tree, wood, and roots of the mangrove tree can provide a number of benefits for local people and create habitats for other species. For instance, the wood can be used as a construction material, and the leaves can be used for their medicinal properties. The flowers can be used to support honeybees, while the ecosystem around the mangroves provides an ideal habitat for collection of cockles at low tide in the mud or on sandbanks, oyster, and clam gathering, shrimping, fishponds and fish culture. Within models of an environmental and solidarity economy there are complementary roles for government and civil society to play in transitioning to a fully sustainable world.

### **Characteristics of Transformation and Accelerated Action**

In order to support transformative pathways and accelerated action, there are a number of key steps that governments and multilateral groups can take. These include debt cancellation for low- and middle-income countries, financial burden relief mechanisms and large-scale aid investments to fund universal public healthcare and social service delivery.

We must identify measures to directly support those in a fragile economic position by establishing a global recovery fund and delivering full implementation of universal social protection benefits and safety nets in all countries, including establishing and supporting social protection floors.

Economic stimulus plans must ensure that the economy of the future is sustainable and just, moving subsidies away from fossil fuel industries and using stimulus packages to create millions of sustainable 21st Century jobs. The UNSG and others need to unite in committing to “building back better” and building back with clean energy and green economies.

### **Challenges**

Significant challenges remain which pose major barriers to transformative change.

There is the critical issue of political will and commitment to deliver the transformative agenda of the SDGs. A number of countries seem less willing to take up this transition due to their own election priorities and the support that they may receive from major investors, e.g. in fossil fuel industries. COVID-19 has put further pressure on many governments who are increasingly aware of the need to balance economic, social and environmental priorities.

In many countries there are major challenges of corruption and tax evasion. In this context, it is crucial that major corporations should be appropriately taxed in the country of their operations and that systemic corruption should be tackled through an independent judiciary.

At the same time, there are structural inequalities, whereby the development process is often captured by elite or corporate interests, or other authorities who often do not take into consideration the aims of the

SDGs or the needs of the people. Additionally, cultural or discriminatory barriers sometimes lead to inequities in the distribution of funds or prioritizing of projects.

Finally, there are growing challenges around the lack of economic opportunities following the crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic. There is a real risk that financial resources are re-directed away from essential activities for those who are most marginalized in society. It is more important than ever to ensure direct support for community-led activity for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

### **Questions we should be asking**

Two key questions must be considered:

- a) Can technology promote the development of more equal societies rather than further the concentration of wealth?

During the pandemic, many people have come to rely more heavily than ever on technology to enable remote working and to practice social distancing. There is a real risk that the benefits of technology could further exacerbate inequalities.

- b) How can governments move towards a more consultative approach?

There are good examples of governments which are open to dialogue on their socio-economic plans. This is now the key moment for wider community dialogues and citizen assemblies to help to define a just recovery. Governments must seek wide stakeholder inputs and evaluate plans informed by community priorities.

### **Recommendations**

As all countries tackle the Covid-19 pandemic and governments begin to plan ahead for the steps forward, it is essential that governments commit to a just recovery so that we can collectively emerge from this crisis to build a better world. To both recovery from the economic strains brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic as well as continue toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, we must aim to:

1. Promote universal healthcare (including full funding of vaccination programs and women's sexual reproductive health care), welfare payments, and social protection that is rights-based and universally applied
2. Re-examine and where feasible cancel or postpone national debts to ensure sufficient finance is available to governments to ensure a just recovery
3. Promote a global ceasefire and pressure governments to redirect military spending towards social protection
4. Adopt progressive and redistributive taxation policies, alongside measures to tackle corruption, tax evasion and illicit financial flows to pay for these protections
5. Ensure long-term financial support for critical infrastructure education, wider training and skills.
6. Incentivize clean energy, green industries, and a rapid scaling up of sustainable jobs
7. Involve civil society organizations in economic policy and operational planning
8. Ensure a holistic approach with clear social and environmental conditions on any emergency financial stimulus to companies, such as treating workers fairly, protecting biodiversity and cutting carbon emissions to enable a shift to a more localized, just resilient and environmentally balanced economy.

### **Section 3. Building Sustainable Food Systems and Healthy Nutrition Patterns: Ending Hunger and Achieving Food Security for All**

#### **Characteristics of Transformation and Accelerated Action**

Transformative and accelerated action toward sustainable food systems must be rooted in locally relevant solutions, with a significant focus on capacity building. Funding for quality, and equal education around sustainable food systems, political and economic will is necessary to support awareness-raising and the development of infrastructure, recognizing that many rural communities are being left behind. This is particularly clear when considering the impact of climate change and related disasters on food-producing areas. Harnessing the skills and experience of stakeholders, in line with the 2030 Agenda's requirement of "robust participation of the peoples of the world", and ensuring local, regional, and cross-sectoral collaboration will also accelerate the impact on global food systems. This is relevant in light of the current Covid-19 pandemic which likely sprung from the unsustainable trade and consumption of wildlife,<sup>123</sup> yet which has seen communities rely on low-carbon, short value chains and local partnerships to keep communities functioning.

#### **Challenges**

It is important to recognize that rural family farming is responsible for 80% of world's food production and provides a host of economic opportunities. However, economic structures such as harmful subsidies create an unfair playing field in agricultural systems, marginalizing workers, environmental and animal welfare concerns. Traditional ways of measuring development pull agricultural development towards industrialized systems which perpetuate inequities, rather than incentivizing investment in sustainable, equitable and humane agricultural development. Investment is needed to develop better alternatives to current processes. Political will and policy structures are also hurdles to improving food systems. In many countries, large corporations have undue influence over the policies affecting food systems, leaving consumers, smallholders, and workers behind. Policy frameworks in many countries favor the development of industrialized agriculture infrastructure, putting the economic interests of a select few above the economic and environmental wellbeing of the majority. Poor multilateral cooperation; lack of representation of consumers, smallholders, and workers in food policy development; inhibited technological progress and local government involvement are also key challenges.

Lack of awareness and barriers to education create limitations to achieving a sustainable food system. Consumers need information to make healthy and sustainable food choices, and they need meaningful product labeling which makes good decision making possible. Training and education on best practices are also needed at all levels and stages of production to support the transition to more equitable, sustainable and humane systems.

Lastly, food systems cannot continue on the current trajectory: there are not enough resources. Industrial agriculture, particularly for livestock, is recognized as a key driver of climate change, deforestation,

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<sup>1</sup> The proximal origin of SARS-CoV-2. *Nature*. <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41591-020-0820-9>

<sup>2</sup> COVID-19: The Wildlife Trade and Human Disease. *Scientific American*. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/podcast/episode/covid-19-the-wildlife-trade-and-human-disease/>

<sup>3</sup> Scientists track the link between wildlife and COVID-19. *University of Southern California News*. <https://news.usc.edu/168960/wildlife-covid-19-pandemic-usc-scientists-animal-trafficking/>

biodiversity loss and pollution. At the same time, increasing environmental degradation further reduces agricultural productivity and food security.

### **Questions we should be asking**

As the world aims to end hunger, improve food systems, and ensure food security for all, NGOs find themselves still facing these questions:

1. How can we introduce genuine systemic change to the system that is creating the issues our planet and human society around the world are facing?
2. How do these transformative models guarantee and uphold human rights and ensure genuine social inclusion of all?
3. With the need to restart economies in light of Covid-19, how do we ensure that small island states and those most likely to be left behind are not ignored, without a focus on disaggregated data and civil society access to governmental and international processes?
4. In light of Covid-19, how can a One Health/One Welfare approach be mainstreamed, ensuring that food systems account for linkages between environmental, animal and human health and wellbeing?

### **Recommendations**

To achieve the sustainable food systems for needed to end hunger and to ensure the health of the biosphere, we need to:

1. Establish economic incentives and disincentives that drive production and consumption towards more sustainable, equitable and humane products; and remove harmful subsidies and taxes on unsustainable and unhealthy foods, such as meat, processed food and food high in sugar and saturated fats.
2. Strengthen protections and regulations for workers, migrant workers, smallholders, the environment and animal welfare are needed.
3. Disaggregate data and share such data in order to establish the reality of the problem and shape effective policies.
4. Ensure participation of all stakeholders in policy development to ensure that agricultural development supports and improves the wellbeing of those furthest behind.
5. Support and expand education and awareness-raising to empower consumers to make healthy, sustainable and humane food choices, to reduce food waste, and to reduce the global climate and environmental footprint of agriculture.
6. Increase training and capacity building to implement best practices to improve animal welfare and sustainability, and also to increase the competitiveness of smallholders.
7. Learn from local wisdom, local practices, and indigenous knowledge.

## **Section 4. Achieving Energy Decarbonization and Universal Access to Energy**

### **Overview**

NGOs play a pivotal role in building partnerships, educating local communities, and influencing responsive policies that impact the inherent linkages between energy access and poverty, health, wellness, nature-based solutions, and equity. For example, in one study looking at the Social Return On Investment (SROI) in households receiving basic energy access in remote rural Uganda, there appears to be a 40x SROI when health, safety and productive benefits are taken into account. Working across silos with a variety of stakeholders is increasingly necessary to create cross-sectoral and transformative pathways. The NGO MG's collective knowledge and strengths hold the key to accelerated action on achieving energy decarbonization and universal access to sustainable energy, as together we work to achieve Agenda2030 in a changed global landscape.

### **Characteristics of Transformation and Accelerated Action**

The characteristics of transformative and accelerated action toward sustainable energy include a focus on interlinkages and a demand for increased funding for cross-sectoral coordinated action. One example of a transformative pathway for policy makers is the Water, Energy, Food and Climate nexus, which recognizes the interconnectedness of Agenda 2030 and can act as a framing mechanism for strategic action. Increasing renewable energy access in low-resource communities is a proven transformative pathway which accelerates action on Agenda2030.

### **Challenges**

Due to a lack of equity in energy access, hundreds of millions of people are being left behind and out of critical conversations shaping our changing world. While many in the industrialized North pivot to online work, political engagement and social interactions, the internet is a blank screen for those living without electricity. Without reliable energy access, frontline healthcare workers cannot treat patients, communicate supply needs, and participate in data collection and disease mitigation strategies. NGO partners in low-resource, off-grid communities cannot join online working groups, coordinate programming, involve staff in safety training or access health resources necessary to combat and, indeed, survive the crisis.

Challenges to developing transformative SDG7 pathways and accelerating action are grounded in economics, stakeholder engagement and policy decisions. As the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates, we cannot address major issues without buy-in from all sectors and communities. Immediate funding, for instance, is needed to electrify off-grid clinics in sub-Saharan Africa, where approximately ¼ of all clinics lack electrification. In the future, sustainable sources of electricity for such facilities may be developed from emerging technologies.

### **Questions we should be asking**

The questions that continue to be unresolved in the aim to achieve energy decarbonization include:

1. What are the quantifiable cost-benefits to health, safety, education, women's empowerment, productive use, and the environment when sustainable energy is available?

2. How can policy makers leverage financing and social safety net mechanisms to reach the 580 million people living without electricity and the 3.1 billion people using biomass and inefficient cookstoves?
3. How can we leverage RES to address concerns for planetary boundaries and conserve the water needed in energy production?

### **Recommendations**

In this climate of emergency response, we must prioritize renewable energy programming in governmental responses as we build transformative pathways and accelerate action. Therefore, we call on all stakeholders to

1. Increase cross-sectoral interventions to implement clean energy programming to benefit the greatest number of communities without harming our shared ecosystem.
2. Include in stimulus packages and aid interventions funding only for sustainable projects that incorporate clean, renewable energy.
3. Minimize fossil fuel subsidies until they can be eliminated and incentivize renewables.
4. Increase healthcare funding to build more hospitals and clinics that incorporate clean energy in the planning.

As governments commit to massive financial investments to fight COVID-19, we have a unique global opportunity to shift from unsustainable energy to clean solutions across all of our sectors.

## **Section 5. Promoting Sustainable Urban and Peri-Urban Development and Bolstering Local Action to Accelerate Implementation**

### **Overview**

Action at the local level has the potential to have a direct and transformative effect on progress towards the SDGs in terms of the way people live and work by engaging all stakeholders *meaningfully*, drawing on their strengths, resources and expertise, and respecting the rights and interests of all. Key areas where local solutions can make a difference are in sustainable urbanization and rural development, climate action, and a whole range of social and economic outcomes, across the SDGs. However, the failure to act or continuing to prioritize profit or short-term growth, can be costly, leading to overcrowded and polluted cities, contributing to climate change, and leaving rural areas behind.

### **Characteristics of Transformation and Accelerated Action**

As evidenced in the work of NGOs, transformative, accelerated actions to ensure sustainable urban and peri-urban development can be characterized by the following:

- A rights-based approach: In the context of urban and peri-urban development, this applies particularly to questions around land and housing, and access to public services, such as healthcare, education, public spaces and facilities such as libraries.
- A unified approach, taking account of the interaction between urban and rural, and between nature and society, as characterized by initiatives like eco-villages, or community-supported agriculture.
- Enhanced participation of civil society organizations (CSOs), drawing on their expertise and experience to help truly localize the SDGs. This participation needs to be supported, both through laws and funding.
- Effective use of existing assets and institutions: more needs to be done to regenerate existing neighborhoods, or engage institutions such as libraries, rather than simply create new buildings and centres.
- Incorporating culture and tradition into policymaking: these are not just goals in themselves, but can unlock possibilities and ensure greater public buy-in.
- An informed and engaged community, involved in policy planning and implementation, for example through education for sustainable development.
- Effective institutions at all levels: national governments should support effective coordination mechanisms and empower regional and local entities to integrate the SDGs into their own action. All institutions need to be effectively and transparently governed.
- Effective use of data and evidence: new technological tools can help, but should be used wisely, and with respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. Data needs to be disaggregated in a way that allows the needs of vulnerable groups to be addressed, as well as to allow for tailored local approaches.

The Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) have made a positive step in improving civil society participation in sustainable development.

### **Challenges to Sustainable Urban and Peri-Urban Development**

One of the potential strengths of delivering development at the local level is the possibility to bring together actors more effectively to create sustainable solutions. However, this is not always the case. Too often governments at all levels have not engaged in the SDGs, or at least only talk rather than acting. There is also often a lack of coordination across government, leading to cross-cutting drivers of development such as culture being forgotten or even harmed.

More long-term thinking and planning is needed, including support to scale-up successful pilot projects. Impacts on rural areas, on the environment, and on the long-term need to be taken into account through a more unified approach to urbanization policy. This often stems from insufficient use of data and research. Similarly, many governments do not offer stable, meaningful ways for civil society organizations (CSOs) to engage. Potential partners - NGOs, libraries, people with experience - are not engaged. In parallel, civil society organizations themselves need to be ready to cooperate. Finally, too little consideration is given to engaging citizens meaningfully. Creating sustainable cities and communities depends to a major extent on changing behaviors. When citizens are not informed, or effort is not made to engage them, they cannot be expected to buy-in to initiatives.

### **Questions We Should Be Asking**

The gaps in improving and empowering localized action as well as sustainable urban and peri-urban development must be addressed through the continued search to the answers to the following questions:

1. How effectively are those taking decisions basing these on full information and consideration of social, environmental and economic dimensions of development, as well as of available assets?
2. Are there structures and institutions at all levels with the resources, powers and attitudes necessary to enable local action?
3. To what extent are decision-makers focusing on engaging, informing and empowering individuals as a key tool for accelerating development?

### **Recommendations**

If we are to harness the strength of local action, bring about a more inclusive process of achieving Agenda 2030, and achieve the sustainable urban and peri-urban development needed to mitigate the impacts of climate change, we all must commit to

1. Action at the local level, taking account of local characteristics, assets and culture can make a transformative impact on the SDGs, and should be recognized and enabled.
2. The success of urban and peri-urban development can only be measured through its impact on people and environment. These therefore have to be involved from the beginning by taking a unified approach, drawing on data, and promoting an informed and engaged citizenry.
3. Sustainable urban and peri-urban development benefits strongly from civil society engagement. For this to happen, there need to be the right institutions and right attitudes towards engaging civil society and the wider population at all levels.

## **Section 6. Securing the Global Environmental Commons**

### **Overview**

In recent years, we have become increasingly aware of the need for and benefits from protecting and restoring our global environmental commons. Nature-based solutions are now seen as being essential for increasing food production; reducing poverty; providing access to clean water, basic sanitation, energy, and the natural resources needed for sustainable consumption and production; and to restore the Earth.

Humanity must develop much more of a sense of unity while striving to live in harmony with nature; create an inclusive and fair society and support a healthy economy — all of which are fundamental to achieving the SDGs. COVID-19 also demonstrates how society's current use of animals, especially wildlife, can have severe negative repercussions for human health and wellbeing, along with the global economy. It is imperative that we recognize the intrinsic value of nature, including wildlife, and take into account how scientific knowledge and understanding can and should transform our values and approach to protecting the environmental commons.

It is essential that we stem environmental degradation and transition to regenerative agriculture as rapidly as possible, while addressing interconnectedness and recognizing the central role of water as a catalyst for action and progress across all SDGs.

Thousands of ecovillage communities around the earth are demonstrating how we can all respond more effectively to our most urgent local to global challenges. They are among the most sustainable and regenerative communities on Earth - truly becoming Sanctuaries of Life. The Global Ecovillage Network and GAIA Education have developed and led countless numbers of Ecovillage Design Education and Sustainable Community Development courses and training programs. They are one example of the thousands of grassroots and community-based organizations that have developed such tools and resources that ought to be better supported by both governments and UN agencies.

Education for sustainable development and on our global commons is also essential in order to adequately address our most urgent challenges and meet the SDGs. Hands-on learning is key for understanding new concepts and embedding habits for sustainable living.

The international community can and must scale up ambition by focusing on such things as transitioning to a Circular Economy, Net-Zero GHG Emissions, 100% Renewable Energy, Limiting Economic Growth, Reducing Environmental Impacts, and investing in Community Resilience.

### **Characteristics of Transformation and Accelerated Action**

Direct observation of natural growth can teach us how to solve many of our own problems. For example, we can look at how nature typically steers a system to thrive and yet be flexible, adapting over time, thus avoiding a coming catastrophe and general collapse.

Finance solutions for biodiversity can promote peace and prosperity and provide the means to unlock multiple sources of financial benefits that can come from restoring mangrove forests and other degraded ecosystems.

Social Solidarity Economy (SSE) has shown effectiveness as another way to secure the global environmental commons. In this model, cooperatives and worker ownership, community services, ethical banks and local currencies create a more just and sustainable economic system. SSE focuses on a circular economy of production and consumption, and views growth from a perspective of human and ecosystem wellbeing.

The role that civil society can play in implementation processes has been greatly undervalued. Unfortunately, our governments and international institutions seem to be much better at funding pilot programs than in carrying out the essential strategies for scaling up and shifting whole regions, or supporting the adoption of best practices and transformative initiatives.

### **Challenges**

NGOs experienced the greatest barriers to bringing about the fruition of a sustainable global commons in two key areas: a lack of political will; and a failure to support many of the most promising means of financing such as Land Value Taxation, subsidy reform, ODA increases, new and innovative means of taxation including currency transaction fees, carbon taxes and/or other such climate financing schemes, among other financing innovations.

Furthermore, it is impossible to "decouple" the economy from environmental impacts. Neither growth of GDP nor its systemic impacts have slowed since global data on this became available 45 years ago. Failure to look at growth patterns is inhibiting progress in the SDG's.

### **Questions We Should Be Asking**

Even with the progress being made, to secure the global commons, we still need to answer these questions:

1. What are the prerequisites that need to be taken in order to transition as rapidly as possible to full sustainability?
2. Are we making the most of what biodiversity has to offer?
3. How can we balance the wellbeing of the global environmental commons with the needs of populations that depend upon the informal economy in Africa and other Least Developed Countries, particularly in those communities that rely on biodiversity and self-sufficient agriculture?
4. How can we popularize Cruelty Free products and the growing interest in cruelty free animal husbandry?
5. What can we do to help ensure that animal sentience is recognized and considered in the intersection between human and environmental issues that are found within the global environmental commons?

### **Recommendations**

Securing the environmental commons require the international community to

1. Support the outcomes from this year's conference on the Convention on Biological Diversity along with the Goals and Strategy of the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration and the efforts to Strengthen and Implement National and International Environmental Legislation and Law; and commit to fulfilling these agreements as rapidly as possible.
2. Take sufficient action to stem climate change; build bridges and create awareness about the interlinkages among sustainable development, climate action, and disaster risk reduction;
3. Fully incorporate Education for Sustainable Development into national curriculums.
4. Fund and support ecologically sustainable communities and the design, planning and implementation for sustainable communities in collaboration with civil society.
5. Assess the potential for redirecting economic growth onto a natural path modeled after nature's systems, for a healthy and enduring trajectory of sustainable development.
6. Adopt *sustainable* development as a fundamental operating principle of governance and central in government decision making.
7. Meet the existing commitments to develop Local and National Plans for sustainable consumption and production, to restore ecosystems, to protect and sustain biodiversity, to eradicate poverty, and to do these things in a fully integrative manner, both vertically and horizontally, ideally in one holistic and cohesive National and Global Sustainable Development Strategy and Plan.

8. Designate within each country a federal office or agency with the responsibility to oversee and coordinate that country's sustainable development programs and initiatives.
9. Mandate Federal, State, and Local budgetary processes to ensure that government funding fully supports efforts to transition to full sustainable development
10. Develop the means for climate-proofing water management tools and approaches; recognize water's value as part of social, environmental and economic prosperity; and adopt a human rights-based approach to water that ensures women, youth, indigenous populations and other vulnerable groups are empowered to take action and become rights holders as well as duty bearers.
11. Recognize and support community-based approaches that provide multiple benefits across sectors, and foster partnerships between civil society and government.

## **Section 7. Financing for Transformative pathways and Accelerated Action**

NGOs and civil society are increasingly recognized as valuable partners in the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Yet, NGOs still find that their work and the conditions that are needed for achieving the goals are severely impeded by international and national funding criteria and practices.

In some instances, funding may be controlled by corporations or high-power special interest groups with a mindset of short-term gains or mismatched expectations of return on their investments. Additionally, funding is often earmarked for a single sector or toward the achievement of just one particular SDG, when accomplishment depends on cross-sector collaboration. These practices sometimes find their way into the national funding, where corruption and fund reallocation to projects that create political gain or favor can be observed.

At the local level, smaller scale yet effective actions and programs may be left out of funding-streams because (1) a lack of past histories of grant management, (2) as a result of not knowing the ways to access funds, or (3) as a result of taking a more integrative or holistic (less siloed) and long-term approach to problem solving that does not meet the grant requirements. In a risk-averse climate, these situations sometimes result in the work of grassroots organizations either being overlooked or swallowed up under the auspices of larger, more well-known organizations. While the latter umbrella approach only supports the development and success of local programs temporarily. Unless conducted in a spirit of capacity building, in the long term this practice compounds the lack of training for higher level management skills, aggravates the absence of management histories and expertise of small or grassroots organizations, and sends a message that only “developed” world organizations can manage funds.

As the way we both perceive and work to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals shifts from narrowly siloed perspective to more multidisciplinary and holistic pathways, funding must follow the same direction. This will require funding through the lens of the Sustainable Development Goals as well as the Paris Agreement, and calls for unified efforts of private sector, Member States, multilateral financial institutions and the UN system in taking the following actions:

1. Put in place meaningful and effective anti-corruption mechanisms
2. Incentivize funding for long-term high impact programs toward the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, while allowing for multi-sector collaborations that enhance transformative pathways
3. Eliminate subsidies to industries whose operations contribute to or worsen the impacts of climate change or put people, ecosystems, animals or the planet at risk
4. Improve access to grants for small, local programs, initiatives and organizations by providing or enhancing financial literacy, teaching grant management, and providing monitoring and evaluation tools, rather than requiring proven success; and increase awareness of existing financial support mechanisms
5. Improve access to affordable, low-cost financing under favorable terms for projects and programs that are in alignment with a green economy and/or the SDGs
6. Strengthen and make space for the meaningful participation of local communities at all phases of funding from determination of needs and fund allocation, to monitoring and evaluation

7. Increase oversight of funds granted to and managed by governments, and where mismanagement exists, redirect funds to high-impact programs or projects conducted by civil society organizations at local or regional levels
8. Implement public financing instruments that maximize efficiency and effectiveness, while also catalyzing private capital, such as revolving funds and credit enhancement schemes.
9. Build social protection floors that create the basic stability required to achieve the SDGs
10. Fulfil ODA commitments and keep ODA funds separate from national security and military or security public expenditures

As shown through the united efforts in the recent Forum on Financing to create a [Programme of Action](#) to fight the COVID 19 pandemic, we can work together to ensure adequate, just, responsive, and responsible funding to achieve the SDGs.

## **Section 8. Progress and Challenges as We Strive to Leave No One Behind**

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the world was not on track for achieving most of the 169 Sustainable Development Goal targets. Consequently, when COVID-19 arrived, it further exposed the pre-existing inequalities in a shared world.<sup>4</sup> This crisis has brought to the forefront the need for accelerated and united action from all stakeholders with each actor playing its own role, in different ways, to leave no one behind in bringing about a sustainable world for all.

As demonstrated by the examples given by members of the NGO Major Group, at the core of this united action must be the conviction that if people, especially the most marginalized and the voiceless, are not treated as rights-holders, including being given the information and skills they need in order to be able to make the best possible decisions for themselves, policies and measures will largely fail and will not bring about sustainable progress. The goals of local, national, regional or international governments as well as civil society, private organizations, businesses, academia or those in scientific fields, must be formed in collaboration with the people affected by their programs and policies. Central to the goals should be awareness and transparency about how proposed actions affect humanity as well as our planet, its ecosystems and biodiversity.

However, prior to the pandemic the aim to leave no one behind faced challenges that now have been even further exasperated by COVID-19. Although all Member States have human rights obligations under international law, ensuring the compliance with these obligations while implementing the 2030 Agenda largely remains aspirational. Gender equality (SDG 5) for example, while appearing in the rhetoric of policy, has not yet been woven into the social fabric of all communities. Additionally, we continue to witness “the growth of racism and the continuous disrespect for indigenous populations rights. Whilst the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and intersex community (LGBTQI) also continues to suffer harassment, violence and overall discrimination” (Gestos).

There also continues to be gaps in participatory democracy, that includes decision-making at local levels, including budget allocations, and is supported by education/awareness and information and transparency. Consequently, bidirectional mistrust between peoples and governments thickens the barriers that leave individuals and communities behind.

Despite the disruption caused by the pandemic, many governments are still operating under a business as usual model, supporting the private sector and the strong market approach rather than goals of inclusion and a fully circular economy. Among other obstacles that we still face in leaving no one behind is the lack of political will, oversight, accountability, transparency, co-operation and participation as well as institutional barriers including that of siloed work. Additional challenges include the availability of limited financing. Moreover, issues around debt, financial instability, austerity policies, and private sector involvement in the provision of social services need further study and action in the SDG context.

It is also crucial that issues related to financing generally do not serve to limit civil society participation and that participative and democratic budgeting is promoted, with the maximum available resources

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<sup>4</sup> [Saving Life on Earth: a Plan to Halt the Global Extinction Crisis](#), Center for Biological Diversity, January 2020, page 3

dedicated to those who have been left the farthest behind including inhabitants of our planet who do not have a voice but are part of a rich biodiversity or sustainable ecosystems on our planet.

Leaving no one behind requires empowering people through inclusion. Yet while this has been described as being the secret for achieving SDGs, this is also a task to which sufficient attention has not been given. Local practices have the potential to become new norms that build sustainable practices into the culture and from the ground up. However, political backlash and push back by governments has led to shrinking the space for civil society across the globe.

#### Recommendations:

1. Develop plans which place the expressed needs of a community or population at the center of all goals and then allow actions to revolve around both immediate concerns and long-term capacity as they implement strategies to transition to full sustainability and achieve the SDGs at all levels of government, while inviting and including all of their people to participate actively in such processes. People want and have a right to determine their own futures.
2. Foster input, participation and leadership from the people who have been left out of systems that ensure well-being and opportunities to demonstrate capacity.
3. Be willing to be self-critical, and the willingness to listen to dissenting voices. This requires protecting the freedom of civil society to articulate honestly the state of the nations.
4. Include a diverse civil society at the decision-making level and respect differing perspectives.
5. Take an honest look at the model of development that we are currently following that continues to increase inequality in such alarming proportions, examine the current practices of financing that are increasing inequities, eliminate inequitable taxation schemes that favor the wealthiest out of fear of de-incentivizing multinational corporations control illicit financial flows, and develop financial mechanisms that reduce inequalities.
6. Even in all short-term responses, integrate long-term, *locally* driven systems that strengthen resiliency.
7. Place the expressed needs of a community or population at the center of a goal rather than the agenda of the organization that is providing service, transfer the work of development into the hands of local community members, and if or where skill needs to be strengthened in order to do that work, do not supplant local providers but rather strengthen their ability to serve.

#### Questions that Remain

In a world where inequalities are on the rise, paying special attention to the most vulnerable groups is a question of human rights and social justice. To address entrenched inequities, we must look into the systemic obstacles that prevent them from participating fully in the economic, social, and political life of their country.

It follows, then that we should ask ourselves:

- Are we empowering people; recognizing their strengths, value and contributions; and strengthening the skills that give them the capacity to achieve the sustainable development goals? Do solutions enable people to have a sense of belonging and being valued in the community, as well as create connectedness across class, race, ethnicity, social identities and other divides?

- Are all stakeholders involved in the design of the action? Whose voices are we missing? How can we bring those voices into the decision making?
- How can we improve collaboration?
- How can we better ensure that data reflects the experiences of all people, especially those living in remote areas or from marginalized populations?
- Are we really understanding the needs of the community and are the programs actually meeting them?
- Do these solutions reduce and eliminate barriers that interfere with people earning a decent living and caring for their family members?

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Humanity is facing a unique opportunity in its history — an opportunity to unite. We must learn from the pandemic the lessons of collaboration and all-citizen, all person action that we have needed to face this crisis together. Let us not squander our opportunity to shine a light on our collective power and the strength of our voices rising together and across silos to achieve the SDGs.

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**Appendix 1**

**Table 1. Barriers to transformative pathways: Results of a survey of challenges to the SDGs as experienced by NGO Major Group members, 2020.**

