

# COMMON CHARTER FOR COLLECTIVE STRUGGLE



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### **Shared analysis and a call for collective action**

**November 2016, with updates from July 2024**

This Charter was affirmed by ESCR-Net Members during their Global Strategy Meeting (15-19 November 2016) as a shared analysis about common conditions deepening inequalities and leading to the impoverishment and dispossession of communities around the world. The Charter provides an overview of the global forces affecting people living in both rural and urban areas in all regions of the world. It also contains an emerging vision for forging unity across struggles and concludes with initial points of consensus relating to shared demands for justice that might inform a global campaign or coordinated actions in line with ESCR-Net's mission "to build a global movement to make human rights and social justice a reality for all."

The Charter was originally developed by the Network's Working Group of Social Movements and Grassroots Groups over a yearlong series of meetings. Following circulation of an initial draft with members of ESCR-Net's thematic working groups in June 2016, and the incorporation of the input offered by those members, the Common Charter for Collective Struggle was subsequently presented and discussed at the Global Strategy Meeting, held in Buenos Aires Argentina, in order to contribute to a common analysis of shared challenges and global conditions and to inform the Network's forthcoming strategic plan.

#### 2024 Reflection

*"Just like democracy, the Common Charter was slow to build. It resonated so much with us and still resonates with us... It was not constructed by consultants sitting in New York or London but by us as social movements." - S'bu Zikode, Abahlali baseMjondolo, South Africa (February 2023)*

In advance of ESCR-Net's 2024 Global Strategy Meeting (September 2024), the Social Movement Working Group organized series of online discussions, accompanied by in-person meetings in South Africa (February 2023) and Brazil (January/February 2024), to revisit the Common Charter for Collective Struggle in light of the intensifying polycrisis facing communities around the world. These were complemented by a series of systemic critique workshops, taking up themes of the political economy of violence and debt, care and climate in 2023. "We are trying to go deeper and deeper about the analysis, about capitalism, about exploitation, about oppression...it is really necessary, how I feel your fight is my fight, how I feel your struggle is my struggle."<sup>[1]</sup>

Our conversations over the past few years again affirmed that our movements and wider communities face similar global conditions, rooted in unjust economic and social systems, despite the particularities of our individual struggles. These systems have beginnings and can thus have ends. While the global conditions identified several years earlier made much of the current moment predictable, the crises facing many communities have intensified more rapidly than anticipated following the COVID-19 pandemic and related government responses. Since our last global strategy meeting, our collective analysis has sharpened, and we are attentive to shifting challenges, and openings, in an increasingly multipolar world. More than ever, we understand the urgent role of the Network to connect diverse struggles across regions, to embrace strategies to build power for systemic change, and to collectively shape our own futures.

# COMMON CONDITIONS AND SHARED CHALLENGES

As a basis for considering the importance and potential parameters of a global campaign, this section briefly outlines some of the key characteristics of the social, economic and political models that undermine the realization of human rights.

## 1. Impoverishment and Dispossession Amid Abundance

We live in the most productive economy in human history with more than enough resources to feed, house and educate every human being, but these resources are not being used to meet these needs. Rather, there is a widening wealth gap that is concentrating the resources and productive capacity of the world into fewer and fewer hands while the majority face impoverishment and dispossession. What's more, many people have been taught that the substandard living conditions in which they struggle to survive, or that prompt migrants to move, is a result of their own poor choices. "We need to shatter the myth that poverty is self-inflicted," [2] or somehow an inevitable byproduct of a global economy.

Arguably, the current economic model has intensified over the past few decades. Initially piloted in Chile, the UK and US, and then imposed globally via structural adjustment policies imposed by the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and a series of trade and investment agreements, "neoliberal" rhetoric, regulation and policies have created a false dichotomy between freedom and equality and argued that markets free of government interference would most efficiently allocate resources and ensure economic growth. These policies promoted deregulation for the elite, reduced taxation and public spending, privatization of public goods and services, and "flexible" labor markets. Labor market deregulation has led to a growing informal sector, and the suppression of wages, [3] a general worsening of working conditions and a weakening of wage bargaining power that has pushed workers, and in particular female workers, into vulnerable employment. [4] These forms of exploitation are accompanied by dispossession in both rural and urban areas.

Contrary to its claimed promotion of freedom, the current economic system commodifies people and nature and often criminalizes the poor. [5] Whether via autocratic governments, the imposition of unelected officials on struggling municipalities, or international agreements negotiated behind closed doors, rights to political participation—which are interdependent with ESCR—are being consistently eroded in many contexts. Labor, environmental and human rights regulations are treated as impediments to free markets and progressively weakened. At the same time, corporate pursuit of profit is subsidized through tax exemptions granted by governments competing for investment and corporate tax evasion through artificially shifting profits to lower tax

locations or tax havens. This leaves governments with declining public revenue and/or growing debt. Technological innovation and productive capacity have grown, but they have been matched by increasing unemployment and underemployment, stagnating real wages, deepening inequality and economic and ecological crises, which have fueled migration, social unrest and militarism. In essence, “we are not poor; we are made poor. We can’t fight poverty but we need to fight against that which impoverishes us.”<sup>[6]</sup> The rules of the global economic system, in other words, permit profit to be privately enjoyed by a few while the majority (in both rural and urban areas) face growing threats to their livelihoods and their ability to realize economic, social and cultural rights in practice.

In many countries around the world, women face different and disproportionate impacts of these processes, leading to what is often referred to as the ‘feminization of poverty.’ Women are often denied access to land, financing and other productive resources, and often work in sectors that are under-valued by the formal labor market. Their contributions are often made invisible, and their access to essential services, such as health care and education, are often lacking. As a result of conflict, migration spurred by economic necessity and other processes, many rural households are headed by women, yet they are not fully recognized. Subjected to sexual harassment and other forms of violence, women often find themselves caught in the downwards spiral of impoverishment and without the capacity to effect lasting change in their situation.

The intensification of the market-driven global economic system, therefore, has presented grave threats to human rights, viable livelihoods, environmental sustainability and human dignity, in both the global North and the South. In the United States, for example, “capitalism is eating its middle class.”<sup>[7]</sup> This system tends to exploit crises (climate change, terrorism, global hunger) to further maximize profit and concentrate power in the hands of an ever-smaller elite. It is aided by the manipulation of public opinion, often via media outlets that are controlled by states and/or business interests, and which often suggest that a model premised on a drive for profit is the path to happiness and that those who challenge this paradigm are tantamount to criminals.<sup>[8]</sup>

## **2024 Reflection**

In working to understand the history and nature of capitalism, as the dominant economic system, we have more clearly traced its roots to colonialism, the dispossession of common lands and abundance, and the conquest of nature. “The current economic system has brought a process of pillaging and destruction upon mother nature, upon humanity.”<sup>[9]</sup> Colonialism and imperialism were and are justified by racist narratives, dependent on the creation of racist structures, and perpetuated via brutal violence and genocides. “We have questioned the colonial State, which still persists in our countries. Historically, the legal and institutional framework has ensured that social inequalities have deepened in our country and the historical elite has continued to accumulate wealth.”<sup>[10]</sup> The origin of capitalism relied on accumulation by dispossession, slavery, and the creation of other desperate workforces without other means to ensure their survival.

In the wake of an unprecedented global pandemic, the capitalist system managed to sustain itself as the for-profit health care system decided who lives and who dies. Land grabs and extraction intensified as the pandemic

provided cover for further militarization of our communities and development aggression. As many in our communities became sick and schools and other institutions closed, our governments seemingly counted on patriarchal models imposed or deepened by colonialism to address the care crisis. These models have long insisted on narrow definitions of family and gender, giving exploited and individualized male workers tokenistic power within their homes, devaluing care for people and planet, yet ensuring the social reproduction and survival of a ready workforce via the hyper-exploitation of women and particularly women already marginalized by racism. Yet many of our communities relied on longstanding or renewed practices of collective care and solidarity.

Under capitalism, we understand that the primary reason for being of any corporation or private financial institution is profit. We have seen that capitalism can welcome more women board members in the US, permit the emergence of a small Black professional class in South Africa, or alleviate the extremes of poverty when commodity prices are high in Brazil. However, when profits are threatened, corporate and private financial actors—which have captured our State institutions—will protect their interests, in many cases supporting the rise of rightwing populist leaders, alliances with organized crime, repression of human rights defenders and their communities in the name of law and order, or simply the imposition of regressive taxes, deregulation and public spending cuts that deepen inequality. In our home countries, many of us are blamed for our own impoverishment—labeled as criminal, lazy, backward, anti-development. To escape poverty, hunger and other forms of violence, many in our community migrate. In host countries, our siblings become scapegoats, blamed for low wages and crime, treated as security risks with militarized borders, and denied basic human rights. Ultimately, migrants become a precarious and highly exploitable workforce for the already wealthy.

In the past few years, sovereign debt crises have rapidly escalated in the face of the intensifying polycrisis, including the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic, growing loss and damage due to climate change, and escalating food prices amid financial speculation and conflicts as well as drought. Debt accumulation and resulting financial and economic crises are not new but rather endemic to capitalism, yet the magnitude of current debt and evolving crises is particularly alarming.<sup>[11]</sup> While sources of capital have grown, the majority world has become increasingly reliant on private finance, making debt restructuring more difficult and debt itself more expensive, with more impoverished countries paying substantially more to borrow than wealthier countries. Debt crises have in turn been used to reshape our economies, prioritizing debt repayment (as another form of dispossession) and imposing the neoliberal capitalist model as a condition for debt relief, as outlined in the 2016 Common Charter. As of 2023, over 3 billion people live in countries spending more on interest payments than on health or education. As fellow members highlighted in Argentina, when expenditures on public services and care are cut, amid escalating prices for other basic necessities, many—particularly women—are forced to take on unsustainable personal debt to ensure the well-being of their families. Sovereign debt crises become personal debt crises. In other countries, microfinance offers an elusive promise of impoverished women becoming prosperous entrepreneurs at the cost of exorbitant interest rates, amid challenges of basic survival. In discussing the current debt crisis, we recognize that the impoverished and particularly impoverished women bear the greatest burden, even as the wealthy few have become wealthier. In joining calls for the cancellation of

illegitimate and unsustainable debts, we denounce the colonial origins of many of our debts. In many of our countries, after prolonged struggles for national liberation, the final cost of securing the right to self-determination was assuming colonial debts, compensating colonial land owners, and/or being forced to pay an indemnity to departing colonizers who had violently dispossessed our ancestors for generations. In addition to its colonial origins, we understand debt as an ongoing tool of imperialism, used to shape our economies and facilitate the ongoing extraction of wealth. We have echoed the words of Thomas Sankara to the Organization of African Unity: “Debt is neo-colonialism...Under its current form, controlled and dominated by imperialism, debt is a skillfully managed reconquest of Africa, intended to subjugate its growth and development through foreign rules.”<sup>[12]</sup> Unless we transform this global system, “we know that this debt will not be paid for many years, and our children and grandchildren will be condemned to paying this debt.”<sup>[13]</sup>

The collective right to self-determination, complemented by a set of individual rights, was recognized and given legal force in Article 1 of both the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 1966. This includes the right of peoples to “freely determine their political status and freely pursue their own economic, social and cultural development,” including control over their resources and policies in the face of long histories of dispossession and exploitation. Recognition of the right to self-determination was the result of powerful liberation struggles, following a period of brutal war and genocide. Ultimately, “self-determination is a foundational principle that supports a broad spectrum of rights, promoting freedom for all peoples.”<sup>[14]</sup> Yet struggles for self-determination persist almost sixty years later. Indigenous members are denied land and territorial sovereignty, the right to free, prior and informed consent, “self-government in matters relating to their internal and local affairs”, and “the right to maintain and strengthen their distinct political, legal, economic, social and cultural institutions”, as recognized in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Palestinian members face a genocide in Gaza following decades of settler colonial occupation and apartheid. As suggested above, in many of our communities and countries, colonialism was rapidly replaced by economic imperialism, imposed by military might when necessary, directly contradicting the right of self-determination to democratic governance, political participation, and sovereignty as people and peoples. Yet our movements and our communities have maintained, developed, and protected other economic and social models, grounded in practical solidarity and mutual care for each other and nature.

## 2. Corporate Capture of the State

As this economic model has intensified, it is nonetheless built on much longer histories of dispossession, and exploitation. Commercial interests in colonialism, slavery and imperialism relied on government support; today, we are witnessing the growing phenomenon of “corporate capture,” by which an economic elite undermines the realization of human rights and environmental sustainability by exerting undue influence over domestic and international decision-makers and public institutions. This has been facilitated, in part, by drastic reductions in public spending and increasing reliance on private sector actors to provide essential services that fall under the

responsibilities of states (education, health care, water distribution, etc.) Corporations, financial institutions and investors have often relied on the collusion of States to extract and maximize profit. Since the widespread introduction of the neoliberal economic model in the 1980's, many countries have seen elite private actors seize more power within the political system. This model finds expression in trade and investment agreements shaped by the interests of global capital to favor the plunder of common goods or so-called "natural resources" and the provision of cheap labor. This has led to a "race to the bottom" that undermines regulation and pits workers or communities against each other in all regions.

This has led, in many places, to a shift in the role of the State to serve as "an apparatus of global capital" instead of a regulator of public good.<sup>[15]</sup> In some countries, from the perspective of grassroots leaders on the frontlines of social justice struggles, they are confronting a corporate-police state,<sup>[16]</sup> which is "increasingly willing to use police and military to serve the interests of capital instead of people."<sup>[17]</sup> Despite decades of voluntary "corporate social responsibility" and apparent legal protections in some contexts, communities often face immense struggles just to secure information and participate in decisions affecting their future or access justice in the face of systemic violations of human rights.

#### **2024 Reflection**

Corporate capture of governmental and intergovernmental institutions and decision-making, as well as much of mainstream media and other societal institutions, has become a primary framework for ESCR-Net members to understand the political dynamics of this period. While corporations and the financial sector have looked to influence government policy and decisions throughout the history of our current economic system, this has intensified in recent decades of neoliberal capitalism, threatening all forms of democratic participation. At our first Systemic Critique Workshop (Chiapas, 2019) and again in a series of online discussions (2022), social movement members dubbed the current era as the "corporation nation" stage of capitalism. Corporate capture is "a phenomenon of social, political, and cultural grabbing that has devastating effects on the lives of people and, of course, communities."<sup>[18]</sup> With the rise of right-wing populist regimes, closely tied to corporate interests, we are arguably seeing a further manifestation of the "corporation nation." Some member have also called this phenomenon "anarcho-capitalism," in which far-right authoritarian leaders enjoy some level of popular support amid wider crises of legitimacy and advance even more extreme levels of privatization and austerity while undermining longstanding rights protections. Corporate capture of powerful States, as well as intergovernmental institutions, was on brutal display during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ensured by monopolies secured through the World Trade Organization's intellectual property rights regime, the profits of the pharmaceutical industry were given priority over the lives of millions of people, echoing the devastating and unnecessary loss of life during the HIV/AIDS crisis.<sup>[19]</sup>

Unchecked corporate capture, in an era when many corporate and financial actors are economically larger than entire States, is a root cause of many of the crises facing our communities. Corporate capture has facilitated extraction of fossil fuels and now transition minerals with devastating impacts on the health and well-being of communities, frequently on the lands of Indigenous Peoples without their free, prior and informed consent.



After decades of inaction in the face of scientific warnings of catastrophic climate change, our communities now face a climate crisis driven foremost by the extractive sector. However, corporate capture has also diverted attention from the losses and damages facing our communities and has instead secured government subsidies amounting to US\$ 11 million every minute for the fossil fuel industry by 2020, according to the IMF, with these subsidies almost doubling in 2021.<sup>[20]</sup> At COP28 (2023), chaired by Sultan Al Jaber, the chief executive of ADNOC, the state oil and gas company of the United Arab Emirates, the number of fossil fuel lobbyists rose to a record of at least 2,456, from 636 in 2022.<sup>[21]</sup> In turn, the debt crises facing many countries are being utilized, at the behest of private investors and corporate actors, to further privatize and commodify nature and care. We have seen corporate capture intensify at every level, from the UN under the guise of multistakeholderism to the interactions of companies, elected officials, and police at the local level. “Communities can speak clearly about the phenomenon of corporate capture, of corporations capturing government decisions and devastating communities... We have seen our public services appropriated by corporations, serving corporate interests. We see capitalism driving the harms facing our communities, exploiting workers, failing to provide safe conditions, destroying the environment... Companies and States work together to violate our rights. In small localities, you see people working in both mining and the government; they use the police to protect company interests.”<sup>[22]</sup>

Corporate capture goes hand-in-hand with corporate impunity as corporations are regularly guilty of committing violence and repression against human rights defenders resisting their abuses. Unfortunately, these corporations, backed by captured-states and other institutions, face little to no accountability. In many of our contexts, challenges in accessing courts due to limited resources and longstanding discrimination are further compounded by explicit corporate influence over or direct interference with our justice systems. In turn, corporate control of media means that many of our stories and demands are never included in mainstream media. Instead, media outlets become platforms for economic and political elites to label us as anti-development, anti-national, or some version of violent, criminal or lazy, drawing on colonial and racist stereotypes. This behavior of mainstream media, as corporate actors who exercise an undue influence on public opinion, sustains overall corporate impunity and justifies the repression of human rights defenders.

### 3. Deepening Inequality

The world today is characterized by staggering degrees of inequality. As reported by Oxfam, “The gap between rich and poor is reaching new extremes. Credit Suisse recently revealed that the richest 1% have now accumulated more wealth than the rest of the world put together. This occurred a year earlier than Oxfam’s much-publicized prediction ahead of last year’s World Economic Forum. Meanwhile, the wealth owned by the bottom half of humanity has fallen by a trillion dollars in the past five years.”<sup>[23]</sup> At a time when a select few individuals and corporations have amassed more wealth than entire nations and where essential public services are increasingly available only to those with the money to pay for them, the gap between the rich and poor has reached unacceptable proportions.

This economic inequality has frequently been justified and maintained by socially-constructed divisions, gender stereotypes, racism, discrimination against minority groups, and other forms of fear and prejudice. Histories of oppression, often intertwined with exploitation and dispossession, mean that women and certain groups—including indigenous and Afro-descendent communities, migrants and refugees, persons with disabilities, and many others—are disproportionately impacted by impoverishment and excluded from decision-making processes, intensifying economic inequality or adding compounding inequalities. Attention to substantive equality—beyond legal or formal equality—must include a focus on how different groups are positioned within societies due to norms and structures embedded over time. For instance, women continue to bear a disproportionate burden of (unpaid) care for children and the elderly, while domestic workers—the vast majority of whom are women and often migrants—face chronic exploitation with few labor protections. Apparently neutral laws and policies may fail to secure justice, inclusion and material well-being for all groups.

### **2024 Reflection**

Capitalism relies on inequality within and between countries. All workers are exploited under capitalism or not paid the full value for their labor power to ensure profit for the wealthy few in each of our countries. As outlined above, capitalism is also entwined with racism and patriarchy, creating modicums of privilege for male workers and workers from dominant races, ethnicities, tribes and castes. As domestic workers' unions remind us, the implications of this are substantial. “What is made visible is the work of men, which is valued at some level, while the work of women is often invisible and unvalued.”<sup>[24]</sup> Care workers are under-paid and still not fully recognized or given adequate labor protections in most of our countries, seemingly due to domestic workers being predominantly women and often from marginalized and/or migrant communities. In some of our contexts, women are excluded from or not meaningfully engaged in formal and informal decision-making processes, reinforcing patriarchy and limiting women's access to land, territory and other common goods, despite their central role in struggles against dispossession. Inequalities facing all women are often compounded by other forms of marginalization or oppression, for instance for women from Indigenous and/or Afro-descendant backgrounds and/or women with disabilities. In turn, inequalities between countries, built on histories of colonialism and imperialism, mean that some countries have much greater wealth that could be redistributed to address impoverishment and other social issues within and beyond their borders. These same countries bear primary responsibility for climate change, with devastating impacts on poorer countries and particularly impoverished and marginalized communities within them, who in turn bear minimal responsibility for causing the climate crisis. The demand for cancellation of illegitimate and unsustainable debts is a first step towards needed redistribution and reparations. However, workers and wider movements often remain effectively divided within and across countries, fighting over crumbs and navigating the real harms embedded in histories of oppression. These divisions are only intensified as our societies are pushed into the liberal capitalist mode, elevating individual self-interest and competition instead of principles of solidarity, cooperation, and collective well-being. In turn, these divisions are utilized and heightened by corporations—and governments aligned with narrow corporate interests—in attempts to advance so-called development projects, further corroding the social fabric of many of our communities.

In this regard, we recognize that we and our movements emerge from our wider societies and are shaped by historical hierarchies. Building inclusive and egalitarian movements, with diverse and shared leadership, requires intentional effort. This has led to intensive discussions within the Social Movement Working Group, with women and gender non-binary leaders reflecting on the specific and multiple challenges that they face in coming into leadership due to gender norms and discrimination within their families, communities and movements. In many communities, these challenges are compounded for women and non-binary leaders who face discrimination based on other aspects of their identity (i.e. ethnicity, marital status, disability, citizenship status, etc.). Creating theoretical openings for inclusive and shared leadership, for instance via movement elections open to female candidates, is often not sufficient, but rather difficult work of community political education, intentional leadership development focused on historically marginalized groups, efforts to foster mutual learning and solidarity between women and non-binary leaders, and more is often necessary. As discussed below, the challenges facing women in their diversity have only intensified under the rise of rightwing populism over the past several years, with attacks on the rights of women and gender non-binary communities to control their own bodies and identities. “The extreme right is where misogyny and capitalism meet.”<sup>[25]</sup> Similarly, in the face of repression, cooptation, and even illness, we have learned the importance of continuously identifying and developing multiple leaders—including youth leaders—at every level and creating intentional spaces for political education to reinforce clear, committed, and collective leadership of our movements rather than focusing on individual charismatic leaders.<sup>[26]</sup>

## 4. Degradation of Ecosystems and Climate Crisis

The global economic forces that have broadened the divide between rich and poor have privatized and concentrated the world’s common natural resources in the hands of increasingly few. They have driven rising consumption, further aided by the planned obsolescence of goods and technologies, as vital to ongoing economic growth and profit, while treating nature as a commodity. This has led to the destruction of forests, rivers and parts of our oceans, upon which many people depend for survival, as well as the contamination of air. It has also destabilized the global climate, posing severe threats to the ability of countless people – and their children – to realize their human rights. “The ability of the environment to sustain life is threatened by climate change, perhaps the clearest symptom of a system driven by private profit over public good.”<sup>[27]</sup>

With CO<sup>2</sup> levels in the atmosphere today, far higher than levels present on the planet for two million years, the global temperature today is higher than it has been in the last 115,000 years. Deep ocean warming is melting glaciers, driving fish and marine animals toward the poles at unprecedented rates, and raising sea levels faster than at any time in the last 2,800 years. Climate change has altered the timing of the seasons, and brought about more severe, and unpredictable, extreme weather patterns, including devastating floods, draughts and other phenomena. These changes have disproportionately impacted the world’s poorest people, especially those who live off the land or live in precarious dwellings or low-lying coastal areas. These impacts usually are felt most strongly in locations far from the sources of the original carbon emissions or by the poor and marginalized in wealthier countries, who are neglected in times of natural disasters.

## 2024 Reflection

The major carbon emitters, largely located in the global north, have evaded their historical responsibility for driving the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution, jeopardizing the rights of future generations. The consequences of unabated extractivism, toxic agro-business, and overall climate destruction has resulted in immeasurable and irreparable loss and damage for communities who have contributed the least to the climate crises. The loss of not only lands and waters, but also of culture and histories, has resulted in the erasure of entire communities, particularly Indigenous, peasant, and Afro-descendant communities who are dependent on the land for their survival. Centuries of colonialism and imperialism have prevented many States from being able to address loss and damage due to the impacts of illegitimate debt burdens and decades of austerity.

Meanwhile, war and conflict over resources continue to spread, leaving communities and the environment devastated. We are now facing the costs of adaptation to and mitigation of climate change, for which we bear minimal responsibility, as substantial economic and non-economic losses and damages mount. “We are paying for decisions we didn’t make.”<sup>[28]</sup> Women, in all their diversity, are disproportionately impacted by the climate-induced disasters and their multiple impacts on health and well-being, as they perform the majority of care work for their communities and for their territories.

Instead of addressing the crises with swift action to curb global temperatures, the phasing out of fossil fuels, or the drastic reduction in carbon emissions, corporations and wealthy countries continue to promote “false solutions” to the crises. These “solutions” do not address the root causes of the crises, but rather “green-wash” the real problem by distracting and misleading efforts. False solutions like carbon markets, “net-zero”, “clean hydrogen” or multiple green technologies that rely on the mining of critical minerals promote capitalist-centric models which further entrench the planet in deeper ecological disaster. So-called “nature-based solutions” such as fortress conservation efforts are used to justify the dispossession of Indigenous communities from their lands under the guise of conservation. Ultimately, any so-called climate solution is false if it does not place Indigenous Peoples’ rights and the human rights of other communities at its center, together with genuine care for the entire planet.

“We need to confront capitalism. We are particularly seeing the devastation of fisheries, following the devastation of our lands. Ocean-grabbing is advancing as the next frontier for capitalism,” emphasized one member during our gathering in Brazil. Echoing multiple members, she further stressed, “Communities need to be central, recognizing the importance of Indigenous or traditional knowledge.”<sup>[29]</sup>

Real solutions to the climate crisis rest in the custodians of our planet, communities who long pre-date the proliferation of neoliberal capitalism. Indigenous Peoples protect 80% of the world’s biodiversity despite making

up only 5% of the world's population.<sup>[30]</sup> Members are advocating alternatives to the dominant economic system that recognize the rights of nature and are rooted in principles of care, regeneration, and respect for Mother Earth.

## 5. Growing Repression and The Political Economy of Violence

Social movements, grassroots organizations and other groups that represent people confronting human rights violations and threats against their ability to live in dignity are, today, facing intensifying repression and, in some cases, a militarized response to the challenges they pose to the prevailing system. These threats are perpetrated by actors associated with government, military and paramilitary forces, corporations and organized crime who have targeted human rights defenders in reprisal for their work mobilizing people to defend and promote economic, social and cultural rights. In some places, freedom of association and expression for organizations has been curtailed by restrictions on their ability to receive funding or basic permissions to operate. In other cases, the law has been used as a tool to silence human rights defense and criminalize human rights defenders, as well as people living in poverty themselves.<sup>[31]</sup> Too often, human rights activists have been subject to surveillance (whether lawful or otherwise) as a result of their work. As stated by the daughter of trade union activists facing serious criminal charges, “they have become so aggressive, they are killing our human rights defenders.”<sup>[32]</sup>

In the first half of 2016, ESCR-Net responded to weekly threats against members, involving harassment, unlawful surveillance and criminalization of human rights defenders, grassroots organizations or social movement struggles, often in the name of national interests or security, and bolstered by an overriding “culture of impunity.”<sup>[33]</sup>

In many countries, this repression has been intertwined with a wider politics instigating fear and prejudice, in which corporate- and/or government-captured media is involved in defaming individuals and, sometimes, entire groups claiming their human rights, as criminal, anti-national, extremist and otherwise illegitimate. In some cases, ethnic or religious differences are deepened and utilized to divide those facing common injustices. In other cases, powerful individuals and families, whose position is reinforced by autocratic forms of government and vestiges of colonial injustices, have orchestrated (or have been complicit with) repressive responses to human rights defense.

In the face of these trends, SMWG members have, on the one hand, celebrated the times when they have survived such attacks and reaffirmed their commitment to robust cross-regional solidarity in times of threats. On the other hand, social movement leaders have also emphasized the need to confront the root causes that have prompted social movements to mobilize in the first place to defend or promote ESCR, after a necessary solidarity action is taken in response to these threats.<sup>[34]</sup> In essence, this is a call to move beyond solidarity and collectively address the common conditions pushing communities into struggle to resist dispossession,

impoverishment and environmental destruction and to insist on their dignity and rights to material well-being, self-determination and political participation.

## **2024 Reflection**

Building on the work of the first Systemic Critique workshop held in Chiapas, Mexico (2019), we recognize the violent nature of capitalism, which is reliant on the accumulation of land, resources, and territory through forceful dispossession. In reflecting on the history of capitalism, some of us developed a timeline of capitalism highlighting the many phases of capitalism from colonization through neoliberalism.<sup>[35]</sup> Capitalism was born from invasion, occupation, and colonization by European powers, which depended on violence to extract resources from stolen lands through the forced labor of stolen people.<sup>[36]</sup> Over the past few years, we have deepened our understanding of the political economy of violence (PEV) or the ways in which violence has been used by State and non-state actors as a tool to develop and maintain capitalism. While a working definition is still in progress, members are understanding the PEV as: The violent exercise of power (physical, institutional, or symbolic) by non-state actors, often in collusion with the State, to ensure their economic benefit under the capitalist system at the expense of the impoverished and working classes.

The political economy of violence points to the ways that the traditional nation-state and its government institutions is facing a crisis of legitimacy, leaving room for power to be contested by non-state actors, including corporations, who share interests in accumulating profit, if necessary through the use of violence. For example, the advent of the so-called “narco-state” can help to exemplify the ways in which the traditional role of the State has become controlled by criminal organizations, who often collude with corporate interests for control over land, resources, and peoples and often in response to popular resistance to hegemonic and extractivist development projects. We can also understand this as a form of “narco-capitalism”. Organized crime has permeated all aspects of societies – occupying positions of political power; controlling borders, media, and local police forces; dominating various industries (not just drugs and arms but also mining, agriculture and tourism); and reinventing the social fabric of communities.

“What we consider the most dangerous in Mexico is when the State, corporations and organized crime melt into one...The narco no longer buys the politicians, they are the politicians. They are also businessmen. This means that the narco has control over the funds, the police. It is the narco that becomes the governor...The narco controls the migration, trafficking of women and children. They control the territories, the media. Their business is no longer only drugs. They control everything including mining and palm oil plantations. They also control social life for instance by imposing curfews. They control fear.”<sup>[37]</sup>

This violence has gendered and racial dimensions, which need to be understood in the context of an economic system entwined with racism and patriarchy from its origins. Women, LGBTQ+, and Afrodescendent communities often bear the brunt of violence. Women human rights defenders (WHRDs) are at the forefront of

territorial defense confronting development aggression and dispossession, which is often carried out by paramilitaries, private security forces, and military apparatuses.<sup>[38]</sup> “So many sisters have been killed for defending our earth. This affects not only women and their families but communities...this threatens the whole world. Communities are the ones defending nature, and all human beings without exception depend on earth to survive.”<sup>[39]</sup> Grassroots women leaders and WHRDs have reflected on the multiple forms of violence they face, as well as on the main perpetrators of violence against them, within the context of patriarchal societies, noting that oppressive gender norms are also often internalized within communities, organizations, and movements. “We confront gender-based state violence such as rape, killings, and sexualized threats online and offline starting from the highest office of the country. We live in a very patriarchal society where state and religious institutions consider women as objects.”<sup>[40]</sup>

Fundamental to our understanding of the PEV is the profound connection between corporate capture, militarism, and the arms industry. As systems of violence are reliant on weapons (largely produced in the Global North and exported to the Global South), the role of corporations in promoting global militarism cannot be overlooked. Corporate interests, in the arms and tech sectors, are profiting directly from war, even as wider corporate investments have long been protected by military might. Over the past couple decades, the arms industry has benefited from the rise of the so-called “war on terror”, helping to promote policies and ideologies rooted in surveillance, policing, and militarization in response to “terrorism.” While this phenomenon is often associated within imperial countries, like the United States, it has expanded across borders, including in the Global South, with many States adopting “war on terror” rhetoric to justify military interventions, development aggression, and the suppression of political dissidents.

Amidst deepening repression, reprisals, and attacks on Human Rights Defenders – the growth of far-right populist movements also poses serious threats to our movements and communities. These forces attempt to sow division, reinvigorate patriarchy and racism, and take advantage of communities forced into precarity. In many instances, the far right is represented formally in the government but also reinforced by non-state groups such as think tanks, media outlets, religious organizations, and militias or paramilitaries, who often enjoy impunity and protection by right-wing governments. These forces are the “most wild expression of capitalism...are racist and elitist, uniting with colonists and imperialists to deny human and environmental rights.”<sup>[41]</sup> The far-right encourages violence against those who resist their imposition of neoliberal capitalism, including “red-tagging defenders”, and often weaponize religious ideologies to justify their actions. In reflecting on the experience in Brazil, “the far right brought violence against our movements, with femicides and crime growing...Environmental laws were weakened, so the agribusiness could quickly progress as we were worried about the pandemic. The name of God was used to justify violence.”<sup>[42]</sup>

# EMERGING POINTS FOR UNITY ACROSS STRUGGLES

The social movements that are members of ESCR-Net posit that “another world is possible, and necessary, and we are the vehicle to get there.”<sup>[43]</sup> In part, this requires a recognition that the diverse members of ESCR-Net are all facing common global forces and interests that often gain from the impoverishment and dispossession of others. “Just as capitalism is globalized, we must globalize the struggle for the rights of the poor.”<sup>[44]</sup>

## 2024 Reflection

In response to the global conditions facing our communities, the intensifying polycrisis of the past several years, we reaffirm the need to build collective power across movements and regions, centering grassroots women leaders in all of their diversity. ESCR-Net, as its social movement, Indigenous Peoples, independent trade union, and NGO members, should deepen its role as a platform for connecting struggles, facilitating cross-regional solidarity, and ultimately building power for systemic change. We have achieved formal recognition of our rights, and we have secured many hard-won victories, protecting our ways of life and blocking extractive projects and other forms of dispossession. These initial victories, as well as the many sacrifices of our siblings, have given us a clarity that “we need to keep organizing at the grassroots level because this is where our strength will come from.”<sup>[45]</sup> Further, we understand that we need to connect struggles – peasant, Afro-descendant, Indigenous, feminist, LGBTQ+ – and “build an international alliance in the face of capitalism, as a system of death, as a hegemonic system. Within this international alliance, we need to incorporate solidarity and internationalism as key practical principles.”<sup>[46]</sup> As described below, building on deepening practices of popular political education and community-led research, we reaffirm the potential of campaigning to facilitate our ability to act together and draw on the fuller strength of ESCR-Net, securing wins towards more systemic change.

While we face increasingly powerful interests, with many of our movements embattled by long years of struggle, we also celebrate the alternatives or solutions that already exist and have been defended in our communities, centering care for people and the planet, cooperation and solidarity. In Durban, social movement members affirmed and built on principles emerging from the struggle of Abahlali baseMjondolo, which resonated across many of our struggles. This included the principle of “ubuhlalism” or the understanding that “I am because we are,” that our humanity is defined by, dependent on and confirmed in our relationships with those around us.<sup>[47]</sup> We build inclusive and connected movements of necessity, prioritizing collectivism over individualism and “practical solidarity” within and across our movements. In doing so, we embody the world we want to see now with clarity and commitment. In the face of powerful imperialist and capitalist interests, we also deepen our demand for the right to self-determination. At its most basic level, the right to self-determination emerges from the demand to reclaim our own histories and communities and to shape our own futures. In our ongoing mission “to build a global movement to make human rights and social justice a reality for all,” the right to self-determination is foundational.



## Reclaiming Human Rights

Human rights are a powerful tool with which to counter these trends, promote accountability and challenge the prevailing development model. This is because human rights standards have emerged as a result of long legacies of struggles. As a result, States have obligated themselves to respect, protect and fulfill human rights to the maximum of their available resources and via international assistance and cooperation, guaranteeing rights to self-determination and both formal and substantive equality in the enjoyment of rights. International instruments, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, several core human rights treaties and jurisprudence from international and regional bodies, offer evidence of common demands for a transformed world, based on the principles of substantive equality and dignity. Building awareness of human rights—particularly economic, social and cultural rights—has the potential to break the isolation of emerging grassroots struggles confronting powerful, increasingly global, interests. Human rights provide a common framework for analysis and demands, which will necessarily include a focus on the enforcement and implementation of human rights standards in the struggle for dignity.

### 2024 Reflection

In reclaiming the human rights framework, we reinforce the central importance of the collective right to self-determination, embodied in common Articles 1 of both of the UN International Covenants on Economic Social and Cultural Rights and on Civil and Political Rights, namely: “All peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.” Over the past several years, self-determination—particularly for Indigenous Peoples, for Palestine, and other anti-colonial and anti-imperial struggles—has been integrated in much of our collective advocacy as ESCR-Net. For Indigenous Peoples, self-determination involves rights to self-governance—including shaping the education of children and using Indigenous languages, territorial sovereignty and collective land rights, and free, prior and informed consent (FPIC). As the result of powerful Indigenous struggles, the right to self-determination has been affirmed and elaborated in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The right to self-determination has also been embodied in the recognition of Plurinational States via the 2008 Ecuadorian Constitution and the 2009 Bolivian Constitution, with similar struggles underway in other contexts. “The exercise of self-determination is a means to confront capitalism. Self-determination is a fundamental right that has validity over and above the Constitution. Self-government is a principle proper to Indigenous communities, pre-existing and prior to States.”<sup>[48]</sup> However, despite this legal recognition, the struggle for implementation continues, including as the right to FPIC is too often denied or minimized in the face of powerful corporate interests.

Ongoing decolonization processes are important. We also need to examine and confront the “recolonization process of the State.” Recolonization or “internal colonization” undermines self-determination and territorial integrity in the service of “development projects, extractive industries, new initiatives of carbon markets,” often via militarization and repression.<sup>[49]</sup> In this regard, we have to be thoughtful about how we conceptualize

self-determination. “Self-determination will not come when the government recognizes us. Self-determination comes when we as a community put our own visions into practice.”<sup>[50]</sup> Securing the right to self-determination ultimately involves building collective awareness and power from the grassroots level. “Our experience says that this comes through the process of struggle. This is about formation from the grassroots up, building on small victories. In our practice as collective subjectives, this depends on us as a collective.”<sup>[51]</sup>

Ultimately, the right to self-determination is relevant to many of our communities. In the face of economic imperialism, “we have to think about the self-determination of peoples beginning with the conditions imposed on us. The International Monetary Fund and the World Bank impose conditions on peoples...condition the economic, social and cultural development of peoples.”<sup>[52]</sup> In turn, the collective right to self-determination is complemented by the wider human rights framework. This framework includes individual rights to control over our bodies, identities, and futures, free from violence and suppression. Our Afro-descendant and Indigenous feminist movements in Latin America and beyond have utilized the notion of “cuerpo territorio” to explicitly connect demands for individual rights to bodily autonomy with struggles for collective rights to land and territory often guided by grassroots women leaders. Reclaiming these interconnected rights, particularly in the face of growing rightwing populism, which tries to divide us via histories of patriarchy and racism, is vital.

We also claim environmental rights as central to the realization of economic, social and cultural rights. In many of our countries and at the international level, we have been part of struggles for the recognition of the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, including the rights of future generations to enjoy this environment. In addition, we are clear that human beings are part of nature, interdependent with all life and the planet. The communities of our Indigenous members have cared for land as a collective good, lived in harmony with nature, and preserved biodiversity for generations, resisting colonial and capitalist models that treat land and life as commodities to produce wealth for the few. In this regard, we demand climate and environmental justice, with Indigenous Peoples’ rights and wider human rights as vital to efforts to preserve our environment and halt climate change. We also claim the right to reparations for communities who have suffered immeasurable loss and damage due to the climate crisis. Any climate solution is a false solution if it does not include the central participation of impacted communities and recognize Indigenous rights to free, prior and informed consent. Further, we need to continue to expand our conception of rights, elevating the rights of nature as ultimately tied to our own survival and well-being.

## **Connecting Struggles – A Global Movement United to Confront Injustice, Inequalities, Dispossession and Exploitation**

Communities, each with a unique history, are increasingly being shaped by global actors, policies and practices that are perpetuating an ongoing crisis of deepening inequality, impoverishment, environmental destruction and related rights violations. Social injustice is not a concern only in rural – or urban – areas. It is not only isolated in pockets in the Global South. Today, people living in poverty, impacted by ESCR violations or threatened with losing the basis of their livelihoods, reside in every country. If not explicitly united in a common struggle, these

communities and movements share fundamental challenges, providing a basis for coordination. Through deepening the unity of these individual struggles and showing the connections between them, it is possible to build a broader campaign for the universal realization of human rights. Indeed, the only force that can contend with this model that privileges private gain over public well-being—ensuring accountability and ultimately advancing alternative models—will be the united actions of communities and allied organizations collectively confronting impoverishment, dispossession and inequalities. Efforts to contest the interests embedded in our current economic and social models would likely:

Ø **Confront corporate capture of state institutions and decision-making processes:** Corporate and other private actors particularly in the finance and investment sectors, often working in close partnership with governments, have become increasingly aggressive in their pursuit of profit. This is a key driver of the growing repression outlined above, particularly as communities have mobilized to resist dispossession and demanded rights. Rather than allowing corporations, investors and financiers to co-opt state institutions and processes, exploit nature and amass wealth at the expense of people, articulated collective action has the potential, in the words of Gandhi, to ensure that “there is enough for need, not for greed.”<sup>[53]</sup>

Ø **Insist on rights not goals:** Human rights—including economic, social and cultural rights—are non-negotiable, universal, interdependent and indivisible, and society must make available the maximum available resources for their realization. Rights to equality, life and livelihood, among others, may not be reduced to “development goals” and voluntary codes of conduct that can be underfunded, left to the private sector, missed or pushed back due to unforeseen circumstances. In this regard, reinforcing the status of human rights as legal obligations is key. As a result of peoples’ struggles, human rights have been codified into international treaties, and every State is legally bound by at least one human rights treaty, including 164 States that have ratified the International Covenant on ESCR. States have legal obligations to respect, protect and fulfill these rights, including through ensuring effective remedies and equal access to justice in the case of violations. These obligations, similarly, must be fulfilled in practice, often prompted by people’s insistence on claiming them.

Ø **Question the morality of profit amid deepening inequality:** We are in a society where the pursuit of profit justifies the concentration of resources, dispossession of millions of people, destruction of the environment and resulting poverty, spun as both the effect of individual failures and the inevitable cost of ‘progress’. Taxes are avoided and public goods are privatized to increase the profit margins of large corporations and their investors. At the same time, grassroots leaders that mobilize to defend the human rights of people and communities in the face of the relentless drive for profit are criminalized and silenced. This represents a fundamental imbalance in the values governing the world’s economic architecture, and calls for a concerted effort to “demonize profit and make it sound like a bad word, rather than a noble pursuit.”<sup>[54]</sup>

## Advancing the Leadership of the Impoverished, Dispossessed and Marginalized

As economic forces leverage local dynamics and histories to their own advantage, they are also prompting economic, social and environmental conditions that are compelling the impoverished and dispossessed to action. In almost every country in the world, inequality is growing, pushing increasing numbers of people into poverty or rendering their livelihoods increasingly precarious. They include workers who are forced to work excessively long hours or tolerate inhumane working conditions, informal urban workers, and agricultural workers—70 percent of whom are women—vital to food security but without adequate rights to land.

No one is voiceless. In fact, the leadership of those directly impacted by dispossession, impoverishment, exploitation and environmental devastation, together with those who have made a political commitment to secure human rights, is critical if a global movement for positive social change has any prospects of succeeding. Pervasive, compelling and accessible evidence showing the existence of poverty amid clear global abundance has further strengthened multiple new movements around the world. These developments present the opportunity to build shared analysis, foreground common demands for human rights and unite action across borders. As articulated in ESCR-Net's core principles, social movements and politically organized communities must be central to analysis and action. Movements themselves have clearly said, "Nothing about us, without us."<sup>[55]</sup> The groups involved in shaping this Common Charter have also emphasized the need to support women in positions of leadership and stronger gender analysis, as well as for the ongoing development of grassroots youth leaders.<sup>[56]</sup>

## Amplifying and Articulating Alternative Models

The human rights framework offers potential parameters for common demands and alternative models, beginning with principles of transparency, accountability, and participation, but ultimately insisting on substantive equality and the use of maximum available resources and international cooperation to realize human rights. Based on the human rights framework, these alternative models or solutions, emerging foremost from communities, would seemingly:

Ø **Affirm human dignity and the primacy of life:** Human rights are non-negotiable because every human life is sacred and possesses inherent dignity. Alternative models would ideally affirm our common connections and responsibilities to future generations, ensure environmental sustainability, and create space for self-determination and the reclamation of freedom. They would honor and protect all forms of life – from the fisheries and waterways to the land and air. Human life is interdependent with all other forms of life.

Ø **Demand substantive equality as a prerequisite for moving forward:** Women often bear the brunt of global poverty because systems of patriarchy intersect with and influence the global economic system. Women and girls face different and disproportionate barriers to the enjoyment of their ESCR, even while women in the

same society are differently positioned due to intersecting issues of class, citizenship status, sexual identity, race or other issues. If our mission is to make “human rights and social justice a reality for all” while building a movement able to achieve this, we must insist on both formal and substantive equality as central to this mission and to our movement. Alternative models must therefore foreground the rights and realities of women and girls around the world, ensuring that they are central to their construction.

Ø **Safeguard space for dissent and “the right to claim rights”:** In the face of the growing criminalization of dissent and the closure of space for civic action, all human rights must be upheld. These include freedom of conscience, expression, assembly and association and due process rights as mutually reinforcing with economic, social and cultural rights.

Ø **Envision a common future:** This involves acknowledging historical injustices and the ways in which the powerful have often maintained their position by sowing fear, prejudice and division. This entails attention to substantive equality, ensuring the struggles to end poverty and dispossession ultimately lead to shared well-being and full participation and rights for all people, “without discrimination of any kind as to race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status,” including gender identity and sexual orientation. It necessitates ensuring ecological sustainability, advancing common but differentiated responsibilities, and challenging inequalities within and between countries.

Ø **2024 Reflection: Center care for people and the planet:** Care is what sustains life from birth to death - meeting the needs of infants and the sick, nurturing children and maintaining community practices, producing food and preserving biodiversity. Care is “an individual and collective responsibility, related to the well-being of the community itself and the members of the community as individuals. For Indigenous People, land and territorial defense is also a form of collective care.”<sup>[57]</sup> Across our communities, we honor resistance and solidarity as vital forms of care for our collective well-being now and into the future. We are interconnected and interdependent with each other and with all life on the planet. “We need to center care for the environment, for the earth, for air, for water, which sustain us, our food systems, our well-being.”<sup>[58]</sup>

Under capitalism, once collective forms of care have become individualized, commodified, and privatized. Forty years of neoliberal capitalism, often imposed in moments of debt crisis, have involved constant attacks on the public provision of care in multiple forms. We demand debt cancellation, progressive taxation, public provision, and reparations for illegitimate debts and climate-induced loss and damage. We also demand the participation and centrality of our communities in any model for providing care, as our communities have maintained, developed, and protected practices of collective care and solidarity.

Reflecting long traditions of reciprocity and care, “women are central to defending our territories in the Bolivian Andes. They are conscious of their roles as caretakers of Mother Earth, as caregivers of the land. We have an alternative to encourage the rights of women in our territories...to combat capitalism.”<sup>[59]</sup> South African members are collectively occupying land, sharing in food production and cooking, and building community

spaces for political education, based on the principle that our humanity is defined by, dependent on, and confirmed in our relationships with those around us.<sup>[60]</sup> Multiple of us have formed unions, despite the lack of relevant legal frameworks, to secure recognition of our essential contributions, assert our dignity as domestic or care workers, and “develop our own demands and strategies and achieve what we were told was not achievable.”<sup>[61]</sup> In Guatemala, women-led cooperatives are leading struggles for food sovereignty and resisting the capitalist driven food-system, resisting export-driven agriculture, mono-crops, and toxic pesticides.<sup>[62]</sup> We celebrate women-led alternatives and resistance across our communities. However, we recognize that in many of our communities and in our wider societies, patriarchal norms—entwined with capitalism that “twists notions of love”<sup>[63]</sup>—place the disproportionate burdens on women in their diversity. Care work remains invisibilized, unpaid or underpaid, and unprotected. “What is made visible is the work of men, which is valued at some level, while the work of women is often invisible and unvalued.”<sup>[64]</sup>

Care is fundamental to our collective survival, and it is care work that makes all work possible. “Care is essential to reproducing human society. We want to nurture our children. But this often takes place in highly unequal relationships. This is the problem.”<sup>[65]</sup> We need to focus on building caring or care-centered economies, “refocusing on social reproduction instead of production for profit.”<sup>[66]</sup> This involves recognizing care as a common right including for caregivers, valuing the essential role of care for people and the planet, recognizing care as a collective responsibility to be shared by all persons regardless of gender, and insisting that “the caring economy needs to be debt free.”<sup>[67]</sup>

Ultimately, “ESCR-Net’s social movements are all calling for the same thing: to end poverty and violence against the poor and those that fight to defend their rights.”<sup>[68]</sup> A global campaign to realize economic, social and cultural rights has the potential to unite these different struggles into one overarching effort. Not only is a world that embraces all human rights and upholds the primacy of all life possible, it is already breaking through in these struggles.

## **ENVISIONING A GLOBAL CAMPAIGN**

The Social Movement Working Group has discussed the possibility of a global campaign which, developed in conversation with the entire network, would ideally lift up the diverse actions of social movements and insist that they be understood as part of an interconnected whole – where one cannot be won without the other. A victory for decent jobs in the Philippines will only be fulfilled when there is adequate housing in South Africa, safe and abundant waters in the Gulf Coast, and secure livelihoods in Sri Lanka. Otherwise, each of these victories becomes a reason for powerful economic actors to shift their operations elsewhere in the world and continue their pursuit of ever-increasing profit and growth at the expense of human rights and environmental sustainability. In connecting these struggles, a coherent plan for collective action, perhaps in the form of a global

campaign, would reveal not only the contradictions of the current economy and related political systems, but also build the analysis and broader leadership necessary for “a global movement to make human rights and social justice a reality for all.”

An initial audience for this campaign would include ESCR-Net members and allies, who would strengthen an understanding of the connections between their stories and collectively deepen critical analysis of the common global conditions impacting their communities. Foregrounding demands for economic, social and cultural rights, as well as common issues facing communities, would serve to break the isolation of grassroots struggles and draw a new set of movements, communities and civil society organizations to this campaign, reinforcing the recognition that: “your problem is my problem and your struggle is my struggle.”<sup>[69]</sup> These movements, together with a growing number of allied struggles, would form a potentially powerful basis on which clear demands could be articulated to governments to realize ESCR, while calling private actors and the wider economic system to account for violations of human rights. A campaign would also have to contend with deepening backlash by powerful private actors and government officials against communities and individuals who have mobilized to claim human rights, reinforcing their right and strengthening their ability to organize and to act collectively to defend and realize ESCR. Finally, amid intensifying economic and social conditions that threaten the well-being and even life, there is a strong desire to defend and explore alternative economic and social models that realize human rights.

### **2024 Reflection**

Since the initial drafting of the Common Charter, the Network has taken strides to support the development of Network-wide campaigns with the creation of a Campaign and Membership team within the ESCR-Net Secretariat, beginning in 2021. This team has facilitated spaces for members to explore potential campaigns, incorporating campaign strategic discussions as part of Social Movement Working Group gatherings and in political education spaces, notably our ongoing systemic critique workshops. Our deepening practice of community-led research, from 2020, can also serve as an important tool in building campaigns.

While launching a global campaign comes with a number of challenges given the diversity of issues and members present in the Network, it also poses an opportunity to collectively take action and build power across ESCR-Net to challenge systems of oppression and exploitation. Members are increasingly deepening solidarities, sharing stories and experiences of common struggle. These commonalities form the basis of collective action, guiding the Network as we embark on a new modality for change-making.

A Network-wide campaign would help bring together critical issues central to the collective work of ESCR-Net members, providing another model for bringing about transformational change. Members across working groups, with attention to core principles of social movement centrality and gender and regional balance, would lead campaign strategy and implementation with support from the secretariat.

## END NOTES

Cover Photo: Hakijamii

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