

# **In the middle of nowhere at the midpoint of agenda 2030; Peoples demand for development justice and transformative environmental multilateralism**

Statement of the Major Groups and Stakeholders Forum for the fifth Asia Pacific Forum and UNEA 6

3<sup>rd</sup> October, Colombo, Sri Lanka

## **I. Chapeau**

1. We, more than eighty community-based and grassroots organizations (CSOs) belonging to the Major Groups and Stakeholders, met at the Major Groups and Stakeholders Forum on 3<sup>rd</sup> October, 2023 at Colombo, Sri Lanka ahead of the Fifth Asia Pacific Forum of High Authorities and Ministers of Environment.
2. We considered the multiple intersecting crises (including the climate crisis, rapid loss of biodiversity, pollution and cost of living and financial crises, ecosystem collapse, and punctuated recovery from the COVID 19 pandemic; systemic issues and structural barriers as major drivers of crises, and impact on the people, economy and environment) in the region. We also considered the lack of progress on the Agenda 2030 and its SDGs and its implications for the poverty, food, water, health, education, access to renewable energy, sustainable industrialization and infrastructure, inequality, wars and conflicts in the region and impact on human rights, gender, rights of the workers and the marginalized and the most vulnerable communities.
3. Having considered these broad and wide perspectives and our lived experiences, we strongly feel that among the meta crisis of ambition, legitimacy and sustainability, we are at the cusp of a time where incrementalism is no longer sufficient, and where multilateral actions can either break or make a sustainable and inclusive future for the region as well as all for entire humanity.
4. We are concerned that despite some efforts, we are still shackled by multiple structural or systemic barriers and a fractured multilateralism impeding our progress. Therefore, we urge the governments in the region (and beyond) to focus on the drivers of poverty, inequality (global as well as regional and national), patriarchy and marginalization besides triple planetary crises, in order to resolve

them through ambitious political solutions and a strengthened cooperative multilateralism committed for transformational changes .

## II. Overview of Asia Pacific Region

1. The Asia-Pacific region has been a global growth engine for quite some time. It has lifted more than a billion people out of poverty in the last few decades but many countries have also slipped deeper into poverty. Environmental degradation has also been a prime victim in its growth story. Besides, democracy, rule of law, freedom of expression and press freedom, gender, human rights and rights of women, indigenous peoples, workers, **communities discriminated on work and descent (CDWD)/ Dalits** and environmental defenders have also seen significant backsliding.
2. At the midpoint of the agenda 2030 and its SDGs, it is clear that SDGs remain a promise belied. Asia-Pacific with 14% targets likely to be achieved by 2030, it will take another 42 years to achieve the SDGs. SDG 13 and SDG 14 have regressed to a situation worse than 2000 in all five sub-regions. The assessment in Asia-Pacific is based only on 60% of data as 40% of targets cannot be measured due to lack of data. The region is on track to achieve only 9 out of 104 measurable targets. Also keep in mind the delay in achieving the SDGs is likely to set runaway degradation once environmental tipping points (planetary boundaries) have been exceeded. Lack of resolute action to pursue the SDGs now is creating a very risky situation in which achieving SDGs can become downright impossible and the consequences for human and environmental systems is likely to be disastrous.
3. 155 million people in Asia Pacific (3.9%) lived in extreme poverty in 2022 (at USD 2.15/day). The pandemic pushed 75 million more people into extreme poverty in the region. Now, the cost of living crisis is undermining efforts to eliminate poverty in many countries. The poorest communities (including the urban poor) are worst affected as often they have to pay more to access basic services and as they buy commodities in small quantities, have bigger health expenses as they live in poorer living conditions. Majority of them are coping by cutting expenses on food, education and health. Despite Asia-Pacific providing 70% of the global growth, an estimated 30% of the population will still be economically vulnerable even in 2030. In addition, Unilateral Coercive Measures (UCMs) exacerbate the situation. A total of ten countries are under the UCMs in Asia and it is the very basic human rights of the grassroots and local communities that are being violated.

4. Global hunger is likely to remain at 600 million in 2030, almost the same number as when the Agenda 2030 was adopted in 2015. 122 million more faced moderate to severe food insecurity taking the total number of people facing hunger to 735 million in 2022 as compared to 2019 pre-pandemic status. More than 42% were unable to afford healthy food in 2022. In Asia-Pacific, 7 million more people faced acute food insecurity making it 69 million people in acute food insecurity. The region is also home to 465 million undernourished people (55% of global undernourished population). 1.9 billion people in the region are also unable to afford healthy food.
5. The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound and lasting impact on health systems and economies in all the countries including in the Asia-Pacific region. The crisis not only exposed the underlying inequity and fault lines in the health systems but further exacerbated them. Particularly for marginalized and most vulnerable communities including women and indigenous peoples, elderly, people with disabilities and the poorest, limited access to essential health care services unbearably high levels of out-of-pocket expenses and catastrophic health spending, and poor health infrastructure, among others, characterize the health situation in the region, especially among the low income countries (LICs) and lower middle income countries (LMICs).
6. Since January 2020, 1 million people have died due to the COVID-19 pandemic and more than 80 million have lost their jobs. Life expectancy reduced by one year during the COVID-19 pandemic and maternal mortality ratio (140/1000 live births) in the LICs and LMICs is still twice of the SDG target against the SDG target (70/1000 live births). Neonatal mortality in poorer countries (15.8/1000 live births) is still higher than the SDG target (12/1000 live births). There is huge variation in the health spending in the LICs and LMICs (USD 285/person/year) as compared to the UMICs (USD 822) and HICs (USD 3891) regrettably, almost half of the health spending (49%) comes from out-of-pocket expenses from poor people in the LICs and LMICs in the region.
7. The corporate drive for profit is fuelling intensified plunder of natural and human resources as seen in the massive land grabbing for industrial and infrastructure purposes and in the exploitation of labor to spur overproduction and overconsumption; control of land, water, seeds and produce of small farmers is resulting in hunger and malnutrition. The aggressive extraction of minerals and oil by TNCs further worsens the export-oriented economies as well as exacerbates the situations of local ecosystems and communities.

8. There are critical issues of environmental governance including the lack of environmental and social safeguards, false solutions including net zero, nature-based solutions, and geo-engineering financed by vested interests and transnational corporations. Prosperity and affluence in the global north remain partly financed by the exploitation of natural and human resources in the global south. There is a need to devise an adequate accounting and governance system to capture and remedy this situation to ensure that benefits and impacts are shared equitably across a planet characterized by ever shrinking spaces.
9. Apart from the direct references to the role and rights of Indigenous Peoples in the 2030 Agenda, many of the Sustainable Development Goals and associated targets are relevant for Indigenous Peoples. Moreover, the overarching framework of the 2030 Agenda contains numerous elements that can go towards articulating the development concerns of indigenous peoples. Of significance is the fact that out of 48 countries in Asia, just three of them (Philippines, Nepal, and Japan) legally recognize their Indigenous Peoples. The lack of recognition in this region led to the violation of the rights of these people regarding their lands and territory, education, language, culture, resources, and human rights.

### **III. At the intersections of climate, biodiversity and pollution crisis**

1. Accounting for more than half of the global carbon emissions, the Asia-Pacific region is warming faster than the global average. The surface ocean warming rate in the region is three times of the global average. Asia-Pacific countries' emissions are projected to increase by 16% (over 2010 levels) by 2030 as against the 45% reduction in emissions as desired by the 1.5 degrees Celsius pathway. 44 economies in Asia Pacific have some sort of the net zero targets but only 7 of them have enshrined it in the law (Australia, Fiji, Japan, Maldives, New Zealand, South Korea and Taiwan). Though G20 (including 8 countries in Asia-Pacific, namely, Australia, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Saudi Arabia and Türkiye) accounting for more than 80% of global emissions are only likely to reduce their emissions by 10% by 2030. Yet, only one country in the region (i.e., New Zealand) has committed to phase out coal by 2030 and only six countries (mainly small countries led by Vanuatu) have supported the Fossil Fuel Non-proliferation Treaty.
2. The region is witnessing the impact of runaway climate change in extreme weather events. There were 81 extreme weather events and water related disasters in 2022 (83% of them being floods), which killed 5000 people, directly affected 50 million people and caused an economic loss and damage of \$ 36

billion. China suffered prolonged droughts, Pakistan suffered biblical floods and most glaciers suffered intense mass loss.

3. 155 million people in the region still do not have access to electricity and 35% of the population do not have access to clean cooking fuel. The infrastructure gap in the region requires investment of USD 1.7 trillion every year through 2030.
4. We welcome the Kunming Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) and legally binding High Seas Treaty in March 2023 where countries agreed to protect 30% of the marine areas biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction (BBNJ). However, we are also aware that there are significant challenges in achieving the GBF.
5. The Asia-Pacific region (especially South East Asia and South Asia) is also richest in biodiversity. The food, land and ocean ecosystem contribute to 40% to the regional GDP and provides employment to 60% of the population. As of 2021, only 16.6% and 7.7% of marine areas globally were under protection. We are cognizant of the fact that the Asia Pacific region recorded the highest number of threatened species in 2014 and reportedly 40% of coral reefs in the region have disappeared. The region was also the most underperforming region in achieving the Aichi Targets (2010) of protecting 30% terrestrial land and inland waters and 10% marine areas by 2020. It had only 13.2% land being designated as terrestrial protected land. At this rate the region is only likely to achieve 18% protected land as against the GBF target of 30% by 2030. 63% of the GDP of the region is at risk due to rapid biodiversity loss. In South East Asia 42% of the biodiversity could be lost by the end of this century. We underline the critical need of regional and global cooperation in South East Asia and South Asia for meeting GBF targets.
6. Air pollution is a scourge in Asia and the Pacific. Globally approx. 7 million deaths take place due to air pollution and 70% are in the region. Despite a slight downward spiral, people in South East Asia and South Asia still breathe deadly air. 37 out of 40 most polluted cities are in South Asia and 148 most polluted cities are in Asia. People lose several years of their life due to this deadly air, from 3 years in Kathmandu, 7 years in Lahore, 8 years in Dhaka to 10 years in Delhi.
7. Over half of the world's plastics (52% of 390.7 million tonnes in 2021) are produced in Asia Pacific, with China being the largest producer (32% of global production). Over 11 million tonnes of plastic waste enter oceans and Asia Pacific countries contribute over half of land-based source of marine plastic production. Up to 95% of riverine plastic pollution is transported by just 10 major rivers,

eight of which are in Asia. The region is projected to increase production by 3.2% by 2026 and single use plastics are projected to increase by 5.6% by 2030 despite recent plastic pacts on China, India and Japan.

8. Production and use of chemicals is shifting to developing countries and emerging economies in the global south and double standards of the northern countries, leading to increased use to pesticides and highly hazardous pesticides , herbicides with serious health impacts and poisoning of air, water, land and food. Often with irreversible damage. Poor national legislations, insufficient information on environmental and health impacts, poor technological and human resources and profiteering by private companies and corporations is making it impossible to achieve pollution free future.
9. People and community solutions and innovations and appropriate technologies that protect the environment, promote sustainability, community ownership, social solidarity deepen democracy. Innovative solutions that make positive changes in peoples and communities' lives are not necessarily technological solutions but social innovations rooted in traditional practices and evolved through local and indigenous schools of knowledge. Women play an important role as innovators in managing energy, water, food security and health in the families. These solutions contribute to building community resilience and response to environmental challenges far more effectively than top down technological solutions.

## **Key messages and recommendations**

### **Protecting people's rights and Recognizing existing adaptive capacity**

1. Peoples and communities' rights and sustainability should be at the core and center of multilateral and national actions in achieving the SDGs, climate action and environmental conservation. An enabling environment must be provided to develop and advance peoples and grassroots innovations and alternatives as responses to environmental challenges and unsustainable lifestyles. This requires recognizing the rights, traditional knowledge and adaptive strategies employed by different groups such indigenous groups, women, coastal communities and communities discriminated on work and descent (CDWD)/Dalits.
2. Social enterprises allow poor and marginalized communities to become key economic players based on principles of care, cooperation, solidarity, fair trade, and participation. These should be promoted as they have strong human dimension and help to diminish poverty and inequality.
3. Member states and the private sector should commit no harm and protection to environmental and human rights defenders.

4. Assert and protect public control over natural resources. Strong policies and regulatory standards are required to address corporate driven interests and techno fixes that cause and further aggravate environmental problems and undermine people's rights and responses. Advance good governance with increased accountability and transparency and remove anti people policies to protect natural resources. The need to address environmental wellbeing hand in hand with human development cannot be a step that comes after certain human development indicators are achieved. This cannot also be done without pro-poor policies and attention to addressing inequality and discrimination in all its forms. The responsibility to achieve this also lies squarely in the realm of multilateralism.

### **Transformative Multilateralism from below; Meaningful participation and environmental governance**

5. Ensure and enable peoples and CSOs meaningful participation in environmental governance at the national, regional and global levels and address the barriers to effective participation. Ensure and promote transparency and access to information as a fundamental prerequisite to people's meaningful participation.

6. Participation must be extended to CSOs, trade unions, grassroots movements and other stakeholders in assessing new and emerging technologies as a key component of environmental governance. Due importance should be given in capturing the interpretation of evidences by different actors and enabling broad participation in societal deliberation on technologies.

7. Environmental governance should include governance of research and ensuring peoples participation in defining the direction and priorities of research on technologies that would benefit society and those who are left behind.

8. Furthermore, preventing catastrophic climate crisis, biodiversity loss, environmental degradation and pollution (and many resultant crises) is the result of flagrant negligence of the systemic barriers and cannot be improved without a transformative multilateral actions and cooperative multilateralism.

9. Just transition should be viewed as an opportunity not only for energy transition but also building an inclusive, equitable and sustainable society. It should involve recalibration of existing fossil fuel infrastructure by reducing their emissions while reskilling workers towards green and decent jobs. Just transition plans must be developed in social dialogue with workers and their trade unions to ensure that fundamental labour rights, social protection, job security, and training opportunities for workers affected by global warming and climate change policies are guaranteed.

10. We also call for the tightening of what is referred to as "nature-based solutions". This is a concept that is widely misused to justify false solutions such as GMOs and geoengineering that aim to manipulate biological and climate systems to technologically

address the biodiversity, environment and climate crises that we humanity is currently facing. We strongly condemn and oppose these dangerous distractions, and call on the UN and member-states to support, enable and promote genuine solutions.

11. Member states should put up strong national Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plans (NBSAPs) aligned with the Global Biodiversity Framework. They must ensure that the pledged financial support to developing countries and biodiversity hotspots start flowing by 2024.

12. Other core framework elements such as the Science-Policy Interface processes and mechanisms must be genuinely inclusive, enable the participation of communities and civil society and treat their insights and lived experiences as on par with experts' knowledge in informing policies, decisions and collective actions.

13. Furthermore the proposed Science Policy panel on sound management of chemicals, waste and prevention of pollution should have equal focus on chemicals as well as on pollution. We endorse this idea urge the member states to commit to a pollution free future.

### **Solutions based on Natural Resource Management**

14. It is proven that food production, agro ecology as a practice, a science and a social movement is known to improve soils, protect health and the environment, improve livelihoods and increase household income and resilience. Agro ecology also harnesses traditional and indigenous knowledge systems supported by people's science and builds social solidarity. These techniques should be promoted and supported.

15. Planetary scale renewable energy will further increase extraction many times and therefore, there is an urgent need for reduction in energy consumption in northern countries and affluent communities in the global south. In addition, mega scale renewable energy projects restrict energy democracy and localization and people's participation. These projects should respond to local needs and should respect their rights and access to resources and should not result in further extraction of resources.

16. Localised implementation is also needed with adequate resources, better harmonization of needs and definitions, life cycle management, strong law enforcement and Increased research capacity if developing countries are to achieve the desired global agendas.

17. Member states should regularly seek an assessment of impact of wars and conflict on environment and its management.