



February 4, 2022

Dear friends and colleagues of Southern Voice and the Club de Madrid,

Your invitation to participate in a round table today about the proposed 2025 Social Summit led me to put pen on paper, musing about the previous Social Summit in Copenhagen, where I co-chaired the development caucus and its follow-up, that led to the creation of Social Watch as a network of people's organizations that make their governments accountable to the commitments they made on that occasion. These are personal, preliminary ideas, intended to kick off further discussions.

The 1995 WSSD was part of the cycle of UN conferences that, during the nineties, attempted at reshaping the global agenda in the post-Cold War era. Interestingly enough, in parallel to the preparatory process of the Copenhagen Summit, with very different premises, the World Trade Organization was being established outside the UN (in blunt violation of the spirit of the UN Charter and only accommodating to its letter by putting "world" in its name instead of "International").

Three decades after, the world is suffering the asymmetrical consequences of climate change and the Covid pandemic, both crises directly aggravated by the global economic relations that the WTO boosted: a fast increase in fossil-fuel consumption and the exacerbated private appropriation of knowledge, particularly of vaccines and medicines. The latter led to present-day "vaccine apartheid" that not only is a blatant injustice, but on top helps incubates new variants that threaten the apparent beneficiaries. Fossil-fuel consumption grew from 25 billion tons a year in 1995 to 36 billion in 2020, without that massive aggression in the environment having produced a meaningful improvement in the lives of the majority of the world population.

Can we keep pretending that some band-aid palliatives will help those majorities without looking at the causes? In 1995 the WSSD thought that the answer was "no". The Summit was convened around three axes: poverty, employment and "social integration". Poverty was a Southern issue, Employment was a Northern issue, integration was everybody's issue. By tackling them and looking at causes, it agreed on ten commitments, that started with the need for "an economic, political, social, cultural and legal environment", linked social integration with "the enhancement and protection of all human rights" (note the emphasis on ALL), defended "universal and equitable access to education and primary health care" (listen Chile, listen US) and clearly stated that structural adjustment programs could not continue as they were being promoted by the World Bank and the IMF.

This should be our starting point for a new Social Summit to build upon and move on the many areas not sufficiently addressed. And yet, honestly, we may doubt if that same language

would be agreed upon today. In the year 2000, precisely during the first (and last) five-year after ministerial conference to follow-up on the Social Summit, a joint document of the OECD, the IMF, the World Bank and (marginally) the UN, proposed what later became the MDGs and concentrated all the focus on alleviating the fate of the poorest of the poor. By “focusing” energies into an easy target the world would gain confidence and trust to deal with the bigger challenges later. The result was exactly the opposite. The bigger challenges disappeared from the agenda and at the end even the low hanging fruit ended up not being harvested.

The 2030 Agenda, decided upon after a long and open consultation process that achieved massive involvement of governments and civil society re-established a sense of ambition and transformation. The notion of inequalities, a taboo subject in the past that WSSD could only mention in relation to gender, is now enshrined, both within and between countries, in SDG 10. The social justice goals are to be achieved in simultaneous with those of environmental justice.

This is a huge challenge. How can the world organize an equitable energy transition away of fossil fuels when it can't properly organize a global vaccination campaign? What are the vested interests that don't let it happen? Are we going to tackle them, or will they be sitting with their victims at the table and be whitewashed, pink-washed and greenwashed so they donate a tiny part of their profits to pretend to solve the problem they created?

We have to keep trying. We cannot afford not to, since too much is at stake.

In 1987 Margaret Thatcher famously said “who is society? There is no such thing!”. It took a tiny virus called SARS-COV-2 to prove her wrong. If humans were not in essence social animals, they would not be vulnerable to Covid. As we rediscover that humanity is social and not an aggregation of individual economic agents, the notions of cooperation, solidarity, equity, and care, particularly care, are revalued as essential for our very survival. Social constructions, nation states, the UN system, our own civil societies are full of defects and need to be permanently reformed and improved. But the un-social alternatives have been tried and failed.

The 2025 Social Summit can become a moment in the necessary transformation. For that it needs to learn from the 1995 WSSD and inspire, encourage, and offer space to the agents of social change. I am sure that most member of the Social Watch network will be willing to participate and contribute, together with many other organizations and movements. Many and diverse flowers need to bloom. We need many manifestos, studies, slogans, books, and tweets. The creative mutations will not happen if there is no space for errors. That is why at the very beginning of the preparatory process of WSSD we decided not to expect a single civil society voice but many. Instead of the usual social pyramid, inspired by the then incipient internet, we organized in networks and caucuses. Participation is a process of which ownership is a result. Civil societies do not want to be invited to the diner table, but to get our hands dirty in the kitchen.

Yours,

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Social Watch