CSOs Engagement in VNR Process- 7th APFSD, May 20, 2020

While global processes around the 2030 Agenda to date have seen unprecedented levels of engagement by civil society, and a growing engagement of civil societies and grassroots communities in the regional level, a significant gap still remains in the national level. However, we see setback of engagement in this era of COVID-19 and online engagement (like this meeting) when the issue of wide digital divide hinders the meaningful participation of the poor and the most marginalised constituencies, and our collective efforts to bring out grounded realities can be easily hindered by technological glitches, bypassed or skipped when the engagement takes place online. We hope that APFSD can give more spaces to these CSOs voices - the Dalits, Indigenous Peoples, Farmers, Urban Poor, Migrants, LGBTIQ, and all others who could not speak during the past sessions to ensure our voices are heard clear, and to have all our constituencies prepared inputs and statements to be considered in the proceedings and uploaded in the website.

Our following key concerns, lessons learned, and recommendations are coming from our long critical engagements, actions, and follow up in all SDGs processes

- **More progress needed to establish key SDG building blocks** - Some countries have made significant progress on building blocks, but not all, and they still have much to learn from emerging practice. For example:
  - In Nepal, the Government has reformed the composition of SDGs National Steering Committee and Coordination and Implementation Committee by including representation from province governments and local governments apart from having representatives from NGOs but they miss similar mechanisms at the local level. In Uzbekistan, a National Strategy of Action has been adopted that reflects the SDG goals on a wider scale.

- **Stakeholder engagement needs further improvement, going beyond ad hoc measures** - In India, the stakeholders contributed to the VNR-2020, including government agencies, civil society organisations, academia, research as well as the business sector, unlike weaker engagements in 2017. In VNR 2020, under the "Leave No One Behind" theme -- there is a dedicated chapter which adequately integrates CSOs’ perspectives, data and inputs. The civil society process was more robust and inclusive wherein voices of maximum possible stakeholders and community members from the vulnerable communities participated in input to the VNR.
The Nationwide Movement “Yuksalish” is the main National NGO in Uzbekistan to consolidate the data for reports on conducted actions on monitoring and review.

- **Lack of focus on tackling systemic barriers and little engagement in the transformative potential of the 2030 Agenda** - The follow up and review processes of 2030 Agenda gives too much focus on lesson learnt on the success stories, best practices without giving enough focus on analysing the roots causes and tackling the systemic barriers to achieve sustainable development - this includes the issue of wealth inequality, corporate power, resource grabbing, militarism, unjust trade and investment agreements, unfair economic sanctions, patriarchy, casteism, fundamentalism. These issues are often not mentioned in the VNR reports.

**Enabling Environment**

- Governments should strengthen a supportive, enabling environment for civil society actors to actively engage in SDG monitoring and evaluation, including in the reporting processes.
  - Over 2017-2019, No VNR report referred to closing civic space and on tackling systemic barriers to achieve SDGs despite increasing calls for action by civil society organizations and others around the world to address the deteriorating human rights situation in many countries and protect human rights defenders and environmentalists.
  - Some of the global CSOs are already working on the civic monitor (CIVICUS) and building global alliances (TAP Network). Asia Development Alliance along with the Forus is working on a paper on shrinking civic space towards developing global civic space indicators.

**Data**

- Governments everywhere should take the necessary steps to ensure a systematic data collection process and the development of relevant data analysis and storage platforms at national level. Data gaps need to be identified and addressed as quickly as possible for better policy formulations and realization of the SDGs at all levels. A reliable national SDG database system needs to be created with the consent of all related stakeholders including CSOs and government departments.
- Each government must recognize and accept the results of citizen-led data initiatives, which are ample. This could be done by using both qualitative information (case studies) and quantitative data/information in national monitoring reports.

**Linking National, Regional and Global accountability processes.**

Some of the ideas to strengthen the connections/coordination between multilevel processes include:

- VNRs to be reviewed at the national, regional and global levels of the HLPF cycle. This will mean that Member States should review:(I) the Voluntary National Review
processes, (ii) the regional level peer review processes which take place through the UN’s Regional Sustainable Development Forums (Regional VNR) member states to submit interim VNRs to the regional forums, receive comments and subsequently submit the final reports to the HLPF. and (iii) the global level HLPF annual peer review system that takes place in New York every July.

- We also call for particular attention to be paid to the VNR process in order to ensure that it becomes a national and locally-owned process - for instance, presenting draft VNRs for debate and approval by national parliaments and by the official multi-stakeholder Sustainable Development Forum before it is submitted at a global level to the HLPF.

- **Participation of stakeholders in regional follow-up mechanisms should be further outlined and strengthened including allocation of financial resources.** There should be a call to create an official regional civil societies coordination mechanism. In addition, all regional sustainable development forums should convene a pre-meeting for stakeholders with outcomes that officially feed into the forum. We are happy to know that ECE RCEM, ECLAC RCEM and ECA RCEM are also currently underway. On funding, civil society should be properly resourced to organize itself across national and sub-regional boundaries.

- CSO Shadow Reports linked to VNRs should be given a formal status by the UN and a dedicated website linked directly to the UN website should be provided where these parallel reports can be uploaded.
  - A common critique of voluntary national reporting by civil society is that it is a very state-led and state-centered process and bureaucratic in nature, and the role of CSOs are very limited: In most of the VNRs reporting, the CSOs intervention is limited to approximately two minutes to comment publicly on the VNRs produced by governments. CSOs have very little say in the formal VNR writing process. The growing number of high-quality, CSO Shadow Reports produced in parallel to the VNRs are given no official status of any kind as part of the HLPF, and cannot be uploaded on the UN website. Fortunately, in the Asia-Pacific region, the SDG help desk has been encouraging the CSOs to put their shadow reports on their portal.

- **Thank You!!**