

Session 1

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Distinguished delegates, UN agencies, my civil society friends, thank you for giving me this opportunity to address you in this important meeting. I feel privileged to represent civil society from across the region who, through the Regional Civil Society Engagement Mechanism, represent more than 350 organisations and diverse movements across the region.

This is my first time speaking at such an important meeting.

When I was young I couldn't imagine attending a meeting like this. In fact I didn't know about the UN because I had very little chance to study. I started work as a garment worker in Bangladesh at 11 years old.

The right to sustainable development means little to an 11 year old garment worker. When the money you earn is not enough to eat well; when you work 12-14 hour days; when sexual

harassment is normal; when women lose their jobs when they are pregnant; when joining a trade union becomes life threatening; when fumes make it dangerous to breathe and you are locked in – it's difficult to recognise the promises governments made to deliver human rights.

Through my work I started to realise that the only way to develop, to achieve fairness for the least powerful is to act collectively. I became a trade union leader and began to demand better wages, conditions and safety for women like me.

And you are all gathered here today for what should be a similar belief: that governments working collectively can deliver fairness.

But fairness is very very far away. Injustice is everywhere I look. Inequality is so high that next year 1% of the world's population will own more than 99%. The owners of Walmart, one of the retailers who have their clothes made in Bangladesh, make more in every single second, than a garment worker like me makes in an entire year.

These inequalities are not natural. They are not inevitable. They are created because the very few with wealth and power make the rules so that economies favour their interests – and their interests are defended through the use of violence and war against those who advance a more just system.

So what can the sustainable development agenda do to change the rules so that promises of sustainable development and human rights are no longer empty?

First we need to shift to Development Justice. For true transformation we need Redistributive Justice, Economic Justice, Gender and Social Justice, Environmental Justice and real Accountability to 'we the Peoples'.

The single largest failure of the UN is the lack of accountability. While promises are made at the UN, governments negotiate away our rights through trade and investment treaties and allow multi-national corporations to determine the development framework and set rules that make it impossible to hold them to account for violations throughout the supply chain.

The High Level Political Forum must restore the primacy of human rights in international law and restore the UN itself as the rightful venue for all sustainable development matters.

The role of the Asia Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development as a regional accountability mechanism must address specific regional problems, report on systemic failures and provide opportunities for ‘we the peoples’ to monitor your work and provide proposals to remedy regional problems.

This forum must develop a Regional Road Map, which goes beyond mapping progress. The forum should not simply prepare for global meetings but should address specific regional problems and agree on specific actions. Examples could include:

- Redistributive Justice – Reversing growing inequality of wealth, resources, power and opportunities in the region
- Restoring the public sector or the commons – with a proper analysis of Public Private Partnerships and the impact of using public money to develop private wealth
- Access and control over land and growing resource grabs in the region
- Regulation of the private sector throughout the supply chain and holding multi-national corporations accountable

This forum could also consider what sustainable development looks like for stateless people, pushed from their homes by conflict, forced into slavery and denied dignity or even the basic right to life, like the 8000 Rohingya caught in what the UN has called 'floating coffins' in seas not far from us.

For them, for the 122 million children labouring in this region, for millions of women denied the right to make decisions over their own bodies, for the millions forced from their lands from climate change, disasters and land-grabbing, for the majority of people in our region ... I beg you to make this forum one where promises to 'we the peoples' are finally kept.

Thank you.