Alternative national reports throw light on inequalities

BY ROBERTO BISSIO, SOCIAL WATCH[1]

The 2030 Agenda and its universal commitments to eradicate poverty and reduce inequalities within planetary boundaries are inspirational. People from around the world expect their governments and the international system to act on their promises. While government reporting to the UN is voluntary and without any form of required response, civil society's role as 'watchdog' is exercised in multiple ways. Independent 'spotlight' reports by citizen groups throw light on obstacles and trade-offs in public policies.

The national civil society reporting promoted and compiled by Social Watch clearly show that while circumstances and capabilities are unique in each country, common threads emerge: Inequalities, often exacerbated by the international policy framework, are not being reduced, poverty is underestimated or hidden but not eradicated, sustainability is sacrificed to extractivism.

As the 2030 Agenda is universal, civil society in developed countries grab the opportunity to discuss both domestic policies and their extraterritorial impact. Those spotlights are welcome, and at the same time challenge the system to take on board the contribution of every lantern lit by those that were promised to not be left behind.

At the start of a workshop aimed at building capacity for national-level alternative reports on the SDGs in the Latin American and Caribbean region, the facilitator (who was the author of this contribution) asked the participants to grade, on a scale from zero to ten, the expected impact of civil society inputs into actual policy-making. The answers were oscillating between two and four, submerging the room under a cloud of doubt and skepticism: why would some 40 leaders of prestigious NGOs and wide civil society coalitions lose precious hours preparing for a useless exercise? "The government will probably not move an inch due to our report," observed candidly a Central American cooperatives organizer, "but I will still give ten points to the process of civil society coming together, studying the issues and agreeing on a common platform."

This perception motivates citizen groups to comment, challenge or interpellate their governments and to bring their alternative views to the United Nations when the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development meets to assess the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

The 'spotlight' reports (replacing the former 'shadow reports') come from all continents and from countries with very different capacities. Yet, in 2018 there is one issue that is highlighted in most of them: inequalities.

Colonial extractivism at the root of power asymmetry in Kenya

In **Kenya**, for example, the NGO SODNET reports that "the widening gap between the rich and the poor continues to undermine confidence in the institutions of democratic economic governance and, alongside it, the imperative of social cohesion as a condition for sustainable development".

Edward Oyugi, J. Ocholla and Mwaura Kaara report that "Kenya still lives uneasily with a colonial past and its legacy of unequal development, arising from acute asymmetry of power relations associated with

1 All civil society reports quoted in this article are available on the Spotlight Report website: www.2030spotlight.org.

the continuation of a colonial system that had merely engaged a strategic retreat gear against the false belief that the post-colonial dispensation marked a systemic transformation of the colonial societies." The country was first managed by the British East Africa Association, mainly for extractive economic interests. While "decolonization was fought for and achieved to ensure that all sections of the Kenyan society would prosper by pursuing a balanced social development, "the seeds of inequality and the trajectory of unequal development remained intact" and "to some extent, disparities experienced rapid but toxic escalation" after independence.

The report concludes that democracy and sustainable development remain "a dream" because "the culture and practice of corruption has grown deep and enduring roots in Kenyan society and become endemic" and allows for concentration of wealth within the ruling circles. The political and bureaucratic leadership benefit from it "and the existing governance institutions either kick the can down the road or lack both the will and capacity to stop them from doing so".

Inequality will rise in the UK

Meanwhile in the **United Kingdom**, a consultation process coordinated by the UK network of Stakeholders for Sustainable Development (UKSSD) observes that "inequality is projected to rise in the coming years". Paradoxically, the unemployment rate is reaching an historical low, but "at the same time, tax and social security cuts introduced since 2012 have had a particularly severe effect on people on lower incomes. Black and ethnic minority households, families with at least one disabled member, and lone parents (who are overwhelmingly women) have suffered disproportionately".

A member of the network, Just Fair, led the drafting of the civil society chapter on SDG 10 on the reduction of inequality at the national level and highlights the fact that, thanks to the Equality Act of 2010, "authorities gather and transparently report useful disaggregated data". Yet, successive governments have failed to implement this Act. The duty is in force in Scotland since April 2018, Wales has the power to follow suit, some councils are voluntarily implementing it and 78 Members of Parliament from five different parties are calling on the government to bring the duty into effect.

The report concludes: "A significant change of course is required to meet SDG 10 and internationally recognized socio-economic rights and to turn the UK into a fair society that does not leave anyone behind."

Illicit outflows deprive Bangladesh of scarce resources

In **Bangladesh**, civil society celebrates that in March 2018 the country met the requirements to "graduate" from its current status of Least Developed Country and be officially listed as "developing". This success "brings confidence in achieving also the SDGs," according to the report by COAST Trust, secretariat of Social Watch-Bangladesh. However, the report identifies three major challenges: inequalities, climate change and illicit financial flows.

Income inequalities are remarkable between rural and urban areas, between different regions and between the top 5 percent of households that captures one quarter of the national income, while the bottom 5 percent gets less than 1 percent.

In the coastal region of Bangladesh, one fifth of the country and home to more than 50 million people, most of them living below the poverty line, salinity intrusion and a severe water crisis are causing lower crop yields and scarcity of drinking water, thus endangering livelihoods. Every year thousands of affected people are migrating and taking shelter in urban slums in cities, especially in Dhaka and Chittagong. The government has committed to protect coastal people through critical infrastructure like embankment and polders, but the current, traditional approach is focused on growth-oriented development infrastructure like transport facilities and export processing zones.

Bangladesh is an innocent victim of global warming, not responsible for its increase and with limited financial capacity to mitigate it. Civil society therefore considers it a "special legitimate right" to receive more support "from those developed countries who are historically responsible for carbon emission and global warming".

Domestic resource mobilization is further hindered by illicit finance outflows by the business sector and multinational corporations in particular. The Global Financial Integrity report of 2015 estimated that over US$ 55.88 billion have been transferred from Bangladesh to foreign countries between 2003 and 2014, which is roughly 1.5 times the national budget and around 12 times more than the foreign aid received in this period. Swiss Bank deposits and acquisition of second homes in Malaysia are the preferred money laundering techniques.

Global coordination and support is needed to stop tax dodging, but the BEPS (Base Erosion and Profit Shifting) Project, initiated by the OECD and the G20 does not include the least developed countries – or those just graduated, like Bangladesh. Thus, Bangladeshi CSOs demand to upgrade the UN Tax Committee, better local tax transparency laws and international rules that reduce the trend to 'race to the bottom' by countries in favour of foreign capital.

Switzerland attracts profits generated elsewhere

The report on **Switzerland** by the NGO coalition Alliance Sud echoes these "negative spillover" comments and states that: "Swiss foreign economic policy and its international financial and fiscal policy are still far from taking sufficient account of the requirements of the 2030 Agenda." After a visit to Switzerland, UN Independent Expert on foreign debt and other financial obligations Juan-Pablo Bohoslavsky drew attention in a report to the Human Rights Council to deficiencies in the prevention of unfair financial flows and problems in the area of international corporate taxation: "The existing Swiss tax privileges for the foreign profits of multinational corporations … create massive incentives for profit transfers to Switzerland and help to deprive developing countries of potential tax revenues in the hundreds of billions." Alliance Sud observes that "in the planned Swiss corporate tax reform, the Federal Council plans to abolish the previous tax privileges, but intends to replace them with measures that will ultimately have the same effect: for multinational corporations it will remain attractive for tax purposes to transfer profits from abroad - not least from poorer countries - to Switzerland".

The Swiss CSO report criticizes especially the allocation of resources at national level: "In 2017 the number of people affected by poverty in Switzerland has risen for the second year in a row and public funds in support of the poorest are being cut. This is unacceptable, given a government surplus of CHF 5 billion."

Finland does not see its footprint

Reporting on **Finland**, the platform of civil society organizations Kepa also worries about the extraterritorial impact of national production and consumption patterns. "For example, almost half of Finns' water footprint is caused by production chains outside Finland" they conclude. Kepa worries that "the group selecting national indicators made the startling observation that there is no reliable or even partially comprehensive information available in Finland on the external impacts of Finnish consumption, i.e., how we exploit natural resources outside of our own country".

The Finnish Ministry of Finance initiated an assessment of the national budget from a sustainable development perspective. However, the initial work is judged "quite modest". The budget proposal for 2019 is going to be estimated mainly from the climate change perspective, and will focus on the plans for Finland to become carbon neutral after having reached a historic high in carbon emissions in 2017. Kepa considers it "necessary to widen the approach of taking sustainable development into account in the budget planning" to cover other issues and "to look courageously at tax support for fossil fuels and other activities that may even conflict with sustainable development."

Bitter observations from Benin

In **Benin** the Social Watch-Benin network set up four working groups (social, economic, environmental and governance) to draft a parallel report to the government's Voluntary National Review which reviewed 33 priority targets selected from each of the six SDGs to be reviewed at the HLPF in 2018. Indicators were available for only six of these. The network concludes that while the SDGs "have been incorporated in the government's Programme of Action and the projects initiated by the development cooperation partners" the lack of "an efficient information system able to illustrate about implementation" risks resulting in "bitter observations, as has happened with other international commitments and conventions".

France fails to synergize

In **France**, a High Level Steering Committee for the implementation of the SDGs held its first meeting in April 2018 as a forum to debate and collectively build, with public and private actors, a 'roadmap' to be issued in the fall of 2019. This move was applauded by the ATD Fourth World Movement for being inclusive, but also criticized as "coming late".

Civil society submitted several suggestions to the official French 'milestone report' that will be submitted to the UN in 2018, covering six of the 17 SDGs and ATD Fourth World finds "very little effort to synergize the various objectives, while these so-called 'environmental goals' have a high impact on each other. For instance, we can regret that these objectives are not seen as having an impact on SDG 1. The objective of overcoming poverty in all its forms and worldwide is not a major concern in the French report, whereas it is transversal. At this writing stage, the 'milestone report' concerning SDG 6 on water does not mention that access to water is an essential condition of reducing poverty, just like SDG 7 and the access to energy. Similarly, the fundamental recommendation to 'leave no one behind' is not translated in the implementation of the SDGs."

The Movement hopes "that the enforcement of each SDG reaches the poorest, on the national territory as well as in the international development cooperation by France" and it campaigns in particular on the issue of unemployment (currently 9 percent in France) demanding "access to work as a right, just as the right to education or the right to social security".

Austerity undermining SDGs from Spain to Jordan

Spain is preparing its first Voluntary National Review to be submitted in 2018. A High Level Group (GAN in Spanish acronym) has been created and a Plan of Action 2018-2020 has been announced. The alternative report by La Mundial regrets the lack of dialogue on the SDGs between the government and stakeholders like academia and civil society. Spain is seen as starting late to take note of the 2030 Agenda and the GAN is perceived by civil society as not having the required political standing or participation of key ministries. Further, the GAN is not engaging civil society and the drafting of a plan to promote and implement the 2030 Agenda envisages no democratic involvement of social and political actors or a transparent framework for dialogue.

It is feared that the policies required to achieve the SDGs will be undermined by the continuity of policies of fiscal austerity and shrinking rights that are pushing Spain away from the agreed goals and targets.

Austerity is a major concern also in the reports from Jordan, Argentina and Brazil. In **Jordan**, according to the report by Ahmad M. Awad, from the Phenix Center, "A new series of measures started in 2016, aimed at achieving 'fiscal consolidation,' as a condition to unlocking access to IMF aid. Additional austerity measures were thus implemented, leading to rises in fuel prices, as well as in both the sales taxes and customs."

Nearly half of the Jordanian labour force works in the informal economy, which together with "the continued implementation of business-friendly labour policies, resulted in rising unemployment. Many began to see their ability to afford basic commodities threatened – a predicament termed 'transient poverty.' Among unskilled workers, waves of migrant workers and refugees (many desperate) have saturated the market – one hardly bound by any minimum-wage constraints – triggering a race to the bottom." At the same time, "numerous political and legislative institutions had been severely weakened. The impact of civil society in meaningful public policy debate had all but vanished, and nearly all instances of social dialogue on labour issues seemed to have been predetermined in favour of employers" and "the possibilities for productive social dialogue and the development of policies based on agreements between workers, employers, and government seem ever more distant".

Thus policies "have been repeatedly prescribed, recommended and defended by the IMF [that] have, for the most part, disproportionately impacted the poorer segments of the country's population." While this clearly contradicts the SDGs, "Jordan's bilateral and multilateral partners seem to remain either oblivious or unwilling to react to this fact, as well of that of the erosion of democratic oversight through power accumulation, under the supervision of an international financial institution."

Poverty returns to Argentina and Brazil

In **Argentina**, currently hosting the presidency of the G20, over 10 percent of households are not connected to a clean water supply network and over 30 percent lack sanitation. Investment in water and sanitation was stable at around 2 percent of public expenditure between 2012 and 2015. It dropped to 1.4 percent in 2016 and 0.3 percent in 2017, months before President Mauricio Macri announced in May 2018 the request for an IMF emergency loan that may result in fiscal austerity with further cuts to budgets.

The report by CELS and FOCO registers a similar drop in public expenditure on housing and shift in how the State perceives its role "from 'builder' to 'facilitator' of private sector investment". Yet, "Latin American experience (as studied in Chile, Costa Rica and Mexico) shows that restricting public policies to the promotion of mortgage financing, with focalized assistance in poorer areas while leaving to markets the key decisions on urban development and housing usually leads to more speculation around prices, deepens the urban gaps and social segregation."

In **Brazil,** after over a decade of meaningful progress in tackling poverty through public investments in health, education and social protection, constitutional amendment 95/2016 (CA 95), known as the "Expenditure Rule", came into force in 2017, freezing real public spending for 20 years. "By constitutionalizing austerity in this way", comments the report by INESC, "any future elected governments will be prevented from democratically determining the size of human rights and basic needs investments."

Rule CA 95 has already begun to "disproportionately affect disadvantaged groups" as "significant resources are diverted from social programmes towards debt service payments". These fiscal decisions "put at risk the basic social and economic rights of millions of Brazilians, including the rights to food, health and education, the implementation of the SDGs, while exacerbating gender, racial and economic inequalities". They could also amount to a massive violation of social and economic rights, since "the Brazilian government has not demonstrated that EC 95 was necessary, proportionate and a last-resort measure, nor that less restrictive alternative measures have been explored and analysed." In fact, NESC, CESR and Oxfam argue that alternatives – such as more progressive taxation and tackling tax abuses – are readily available.

Rights are the departure point in Mexico and Ecuador

Human rights are also the departure point for the civil society critique of official policies in **Mexico**. Mexican civil society organizations demand coherence between the 2030 Agenda and governmental policies in economic and energy matters. They claim that the ongoing reform of the energy sector prioritizes business activities of exploration and exploitation of hydrocarbons over any other activity in the territories and without the necessary safeguards that effectively protect water, biocultural heritage, health of people and communities.

As a result of the examination carried out in March 2018, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recommends that the Mexican State takes full account of its obligations under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and ensures the full enjoyment of the rights recognized in it in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda at the national level. It also encourages the State to establish independent mechanisms to monitor progress and treat beneficiaries of public programmes as holders of rights to which they may be entitled.

Civil society organizations from **Ecuador** have brought to the attention of human rights bodies cases of conflict between extractive industries and indigenous communities. In August 2017, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination was urged to investigate the situation of several families from the Shuar community displaced unlawfully by the copper mining project San Carlos Panantza in the Amazon region. Four Amazonian provinces (Napo, Orellana, Pastaza and Morona Santiago) are affected by oil explorations over a total surface of four million hectares. The Center on Economic and Social Rights (CESR) is concerned that the consultation process with hundreds of indigenous communities in that huge area has not been conducted properly. (see also Box 0.2 on the need to include indigenous peoples in all areas of SDG implementation).

Box 0.2

Claim of ‘leave no one behind’ must include indigenous peoples

BY JOSHUA COOPER, UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI’I

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a path to protect the remaining natural resources for future generations and forge a future for those furthest behind. The 2030 Agenda is unequivocally grounded in globally recognized human rights. This includes the rights of indigenous peoples. There are six direct references to indigenous peoples in the 2030 Agenda.

Indigenous peoples spiritual and cultural practices since time immemorial offer valuable insight to humanity if it is to achieve the 2030 Agenda. Indigenous peoples’ traditional knowledge and ancestral wisdom is what the world is seeking with sustainability.

However, the review process to monitor the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the context of the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) of the UN is absolutely insufficient. The presentations of the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) by Member States have forgotten indigenous peoples or intentionally forced them into exclusion. Some governments have even returned to earlier positions, prior to the adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and ignore the right of self-identification.

One vital addition of the SDGs to the Millennium Development Goals is that every Member State will measure how they achieve the 2030 Development Agenda. No longer are Indigenous Peoples in developed countries excluded from a global initiative.

During the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues that took place in April 2018, only three months ahead of the HLPF, indigenous peoples explored engagement around the VNRs at every step in four countries – Australia, Canada, Laos and Vietnam.

While the political systems in those countries are different, the end result is quite similar – in all of them, Indigenous Peoples are invisible and haven’t been included so far in the reports. Indeed, there was little if no communication directly with indigenous peoples to seek their input in their countries’ VNRs.

For the more developed countries, there were promotional materials printed and decorating buildings in capital. However, indigenous peoples never heard from national agencies responsible for drafting the SDG VNRs or were they contacted to participate at the HLPF, let alone to engage in consultations in country.

At the Permanent Forum interactive dialogues, indigenous peoples asked pointedly about SDGs. One of the responses regarding VNRs was: “This is still a relatively new review process. It is the starting point to establish benchmark and priorities.” But we only have a bit over a decade to achieve the SDGs.

During every opportunity to organize, there were no signs from States that showed indigenous peoples were being recognized as partners. In fact, indigenous peoples wondered if they had missed the development bus and not even been told where the bus stop is.

During the HLPF in 2019, we must indigenize the SDG process for a genuine measurement of the global sustainable development movement. Reforms must mainstream indigenous peoples and other vulnerable voices so as to provide a valuable vision through transformative initiatives.

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Weakening environmental protection in Colombia

In neighbouring **Colombia**, a report by Angélica Beltrán, Karla Díaz and David Cruz, researchers from Asociación Ambiente y Sociedad argues that “extractive industries and atmospheric pollution in the cities are a major source of socio-environmental conflicts”. The report states: “Environmental protection shows a progressive weakening.… Due to the lack of updated environmental information and the simplification of procedures in the granting of permits and licenses, the affected communities find it increasingly difficult to monitor the threats over their land and livelihoods.” Further, environmental control institutions do not have the capacity to oversee extractive activities adequately, which has allowed serious ecocides such as the outcropping of crude oil in the Lizama Block and the violation of environmental rules by Emerald Energy in the Ombu Block, located in the Amazon region.

In fact, the regulatory framework favours extractive activities through measures such as the creation of areas of rapid mining concessions, the opening of oil blocks around national Natural Parks, and territorial gerrymandering in order to allow activities that violate international agreements for the protection and conservation of the Amazon. The increase in the rate of deforestation, the rise in the number of oil exploration and extraction permits and delays in the implementation of deforestation control strategies have led the Colombian government to postpone the goal of zero net deforestation in the Amazon, initially set for 2020 and now extended until 2030.

Guatemala fails to tax

Meanwhile, in **Guatemala** the main complaint about the State is its absence. “We have the sensation that there is no government,” reports Helmer Velazquez, director of the cooperatives and NGOs association Congcoop, “because taxes are so low and the ‘state captors’ don’t even pay them, thanks to tax exemptions or plain avoidance, which leaves the mortgage of natural resources as the only funding source.”

“This wouldn’t be a problem if we didn’t have seven million people living in poverty: Half of the population! And poverty is extreme for three million of them. Very calm, the government reported in 2017 ‘institutional progress’ by linking the SDGs with the national development plan K’atun 2032. In substantive terms, nothing.”

Fiscal reform and a reorientation of public expenditure are demanded by civil society, which proposes massive investment in family agriculture as the way to unleash virtuous circles on employment and food and thus meet the goals and targets set for 2030.

Food is the key in Nepal

Food is also the axis of the civil society report from **Nepal**, where "transnational corporations are grabbing land, monopolizing seeds and food markets, as a result of which small holder farmers are more and more marginalized". As visible evidence, "now in Nepal packed foods are common not only in the urban townships but also in remote and hard to reach areas, replacing indigenous food consumption patterns. Farmers rely heavily on seed markets rather than preserving their own seeds which was common practices in Nepal even a few years back."

Food quality is degrading as farmers are using chemical pesticides and fertilizers. This creates health problems, and even when food availability has improved, the supply is inadequate to meet the surging food demand. Cereal import dependency has been rising, while Nepal's capacity to export food has been falling. This can also be linked with the huge out-migration among youth for work in foreign lands in the absence of opportunities in the country.

"There are three main threats to food security: inequality, limited role of small-scale farmers, and climate change," concludes the report authored by Gyan Bahadur Adhikari and Kritika Lamsal, from Rural Reconstruction Nepal. To tackle them "the food system must become more rights-based, less market-based, and more people-centred and designed to take into account the perspectives of the poorest people themselves".

In Nicaragua to defend water is to defend life

In **Nicaragua**, the entry point is water for the joint report of Coordinadora Civil and the National Platform in Defense of Water and Life, "because access to water is both a human right and one of the Sustainable Development Goals". Nicaragua is suffering a shortage of safe water as a result of the combined effect of climate change that reduces superficial water and the unregulated extraction of underground water by industrial agro-exporters and enclave tourism.

"Sustainable human development – concludes the report – will improve quality of life for all if it reduces environmental destruction, limits agricultural expansion and restricts open-pit mining that is exhausting natural resources, poisoning the water and causing disease and poverty."

Right to development denied in Palestine

In **Palestine**, the main obstacle to realizing these goals and targets is the occupation that continues to confiscate lands and, as reported by UNCTAD, deny Palestinians the human right to development.[2] The indicators are alarming: unemployment has reached 27.7 percent in the Palestinian territories occupied in 1967 and 44 percent in the Gaza Strip. The poverty rate for the year has reached 29 percent in 2017 and it is 53 percent in the Gaza Strip, reflecting the catastrophic effect of the 10-year ongoing blockade.

On the other hand, the civil society report by the Al-Marsad Social and Economic Policies Monitor perceives the Palestinian National Authority's efforts as "reproduction of the same policies and practices", without the changes that would be required to progress towards the SDGs, "particularly employment and labor, social protection, progressive taxation, industrial and agricultural development, and public expenditure". Civil society perceives its space as shrinking, while the Authority "takes control of the judiciary and affiliates with the private sector."

Natural and financial catastrophes in Puerto Rico

From **Puerto Rico**, the women's organization Cohitre also describes a "colonial condition that imposes agendas foreign to our people". In September 2017

2 See: UNCTAD (2018): The Economic Costs of the Israeli Occupation for the Palestinian People and their Human Right to Development: Legal Dimensions. Geneva. (http://unctad.org/en/pages/PublicationWebflyer.aspx?publicationid=2044)

hurricanes Irma and Maria hit the island, destroying 70,000 homes and collapsing its electric network (still not completely restored), its transport system, hospitals and fuel and food supplies.

The catastrophic effects are sharpened by the absence of political powers – the island is a US 'unincorporated territory' since 1898 – and the control of its finances by a US-imposed Fiscal Control Board, due to its indebtedness. "The diversion of funds to pay off public debt, adjustment plans, austerity measures, the reduction of the public sector and privatization has compromised the government's capacity to respond to the crisis" while "the response of the US government is slow, erratic and centralized" and "the US Congress has shown no rush to provide aid to Puerto Rico, given the debate over corruption and how to manage the funds".

It is estimated that over a hundred thousand people (3% of the population) have migrated following the hurricanes, either for health reasons (seeking appropriate medical services), for reasons of education (closed schools) or looking for a job (due to economic collapse and job loss) and "especially due to a policy from the US Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) that stimulates migration".

Civil society groups demand the elimination of the Fiscal Control Board that undermines democracy and that "the payment to creditors not be placed above the payment of the ordinary expenses of the government that directly benefit the population, which causes a problem of human rights".

Peru is unable to implement

Peru was affected by natural disasters more than a year ago, when heavy rains and floods affected 21 of its 25 departments. As of May 2018, thousands of families still live in tents and many schools and hospitals have not recovered completely. In fact, many families still have not recovered their houses, destroyed by an earthquake in 2007, more than ten years ago!

Peru is part of the "Ring of Fire" around the Pacific Ocean, prone to earthquakes and volcanic activity. It is further vulnerable to the climate change-induced alterations in ocean currents, causing floods in the north of the country and drought in the south and centre. According to the report by Grupo Red de Economia Solidaria del Perú (GRESP) and the Intercontinental network for the promotion of social solidarity economy (Ripess) "lack of planning in the use of land for housing and criminal-led occupations of unsuitable terrain to set up slums make the problem worse. Captured by corruption, the Peruvian state is too weak to implement public policies, risk prevention, emergency assistance or rehabilitation and reconstruction."

In 1990, when neoliberal policies started to be implemented, poverty affected 24 percent of the population. The 2018 household survey situates income poverty at 21.7 percent. "Peru has sold at throw-away prices its state-owned enterprises and given away all its natural resources to lower poverty to less than three percent" comments NGO leader Héctor Béjar. "The 2030 Agenda, from this perspective, looks like a beautiful but unreachable utopia."

Transition left too many behind in the Czech Republic

In the **Czech Republic** the most pressing social issue is the degree of household debt households and the frequency of debt-related property seizures, which concerns more than 8 percent of the population. The costs filed by private collection agencies for often minor sums have deprived hundreds of thousands of people of their property and often forced them to the edge of the society or even into homelessness.

Nevertheless, Ondřej Lánský and Tomáš Tožička report on behalf of Social Watch-Czech Republic that "the conservative and liberal political right that has so far dominated the public discourse for the last three decades keeps repeating that we are living in the best of times and that everybody's well-off. It therefore forgets a large part of the society that lost in the transformation towards a market economy. They lost in the sense of lacking economic securities that used to be in place, and as a result of direct social degradation. But the major part of academia and the cultural elites refused to pay attention to social issues. Most of the churches and NGOs focused on providing paternalist assistance to the most vulnerable while keeping with the logic of individualistic responsibility. 'New politicians' coming from the oligarchic circles are preying on such sentiments, promising more dignity to the low and middle classes, often outside of the urban centres."

Challenges in Cyprus

Circumstances look more promising in **Cyprus**, where the 2013 financial crisis seems over and NGOs work together with government and parliament to implement the SDGs, as reported by Charalambos Vrasidas and Sotiris Themistokleous, from CARDET. Yet, even when progress is observed in all SDGs and planning is in place, the official review acknowledges important challenges: "High public debt, high unemployment rate, the low contribution of the agricultural sector in the GDP, under-representation of women in political and public life, the need for a sustainable consumption policy, a high percentage of non-attainment in mathematics, science and reading and the need to increase ODA."

Build, build, build in the Philippines

In the **Philippines**, with a huge mandate to back it up, the government of President Rodrigo Duterte (locally referred to as "DU30") set off on a long-term goal consistent with the 2030 Agenda, promising to end poverty by 2040 and building a more fair, prosperous, stable and peaceful society through inclusive economic growth that minds environmental limits.

Two years down the road, Isagani Serrano, president of the Philippines Rural Reconstruction Movement and a convener of Social Watch Philippines, reports that "DU30 appears on track with its 7-8 percent annual economic growth target because of a massive 'build, build, build' infrastructure programme accounting for 5.4 percent of GDP in 2017. The negative impact of this programme, specifically conversion to other land uses of already diminishing farmlands, is still to be determined. But the fossil fuel- intensive infrastructure and power programmes and projects could reverse modest gains achieved in environmental protection and rehabilitation."

Top priority is yet to be given to light infrastructure, like rural roads, water and sanitation, and home electricity, which impact more directly on the lives of the poor and excluded. There is no firm indication as yet whether and how the promised poverty reduction from 21.6 percent to 14 percent by 2022 will be achieved, but spending on the social sector was 8.5 percent of GDP. Remittances from overseas Filipinos – a record-setting US$ 28.1 billion in 2017 – keep the economy going mainly by financing family consumption and, potentially, the growth of the local economy.

"The regime that started off on a high note of social consensus is now being threatened by creeping polarization", concludes Serrano. "This is due in part to an abrasive yet popular style of leadership that's unforgiving to opposition and bearing streaks of authoritarianism. Underlying such polarization is the continuing high inequality that allows a tiny group of 16 billionaire-families and their political allies across the political spectrum – accounting for less than 1 percent of the population – so much power and wealth at the expense of so many."

Women lead the struggle in Thailand

Writing from **Thailand**, Ranee Hassarungsee from the Social Agenda Working Group finds it impossible to constrain the analysis within national borders because "trade liberalization in the process of globalization has enabled transnational corporations to exploit natural resources widely and deeply across borders, in collusion with domestic elites. National-level natural resource policies have implications in other countries as State agencies, domestic monopoly capital and transnational corporations have assumed key roles in framing various aspects of development policies, in manufacturing, energy, environment, land use, etc." The other side of the coin is that "people's rights to self-determination is being restricted as their participation in decision-making is curtailed".

In the case of Thailand, "the State has become a joint stakeholder, either as a major shareholder, or the owner of capital itself. When the government is under the absolute control of the military and the people are deprived of their democratic rights to demand accountability, to voice any opinions, not to mention criticism, nor to access information, the problems of natural resource management become even more complicated. Large domestic monopoly capital and corporations that rely on military support are joining hands with foreign corporations to strengthen their access to and control of the country's resources, thereby creating further injustices in Thai society."

The invasion of the farm land of the poor, the expansion of industries into the food resource base of local people, overproduction, and the expansion of energy sources increase the threats of drought, flash floods, severe storms, unseasonal downpours and extreme temperatures. "In this convergence of a socio-economic crisis and an ecological crisis, various groups of women have emerged and are leading the struggles to defend natural resources and the livelihoods of their families and communities".

If it is likewise appropriated by the grassroots around the world, the 2030 Agenda will shift from a utopian dream into a source of hope.

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