The 12th Session of the Expert Mechanism on the Right to Development

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Implementation of the Mandate and Programme of Work –
Focused Thematic Discussions and Interactive Dialogues
Palais des Nations, Room XVI, Geneva

How to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the UN Declaration on the Right to Development: reflections and proposals

Monday, 27 October 2025, 16:30 – 18:00

Transcript of statement by Bonny Ibhawoh

Please check against delivery

Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,

40 years ago, in December 1986, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a declaration on the right to development, a visionary affirmation that development is not merely a matter of economic growth or technical progress, but a human right belonging to every person and all peoples. This declaration emerged from the conviction that true development must be people-cantered, participatory, equitable, and just, anchored on the indivisibility and interdependence of all human rights. Today, as we approach the 40th anniversary of this landmark declaration, we are invited to commemorate its adoption and renew its promise. We do so in a wall shaped by profound inequalities, persistent conflicts, and a climate emergency that threatens lives and livelihood across generations. Yet this anniversary is not an occasion for nostalgia. It is a call to action. It is a moment to transform the right to development from principle to practice, from aspiration to realization.

Over the past four decades, the right to development has become both a beacon and a battleground. It has illuminated the moral and legal imperatives of human cantered development, while also reflecting the tensions of an unequal international order. Through the work of the Working Group on the right to development, this Expert Mechanism, the Special Rapporteur, and successive reports of the Secretary General and High Commissioner, the United Nations has progressively clarified content, scope, and obligations of the right to development. These efforts have culminated in the draft Covenant on the Right to Development, which articulates binding norms for states and collective responsibility in the international community.

The task before us now is to ensure that the 40th anniversary becomes a platform for renewed global consensus and practical cooperation. Three key imperatives guide this reflection.

First, to reaffirm the right to development as central to the UN's normative and operational agenda. The Pact for the Future, adopted in 2024 Summit of the Future, calls for a bold, just, and transformative action to achieve the 2030 Agenda and poverty reduction, reducing inequalities, and protect the planet. These commitments echo the right to development foundational principles of equity, participation, and international solidarity. To commemorate 40 years meaningfully, we must mainstream the right to development across all pillars of the United Nations - human rights, peace and security, and development, and ensure that financing for sustainable development upholds the right to development principles of fairness, inclusivity, and shared responsibility.

Second, to link the right to development with today's global transformations. Our world, we know, is being reshaped by digital technologies, climate transitions, and new patterns of geopolitical and economic interdependence. The right to development offers a coherent framework to ensure that these

transformations advance rather than erode human dignity. As the Expert Mechanism's recent thematic studies emphasize, the right to development provides guidance for governing critical areas such as climate adaptation, energy transitions, debt sustainability, and equitable asset to technologies. Its principles of participation, equity, accountability, and solidarity remain essential to addressing the asymmetries that define today's global economy.

Third, to build institutional and political momentum towards the adoption of the covenant on the right to development. Commemorating 40 years should not be merely symbolic. It should culminate in renewed political will to finalize and finally adopt this important covenant. This will transform the right to development from a moral commitment into a legally binding instrument, providing clear obligations for states and international institutions. Such a step would align with the United Nations ongoing reform agenda, strengthening the global governance and restoring trust in multilateralism. It would also respond to the growing demand for more equitable international order.

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Distinguished Delegates,

The journey of the right to development is, at its core, the story of human solidarity. It reminds us that development is a shared endeavour of peoples, of nations, of individuals, and of communities, the public and the private sector alike. The principle of common but differentiated responsibilities, central to both climate justice and development cooperation, draws directly from the ethos of the right to development.

As prepared to mark this anniversary, let us recall the words of the 1986 Declaration itself, quotes "The human person is the central subject of development and should be the active participant and beneficiary of the right to development." Commemorations must therefore elevate the voices of those at the front lines of inequality - women, indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, communities confronting poverty, conflict, and environmental degradation.

To this end, I propose that our 40th anniversary commemoration be guided by three mutually reinforcing goals. Reflection, a global stock taking of progress, challenges and lessons learned in realizing the right to development. Renewal, a commitment to integrate right to development principles into the implementation of the Pact for the Future, the Global Digital Compact, and the New Declaration on Future Generations. Finally, recommitment, a concerted push towards the adoption of the covenant on the right to development as the legal and moral legacy of this anniversary. 40 years on, the vision of the 1986 Declaration remains both urgent and unfinished. Our task here today, collectively and individually, therefore, is to make the right to develop not just a promise deferred, but the reality delivered.

Thank you.

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