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

Item 5 of the Provisional Agenda
Implementation of the Mandate and Programme of Work –
Focused Thematic Discussions and Interactive Dialogues
Palais des Nations, Room XVI, Geneva

The role of civil society organizations in realizing the right to development at the grassroots level

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Transcript of statement by Mr. Akhilesh Anilkumar,
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Respected Chair,
Expert Mechanism Members,
Esteemed Colleagues,

It is an honor to join this critical discussion on the right to development and role of civil society organizations.

I start this presentation by acknowledging that the inequalities that people face in society are reaching near historical peaks. Several reports suggest we have food to feed everyone, clothes for the next six generations, and the top richest 1% emit more emissions than the poorest 50% combined. In this context, it is a great reflection point to see how we go forward with the right to development and if we are far away or closer to actualizing its goals. With my presentation, I want to focus on the works done with our foundation and some of the grassroots initiatives which might reflect the initiatives for the right to development. We, Bring Back Green Foundation, is a completely youth-led nonprofit organization based in Kerala, India and have been working in the intersection of climate change, working with youth, women and gender, and policy making to create lasting impact within grassroots communities and helping shape policies across local national levels with the support of communities and their involvement.

We work in building scalable, community centric solutions with a focus on bridging governments with youth and communities to realize their development and human rights needs. We work particularly in climate action and focus on climate justice, and as the respected Chair and his thematic study on climate justice, sustainability and right to development pointed out, climate change is an existential threat to society and the right to development process. Climate action is therefore necessary to advance the right to development process. We work with communities in the front lines to make sure their voices are heard in policy-making spaces and also ensure policies that exist or are discussed at an international level get translated into the community level so they can understand what's happening and also contribute to both bottom up and see what's happening top down.

I would like to start by pointing out an example for how civil society can play a critical role in helping actualize the right to development process. Top right photo that you see is of a coastal town, coastal city in India, which over the past few years, especially since post-2019, have been seeing severe coastal erosion, especially due to climate change. But exasperated by a major development project that's happening nearby. The attention to the coastal erosion only came across in news media and to everyone else when a major international airport, which was right next to the beach that you see, which was eroded, was impacted. Until then, for the past several years, even before the coast proceeded till the airport, the communities were severely impacted, displaced and lost their

livelihoods. The pictures that you see below are the impact of climate change induced cycling, again with the aspect of the coastal erosion displaced many community members to temporary shelters where they stayed temporarily for seven years, where they were only supposed to stay for a few weeks. The pictures that you see are from a primary school where in a single classroom up to 20 people had to live and share rooms for almost 6, 7 years. Whereas the fair share of benefits for the development project, which was also promised to them, has something that will help them with livelihoods, employment and so much more, but yet displaced hundreds of people in this process.

The discussion between the community and the policy makers reached a stalemate where the community members seek a complete stoppage of the particular development project, which was impacting their right to life, their livelihoods and their entire living itself. Now, as a non-biased civil society organization, we were able to negotiate on behalf of the community and conduct a technical research on ground with a successful negotiation with the government that led to support for a technical pause on this major development project. This technical pause led us, with the support of the Government, to create a group of advisors and a mechanism to do another technical study over the one that was existing to understand what exactly were the impact to the community. Even though the political regime change stalled this process going forward, the amount of progress we made shows how much involvement civil society organizations can make in such cases and helping communities make sure they have their fair share of benefits.

Another project I would like to highlight that we have been conducting is the Panchayat Climate Parliament, where we have developed a model for grassroots climate governance with an institution in Kerala called the Kerala Institute of Local Administration to develop a bottom-up support, development of bottom up policies that reflect community needs. Over the past several years, we have been working closely with 25 plus local governments and onboarded over 4,500 youth participants and volunteers, with the focus on the young people from their own communities being able to shape policies with their local governments. This helps governments to translate and fulfill their duty to cooperate at local levels, by bridging the gap between youth and local governance for long term climate resilience. This particular project got the attention of the state government and beyond and hence was recognized in the environment and budget for the state of 2025-26. We have a multi-pronged approach where we also enabled technology and use intersectional topics to help both the community and also train the policy stakeholders. We have helped build capacity of the local governments to work closely with community, which has reflected in better synergies where they create policies together. And over the past several years, over 50 plus policy recommendations have been suggested and with the help of the ministry as well as different local government stakeholders, we have helped translate many of them into government initiatives.

A national level scale up version of this project is called the National Youth Climate Consortium, which we have been running for the past two years with the support of UNICEF in India. Through this project, we have been trying to close the finance gap and build local to global advocacy where throughout the past few years, we have empowered several grassroots youth and grassroots young leaders to discuss international level policy advocacy in local level and translate them into community action. We have pushed for youth driven implementation of several of the projects as well as build a proper bottom-up model that reflects the needs of the communities across the country. We now reflect our projects in 33 states and Union territories of India and have plans to expand to different countries outside. We always keep inclusivity at the core of our approach, and through promotion of inclusivity, we have seen how much marginalized communities and indigenous representation accelerate different journeys of communities towards making progress in their development goals. Again, advocacy is and has always been a central, central to our process, be it with waste management, marine and land biodiversity conservation.

We have been helping many grassroots young leaders achieve their goals within their community, with varying needs through innovation, research, awareness and capacity building and mobilization, by providing them access to funds as well as resilience and capacity to work hand in hand with their local governments. Over the past 18 months since launch, we have reached over 100,000 young people and community members with 62 plus national projects within just this one consortium and engaged with over 380 government stakeholders in the country. Almost 63 plus grassroots young people have represented at international and national forums like COP29, where they were able to push their advocacy forward and build real pathways from local to global approach. We also with the support of philanthropies and other stakeholders, were able to launch an Advocacy Resource Kit Workbook that has now is being in process to be translated in multiple languages and is being used by grassroots youth across the country.

I would also like to highlight the point where CSOs have a strong power to translate ground realities into actionable stories and narratives, which we have seen with several of our projects and with our partners where some of the images that you see are from a series of documentaries that we did over several coastal villages, which were facing issues like I showed before, which led to successful screening in government offices, educational institutions, academia, and many more, which led to a much more involved discussion on what solutions should be looked forward for such issues.

I would like to close by saying a few recommendations from us and civil society space in general. We wish to have strengthened local governments and, in their capacity, to promote inclusive decision making, to fulfill their duty to cooperate, enable active, free and meaningful participation of youth in negotiations and decision making for their community's development, strengthen platforms and institutions for CSO participation and engagement at grassroots levels. With this, I would like to close by saying real development is not handed down from the top. It is built from the ground up when governments fulfill their duty to cooperate and communities are given the power to lead.

Thank you.

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