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

Wednesday 29 October 2025, 10:00 to 12:00

Transcript of statement by Ms. Donatella Benjamin,
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Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me first to thank the Expert Mechanism on the right to development for organizing this important thematic discussion and inviting Soroptimist International.

The Special Rapporteur on the RTD, Surya Deva, recently underlined the mutually reinforcing nexus between gender equality and the right to development. Without gender equality, the right to development cannot be realized, not only for girls and women, but for anyone, irrespective of their gender. Unfortunately, due to persistent inequalities, patriarchal norms and structural barriers, women and girls are unable to realize their right to development and remain disproportionately affected by poverty, conflict, and systemic exclusion.

Since 1921, thanks to its global network and dedicated 66,000 volunteers in 120 countries. Soroptimist International has brought change to the lives of all women and girls worldwide through education, empowerment and by enabling opportunities. The name Soroptimist was coined from the Latin “soror” meaning sister, and the “optima” meaning best. Soroptimist can be interpreted as the best for women.

Our projects support all women and girls around the world across five pillars - education, eliminating violence, economic empowerment, health and environment.

Let me briefly introduce two projects in Kenya and Cambodia, both reflect Soroptimist commitment to support women and girls. Though very different in context and environmental action in Kenya and education in Cambodia, they share the same goal - empowering women and girls to lead change in their communities in the true spirit of the right to development.

Kenya, Greeting Our Horizon was launched in May 2025 in partnership with the Directorate of Children Services. This project works with three rehabilitation schools to empower girls through environmental leadership. What are the goals? To restore ecosystems, improve food security, nutrition, health, and create green livelihoods by empowering women and girls as environmental leaders. The Kenyan target to plant 10,000 native trees and edible plants by the end of 2025, 100,000 by 2027. So far, 3,000 trees were planted at … school. 2,000 more are planned. 300 were planted at … school, and 4,000 are planned for … school. There is a Pan African goal of 500,000 native trees and edible plants to be planted in the next three years through five regions in the Soroptimist African Federation.

How it works? Planting indigenous trees, fruit trees and vegetables. Promoting agroforestry, sustainable farming and very important water conservation. Implemented with the Kenya Forestry Research Institute and Agricultural Partners to ensure ecological sustainability.

What are the key outcomes and benefits linked to the right to development? Participation and Agency. Women and girls are positioned as leaders and stewards, schools or hubs for climate education and community action. Policy coherence with government engagement was created since its launch. Equity and inclusion. Focus is on groups disproportionately affected by climate change. Project links environmental gains to food security. Sustainability, and resilience. Planting native species with soil biodiversity gains. Flood risk reduction. Improved air quality. Long term resilience. Finally, economic empowerment creates entrepreneurship and green jobs supporting financial autonomy.

Cambodia, launched in 2021, with the Cambodia Community Dream Organization, The Empowering Women through Education and Leadership Program, supports women and girls in rural areas of … to build confidence, skills, and leadership.

What are the goals? Through education, workshops and training, empower women and girls to take active roles in community decision making. Focus areas are health, hygiene, leadership and gender equality, menstrual health, and financial literacy. But most important, women and girls are offered something many had never experienced, knowledge of their rights, including the right to development and the confidence to change their future.

What are the key outcomes and benefits linked to the right to development? Equity and inclusion. The project reached 2,544 rural women and girls across 8 communities in 2025. Health sessions were held for 1,500 participants. Understanding of good health practices was improved by over 45%. Participation and agency. Gender equality training was offered to 1,400 women. We created a smart women network with local advocates now linking communities and authorities. Economic empowerment. Women created new and sustainable income generating activities. Drop in domestic violence. Striking evidence of the program's impact comes from local authorities themselves, who reported a 62% reduction in domestic violence cases compared to 2024. The change is a reflection of the direct effect of gender equality training and a larger cultural shift. Sustainability. Finally, partnerships with local officials, police and health workers ensure improvements continue beyond the program.

What are the common strengths of these projects? Both projects create lasting change by giving women and girls the tools to act for the planet, for their families, for their futures. They both show tangible results and long-term impacts. Kenya shows how environmental action can drive empowerment. Cambodia proves that education and leadership can transform entire communities. Together, they capture the true spirit of the right to development. Every woman and every girl has the right to learn, to lead, and to act for herself, her family, and her world.

Thank you.

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