The 13th session of the Expert Mechanism on the Right to Development

Item 3 of the Provisional Agenda

General Debate

Conference Room 6, United Nations Headquarters, New York

Tuesday 21 April 2026, 15:00 to 18:00

Unofficial transcript of the oral statement by South Africa

South Africa aligns itself with the statement delivered by Uganda on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement. Madam Chair, this year marks 40 years since the establishment of the right to development as an international human rights norm. It is articulated in the ten articles of the Declaration on the Right to Development. Whilst this is not the genesis of this unique and critical human right, it is important in the moment in its international acceptance and articulation. From its onset, the right to development has always been both an individual human right as well as a collective one. In fact, the Declaration maintains that development is a comprehensive economic, social, cultural, and political process which aims at the constant improvement of the well-being of the entire population and of all individuals on the basis of their active, free and meaningful participation in development and in the fair distribution of benefits resulting therefrom.

The Rio Declaration further established a collective understanding of the norm by recognizing the right to development as one of its twenty-seven principles and viewed it as a vehicle for equitable development for present and future generations. In addition, the recognition of the right to development was also reflected in the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action. The outcome of the World Conference on Human Rights had developed the most important Declaration on Human Rights since the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, specifically speaks to and elaborates on the right to development. In a very real sense, the right to development places the human being at the centre of development. It embodies the belief that development should not only be seen in terms of economic growth, but also in terms of the enhancement of human well-being and the realization of an individual's full potential.

South Africa views and understands the right to development as a critical human right that underscores the inherent dignity and equality of all people and peoples. Since its early establishment in the Declaration and its foundational inclusion in the Rio and Vienna Declarations, this international human rights norm has been eroded and argued against. The 40 years that have followed have not been a period of great elaboration on the right but instead have been characterized by a global pushback from key groups and states that seek to roll back the efforts made to uphold this human right. The reality is that currently the simple recognition of the right to development within negotiated outcomes of UN processes is opposed on the principle of its inclusion, despite being captured in the seminal declarations that have determined our collective understanding of both human rights and sustainable development. As such, the selective application of these two declarations prevents its fulfillment.

South Africa maintains that the right to development can serve as an enabling right that addresses economic inequalities that create the global inequalities and that are plainly observable and would be a key piece of the puzzle in eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions. Furthermore, the right to development seeks to address inequality amongst people, but in doing so, needs to be cognizant of the self-same inequality that exists among States. This is a difficult barrier to overcome as the inequalities among States are not merely political or economic, they are structural and perpetual. The realization of the right to development would be a critical element in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. To achieve this, we need to uphold the VDPA and the Rio Declaration in their truest intention to overcome inequality and actualize the conditions under which human dignity is equally enjoyed.

We, like many developed and developing Member States, recognize the right to development and advocate for the effective and practical implementation of the Declaration on the Right to Development and for the codification of this right, which would link the two rubrics of civil and political with economic, social, and cultural rights. The integral development of the individual is at the centre of the right to development, and it determines how the state and the individual interact to ensure the well-being of all people within countries and importantly, within the global community. We can thus consider the Declaration on the Right to Development and its various follow-up mechanisms as being critical in empowering individuals and nations to actively participate in shaping policies, decisions and initiatives that affect their lives, ensuring the benefits of development are equitably shared.

In essence, upholding this right is a commitment to social justice, participatory democracy, and basis of humanity. Madam Chair, South Africa has always pursued a policy of economic development that places the people at its core, where economic upliftment must also be necessarily accompanied by the promotion, protection, and fulfillment of their human rights. However, human rights require an enabling environment which is created and sustained through a commitment to the principles of the right to development.

Current data reflects a widening wealth gap between developing and developed countries due to the inherently exploitative system that ignores the right to development as a human right. This right recognizes that equitable sharing of resources amongst countries and a fair and just distribution amongst the people of the world is based not just on human rights. It is an expression of Ubuntu. It implies that nations, particularly those that have been historically marginalized or exploited, have the right to forge their developmental path without external interference that negates their best interests, whilst at the same time individuals have the right to be the beneficiaries of a fair and equitable society in which an individual is able to enjoy the full scope of human rights.

Ultimately, the right to development seeks to change our traditional approach. This will be explored this week through the thematic discussions, in which we will actively participate. We are excited to advance the conversation on the linkages between the Durban Declaration and the Right to Development, as well as the key role of regional human rights mechanisms in fulfilling the right to development. Most importantly, we are excited to advance the discussion on the draft International Covenant, for which South Africa advocates its swift adoption and entry into force.

Finally, we need to uphold the importance of the right to development as an imperative that reminds us that the human person is the central subject of development and, through Ubuntu, would be a means to achieve the first article of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, that all human beings are born equal in rights and dignity. I thank you.

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