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

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The role of regional mechanisms in realizing the right to development

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Unofficial transcript of the oral statement by H.E. Mrs. Hedda Samson,
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Thank you for the opportunity to join this august panel and to share a little bit the experiences that we have in the European Union, which I think is it's probably the most advanced and closely integrated regional mechanism globally. I was very interested to hear about how the African Union is approaching the right to development, and I'm happy to go a bit into detail how the European Union is approaching this topic, and maybe to start by saying that the EU is fully committed to the right to development as an integral part of the universal human rights framework.

It is crucial for us that this right must be realized in full consistency with the universality, indivisibility, interrelation, interdependence and mutually reinforcing nature of all human rights. It's no less important than any other human rights. It's also not to be elevated above any other human rights. Allow me to go a little bit into the history. The origins of the European Union, just like those of the United Nations, lie at the time when a wide range of human rights and fundamental freedoms had been brutally violated, and from the ashes of war, Europe chose unity over division, cooperation over conflict, and development over stagnation, and our regional mechanism was built to guarantee peace and security, human rights and development, the same three pillars of the United Nations.

Our cooperation within the European Union on economic issues such as trade, but also the creation of the internal market, always went hand in hand with a very strong commitment to democracy and human rights. This is also evidenced by the fact that democratic principles, human rights and fundamental freedoms are equally important as economic factors during the process of assessment and accession of new members to the European Union. This is probably the biggest lesson that we can share.

Regional economic cooperation doubtlessly pays off. This is evidenced not only by the EU, but also by many other successful examples of cooperation, like the African Union's African Continental Free Trade Area, but also ASEAN's Free Trade Area, Mercosur and other regional cooperation mechanisms. In our experience, the true multiplier of positive impact is to link these economic aspects with human rights, fundamental freedoms, and democratization. That is what makes advances and development sustainable. It's also why the realization of the right to development cannot be seen purely through an economic lens, and neither can development be considered or interpreted as a precondition for the fulfilment of human rights. The two are intertwined and inseparable.

So why did I start with the EU's story and internal perspective? Because the focus of our discussion today, the role of regional mechanisms in advancing development, is what drives and defines us as European Union. But of course, there's also a global dimension. Our commitment does not stop at our borders. If we take stock today, we have to admit that progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals at the global level is very insufficient. Multiple crises have reversed decades of progress, and there is a worrying backsliding on the SDGs, as well as setbacks in the Human Development Index. There are increasing levels of inequality within and between countries and

reductions in financing, which poses a serious threat to sustainable development by hindering long term economic stability and green and inclusive growth which affects citizens' health and education. It damages social cohesion, and it undermines institutional legitimacy and harms the environment.

As a global economic and political player, expectations are high towards the European Union to support other countries and to help shape a global order conducive to development. While the EU cannot fill the large gap that is left open by others in recent years unfortunately, we have been and we will remain a credible and reliable, principled and predictable partner when it comes to development.

Just to give you an example, in 2025, the EU and its Member States collectively remain the largest provider of official development assistance, representing 48% of global ODA. That's almost half of all official development assistance provided globally. But it comes from a region of the world that accounts for less than 15% of global gross domestic product. So, I dare say that we're punching above our weight when it comes to assisting others in achieving sustainable development. That's what I call leadership in action.

It will come as no surprise that our development cooperation follows a human rights-based approach that starts with recognizing that education, health, food, decent work, etc. are not just needs, but legal entitlements that governments need to respect, protect and fulfil for their citizens. This human rights-based approach ensures participation, inclusion, and non-discrimination. It sees individual persons not as passive beneficiaries, but as active participants. Crucially, this human rights-based approach aims to strengthen the capacities of States as duty bearers to fulfil their human rights obligations by raising awareness of rights holders about their human rights and strengthening their capacity to claim their rights. This approach can be challenging, but for us, it's the only way to break cycles of inequality and to build lasting peace.

Because development is not just about how much, it's about how. So, we have the famous global gateway, which is the youth strategy, to address the sustainable investment gap in many, many of our partner countries. We have already hit the target of mobilizing €300 billion by 2027, and in 4 years we will have mobilized over €306 billion in global gateway projects in partner countries. In line with this approach, we use these funds to support high quality, sustainable infrastructure and value chains supporting green, digital, health, education and transport connectivity that are mutually beneficial. We achieve by combining investments with support to the enabling environment. So, regulation, institution building, social and environmental safeguards, social protection, etc. That's how we seek to ensure that investments help reduce inequalities. That means that global gateway is about sustainable development for the benefit of all.

Let me give you one concrete example. For example, in South Africa, our critical raw materials partnership is not just about supply chain. It's about local processing. It's about skills training, rigorous environmental, social governance, and human rights standards and social safeguards, ensuring benefits also flow to people and leave no one behind. So, in all of this, we make sure that we measure impact, and we apply a so-called inequality marker, which informs us about the contribution of any given development cooperation action to the reduction of inequalities to every single action we fund. The results show that we are moving in the right direction. In 2024, 62% of our new actions had inequality reductions as a principal or significant objective, that is from 59% a year before. So, this progress can be measured. It's not abstract. It's tangible.

Let me conclude by saying that at a time when multilateralism as we know is under severe pressure, our message from the EU is clear. International partnerships on a regional but also global level are not just optional or nice to have. They are the only path forward, and we must bridge divides and unlock potential, and this will not happen by chance. It will happen by choice. Our choice is clear. We will continue to advocate, invest, and innovate for human rights and for sustainable development,

and we build international partnerships that are mutually beneficial. So, we want to turn ambition into action and promises into progress.

Thank you very much.

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