



# A Common Charter for Collective Struggle

Shared analysis and a call for collective action

November 2016

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This Charter was affirmed by ESCR-Net Members during their Global Strategy Meeting (15-19 November 2016) as a shared analysis about common conditions deepening inequalities and leading to the impoverishment and dispossession of communities around the world. The Charter provides an overview of the global forces affecting people living in both rural and urban areas in all regions of the world. It also contains an emerging vision for forging unity across struggles and concludes with initial points of consensus relating to shared demands for justice that might inform a global campaign or coordinated actions in line with ESCR-Net's mission "to build a global movement to make human rights and social justice a reality for all."

The charter was originally developed by the Network's Working Group of Social Movements and Grassroots Groups over a yearlong series of meetings. Following circulation of an initial draft with members of ESCR-Net's thematic working groups in June 2016, and the incorporation of the input offered by those members, the Common Charter for Collective Struggle was subsequently presented and discussed at the Global Strategy Meeting, held in Buenos Aires Argentina, in order to contribute to a common analysis of shared challenges and global conditions and to inform the Network's forthcoming strategic plan.

# Common Conditions and Shared Challenges

As a basis for considering the importance and potential parameters of a global campaign, this section briefly outlines some of the key characteristics of the social, economic and political models that undermine the realization of human rights.

## Impoverishment and Dispossession Amid Abundance

We live in the most productive economy in human history with more than enough resources to feed, house and educate every human being, but these resources are not being used to meet these needs. Rather, there is a widening wealth gap that is concentrating the resources and productive capacity of the world into fewer and fewer hands while the majority face impoverishment and dispossession. What's more, many people have been taught that the substandard living conditions in which they struggle to survive, or that prompt migrants to move, is a result of their own poor choices. "We need to shatter the myth that poverty is self-inflicted,"<sup>1</sup> or somehow an inevitable byproduct of a global economy.

Arguably, the current economic model has intensified over the past few decades. Initially piloted in Chile, the UK and US, and then imposed globally via structural adjustment policies imposed by the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and a series of trade and investment agreements, "neoliberal" rhetoric, regulation and policies have created a false dichotomy between freedom and equality and argued that markets free of government interference would most efficiently allocate resources and ensure economic growth. These policies promoted deregulation for the elite, reduced taxation and public spending, privatization of public goods and services, and "flexible" labor markets. Labor market deregulation has led to a growing informal sector, and the suppression of wages<sup>2</sup>, a general worsening of working conditions and a weakening of wage bargaining power that has pushed workers, and in particular female workers, into vulnerable employment.<sup>3</sup> These forms of exploitation are accompanied by dispossession in both rural and urban areas.

Contrary to its claimed promotion of freedom, the current economic system commodifies people and nature and often criminalizes the poor.<sup>4</sup> Whether via autocratic governments, the imposition of unelected officials on struggling municipalities, or international agreements negotiated behind

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<sup>1</sup> Bob Zellner of the Forward Together Moral Mondays Movement of the USA, during the meeting of the Social Movement Working Group in Biloxi, MS, 15-19 September

<sup>2</sup> Ida Le Blanc of NUDE, Trinidad and Tobago, and Melona Daclan Repunte, Defend Job, Philippines, Millerton, NY, June 8-11, 2016

<sup>3</sup> International Labour Organization (ILO), 'Global Employment Trends for Women,' International Labour Organization: Geneva, December 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Herman Kumara, National Association of Fisherfolk Solidarity Organization, Sri Lanka, Millerton, NY, June 8-11, 2016

closed doors, rights to political participation—which are interdependent with ESCR—are being consistently eroded in many contexts. Labor, environmental and human rights regulations are treated as impediments to free markets and progressively weakened. At the same time, corporate pursuit of profit is subsidized through tax exemptions granted by governments competing for investment and corporate tax evasion through artificially shifting profits to lower tax locations or tax havens. This leaves governments with declining public revenue and/or growing debt. Technological innovation and productive capacity have grown, but they have been matched by increasing unemployment and underemployment, stagnating real wages, deepening inequality and economic and ecological crises, which have fueled migration, social unrest and militarism. In essence, “we are not poor; we are made poor. We can’t fight poverty but we need to fight against that which impoverishes us.”<sup>5</sup> The rules of the global economic system, in other words, permit profit to be privately enjoyed by a few while the majority (in both rural and urban areas) face growing threats to their livelihoods and their ability to realize economic, social and cultural rights in practice.

In many countries around the world, women face different and disproportionate impacts of these processes, leading to what is often referred to as the ‘feminization of poverty.’ Women are often denied access to land, financing and other productive resources, and often work in sectors that are under-valued by the formal labor market. Their contributions are often made invisible, and their access to essential services, such as health care and education, are often lacking. As a result of conflict, migration spurred by economic necessity and other processes, many rural households are headed by women, yet they are not fully recognized. Subjected to sexual harassment and other forms of violence, women often find themselves caught in the downwards spiral of impoverishment and without the capacity to effect lasting change in their situation.

The intensification of the market-driven global economic system, therefore, has presented grave threats to human rights, viable livelihoods, environmental sustainability and human dignity, in both the global North and the South. In the United States, for example, “capitalism is eating its middle class.”<sup>6</sup> This system tends to exploit crises (climate change, terrorism, global hunger) to further maximize profit and concentrate power in the hands of an ever-smaller elite. It is aided by the manipulation of public opinion, often via media outlets that are controlled by states and/or business interests, and which often suggest that a model premised on a drive for profit is the path to happiness, and suggests that those who challenge this paradigm are tantamount to criminals.<sup>7</sup>

## Corporate Capture of the State

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As this economic model has intensified, it is nonetheless built on much longer histories of dispossession, and exploitation. Commercial interests in colonialism, slavery and imperialism

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<sup>5</sup> Mkhaleseni (Ndaboh) Mzimela of Abahlali baseMjondolo, South Africa, Biloxi, MS, September 15-19, 2015

<sup>6</sup> Kindra Arnesen. Bridge the Gulf, USA, Biloxi, MS, September 15-19, 2015

<sup>7</sup> Leonardo Pereira Xavier, Movimento Sem Terra, Brasil, Biloxi, MS, September 15-19, 2015

relied on government support; today, we are witnessing the growing phenomenon of “corporate capture,” by which an economic elite undermines the realization of human rights and environmental sustainability by exerting undue influence over domestic and international decision-makers and public institutions. This has been facilitated, in part, by drastic reductions in public spending and increasing reliance on private sector actors to provide essential services that fall under the responsibilities of states (education, health care, water distribution, etc.) Corporations, financial institutions and investors have often relied on the collusion of States to extract and maximize profit. Since the widespread introduction of the neoliberal economic model in in the 1980’s, many countries have seen elite private actors seize more power within the political system. This model finds expression in trade and investment agreements shaped by the interests of global capital to favor the plunder of common goods or so-called “natural resources” and the provision of cheap labor. This has led to a “race to the bottom” that undermines regulation and pits workers or communities against each other in all regions.

This has led, in many places, to a shift in the role of the State to serve as “an apparatus of global capital” instead of a regulator of public good.<sup>8</sup> In some countries, from the perspective of grassroots leaders on the frontlines of social justice struggles, they are confronting a corporate-police state,<sup>9</sup> which is “increasingly willing to use police and military to serve the interests of capital instead of people.”<sup>10</sup> Despite decades of voluntary “corporate social responsibility” and apparent legal protections in some contexts, communities often face immense struggles just to secure information and participate in decisions affecting their future or access justice in the face of systemic violations of human rights.

## Deepening Inequality

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The world today is characterized by staggering degrees of inequality. As reported by Oxfam, “The gap between rich and poor is reaching new extremes. Credit Suisse recently revealed that the richest 1% have now accumulated more wealth than the rest of the world put together. This occurred a year earlier than Oxfam’s much-publicized prediction ahead of last year’s World Economic Forum. Meanwhile, the wealth owned by the bottom half of humanity has fallen by a trillion dollars in the past five years.”<sup>11</sup> At a time when a select few individuals and corporations have amassed more wealth than entire nations and where essential public services are increasingly available only to those with the money to pay for them, the gap between the rich and poor has reached unacceptable proportions.

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<sup>8</sup> Liz Theoharis, Kairos Center for Religions, Rights and Social Justice, USA, Biloxi, MS, September 15-19, 2015

<sup>9</sup> Francisco Rocaël, Consejo de Pueblos Wuxhtaj, Biloxi, MS, September 15-19, 2015

<sup>10</sup> Melona Daclan Repunte, Defend Job, Philippines, Biloxi, MS, September 15-19, 2015

<sup>11</sup> Oxfam. 2016. “An Economy for the 1%: How privilege and power in the economy drive extreme inequality and how this can be stopped.” At:

[https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/file\\_attachments/bp210-economy-one-percent-tax-havens-180116-summ-en\\_0.pdf](https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/file_attachments/bp210-economy-one-percent-tax-havens-180116-summ-en_0.pdf).



This economic inequality has frequently been justified and maintained by socially-constructed divisions, gender stereotypes, racism and discrimination against minority groups and other forms of fear and prejudice. Histories of oppression, often intertwined with exploitation and dispossession, mean that women and certain groups—including indigenous and Afro-descendent communities, migrants and refugees, persons with disabilities, and many others—are disproportionately impacted by impoverishment and excluded from decision-making processes, intensifying economic inequality or adding compounding inequalities. Attention to substantive equality—beyond legal or formal equality—must include a focus on how different groups are positioned within societies due to norms and structures embedded over time. For instance, women continue to bear a disproportionate burden of (unpaid) care for children and the elderly, while domestic workers—the vast majority of whom are women and often migrants—face chronic exploitation with few labor protections. Apparently neutral laws and policies may fail to secure justice, inclusion and material well-being for all groups.

### **Degradation of Ecosystems and a Changing Climate**

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The global economic forces that have broadened the divide between rich and poor have privatized and concentrated the world's productive and natural resources in the hands of increasingly few. They have driven rising consumption, further aided by the planned obsolescence of goods and technologies, as vital to ongoing economic growth and profit, while treating nature as a commodity. This has led to the destruction of forests, rivers and parts of our oceans, upon which many people depend for survival, as well as the contamination of air. It has also destabilized the global climate, posing severe threats to the ability of countless people – and their children -- to realize their human rights. “The ability of the environment to sustain life is threatened by climate change, perhaps the clearest symptom of a system driven by private profit over public good.”<sup>12</sup>

With CO<sub>2</sub> levels in the atmosphere today, far higher than levels present on the planet for two million years, the global temperature today is higher than it has been in the last 115,000 years. Deep ocean warming is melting glaciers, driving fish and marine animals toward the poles at unprecedented rates, and raising sea levels faster than at any time in the last 2,800 years. Climate change has altered the timing of the seasons, and brought about more severe, and unpredictable, extreme weather patterns, including devastating floods, draughts and other phenomena. In fact, these changes have disproportionately impacted the world's poorest people, especially those who live off the land or live in precarious dwellings or low-lying coastal areas. These impacts usually are felt most strongly in locations far from the sources of the original carbon emissions or by the poor and marginalized in wealthier countries, who are neglected in times of natural disasters.

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<sup>12</sup> Leonardo Pereira Xavier, Movimento Sem Terra, Brasil, Biloxi, MS, September 15-19, 2015

## Growing Repression

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Social movements, grassroots organizations and other groups that represent people confronting human rights violations and threats against their ability to live in dignity are, today, facing intensifying repression and, in some cases, a militarized response to the challenges they pose to the prevailing system. These threats are perpetrated by actors associated with government, military and paramilitary forces, corporations and organized crime who have targeted human rights defenders in reprisal for their work mobilizing people to defend and promote economic, social and cultural rights. In some places, freedom of association and expression for organizations has been curtailed by restrictions on their ability to receive funding or basic permissions to operate. In other cases, the law has been used as a tool to silence human rights defense and criminalize human rights defenders, as well as people living in poverty themselves.<sup>13</sup> Too often, human rights activists have been subject to surveillance (whether lawful or otherwise) as a result of their work. As stated by the daughter of trade union activists facing serious criminal charges, “they have become so aggressive, they are killing our human rights defenders.”<sup>14</sup>

In the first half of 2016, ESCR-Net responded to weekly threats against members, involving harassment, unlawful surveillance and criminalization of human rights defenders, grassroots organizations or social movement struggles, often in the name of national interests or security, and bolstered by an overriding “culture of impunity.”<sup>15</sup>

In many countries, this repression has been intertwined with a wider politics instigating fear and prejudice, in which corporate- and/or government-captured media is involved in defaming individuals and, sometimes, entire groups claiming their human rights, as criminal, anti-national, extremist and otherwise illegitimate. In some cases, ethnic or religious differences are deepened and utilized to divide those facing common injustices. In other cases, powerful individuals and families, whose position is reinforced by autocratic forms of government and vestiges of colonial injustices, have orchestrated (or have been complicit with) repressive responses to human rights defense.

In the face of these trends, SMWG members have, on the one hand, celebrated the times when they have survived such attacks and reaffirmed their commitment to robust cross-regional solidarity in times of threats. On the other hand, social movement leaders have also emphasized the need to confront the root causes that have prompted social movements to mobilize in the first place to defend or promote ESCR, after a necessary solidarity action is taken in response to these threats.<sup>16</sup> In essence, this is a call to move beyond solidarity and collectively address the common conditions pushing communities into struggle to resist dispossession, impoverishment

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<sup>13</sup> Tchenna Masso, MAB, call of the SMWG, Tuesday, March 29, 2016

<sup>14</sup> Niki Gamara, Defend Job, Philippines, call of the SMWG, Wednesday, March 17, 2016

<sup>15</sup> Melona Daclan Repunte, Defend Job, Philippines, call of the SMWG, Wednesday, March 17, 2016

<sup>16</sup> Melona Daclan Repunte, Defend Job, Philippines, Biloxi, MS, September 15-19, 2015

and environmental destruction and to insist on their dignity and rights to material well-being, self-determination and political participation.

## Emerging Points for Unity Across Struggles

The social movements that are members of ESCR-Net posit that “another world is possible, and necessary, and we are the vehicle to get there.”<sup>17</sup> In part, this requires a recognition that the diverse members of ESCR-Net are all facing common global forces and interests that often gain from the impoverishment and dispossession of others. “Just as capitalism is globalized, we must globalize the struggle for the rights of the poor.”<sup>18</sup>

### Reclaiming Human Rights

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Human rights are a powerful tool with which to counter these trends, promote accountability and challenge the prevailing development model. This is because human rights standards have emerged as a result of long legacies of struggles. As a result, States have obligated themselves to respect, protect and fulfill human rights to the maximum of their available resources and via international assistance and cooperation, guaranteeing rights to self-determination and both formal and substantive equality in the enjoyment of rights. International instruments, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, several core human rights treaties and jurisprudence from international and regional bodies, offer evidence of common demands for a transformed world, based on the principles of substantive equality and dignity. Building awareness of human rights—particularly economic, social and cultural rights—has the potential to break the isolation of emerging grassroots struggles confronting powerful, increasingly global, interests. Human rights provide a common framework for analysis and demands, which will necessarily include a focus on the enforcement and implementation of human rights standards in the struggle for dignity.

### Connecting Struggles – A Global Movement United to Confront Injustice, Inequalities, Dispossession and Exploitation

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Communities, each with a unique history, are increasingly being shaped by global actors, policies and practices that are perpetuating an ongoing crisis of deepening inequality, impoverishment, environmental destruction and related rights violations. Social injustice is not a concern only in rural – or urban – areas. It is not only isolated in pockets in the Global South. Today, people living in poverty, impacted by ESCR violations or threatened with losing the basis of their livelihoods reside in every country. If not explicitly united in a common struggle, these communities and movements share fundamental challenges, providing a basis for coordination.

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<sup>17</sup> Herman Kumara, National Fisheries Solidarity Organization, Sri Lanka, Biloxi, MS, September 15-19, 2015

<sup>18</sup> Roshan Bhati, Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum, Pakistan, call of the SMWG, Wednesday, March 17, 2016



Through deepening the unity of these individual struggles and showing the connections between them, it is possible to build a broader campaign for the universal realization of human rights. Indeed, the only force that can contend with this model that privileges private gain over public well-being—ensuring accountability and ultimately advancing alternative models—will be the united actions of communities and allied organizations collectively confronting impoverishment, dispossession and inequalities. Efforts to contest the interests embedded in our current economic and social models would likely:

- **Confront corporate capture of state institutions and decision-making processes:** Corporate and other private actors particularly in the finance and investment sectors, often working in close partnership with governments, have become increasingly aggressive in their pursuit of profit. This is a key driver of the growing repression outlined above, particularly as communities have mobilized to resist dispossession and demanded rights. Rather than allowing corporations, investors and financiers to co-opt state institutions and processes, exploit nature and amass wealth and the expense of people, articulated collective action has the potential, in the words of Gandhi, to ensure that “there is enough for need, not for greed.”<sup>19</sup>
- **Insist on rights not goals:** Human rights—including economic, social and cultural rights—are non-negotiable, universal, interdependent and indivisible, and society must make available the maximum available resources for their realization. Rights to equality, life and livelihood, among others, may not be reduced to “development goals” and voluntary codes of conduct that can be underfunded, left to the private sector, missed or pushed back due to unforeseen circumstances. In this regards, reinforcing the status of human rights as legal obligations is key. As a result of peoples’ struggles, human rights have been codified into international treaties, and every State is legally bound by at least one human rights treaty, including 164 States that have ratified the International Covenant on ESCR. States have legal obligations to respect, protect and fulfill these rights, including through ensuring effective remedies and equal access to justice in the case of violations. These obligations, similarly, must be fulfilled in practice, often prompted by people’s insistence on claiming them.
- **Question the morality of profit amid deepening inequality:** We are in a society where the pursuit of profit justifies the concentration of resources, dispossession of millions of people, destruction of the environment and resulting poverty, spun as both the effect of individual failures and the inevitable cost of ‘progress’. Taxes are avoided and public goods are privatized to increase the profit margins of large corporations and their investors. At the same time, grassroots leaders that mobilize to defend the human rights of people and communities in the face of the relentless drive for profit are criminalized

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<sup>19</sup> Prafulla Samantara, Lok Abhay Shakti, India, call of the SMWG, Wednesday, March 17, 2016

and silenced. This represents a fundamental imbalance in the values governing the world's economic architecture, and calls for a concerted effort to “demonize profit and make it sound like a bad word, rather than a noble pursuit.”<sup>20</sup>

## **Advancing the Leadership of the Impoverished, Dispossessed and Marginalized**

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As economic forces leverage local dynamics and histories to their own advantage, they are also prompting economic, social and environmental conditions that are compelling the impoverished and dispossessed to action. In almost every country in the world, inequality is growing, pushing increasing numbers of people into poverty or rendering their livelihoods increasingly precarious. They include workers who are forced to work excessively long hours or tolerate inhumane working conditions, informal urban workers, and agricultural workers—70 percent of whom are women—vital to food security but without adequate rights to land.

No one is voiceless. In fact, the leadership of those directly impacted by dispossession, impoverishment, exploitation and environmental devastation, together with those who have made a political commitment to secure human rights, is critical if a global movement for positive social change has any prospects of succeeding. Pervasive, compelling and accessible evidence showing the existence of poverty amid clear global abundance has further strengthened multiple new movements around the world. These developments present the opportunity to build shared analysis, foreground common demands for human rights and unite action across borders. As articulated in ESCR-Net's core principles, social movements and politically organized communities must be central to analysis and action. Movements themselves have clearly said, “Nothing about us, without us.”<sup>21</sup> The groups involved in shaping this concept note have also emphasized the need to support women in positions of leadership and stronger gender analysis, as well as for the ongoing development of grassroots youth leaders.<sup>22</sup>

## **Articulating Alternative Models**

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The human rights framework offers potential parameters for common demands and alternative models, beginning with principles of transparency, accountability, and participation, but ultimately insisting on substantive equality and the use of maximum available resources and international cooperation to realize human rights. Based on the human rights framework, these alternative models would seemingly:

- **Affirm human dignity and the primacy of life:** Human rights are non-negotiable because every human life is sacred and possesses inherent dignity. Alternative models

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<sup>20</sup> Legborsi Saro Pyagbara, Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People, Nigeria, Biloxi, MS, September 15-19, 2015

<sup>21</sup> Mzwakhe Mdlalose, Abahlali baseMjondolo, South Africa, Millerton, NY, June 8-11, 2016

<sup>22</sup> Herman Kumara, NAFSO, Sri Lanka. Millerton, NY, June 8-11, 2016

would ideally affirm our common connections and responsibilities to future generations, ensure environmental sustainability, and create space for self-determination and the reclamation of freedom. They would honor and protect all forms of life – from the fisheries and waterways to the land and air. Human life is interdependent with all other forms of life.

- **Demand substantive equality as a prerequisite for moving forward:** Women often bear the brunt of global poverty because systems of patriarchy intersect with and influence the global economic system. Women and girls face different and disproportionate barriers to the enjoyment of their ESCR, even while women in the same society are differently positioned due to intersecting issues of class, citizenship status, sexual identity, race or other issues. If our mission is to make “human rights and social justice a reality for all” while building a movement able to achieve this, we must insist on both formal and substantive equality as central to this mission and to our movement. Alternative models must therefore foreground the rights and realities of women and girls around the world, ensuring that they are central to their construction.
- **Safeguard space for dissent and “the right to claim rights”:** In the face of the growing criminalization of dissent and the closure of space for civic action, all human rights must be upheld. These include freedom of conscience, expression, assembly and association and due process rights as mutually reinforcing with economic, social and cultural rights.
- **Envision a common future:** This involves acknowledging historical injustices and the ways in which the powerful have often maintained their position by sowing fear, prejudice and division. This entails attention to substantive equality, ensuring the struggles to end poverty and dispossession ultimately lead to shared well-being and full participation and rights for all people, “without discrimination of any kind as to race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status,” including gender identity and sexual orientation. It necessitates ensuring ecological sustainability, advancing common but differentiated responsibilities, and challenging inequalities within and between countries.

Ultimately, “ESCR-Net’s social movements are all calling for the same thing: to end poverty and violence against the poor and those that fight to defend their rights.”<sup>23</sup> A global campaign to realize economic, social and cultural rights has the potential to unite these different struggles into one overarching effort. Not only is a world that embraces all human rights and upholds the primacy of all life possible, it is already breaking through in these struggles.

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<sup>23</sup> Ida LeBlanc, National Union for Domestic Employees, Trinidad and Tobago, call of the SMWG, Wednesday, March 17, 2016

## Envisioning a Global Campaign

The Social Movement Working Group has discussed the possibility of a global campaign which, developed in conversation with the entire network, would ideally lift up the diverse actions of social movements and insist that they be understood as part of an interconnected whole – where one cannot be won without the other. A victory for decent jobs in the Philippines will only be fulfilled when there is adequate housing in South Africa, safe and abundant waters in the Gulf Coast, and secure livelihoods in Sri Lanka. Otherwise, each of these victories becomes a reason for powerful economic actors to shift their operations elsewhere in the world and continue their pursuit of ever-increasing profit and growth at the expense of human rights and environmental sustainability. In connecting these struggles, a coherent plan for collective action, perhaps in the form of a global campaign, would reveal not only the contradictions of the current economy and related political systems, but also build the analysis and broader leadership necessary for “a global movement to make human rights and social justice a reality for all.”

An initial audience for this campaign would include ESCR-Net members and allies, who would strengthen an understanding of the connections between their stories and collectively deepen critical analysis of the common global conditions impacting their communities. Foregrounding demands for economic, social and cultural rights, as well as common issues facing communities, would serve to break the isolation of grassroots struggles and draw a new set of movements, communities and civil society organizations to this campaign, reinforcing the recognition that: “your problem is my problem and your struggle is my struggle.”<sup>24</sup> These movements, together with a growing number of allied struggles, would form a potentially powerful basis on which clear demands could be articulated to governments to realize ESCR, while calling private actors and the wider economic system to account for violations of human rights. A campaign would also have to contend with deepening backlash by powerful private actors and government officials against communities and individuals who have mobilized to claim human rights, reinforcing their right and strengthening their ability to organize and to act collectively to defend and realize ESCR. Finally, amid intensifying economic and social conditions that threaten the well-being and even life, there is a strong desire to defend and explore alternative economic and social models that realize human rights.

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<sup>24</sup> Herman Kumara, NAFSO, Sri Lanka. Email correspondence sent June 23, 2016