

Civil Society FfD Group Follow-up Meeting – Unedited Notes

May 26 – UNCTAD New York Office Meeting Room

1. Assessment of FfD Forum 2017

Overall comments

- Civil society warnings seem to be heard by some, particularly the concerns on the private sector bias. The Synthesis by the President of ECOSOC referred some key points raised by civil society. Good ability of civil society to speak across the entire agenda, which was noted and appreciated
- Strong power play from large organizations, e.g. OECD, which was somehow, though still unevenly, balanced by civil society interventions
- Genuine misunderstandings and limited knowledge of the history and thematic issues of FfD seem to be significant within MS, particularly within the renewed delegations in NY
- Even if our positions might often be different, the Forum provided important opportunities to socialize with the people that deal with FfD within some of the capitals. This also exposed the frustrations by many FfD-MS representatives with the limited impact they have within their capitals and even the limited knowledge and traction that FfD has beyond restricted circles. It was therefore evident that lots of work is required within national spaces
- Evidence of critical importance of the IATF Report as fundamental framing of the process, with positive and negative implications, and need for civil society to find a way to engage in its process. At the same time, it is increasingly evident that the IATF is a gateway for issues to be considered by the Forum, which provides the institutional stakeholders a very strong grip on the follow-up (unsurprisingly)
- Renewed evidence that the UN continues not to be taken seriously by developed countries when it comes to economic governance: some FfD issues considered “too serious” for the UN!
- Unhappiness with outcome document even if MS need to claim that this was a step forward. No impact of the civil society submission on the Zero Draft and need to change the strategy on influencing the outcome negotiations. Also need for greater transparency on individual advocacy strategies by different organizations
- While the private sector bias in the discussion was pervasive, the actual narrative coming from the private sector is relatively weak, with limited attendance largely based by the usual suspects
- Last year’s negative context seems to have influenced the level of attendance, fairly limited and low level even within the Ministerial segment. The Forum might have been a first step in restoring confidence, but it has hardly convinced as it did not manage to really confront any of its mandates
- Confusion between Follow-up and Forum persists, as well as lack of clarity on what the Forum is about
- Strong push for national implementation (where national means developing countries) away from global policy convergence, which is quite incoherent with the whole point of having a FfD process
- Good cross proliferation of themes across civil society, including on gender equality and women’s rights, though there is need to re-energize the civil society group by engaging groups and networks that have a stake in the process but might feel sometime intimidated by the technicalities associated to the FfD issues. Very often just few civil society representatives in the main room
- Gender dynamics within the group require attention and need to be addressed: length of interventions tends to be much longer for men while it was noted that requests to shorten intervention times tend to be raised after interventions by women. Also, many speaking slots were quickly allocated to men, while the gender balance, while continuously pursued, always appeared as ‘the problem to be solved’. An episode that exposed misogynist behaviours was also raised to the group’s attention, though there was no opportunity to debate it

Take away on thematic pillars

- Strong call by the IATF that we are off track to achieve the SDGs, though this was not being heard
- Significant work remains to be done to truly raise the macro dimensions of gender equality and women's rights as well as strengthen the gender dimension of all FfD pillars. In this respect, it seems that gender, as well as the other cross-cutting issues, seems to have been housed in its own box, rather than being truly cross-cutting
- Advancement on social protection were achieved, also thanks to the significant preparations, and the call on the IATF was obtained, providing for avenues for future work
- Disaggregation of data and statistics may require greater emphasis and more connection and coordination across different non-FfD processes
- Progressive taxation hardly heard, nor any discussion on extreme wealth. Similarly, very limited discussion on tax accountability and use of public resources. The combination of both often require comprehensive fiscal reforms as none of the two makes sense in isolation. Some mapping might be required on countries that are engaging or have already advance progressive and comprehensive fiscal reforms
- IFF was paid attention to as there has been a lot of work in parallel spaces. Good to appreciate efforts by Ecuador and Panama on the global tax body and G77 continues to give priority to it. Also, strong push by the Africa Group on the issue, also thanks to the High-Level Panel Report. Positive language on the need to tackle tax competitions, mostly by regional commissions, which raises the importance of regional processes. At the same time, narrative on tax incentives remains very strong and therefore inconsistent and problematic. Significant presence by OECD, which somehow demonstrate the importance of the space, though continued overemphasis on the OECD BEPS initiative. Some G77 continue to call for the upgrading of the tax committee, which prompts the AAAA red card by developed countries. IATF work on IFF does not support the broader definition that civil society calls for and it is therefore problematic. The upcoming conference of the Addis Tax Initiative (June) was noted
- Report on DCF was placed at the very last moment of the meeting, which did not help the flow of the discussion. One of the key discussion seem to be the battling between LDCs and MIC on accessing concessional finance, which also signalled the expectation that ODA may shrink rather than grow
- Pervasive private sector narrative, though some more cautious statements on PPPs begin to be raised. The process for SDG bonds might require more in-depth analysis from civil society side
- Very weak conversation on trade and strong US opposition even to the very weak outcome document. No reference to fair trade, inequalities and trade asymmetries
- Debt discussion was somehow overshadowed by the search for concessional finance, despite some positive initial contextualization, also spurred by the IATF, on the re-emergence of debt challenges. Vulnerable 20 might be a new interlocutor for civil society, also in cooperation with the G24. Grenada picked up the proposal for a SIDS debt country initiative and pledged to disseminate within CARICOM
- Complete neglect of systemic issues to which one can add the crisis induced by the new US stance on climate. Rejection that climate and migration are systemic and rather treated as conjunctural. Stronger preparation required by civil society on these issues

Format and quality of the dialogue

- It was a boring discussion, often ritualistic with usual UN litanies and many formal statements. Very limited dialogue even when there was time for it. Difficult to advocate for high level attendance in this context as the debate was hardly qualitative, also given the lack of thematic focus
- Side events did not seem to be immune from the disease, with many speeches and limited dialogue
- TV anchor approach (used within the first day) to be seriously challenged
- IATF session as dialogue among the IATF members, rather opportunity to interrogate the report

- Paradox of high-level attendance: it may actually make the format worse if there is not clear meaning for ministerial attendance (problem of entertaining ministers)

Opportunities and threats

- The annual follow-up might generate lower traction for hosting another FfD Conference. In this respect, the actual desirability of a new conference in today's regressive circumstances is highly debatable. Re-opening negotiations now may further lower the bar. No appetite for a 2019 conference call
- Low level attendance of MS and evidence of limited awareness and engagement at capital level
- Very new group of representatives within UN missions, particularly Second Committee delegates, which poses both opportunities and challenges
- New geopolitical context weakens the FfD space as consensual space and requires strong location within the broader UN context (General Assembly)
- Some opportunities may be generated by the dissatisfaction with this year's format, e.g. some begin to see the need for thematic focus and to avoid the long series of statements

2. Reflection on future strategies and tactics

- Need to front-load civil society engagement rather than chasing the tail-end of the process. This is particularly true for the negotiations. We may need to organize a much earlier dialogue with MS, far ahead of the start of the negotiations, with key engagement of the actual negotiators of the various regional groups. Once the negotiations actually start, it is difficult to engage comprehensively and we can only chase limited and targeted priorities
- Need for much more out-of-the-room work, both in terms of visible advocacy campaigns and in terms of much more national level and regional level work. The 'speaking in the room' strategy, while always important, remains insufficient to generate impact
- It is therefore essential to sustain the dialogue at national level and it would be good to establish ongoing dialogue mechanisms with national authorities. Regarding the regional level, significant differences. It may not be easy to find the political backing for regional FfD forum in LATM, though the situation is different at ESCAP level. Unclear at UNECA level, maybe some opportunity exists. The UNECE space is obviously problematic, also but not exclusively for the PPP process
- More communication material is required. Also, sometimes our documents are too lengthy and technical and need to be supported by short & sharp advocacy materials. This is not only important for MS but also with our civil society colleagues, as we need to demystify the technicality of FfD versus its political significance
- Need to be better prepared on the TNCs that are invited to participate, so that we can be ready to expose their inconsistencies, though some have raised concerns with being too belligerent, as negative campaigning may boomerang on us
- It is essential to generate convergence and synergy across different spaces, campaigns and processes. The role of the group in creating such space might therefore be very important

3. Next steps and critical path to 2018 Forum

Immediate Forum follow-up

- Official communique: SP to circulate draft in the week starting May 29 for finalization within 1 week
- Side event thank you letters and final reports by the various side-event leads
- Financial follow-up and cost sharing (depending on the GIZ arrangements) by SID

- Analysis of country statements (Task Group?) as the session happened in the evening and limited notes were taken (check with MGCY as its delegation has taken extensive notes)

HLPF

- Challenge with side event given high level of side event applications, though we would expect that each constituency will get at least one side event. Need to constitute Task Group to initiate preparations
- Draft submission should be finalized as soon as possible, even if the formal deadline has passed. Importance to complete the submission as a sign of engagement with HLPF process was stressed
- Deadline for speakers was May 26 (the actual day of the meeting). It would be important to ensure some FfD speakers are included in the HLPF programme, though this would require a clear priority list for negotiation with other constituencies. In this respect, it was suggested that a strong female speaker be identified among the applications
- Possible opportunity to meet in the corners of the HLPF, though calendar might be challenging, including during the week-end
- Review list of expected participants from CS FfD Group in order to establish a preparatory mechanism

IATF Engagement

- Importance to complete the civil society comments on the final report with forward looking considerations on the next report, including early recommendations on the structure of the report, for instance with respect to cross-cutting issues. SP to circulate current draft and re-engage RRG on the process, prior to consultation with GSEG
- Request official calendar of consultation with formal engagement with the CS FfD Group rather than ad-hoc invitations. In this respect, an early planning meeting with the IATF Branch of the FfD Office might be necessary in order to plan engagement, including the opportunity of a joint IATF CSO meeting
- Important to be clear of what we can actually deliver and be aware of the fast pace of the process

October FfD Forum Planning Day

- Uneven traction within MS. This ‘5th day’ (additional to this year’s 4-day Forum) could be a civil society meeting where MS are invited or an informal meeting catalysed by civil society in cooperation with few MS that could formally co-host it. It may also be important to explore the nexus with the Friends of Monterrey process (though this is more targeted on the actual negotiations rather than to the early planning of the Forum design)
- The other possible approach could be to drop the “comprehensive approach” and look for “friends of *.*” on specific issues, such as it is already happening on some areas. This would call for diversified modalities and events adapted to the various pillars
- Another possibility would be to focus on dialogues with specific groups, namely the G77, including a focus on knowledge/capacity-building, maybe with technical expertise from outside the CS Group
- Whatever option (or combination of options) is eventually chosen, planning needs to start soon for it to unfold in the October-November period. The coordination group was invited to further reflect on options and define working mechanisms

Other issues to be addressed in the strategy meeting (as time elapsed)

- Possible role of the Regional Sustainable Development Fora

- Planning for workstreams (PPI, IFF, Systemic Issues, others)
- Modalities of engagement and coordination with other campaigns

4. Working procedures

- It was pointed out that our meetings tend to focus on the substantive issues (which is of course important) but tend to relegate to the last minutes our internal organization, which does not provide adequate time for proper planning, task assignment and proper burden sharing. The coordination group was invited to give priority attention to the review of the workplan in its next call
- The urgency of a strategy meeting (possibly in September) was stressed and it was agreed that the date should be decided within the next 2 weeks, in order to squarely locate it on people's calendars. A Doodle will soon be circulated by SP to this end
- GSEG calls should be organized on monthly basis, with time schedule to be fair to different regions rather than to the majority of the participants. In the post Forum period, thematic focus for the calls might help generate traction and increase participation, rather than simply regular updates. The first of such call should focus on the HLPF and should be organized in the first part of June
- Complete clean-up of GSEG to be finalized after the Forum, followed by calls to engage and participate in the various work teams, in order to re-constitute viable and active groups and attract new organizations to engage and support. In this respect, it is essential to clarify the mechanisms of engagement within the various work teams, including the relations with other networks and mechanisms, building on the idea of the CS FfD Group's process as a space for convergence. The next coordination group call should map and review the working mechanisms of all groups
- Need to develop internal rules and behavioural codes to ensure we operate coherently with our values and aspirations in terms of respect for diversity and gender equity, among others. This is also in response to the issues raised in the assessment. A Task Group should be established in this respect. While some volunteered during the meeting, Rosa will circulate a call for volunteers
- Next call by the ACG/RRG (to be organized within the next two weeks) will need to review this report and allocate clearer responsibilities on the various tracks, processes and workstreams
- The definition of the clear objectives and workstreams (strategy session) should also be combined with a resource development strategy to both ensure resources for Southern participants to key events and processes, but also to provide the actual resources for the workstreams and related activities