In 2015, the world’s governments adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a universal Agenda that recognises gender equality (SDG 5) and peaceful, just and inclusive societies (SDG16) as stand-alone global development priorities and provides specific guidance on the means of implementation (Goal 17).

The Second High-Level Political Forum (2017 HLPF) was convened at the time when the aspirations of the SDGs are on the rise but the current climate of violence, patriarchy and political economies of war increasingly restricts women’s meaningful participation and creates structural barriers to the effective SDG implementation.

As part of our work to strengthen conflict prevention and promote accountability on gender equality and peace, WILPF’s Women, Peace and Security Programme monitored the forum for gender and conflict issues, mobilised action, through its outreach strategy and in coalition with Women’s Major Group, to promote implementation of the SDGs in a way that ensures women’s meaningful participation and engaged in other opportunities for concrete action.

Now, the Forum is over! And it is time to assess what has been achieved and what are our next steps as a global movement for feminist peace and development.

DEBATING MINISTERIAL DECLARATION

The Forum has resulted in the Ministerial Declaration aimed at advancing and achieving the goals put forth, agreed to and adopted by all Members States in 2015. In this document, Member States call upon the world’s development leaders to ensure that all barriers to women’s empowerment are removed and redouble their efforts to resolve and prevent conflict by ensuring that women have a role in peacebuilding.

Despite this, the call of the Women’s Major Group for a full commitment to gender equality and women’s empowerment, the rights of Women Human Rights Defenders
(WHRDs), as well as the Means of Implementations, remained unheard. Without these elements, the SDG promise and potential cannot be fully realised, maintaining the “business as usual” with only increased reach of corporations.

ANALYSING VOLUNTARY NATIONAL REVIEWS (VNRs)

As part of the 2017 HLPF process, 44 Member States has presented their VNRs, reporting on the progress in attaining the 2030 Agenda and sharing good practices in implementation. Of the submitting states, 41 (93%) countries specifically mentioned SDG 5, 25 (57%) referenced SDG 16, and 38 (86%) discussed SDG 17.

Reporting on SDG 5 was primarily focused on efforts made by Member States to empower women in all spheres of the society and address gender-based violence. In the meantime, only 10 states (22%) specifically addressed gender equality as a cross-cutting issue, only 5 states (11%) recognised their extra-territorial obligations for realising SDG 5, and only 3 (7%) developed some monitoring and evaluation mechanisms and a clear system of measuring the SDG 5 progress.

The SDG 16 reporting was primarily focused on strengthening the rule of law and addressing corruption. The need to prevent arms transfers, which contribute to human rights violations across the globe, was largely ignored, including by the major arms sellers such as Sweden. As highlighted in the report published by the South Asia Alliance for Poverty Eradication, Member States continue responding to violence and instability pursuing militarised solutions.

Partnering with the private sector and corporations and updating taxation systems were the most widely referenced mechanisms for financing SDGs in both developed and developing countries. Member States also recognised the value of partnerships and cooperation. In the Asia-Pacific Region, for example, a regional roadmap was adopted to foster cooperation and effectiveness in key areas of data statistics, finance and policy coherence. The majority of developed countries recognised their extra-territorial obligations for achieving SDGs, while the countries from the developing world admitted that the SDg implementation is a matter in which they rely on external financial support.
Reportedly, civil society organisations (CSOs) played some role in the development of all VNRs, while the degree of this engagement varies greatly among countries. The government of Nigeria, for example, included the CSO Statement of Validation in its 2017 VNR. Many organisations however suggested that the consultations with civil society were often conducted online and within a small group of bigger national NGOs, while many representatives of indigenous women and women with disabilities were prevented from being included in the decision-making process.

Although all VNRs present some good practices for further exploration, the scale of inequality is still rising. Across the globe, the reduction of investment in public services and the processes of dismantling social protection with long-term underfunding of gender programs persist. Arms transfers continue violating international commitments, including on health (SDG 3), education (SDG 4) and housing (SDG 11). Simultaneously, there are increasing investments in the private sector and reductions in corporate taxation. If unaddressed, these trends will undermine the commitment to eradicate poverty. The participants of the Forum also agreed that women are more likely to be affected by this.

MONITORING THE FORUM

As a part of the Official Programme, the representatives of Member States, private sector and civil society, among others, gathered together to discuss the progress achieved in the implementation of each specific goals under the review.

The SDG 5 review session offered a space to identify strategies and outline good practices for strengthening gender equality. The speakers agreed on the cross-cutting nature of SDG 5 and that gender equality is paramount to the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Despite the recognition and existing efforts to empower women and girls throughout the world, women were noted to be disproportionately affected by the shortcoming of the process. The main structural barriers to gender equality highlighted during the session include: (i) patriarchal political economies, (ii) increased militarisation and (iii) corporate influence. This recognised the contribution of the Women’s
Major Group, including WILPF’s call to address root causes of inequalities, including political economies of war.

The SDG 17 review session highlighted how increased efforts to engage private actors and corporations have led to increased “corporatisation” of the Agenda. As noted in the timely and incisive Spotlight Report, many studies and experiences of affected communities have shown that privatisation and public-private partnerships involve disproportionate risks and costs for the public sector and can exacerbate inequalities, decrease equitable access to essential services and jeopardise the fulfillment of human rights. As stated by the Director of Columbia University’s Earth Institute, Jeffrey Sachs, “we cannot let a few powerful industries endanger the entire planet”.

It became clear during the Forum that the complexity and comprehensiveness of the 2030 Agenda have led to a number of conflicts and trade-offs between SDGs. The SDGs’ ambition and emphasis on integration challenge current institutional and governance arrangements and require new mechanisms for driving policy integration and coherence. In the ISCU report, leadership and the development of cross-cutting coordination mechanisms will be key to achieving this in practice. Some countries have already developed cross-ministerial and consultative mechanisms, including Germany, Colombia and Finland. But this also needs to be aligned with decision-making and implementation processes.

While SDG 16 was not under review, CSOs and Member States have expressed their interest in tracking progress on SDG 16 targets, presenting good practices and providing an evidence base to help policymakers strengthen implementation and monitoring of SDG 16. Specifically, the SDG 16 Data Initiative presented their efforts to develop an independent indicator framework for the SDG 16 monitoring. At the same time, the Roadmap for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies and SDG+16 Expo presented some good practices developed by Member States across the main catalytic actions, including

| Participants and panellists of the event entitled, “From Shrinking Spaces to Feminist Movement Building” (Photo: Alexandra Rojas) | |
empowering people as agents of change and scaling up violence prevention, while good practices of women’s groups and CSOs remained missing from the conversation.

The forum therefore highlighted that eradicating poverty and promoting prosperity in a changing world requires tackling systemic barriers and structural inequalities, including neoliberalist capitalism and patriarchy that cause and exacerbate inequalities; it also requires addressing militarism, corporate influence and shrinking civil society space.

**ENGAGING IN CIVIL SOCIETY ACTION FOR SDGs**

In the midst of the 2017 HLPF, the civil society was very active. There have been around 145 side-events. Many events were not included in the Official Programme of the Forum.

The discussions during the civil society side-events have been focused around (a) building partnerships; (b) strengthening policy coherence; (c) developing ways to address increased privatisation and corporatisation of SDGs; (d) tackling structural barriers, including militarism and shrinking civil society space; (e) fostering governments to recognise the rights and needs of all groups, including indigenous populations that are often not recognised as citizens. Many also reflected on the absence of voices from the conflict countries and the Middle East region caused by the difficulties in obtaining visas.

Specifically, CSOs expressed concerns about the SDGs being used not as a roadmap for social, economic and environmental transformation, but as a vehicle to entrench inequitable power relations. In particular, as exhibited in many speeches at the HLPF over the last week and official national reports, much energy is invested in partnerships with the private sector. This bias is illustrated by the fact that the UN General Assembly Hall was dedicated to the SDG Business Forum, while the majority of civil society requests to hold events within the UN were turned down.

The event entitled “From Shrinking Spaces to Feminist Movement Building: Key Priorities on SDG 5 and 16 for Sustaining Peace” and co-organised by WILPF and its partners, illuminated the interconnected barriers and systems of oppression for feminist movements that prevent meaningful participation for action on gender equitable development and peace. The event denounced the oppression faced by feminist movements due to their critical role of challenging patriarchal societies. It explained to its participants the ways in which national governments have restricted women’s rights organisations through formal (i.e.: prohibition from registering women’s rights organisations) and informal (i.e.: women’s freedom of movement, tolerated harassment, impunity) ways. As summed up by one of the participants, “the reason why governments limit civil society space is because they
feel threatened by activists organising around gender.”
Under the leadership of the Women’s Major Group, we have developed an outreach strategy and contributed key messages to bring the attention of everyone to essential areas of action, including women’s human rights, meaningful participation, civil society space, finance and accountability.

WILPF has also put together its HLPF Social Media toolkit to mobilise recognition by Member States, the UN and the international community of local women’s work and strengthen action that implements the SDGs in a way that works for women in conflict situations. The campaign was supported by other civil society and research organisations, including Monash Gender, Peace, and Security and the Voices of Women Organising Project, and drew an average of 150 Facebook comments, shares and likes, and 2,000 retweets, replies, likes and link clicks on Twitter.

Similar initiatives have been undertaken by the British Columbia Council for International Cooperation and the NGO Committee for Social Development. Each day, women peace activists and women human rights defenders around the world contribute - directly and indirectly - to developing and mobilising local action to ensure sustainable development based on disarmament and women’s meaningful participation, political participation and human rights. And yet their efforts are being disregarded and ignored by the international community.

Our partner, Binalakshmi Nepram of Manipur Women Gun Survivors Network, participated in the Women’s Major Group’s exhibit highlighting the crucial role of Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRD’s) in the 2030 Agenda. This exhibit sought to bring into light the interlinkage between existing WHRDs instruments and the 2030 Agenda, but also to point out the need of making explicit that they are central to the agenda.

Our coalition engagement has resulted in an increased recognition of the structural barriers to the SDG implementation during the Official Programme of the Forum,
especially during the SDG 5 review session, as well as during a variety of side-events co-organised by WILPF, members of Women’s Major Groups and our partners.

Our analysis and the work of our partners and sections, including WILPF Sweden and the Manipur Women Gun Survivors Network, also demonstrated that the SDGs are not always addressed from a conflict or a gender lens and that gender and peace financing remain far from a reality, with militarisation and arms proliferation remain the challenges that are yet to be taken into consideration by the world’s leaders.

MOVING SDGs FORWARD

The 2017 HLPF has presented an opportunity for WILPF to learn more about the ways in which leveraging SDGs for peace work is possible. We were able to strengthen the feminist movement for peace, generate public awareness on Sustainable Development and gain some political support for the cause.

Now, it is important not to lose the momentum and strengthen local action for Feminist Peace and Gender Equality.

Based on our belief in feminist peace for equality, justice, demilitarised development and non-violent inclusive social transformation, we identified several steps for further leveraging SDGs to complement peace work of local partners on the ground:

- Build [inclusive national and regional participatory mechanisms](#) for the SDG implementation;
- Utilise [other UN processes](#), including the UPR review and the CEDAW Committee’s work, to strengthen the SDG Implementation;
- [Sensitise local population](#) about the 2030 Agenda through media and academia;
- Develop [specific roadmaps for each goal](#) with solid monitoring and indicators and data collection mechanisms;
- Identify [the interactions between and among the 17 SDGs](#) to inform priority-setting in a given context;
- Expose [the long-term impact of working with corporations](#) and big for-profit companies on the SDG implementation on human rights and freedoms.

While 2030 seems to be very far, decisions that we are making today influence the development trajectories for the next decades. That is why it is very important to [empower feminist movements](#) for develop a feminist vision today.