

# SYNERGIES IN STRATEGIES FOR A JUST RECOVERY

## LEARNING FROM OUR COMMUNITY DECEMBER 2021

### WHAT DID WE DO?

In December 2021, the Center for Economic and Social Rights (CESR) organized a community call with partners and allies from across the social, economic, and environmental justice movements on mobilizing for rights-based economic transformation in the wake of COVID-19. Around 20 people joined the call—a diverse group of activists and advocates from around the world, whose works spans a range of issues from the local to the global level. This was the fourth time we'd organized one of these calls.

Continuing the theme of mobilizing across movements for a just recovery to COVID-19, this quarter's call focused on "synergies in strategies". **Our aim was to share intelligence about advocacy targets; brainstorm ways to coordinate and combine "insider" and "outsider" tactics to influence them; and bridge gaps between online and offline activism.** As in previous calls, the idea was to come together in a more informal way; to collectively reflect on shared challenges and opportunities; to explore synergies between our efforts; and to create space for more open conversations and spontaneous connections. But, given that we were gathering at the end of an intense year, we also wanted to make sure the atmosphere was fun; the conversation entertaining; and the focus on celebrating community. We did this through a series of exercises that included visual brainstorming and a mock "People Power" awards ceremony.

As always, we're so grateful to everyone who joined the call and shared their wisdom on the topic so generously. This short reflection note summarizes highlights from the discussion.

### WHAT DID WE LEARN?

One of the issues highlighted in the first round of calls was the challenge of shifting power structures within the institutions that make up the global economic governance system. **Some of the contributing factors mapped out during that call included: rampant nationalism; the strength of corporate power making much-needed reforms seem politically impossible; spaces for civil society advocacy—and opportunities to confront**



**power holders—narrowing; and limited opportunities to share intelligence and insights among groups intervening in different parts of the system.**

To create such an opportunity, we started by mapping out where different groups were focusing their advocacy efforts.

We found that **engaging in global policy debates—from the OECD tax deal, to the IMF’s allocation of Special Drawing Rights, the TRIPS waiver proposal at the WTO, and COP26—was a focus for many.** National level work is also a common priority. But, there appears to be less engagement at the regional level.

Reflecting on what shifts, if any, people had seen over the course of the year in the way these institutions have engaged with civil society (or, vice versa, the way civil society has engaged with these institutions), a number of recurring themes emerged. These included:

- **Shifts in the quality of engagement:** a number of people felt that there was generally “more” dialogue, but not a lot of listening or meaningful engagement. **Follow through is often superficial, for example, while the basic enablers of engagement (transparency, accessibility, funding etc.) are not meaningfully addressed.** Working in “virtual mode” is a particular factor here, as it weakens accountability. That said, some people did feel that civil society was seen as an important ally among some policymakers, who had relied on their expertise. Notably, this tended to be the case among social, rather than economic, policymakers.
- **Shifts in rhetoric:** claims to support efforts to “build back better” were seen as encouraging, on the one hand, but a risk on the other. In particular, **where there’s no real political commitment to acting in line with such claims, uptake of messages can easily turn into co-opting of messages.**
- **Openness to specific policy proposals:** we heard a number of examples where **progressive rhetoric had translated into shifts in policy, which “should be celebrated, even if they’re inadequate”.** These included: extending emergency social protection programs; cracks in resistance to the TRIPS waiver proposal; collective vaccine purchases by the African Union; discussions on recognition of indigenous land tenure in the context of debates about implementing the Convention for Biological Diversity; issuing Special Drawing Rights.
- **Resistance to questioning the fundamentals of macroeconomic policy:** these are “still largely seen as indisputable and unmovable”. In particular, it was noted that **the ‘trajectory of the recovery’ promoted by the IMF and OECD (i.e. a short period of expansion and then a long contraction) has not shifted.** No other institution has meaningfully weighed in on the recovery trajectory, apart from the European Union. It is moving away from harsh fiscal rules, to allow fiscal expansion to promote a green and digital transition in Europe. But it continues to promote contractionary policies in the Global South, via the World Bank and IMF. Another observation was that the African Union (in partnership with ILO) is open to challenging prevailing macroeconomic orthodoxies, but doesn’t have real power to push governments.

- **Siloing is ‘crowding out’ important issues:** An example of this shared was the **worry that gender equality and women’s rights are being side-lined in debates about climate change.** Despite some attempts at integration, there’s not generally a lot of conversations happening between climate and women’s rights activists. It was observed that, in the UK, climate activism is a very white space, too.

Despite these challenges, our ‘retrospective’ of the year showed that we had a number of “highs” to celebrate as a community, alongside the “lows” to commiserate. **Our “People Power” awards nominations (some serious, some tongue in cheek) were an opportunity to put examples on people’s radar that we have something to learn from. These highlighted efforts by cross-movement coalitions that leveraged evidence creatively in online and offline activism.** In some cases, these efforts had led to notable policy “wins”. For example, a presidential executive order directed US representatives at the World Bank and IMF to reflect national climate goals; South Africa’s emergency social protection measures were extended after pressure from civil society; Global South countries have been able to use Special Drawing Rights to support fiscal measures. In other cases, they’d succeeded in meaningfully shaping debates. For example, the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) and Global Alliance for Tax Justice (GATJ) were nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize for their work in exposing and tackling illicit financial flows; the Prime Minister of Barbados, Mia Motley, spoke “truth to power” at COP26; high-profile economists such as Joseph Stiglitz have endorsed open science in medical research.

## WHAT NEXT?

While it was clear that people are tired and in a “mixed” mood at the end of another intense year, the feedback we received again highlighted the value of these calls. They create an “unusual” opportunity to meet diverse people with shared interests, particularly while we’ve been “cocooned” during lockdown. **Participants appreciated the chance to strategize across sectors and to “step back a little” from the day-to-day battles they face in their work, in order “to just be, to feel, and to share how they’re feeling”.**

There is clearly an appetite to continue these calls in the new year and—potentially—to explore the possibility of meeting in person. As well as helping to build relationships of trust among partners and allies, the calls are an opportunity to gather collective intelligence on questions of shared interest. Some of the specific questions people flagged included:

- **What has COVID-19 taught us? What in our thinking has shifted?**
- **How can we deepen the interlinkages among our work?**
- **What are the different ways that impact is perceived/ measured/ understood?**

We’re so grateful, again, to everyone who shared their wisdom so generously. We’ll share some more concrete ideas for taking forward the calls shortly. Please stay tuned! In the meantime, we’d love to hear further suggestions. Please don’t hesitate to get in touch.