

Transforming the Global Economic System 2023-2027 Strategy



CENTER for
ECONOMIC and
SOCIAL RIGHTS

DETAILED VERSION

A strategic response to the polycrisis

The global economic system is not fit for purpose. Its many failures are at the heart of today's polycrisis: climate emergency and biodiversity loss; the economic aftereffects of COVID-19; the spiraling cost of living, food insecurity, and inequality; and assaults on human rights defenders. All these disproportionately affect marginalized communities in the Global South.

The next four years are critical if the polycrisis is not to worsen. Momentum for change is building and reforms are on the agenda in various multilateral processes. To achieve a true power shift between and within countries, and to transform the global economic system, we need unprecedented levels of collaboration between NGOs and social movements.

CESR's strategy consultations highlighted broad recognition of the need for collaboration to shift power, the gaps to address, and how CESR could contribute. Partners asked us to scale up our role of building bridges across issues, regions, and partners, to strengthen collective efforts for systemic economic reform.

The overarching goal of CESR's 2023–2027 strategy is to strengthen cross-movement mobilization through a transformational rights-based agenda. This requires us to advance rights-based reforms; to identify synergies between alternative economic visions and agendas; to collect evidence with partners that decodes injustices; and to challenge the narratives that sustain the status quo. We will build on what we have achieved in 30 years of work to advance economic, social, and cultural rights.

We thank everyone —the more than 70 people— who participated in our consultations and helped shape this strategy and in particular our Reference Group, who generously advised us throughout the process: Audrey Gaughran, Fatimah Kelleher, Grazielle Custódio David, Irene Ovonji-Odida, Karin Lissakers, and Rodolfo Lahoy.

We look forward to working with our partners and allies to achieve transformative change over the next four years.

Meghna Abraham
Executive Director

An overview of our 2023–2027 strategy

Strategic objectives

1

Articulating and advancing rights-based reforms of the rules and institutions that distribute global economic power.

2

Building synergies between economic alternative visions to strengthen collective power and advance rights-aligned transformations.

5

Strengthening systems and processes to support our decentralized, globally distributed team to work with diverse movements.

3

Shifting power to 'decode' how the global economic system's injustices harm people's rights and to pursue reparations.

4

Building narrative power about the need to transform the global economic system and the role of rights in doing so.

How we will work

Agenda setting, thought leadership, and narrative change

Sharing knowledge, building evidence, and connecting across movements

Advocacy and influencing

Overarching goal

To strengthen cross-movement mobilization through a rights-based agenda for transforming the global economic system

About Us

The Center for Economic and Social Rights (CESR) is an international NGO that leverages the power of human rights to inspire fairer and more sustainable economies. Founded in 1993, CESR was the first international NGO dedicated specifically to economic, social, and cultural rights. For the past 30 years, we have taken a radical approach to the practice of human rights: articulating how rights can advance economic justice and challenge the neoliberal economic model. Our pioneering role in ensuring these rights are recognized, defended, and advanced is widely acknowledged by NGOs and others around the world.

In its early years, CESR focused on catalyzing global action on economic, social, and cultural rights. Our projects sought to demonstrate that these rights are as fundamental to people's lives as civil and political rights and to rigorously assess the impact of policies on these rights. We quickly broadened our geographic scope by fostering partnerships and incubating organizations in the Middle East and Latin America. This movement-building work culminated in the establishment of the now [independent International Network on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights \(ESCR-Net\)](#).

CESR's work with partners to expand global action has meant that economic, social, and cultural rights are now more fully codified in international instruments, better protected in national laws, and more effectively safeguarded by national and international oversight bodies.

Following the global financial crisis of 2008, we pushed ourselves and others in the human rights and economic justice movements to adopt a stronger critique of the economy and to more squarely address as human rights concerns the inequalities it brings about. To this end, CESR has carried out a number of groundbreaking investigations showing how ill-conceived austerity policies have contributed to escalating levels of inequality and wealth concentration, disproportionately affecting marginalized communities in both Global North and Global South countries. We've leveraged this evidence to strengthen demands that governments and international financial institutions account for harms caused in countries as diverse as Brazil, Egypt, South Africa, and Spain.

In doing so, we have helped bring about concrete policy changes. For example, Brazil's Congressional Human Rights Commission called for an official human rights impact assessment of the country's 20-year expenditure freeze after CESR and partners presented to Congress our [research on austerity's foreseeable impacts](#). In Spain, the government repealed an austerity decree denying access to health care to half a million migrants after advocacy by CESR, Médicos del Mundo, Red Acoge, and Amnesty International prompted [United Nations calls to rescind it](#).

We have also made a significant contribution to building the body of knowledge, analytical skills, and tactical repertoire that others draw on. Our hallmark mix of legal and economic analysis has allowed more rigorous interrogation of the structural barriers that hamper people’s economic, social, and cultural rights — and enabled their more forceful articulation as human rights concerns.

Over the past decade, we’ve collaborated with hundreds of activists, practitioners, and academics to design and apply innovative research tools. Our [OPERA](#) framework, for example, provides a way to assess how far governments meet their human rights obligations by grouping them around four dimensions: Outcomes, Policy Efforts, Resources, and Assessment. We’ve seen widespread interest in, and uptake of, such approaches. For example, the then UN Independent Expert on Foreign Debt and Human Rights drew on our methodological guidance for conducting human rights impact assessments in the context of his work developing Guiding Principles on this issue. The most recent iteration of our research approach, [Decoding Injustice](#), has expanded the reach of these tools to a diverse range of activists worldwide.

We have forged critical alliances beyond the human rights movement with activists working for more equitable, sustainable, and human-centered economies. We played a pioneering role in building coalitions that bring together human rights and fiscal justice actors, for example. In May 2021, we co-launched the [Principles for Human Rights in Fiscal Policy](#) as the culmination of a long-standing collaboration between national and regional organizations in Latin America, with CESR playing a key role as secretariat. The Principles are a groundbreaking normative tool that distill applicable human rights standards and translate them into concrete guidelines for the design, implementation, and assessment of fiscal policies. National and regional campaigns have used the Principles to reform fiscal policy to further human rights.

Recognizing the political significance of world leaders’ adoption of the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) in 2015, we campaigned to ensure the goals, targets, and indicators at the core of the new framework fully reflected human rights. Our efforts contributed to a set of far-reaching, comprehensive, equality-sensitive, and universally applicable commitments. However, the transformational promise of the 2030 Agenda has not been realized, in large part because governments have not cooperated to mobilize and allocate resources as they committed to. In response, we’ve collaborated with human rights and development organizations to advance innovative ways to hold governments accountable for the human rights obligations underpinning their Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) commitments.

In July 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded, CESR adopted a three-year strategy with the goal of envisioning a rights-based economy and catalyzing action toward it. Three years later, we’ve made significant progress. Influential actors are beginning to embrace the concept of a rights-based economy. There’s burgeoning interest in the role

human rights can play in shifting economic narratives. Proponents of economic transformation increasingly incorporate human rights tools and analysis into their demands. On issues from vaccine equity to tax abuse to debt reform and resources for climate justice, we have seen increasing uptake of human-rights-based approaches and discourse among NGOs and movements we work with or have consulted. Nevertheless, both the external and the internal landscape shaping our work has shifted significantly over this period — posing new opportunities and challenges for us to respond to.

Our approach to change

We believe the most pressing challenges of our time are caused by, and in turn reproduce, widespread denials of economic, social, and cultural rights. These challenges have their roots in the unjust distribution of resources and power that characterizes the global economic system.

Our aim is to transform this system, including by achieving steady progress on the pathways necessary to shift resources and power within and between countries. The long-term outcomes we are working toward reflect key characteristics of a democratic state that is capable and effective in ensuring the full range of human rights for all people. But we recognize that a state's effectiveness is heavily influenced by its position in the global economy.

This type of change cannot be realized without a critical mass of organizations — across the economic, development, human rights, and environmental justice movements — joining forces to exert pressure from below, pressure from above, and pressure from within the state. We believe that strategies grounded in a progressive, holistic, and transformative vision of human rights can play an important role in bridging these movements. But this depends on increasing economic fluency within the human rights movement, while also increasing human rights fluency among related movements. It also requires honest engagement with concerns around the human rights movement's delays in tackling the root causes of global challenges, such as the legacies of colonialism and neoliberal globalization. It's also essential that attempts to strengthen coordination across movements hold space for a multiplicity of perspectives.

We're a small organization with a broad vision, niche expertise, and a collaborative ethos. Driven by our understanding of how change happens, the action we take to support progress toward more just and sustainable economies that realize human rights for all is based on, and tests, the following logic and assumptions:

If ... CESR demystifies the global economic system; builds a more comprehensive body of evidence illustrating its injustices; and strengthens normative frameworks for changing it ...

and ... CESR facilitates mutual learning, shared analysis, and joint strategizing among our partners and allies to identify points of convergence, common priorities, and shared agendas for change ...

then ... there will be deeper solidarity and greater cross-movement mobilization to transform the global economic system, which can result in a radical redistribution of power and resources between and within countries ...

because ... NGOs and movements across different sectors and regions will have new perspectives on synergies between different injustices; new ideas about how to leverage human rights in their work; and new relationships that can enable better coordination and amplification of their organizing, campaigning, and advocacy.

The values we seek to reflect, and hold ourselves to, in our work include:



Collaboration

We know we cannot bring about systemic change alone, so we actively build relationships with others across movements seeking transformational change.



Creativity

We develop original ways to analyze complex problems; seek novel insights by working across different disciplines; and experiment with new approaches.



Intersectionality

Our work adopts an explicitly feminist lens and addresses overlapping forms of discrimination, oppression, and exploitation.



Mutual learning

We approach our work with humility, curiosity, and thoughtfulness; we seek out shared wisdom from our collaborations.



Solidarity

We strive to dismantle power asymmetries in the fields where we work; we're conscious of our institutional positioning, and aim to create space, not take it.

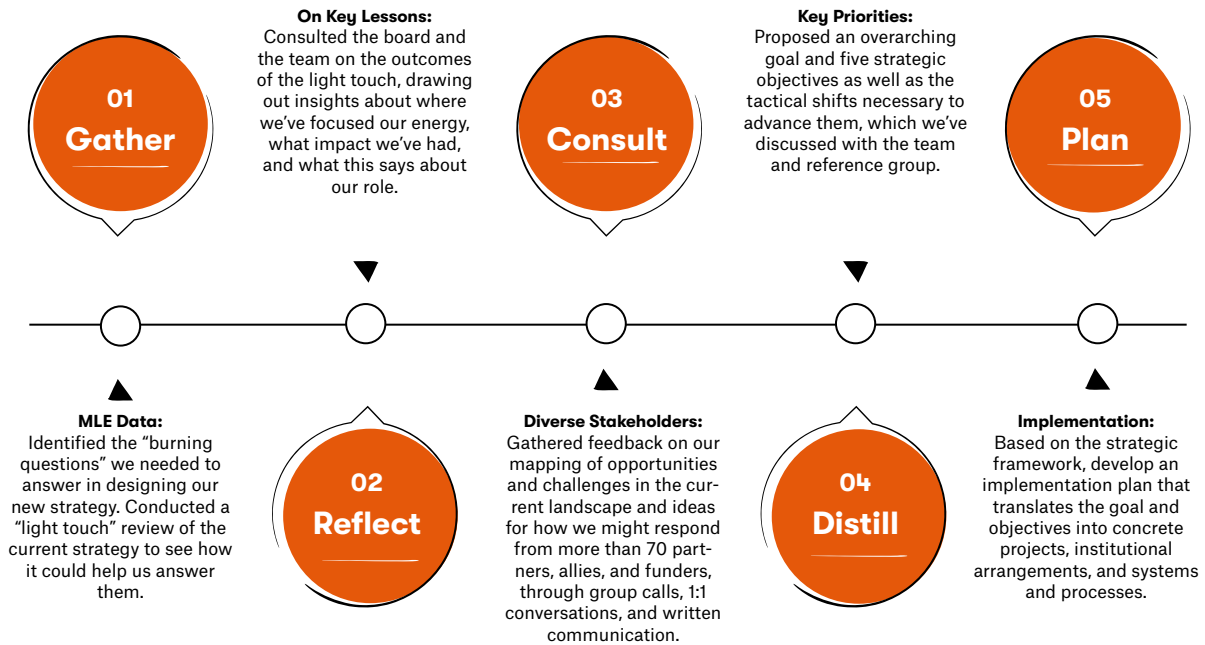


Boldness

Our ambition is to fundamentally transform the economy; we recognize our work is political and we advance a radical vision of human rights.

Strategy design process

Our strategy design process, which took place between February and August 2023, included:



Through our consultations, we heard from more than 70 people belonging to a diverse group of NGOs and movements about the great need for CESR's work. We held four thematic consultations on economic alternatives; global financial architecture, financialization, and resourcing for climate justice, as well as regional consultations with partners and allies in sub-Saharan Africa, Asia-Pacific, Latin America, southwest Asia, and North Africa. We sincerely thank all the people — and their organizations — who collaborated with us throughout the process. Particular thanks go to our Reference Group, who acted as an invaluable sounding board: Audrey Gaughran, Fatimah Kelleher, Grazielle Custódio David, Irene Ovonji-Odida, Karin Lissakers, and Rodolfo Lahoy.

The moment we're in: the context for this strategy

Through extensive consultations, we identified a number of complex, interrelated, and sometimes paradoxical trends to respond to. Both the external and internal landscape shaping our work has shifted significantly — posing new opportunities and challenges. A central theme connecting these trends is the urgent need to reform multilateralism and the global economic system.

Trends in the political, economic, and environmental landscape

The term “polycrisis” has become widely used to describe the compounding effects of deepening climate crisis and biodiversity loss; intensified conflicts; the economic aftereffects of the COVID-19 pandemic; the spiraling cost of living, food insecurity, and inequality across the globe; and assaults on human rights defenders. The polycrisis affects people worldwide. But communities in the Global South bear the brunt — with groups already facing discrimination disproportionately affected.

The [UN Development Programme estimates](#) that 165 million people have been pushed into poverty over the past three years. Rich countries have by and large afforded expansionary policies to cushion the impacts of successive shocks on at least some of their populations, but this had knock on effects on lower-income countries.

In today's globalized world, economies are deeply interconnected and interdependent. A recurring theme in our consultations was the importance of recognizing the deeply rooted coloniality of the global economic system. Global economic rules continue to be made by institutions heavily dominated by the interests of Global North stakeholders. Divergence from these norms brings adverse economic consequences. This denies space to alternatives, such as the rights-based economy. This has been starkly demonstrated by the refusal of higher-income countries to share vaccines and other life-saving medical resources during the pandemic and to meaningfully address debt distress while indebted countries reel from climate-related disasters.

What do we mean by Global South and Global North?

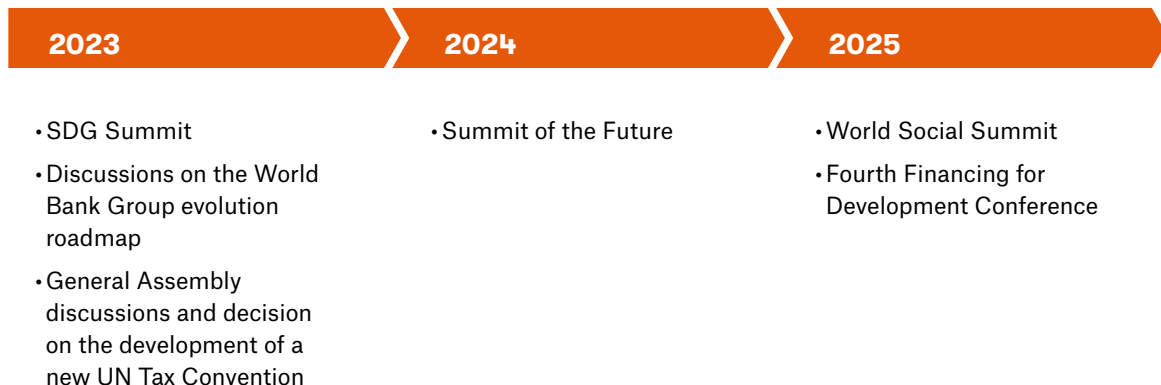
These terms highlight disparities in wealth, consumption, economic power, and political influence between different parts of the world. The Global South includes many formerly colonized countries across Africa, Asia-Pacific, and Latin America and the Caribbean. The Global North includes Australia, Canada, Japan, the US, and Western Europe.

These terms have limitations. Neither grouping reflects a strictly defined geographic area; the countries within each group are diverse, and the challenges they face vary widely; within all countries there are dominant elites and marginalized communities; and which group particular countries might fall into can shift depending on the context. Nevertheless, the terms are a useful way to capture inequalities in the global economic system and are used widely by our partners and allies.

At the same time, we see the adoption of regressive policies that concentrate wealth and increase inequalities within countries. Often, this trend is intertwined with a rise in right-wing movements, increased authoritarianism, militarization, and closing civic space. At the international level, this undermines global solidarity. At the national level, it co-opts economic messaging. This means that for movements in the Global South, an injection of cash from the Global North is not necessarily a win, if it exacerbates power imbalances within countries. So it is essential that global reform efforts are grounded in, build solidarity for, and strengthen national struggles for the realization of rights, redistribution of resources, and reinforcement of democracy.

There is a broad spectrum of agreement — rhetorically at least — that the current global economic system is not fit for purpose. In the [words of the UN Secretary-General](#), without urgent action, the gap between the “haves and have-nots” will translate into “a lasting divergence, economic fragmentation, and geopolitical fractures”. We also have a closing window of time to limit global warming to around 1.5°C and to secure a livable future as we approach 2025, when the scenarios assessed by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change require that global greenhouse emissions peak.

New avenues for reform are opening up in international fora. Some of the key events during the next four years for adoption of reforms across these areas include:



However, proposals on the table so far are too limited and insufficiently systemic. There's a real risk that reforms entrench, rather than challenge, neoliberalism. As we heard in our consultations, the ideological power of economic orthodoxy cannot be underestimated. At both national and international levels, deeply entrenched narratives of "scarcity" and "market efficiency" prevail. These arguments are used to imply that governments cannot generate the necessary resources to avert the climate crisis and meet development needs and must attract private capital by making these issues more profitable or less risky (or both) to investors.

The outsized, deeply entrenched, and often opaque influence of corporate interests fuels a flawed, market-centric agenda that attempts to protect opportunities for profit-making and minimize disruption to current distributions of wealth and power. This is leading to a growing push towards financialization in reform proposals (such as through blended finance, de-risking private investment, and the creation of financial markets by turning nature and social infrastructure into new asset classes).

How do we define the global economic system?

We use the term to describe the institutional arrangements that facilitate the production, distribution, and consumption of goods, services, and resources among countries around the world. The system's functioning is shaped by international agreements, regulations, standards, and markets — with international financial institutions playing major roles. A key feature of the system is the global mobility of capital, which profits from "race to the bottom" competition among countries to attract investment by showing they are "business friendly".

Trends in human rights and related social justice fields

What will it take to harness the reform momentum for a genuine transformation of the global economic system, rather than superficial changes that reinforce corporate influence? NGOs and social movements will need to come together across sectors and regions and collaborate on an unprecedented scale. Our consultations demonstrated widespread recognition of this. But they also pointed to gaps that we must collectively address to achieve our goal. These include:

- Silos between sector-focused work, "outsider" and "insider" tactics, and civil society in the Global North and the Global South, which undermine global solidarity and make it difficult to build alliances with the social movements that have the ability to shift power.
- The multitude of different spaces, highly technical framing, and logistical barriers to participation in international negotiations where reforms are debated, which make it difficult to know where to focus energy.

- A multiplicity of economic alternatives, which make it challenging to agree on a set of common principles that we can advance across movements. In addition, prominent economic alternatives tend to be articulated in a top-down manner and primarily discussed within academic, policy, NGO, and UN circles in the Global North, instead of building on people’s lived experience and on the demands of social movements that have pushed for these alternatives for decades.
- Comparatively underdeveloped normative guidance on how states should cooperate internationally in line with their human rights obligations, which makes it difficult to elaborate what a rights-based transformation of the global economic system would look like concretely.

At the same time, we heard a number of ways we can tackle these gaps and support mass organizing across movements. These include:

- NGOs and social movements increasingly emphasizing (and organizing around) the connections between economic issues, such as climate financing and debt — and adopting feminist, decolonial, green, and rights-based lenses on these issues.
- Increasing recognition that the majority in the Global North have also been negatively impacted by the global economic system: a commonality that binds us together.
- Further development of the toolkit of approaches and methods that communities and activists can use to identify and analyze how the global economic system shapes their experience. This, in turn, will help us build a more comprehensive body of evidence to make the case for reparations based on people’s lived experience.

How CESR is positioned to respond to these trends

We heard broad agreement that rights-based framing could add normative weight to help galvanize broader cross-movement support for reforms that can shift power.

Specific areas where our partners and allies indicated CESR could add value to collective effort included:

- Conceptual work: engaging in robust structural analysis that takes human rights beyond the legalistic.
- Propositional work: providing a comprehensive picture of the availability of resources (such as for climate justice) and making a case about the obligations that states have to make these resources available.
- Interdisciplinary work: bringing economic discourse into human rights spaces and human rights discourse into economic and climate spaces to demystify issues and make them more accessible to partners and allies.
- Strategic work: pointing to the “value add” of leveraging governments’ obligations as a way to unify demands for transformative change.

Appreciation for our movement-bridging work was a recurring theme in our strategy consultations. We heard a clear demand for us to expand it.

What concretely does movement-bridging look like for CESR? We see ourselves as more of a connector than a coalition builder. While we sometimes convene spaces ourselves, we see our larger role as building connections across different sectors and regions between NGOs and social movements that themselves are coalition builders and mobilizers.

That said, attempts to strengthen coordination across movements must hold space for a multiplicity of perspectives. We don't think it's desirable or feasible to seek agreement on one economic alternative or a single set of demands. But we heard a need to identify synergies between different agendas and economic alternatives — particularly those that are feminist, decolonial, green, and rights based — and to translate them into shared priorities. Partners said that our collaborative and multifaceted way of working (across issues, geographies, and types of partners) positions us well to build synergies between diverse alternatives, including the Rights-Based Economy.

A key time for movements to come together is in response to advocacy opportunities. The multitude of different spaces where reforms are being debated and the highly technical nature of some critical discussions make it difficult for NGOs and social movements to know where to focus their energy. In our consultations, people said they trust us to give an honest assessment of political opportunities, to highlight which are worth investing in and which should be disrupted, and to translate technical concepts to support them to develop their positions. This in large part reflects our approach of supporting partners in advancing their own agendas, as well as the breadth of our focus, which allows us to have a bird's-eye view across different fora and issues.

Where we'll focus: our overarching goal and strategic objectives

Overarching goal | To strengthen cross-movement mobilization through a rights-based agenda for transforming the global economic system.

We plan to focus on areas of the global economic system where we see the critical need for, and opportunity to advance, transformative change — and where partners have indicated CESR can add considerable value to collective efforts. This includes:



Rethinking international financial institutions' role and governance.



Ensuring fairer financial flows and more expansive fiscal space through a rights-aligned UN Tax Convention and a multilateral framework for debt resolution that breaks countries free from a vicious cycle of debt.



Advancing a reparations-based framework to radically scale up resources for climate justice.



Reversing the trend of financialization in international development, climate action, and biodiversity protection.



Weakening the dominance of narratives that underpin the promotion of market-based approaches and building support for alternative economic visions.

This will allow us to build momentum on the global “pillar” of the rights-based economy and to demonstrate how rights can contribute to the framing of economic alternatives.

We will advance this goal by adopting a system change approach that strategically targets different leverage points to bring about transformative solutions. This includes:

- Shifting who does and doesn't have information about the global economic system.
- Changing the system's rules, policies, and governing structures.
- Building connections to drive system change.
- Challenging the underlying mindsets, beliefs, and paradigms that shape how actors in the system perceive and interact with it.

Specifically, we will focus on achieving the following objectives:



Articulating and advancing rights-based **reforms of the rules and institutions** that distribute global economic power.



Building **synergies between economic alternative visions** to strengthen collective power and advance rights-aligned transformations.



Shifting power to '**decode**' how the global economic system's injustices **harm people's rights** and to pursue **reparations**.



Building **narrative power** about the **need to transform the global economic system** and the role of rights in doing so.



Strengthening systems and processes to support our decentralized, globally distributed team to work with diverse movements.

How we'll focus: priority activities and tactical shifts

To help us achieve our objectives, it is important we rationalize, prioritize, and systematize our work. The tactics CESR uses include:



<p>Agenda setting and thought leadership that conceptualizes the human rights approach to different economic policy issues.</p>	<p>Demystifying the global economic system and assessing opportunities and challenges for change.</p>	<p>Mapping agendas and identifying synergies between them</p>	<p>Sharing knowledge and building a stronger evidence base illustrating the need for change.</p>	<p>Challenging dominant narratives and advancing alternative visions.</p>
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Deploying these tactics in a context-specific way, we'll pursue our strategic objectives through activities such as:

- Articulating normative arguments that states' human rights obligations extend to radically shifting resources and power, such as through tax and debt reforms and reparations, in the global economic system, including through targeted work with human rights monitoring bodies.
- Building a more comprehensive body of evidence that demystifies the global economic system and shows the concrete ways it harms people's rights.
- Producing materials that analyze market-based proposals for reforming the global economic system and developing rights-based alternatives (for example, on debt sustainability analysis, the UN Tax Convention, and raising resources for climate justice).
- Researching synergies between different agendas for reform and economic alternatives, particularly feminist, decolonial, green, and rights-based agendas (in partnership with groups and movements advancing these reforms).

- Strategically engaging in relevant global advocacy processes and supporting others to navigate them, including by sharing information, translating technical debates, and analyzing power dynamics.
- Building connections, co-convening conversations, and contributing to collective spaces that facilitate mutual learning, shared analysis, and joint strategizing on common priorities and critical pathways for advancing economic alternatives.
- Facilitating mutual learning across movements in different regions and sectors to deepen collaboration and amplify strategies.
- Developing resources that interrogate narratives underpinning the promotion of financialization and co-designing counter-narratives that can support alternative economic visions.

To do this, we see a number of key shifts in our tactics as necessary, including:

- *Strengthening and sharpening our global advocacy priorities.* We're seen as a key partner that can monitor developments in, and facilitate access to, global spaces. To play this role effectively, we're proposing to build up our capacity to strategically engage in priority processes.
- *Diversifying our communications.* To engage more effectively across movements, we're proposing to produce outputs that are quicker, more informative (explainers, briefings, etc.), and in more digestible formats (such as graphics and audiovisual materials).
- *Deepening our engagement with social movements.* Despite recognizing the critical importance of mass mobilizing to achieve the kind of systemic change we seek, we've found it challenging to build connections with those movements we're less proximate to. To overcome this, we're proposing to better position ourselves to accompany movements in their agendas.
- *Better contextualizing our work at regional levels.* We see scope to draw on our increasing global presence more meaningfully in how we contextualize our work at regional and national levels. To do this, we're proposing to localize our strategy, including identifying where to focus cross-regional and national engagement.

To deepen our movement-bridging role, we need to strengthen our organizational capacities, systems, and processes in critical ways. Across all our consultations, partners identified areas where they wanted CESR to increase its engagement and support to their work. In order to do this, we need to grow the size, diversity, and cross-disciplinary competencies of our team. This in turn will require a leap in our fundraising efforts and more support from donors.

Next steps: strategy implementation

We will develop and disseminate a strategy implementation plan later in 2023 that shares more detail on how we will operationalize these tactical shifts.

Our implementation plan will provide a roadmap for advancing our overarching goal and five strategic objectives, and will describe the projects we'll undertake. It will set out:

- The different teams and staff members responsible for implementing the projects.
- A timeframe with key milestones for tracking progress on the strategy.
- Metrics of success and a plan for measuring them.
- How we will allocate resources to drive the strategic plan forward.

We will continue to develop our organizational learning agenda that enables us to listen, iterate, and listen again. This will include expanding our monitoring, learning, and evaluation (MLE) practices both within CESR and with our partners. We'll periodically take stock of who our work is reaching, what they think about it, and how they act as a result. This will be important for ensuring we stay on course and that we can adapt in response to learning, changing context, or shifting assumptions.

We welcome further feedback on our strategy. We know its implementation will be a collective endeavor and look forward to working with partners and allies in carrying it out.



The power of many can transform an economic system that only benefits a few.

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30 YEARS CENTER for
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SOCIAL RIGHTS
Fighting for social justice
through human rights