

The background of the entire page is a photograph showing the silhouettes of several people at a protest or rally. Their arms are raised, and their fists are clenched, set against a bright, hazy sky that suggests a sunset or sunrise. The lighting is warm and backlit, creating a strong contrast between the dark figures and the light sky.

CENTER for
ECONOMIC and
SOCIAL RIGHTS

**Transforming the Global
Economic System:
2023–2027 Strategy**



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 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

Our role and approach

The Center for Economic and Social Rights (CESR) is an international NGO with a radical approach to human rights practice. We recognize the indivisibility and interdependence of all rights but focus specifically on economic, social, and cultural rights as a powerful but underutilized tool for redressing economic injustice. Our role in ensuring these rights are recognized, defended, and advanced is widely acknowledged by NGOs and others around the world.

Our **vision** is of a world where a just distribution of resources and power enables current and future generations to live with dignity, in full enjoyment of their economic and social rights.

Our **mission** is to harness the power of human rights to inspire fairer and more sustainable economies.

We believe the most pressing challenges of our time are caused by, and reproduce, widespread denials of economic, social, and cultural rights, rooted in the global economic system's unjust distribution of resources and power. Our aim is to transform this system.

System change requires a critical mass of organizations across different movements to join forces. We believe a transformative human rights vision can bring together diverse movements, particularly those that are feminist, decolonial, and green. It is not desirable or feasible to seek agreement on a single economic alternative or set of demands. But we need synergies and shared priorities between different agendas.

We're a nimble organization with a broad vision, niche expertise, and a collaborative ethos. Our partners and allies told us this places us uniquely to help break down silos between movements. Our expertise spans a wide range of issues, we engage in a range of spaces, and our skills include translating technical concepts for different audiences. We support our partners in advancing their own agendas, so people trust us to give an honest assessment of political opportunities.



Building on thirty years of activism

Founded in 1993, CESR was the first international NGO dedicated to economic, social, and cultural rights.

- Our early years focused on catalyzing global action, broadening our geographic scope by fostering partnerships and incubating organizations in the Middle East, Latin America, and the United States. This movement building culminated in the establishment of the now independent International Network for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ESCR-Net).
- Following the wave of austerity triggered by the global financial crisis of 2008, we promoted a stronger critique of the neoliberal economic policies escalating inequality and wealth concentration, disproportionately affecting the rights of marginalized communities.
- We have helped partners bring about concrete policy changes in a range of countries and contributed to the knowledge, analytical skills, and the tactical repertoire others draw on to strengthen demands for governments and international financial institutions to account for harms caused.
- Forging alliances beyond the human rights movement, we've produced cutting-edge thinking on translating human rights commitments into guidelines for policy design, implementation, and assessment. We've focused particularly on fiscal policies, including in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals.
- With the COVID-19 pandemic throwing into stark relief globally many fallacies underpinning our dominant economic model, we recognized the need for a strong alternative economic vision. We centered our previous strategy (2020–2023) on the idea of a Rights-Based Economy. Three years later, influential actors such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights have embraced the concept, and interest has grown in the role of human rights in shifting economic narratives.

“CESR is a model of an international organization working to support national groups, aiding in research, advocacy, and building collaborations. CESR's innovation extends beyond methodological tools, encompassing interventions that are local, national, and international in scope.”

Heba Khalil, Senior Advisor, Social Justice Platform (Egypt)

Our Impact



- We've collaborated with hundreds of activists, practitioners, and scholars to design and apply innovative research tools. 'OPERA', for example, is a framework to assess how far governments meet their human rights obligations across four dimensions: Outcomes, Policy Efforts, Resources, and Assessment. The most recent iteration of our research approach, 'Decoding Injustice', has expanded the reach of these tools.



- World leaders' adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015 was a political milestone. We campaigned to ensure the new framework's goals, targets, and indicators fully reflected human rights. Our efforts contributed to a set of far-reaching, comprehensive, equality-sensitive, and universally applicable commitments.



- In 2021, we co-launched the Principles for Human Rights in Fiscal Policy — the result of a long-standing collaboration between organizations in Latin America, with CESR as secretariat. The Principles are a groundbreaking normative tool that national and regional campaigns have used to reform fiscal policy to further human rights.



The context we're in

A recurring theme in our consultations was the deeply rooted coloniality of the global economic system at the center of the polycrisis. In today's globalized world, divergence from global economic rules — which largely reflect the interests of Global North stakeholders — comes with adverse consequences. This denies space to alternatives, such as the Rights-Based Economy.

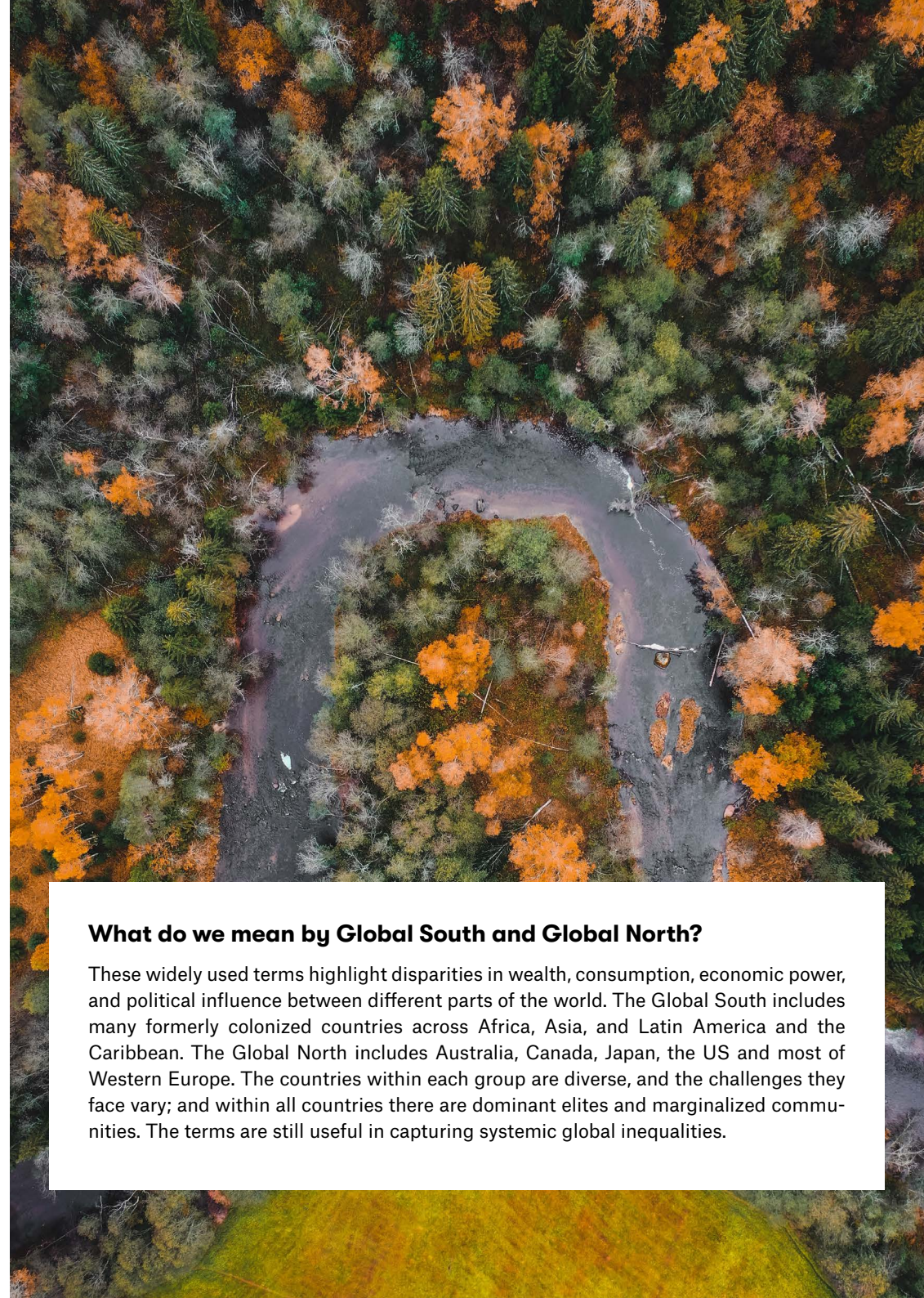
Regressive policies that worsen inequalities continue to proliferate worldwide. In some cases, they are intertwined with populist right-wing movements, authoritarianism, militarization, attacks on human rights defenders, and closing civic space. Global reform efforts must therefore be grounded in, support, and strengthen national struggles to realize rights, redistribute resources, and reinforce democracy.

Governments are debating proposals for major reforms through various multilateral processes. But there's a risk that reforms will entrench, rather than challenge, neoliberalism. The ideological power of economic orthodoxies is strong. Ingrained narratives of 'scarcity' and 'market efficiency' fuel a flawed agenda that seeks to protect profit-making opportunities at the expense of human equity and survival. This has led to a growing push toward the financialization of development, climate, and biodiversity protection — increasing the role of the financial sector, including by treating natural and public resources as financial assets— in reform proposals.

Given the outsized influence of corporate interests and power of colonial legacies, to harness momentum for transformative change demands unprecedented collaboration among NGOs and social movements. Our consultations demonstrated widespread recognition of this and pointed to gaps we must address to achieve it: silos that undermine global solidarity; the multitude of different spaces, highly technical framing, and logistical barriers to participation in international negotiations; the multiplicity of economic alternatives; and comparatively underdeveloped normative guidance on how states should cooperate internationally.

While attempts to strengthen coordination across movements must hold space for a diversity of perspectives, we heard a need to identify synergies between agendas — particularly those that are feminist, decolonial, green, and rights-based — and to translate them into shared priorities.

Appreciation for CESR's movement-bridging work — across issues, geographies, and partners — was a recurring theme in our consultations. We heard a clear demand for us to expand our role and suggestions as to where we can add most value.

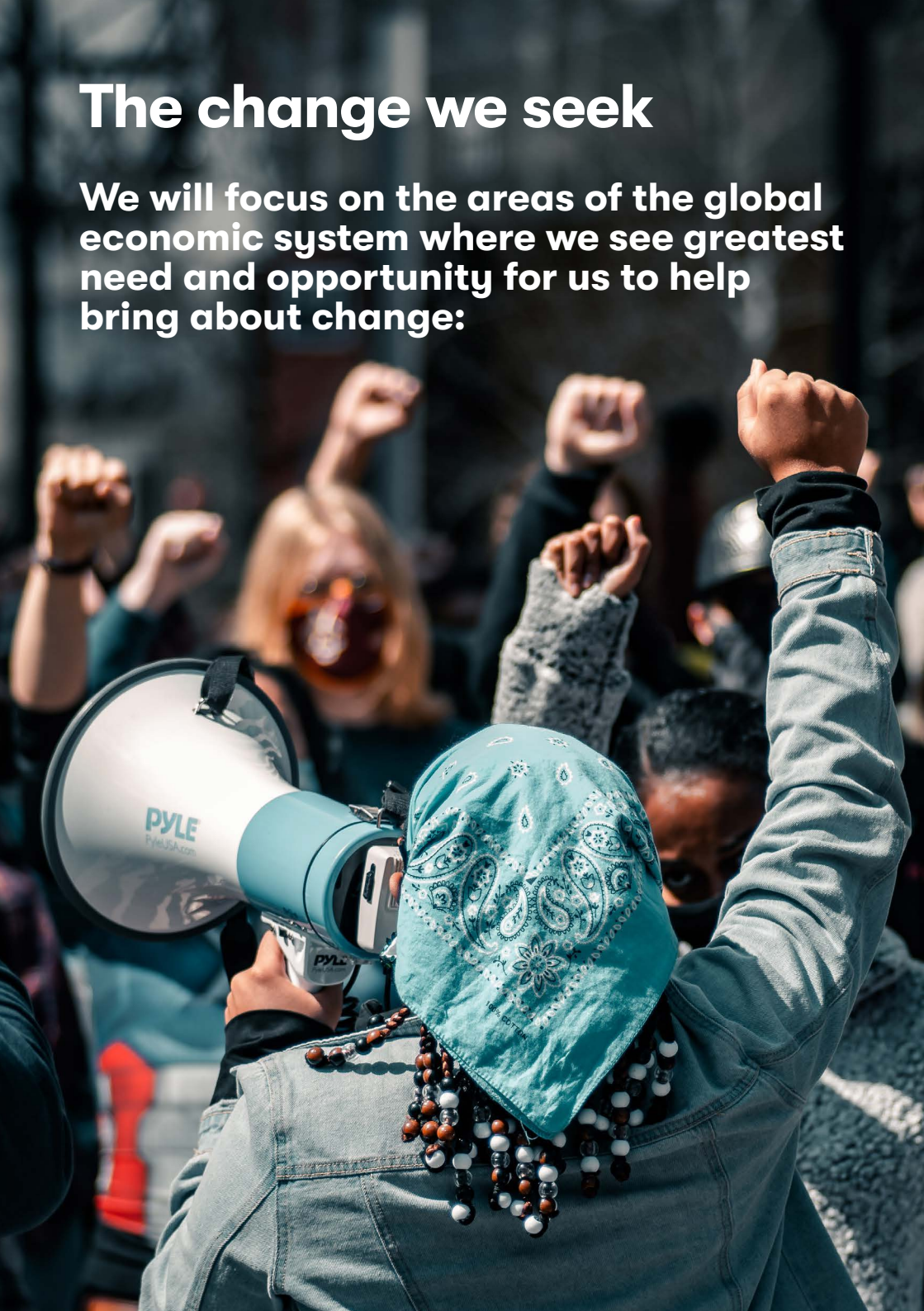


What do we mean by Global South and Global North?

These widely used 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, and Latin America and the Caribbean. The Global North includes Australia, Canada, Japan, the US and most of Western Europe. The countries within each group are diverse, and the challenges they face vary; and within all countries there are dominant elites and marginalized communities. The terms are still useful in capturing systemic global inequalities.

The change we seek

We will focus on the areas of the global economic system where we see greatest need and opportunity for us to help bring about change:



01



Rethinking international financial institutions' role and governance.

02



Ensuring fairer financial flows and wider fiscal space.

03



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

04



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

05



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

Avenues for reform are opening up in international fora. Key events during the next four years will enable allow us to build momentum on the global 'pillar' of the Rights-Based Economy.

2023

2024

2025

• SDG Summit

• Summit of the Future

• World Social Summit

• Discussions on the World Bank Group evolution roadmap

• Fourth Financing for Development Conference

• General Assembly discussions and decision on the development of a new UN Tax Convention

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 is shaped by international agreements, regulations, standards, financial institutions, and markets. The system promotes global capital mobility and 'race to the bottom' competition between countries to attract investment.

Our 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.



Overarching goal

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

How we will work

Agenda setting, thought leadership, and narrative change

Sharing knowledge, building evidence, and connecting across movements

Advocacy and influencing



How we will work



Agenda setting, thought leadership, and narrative change:

- We will conceptualize the human rights approach to economic issues, identify opportunities for change, and assess challenges.
- We will articulate normative arguments that states' human rights obligations extend to radically shifting global economic resources and power.
- We will develop resources to interrogate the narratives underpinning financialization and co-design alternative counter-narratives.



Advocacy and influencing:

- We will critique market-based proposals for reforming the global economic system and develop rights-based alternatives.
- We will engage strategically in global advocacy processes and support others to navigate them.



Sharing knowledge, building evidence, and connecting across movements:

- We will build a more comprehensive body of evidence to demystify the global economic system and show concretely how it harms people's rights.
- We will facilitate mutual learning across movements to deepen collaboration and amplify strategies.
- We will map synergies between different reform and economic alternative proposals, particularly feminist, decolonial, green, and rights-based agendas.
- We will build connections, co-convene conversations, and contribute to collective spaces for shared analysis and joint strategizing on common priorities and critical economic alternative pathways.



Strengthening our capacities

To deepen our movement-bridging role, we aim to strengthen our organizational capacity. We see scope to draw on our team's global presence more meaningfully in contextualizing our work at regional and national levels. **For this reason, our organizational development objective for 2023–2027 is to strengthen the systems and processes supporting our decentralized, globally distributed team to work with diverse movements.**

Across our consultations, partners and allies identified areas where CESR should increase its engagement with and support for their work. For this, we need to grow our team's size, diversity, and cross-disciplinary competencies. This will require a leap in our fundraising efforts and greater support from donors.

We will develop and disseminate a strategy implementation plan later in 2023 that details how we will operationalize our overarching goal and five strategic objectives. The plan will elaborate where we will focus our national, regional, and cross-regional engagement. This includes continuing our regional-level work in Latin America and consolidating the county-level work we've done across North Africa and Southwest Asia, Southern Africa, and South Asia. We will also explore new relationships in regions where we can add value to collective efforts.



We look forward to working with partners and allies in implementing our strategy in line with our organizational values:



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

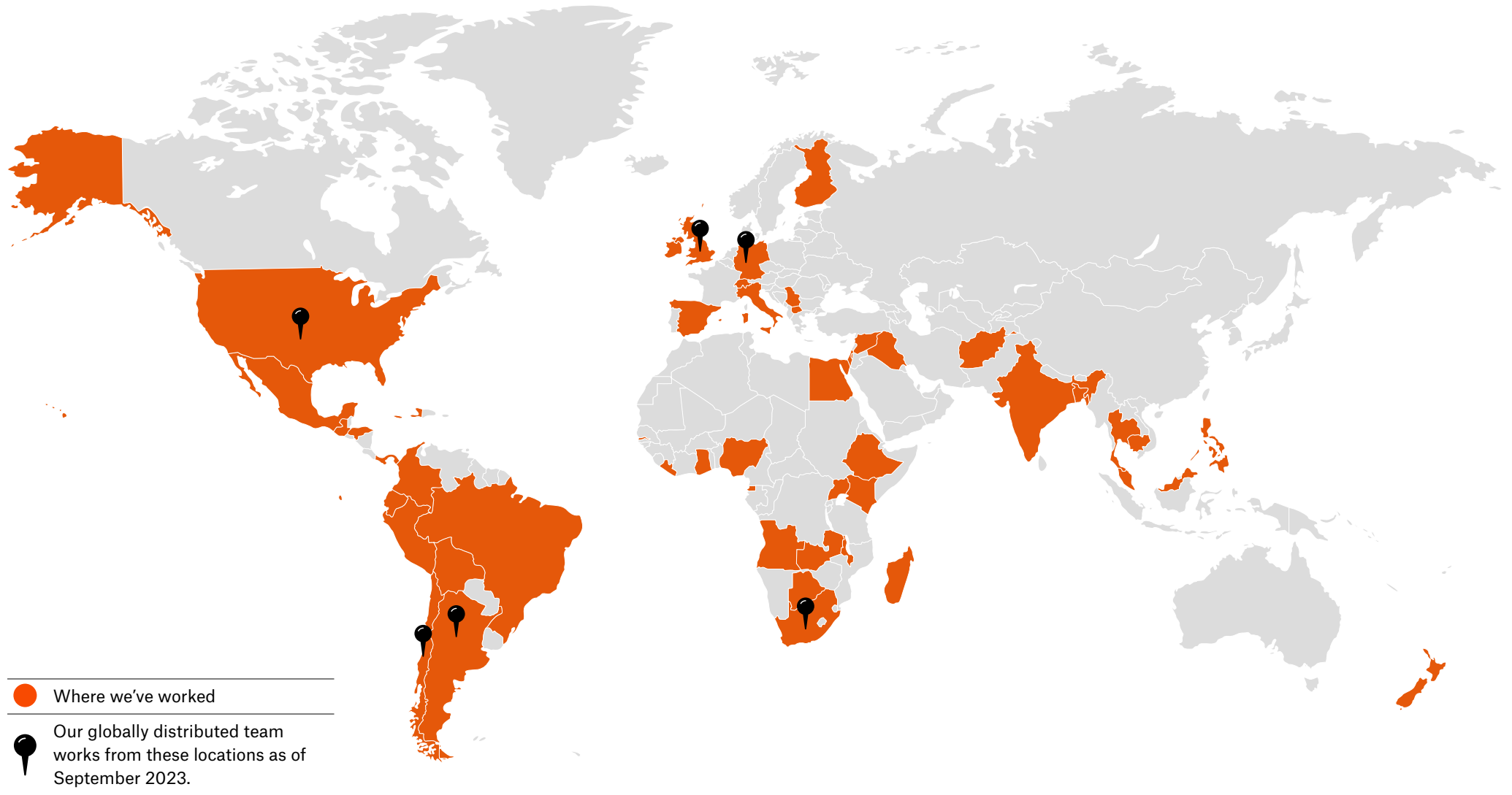
We strive to dismantle power asymmetries in the fields where we work; we're conscious of our institutional positioning, and aim to create space, not take it.



BOLDNESS

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

Join us as we continue to grow our work around the world



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

Here are simple ways in which you can support us:

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Contact us:

1330 Avenue of the Americas

23rd Floor

New York, 10019

+1 (212) 653 0978

info@cesr.org

cesr.org

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The Center for Economic and Social Rights is registered as a 501 (c)(3) nonprofit organization in the state of New York.