



ARE WE ADVANCING TOWARDS A RIGHTS-BASED ECONOMY?

Outcomes of CESR's Mid-Strategy Review process

February 2022

WHAT DID WE SET OUT TO DO?

In July 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded, CESR adopted a new three-year strategy with the goal of envisioning a rights-based economy and catalyzing action towards it. Our strategy aimed to respond to the long-standing inequities which the onset of the pandemic had thrown into stark relief, from escalating inequality to the erosion of workers' rights and public services.

We grounded our strategy in a renewed reflection on CESR's distinctive role within the broader human rights ecosystem. Its approach reflects the conviction that our human rights practice must be *systemic*, tackling the roots of socioeconomic inequality, including the unjust distribution of wealth, resources and power within and between countries. It must be *holistic*, ending the continued marginalization of economic and social rights, and advancing a radically transformative understanding of rights. And it must be *collaborative*, since systemic change can only happen if we build collective counter-power with allied movements working for social, economic and environmental justice.

We set ourselves five objectives aligned with our overarching goal and theory of change:

- To **articulate** a vision of a rights-based economy and increase alignment around it in broader agendas for economic transformation and a just transition
- To **expand** the shared toolkit of methods that the human rights, economic and environmental justice communities use to challenge the systemic causes of economic and social rights abuse
- To **strengthen** the ability of human rights and fiscal justice coalitions to influence how tax and budget policy-makers act on their human rights obligations
- To **shift** the narrative about the role that human rights can play in advancing systemic change to address people's socio-economic grievances; and
- To **boost** our capacities and diversify our capabilities, in order to grow CESR as a global organization with closer connections to the movements and communities we serve.

This note shares our mid-strategy assessment of the progress we've made towards these objectives.

It highlights the shifts we've helped bring about, the changes we've observed in the landscape, and the learnings we've identified for the remainder of the strategy cycle. It reflects the findings of the mid-strategy review carried out between November 2021 and February 2022, drawing on monitoring, learning and evaluation (MLE) data gathered by the CESR team, as well as valuable input from the CESR Board and external partners. We hope it will be of interest to our allies and supporters across the different communities with whom we work.

WHAT SHIFTS ARE WE SEEING AS A RESULT OF OUR WORK?

Proponents for economic transformation are increasingly incorporating human rights tools and analysis into their demands. A central plank of our strategy to date has been to support specific economic reform proposals in the wake of the pandemic by advancing their human rights rationale. Evidence suggests CESR's analysis and arguments have directly influenced the framing of broader civil society demands for:

- [a TRIPS waiver](#) to enable equitable, universal and non-discriminatory access to vaccines
- [debt cancellation and reform](#) to liberate resources in the global South
- [release of IMF reserve assets \(SDRs\)](#) and reallocation to countries most in need
- [new standards to curb corporate tax abuse](#) draining revenues from low/middle-income countries
- [adoption of wealth and excess profits taxes](#) to generate resources and reduce inequality
- [reevaluation and reorganization of care work](#) falling increasingly on women
- [basic income schemes](#) and other steps to expand social protection in response to the pandemic

As these processes tend to be led by economic justice advocates and others beyond the human rights movement, CESR's engagement has been critical in injecting a strong focus on human rights (particularly socio-economic rights), which otherwise risk being referenced in a tokenistic manner or overlooked entirely in these debates. The convening and community-building role we've played over the last year has also helped us promote and track the [uptake of human rights arguments](#) by economic and social justice activists in framing their demands for a just, green and transformative economic recovery.

Influential actors are beginning to embrace the concept of a "rights-based economy". Beyond support for specific reforms, we've been advancing a more comprehensive and propositional vision of a Rights-Based Economy (RBE), one that guarantees the material, social and environmental conditions necessary for all people to live with dignity on a flourishing planet. The RBE concept, outlined in a [joint publication with Christian Aid](#) and accompanying [video](#), has been welcomed and echoed by high-profile figures including UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet; prominent economists such as Jayati Ghosh and Isabel Ortiz; and senior staff from leading economic justice organizations such as Oxfam International and Tax Justice Network. An impressive group of feminist economists and environmental, labor and human rights advocates from around the world will lead a collaborative process to flesh out a "blueprint" for a Rights-Based Economy over the next 18 months, weaving connections to allied paradigms such as the feminist and solidarity economies, degrowth and *buen vivir*.

Economic justice activists have shown growing interest in engaging with human rights approaches and discourse. Since the start of the pandemic, we've seen growing appetite among actors beyond the human rights movement for rights-focused methods to challenge economic injustice. We have held workshops with some 150 activists from different movements to share and co-create tools for [decoding economic and social injustice](#), from extractive industry abuses against indigenous communities in [Colombia and Peru](#) to violations of women's labor rights in [Egypt](#). Activists across sectors have warmly welcomed and widely used other virtual resources, such as our [Recovering Rights](#) briefs unpacking how to use human rights standards to advance a just recovery. From our [conversations with economic justice allies](#), a key value of framing their demands in human rights terms is in helping to shift the focus from charity to entitlement. For many, a rights framing has broad legitimacy and can help build consensus around a common agenda.

There's burgeoning interest in the role human rights can play in shifting narratives about the economy.

Progressive actors have long recognized the need to change mainstream discourses naturalizing the economic status quo. But there's been less exploration of how to use human rights to shift narratives about who and what the economy is for. To this end, CESR has been working with [FrameWorks](#), a social justice communications think tank, and with economic justice activists and academics in [South Africa](#), to map narratives about human rights and the economy, develop and test alternatives, and map changes in specific contexts over time. As narrative change has not received as much attention in the human rights field as in other sectors, our hope is that this action-research will be of service to the broader field.

The pandemic has prompted deeper collaboration between tax justice and human rights activists.

Given the obvious need to mobilize resources to fund pandemic recovery, governments and IFIs have been more receptive to progressive fiscal policies. This has given a boost to our long-standing efforts to bring human rights and fiscal justice advocacy together. These efforts reached a new milestone in May 2021 with the adoption of the [Principles for Human Rights in Fiscal Policy](#), an initiative steered by CESR with six leading human rights and fiscal justice organizations in Latin America. The Principles offer operational guidance for fiscal policy-makers as well as a tool for activists to hold governments, corporations and IFIs accountable. They have been successfully invoked in advocacy for a wealth tax in Argentina, the repeal of austerity measures in Brazil, and constitutional reforms in Chile, and endorsed by regional bodies such as ECLAC and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. Tax justice networks in other regions have also deepened engagement with human rights groups such as CESR, seeing it as a way of reframing tax as a political and moral issue rather than a purely technical one.

HOW HAS THE LANDSCAPE CHANGED?

Opportunities for transformative economic change remain in flux. By simultaneously exposing so many of the fallacies underpinning our dominant economic model, and doing so on a global scale, the pandemic seemed to open a historic window of opportunity for a paradigm shift. Certainly, it has created space in some contexts to advance progressive economic policies that were previously seen as politically unviable, from expansionary public spending to solidarity wealth taxes and universal basic income schemes. While pressure for change has never been stronger, earlier windows of opportunity at the institutional level are now closing in many countries, yielding to the gravitational pull of neoliberal orthodoxies. For example, [over 150 countries are currently putting in place austerity measures](#) aimed at curbing public spending, hiking regressive taxes and reducing social protection coverage - measures supported by the IMF despite earlier shifts away from austerity.

The rhetoric of global cooperation has masked rampant economic nationalism. Despite bolder calls for international solidarity from multilateral institutions and increasing civil society mobilization on transnational issues such as [access to vaccines](#) and [financial transparency](#), multilateral cooperation continues to be undermined by powerful corporate interests and ultranationalist government responses. This has thwarted meaningful progress in global negotiations on the vaccine TRIPS waiver, climate justice, and sovereign debt reform, prolonging the pandemic and widening the gap in recovery trajectories between the global North and South.

The pandemic has been used as a pretext by authoritarian regimes to further restrict civic space.

Compounding the legitimate restrictions necessitated by the pandemic, repressive constraints on participation and protests have intensified the challenges civil society groups face in scrutinizing economic responses and mobilizing for fairer alternatives. Restrictions on international support and

funding in countries with repressive regimes have further limited civil society's ability to operate in such contexts. While virtual advocacy has enabled broader activist engagement in some respects, there is widespread concern that it has less impact on decision-makers and risks reinforcing civil society echo chambers.

CESR's internal context has shifted along with the external landscape. Our strategy recognizes that to change the world we need to change ourselves and our ways of working. We committed to diversifying our capabilities in order to grow as a global organization with even closer connections to the movements and communities we serve. Despite the many challenges posed by the pandemic, we have made significant shifts in this regard since 2020. The CESR team is now located in five continents, with the majority of staff in or from the global South, a strengthened leadership team and new competencies in areas such as environmental and climate justice, strategic communications and operations management. Our organizational effectiveness has also been boosted by more systematic MLE practices, a robust new communications strategy and a carefully managed transition to an entirely virtual and globally dispersed team. A year-long process of internal reflection, prompted by the worldwide mobilizations for racial justice and interrelated struggles, has led us to adopt a strategy for Embodying Equity and Justice (EEJ) in all aspects of organizational life and culture.

WHAT ARE WE LEARNING FROM OUR PROGRESS AND CHALLENGES SO FAR?

We need to keep testing our assumptions about how change happens. The theory of change underpinning our strategy sees three medium-term outcomes of our work: *amplified civil society power*; *more responsive institutions*; and *an improved policy environment*. These are mutually reinforcing: a change in one affects the others, in a virtuous cycle of accountability. Increased mobilization by civil society and social movements will influence the responsiveness of key institutions, which can in turn lead to an improved policy environment in which rights-based economic change can occur. However, in the current context, setting that cycle in motion has proven harder than we imagined, as set out below.

New approaches are needed to build civil society counterpower in a fragmented, virtual environment. Despite growing recognition of the need for cross-movement collaboration, advocacy for economic transformation remains fragmented. The limitations of working virtually, the restrictions on civic space and the need for organizations to attend to immediate pandemic-related crises have all conspired against forming and sustaining new alliances across movements and geographies. In this context, many international NGOs are still operating in sectoral and tactical silos, hampering our efforts to advance human rights as a unifying frame for economic justice. Where we have drawn hope, however, is from people's movements linking rights and economic justice demands instinctively at the community level, such as the farmers' protests in India; from the inspiring cross-border mobilization of indigenous youth at COP26 or of Feminists for a People's Vaccine; as well as from movement-driven political change processes such as in Chile, which have affirmed social rights as central goals of public policymaking. This is prompting us to give greater priority to fostering alliances with community-based organizations and social movements (feminist, labor, indigenous and environmental) as driving forces of economic change.

The institutions most responsive to our advocacy messages are not always the ones with the most influence. We have seen positive uptake of our economic policy recommendations among human rights institutions at the UN, regional and national levels. From Scotland to South Africa, we've seen the important contribution these can make in guiding policy change and holding states answerable to their

commitments, when aided to do so by civil society groups. But this alone will be ineffectual if the international institutions with more direct sway over the economy keep prescribing policies antithetical to human rights. Bodies such as the IMF, World Bank or multilateral development banks remain impermeable to human rights arguments, many still denying that human rights are part of their mandate. Though channels for civil society engagement with these institutions are more limited than those of the human rights system, well-coordinated advocacy by international coalitions on issues such as austerity, debt and SDRs has gained some traction, accounting for the minor shifts in policy, rhetoric and openness to dialogue seen at the IMF, for example. Nevertheless, such shifts are glacial, and often contradicted in country-level programming. We are learning that the best way for us to influence these actors is to weave our rights-based arguments into the collective demands of broader economic justice coalitions, as well grounding our global advocacy messages in the national-level evidence and experience acquired through our web of country partnerships. Opening space for our Ecuadorian partners CDES in [global debt justice initiatives](#), for example, has been crucial in countering IMF rhetoric on the impacts of its austerity policies.

Improvements in the global policy environment have been more superficial than structural. From corporate taxation to vaccine related intellectual-property rights, there have been some important steps forward as a result of the collective advocacy CESR has contributed to at the international level. Yet the woefully inadequate progress made in all cases can be traced to the same factors: the undue weight of wealthier countries in global decision-making and their subservience to the corporate interests they often defend in these spaces. Corporate capture of multilateral institutions has created the conditions in which discussion of rights-aligned policies remain rhetorical and the civil society voices needed to ground these conversations are either excluded or drowned out. In many countries, initially expansionary and state-centric approaches to “building back better” have also become co-opted by corporate interests and narrowed in the rush to return to “business as usual”. A key learning for CESR is that our advocacy must continue to frontally address the skewed structures and dynamics of global economic governance, not only their unjust policy outcomes.

HOW WILL WE ADAPT OUR STRATEGY AS A RESULT?

The mid-strategy review process generated positive feedback on the role and goals CESR has set for itself. In the words of one long-standing ally, *“CESR has made huge progress, and you continue to be the only ones who are really pushing the margins of the envelope in the way that needs to be done.”* But while the review confirmed the continued relevance of our objectives, our plans over the next 18 months will include strategies to incorporate five important shifts in light of the learnings above:

- 1. Focusing our efforts:** The overarching focus of all our work over this period will be on co-designing the blueprint for a [Rights-Based Economy](#) with a cross-movement network of allies. We will center our advocacy efforts on two principal axes of the RBE: [Advancing Fiscal Justice](#) and Transforming Global Economic Governance. Our [Decoding Injustice](#) initiative will build skills and solidarity across movements to advocate for these rights-based paradigm shifts, complemented by the outcomes of our narrative-shifting work in South Africa. Focusing our efforts will also entail strengthening the synergies across these five interrelated projects.
- 2. Expanding our partnerships:** We aim to forge deeper connections with community-based groups and social movements working for the above goals, building on the important partnerships with indigenous, afro-descendant, environmental and climate justice groups established over this

period. We hope to count on our partners, networks and funders to help facilitate new relationships with actors we're less proximate to. We also intend to build on the creative virtual methods we've used to bring actors from different movements together to strategize, including our widely valued [quarterly community calls](#).

3. **Choosing our spaces:** We will continue to carry out our advocacy before both human rights and economic governance institutions, seeking synergies between them. But given the challenges of working in each sphere, we will make more judicious choices in terms of where to selectively deploy our energies. We will press key human rights mechanisms to use the Principles for Human Rights in Fiscal Policy to challenge fiscal injustice in selected countries. And we will work with partners in the global South to shift the unjust power dynamics in international financial forums, which restrict the fiscal space low-and middle-income countries need to meet their rights obligations.
4. **Anchoring our advocacy:** Our ability to bring findings from nationally grounded research into our global advocacy on tax and debt has always strengthened the legitimacy of our arguments. However, since 2020 COVID-19 constraints have limited our ability to carry out the kind of empirical evidence-gathering that we did prior to the pandemic in countries such [Peru](#) and [Botswana](#). Over the next period, we hope to carry out in-depth research and advocacy projects in at least two countries in Latin America, Southern Africa, South West Asia and North Africa (SWANA) and the Asia-Pacific region. These will build on the close partnerships and increased presence we have built in these regions, as well as our analysis of where windows of opportunity lie.
5. **Challenging and changing ourselves:** The last two years have been a period of organizational evolution and diversification, underpinned by the strategy and accelerated by the pandemic context. The next 18 months will see further organizational strengthening as we act on the commitments of the Embodying Equity and Justice strategy, aimed at aligning all aspects of CESR's culture, infrastructure, programming and partnerships with our human rights values.

The review has also yielded valuable insights for us as an organization committed to learning. We've worked hard as a team to strengthen our systems for monitoring, learning and evaluation. We see value in sharing our reflections on progress more publicly, as we've learnt that these resonate with the challenges others are experiencing and that discussing them together can help identify solutions and entry points collectively. We look forward to designing shared MLE frameworks with partners on collaborative initiatives, and to opening more spaces to share learnings with our communities of practice. We hope these reflections can feed into broader civil society and philanthropic discussions about how systems change happens, and how impact is defined, valued and measured.

While sobering in some respects, the findings of the mid-strategy review have redoubled the CESR team's motivation to collectively strive towards the ambitious goal of advancing a Rights-Based Economy. It has been heartening to hear how this concept has fired the imagination of so many of our allies, and that our strategy has been an inspiration to others, offering "*a path forward for many allies in the human rights community*", as one ally put it. We are deeply grateful for the insightful and critical inputs received as part of the review, which will help us adjust course over this next pivotal period.

Any feedback on the observations in this note would be warmly welcome at: learning@cesr.org