Reaction Paper to the Draft Political Declaration for the World Social Summit II (WSSD2)

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INTRODUCTION

Amid mounting global challenges, international efforts to renew commitments to social development are regaining visibility and urgency, though significant gaps remain between ambition and implementation. In this context, the Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND) presents this reaction paper to critically engage with the Draft Political Declaration (REV2) for the World Second Social Summit (WSSD2), scheduled for November 2025. While the draft reaffirms global goals such as poverty eradication, decent work, and social integration, it falls short in addressing the urgent and interconnected challenges facing the Arab region. Structural inequalities, protracted conflicts, occupation, and political instability continue to erode the foundations of social development. These are compounded by economic crises, climate vulnerability, forced displacement, and shrinking civic space, all of which deepen social fragmentation and insecurity. Even though some pressing challenges are acknowledged, it lacks clear and actionable measures to effectively address them and foster an environment where social development can genuinely thrive. Through this paper, ANND calls for stronger Arab civil society engagement to ensure that the WSSD2 outcomes reflect the lived realities of the region and reaffirm the centrality of human rights, democratic participation, and social justice in shaping inclusive and sustainable development agendas.

A) GENERAL ASSESSMENT ON THE DRAFT DECLARATION

- While the Draft Political Declaration rightly refers to human rights challenges and the need to ensure peace and security in accordance with international law, social development, and social justice, it fails to acknowledge the global crisis facing the international legal order itself. In the face of ongoing conflicts, deepening impunity, and the erosion of accountability mechanisms, the Declaration remains silent on the structural failures of the international system, particularly the paralysis of the UN Security Council and other UN frameworks involved in decision-making and crisis response. Without confronting these root causes at both the state level and within global governance structures, any commitment to human rights and justice risks being rhetorical rather than transformative.

- The Draft Political Declaration admits the need to assess the progress in the implementation of the Copenhagen Declaration and Program of Action and the Social dimension of sustainable development. Yet, what has been measured as “progress” in the current available monitoring mechanisms, remains limited. They tend to provide limited and quantitative statistics, rather than genuine accountability towards achieving qualitative and holistic achievements from a human rights-based perspective.

- The affirmation in the Political Declaration of a “full, timely, and effective implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals” is, in simple terms, disconnected from reality. With only five years left until the 2030 deadline, only %17 of SDG targets are on track and developing countries are under unsustainable debt burdens, facing limited fiscal space, and struggling against a $4 trillion annual SDG investment gap. In these conditions, the notion of fulfilling the 2030 Agenda in a timely and effective manner is unrealistic and misleading. The WSSD2 should rather be a momentum of reflection on addressing structural challenges and critical gaps remaining.

B) STRUCTURAL BLIND SPOTS IN ACHIEVING THE WSSD2 GOALS

- The first commitment to poverty eradication goes in the wrong direction by failing to confront the poverty-generating nature of many current economic policies. Funding, capacity building and technical assistance reinforces a top-down logic, overlooking the systemic drivers of poverty including corruption, weak governance, and opaque fiscal systems, which hinder effective use of public resources. Poverty eradication efforts must begin recognizing how economic policy choices, such as austerity, debt servicing, and market-driven reforms often driven by neoliberal frameworks, have deepened inequality and undermined social cohesion. Revisiting and reforming these structural choices, with rights-based policies is needed rather than measures compensating for their impacts. Likewise, the focus on "building resilience" while addressing poverty reduction is misleading, as there is no automatic way out of poverty through resilience. Resilient societies may learn to adapt to shocks but root causes of their poverty remain unaddressed.

- While the declaration outlines a comprehensive framework for promoting decent work and full employment, it does not sufficiently address the structural and intersectional barriers that exclude marginalized groups. In many regions, persistent structural barriers continue to hinder labor market inclusion, and overemphasizing entrepreneurial solutions risks placing the burden of overcoming systemic exclusion on individuals rather than addressing the root causes through inclusive labor and social policies. In this regard, there is no concrete commitment to enhancing access to employment for persons with disabilities, migrant workers, refugees, or those living in conflict-affected areas—populations that remain largely excluded from formal labor markets. In addition, the growing divide between public and private sector working conditions is ignored, as is the pressing need for effective regulation and oversight of private labor markets. Although informal work is mentioned, the absence of enforceable strategies and accountability mechanisms undermines the promise of universal labor rights and comprehensive social protection. The paragraph's treatment of care work is particularly limited, as it frames care primarily as a sector that supports labor force participation, rather than as a central component of a just and sustainable economy. This instrumental approach neglects the intrinsic value of care and the transformative potential of rethinking care as a societal responsibility. This can only be achieved with a commitment to both care society and care economy, which should be integrated across the declaration as a foundational principle.

- Although presenting a broad and inclusive vision on social integration, this section remains limited in practical terms. The commitments are largely aspirational, lacking concrete implementation strategies, timelines, or accountability mechanisms to ensure effective follow-through. Social integration is framed primarily as a cultural and social process, without emphasizing the importance of civic and political rights as essential foundations for inclusion. While the text refers to social cohesion, it overlooks key economic drivers of exclusion such as displacement, inadequate housing, and lack of access to public services. It also fails to address the specific barriers faced by women, youth, older people, indigenous communities, ethnic minorities, and persons with disabilities—groups that are often disproportionately affected by marginalization. In addition, the section does not engage with the broader structural and macro-level factors shaping social cohesion and disintegration. Instead of a narrow sectoral approach targeting specific groups, what is needed is a more comprehensive analysis that considers the overall unity of societies, the internal and external forces influencing integration, and the global dynamics, including conflict and international intervention, that undermine the social fabric. Social cohesion should be understood not as a fixed goal of stability, but as a dynamic process rooted in rights, inclusion, and collective responsibility.

C) ASSESSING THE DECLARATION'S APPROACH TO INTERCONNECTED CHALLENGES

a. Building inclusive and resilient social systems

- The declaration reaffirms the right to food and outlines broad commitments to ending hunger and malnutrition. However, it falls short of adopting a clear rights-based approach and lacks concrete accountability mechanisms to ensure

implementation. It fails to identify and address the root causes of global food crises, including the structural imbalances in the global trade and economic systems, land grabbing, corporate control over food systems, and speculation on food prices. Changing the rules governing food trade and the increasing trend of investing in developing countries' land for export-oriented food production further erode national food sovereignty and deepen global inequality. The emphasis on trade and market-oriented solutions is not counterbalanced by strong support for food sovereignty or by regulatory measures to ensure justice and equity in global food systems. The language does not translate international responsibility into specific actions, commitments, and necessary adjustments in state-to-state relations to uphold the right to food. Moreover, the declaration largely overlooks the specific needs of displaced and crisis-affected populations, who are among the most vulnerable and in urgent need of targeted interventions.

- The declaration recognizes health as a fundamental right and calls for universal coverage and pandemic preparedness. Yet, the text insufficiently addresses the realities of conflict-affected and fragile settings, where access to even basic services is severely limited. Its limited attention to the needs of displaced populations and to critical issues like health workforce shortages highlights a disconnect from the lived experiences of those most at risk. Moreover, while mental health is mentioned, the declaration overlooks other direct and long-term impacts of COVID-19, including disruption of essential services and the widening of health inequalities. Health care provision remains largely shaped by a commercial logic that fuels disparity and exclusion. A more just approach requires questioning the commodification of health and strengthening the public sector's role in ensuring equitable access to comprehensive care.

- Education is also reaffirmed as a core right and pillar of social cohesion, yet the declaration does not adequately address persistent barriers to access and quality, particularly for poor, rural, and displaced populations. Moreover, it references science and technology, mathematical sciences, artificial intelligence, and innovation without emphasizing the need to cultivate critical thinking or invest in the social and economic sciences, philosophy, arts, and literature, which are essential to building just and inclusive societies. The call for strengthened investment and advancing quality education requires further commitment on available resources, yet the document fails to capture the ongoing trend of militarization of budgets globally, at the expense of healthcare and education. A truly transformative vision for education must prioritize human development, civic engagement, and the cultural and social dimensions of learning.

- Access to essential services such as housing, clean water, sanitation, and transportation is addressed in the declaration through broad commitments, including references to urban development. However, it lacks a concrete framework for addressing the intersecting impacts of poverty, displacement, and climate vulnerability on service provision. Ensuring equitable access requires integrated approaches that tackle structural inequalities while promoting bottom-up planning and accountability mechanisms.

b. Addressing structural inequalities and social exclusion

- While recognizing the role of digital technologies in social development, the declaration lacks clear commitments for sustainable investment in infrastructure, particularly in marginalized and rural areas where digital divides remain stark. It promotes artificial intelligence for public services but overlooks critical risks such as bias, privacy violations, and the potential for increased inequalities. Likewise, the text makes no reference to the key challenge of excessive intellectual property protections in developed countries and patent regimes that prevent the use of frontier technologies—such as data and AI—in sectors like health and agriculture, which are vital to achieving sustainable development. Furthermore, the vague language on combating misinformation and protecting free expression risks enabling censorship rather than safeguarding open dialogue. Most importantly, the declaration fails to address the deeper governance challenge: who controls and regulates these technologies, under what frameworks, and in whose interest. Effective digital transformation requires inclusive and transparent governance, involving civil society and affected communities, to ensure that technologies reflect local realities, reduce

inequalities, and uphold fundamental rights.

- Similarly, the declaration's commitment to removing barriers to women's empowerment and equality fails to capture the full scope of challenges faced by women and girls, shaped by poverty, limited access to education and housing, and the compounded effects of insecurity, conflict, and climate crises. Yet, it continues to confine women's roles primarily to the social dimension, overlooking their vital contributions across all spheres—economic, political, environmental, and beyond. A truly inclusive approach must adopt a feminist perspective across all sections of the declaration, including economic policy reform, labor rights, and the care economy. This also requires assessing and addressing the structural factors and root causes that sustain gender inequality, such as discriminatory power dynamics, unpaid care burdens, and the exclusion of women from decision-making spaces. Efforts should be comprehensive and context-sensitive, integrating women's rights into national poverty eradication strategies, guaranteeing universal access to essential services, and protecting women and girls in vulnerable contexts in line with international human rights obligations.

- Regarding migration, the declaration affirms migrants' economic and social contributions but frames migration mainly through political and economic lenses, overlooking the urgent need for social inclusion. Migrants face discrimination, exclusion, and heightened vulnerability, often fueling social tensions. To build cohesive societies, policies must go beyond economic narratives and commit to rights-based, context-sensitive integration strategies that combat discrimination, protect migrants' rights, promote community engagement, and strengthen social cohesion. However, the declaration fails to address the root causes driving migration—such as armed conflict, socio-economic disparities, and forced displacement—which must be confronted to develop truly comprehensive and sustainable responses. It also makes no reference to the securitization of migration or related challenges, including increased border militarization. As a result, the reality of millions facing legal, social, and economic exclusion—particularly in crisis-affected regions—is overlooked.

c. Advancing Climate and Environmental Justice

- The Political Declaration appropriately acknowledges the link between climate change, disasters, and social development, and it notes that inequality and weak infrastructure exacerbate climate impacts. However, the emphasis on inequality could be strengthened, particularly in recognizing how it shapes the capacity of individuals and communities to withstand and recover from climate-related shocks. Over %90 of deaths from climate-related disasters occur in developing countries, where poorer populations are up to four times more likely to be affected by extreme weather due to limited resources, inadequate infrastructure, and restricted access to basic services. Disasters deepen poverty, drive displacement, disrupt livelihoods, and further exclude those already lacking social protection or housing security.

To truly reduce risks and advance inclusive resilience, the Declaration would benefit from a more explicit commitment to preventive action. This includes investing in climate-resilient public infrastructure in underserved areas, securing land and housing rights to reduce displacement, strengthening universal social protection systems that can absorb shocks before crises escalate, and ensuring that early warning systems are accessible to all, especially marginalized communities. Beyond adaptation, a transformative approach must also prioritize climate mitigation and structural shifts toward climate justice—addressing the root causes of environmental vulnerability and embedding sustainability into broader development and economic planning.

d. Financing for Social Development

- The declaration's financing commitments recognize the need for increased investment and reforms of international financial institutions. However, they fall short of emphasizing wealth redistribution and the adoption of fair and progressive tax systems as central pillars for achieving equitable social development.

- Transparent and accountable governance, which is essential for effective fund allocation and tangible impact on the ground, is notably underdeveloped in the framework.
- While the text refers to reforming the global financial architecture, it does not adequately confront its deep-rooted structural flaws—including unsustainable debt burdens,

restrictive conditionalities, and imbalances in decision-making power—that continue to restrict the fiscal space of developing countries. Moreover, the declaration lacks specific proposals or commitments to transform the international financial system in a way that prioritizes social investment over military expenditure and security-driven allocations. It also overlooks the role of the UN in leading inclusive, multilateral efforts to advance financing for development, including through frameworks on debt sustainability, fair taxation, and financial accountability. To truly advance social development, a more progressive position is needed—one that centers redistributive justice, transparent and accountable public resource management, and ambitious, concrete reforms in global financial governance. This must include binding commitments on debt relief and restructuring, global tax justice measures to combat tax evasion and illicit financial flows, and more inclusive decision-making spaces under the UN rather than limited, creditor-driven platforms.

D) CONCLUSION AND WAY FORWARD

- To move from vision to meaningful change, the Political Declaration must go beyond reaffirming principles and begin addressing the realities on the ground.

- While it outlines an ambitious agenda on social development goals, it stops short of offering the concrete mechanisms needed to turn these goals into action. Without clear strategies, practical steps, and accountability measures, the declaration risks remaining a statement of intent rather than a roadmap for action.

- The declaration makes only limited reference to civil society, with vague commitments to meaningful collaboration. Yet, such collaboration must be clearly defined, especially given the frequent tokenistic inclusion of civil society, shrinking civic space, and the reliance on ad hoc engagement. A rights-based approach requires structured, institutionalized participation within an enabling environment, alongside strong community engagement that ensures local voices shape both policies and outcomes. Crucially, the text overlooks the indispensable role of regional organizations and civil society actors, whose local knowledge, community ties, and long-term engagement are essential to turning global commitments into concrete outcomes.

- In regions such as the Arab world—where war, occupation, displacement, and state violence intersect with economic precarity—regional perspectives and intertwined challenges' omission is not just a gap; it undermines the very foundation of any credible social development agenda.

- As the process toward WSSD2 continues, it is vital to shift from broad aspirations to concrete commitments that recognize regional specificities, confront structural obstacles, and meaningfully engage civil society.

- To ensure that the commitments outlined in the declaration lead to real and measurable progress, a robust follow-up and review mechanism must be established. This mechanism should include periodic assessments at short and regular intervals—not distant future dates—to evaluate implementation, address emerging gaps, and adapt to evolving challenges. Without such timely and structured reviews, the political declaration risks becoming a one-time pledge rather than a living framework for sustained action on social development.