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Reflections on the Major Groups and other Stakeholders (MGoS) System

Why reflect?

“Women are often not even let in the door. The Major Group structure provides a guaranteed slot in the door. It's never enough, it's always very thin, but it's that guardianship that gives us the chance to make it stronger and is so important.”

Since the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals, the Major Groups and other Stakeholders (MGoS) have been absolutely critical to the processes of implementation, monitoring, and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Each constituency finds ways to self organize its civil society networks to advocate, initiate, and share knowledge in regards to the Sustainable Development Goals, strengthening the efforts of and often working in tandem with other actors in sustainable development.

Since the Major Group inception in Agenda 21 at the Earth Summit in 1992, Major Groups and other Stakeholders have only evolved to become more organized. As we continue to pursue the 2030 Agenda, and the conversation around High Level Political Forum (HLPF) reform process, it is critical that civil society remains involved and consulted in the inclusive, structured form already provided and mandated to the MGoS system.

This brief paper aims to highlight the construction of the Major Groups, their importance and influence in HLPF and other UN bodies and forums, and the value they - in particular the Women's Major Group and its structure - hold for advancing feminist perspectives and building women's power at local, regional, and global levels. Interviews and conversations with current Organizing Partners and other members of the Women's Major Group have informed the personal and organizational testimony this paper relies upon.

Including Those Most Likely to Be Left Behind

For the Organizing Partners in the Women's Major Group, the existence of the network is critical to amplifying civil society's voices in global governance processes. The Major Group structure

provides a clear, intentionally democratic framework that enables diverse constituencies to have a voice in the UN process. There is a clear and rich history that was developed, and that feminists and activists fought for, to enable this kind of democratic participation. While the structure is imperfect, with room to grow in realizing its ambitions of truly representative participation, it does provide a framework that enables open, transparent, democratic processes and, critically, enables self-organizing by different constituencies. One member of the Women's Major Group spoke about that self-organizing specifically in relation to feminist demands:

“It's been a really valuable space for the Women's Major Group, because feminists and women's rights organizing is super powerful, and has been able to self organize and collectively organize really well. We have moved from a “women's space” to a feminist space in the Women's Major Group, and brought that vision and perspective into the the rest of the Major Groups. We can see now that the MGoS has been pushing a much more progressive agenda because of the leadership of the WMG. So to me, it's really important that we maintain the Major Group structure so that we sustain that democratic space. We need to build on the organizing history, and of course improve it where we can, but not lose it in the process.”

As this member stressed, Major Groups influence and inform each other's work by providing the space for self-organizing according to each constituency's priorities and capacities. This self-organizing is often the only way that the voices of the most marginalized might reach the halls of the UN. As another member of the WMG put it, *“The Major Groups and other Stakeholders process, is really so far -- though we must always work to improve it-- the best way to include those most likely to be left behind.”*

Building Civil Society Power Regionally

Just as critical to MGoS presence in official UN spaces is their presence outside of them. Major Groups have been instrumental in building regional power in preparation for global processes, collecting experiences, strengthening regional knowledge sharing, and coordination efforts. The WMG has been a leader on this front as well. One member articulated this as the most significant part of the WMG's work.

“What has been very successful has been actually adopting the MgoS system to the regions, but making it even stronger. Right now, we are all looking at the example of the Asia Pacific and how they have self-organized very strong civil society movements. This includes groups which are not registered, and specifically represented underrepresented groups, like migrants or landless farmers or so, and they have invested a lot of time and effort in that. They have been very successful.”

Learning from the work done at the regional level informs and strengthens the work at the global level, as it brings Major Groups closer to ensuring civil society's voices - especially the most marginalized - are foregrounded in their advocacy. Building partnerships and coordination at the regional level, and strengthening civil society participation in this process, is crucial for actual implementation at the regional level. One member noted,

“The SDGs are about implementation, and you have to do it on the ground. If you can't have participation of the feminist organizations at the local and national level, then this won't work. So we really need to create that type of space at the national and local level as well.”

Due to the democratic nature of the MGoS system, broader regional civil society participation ensures stronger accountability at the global level, and Major Groups are uniquely positioned to coordinate these civil society consultations. They provide the space to shift demands according to local contexts, and shape the initiatives, projects, and text from the global level in order to be most effective in their own region.

“The idea is that at a regional level, you're going to have a dedicated space for this constituency, with the ability for democratically-accountable governance with substantial feminist and women's rights agenda, and that engages with broader stakeholders. You have feminists in the Asia Pacific regional forums saying, for example, “no we don't want to have a stakeholder group on business, we're going to make it small enterprises.” It's a platform for voice, really, and because the Asia Pacific region has been able to adopt it to the regional level, it's actually I think even potentially stronger than it was at the global level.”

Looking Forward

Four years into the SDGs, it is clear that member states are not on track to meet the goals laid out in the 2030 Agenda. Discussion around reform and HLPF's inadequacy to meet its mandate are evolving into demands, and visions for transformational action are overdue. As we ask ourselves what is next, we must remain grounded in the power built collectively already within the Major Group structure, regionally and globally. Members of the Women's Major Group are optimistic about the direction the Major Groups are heading, and the potential for exchange and growth amongst each other.

“So to me, my hope for the WMG is that during this series of transitions as we're moving forward, we will never lose that herstory and that we continue to build on it and make it even stronger. This is why we're so brave and impactful-- because we've managed to find

how all of us can support all of us together while still being experts in our own field and while still supporting local voices.”