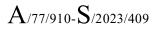
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Integrated and coordinated implementation of and follow-up to the outcomes of the major United Nations conferences and summits in the economic, social and related fields

Follow-up to the outcome of the Millennium Summit

The responsibility to protect and the prevention of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity

Development and the responsibility to protect: recognizing and addressing embedded risks and drivers of atrocity crimes

Report of the Secretary-General*

Summary

At the 2005 World Summit, States Members of the United Nations affirmed their responsibility to protect their own populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. States agreed to support each other in realizing the stated responsibility under the concept of the responsibility to protect, and to take collective action, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations, where States were unable or unwilling to do so themselves. As has been reiterated in successive annual reports of the Secretary-General on the responsibility to protect, the commitment requires that States provide accountable leadership, take purposeful decisions and make significant investment to integrate the prevention of atrocity crimes across domestic strategies, policies, programmes and institutions.

The present report provides an examination of the interrelationship between sustainable development and the responsibility to protect. It includes a recognition that development can build the conditions for sustainable peace, equitable growth and accountable governance and thereby cement the prospects for realizing the fundamental purposes and objectives of the responsibility to protect. At the same time, development deficits or exclusions have the potential to trigger and escalate mass atrocity risks, especially when combined with other critical factors. The risk factors,

⁴ The present report was submitted late owing to delays caused by additional consultations which became necessary in its finalization.





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drivers and multipliers of atrocity crimes as they relate to sustainable development are discussed in the present report. Member States are encouraged to recognize the intersection between development and the responsibility to protect and to leverage development programming across the spectrum of atrocity risk assessment, early warning, preparedness and response to avoid, reduce or mitigate these risks and occurrences.

I. Introduction

1. The responsibility to protect was endorsed in the 2005 World Summit outcome document and has since been reaffirmed in successive United Nations resolutions.¹ The General Assembly decided in 2021 to include an item entitled "The responsibility to protect and the prevention of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity" in its agenda and mandated the Secretary-General to report annually on the subject.²

2. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development sets out a shared blueprint for prosperity in the form of the Sustainable Development Goals. Under the 2030 Agenda, Member States committed "to end poverty and hunger everywhere; to combat inequalities within and among countries; to build peaceful, just and inclusive societies; to protect human rights and promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls; and to ensure the lasting protection of the planet and its natural resources [and] to create conditions for sustainable, inclusive and sustained economic growth, shared prosperity and decent work for all, taking into account different levels of national development and capacities".³ As an integrated agenda, the Sustainable Development Goals are a recognition that "[t]here can be no sustainable development without peace and no peace without sustainable development".⁴ The Goals are a call for action by all countries – developed and developing – in a global partnership.

3. The present report provides an examination of the relationship between the challenges to sustainable development and the risks, causes and drivers of atrocity crimes. This relationship was acknowledged in the conception of the responsibility to protect,⁵ as well as in its subsequent conceptual and operational development. The relationship between sustainable development deficits and the risks, causes and drivers of atrocity crimes has also been raised in previous reports of the Secretary-General on the responsibility to protect.⁶ The present report is aimed at deepening the analysis of this relationship. To that end, it includes an examination of the particularities, risks, causes and dynamics of the four atrocity crimes covered by the responsibility to protect that are linked to critical development concerns. It also provides an outline of ways in which development can be leveraged towards the realization of the cardinal objectives of the responsibility to protect.

¹ As of the end of 2022, 89 Security Council resolutions and presidential statements, 35 General Assembly resolutions and 71 Human Rights Council resolutions referencing the responsibility to protect had been adopted.

² General Assembly resolution 75/277.

³ General Assembly resolution 70/1, para. 3.

⁴ Ibid., preamble.

⁵ In the part of its report focusing on armed conflict and the need to pursue long-term effective preventive strategies, the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty underscored that "it is common to differentiate between underlying or 'root' and precipitating or 'direct' causes" and that "there is a growing and widespread recognition that armed conflicts cannot be understood without reference to such 'root' causes as poverty, political repression, and uneven distribution of resources", and went on to highlight that "root cause prevention may also mean tackling economic deprivation and the lack of economic opportunities", the strategies for which it then elaborated. See *The Responsibility to Protect, Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty* (International Development Centre, Ottawa, 2001), paras. 3.19 and 3.22.

⁶ A/63/677, A/68/947-S/2014/449 and A/73/898-S/2019/463, among others.

II. Development in the context of atrocity risk and drivers

4. Beyond the midway point to 2030, the Sustainable Development Goals are in deep trouble. Only about 12 per cent of Goal targets are on track to be met by 2030. The remaining are off track, with some stagnating and even regressing against 2015 baselines.⁷

5. The world faces a series of global challenges, including the enduring impacts of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, armed conflicts, climate emergencies, and the financial, food and energy crises. Combined, these crises have exacerbated global inequalities and poverty for the world's most vulnerable populations.⁸ They have also set back development gains in many areas. In both 2020 and 2021, the human development index value fell for 90 per cent of countries.⁹ The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development estimates that about 100 million people have fallen into extreme poverty following the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁰ In this grim environment, development cooperation urgently needs to be adapted in response to the multidimensional vulnerabilities that populations face.¹¹ The need to identify and address the risks for mass atrocities, which have increased with the rise of extreme poverty, inequality and conflict in recent years, is a crucial dimension of this challenge.

6. Mass atrocities are the confluence of a set of structural factors, political dynamics, triggers to violence, and patterns of targeting during violence. However, there are clear patterns that hold across atrocities, which enables risks and the likelihood of mass atrocities to be identified. These patterns are deeply rooted in central development concerns, including societal inequalities, weak institutions and political instability.¹²

7. The present section of the report includes a consideration of some of the major risk factors and drivers of atrocity events rooted in the economic, social, governance, conflict and human rights development contexts within States.

A. Underdevelopment and poverty

8. While chronic underdevelopment does not, in and of itself, cause strains among different ethnic, religious or cultural communities, underdevelopment, extreme poverty and inequality could present structural risks for atrocities. ¹³ Difficult economic conditions, when compounded by other forms of political grievance or exogenous shocks (such as sharp rises in the cost of food or fuel), can drive instability, unrest, repression or mass violence.

9. While there are pockets of extreme poverty in most countries, the incidence of poverty tends to be higher in those which are conflict-affected.¹⁴ Some of these countries are also typically characterized by resource scarcity, which can lead to intercommunal disputes, grievances and competition over access to and redistribution of wealth, often articulated along ethnic, regional and religious lines. Abounding environmental factors such as land degradation caused by mismanagement, climate change, extreme drought, water scarcity

⁷ A/78/80-E/2023/64.

⁸ The Sustainable Developments Goals Report 2022 (United Nations publication, 2022).

⁹ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Human Development Report 2021/2022: Uncertain Times, Unsettled Lives – Shaping our Future in a Transforming World, United Nations publication, Sales No. E.22.III.B.4.

¹⁰ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *Development Co-operation Report 2023: Debating the Aid System* (Paris, OECD Publishing, 2023).

¹¹ E/2023/48.

¹² United Nations, "Framework of analysis for atrocity crimes: a tool for prevention" (2014).

¹³ A/63/677, para. 43.

¹⁴ Ibid.; see also Paul Corral and others, *Fragility and Conflict: On the Front Lines of the Fight against Poverty* (Washington, D.C., World Bank, 2020).

and overpopulation may exacerbate these social and political strains and could spawn conflicts, violence and mass atrocity events.

B. Food insecurity

10. Food insecurity, including hunger, famine and starvation, is a critical development concern that has thus far not featured in responsibility to protect frameworks. Recognition of food-related deprivations in the context of the responsibility to protect would be an acknowledgement of the role that starvation and blockades may play in the commission of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.¹⁵ The development community is well positioned to address issues of food insecurity through monitoring patterns of food insecurity, hunger, famine and starvation and alerting the international community to potential or early signs of mass atrocities.

C. Stressors on social resilience

11. Sustainable development plays a critical role in building the social resilience of populations to mitigate the multidimensional vulnerabilities generated by overlapping crises and fragility.¹¹ Strengthening social resilience through development is crucial for protecting populations from mass atrocities, as vulnerabilities are often created or exacerbated by wider policies and practices of exclusion, discrimination or persecution. Patterns of vulnerability established in peacetime play a vital role in shaping the nature of violence during atrocities and the likelihood of particular groups being targeted. Likewise, patterns of child recruitment and victimization often follow those of pre-conflict social vulnerability and can escalate into violent conflicts and mass atrocities in which children are killed, maimed, detained and tortured, raped or subjected to other forms of sexual violence on a targeted basis.¹⁶ An understanding of these and other patterns of violence should inform atrocity-sensitized approaches to building social resilience.

D. Governance-related drivers of atrocities

12. Sustainable Development Goal 16 commits Member States to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions. Effective governance promoted through development, including strong institutions that are transparent and accountable,¹⁷ respect for the rule of law, effective national human rights institutions and security sector reform, can mitigate the risk of creating an environment that could lead to atrocities.

13. On the other hand, absence or deterioration of the rule of law directly contributes to political instability that might trigger atrocities. In severe cases, the likelihood of arbitrary exercise of power, violent repression of civilians and opponents to maintain power and political control, and elevated levels of impunity is amplified.

14. Development that promotes inclusive democratic societies can directly support atrocity prevention by fostering accountable and representative political leadership.

¹⁵ The Security Council has strongly condemned the use of starvation of civilians as a method of warfare and the unlawful denial of humanitarian access in situations of armed conflict (see Council resolution 2573 (2021)).

¹⁶ A/76/844-S/2022/428.

¹⁷ A/67/929-S/2013/399.

Political leadership that is accountable to populations can serve as an effective restraint on mass atrocities by addressing the key drivers of violence and reining in violence in times of crisis.¹⁸

15. Accountability is vital for the prevention of atrocities.¹⁹ Impunity that is historical in a society or persists across leadership and institutions undermines the rule of law, sows the seeds for future violence and increases the risk of atrocities.

E. Discrimination and other violations and abuses of human rights

16. Discriminatory ideologies and policies of exclusion that deny populations social, economic, cultural, civil and political rights are significant risk points for genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.²⁰ While individual human rights transgressions are not mass atrocities in and of themselves, specific patterns and types of human rights violations feature consistently in the lead-up to mass atrocities.¹⁷ Therefore, development programmes that strengthen national human rights protection systems and are embedded in inclusive sustainable development are supportive of the objectives of the responsibility to protect by shoring up early warning mechanisms and providing protection for populations from violations and abuses of human rights that can lead up to mass atrocities.

17. The propensity for a State or another actor to carry out large-scale human rights violations does not arise spontaneously but rather from pre-existing patterns of systemic violations and impunity. A sudden deterioration of human rights, especially where violations are directed towards a particular identity group, can be an early warning sign for atrocities. Early warning through the special procedures of the Human Rights Council, and the Commission on Human Rights before it, have on many occasions alerted the international community to imminent mass atrocities.²¹

18. Genocide and ethnic cleansing are extreme forms of identity-based targeting. Discriminatory policies that are evident prior to (or part of) genocidal processes include the deprivation of social, cultural, economic, political and civil rights, the exclusion of targeted groups from society and the denial of their basic humanity.²² Since the rights violated in these situations are key to meaningful sustainable development, it is important that development programming be sensitized to the patterns and scale of deprivation directed towards specific identity groups, as it can be a warning of mass atrocity risk.²³

F. The presence of armed conflict

19. The number of armed conflicts worldwide is rising,²⁴ undermining significant development progress. States and international development actors have recognized the complex interrelationship of risk and vulnerability in conflict settings and the need to balance long-term development strategies to prevent conflict with emergency

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ A/71/1016-S/2017/556.

²⁰ A/68/947-S/2014/449.

²¹ See, for example, E/CN.4/1994/7/Add.1, paras. 79–81.

²² For example, recognizable patterns of systematic human rights violations were directed against targeted population groups in the lead-up to the Holocaust and the genocide in Cambodia.

²³ General Assembly resolution 43/29.

²⁴ UNDP, Human Development Report 2021/2022.

humanitarian response. Research suggests that armed conflict is also the most significant risk factor for the occurrence of mass atrocities.²⁵

III. Leveraging development for the prevention of and response to atrocities

A. The fundamental responsibility and role of States

1. High-level political commitment, national ownership of the responsibility to protect and a whole-of-government approach

20. Responsibilities for sustainable development and the responsibility to protect belong first and foremost with Member States. Pathways to integrate atrocity prevention and response and institutionalize a responsibility to protect lens will be specific to each national context. Nonetheless, key learnings and common themes across Member States can support and guide the development of these pathways. A whole-of-government approach will ensure coherence of national responses to preventing atrocities in the context of development. Moreover, institutionalizing atrocity prevention functions can enhance coordination and ensure that expertise is preserved. Over 60 countries have designated responsibility to protect focal points to orchestrate and advance coordination for national implementation of the responsibility to protect.²⁶ The focal points are linked to a global network that supports peer-to-peer learning and international partnerships to shore up State-level efforts.

2. Developing capacity through national mechanisms for atrocity prevention

21. The participation and active engagement of government and non-government actors in atrocity prevention is critical. This can be supported through formal institutions and processes that connect atrocity prevention efforts with local government, communities and civil society, and include traditional forms of justice.²⁷

3. Strategies aimed at poverty alleviation and economic equality

22. Sensitizing economic development strategies to the responsibility to protect involves ensuring that the strategies do not exacerbate the risks or drivers of atrocities. In addition, strategies aimed at poverty alleviation can be aligned to ensure that they pinpoint risks, patterns and trends of deprivation and inequality likely to foment or escalate atrocity risks or drivers.

23. The effective management and regulation of natural resources can reduce sources of tension generated by competition over scarce resources. It can also prevent the resources being used to fund armed conflict. To address the risk of future violence, governance reforms can strengthen institutions and the rule of law, improve the resilience of communities and complement broader peacebuilding processes.

²⁵ Scott Straus, Fundamentals of Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention (Washington, D.C., United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, November 2014).

²⁶ On the global responsibility to protect focal point initiative, see www.globalr2p.org/the-globalnetwork-of-r2p-focal-points.

²⁷ Examples of such mechanisms can be found in Global Action against Mass Atrocity Crimes Africa Working Group, "Training toolkit: establishing and managing national mechanisms for mass atrocity prevention" (2021). Available from https://gaamac.org/wp-content/uploads/ 2022/07/RL AWG-toolkit FINAL EN.pdf.

4. Improving the measurement and monitoring of sustainable development indicators, in particular through a lens of assessing atrocity risk

24. Monitoring indicators of social resilience relating to poverty, inequality, health, education and food security is relevant to atrocity prevention. In line with target 17.18 of the Sustainable Development Goals, data should be disaggregated by income, gender, age, race, ethnicity and migratory status. Sustainable development strategies should be developed in consultation with local communities and be responsive to population groups exhibiting increased vulnerability. This can enable the integration of atrocity prevention into sustainable development policies in a manner that is intersectoral and targeted to priority groups, when necessary and appropriate.

5. Targeting governance reforms towards rule of law and accountability measures that address atrocity risk

25. Meaningfully addressing institutionalized discrimination, marginalization and sources of social inequality that can trigger or drive atrocities requires governance reforms which promote inclusiveness and accountability, such as representative and inclusive political processes, independent and robust judiciaries, access to justice, and the general strengthening of the rule of law in line with Sustainable Development Goal 16.

26. Impunity for mass violence and grave human rights violations is a significant risk factor for atrocities and cripples the rule of law and development objectives. It can be addressed through investigating, prosecuting and adjudicating atrocity crimes; facilitating transitional justice processes, including truth-telling and reparations; and promoting justice, reconciliation and the rule of law.²⁸ Addressing hate speech and ensuring the protection of historically discriminated against and persecuted minority groups is also crucial.

6. Strengthening the national human rights protection system to monitor risks and protect at-risk populations

27. National human rights mechanisms, human rights ombudspersons and mediators play crucial roles in preventing human rights violations,²⁹ strengthening the rule of law and providing accountability, and protecting the rights of populations. They are also powerful tools for monitoring identity-based discrimination and patterns of grave human rights violations that indicate increased risk of atrocity crimes.

7. Addressing armed conflict and advancing peacebuilding

28. National peacebuilding strategies aimed at the prevention of conflict and postconflict recovery are most effective if they include the full representation and participation of populations that have experienced or are at elevated risk of atrocity crimes. The full participation of religious leaders and faith-based actors,³⁰ civil society, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations, including indigenous communities, women's and youth organizations, schools and the media, is also crucial. These actors can lead and contribute to peacebuilding efforts and build just and inclusive societies that are responsive to atrocity risk.³¹

²⁸ A/HRC/37/65.

²⁹ A/75/224.

³⁰ See Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors to Prevent Incitement to Violence that could lead to Atrocity Crimes (2017), available from www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/ Plan%20of%20Action%20Advanced%20Copy.pdf.

³¹ A/75/863-S/2021/424.

8. Inhibiting the means to commit mass atrocities

29. Security sector reforms can play a crucial role in addressing the risk of atrocities. These can include effective disarmament and the regulation of the flow of weapons, including deterring the supply of weapons to terrorist actors or the stockpiling of weapons and military hardware that could be used to carry out mass violence. More comprehensively, security sector reform entails achieving effective and accountable security for the State and its citizens, without discrimination and with full respect for human rights and the rule of law. It is both a preventive measure and a long-term development goal. The nexus between security and development is now widely acknowledged. The reform of the security sector, in particular in conflict-affected societies, creates an environment conducive to political and socioeconomic growth.

B. The international community

1. Prioritizing the nexus between the responsibility to protect and development

30. Development approaches can give emphasis to the nexus between the responsibility to protect and development in accordance with the second pillar of the responsibility to protect. Bilateral donors, regional and international organizations, multilateral development banks, international financial institutions, the private sector, NGOs and civil society can integrate the responsibility to protect into development activities, including through the steps outlined below.

2. Development frameworks that detect and respond to atrocity risks and drivers

31. Development actors that are sensitive to and aware of the risk of mass atrocities could engage with experts trained to assess and monitor atrocity risks in their programmes and field operations. The principle of "do no harm" can be applied throughout frameworks and activities to ensure that assistance does not exacerbate atrocity risk. Development actors can be particularly attentive to governance reforms, security and economic growth assistance that have historically been insufficiently attuned to atrocity risks, such as the persecution of minorities.

32. Thus, investment in governance institutions to promote peace, justice and inclusion (Sustainable Development Goal 16) can be carefully tailored to respond to specific governance-related drivers of atrocities in each development context. This includes addressing patterns of discrimination, exclusion and human rights violations to enhance the ability of States to manage diversity and protect minorities, and promote transparency, accountability, peace and social cohesion. Inclusive political processes can also be designed to mitigate potential sources of political instability experienced during periods of transition.

3. Sensitization of public development banks and international financial institutions to atrocity risks

33. Public development banks and international financial institutions play a significant role in development assistance to States to reduce poverty and promote sustainable development. They can take action to ensure that their activities do not create new forms of vulnerability or exacerbate pre-existing social tensions that in turn increase atrocity risk. This includes undertaking human rights assessments in accordance with the guiding principles on human rights impact assessments of economic reform policies³² to determine if and how any of their activities create or exacerbate existing human rights concerns. By including atrocity indicators, these

³² A/HRC/40/57.

assessments can help to identify atrocity risks that may be associated with their activities. They can also be used to develop robust safeguards.³³ Public development banks and international financial institutions can also invest in activities that alleviate atrocity risks in the communities being supported.

4. Identifying and responding to patterns of social deprivation and food insecurity that point to atrocity risk

34. International development actors can monitor patterns of social deprivation and food insecurity within societies and evaluate risk as part of atrocity early warning systems. International assistance to support social resilience can be used to address concerning patterns should they arise.

5. Integrating an atrocity lens into conflict and fragility programming

35. Atrocity crimes are most likely to occur in contexts of conflict and fragility. International development actors can leverage existing programming on conflict and fragility to detect atrocity risks in early warning assessments. Several regional and subregional organizations have dedicated mechanisms for early warning and conflict prevention, including the African Union, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Economic Community of West African States and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development. These dedicated mechanisms are well placed to include specific capabilities on atrocity early warning, prevention and response.

6. Inhibiting the capacity to commit atrocities

36. In complement to broader security sector reform (discussed above), Member States and international actors can target the illegal flows of small weapons and illicit trade to prevent actors from accumulating the means to commit atrocities. Respecting arms embargoes imposed by the United Nations plays a crucial role in this regard. Designing disarmament and demobilization efforts that are sensitive to early warning signs of impending atrocities is also vital.²⁰

7. The role of private sector actors in supporting the responsibility to protect

37. Private sector actors can assess atrocity risks, understand vulnerabilities among local communities affected by their activities, and design and disclose business strategies that both contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and take atrocity risks into consideration. This can include conducting assessments to understand how diverse groups, including women, indigenous and local communities, are affected by their actions. Subsequently, such assessments can inform measures to ensure that their actions do not exacerbate existing social stressors that could contribute to atrocities.

C. United Nations development system

38. The United Nations Development system is present in 170 States and territories through United Nations agencies, funds and programmes. The system combines efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, including by working towards the reduction of violence in all its manifestations and thus contributing to the responsibility to protect, given the crucial risks and drivers of atrocities that are rooted in development concerns.

³³ A/HRC/45/28.

1. Drawing clear linkages between the responsibility to protect and development through prevention

39. By applying a human rights-based approach as one of the six guiding principles of the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework, the United Nations development system ensures that human rights principles (universality, indivisibility, equality and non-discrimination, participation and accountability) guide United Nations development cooperation, and focuses on developing the capacities of both "duty-bearers" to meet their obligations and "rights-holders" to claim their rights.

2. Supporting considerations of the Economic and Social Council

40. On 24 January 2023, the Economic and Social Council held a special meeting to consider the potential of social and economic measures to prevent genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.³⁴ As the General Assembly will continue its mandated consideration of implementation of the responsibility to protect at large, I encourage the maximization of all opportunities within the work programme of the Council to consider further the economic and social questions outlined in the present report in the context of the responsibility to protect. As always, my Special Advisers on the Prevention of Genocide and on the Responsibility to Protect are available to support these dialogues, including the development of the working ideas, concepts, data and case studies.

IV. Recommendations

41. I encourage Member States to invest in national capabilities and coordination mechanisms for early detection, early warning, prevention and response to atrocities, and to develop improved systems for data collection and analysis to identify key risks that are embedded in social and economic patterns of deprivation or exclusion.

42. I further encourage all stakeholders working in international development to:

(a) Ensure that development programmes are sensitive to the risks and drivers of atrocities, such as extreme poverty, impunity, weak institutions, human rights violations and armed conflict;

(b) Take steps to identify and understand atrocity risks and drivers in areas where they operate;

(c) Find ways to tailor development strategies to respond to assessed atrocity risks and drivers and conduct routine assessments that include local communities that may be affected;

(d) Ensure that they "do no harm" and that assistance does not exacerbate atrocity risk;

(e) Ensure that civil society, faith communities, traditional leaders, minority groups, including indigenous populations, women, children and youth, the media and other local actors participate in the design and implementation of development programmes aimed at preventing atrocities and are principal actors in national and local peacebuilding processes;

(f) Continue deliberations on the role of development in the prevention of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.

³⁴ Economic and Social Council, Concept note on social and economic measures to prevent genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. Available from www.un.org/ecosoc/sites/ www.un.org.ecosoc/files/files/en/2023doc/ECOSOC-Special-Meeting-24-Jan_Concept-Note.pdf.