

FEDERATION OFFICE FOR SYSTEMIC JUSTICE - Pushing Boundaries, Deepening Community **Sue Wilson, CSJ**

The [UN High Level Political Forum](#) took place in New York in July 2023. It was an opportunity for governments and civil society groups to reflect on how the global pandemic had impacted progress on the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs) and to chart a path toward greater wellbeing for people and planet. Its core mandate is to leave no one behind.

The Federation's Office for Systemic Justice (FOSJ) was part of a delegation from Canada which also included the JPIC office for the Toronto CSJs and the Loretto Sisters. We also invited a young woman from a racialized community and a former migrant worker to join us so they could speak about the barriers they have experienced in Canada. If we are to leave no one behind in our country, we must both understand and dismantle the barriers which people face when they try to participate in our society and economy.

Together, the FOSJ, along with the JPIC offices for CSJ-Toronto and the Loretto Sisters, were part of a larger group which crafted a [Civil Society statement](#) to respond to the [Canadian government's report](#) on how well it is advancing the SDGs in Canada. Our three offices also wrote a "shadow" report focusing on how migrant workers, workers without documentation, and youth (especially youth in families without documentation) are in danger of being left behind. Then, in New York, we met with staff at Canada's Permanent Mission to the UN to highlight our concerns. It's the work of political advocacy but it's also the work of deepening community bonds.

For the most part, the SDGs reference human rights. The framework of human rights is important because it identifies what we owe each other as co-members of community, and it puts a spotlight on the drivers of inequality. For instance, human rights insist that each worker should have access to well-paying work with good working conditions as well as freedom from discrimination rooted in gender, race, or other cultural biases. Human rights also highlight the resources and

opportunities which form the foundation for each "person's wellbeing: a safe environment; housing, decent work, access to adequate food, education, and retirement income; economic support during job transitions; health care including pharma-care and mental health; access to child-care, elder-care, and more. It's the material substance of community on a social level.

That's the vision. It can feel like an elusive dream because so many energies in the world are working against this vision: Soaring corporate profits, the growing gap between rich and poor, the erosion of democracy, weak responses to climate change, the disproportional impacts of climate change on communities in the Global South, and backlash against women's rights and LGBTQ+

rights. People living in homeless encampments are often ignored or attacked, Indigenous rights are disregarded, and workers' rights are undermined.

But there are also graced-filled and transforming energies which have the potential to make a difference. Youth, from all around the world, are pushing the climate change agenda and advancing our understanding of LGBTQ+ rights. People with disabilities are clearly identifying the barriers they face. Civil society groups, including religious orders, are insisting that governments pass accountability mechanisms to measure the effectiveness of their policies and to monitor policy impacts on diverse sectors of the population. Workers' unions, understanding the deep interconnections in the workforce, are advocating for a better wage and working conditions for all, not just their own workers. Indigenous groups are calling out colonial attitudes and actions where they see them. Governments are committing to greater biodiversity protections. And groups working on financial transparency are seeking a new international tax structure to address tax avoidance by multinational corporations.



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These are all important dynamics for protecting human rights. They push the boundaries of what we understand as fair and just. They strengthen communities.

But the intersecting crises affecting the planet today (climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution) call for more. Boundaries need to be pushed further.

One boundary is already being pushed. Former Kitigan Zibi Anishinābeg chief, Gilbert Whiteduck, is spearheading a process to get the Gatineau River legally recognized as a person. It's part of a [global movement](#) that is largely led by Indigenous communities,

environmental groups, and scientists; a movement which intends to give rivers and other ecological features stronger legal protections by granting them rights normally reserved for people.

It could become a game-changer in terms of protecting species and their habitats. And, just as important, it pushes the boundaries of community to include all in earth community.

It deepens our sense of 'the dear neighbour.'

(Photo L-R: Varka Kalaydzhieva, CSJ-TO Program Manager, with Srs. Sue Wilson and Joan Atkinson of the FOSJ)