

Executive Office of the Secretary-General
United Nations
405 East 42nd Street
New York, NY 10017
USA

Brussels, 07.09.2026

RE. PROTECTING THE NATURAL RESOURCES OF WESTERN SAHARA PENDING A SELF-DETERMINATION OUTCOME

Excellency,

We are writing on behalf of Western Sahara Resource Watch (WSRW), an organisation that has been monitoring the economic exploitation of the Non-Self-Governing Territory of Western Sahara for over two decades.

As you prepare your forthcoming report to the Security Council on Western Sahara, and as the Council approaches the renewal of the mandate of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), we respectfully urge you to give substantially greater attention to an issue that is increasingly central to both the legal and political dimensions of the conflict: the ongoing development and exploitation of Western Sahara's natural resources in the absence of a resolution of the Territory's status.

We welcome the fact that your 2025 report (S/2025/612) referred to the landmark judgments of the Court of Justice of the European Union of 4 October 2024. The Court confirmed, in relation to EU-Morocco agreements concerning Western Sahara, that the people of Western Sahara are the holders of the right to self-determination and that their consent is a condition for the application of such agreements to the Territory. The Court further made clear that any presumed consent would require, among other conditions, a specific, tangible, substantial and verifiable benefit to the people of Western Sahara, proportionate to the exploitation of the Territory's natural resources. This emphasis on consent is also reflected in the conclusions of UN treaty bodies, including the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights¹ and the Human Rights Committee², which have stressed the need to obtain the Sahrawi people's consent to developmental projects and resource extraction operations in Western Sahara.

We believe that these developments merit a more substantive consideration of the resource question in the Secretary-General's reporting. The issue is not merely economic. It goes to the heart of the UN-led political process and to whether the conditions under which the people of Western Sahara are to exercise their right to self-determination are being progressively altered while that process remains unresolved.

1. Resource exploitation should not proceed as though the status of the Territory had already been settled

Your 2025 report appropriately recorded Morocco's submission concerning socioeconomic development west of the berm, including infrastructure and public services. We recognise the importance of reflecting the

¹ UN Economic and Social Council, 22.10.2015, Concluding Observations on the fourth periodic report of Morocco, E/C.12/MAR/CO/4*, §6,
https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=E%2fC.12%2fMAR%2fCO%2f4&Lang=en

² UN Human Rights Committee, 01.12.2016, Concluding Observations on the sixth periodic report of Morocco, §10,
https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CCPR/C/MAR/CO/6&Lang=en

information and positions provided by the parties in UN reporting. At the same time, such submissions should be assessed against independently verifiable information and the applicable international legal framework.

In addition, statements by a party to the conflict concerning its development activities cannot alter or diminish the unresolved legal status of the Territory, nor the rights of its people under international law. This distinction is particularly important because the scale and nature of economic activity in Western Sahara are changing rapidly. Investment in infrastructure or socioeconomic development cannot, in itself, substitute for the exercise of self-determination, nor should economic development undertaken by one party be allowed to create an impression that the underlying political question has already been settled.

The concern is particularly acute because economic activity in Western Sahara is not static. Morocco's development of fisheries, agricultural production, phosphate extraction, renewable energy infrastructure and related industrial projects is progressively embedding new economic interests and infrastructure in the Territory.

This raises a fundamental question for the United Nations: how can the political process remain meaningful if the economic and physical realities on the ground continue to be altered in ways that may be difficult to reverse before the people of the Territory have exercised their right to self-determination?

The resource question should therefore not be treated as peripheral to the peace process. It is part of the conditions in which that process takes place.

2. The scale of economic activity warrants systematic reporting

WSRW's monitoring indicates that exploitation and development are continuing across several sectors.

In the fisheries sector, Moroccan government statistics indicate that the ports of Dakhla and El Aaiún are "the country's" largest landing ports. In 2024, the Western Saharan coastal area accounted for more than 73 per cent of Morocco's coastal and artisanal catch by quantity and approximately 61.5 per cent by value.³

In agriculture, large-scale expansion is planned in the Dakhla and Boujdour areas, including a reported target of approximately 5,200 hectares in Dakhla and a further 8,000-hectare irrigation perimeter in Boujdour, compared with approximately 1,000 hectares currently under cultivation.⁴ The expansion is predominantly geared towards commercial, export-oriented production, with farms controlled by Moroccan business interests, including interests linked to Morocco's political and economic elite. Its scale therefore risks entrenching an economic model in which the Territory's land and water resources are developed for external commercial benefit, while the people of Western Sahara have not been able to exercise their right to self-determination or determine the use of those resources.

Renewable energy development is expanding just as rapidly. Wind and solar projects in Western Sahara increasingly serve not only local needs, but resource-extractive and industrial activities, while being incorporated into Morocco's national energy and climate strategy. Morocco is also promoting Western Sahara as a major location for green hydrogen production. Significant projects involve companies connected to Morocco's political and economic elite, including interests associated with the Moroccan royal family and the Prime Minister. Electricity generated in the Territory is also envisaged for transmission to Morocco proper, including to support major desalination projects intended to facilitate agricultural expansion there. The scale of this development is already substantial: one of Africa's largest wind-power complexes is now located in Western Sahara, without the consent of the people of the Territory. These projects risk creating long-term infrastructure, commercial dependencies and vested interests before the Territory's final status has been determined. The green transition should not become a vehicle for accelerating the economic integration of a Non-Self-Governing Territory before its people have exercised their right to self-determination.⁵

³ Ministère de l'agriculture et de la pêche maritime (Maroc), Mer en chiffres 2024, <https://www.mpm.gov.ma/wps/portal/Portail-MPM/ACCUEIL/Publications/Rapports>

⁴ European Commission, SWD(2024) 57 final, p.17: "significant investments by the Moroccan government in public-private partnerships, in particular in relation to desalination stations, have contributed to the launch of construction sites to transform an additional 13 000 hectares into irrigable land: 8 000 hectares in Boujdour and 5 000 hectares in the vicinity of Dakhla. The aim of the projects is to increase the current agricultural land area and the corresponding volume of agricultural production by one thousand percent by 2030".

⁵ WSRW, 2025, Greenwashing Occupation, available via www.wsrw.org

The phosphate sector presents a similar pattern. WSRW recorded approximately 2.02 million tonnes of phosphate rock exported from Western Sahara in 2025, a volume not recorded by WSRW in a single calendar year since 2014. At the same time, participation in the trade has declined substantially as companies and investors have withdrawn over legal and human rights concerns. New downstream infrastructure, including a fertiliser facility and port infrastructure, risks further increasing the scale and permanence of this activity.⁶

All of these activities are taking place without the consent of the people of the Territory.

We respectfully suggest that future reports of the Secretary-General should therefore include a dedicated and systematic account of significant resource exploitation and related economic development in Western Sahara, including but not limited to fisheries, agriculture, phosphates, renewable energy and associated infrastructure.

3. Economic development should not become a substitute for self-determination

We are encouraged by the continuation of talks under the auspices of your Personal Envoy, Staffan de Mistura. We also note his call for the parties to engage in the political process without preconditions.

At the same time, we are concerned that the Trump administration's push to "using Morocco's Autonomy Proposal as the only framework"⁷ risks narrowing the political space available to the people of Western Sahara before they have themselves determined their future.

We note that Security Council resolution 2797 (2025) takes Morocco's Autonomy Proposal as basis for negotiations while simultaneously requiring that the outcome provide for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara.

The latter element should not be allowed to become disconnected.

The preferences of individual UN Member States, however influential, cannot replace the right of the people directly concerned to determine the future status of their Territory. Nor should economic development undertaken by one party be allowed gradually to predetermine that outcome. The fact that economic development may be supported or promoted by individual Member States cannot confer upon those States, or upon either party to the conflict, a right to determine the use of the Territory's natural wealth. Until the people of Western Sahara have been able to exercise their right to self-determination, the international community should take care not to facilitate economic arrangements that could prejudice that exercise.

This is why the resource question should be brought explicitly within the framework of the UN political process.

4. Resource exploitation could instead become a confidence-building measure

We respectfully propose that the United Nations consider a different approach.

Rather than allowing the economic exploitation of Western Sahara to continue as an essentially separate track while negotiations proceed, the resource question could be transformed into a confidence-building measure.

Pending a final settlement consistent with international law and providing for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara, revenues derived from the exploitation of the Territory's natural resources could be placed in a separately administered, transparent escrow or trust mechanism.

Such a mechanism would not prejudice the final status of the Territory or the ultimate allocation of revenues. Its purpose would be precisely the opposite: to ensure that the economic value of the Territory is preserved pending the determination of the rights and wishes of its people.

⁶ WSRW, 2026, P for Plunder 2026, available at www.wsrw.org

⁷ UNSG, S/2025/612, §8.

An appropriately designed mechanism could provide that:

- revenues and other proceeds attributable to the exploitation of Western Sahara's natural resources are independently identified and accounted for;
- such proceeds are placed in a protected account pending a political settlement consistent with international law and the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara;
- no party to the conflict is able to treat the proceeds as an established entitlement before the status of the Territory is determined;
- the mechanism is subject to independent auditing and transparent reporting; and
- upon a settlement, the accumulated funds are made available in accordance with the rights and wishes of the people of Western Sahara and the terms of that settlement.

This approach would also remove one potentially important economic disincentive to a negotiated settlement. At present, the continuation of resource exploitation allows economic benefits to accrue while the political question remains unresolved. A mechanism that preserves these revenues pending a lawful settlement could help ensure that the continued exploitation of Western Sahara's resources does not make the status quo financially preferable to reaching a settlement.

We therefore encourage you to consider whether the question of natural resources could be brought within the framework of the confidence-building measures associated with the UN political process.

5. The human cost makes the current imbalance increasingly difficult to justify

The economic question cannot be separated from the humanitarian situation.

Your 2025 report noted that approximately 80% of the Saharawi refugee population was food-insecure and that humanitarian assistance did not fully meet the needs of households, against a background of funding reductions and rising prices.

This situation presents a profound contradiction. While humanitarian agencies struggle to secure sufficient resources to meet basic needs in the refugee camps, economic activity continues to generate substantial revenues from the natural resources of the Territory from which those refugees originate.

We do not suggest that the humanitarian needs of the refugees can simply be offset against resource revenues, nor that humanitarian assistance should become conditional on the political process. Rather, this disparity underlines the importance of ensuring that the economic exploitation of the Territory does not continue to produce benefits for one side while the people displaced by the conflict remain without a meaningful role in determining how their natural wealth is used.

The United Nations should give serious consideration to how resource revenues can ultimately contribute to addressing the needs and rights of the people of Western Sahara, rather than allowing those revenues to become an enduring source of asymmetry between the parties.

6. Independent monitoring is indispensable

We also remain concerned by the absence of independent international human rights monitoring in the Territory.

Your 2025 report noted that OHCHR has not been granted access to Western Sahara since 2015, despite repeated requests and despite the Security Council's call for enhanced cooperation with OHCHR. The report concluded that the absence of independent, impartial, comprehensive and sustained human rights monitoring remained detrimental to an assessment of the human rights situation on the ground.

This lack of access is particularly concerning at a time of accelerating economic development and reports concerning land acquisition and the development of renewable energy and other infrastructure.

We therefore urge you to continue pressing for full and sustained access for OHCHR and other independent international observers, including in relation to the social, economic and human rights consequences of resource and infrastructure projects.

7. Infrastructure developments also merit scrutiny

We note, finally, that your 2025 report recorded the completion by Morocco of a road of approximately 93 kilometres from Smara to Mauritania, crossing the berm and providing a second crossing in addition to Guerguerat. The Moroccan authorities described the road as intended for civilian use and unrelated to military operations.

Given the significance of the arrangements governing the area around the berm and the continuing hostilities, we believe that such developments warrant clear reporting and clarification as to their consistency with the relevant military arrangements and with the UN's understanding of the status of the Territory.

Our recommendations

In light of the above, we respectfully urge you, in your forthcoming report and in your engagement with the Security Council, to:

1. Give substantially greater attention to the exploitation of Western Sahara's natural resources, including fisheries, agriculture, phosphates, renewable energy and related infrastructure.
2. Make clear that economic development cannot prejudge the final status of the Territory or substitute for the exercise of the right to self-determination by the people of Western Sahara.
3. Encourage the parties and the Security Council to consider natural resources as a potential confidence-building measure, including through the establishment of an independently administered escrow or trust mechanism for revenues derived from resource exploitation pending a settlement consistent with international law.
4. Ensure systematic reporting on resource exploitation and corporate involvement in future reports to the Security Council, including the scale, ownership, destination and economic value of resource-related activities.
5. Continue to press for full and sustained OHCHR access to Western Sahara, in accordance with repeated requests and relevant Security Council resolutions.
6. Ensure that infrastructure and economic developments do not progressively pre-empt the outcome of the political process, particularly where such developments may affect land ownership, resource access or the long-term economic structure of the Territory.
7. Reaffirm consistently that the cornerstone of the UN process is a political solution that provides for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara, in accordance with the UN Charter and international law.

Excellency,

The United Nations has a responsibility not only to facilitate negotiations, but also to safeguard the conditions under which a genuine exercise of self-determination remains possible.

Allowing the natural resources of a Non-Self-Governing Territory to be progressively exploited and its economic landscape transformed while its political status remains unresolved risks creating facts on the ground that the eventual settlement will have to confront. Conversely, preserving the economic value of the Territory pending a lawful settlement could help create incentives for compromise and demonstrate that the natural wealth of Western Sahara will not be used to entrench the status quo.

We therefore respectfully urge you to place the resource question more firmly within the UN's political framework and to explore practical measures that can prevent further economic entrenchment while safeguarding the rights and future interests of the people of Western Sahara.

We remain at your disposal to provide detailed monitoring data, documentation and analysis concerning resource exploitation and corporate involvement in the Territory.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of our highest consideration.

Cc:

- *H.E. The President of the United Nations Security Council;*
- *Permanent Missions of the Member States of the United Nations Security Council;*
- *H.E. Staffan de Mistura, Personal Envoy of the Secretary-General for Western Sahara.*

Sincerely

Sara Eyckmans

Coordinator, Western Sahara Resource Watch

coordinator@wsrw.org