

**Building Back Better:  
Integrating Human Rights in Sustainable and Resilient  
Recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic**

14 January 2021 | 15:00 – 17:00 PM CET | Virtual session

**CONCEPT NOTE**

**Background**

In June 2020, the Human Rights Council adopted resolution 43/19<sup>1</sup> on the promotion and protection of human rights and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.<sup>2</sup> The resolution called for three half-day intersessional meetings for dialogue and cooperation on human rights and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to be held in 2021, 2022 and 2023. The first of the three half-day meetings will be held on 14 January 2021. This half-day meeting will build on the previous two intersessional meetings called for in resolution 37/24<sup>3</sup>, March 2018.

The **first intersessional meeting**, took place on 16 January 2019, under the theme “Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality”. The meeting examined the relationship between the SDGs and human rights and concluded, among other things, that the SDGs would be best realized through a human-rights-based approach to their implementation at the national, regional and global levels. The key conclusions and recommendations are outlined in the summary report<sup>4</sup>, which served as input to the High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) in 2019.

The **second intersessional meeting** was held on 3 December 2019 under the theme “Accelerated action and transformative pathways: realizing the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development”. The intersessional meeting reiterated that much more action and delivery would be needed, and faster, to accelerate implementation of the SDGs, including the adoption of human rights-based public policies, such as stronger social protection and pro-poor macroeconomic policies to counter rising inequalities; enhanced focus on countries and groups of people that are being left behind; tackling climate change as a matter of global urgency; greater attention to human rights-focused conflict prevention and resolution and; a stronger human rights based approach (HRBA) to data collection and analysis to address exclusion, discrimination and inequalities. The key conclusions and recommendations are outlined in the summary report<sup>5</sup>, which served as input to the HLPF in 2020.

**Theme**

The theme for the **third intersessional meeting** is ‘Building back better: Integrating human rights in sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic’. In the context of this theme, the meeting will highlight SDG 10 on reduced inequalities and SDG 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions, and will emphasize the importance of mainstreaming gender in these and all SDG implementation. In keeping with resolution 43/19, the theme of this third intersessional meeting is informed by the theme for HLPF 2021<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/RES/43/19>

<sup>2</sup> Agenda 2030 makes a commitment to promote “a world of universal respect for equality and non-discrimination”, (para 8) to ‘leave no one behind’ and to ensure “targets are met for all peoples and segments of society”. It links to three closely related concepts: equity (fairness in distribution of benefits and opportunities), equality (substantive equality, of both opportunity and results, with full protection under law), and non-discrimination (prohibition of distinctions that are based on impermissible grounds and that have the effect or purpose of impairing the enjoyment of rights).

<sup>3</sup> [https://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage\\_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/RES/37/24](https://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/RES/37/24)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/IntersessionalMeeting2030Agenda.aspx>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/SecondIntersessionalMeeting2030Agenda.aspx>

<sup>6</sup> <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf/2021>

### **Global context for the third intersessional meeting:**

The COVID-19 pandemic is undermining progress across the globe in implementing the 17 SDGs, reversing socio-economic gains and magnifying pre-existing forms of discrimination and inequalities. The World Bank predicts that by 2021 an additional 110 to 150 million people will have fallen into extreme poverty and the IMF warned that the crisis is dragging low-income countries into a ‘lost decade’.

Hardest hit has been women and youth and the marginalized and most vulnerable in society, including the poor, older persons, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, minorities, children, migrants and refugees. For women, for example, the socio-economic fallout of COVID-19 has been particularly challenging because they (i) tend to earn less, (ii) have fewer savings, (iii) are disproportionately more in the informal economy, (iv) have less access to social protection, (v) are more likely to be burdened with unpaid care and domestic work, and therefore have to drop out of the labour force, and (vi) make up the majority of single-parent households.<sup>7</sup>

Mounting evidence has also shown that ethnic, racial and religious minorities are not only at greater risk of contracting the virus for a wide range of reasons – due to their disproportionate employment in high-risk sectors such as nursing, cleaning and public transport, and due to their concentration in overcrowded housing where social distancing is more difficult – but can also face higher rates of mortality once infected, often due to limited access to medical care and other services.<sup>8</sup>

Additionally, some COVID-19 emergency measures have led to unjustifiable restrictions on the enjoyment of civil and political rights, with negative consequences for civic space and for human rights defenders and journalists. Corruption is another area of concern, as it is even more damaging in times of crisis. COVID-19 responses can create new opportunities to exploit weak oversight and inadequate transparency, diverting funds away from people in their hour of greatest need.<sup>9</sup>

As UN Secretary General António Guterres stated in his report “COVID-19 and Human Rights: We are all in this together”<sup>10</sup> in April 2020: “Responses that are shaped by and respect human rights result in better outcomes in beating the pandemic, ensuring healthcare for everyone and preserving human dignity. Moreover, they also focus our attention on who is suffering most, why, and what can be done about it. They prepare the ground now for emerging from this crisis with more equitable and sustainable societies, development and peace.” In this context, the integration of international human rights norms and standards in the design and implementation of COVID-19 socio-economic and political responses and recovery processes is as critical as ever to achieve the 2030 Agenda.

These challenges also reinforce the need for building transparent, effective, inclusive and accountable institutions to advance poverty eradication, fundamental freedoms, justice and accountability, to reduce inequalities, and to promote sustainable development. Further, it calls for responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels, including with a stronger focus on equality, non-discrimination and participation. The ability to participate without fear in public affairs is essential to inclusive governance and sustainable development. Political voice and participation can ensure the accountability of public institutions and officials, including security forces, reveal the needs and values of the population, and call attention to significant deprivations among vulnerable and marginalized groups. Political voice can reduce the potential for conflict within and between communities and enhance the prospect of building consensus on key issues with payoffs for economic efficiency, legitimacy of measures taken, social equity and trust, and inclusiveness in public life.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/9/feature-covid-19-economic-impacts-on-women>

<sup>8</sup> <https://minorityrights.org/publications/covid-briefing/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/coronavirus/statement-corruption-context-covid-19>

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un\\_policy\\_brief\\_on\\_human\\_rights\\_and\\_COVID\\_23\\_april\\_2020.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un_policy_brief_on_human_rights_and_COVID_23_april_2020.pdf)

Building back better post COVID-19, building on states' human rights obligations, reinforces the importance of a whole of society approach, underscores the human rights principle of participation and the need for greater expansion of civic space. It acknowledges the important role to be played by all stakeholders in society, including grassroots, faith-based and community-based organizations, the private sector and industry, media, human rights defenders, national human rights institutions (NHRI) as well as governmental and intergovernmental organisations in support of an inclusive, non-discriminatory, coordinated, comprehensive post-COVID recovery strategy.

Concentrating on the implementation of SDGs 10 and 16 with a human rights-based approach, the meeting will explore national strategies for greater resilience in recovery in 'building back better' as well as how the UN human rights mechanisms can best contribute towards this. The discussion will highlight the principle of "leaving no one behind" and will stress the importance of human rights-based recovery measures that are inclusive, that recognize the gendered dimension of the pandemic, and that address inequalities. Focus will be placed on initiatives and country practices, which show that respect for and protection and fulfilment of all human rights for all are fundamental to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

### **Objectives of the meeting**

The objective of the meeting is to consider good practices and make recommendations to build back better post COVID-19. Highlighting country-level cases and with particular focus on and linkages between SDGs 10 and 16, the meeting will aim to:

1. Discuss how historic, systemic and institutional discrimination, including based on gender, race and ethnicity, has exacerbated inequalities in the context of COVID-19 and thus contributed to impeding the realisation of SDGs 10 and 16.
2. Share examples and best practice of inclusive, non-discriminatory recovery strategies based on human rights.
3. Highlight the contribution of human rights mechanisms, the critical role of civil society and human rights defenders and of institutions that are transparent, effective, inclusive and accountable, to protect against discrimination and address inequalities in a post COVID-19 environment.

### **Methodology and format of the meeting**

Like the previous intersessional meetings, this meeting will provide an opportunity for participants to share good practices, achievements, challenges and lessons learned concerning the promotion and protection of human rights and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its 17 SDGs.

It will commence with a **high-level opening session** followed by one thematic session and a brief closing session. It is envisaged that the high-level session will include opening statements from a Senior Staff of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the President of the Human Rights Council, and the Chair of the Intersessional Meeting followed by a keynote address from a high-level human rights and development expert. During the opening session there will be no question and answer segment.

The **thematic session** will look specifically at SDG 10 on reduced inequalities and SDG 16 concerning peace, justice and strong institutions and will explore the interlinkages particularly as regards systemic and institutional discrimination and the impact on widening socio-economic inequalities. The panelists will include 3-5 national and regional experts who will share practical experiences, challenges and opportunities in implementing SDGs 10 and 16 since COVID-19, highlighting measures to mainstream gender and address inequalities. Participants will make contributions from the floor that link to the presentations of the experts and highlight additional practical experiences, good practices and methodologies.

The Chairperson for the intersessional meeting will moderate both the opening session and the thematic session. He will also close the meeting by providing an overview of the discussions as well as an initial indication of the main conclusions and recommendations to be taken forward to the HLPF in July 2021.

The meeting will bring together representatives of Member States along with experts from State institutions (such as national parliaments, National Human Rights Institutions, and/or national development agencies), United Nations and regional human rights mechanisms, United Nations agencies and country teams (UNCTs), academia and Civil Society Organisations. It will be open to Human Rights Council members and observers, including non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

Given the situation of COVID-19, this third intersessional will take the format of a two hour virtual meeting. The platform and appropriate link to the session will be announced in advance of the meeting and will be placed on the HRC intersessional meeting website. The meeting will be webcasted in the six official UN languages.

Speaking time for participants wishing to take the floor will be 2 minutes. Given the time constraints, it may not be possible to accommodate all who may wish to make an intervention during the meeting. Participants are therefore invited to submit their written statements to SDGS@ohchr.org, no later than 21 January 2021, in order that they may be entered as part of the documents for the meeting and used to inform the summary report.

The meeting will be made accessible to persons with disabilities as per HRC resolution 43/19. Oral statements may be embossed in Braille from any of the six official languages of the United Nations, upon request and following the procedure described in the [Accessibility guide to the Human Rights Council for persons with disabilities](#).

## **Outcome**

The intersessional meeting will contribute to generating focus on and attention to the importance and relevance of the practical demonstrable synergies between the SDGs and human rights. The Chair together with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights will prepare a report summarizing the discussion of the meeting, which will be made available to 46<sup>th</sup> regular session of the Human Rights Council in February/March 2021.

Pursuant to resolution 43/19, the report will also be made available to the HLPF for its 2021 session. The report will be disseminated widely to give greater visibility to how better promotion and protection of human rights will advance the realization of the SDGs.

## **Chair**

H.E. Mr. Sek Wannamethee Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Thailand to the United Nations and other international organizations in Geneva.