

A very good afternoon to all of you...

I am honoured to be part of the third Human Rights Council intersessional meeting for dialogue and cooperation on Human Rights and the Agenda for Sustainable Development. I am glad to share my experiences in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic and share the strategies adopted by Kerala to build back better from the pandemic.

Kerala's response to the Covid-19 pandemic is driven by a humanized, inclusive approach. After dealing with the Nipah virus in 2018, we did not become complacent and have always been vigilant when it came to virus outbreaks in any corner of the world. The state has sustained its efforts to wage the battle against the deadly coronavirus by relying on our strong public health infrastructure that largely meets the targets of SDG3. Kerala achieved remarkable success in containing Covid-19, as the government designed and pursued a set of Covid-fighting strategies that leveraged its core strengths while overcoming its disadvantages. Kerala was able to flatten the Curve and limiting the CFR rate at 0.41 %.

As the state which tops the NITI Ayog's SDG Index, Kerala further embraced a multipronged strategy that secured the state government's commitment and accountability to the people, and capacity of working in synergy with civil society. This is true to the essence of making significant strides towards meeting SDG 10 and SDG16.

Built over generations, Kerala's **public health infrastructure** is made up of well-equipped government hospitals with dedicated medical experts, in addition to a wide network of primary health centres which function as the first level of contact with the population. Ardram Mission was launched in 2017 for deliverables at the grassroot level to meet contemporary needs and

completely transform the public health sector in the backdrop of SDGs 2030. The state also engages Accredited Social Health Activists to ensure citizen's easy access to comprehensive healthcare support. The decentralised health delivery emphasises on making hospitals and clinics patient-friendly and equipped with high technology care facilities. Providing free healthcare to the poor people and affordable treatment to the middleclass is the cornerstone of the system.

Now let me come to the decisive campaigns. The lockdown in Kerala was implemented as an organic process with people's participation and trust. This was followed by daily press conferences by the Honourable Chief Minister, making sure transparent communication channels were kept open to make people understand the gravity of the situation and steps taken by the government. We started the massive break-the-chain campaign highlighting the acronym SMS to sensitize the public about new-normal habits, that reached every nook and cranny of the state. The various government departments and the police force coordinated seamlessly to counter an emergency disease outbreak. Perhaps Kerala is the only state where the policemen delivered essential items to the doorsteps of the afflicted, during the lockdown. The government also tightened the vigil on social media against the spread of misinformation regarding COVID-19.

Next is the people-centred approach. As the state went into lockdown, the government adopted a hunger-free policy to ensure that people were cared for as they stayed indoors and their livelihoods severely impacted. The government announced an economic and social welfare package that included free food kits distributed through the Public Distribution system and advance disbursement of social security pensions. In a novel gesture, the pre-

primary child protection delivered free meals to its children at their homes to ensure that children get nutritious food. We implemented reverse quarantine to protect the vulnerable population and deployed thousands of social volunteers to augment other relief and social support systems. While migrant workers in other states scrambled to go back to their hometowns during lockdown, more than 90% workers in Kerala chose to stay because they were assured shelter, and three meals a day. The government adopted mental health interventions right from the community level by providing counselling and psychological support for people in isolation and quarantine to help them overcome fear, anxiety and stigma caused by the pandemic situation.

Coming to the public trust and cooperation, one major factor that worked in Kerala's advantage is the existence of a robust public health system down to the community level that commands the trust of the people. In addition, the state pre-emptively formulated a comprehensive set of actions that were supported and complemented by community participation. An important facet of the strategy during lockdown ensured that the poor and vulnerable population were not subject to any hardships and that no section of the population was disproportionately affected. The architecture of decentralized governance has served to deepen democracy and accountability of institutions at all levels, eliciting a positive response from the public.

After a year of battling the pandemic, it is time to build back from the catastrophe.

A society that is organised around the welfare of all humans forms the bedrock for building back better from the pandemic. While the battle against the virus is far from over, countries must ensure that they take everyone

along in a unified effort to recover from the pandemic through growth and development that is sustainable and inclusive.

Kerala's decades-old social revolution and development has stood its systems of healthcare, education and social development in good stead. While the COVID-19 pandemic has proved to be a litmus test of governance and healthcare systems around the world, we know that more epidemics, natural calamities, and climate disasters are waiting in the wings. The pandemic has taught us that health behaviour to maintain personal hygiene, farsightedness and far-reaching value of a public health system, and institutional hygiene is very important. Kerala govt has started post-Covid clinics to ensure proper post-Covid management.

Although the state has the highest literacy rate and human development indicators in the country, the pandemic threatens to set back the progress we have made; exacerbated the vulnerability of women and most marginalized sections in our societies. The government will set up several projects to increase their labour force participation and bring the least visible workers in the informal economy to the fore.

There are more initiatives in the anvil to set up sustainable entrepreneurships that embed sustainable business practices, to economically empower women and the marginalized, to uplift them from the fringes of society. The International Trade Centre for Women will be set up under the aegis of the Gender Park to encourage women entrepreneurship and accelerate gender parity in the state. The government will focus on improving gender diversity in the workplace, investing in women leadership, and building resilient, educated and empowered communities. Also the state had rolled out a welfare policy for the transgender community a couple of years ago. And

implemented a life cycle approach project called “Anuyathra” for the differently abled.

During the pandemic we have seen more emphasis on videoconferencing, working from home and using digital technology. This has also exposed the deep digital divide and Kerala will address the issue with the introduction of the state’s free internet connection scheme to benefit the BPL families in the state.

Now let me conclude...

Respect for human rights is key in developing inclusive solutions for building back better from conflicts and crises, to promote strong institutions and peaceful societies by preserving human dignity. Kerala’s recovery from the pandemic will be rooted in gender-responsive measures for a truly shared vision, where all stakeholders must come together to accelerate the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. The pandemic offers crucial lessons but also gives us an opportunity to unite as a global community and focus on the most important elements – public health, sustainable livelihoods, climate stability and equitable societies.

I wish to convey my profound gratitude to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights for inviting me to this session.

Thank you.

Jai Hind!