



South Centre's Submission to the 3rd Intersessional Meeting for Dialogue and Cooperation on Human Rights and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

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Strengthening human rights for fighting inequalities and building back better

Introduction:

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a global crisis without precedent in modern history. Despite the many measures adopted by States to contain and fight against the spread of the disease, the COVID-19 pandemic has become a human crisis affecting all social groups. However, its effects have not been felt equally among all the sections of society: it has exacerbated the profound economic and social inequalities affecting the most vulnerable.

The COVID-19 pandemic has hit the most vulnerable groups disproportionately, including migrants, the disabled, women, the elderly, LGBTI, indigenous peoples, and other racial and ethnic minorities. The vulnerability of these groups has worsened in the face of the public health emergency and the broader impact resulting from the measures adopted to fight against the pandemic. The United Nations Secretary-General has highlighted that “the people most severely impacted by the crisis are those who already face enormous challenges in a daily struggle to survive”¹, while also recognizing that “The 2030 Agenda, underpinned by human rights, provides a comprehensive blueprint for sustainable recovery from the pandemic”².

In light of the lessons, we have learned - and are still learning - from the fight against COVID-19, the 3rd Intersessional Meeting for Dialogue and Cooperation on Human Rights and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development serves as a vital opportunity to understand the needs and realities of those who are still ‘left behind’.

While the COVID-19 crisis has required the implementation of exceptional measures, States’ efforts to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) should not be diminished or left aside. In fact, developing countries endeavour to fight against the COVID crisis should be aligned with national policies oriented to the achievement of the 2030 objectives. Thus, efforts to achieve the SDGs must be enhanced, keeping people’s lives and the improvement of the human condition as the prevailing concern. Human freedoms should be expanded without “leading to unprecedented

¹ United Nations, “COVID-19 and Human Rights We are all in this together” (April 2020), pg. 8 in [un_policy_brief_on_human_rights_and_covid_23_april_2020.pdf](#)

² Ibid. p. 8



pressures on the planet”³ while strengthening human rights as the bedrock for fighting poverty and building a greener, fairer, and more resilient societies for all.

Fighting inequalities and strengthening social inclusion

The relationship between human rights and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in time of crisis requires considering the design and implementation of public policies and programs that not only respond to the current crisis, but also envision a better future for all.

Although modernization brought several advantages for people’s wellbeing, including living longer, communicating faster, and enjoying more trade, technology, and faster exchange of ideas⁴; it has also shown the fragility of a globalized system that also increases existing inequalities. Therefore, there is a need to guarantee that human rights and human lives become the gravitational centre for all response measures, not only to the current COVID-19 pandemic, but to all other health crises rising in the horizon.

The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly underlined the growing inequalities in human development, as it hits the most vulnerable people, who already face increased discrimination⁵. Social sustainability and inclusion should become a critical pillar for responding to crises, as the current pandemic has clearly shown that the most vulnerable groups lack resilience to external shocks.

While the 2020 Sustainable Development Goals Report on achievement of SDG 10 considered the broad aspect of inequalities, mainly looking at the shared prosperity and income disparity among and within countries, the reality is that the interlinkages among the different SDGs are clearer than ever before. Measures adopted to reduce the spread of COVID-19 have evidenced some of the major weaknesses of the social fabric.

Vulnerable groups are not only at a higher risk of contracting the virus, but economic and social costs of “flattening the curve” have also affected disproportionately people living below the poverty line, where suppression strategies, such as social distancing and stay-at-home measures, became difficult or almost impossible to comply with⁶. Similarly, “the poorest quintile of the population in low-income countries (LICs) and lower-middle income countries (LMICs) have a 32% higher probability of dying from COVID-19 compared to the richest quintile partly because

³ United Nations Development Program, *Human Development Report 2020: The Next Frontier Human Development and the Anthropocene* (United Nations, 2020) in <http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr2020.pdf> (Accessed 11 January 2021).

⁴ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (1st. ed, Knopf 1999).

⁵ United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs, *Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020*. (United Nations 2020) in [The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2020.pdf \(un.org\)](http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/goals-report-2020) (Accessed 11 January 2021)

⁶ Not only low-income households mostly depend on the informal labor market, but some of them live in cramped, crowded and dangerous settings, which are less than ideal conditions for reducing the transmission of the virus. See: Johns Hopkins University, “The Unequal Cost of Social Distancing”, Coronavirus Resource Centre (2020) in <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/from-our-experts/the-unequal-cost-of-social-distancing> (Accessed 28 August 2020)

of lack of access to available treatment, but also lack of protective measures and higher exposure to the virus”⁷.

Similarly, inequalities should not only be conceived as income disparity but should also consider horizontal inequalities that prolong inter-generational disparities rooted in systems that affect future generations. For instance, school closures have affected approximately 90 percent of children worldwide, with estimates showing that short-term out-of-school rate in primary education was 86 percent in low human development countries in 2020⁸. This not only critically limits the achievement of SDG 4 on quality education, but also threatens the possible permanent loss of key human capabilities to escape from poverty and close the inequality gap.

Recognizing that “[h]orizontal inequalities between social, ethnic or other population groups, which themselves result from persistent patterns of discrimination, unequal rights, and historical disadvantage [...]”⁹ requires to understand that successful sustainable development strategies are contingent on the existence of comprehensive human rights and development policies, and not only on short-term palliative strategies for facing the COVID-19 pandemic¹⁰.

Universal and equal access to health and the COVID-19 pandemic: A new opportunity

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the fragility of social protection systems as “inequality itself may be acting as a multiplier on the coronavirus’s spread and deadliness,”¹¹ thereby widening the socio-economic divide and health disparities. While States have implemented measures intended to reduce, at least temporarily, the detrimental socio-economic effects of the pandemic, the experiences and knowledge gained from the implementation of these measures should promote the design of more “inclusive social protection systems that include expanded access to health services, sickness benefits, unemployment protection and social protection for the vulnerable and informal households.”¹²

⁷ Lars Jensen and George Gray Molina, “COVID-19 and health system vulnerabilities in the poorest developing countries”, United Nations Development Programme, Transitions Series (July 2020), p. 2.

⁸ United Nations Development Programme, *Covid-19 and Human Development: Assessing the Crisis, Envisioning the Recovery* in United Nations Development Program, *Human Development Report 2020: The Next Frontier Human Development and the Anthropocene* (United Nations, 2020), p. 63 in <http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr2020.pdf> (Accessed 11 January 2021).

⁹ Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, “An Agenda for Equality”

¹⁰ Martin Ravallion, *The Economics of Poverty: History, Measurement, and Policy* (Oxford University Press 2016), p. 29

¹¹ Max Fisher and Emma Bubola, “As Coronavirus Deepens Inequality, Inequality Worsens Its Spread”, The New York Times (Marc 2020) in <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/15/world/europe/coronavirus-inequality.html> (Accessed 15 September 2020)

¹² Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, “COVID-19 and developing countries: What policies and partnerships to respond, reset and rebuild?”, First Session of the Governing Board Meeting (2020), OECD Doc. DEV/GB(2020)8 in https://www.shareweb.ch/site/Poverty-Wellbeing/LNOB/Shared%20Documents/DEV-GB2020_8%20-%20Policy%20Brief%20on%20Policy%20implications%20of%20COVID-19%20in%20the%20developing%20world.pdf (Accessed 23 September 2020)

Nevertheless, the current crisis has unequivocally shown that social health systems around the world are inadequate to face large scale health and social emergencies due to “gaps in social protection and structural inequalities.”¹³ Indeed, the prevention and treatment of the most common non-communicable diseases has been “severely disrupted since the COVID-19 pandemic began, with low-income countries most affected.”¹⁴ Similarly, it has shown the “importance of basic public health, as well as strong health systems and emergency preparedness, for the resilience of a population in the face of a new virus or pandemic, lending ever greater urgency to the quest for universal health coverage.”¹⁵

Achieving universal health coverage by 2030 has now become a necessity, as the pandemic has shown that the globalized world is not only economically interconnected, but that health, social and human rights crises do discriminate. Therefore, States should not be focused only on expending more in health and social inclusion, but “spending better, from protecting health workers and strengthening infrastructure to preventing diseases and providing healthcare close to home, in the community.”¹⁶

We are still far from achieving these objectives. The current crisis has highlighted shortages not only in the access to health services, but also of health technologies, diagnostics, medicines, treatment, and protective equipment for health workers and patients.¹⁷ Therefore, universal access to health will have a significant impact for achieving the SDGs, as all efforts to prevent, treat and contain the COVID-19 pandemic are undoubtedly intertwined with the right to live, to health and all fundamental freedoms.¹⁸ International solidarity, cooperation and assistance are imperative to guarantee that vaccines are developed safely and are affordable and accessible for attaining the highest attainable standard of health for all.¹⁹

¹³ United Nations, *An Inclusive Approach to Strengthening Health Systems in the Context of Universal Health Coverage*, Report of the United Nations Secretary General, UN Doc. A/75/577 (November, 2020) in [Emerging from COVID-19 pandemic: A social inclusion approach to educating learners with disabilities | World Education Blog \(wordpress.com\)](#) (Accessed 11 January 2021)

¹⁴ United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs, *Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020*. (United Nations 2020) in [The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2020.pdf \(un.org\)](#) (Accessed 11 January 2021)

¹⁵ United Nations, *An Inclusive Approach to Strengthening Health Systems in the Context of Universal Health Coverage*, Report of the United Nations Secretary General, UN Doc. A/75/577 (November, 2020) in [Emerging from COVID-19 pandemic: A social inclusion approach to educating learners with disabilities | World Education Blog \(wordpress.com\)](#) (Accessed 11 January 2021)

¹⁶ UN News, “World must invest in strong health systems that protect everyone — now and into the future” (December 2020) in [World must invest in strong health systems that protect everyone — now and into the future || UN News](#) (Accessed 11 January 2021)

¹⁷ Mirfin Mpundu, Caline Mattar and Mirza Alas, “Examining antimicrobial resistance in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic”, South Centre Policy Brief No. 82 (July, 2020) in [PB-82.pdf \(southcentre.int\)](#) (Accessed 11 January 2021)

¹⁸ Statement by United Nations Human Rights Experts Universal access to vaccines is essential for prevention and containment of COVID-19 around the world (November, 2020) in [OHCHR | Statement by UN Human Rights Experts Universal access to vaccines is essential for prevention and containment of COVID-19 around the world*](#) (Accessed 11 January 2021)

¹⁹ Ibid.

Participatory and inclusive response: the right to development and innovation

The current global inequalities in the distribution of wealth, among countries and within countries, and the capacity to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals have been underscored by the current pandemic.²⁰ While COVID-19 has highlighted these inequalities as a human and health crisis, it has also shown clear evidence that the world is not sufficiently resilient to external shocks, increasing social imbalances and the widening gaps for participation in the design and implementation of development strategies.

While promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, providing access to justice for all and building effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels is an admirable goal, the pandemic has also shown the weaknesses of the social system that allowed “to exploit weak oversight and inadequate transparency, diverting funds away from people in their hour of greatest need”²¹. Integrating human rights into the COVID-19 response should also require strengthening the transparency, inclusiveness and collaboration at all levels of public decision making, paying particular attention at the participation of grassroot bases.

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the transition to digital governance, which could serve as an opportunity to strengthening effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions for all. While the use of digital technologies for working and learning during the COVID-19 related lockdowns have shown an increase in innovation and empowerment of certain sections of the society, leading to the possible achievement of SDG 9; it has also showcased how almost half of the world population lacks access to such digital technologies and the internet. The lack of adequate access to the internet re-potentialized the risk of increase in poverty and social exclusion at the expense of human rights.

Likewise, transitioning to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all is imperative to achieve sustainable development²², to address environmental degradation and poverty.²³ Such objective goes hand-in-hand with the Right to Development as a human right by itself, and as a means for the full enjoyment of all other freedom. The comprehensive, crosscutting, and multidisciplinary nature of the Right to Development make it an important pillar for supporting good and informed decision making for promoting sustainable development and articulate actions at the international, regional and domestic level for a comprehensive and coordinated response towards implementing the 2030 Agenda’s 17 goals and 169 targets in its entirety.

This requires seeking the best means for the improvement of human conditions that allow a broader understanding of development for the promotion, protection, and fulfilment of all human rights.

²⁰ See: <https://www.theguardian.com/inequality/2017/nov/14/worlds-richest-wealth-credit-suisse>

²¹ United Nations Secretary General Statement on Corruption in the Context of COVID-19 in [Corruption and Covid-19 \(unodc.org\)](https://www.unodc.org/) (Accessed 11 January 2021).

²² United Nations General Assembly, Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, UN Doc. A/RES/70/1 (21 October 2020), Goal 7.

²³ Adrian J. Bradbrook and Judith G. Gardam, *Human Rights Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (May, 2006), pp. 389-415

International cooperation, and particularly South-South cooperation among developing countries, can play a key role in this regard, through the exchange of relevant experiences, good practices and the provision of innovative solutions created for tackling the unique challenges faced by developing and least developed countries.

In line with these objectives, the COVID-19 pandemic can be an opportunity for innovation and the promotion of greater international solidarity and cooperation, not only for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, but for redoubling the “efforts to eradicate poverty and inequality, deal with the impacts and threat of climate change and work towards achieving the seventeen interconnected and indivisible Sustainable Development Goals.”²⁴

Recommendations

1. States should continue working towards protecting public welfare and well-being, not only as an “extraordinary measure”, but rather as a comprehensive and coordinated public policy that requires the adoption of means towards the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 goals and 169 targets in its entirety. This will achieve better means for the improvement of human conditions towards a broader understanding of development for the promotion, protection, and fulfilment of all human rights.
2. The COVID-19 crisis serves as an opportunity for States to develop new public policies directed towards guaranteeing public investment in social infrastructure, human talent and capacities to promote a more equal and fair redistribution of wealth among society and permanently guaranteeing peoples’ wellbeing and freedom. States should carefully consider instituting austerity measures directed towards reducing welfare and social services, privatization of public services and assets, and by redirecting public funds for the payment of foreign debt or investor-State dispute settlement (ISDS) costs and compensations.²⁵
3. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown the need to ensure autonomy in the manufacturing of pharmaceuticals, particularly in the most affected countries. It highlighted the imperative of expanding developing countries capacities to participate in the global pharmaceuticals market, including through the transfer of technology and know-how, and the investment of public funds to produce vaccines.²⁶ For achieving such objectives there is a need to promote

²⁴ Statement by H.E. Mr. Hugh Hilton Todd, Minister for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of the Co-operative Republic of Guyana, at the Forty-fourth Annual Meeting of Ministers for Foreign Affairs of the Group of 77 and China, "Global response to the covid-19 pandemic and the obstacles it poses to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and Achievement of the SDGs" (New York, 12 November 2020).

²⁵ See: Daniel Chavez, “The State, Public Responses, and the Day After the Pandemic”, TNI Long Reads in <https://longreads.tni.org/the-state-public-responses-and-the-day-after-the-pandemic> (accessed 21 August 2020)

²⁶ Germán Velásquez, *Re-thinking Global and Local Manufacturing of Medical Products After COVID-19*, South Centre Research Paper No. 118 (September 2020) in [RP-118_reduced.pdf \(southcentre.int\)](#) (Accessed 11 January 2021).

a stronger international partnership for the provision of financial and technological resources for developing countries.

4. Strengthening public participation and oversight of public-private partnerships guided by strong principles of transparency and the protection and respect for human rights could support the transfer of technology, skills and knowledge for building back better for the future. This must include measures for digital inclusion, climate change mitigation and adaptation actions, and means for generating, sharing and channelling financial resources towards realizing the right to development.
5. Countries should actively participate in the current discussion on the adoption of a legally binding instrument on business and human rights, and promoting the implementation of the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs)²⁷ to ensure that private actors that are involved in financing for development promote the adoption of a new corporate culture based on the obligation of all stakeholders to respect human rights and “avoid infringing on human rights of others”²⁸ while guaranteeing and promoting adequate measures for the prevention, mitigation and remediation of human rights abuses.²⁹
6. States should actively consider the vital role of international solidarity and cooperation to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, while effectively responding to the global COVID-19 crisis and recovering better, especially in the Global South. The catalytic role of South-South cooperation should be particularly enhanced towards achieving the 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

²⁷ UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UN HRC, UN Doc A/HRC/17/31).

²⁸ Ibid, Principle 11.

²⁹ Ibid, Principle 11 (commentary).