

Half-day panel discussion on deepening inequalities exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and their implications for the realization of human rights

Concept note (as of 17 September 2021)

Date and venue: **Tuesday, 28 September 2021, 3 to 5 p.m.**
Room XX, Palais des Nations, Geneva and online platform (Zoom)
(to be webcast live and archived at <http://webtv.un.org>)

Objectives: As States work to build back better after the COVID-19 pandemic, this panel discussion will address inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic and their implications for the realization of human rights. This discussion aims to identify ways to alleviate inequality within and among States by sharing best practices, solutions to challenges and lessons learned, including in the context of integrated approaches to the promotion and protection of human rights and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – paying particular attention to Goal 10 on reducing inequality.

The meeting will also address the role of greater international cooperation in further reducing inequalities within and among States.

The objectives are:

- To highlight and address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the goal to reduce inequality, with a particular emphasis on the requirement of the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health to eliminate vaccine inequality. Recognition that no one is safe until everyone is safe will also be looked at from a human rights perspective as will the necessity of vaccine equality in promoting and protecting all human rights;
- To identify the role of the promotion and protection of human rights and technical cooperation in setting priorities and addressing gaps in the global vaccine roll out. The focus will be on the importance of the human rights approach in addition to the moral and ethical case;
- To understand how to better use the United Nations human rights mechanisms to advance vaccine equality as a necessary step in the promotion and protection of all human rights and how to provide technical cooperation in this regard;
- To address how the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the digital divide – using education to illustrate how the divide detrimentally affects the realisation of human rights – and to engage in a constructive dialogue among States and other stakeholders about sharing good practices and experience with regard to overcoming the digital divide and ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education for all;
- To identify concrete steps for building back better, including by reversing the impact of austerity and economic inequalities and realising a human rights-based economy.

Chair: **H.E. Ms. Monique T.G. van Daalen**, Vice-President of the Human Rights Council

Opening statements: **Ms. Michelle Bachelet**, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
Professor Joseph E. Stiglitz, Nobel Laureate Economist, Columbia University
(video message)

Moderator: **Ms. Gunilla von Hall**, Foreign Correspondent in Geneva for the Swedish newspaper Svenska Dagbladet

Panellists: **Rt Hon Gordon Brown**, Former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (2007-10) and United Nations Special Envoy for Global Education
(keynote video message)

Ms. Tlaleng Mofokeng, Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health

Ms. Magdalena Sepúlveda, Executive Director of the Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and former Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights (*video message*)

Outcomes:

The anticipated outcomes of this meeting include:

- Better understanding of the requirements and contributions of human rights in addressing COVID-19 vaccine inequality and its consequences for other human rights, including economic, social and cultural rights, civil and political rights and the right to development;
- A creative exchange on how to achieve mutually beneficial cooperation in the pursuit of vaccine equality to advance the promotion and protection of human rights;
- Improved awareness of concrete measures for addressing inequalities in the promotion and protection of all human rights for all by sharing experiences and best practices;
- Shared information on good practices and national experiences with regard to alleviating the detrimental effects of the digital divide, in particular on realizing the right to education in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic;
- Exploration of opportunities to facilitate related technical cooperation, partnership and capacity-building at the bilateral, regional and global levels;
- A summary report to the Human Rights Council at its fifty-first session.

Mandate:

In its [resolution 45/14](#) on eliminating inequality within and among States for the realization of human rights, the Human Rights Council decided to convene at its forty-eighth session a half-day panel discussion focusing on the deepening inequalities exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and their implications for the realization of human rights. It will focus on sharing information, good practices and concrete ways to address inequalities, with regard to the promotion and protection of human rights. Particular attention must be paid to the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals, including Goal 10 on reducing inequality.

The Human Rights Council also requested the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to prepare a summary report on the discussion for submission at the Council's fifty-first session.

Format:

The panel discussion will be limited to two hours. The opening statement and initial presentations by the panellists will be followed by a two-part interactive discussion and conclusions from the panellists. A maximum of one hour will be set aside for the podium, which will cover the opening statement, panellists' presentations and their responses to questions and their concluding remarks. The remaining hour will be reserved for two segments of interventions from the floor, with each segment consisting of interventions from 12 States and observers, 1 national human rights institution and 2 non-governmental organizations.

The list of speakers for the meeting will be established through the online inscription system and, as per usual practice, statements by high-level dignitaries and groups of States will be moved to the beginning of the list. Each speaker will have two minutes to raise issues, pose questions and share information and experience. Delegates who have not been able to take the floor due to time constraints will be able to upload their statements on the online system to be posted on the HRC Extranet.

Accessibility:

In an effort to render the Human Rights Council more accessible to persons with disabilities and to promote their full participation in the work of the Council on an equal basis with others, the panel will be webcast and made accessible. International sign interpretation and real-time captioning in English will be provided. During the event itself, participants can access live English captioning on the StreamText web page (<https://www.streamtext.net/player?event=CFI-UNOG>). In Room XX, four seats are reserved for participants using wheelchairs, in the seventh (last) row. Hearing loops are available for collection from the Secretariat desk. 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* (available on <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/Accessibility.aspx>).

Background:

Human Rights Council [resolution 45/14](#) highlights the importance of eliminating inequality within and among States for the realization of human rights. It focuses on the deepening of inequalities exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and expresses deep concern that the pandemic has reversed the gains of the 2030 Agenda and the Millennium Development Goals. The pandemic and lack of access to the COVID-19 vaccines has eroded years of progress, by perpetuating and exacerbating existing inequalities, including the digital divide, with negative impacts on physical, and mental health, social wellbeing, gender equality, education, the economy and society. Inequalities have grown within and between States, with the vulnerable and marginalized bearing the brunt and at most risk. The impact of the pandemic on economic and social rights has been well documented, as has its impact on low-income earners, the poor and those in precarious employment.¹

The pandemic has laid bare rising economic inequalities. These inequalities flow from decades of erosion of public services, lack of investment in social protection, with economic models often promoting precarious employment, while fiscal policies and taxation have often benefited the few. Foreign debt and corruption have placed heavy burdens on many countries and their means to invest in health, education and social protection have been reduced. Moreover, these inequalities have often been felt acutely by women, thereby exposing and multiplying existing social and economic inequalities. The pandemic has also severely eroded progress achieved around the world on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and has in many cases reversed the progress on human rights, including in connection with gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

Council [resolution 45/14](#) calls upon all States to continuously analyze the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their objectives to achieve equality. It further calls upon States to ensure protection for those most affected, including access to safe, quality, effective and affordable healthcare and services and medical supplies, including access to medicines and vaccines, and to leave no-one behind. It recognizes the importance of and the need for greater international cooperation to further reduce inequality within and among States and to increase capacity-building support to countries with the most constrained resources.

Vaccine inequality and the lack of access to COVID-19 vaccines and medicines has intensified other inequalities within and among countries. The post pandemic recovery requires a human rights-based approach and enhanced international cooperation. Universal and equitable access to vaccines is crucial for how States can control the pandemic and build back better.

The G-20 has described granting equitable access to safe vaccines, diagnostics and therapeutics for all countries as a top priority for Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors. The Secretary-General of the United Nations has emphasized that the Non-Aligned Movement has a critical role to play in forging global solidarity. The Director-General of the World Health Organization has stated publicly that COVID-19 vaccine inequality has created a "two-track pandemic" with Western countries protected and poorer nations still exposed. Vaccines and treatments are therefore crucial to the recovery process for all countries. Without international cooperation and the required financing to roll out COVID-19 vaccines and treatments available and affordable to all, the road to recovery looks bleak. No one is safe until everyone is safe.

One of the biggest impacts of the pandemic has been on access to education and schooling across the globe. This has also resulted in children being denied vital aspects of learning, including social interaction, in particular in families from low-income and disadvantaged backgrounds. While remote and digital learning have played an important role in responding to the negative effects of the pandemic on education, reliable and stable online connections and learning infrastructure has not been accessible to many families and children. This

¹ See <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/46/19>

situation highlights one of the many consequences of the digital divide through its impact on education and the denial of opportunities that flow from it.

As emphasized by the High Commissioner for Human Rights, applying human rights-based approaches to development as part of the tools for recovery will provide long-term resilience. They are the best way to reduce inequalities and resume the path towards realizing the 2030 Agenda, based on a human rights economy that realizes fundamental rights including to health care, quality education, clean water and housing. An emphasis on policies grounded in human rights that address inequalities and build social justice will not only build stronger inclusive economies but will help reach those furthest behind.²

This meeting will provide an opportunity for States and other stakeholders to share reflections and information on good practices and concrete national experiences aimed at eliminating inequalities within and among States for the realization of all human rights for all people in all countries. This will be an opportunity to explore the contribution that United Nations human rights bodies and expert mechanisms can make towards regaining ground towards meeting the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as States combat the COVID-19 pandemic and build back better.

Background documents:

- Human Rights Council resolution [45/14](#) of 6 October 2020 entitled *Eliminating equality within and among States for the realization of human rights*
- *Impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic on the enjoyment of human rights around the world, including good practices and areas of concern*, Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights ([A/HRC/46/19](#), March 2021)
- *Central role of the State in responding to pandemics and other health emergencies, and the socioeconomic consequences thereof, in advancing sustainable development and the realization of all human rights*, Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights ([A/HRC/47/23](#), May 2021)
- United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), [Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2021](#)
- [United Nations/DESA Policy Brief #94: A changing world of work: implications for the social contract](#) (10 March 2021)
- [1993 Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action](#)
- Reports of the Secretary-General and the High Commissioner on international cooperation in the field of human rights ([A/74/351](#), 2019, and [A/HRC/44/28](#), 2020)
- [General Assembly resolution 70/1](#) of 25 September 2015 entitled *Transforming our world: 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*
- [2015 Addis Ababa Action Agenda of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development](#)
- [Shared responsibility, global solidarity: Responding to the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19](#) (March 2020)
- [A United Nations framework for the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19](#) (April 2020)
- Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights entitled [Looking back to look ahead: A rights-based approach to social protection in the post-COVID-19 economic recovery](#) (11 September 2020)
- *International solidarity in aid of the realization of human rights during and after the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic*, Report of the Independent Expert on human rights and international solidarity, Obiora Chinedu Okafor ([A/HRC/47/31](#), July 2021)

² <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=27278&LangID=E>