

**Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights**

**Report on activities (1 May 2020-1 May 2021)**

1. **Introduction**

Professor [Olivier De Schutter](https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Poverty/Pages/OlivierDeSchutter.aspx) was appointed the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights by the Human Rights Council at its 43rd session, in March 2020. He took up his role on 1 May 2020, as the world had entered a major economic recession, provoked by the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Special Rapporteur started his mandate as the economic recession caused by the Covid-19 pandemic was threatening to have massive impacts on global poverty. Despite the obstacles faced, almost a year later, Mr. De Schutter has been able to carry out many different activities in line with the [priorities](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Poverty/20200430_Background_note_extreme_poverty.docx) he had identified at the beginning of his mandate. The challenges facing governments are daunting under the current circumstances. Yet, the shock also provides a once-in-a-generation opportunity to rethink the development model on which the current organisation of the economy is based, and to present proposals to strengthen social resilience.

1. **Background**

Before the crisis, even using the extremely conservative international poverty line of 1.90 USD/day in PPP (a measure that does not cover all dimensions of poverty, and is barely enough to ensure survival), 759 million people (about 10% of the global population) were living in extreme poverty. According to a [study](https://www.wider.unu.edu/sites/default/files/Publications/Working-paper/PDF/wp2020-43.pdf) published by the United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research (UNU-WIDER) at the start of the recession, that figure could increase to reach almost 1.2 billion people (or 15.7% of the population), assuming a 20% contraction in income following the crisis. More recent estimates from the World Bank are that an additional 88–115 million people have been pushed into extreme poverty by the COVID-19 crisis in 2020 alone, with an additional increase between 23 and 35 million expected in 2021.[[1]](#footnote-1) The impacts may thus erase a decade of progress in the eradication of poverty, and poverty increases would be especially significant in Sub-Saharan Africa and in South Asia.

Self-employed workers and workers of the informal sector or in precarious forms of employment will be particularly hurt: the former have minimal or no access to social protection in cases of illness or unemployment, and the latter shall be the first to be laid off as a result of business downsizing or closing. The crisis shall affect people without social protection: according to the [International Labour Organisation](https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS_604882/lang--en/index.htm), 55% of the world's population (4 billion people) have no access to social protection whatsoever, and only 29% enjoy the full range of social security benefits in a life-cycle perspective — from child allowances to unemployment and sick allowances, and from disability allowances to old age pensions.  In the African region, 82.2% of the population has no social protection, and only 5.6% of unemployed workers receive unemployment benefits.

Women will also be particularly affected, since they are over-represented in the informal sector, as well as in certain labor-intensive segments of global supply chains such as in the garment industry, where massive layoffs have already taken place. It is also women who shall shoulder most of the additional burden imposed on families following the closure of childcare services and schools and who, in larger proportions than men, will be caring for the elderly and sick.

1. **Thematic priorities**

The Special Rapporteur proposed to define the thematic priorities of the mandate on the basis of a "poverty matrix", initially [presented](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cl5Su0wppDQ) at the Human Rights Council Social Forum of 8-9 October 2020, which aims to bring together the different factors that contribute to the perpetuation of poverty, at different governance levels, in order to improve the understanding of the interrelationships between these causes and the need to work at different levels in order to eradicate poverty, in line with Sustainable Development Goal 1.

1. **Making Social Protection Floors Universal with the support of a Global Fund for Social Protection**

In 2011, the Social Protection Floor Advisory Group, chaired by Ms. Michelle Bachelet, presented its final report on [Social Protection Floor for a Fair and Inclusive Globalization](https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/ilo-bookstore/order-online/books/WCMS_165750/lang--en/index.htm). In June 2012, the International Labour Conference adopted the Social Protection Floors Recommendation (No. 202) was approved by the ILO’s 185 Member States, including government, employer and worker delegates: 453 votes were cast in favour of adopting the Recommendation, which was adopted with only one abstention. Both referred to the need to strengthen international solidarity for the establishment of social protection floors, by providing predictable support to low-income countries.

However, the implementation remains an [unfinished task](https://www.ilo.org/ilc/ILCSessions/108/reports/reports-to-the-conference/WCMS_673680/lang--en/index.htm). Workers in the [informal sector](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---travail/documents/publication/wcms_711798.pdf)(61 percent of the global workforce, representing 2 billion workers)[[2]](#footnote-2) and workers in [non-standard forms of employment](https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS_534326/lang--en/index.htm), including ["just-in-time" workers of the gig economy](https://www.ilo.org/travail/whatwedo/publications/WCMS_443267/lang--en/index.htm), have little or no access to social protection.

In addition, a number of countries are unable to mobilize sufficient resources domestically to fund standing, rights-based social protection schemes. The cost of financing the full set of benefits included in social protection floors for the 57 low-income and lower-middle-income countries ranges from, 0.3 to 9.8 percent of their GDP, with an average cost of 4.2 percent of the GDP. This is affordable, and it should be seen as an investment in the future, not as a cost. But low-income countries with a poorly diversified economy are vulnerable to shocks - economic, climatic or sanitary, as illustrated by the SARS epidemic in 2003, the Ebola epidemic in 2014-2015 or the Covid-19 pandemic. These countries may fear they will face liquidity problems if they establish standing, rights-based social protection schemes, since a crisis may result in a sharp increase in demand for social protection as well as a loss of public revenues from taxation. This is a risk against which countries should be insured.

In 2012, Mr. De Schutter [proposed](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Food/20121009_GFSP_en.pdf) in his former capacity as UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, together with Ms. Sepúlveda, then the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, a new international mechanism in support of the establishment of social protection floors. The proposal was [widely endorsed](https://www.globalpolicy.org/component/content/article/222-un/52455-video-introduction-global-fund-for-decent-work-and-social-protection.html)by civil society, trade unions, and certain international agencies, and it was discussed at the Third International Conference on Financing for Development, held in Addis Ababa in July 2015. Since then, the establishment of a Global Fund for Social Protection has been discussed in numerous inter-institutional fora, including the High-level Meeting on Poverty Eradication, held on 30 June 2020, at which the Alliance for Poverty Eradication was launched at the initiative of the President of the 74th session of the General Assembly.

The COVID-19 pandemic, and the increased vulnerability to health, environmental, and economic shocks of low-income countries, have shown the fragility of existing social protection systems and the need for States to move towards universal social protection. A Global Fund for Social Protection would allow to increase support to low-income countries, not by creating a new form of dependency, but by ensuring predictable levels of support to improve their capacity to finance social protection over time.

In order to strengthen support for this initiative, the Special Rapporteur convened, together with the French government, which is strongly committed to support this initiative, and ILO, through its Department on Social Protection, a [High-Level Expert Meeting](https://travail-emploi.gouv.fr/actualites/presse/communiques-de-presse/article/initiative-mondiale-en-faveur-de-la-protection-sociale-pour-tous-renforcer-la) on the Global Fund on Social Protection. The meeting was held on 22-23 September 2020. It brought together a great number of participants (experts, civil society, international social partners, representatives of financial institutions and international organizations, directors general from various ministries from several G20 countries and the European Commission as well as developing countries) from various geographical regions and with a wide range of backgrounds. France brought this initiative to the G20 meeting for the G20 countries to support the creation of a Global Fund on Social Protection.

The idea of a Global Fund for Social Protection starts from the finding that social protection floors are affordable, provided low-income countries receive international support in order to complement their own efforts to mobilize domestic resources. The [most recent estimates](https://www.social-protection.org/gimi/RessourcePDF.action?id=56836), updated taking into account the Covid-19 pandemic, are that developing countries would need to invest an additional 1.2 trillion USD – equivalent to 3.8% of their gross domestic product (GDP) – to close the financing gap, and that the gap for low-income countries is 78 billion USD, equivalent to 15.9% of their GDP. By way of comparison, the [total official development assistance from OECD countries](https://www.oecd.org/development/oecd-and-donor-countries-working-to-focus-development-efforts-on-covid-19-crisis-building-on-a-rise-in-official-aid-in-2019.htm) amounted to 152 billion USD in 2019.

In October 2020, the Special Rapporteur published [an op-ed article](https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_759106/lang--en/index.htm) jointly with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, and the Director-General of the ILO, Guy Ryder, on the need to strengthen support for social protection floors. The article was published in English, French and Spanish in various outlets, including Le Monde (12 October) and El País (26 October). In May 2021, he published [another op-ed](https://plus.lesoir.be/371524/article/2021-05-14/carte-blanche-avec-le-fonds-mondial-pour-la-protection-sociale-construire-la) on the same topic with the Belgian minister for development cooperation.

**Next steps**

The Special Rapporteur will present his upcoming thematic report on the establishment of this new mechanism to the 47th session of Human Rights Council in June 2021 (A/HRC/47/36). The report is based on many consultations including the responses received to a [call for reactions](https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Poverty/Pages/global-fund-social-protection.aspx) and the outcomes of the high-level expert meeting in 22-23 September. This upcoming report is a progress report, which explains the desirability and feasibility of a new international mechanism in support of social protection floors, and proposed a way forward.

Mr. De Schutter continues to strongly advocate for major efforts to provide international support for the universalisation of social protection floors. In 2022, the Special Rapporteur will organize a a series of events on the establishment of such international financial mechanism. The objective remains that concrete announcement can be made on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the adoption of Recommendation (No. 202) on Social Protection Floors.

1. **A rights-based approach to social protection in the post-COVID-19 economic recovery**

In the Human Rights Council resolution 44/13, the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights was invited to prepare a report on the COVID-19’s impacts on people living in poverty.

The Special Rapporteur’s [special report](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Poverty/covid19.pdf), issued in September 2020 in response to this invitation, analyzes social protection measures adopted around the world in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. It finds that many of them are short-term, temporary and inadequate, and calls for building social protection systems on the basis of human rights. This report is based, among other sources, on the contributions received as a response to the [call for inputs](https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Poverty/Pages/Covid19.aspx) issued by the Special Rapporteur and on the [joint questionnaire on Covid-19 and human rights](https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/SP/Pages/Joint-questionnaire-COVID-19.aspx) launched jointly with several other Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council.

The findings of this special report were presented during the 44th session of the Human Rights Council, in June 2020, at the [virtual side event on "COVID-19 and the human rights of people living in poverty",](https://youtu.be/eG6gL-l2I6k) jointly organized with ATD Fourth World and Franciscans International.

1. **The “just transition” in the economic recovery: Eradicating poverty within planetary boundaries**

The report on the “just transition” in the economic recovery ([A/75/181/REV.1](https://undocs.org/A/75/181/REV.1)) [presented](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tuq7nf3fRnU) to the General Assembly in October 2020, examines how the fight against poverty can be combined with a transition to a development model that mitigates climate change and halts the erosion of biodiversity. The report argues that the “just transition” should not only protect workers and communities affected by the ecological transformation, but also open up new employment opportunities for people living in poverty and improve their access to goods and services essential to the enjoyment of human rights. In specific areas, such as energy, buildings, food or mobility, “triple-dividend” actions can be taken that would reduce the ecological footprint while simultaneously creating employment opportunities for people with low levels of qualification and facilitating access to goods and services essential to the enjoyment of human rights. The report identifies such actions, arguing that they should be underpinned by a different development model that places the fight against inequalities above the exclusive focus on economic growth and that combats wasteful consumption rather than seeing it an ingredient of growth. The main message of the report is that “building back better” does not mean returning to the status quo, but instead taking public action towards the eradication of poverty within planetary boundaries: the report provides specific, operational recommendations in order to solve this complex equation.

**Next steps**

The Special Rapporteur will continue to work with governments, international agencies, academic experts, civil society and social movements to identify the various tools that could help accelerate this transition. Such tools include strengthening the social and solidarity economy; encouraging cities to support citizens-led initiatives based on the idea of the commons; as well as increasing investments in renewable energy sources, in the insulation of buildings, in public transport, in agroecological agriculture and in local food systems, and in the circular economy, all of which can contribute to boosting local economies, to employment creation, and to the decoupling of economic growth from the ecological footprint.

Mr. De Schutter has already participated in many different webinars, conferences and consultations to present his report and accelerate a “just transition”. More information about these events can be accessed [here](https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Poverty/Pages/Videos.aspx).

1. **The intergenerational perpetuation of poverty**

The [intergenerational perpetuation of poverty](http://www.oecd.org/social/broken-elevator-how-to-promote-social-mobility-9789264301085-en.htm) remains high, due in particular to insufficient investment in early childhood, but also to the stigma attached to poverty: in some countries, it may take people born in low-income families nine, or even up to eleven generations to reach the mean income in their society. People in poverty also have been traditionally excluded from political processes: poorly informed, rarely consulted, they have generally not been a constituency that mattered. They understand, better than most, how economic marginalization and political disempowerment go hand in hand: they know how precious democracy is, but also how democracy will remain a distant dream until the economy is made more inclusive.

From the start, the Special Rapporteur emphasized that we needed to move beyond an understanding of poverty that blames it on the victims: the persistence of poverty is the result of a collective failure, the inability of societies to be truly inclusive by recognizing the contribution of people in poverty and by valuing their experience. A [short video](https://youtu.be/31xY6rYiu2E) was prepared on this topic with the support of the Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung.

On 17 and 18 December 2020, with support from the Government of Luxembourg, the Special Rapporteur organized in partnership with the Luxembourg Institute of Socio-Economic Research (LISER) a virtual meeting on the intergenerational perpetuation of poverty. During these two days, participants (experts, social practitioners, and representatives from international organizations) discussed which measures could be adopted to break this cycle and to improve social mobility, with a particular emphasis on the conditions under which investments in early childhood can make a difference, and on the role of social welfare services in this regard.

On 1 April 2021, as a follow-up to the previous dialogues, the Special Rapporteur participated in a meeting organized by ATD Fourth World, in Luxembourg, where he could hear directly from the participants their experiences living in poverty. This same meeting will be replicated in Brussels on 11 June 2021 where the discussion will focus on the relationship with social workers and social services and the role of schools integrating children living in poverty. On 11 and 26 May respectively, dialogues will be organized with ATD Fourth World representatives and people with experience of poverty, in the African and Latin American and the Carribean (LAC) regions, with an aim to understand which measures could be most effective in breaking the vicious cycles of poverty.

**Next steps**

All of these dialogues will feed into a thematic report on the intergenerational perpetuation of poverty that will be presented at the 75th session of the General Assembly, in October 2021.

1. **Other upcoming thematic priorities**
2. **Discrimination against people living in poverty**

This will be the topic of a special report that the Special Rapporteur plans to issue in 2022. In addition to the special report, Mr. De Schutter also plans to launch a video documentary on the topic of discrimination of people living in poverty. On 17 and 18 June 2021, the Special Rapporteur will organise a Dialogue on the discrimination of people living in poverty, with the support of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), with the German international cooperation agency (Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit - GIZ) as the implementing agency. This dialogue will be an opportunity to relate the legal and policy frameworks on discrimination with experiences of people discriminated because they live in poverty.

1. **The non-take up of rights**

The "non take-up" of rights remains a widespread phenomenon: the intended beneficiaries of social support are not informed about their rights; they face various obstacles in claiming benefits; or they may experience shame or fear their encounters with social services, for instance because they are undocumented migrants or because of the risk of having children removed from the family. Although the specific reasons behind it are very context-dependent, non-take-up represents a fundamental challenge to the very effectiveness and suitability of public services that is pervasive in most countries. For instance, estimates of non-take-up of minimum income benefits in the European countries for 2016 were approximately [between 50%-80%](https://socialsecurity.belgium.be/sites/default/files/content/docs/en/publications/working-papers/bori_greskovics.pdf), while in OECD countries non-take-up was estimated at [40%-80% in the case of social assistance and housing programs, and 60%-80% for unemployment compensation](https://www.oecd.org/social/soc/30901173.pdf). The Covid-19 pandemic has illustrated the limited social resilience of many societies, particularly in developing countries, in the face of economic downturn. This makes it more urgent than ever to shed more light on non-take-up as an important limit to the effectiveness of social protection systems, to hierarchize the factors that can cause non-take-up, and to improve the understanding of governments of how they can address it by identifying the best practices in this regard.

The Special Rapporteur will make this issue a central topic of his mandate in 2022. He will undertake a Worldwide Survey on the non-take up of rights with a global approach that will thoroughly analyse the obstacles that people living in poverty face in claiming their benefits.

The Worldwide Survey on the non-take-up of rights will be a project on its own. It will also feed into the preparation of the Special Rapporteur's report to the 50th session of the Human Rights Council, which will focus on the gap between legal coverage and effective coverage in the field of social protection, providing a "reality check". In addition to non-take-up, that report will explore the challenges resulting from informal work and from corruption in the delivery of social protection.

1. **Country visits**

As of today, due to the difficulties faced with the Covid-19 pandemic, the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights has only been able to carry out one visit to the European Union from 25 November 2020 to 29 January 2021 in a year.

* **European Union**

The Special Rapporteur visited the institutions of the European Union from 25 November 2020 to 29 January 2021. The purpose of the visit was to provide the Human Rights Council with an assessment of the contribution of the EU to the fight against poverty in the EU, and to offer constructive recommendations

During this visit, the Special Rapporteur [met](https://www.srpoverty.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Final-Meetings-schedule-EU-visit-1.pdf) (virtually and in person) with representatives from over twenty institutions, including the European Commission, the Council of the EU, the European Parliament, the European Labour Authority, the European Economic and Social Committee, the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), and the European Central and Investment Banks, as well as with national governments and over 40 civil society and social partner organizations. He also had an exchange with the President of the Eurogroup, as well as with the chairs of the Social Protection Committee and the Employment Committee. He met with the United Nations agencies working on the European region. He also engaged with the representatives of France, Italy, Portugal, Slovenia and Spain, in order to improve his understanding of how national-level anti-poverty policies are supported by EU-level policies. The Special Rapporteur would like to express his deep appreciation to his interlocutors who kindly offered their time and shared their knowledge during this visit.

The visit ended with a [Press Conference](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5zDnqGMmGek) on the last day of the visit where Mr. De Schutter presented his [preliminary findings and conclusions](https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26693&LangID=E) and issued a [press release](https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26698&LangID=E) that received a lot of media attention.

**Next steps**

The UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights will present his visit report on the EU to the 47th session of Human Rights Council, in June 2021.

Prior to the presentation of his reports to the Human Rights Council, he has been invited to participate at various events in preparation of the Porto Summit on a Social Europe, organized in Porto on 7 and 8 May by the European Commission and the Portuguese EU Presidency. In particular, he took part in a webinar organized by the Portuguese EU Presidency on [the role of economic, social and cultural rights in building social Europe](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCMxRo7QOxgfwtEOjUQbo5pA) on 3 May 2021, and to a EuroMed Rights meeting on the feminisation of poverty in the EU on 6 May 2021.

* **Upcoming visits**

In 2021, the Special Rapporteur has been invited to carry out country visits to:

* **Nepal** from 6 to 17 September 2021
* **Kyrgyzstan** from 1 to 12 November 2021

1. **Communications**

The Special Rapporteur filed a number of communications during the first year of his mandate. He made the deliberate choice of carefully choosing the communications on which he takes the lead, focusing only on the allegations that are the most reliable and the most directly related to the mandate on extreme poverty; but of examining the allegations in depth, and ensuring adequate follow-up of each. Specifically, the Special Rapporteur will study carefully the responses received from governments or from other addressees of allegation letters or urgent appeals, in order to assess whether the responses provide satisfactory answers in relation to the concerns raised.

1. **Conclusion**

In addition to all the activities stated above, the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights has also participated in important meetings, conferences, events, webinars such as [the 2020 HRC Social Forum](https://www.srpoverty.org/es/2020/10/08/hrc-social-forum-poverty-matrix-video/), [the High-Level Meeting convened by the President of the General Assembly for the launch of the Alliance for Poverty Eradication,](https://www.dropbox.com/s/ev0xuk4osd4jrdv/HLMPE%20DeSchutter30.6.2020.mp4?dl=0) and many others that can be accessed [here](https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Poverty/Pages/Videos.aspx).

The Special Rapporteur is grateful for the support received by donors, which has allowed and will continue to allow him to expand his work and which makes a major difference to the way in which he is able to pursue the implementation of his mandate. With the support of Finland and Belgium, the Special Rapporteur has been able to recruit, for a duration of 9 months, a consultant (P2), as his advisor, who provides support in implementing activities relating to all of the above-mentioned thematic priorities and a media advisor (P3) who assists in the development and implementation of an effective and comprehensive communication strategy and in producing all public information materials related to the work of the mandate. In addition, the international organization Porticus is also supporting the mandate with a contribution that has allowed strengthening the team with the recruitment of a consultant who is providing essential support on the topics of discrimination of people living in poverty and on the non-take up of rights.

The Special Rapporteur would greatly appreciate continued support from donors in order to carry out these activities, as well as other activities aimed at increasing the visibility of his mandate and promoting the importance of human rights in effectively eliminating poverty.

1. World Bank, *Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2020: Reversals of Fortune* (2020). Since this estimate assumes that losses of GDP and income are evenly spread across the population, it may be underestimating the poverty impacts of the crisis, as there is evidence that the losses for middle- and lower-income households are much greater than for higher-income households: Oxfam assesses that 185 million more people will be in poverty as a result of the crisis (Oxfam, *Shelter from the storm. The global need for universal social protection in times of Covid-19* (Dec. 2020)). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ILO, Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Brief, January 2019, <https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---travail/documents/publication/wcms_711798.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)