

Questionnaire on “COVID-19 pandemic: lessons learnt and moving forward” UNESCO input

1. What were the most significant challenges and obstacles during the pandemic and the recovery period related to ensuring an enabling environment for business to respect human rights? What were the most important lessons learnt from the crisis and how can these lessons help in addressing business-related human rights abuses linked to future crises?

The massification of digital technologies, as well as the creation and maintaining of measures related to the pandemic have in some instances entailed an invasion of privacy to contain the virus, with the track and trace mechanisms collecting a massive amount of data creating a challenge going forward. UNESCO has provided an answer to this important issue through the development and adoption of the Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in 2021, a groundbreaking normative instrument adopted by 193 Member States, which includes provisions to understand what is happening with the information that had to be collected, but in a way in which privacy is going to be respected and the principle of transparency must prevail. Member States had this interest in having this ethical framework because of the challenge also caused by digitalization in the pandemic and the advent and expansion of new digital modalities such as working from home. The lack of standardized regulatory frameworks at the international level on how to deal with information and data in this context has been addressed by this one-of-a-kind normative instrument.

UNESCO is the only UN agency that has a clear mandate on ethics, and in this sense all the analyses produced had an ethical approach at the way in which the pandemic is handled. National solutions have prevailed in a world requiring international solidarity. UNESCO called for a change of course in current COVID-19 vaccination strategies, urging that vaccines be treated as a global public good to ensure they are made equitably available in all countries, and not only to those who bid the highest for these vaccines.

The disproportionate negative impacts and exclusion of the most vulnerable populations, notably those experiencing intersectional discriminations in low-income countries, will considerably hinder the progress towards achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. For instance, persons with disabilities and especially women and girls with disabilities are one of the most affected by the multifaceted drawbacks of this pandemic, and yet their voice is nowhere to be heard in a systemic way, and their specific needs for an equat recovery have been neglected.¹ We urgently need to make sure that the national and global COVID-19 Recovery Packages specifically tackle the needs of persons with disabilities.

In relation to the protection and promotion of an enabling environment for the right to science and scientific freedom, as protected by UNESCO’s Recommendation on Science and Scientific Researchers, that concern business entities and/or could be addressed with business’s contribution, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and exacerbated obstacles such as:

- The alignment with ethical standards and protocols followed to ensure the dignity and integrity of scientific work;
- Addressing gender gaps as regards career opportunities in concerned businesses, particularly in relation to access to high-level positions.

¹ A [Rapid Impact Assessment of COVID-19 on Persons with Disabilities in Zimbabwe and Malawi](#) conducted by UNESCO in 2020, shows that the monthly income of persons with disabilities was reduced by 50% due to containment measures; additionally, 80% of respondents indicated that they only had 1 meal per day since the pandemic started, while this rate was 28% pre-COVID.

- Restricted access to knowledge and data due to the implementation of intellectual property regimes among other factors.²

Studies of political knowledge among the general population reveal a consistent lesson: The public is often ignorant and misinformed when it comes to basic matters of fact and issues of scientific consensus. This is related to the phenomenon identified as “rational motivated ignorance”: that is, ignorance motivated by the costs of being informed. Ignorance is frequently a strategic response to social incentives. In many communities, beliefs come to function as signals of ingroup identity and solidarity. For many people denying or downplaying the function of vaccines operates as a cherished badge of cultural and political identity. For anti-Vaxxers, anti-vaccination is not an emotionally neutral hypothesis. It is a signal of ingroup allegiance, made all the more credible by the collective persecution, ridicule, and stigma often endured by this subculture. Obviously, drawing attention to the “benefits” of such ignorance is not intended to excuse it. The aim is rather to understand it. When societal ignorance is rational motivated ignorance, the solution cannot be ordinary forms of knowledge dissemination and persuasion.

The youth-led research conducted under the UNESCO’s Youth As Researchers on COVID-19 initiative, revealed potential obstacles to young people realizing their right to work (article 23 of UDHR) and their right for an adequate standard of living (article 25 of UDHR) that concern business and/or could be addressed with business’s contribution. These include:

- The double exposure to the virus and to the risk of losing their jobs, for young people who worked in jobs that were medium to high risk of COVID-19 exposure and which, at the same time, were more likely to experience closures related to Covid-19;
- Lack of ICT resources/capacity to be able to continue working from home;
- Young women (increase in childcare, irregular working hours and an increase in unpaid labor responsibilities etc.);
- Young entrepreneurs: (limited availability or lack of financial support for the continuation of their businesses, limited capacities in conducting operations online;
- Greater stress, anxiety and depression during the pandemic.³

The COVID-19 pandemic has underlined the need to support independent journalism and media actors at a time of growing challenges for media viability. As a pre-requisite to preserving free and independent media, a financially viable media sector is also a pre-requisite for media to uphold its role to inform, scrutinize human rights violations and hold governments, businesses and other actors to account for their actions.

The COVID-19 crisis has further emphasized the growing role of digital technologies to maintain functioning societies amid the disruptions caused by the pandemic. Digital technologies have been a crucial enabler, but they also bring new risks, as evidenced by the global wave of disinformation linked to COVID-19, which has sown confusion about life-saving personal and policy choices, with fatal and divisive effects, at times destabilizing already fragile communities.

This calls for continued action to bridge persistent digital and knowledge divides, including through the development and use of open solutions and emerging technologies, as well as through the strengthening of digital skills. It also calls for transparency and access to data from social media platforms and other information providers to enable independent scrutiny of the trends, moderation and curation policies that determine what social media users are exposed to on a daily basis. For access to information to thrive and to effectively address the global challenges of viral disinformation and hate speech while respecting freedom of expression, transparency of internet and social media platforms is crucial.

² UNESCO, *COVID-19 Y VACUNACIÓN EN AMÉRICA LATINA Y EL CARIBE: Desafíos, Necesidades y Oportunidades*; UNESCO, ‘La UNESCO Pide Que Las Vacunas Contra La COVID-19 Se Consideren Un Bien Público Mundial’ <<https://es.unesco.org/news/unesco-pide-que-vacunas-covid-19-se-consideren-bien-publico-mundial>> [accessed 12 May 2021].

³ https://www.cepal.org/sites/default/files/presentations/ppt_dia_internacional_de_la_juventud_2020.pdf

2. What policies and measures did your organization use to address business-related human rights abuses? Please outline any multilateral and international cooperation efforts, and steps to provide financial and technical support to States in times of crisis and during the recovery period. How can these efforts serve as an example for how to both build back better and entrench an enabling environment for sustainable development? What lessons have been learned for handling future crises in a spirit of global solidarity and shared responsibility?

For example, in Zimbabwe, UNESCO supported the Government's COVID Task Force to identify the gaps in the National Response Plan that results in the exclusion of persons with disabilities from the services, information, and prevention measures. An integrated model of Inclusive Governance has been formulated, to ensure that the voices of persons with disabilities are effectively heard in the national COVID-19 instances. But there are no resources for implementation so far. In addition, a series of awareness-raising videos have been produced in Africa, to highlight the ethical dimensions of the COVID-19 crisis and its related containment measures, in terms of social divides, exclusion, discrimination, violence, and political control.

Regarding cooperation with the private sector, UNESCO conducts a Due Diligence (DD) process before engaging with private sector donors. One element of the DD process is to request potential funding partners to complete a DD Questionnaire, which asks inter alia, whether within recent years the entity has been involved in Human Rights abuses. UNESCO also conducts online searches and considers whether the entity is a participant in the UN Global Compact or demonstrates responsible business practices, etc. If an entity is cited as allegedly being involved in potential Human Rights abuse, the DD report would outline the findings for necessary management decision.

At the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic, UNESCO established the Global Education Coalition (GEC), an international multisectoral partnership which now (March 2022) includes close to 180 members from the private sector, including EdTech companies, non-profits, foundations, media and civil society organizations. The GEC is an agile and collaborative platform, that aims to meet the urgent need for continuity of learning disrupted due to COVID-19. UNESCO has worked with members of the GEC in 112 countries through the provision of online learning platforms and open educational resources to students and teachers. UNESCO will continue its endeavours, together with Member States and coalition members to enhance learning opportunities, especially for the most vulnerable and marginalized.

UNESCO works to harness new and emerging technologies for sustainable development, and to enable inclusive participation in the digital transformation. Actions in this field notably build on the findings of the AI Needs Assessment Survey in Africa, carried out by UNESCO, pointing to specific needs and priorities in terms of capacity building.

Informed by the Windhoek +30 Declaration which identifies greater transparency of technology companies as the third pillar needed to ensuring information as a public good, UNESCO has developed a set of 26-high level principles on enhancing the transparency of internet platform companies. The principles span across issues related to content and process, due diligence and redress, empowerment, commercial dimensions, personal data gathering and use, and data access. Developed through a series of consultations, the principles aim to be a resource for companies, policymakers, and regulators.

The principles on transparency are also part of a wider UNESCO initiative to develop global frameworks for transparency that could help inform future regulation of tech companies. Other steps in this process involves developing transparency frameworks and indicators for risk assessment processes, as well as human rights impact assessments.

Between April 2020 and December 2021, under a global project #CoronavirusFacts, Addressing the 'Disinfectomic' on COVID-19 in conflict-prone environments, UNESCO

supported the capacity strengthening of over 30000 journalists, fact-checkers and communicators from 157 countries. UNESCO paved the way for sustainable new partnerships between networks of journalists, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and youth, and other stakeholders such as health/science experts, fact-checkers, and public authorities. The skills and partnerships built will contribute to preparedness to report and monitor human rights also for future crisis.

3. What opportunities would allow your organization to contribute to build back better while ensuring stronger and more decisive action to protect human rights in the context of business activities particularly for those individuals and communities at heightened risk of discrimination or marginalization?

Findings of the youth-led research conducted under the UNESCO's Youth As Researchers on COVID-19 initiative highlighted the importance of a collaborating with national governments and the business community in designing and implementing policies and programmes that would: institute protection of workers in the workplace, invest in ensuring digital infrastructure for youth, improve support to youth-led enterprises and enhance avenues for young people to connect and partner with policy-makers, government etc.

As a follow up of the International Colloquium on Social Sciences and COVID-19 organized by the Management of Social Transformations (MOST) Programme in October 2021, UNESCO engaged in a process for establishing a MOST Social Sciences and Covid network aimed at strengthening collaboration between Member States, international institutions and knowledge partners to better understand and face the major contemporary challenges related to the recent pandemic and the efforts to renew social contracts. This monitoring network would be established in the biennium 2022-2023 and includes the organization of a second symposium in September 2023.

The establishment of the new UNESCO Category 2 International Centre for Social and Human Sciences Palau Macaya – “la Caixa” Foundation, in Barcelona (Spain), creates new opportunities to expand and strengthen UNESCO's activities to engage the business sector in collaborative actions designed to protect human rights in the context of “building back better”.

In terms of supporting access to trustworthy information, the issue of the financial viability and sustainability of the media industry needs to be addressed. Recent years have seen innovative approaches to this issue with mixed results.

As outlined in UNESCO's report on World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development, it is essential to increase the availability, accessibility, utilization, and stability of relevant data, including the amplification of geographic and thematic scope of data protection and the promotion of open data, to enable all stakeholders to better understand the challenges facing free, independent, and pluralistic media.

4. What efforts were made by your organization to engage with all stakeholders in a constructive and meaningful dialogue, including States, businesses, and the civil society sector, to address business-related human rights abuses in crisis situations, to build alternatives for recovery and to prevent human rights abuses in future crisis situations?

At the global level, UNESCO successfully leveraged the expertise of the two of its ethics advisory bodies – the International Bioethics Committee (IBC) and the World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology (COMEST) to provide fit for purpose guidance to policy makers on various ethical challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. To date, four statements on COVID-19 have been published by UNESCO through the IBC and COMEST:

- Ethical Consideration from a Global Perspective (April 2020);
- Call for Global Vaccines Equity and Solidarity (February 2021);

- Statement on the Ethics of COVID-19 Certificates and Vaccine Passports (June 2021);
- Call for the temporary waiving of patents related to COVID-19 vaccines (September 2021).

UNESCO has engaged in dialogues with different stakeholders relevant to business entities as regards the promotion of the right to science and scientific freedom:

- In dialogue with Member States, UNESCO completed the first monitoring process of the Recommendation on Science and Scientific Researchers to explore and enable the protection and promotion of an enabling environment that can serve to address business-related human rights abuses in crisis situations.
- In cooperation with the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, an upcoming report on African perspectives related to scientific freedom will offer insights into trends within the continent, including on issues of indirect interferences and conditions for an enabling environment for scientific freedom.
- In collaboration with the American Association for the Advancement of Science, a report on the connections between the right to science and the SDGs, and the impact this faced during the COVID-19 is being produced.
- UNESCO and the French Presidency of the Intergovernmental Council of the MOST Programme organized an international symposium in October 2021 to examine the importance of social science research in the management of health crises.
- Fostering scientific knowledge on COVID-19 vaccination in Latin American region, UNESCO co-led a task force on the Lancet Commission on COVID-19 for Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) region. It also developed a document about vaccination in LAC.
- A publication was developed: “COVID-19 and vaccination in Latin America and the Caribbean: challenges, needs and opportunities” (<https://bit.ly/32JwbxN>).
- Out of a series of Webinar on “Making COVID-19 Vaccine a “global public good” for its timely allocation to Africa”, a policy brief was produced: [Global vaccines equity and solidarity: for a fair, equitable and timely allocation of COVID-19 vaccines in Africa.](#)

In line with the UNESCO Recommendation on Science and Scientific Researchers, UNESCO invested in implementing the “Youth as Researchers on COVID-19” signature initiative, throughout 2020-2021, as a means to connect youth-generated knowledge with tangible policy solutions and pandemic recovery efforts.

As a follow-up of the findings and recommendations of the youth-led research, UNESCO committed to hosting a High-Level Policy Conference (25 March 2022), which will provide a space for dialogue between young researchers and Ministers for youth to outline commitments that respond to the ways COVID-19 has affected young people around the world. The Conference aims to launch a multi-stakeholder global coalition to address the impact of the pandemic on youth and to secure tangible commitments to a Global Grant Scheme to sustainably support youth-led research and youth-led action for positive social impact.

The Windhoek+30 Declaration on Information as a Public Good was adopted by participants in the 2021 World Press Freedom Conference, organized in Namibia. Its principles were endorsed by the 41st session of the UNESCO General Conference in November 2021. It calls on companies to ensure transparency in relation to their human and automated systems, provide robust notice and appeals opportunities to users, conduct transparent human rights impact assessments and engage in partnerships to support information as a public good.

Through UNESCO’s extensive engagement with journalists and media actors, civil society organizations, UN agencies and public authorities throughout the pandemic, the skills developed by journalists in professional and conflict-sensitive reporting, health and crisis communications, and addressing disinformation, as well as the new partnerships built across professional groups to counter mis- and disinformation will contribute to mitigate, prepare for and manage future crisis and to preserve the respect for human rights.

UNESCO convened meetings with partners both UN, private sector and Member States to ensure continuity in the provision of science education, involvement, continuity and sharing of scientific research findings through advocacy for Open Science.