

**Human Rights Council virtual informal conversation with
the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights
Joint NGO statement on economic, social and cultural rights
Thursday, 09 April 2020**

Madame President,

We thank the High Commissioner for her update, and her Office's ongoing work to ensure human rights are central to the response to COVID-19. We urge states to cooperate in good faith with the High Commissioner and her office, Special Procedures, and other mechanisms to ensure human rights are respected and protected during this crisis.

We face an unprecedented threat that shows our interconnectedness; our strongest tools to respond are solidarity and cooperation – at local, national, and global levels. Effective international cooperation and assistance – including through financial assistance and information sharing will be essential to stemming the tide of this pandemic. Governments should fulfil their obligation to support countries with limited resources to mobilize the maximum available resources to respond to the pandemic and protect those at risk, including through the provision of financial assistance towards the UN's global humanitarian response plan. International financial institutions should also take steps to urgently support countries facing the pandemic with measures consistent with human rights.

States and international institutions will have to mobilise trillions of dollars to support economies and people's livelihoods. They must use all available resources to respect, protect and fulfil economic and social rights that are at the heart of this crisis – including the rights to health, housing, water and sanitation, food, work, social security, education, healthy environment an adequate standard of living, and to equality and non-discrimination as cross-cutting rights. In designing their interventions, they should ensure that those who are most marginalized and at greatest risk are protected, including older people, people with pre-existing medical conditions, people living in poverty, persons with disabilities, children, Indigenous people, people discriminated on work and descent, migrants and asylum seekers, people living in refugee or IDP camps, and people deprived of liberty. States should also ensure their response respects and protects the human rights of all women and girls, and gender non-conforming people to mitigate potential threats to their health, safety and other rights, which are often linked to pre-existing gender inequality.

States must respect, protect and fulfil the right to health at this crucial time. They should ensure that quality health services and goods necessary for prevention and care are accessible, available and affordable for all. Health workers and other front-line workers should be provided with adequate protective equipment, information, training and psycho-social support. Key health services, including sexual and reproductive health information and services, should be confirmed as essential services and their provision guaranteed.

International health and scientific cooperation is vital for an effective response to the pandemic. States should ensure that intellectual property regimes do not impede access to vital medicines and vaccines for populations in need. It is crucial that the benefits of scientific advancements relating to COVID-19 such as diagnostics, medicines and vaccines are available to all, within and between countries. States should ensure that businesses follow a policy with the view of increasing access to health for all, in particular as regards the affordability of medicine for as many persons as possible.

In order to prevent further exposure to COVID-19 and other infectious diseases, states must ensure the right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment.

Since governments have declared strict lockdown measures and millions of people are subject to 'stay at home' orders, the risk of domestic violence and child abuse has increased. We call on governments to put women and children's safety first as they respond to the pandemic including by reviewing national strategies in responding to domestic violence and providing necessary support and resources for continuous operation of shelters, helplines and other support services for survivors.

States should provide emergency accommodation to people who are homeless including facilities where they are able to protect and isolate themselves if necessary. They must also put in place adequate, affordable and safe water and sanitation facilities that are accessible to all. Governments must also take measures to protect people from being made more vulnerable to COVID-19 because of a lack of housing. Governments should, in accordance with the recommendation of the UN Special Rapporteur on Housing, completely suspend evictions during the period of the crisis, including for those who are unable to pay their rent or mortgage.

Measures taken by states to address the pandemic can have adverse impacts on the right to food. States must take measures to ensure that the right to food is guaranteed, including by expanding food distribution programs and providing alternatives to replace school feeding programs. States should consider supporting small-scale food producers to ensure sufficient availability of food for all and should adopt regulatory measures to stabilise food prices and prevent profiteering on foodstuffs, hygiene products and essential medicines and supplies. Measures may include easing all value added tax on such supplies, and subsidizing the costs of essential food and hygiene products.

People in precarious forms of labour, the majority of which are women in low and lower-middle income countries, will be disproportionately affected by the pandemic. Migrant workers, people who work in the "gig" economy, and people in the informal sector are more likely to see their rights to, and at, work adversely impacted, as a result of COVID-19 and the measures to control it.

Micro and small enterprises should be supported in relief packages. This could include through support for easing any debt payments, which affect the lives of millions of households, especially in the global south.

States must ensure that everyone has access to social security protections at this time, as well as economic support where necessary without fear of any retribution. These measures are also essential to help people comply with public health measures put in place. In designing responses to COVID-19, states should identify the impact of certain restrictions on people's livelihood which could then impact a range of human rights, including economic, social, and cultural, and mitigate these to the extent possible.

Faced with school closures, States, in collaboration with teachers, communities, parents and guardians, should explore innovative and accessible ways to provide access to education and ensure adequate guidance and support for home schooling, and must ensure adequate levels of financial support and social protection for individuals and families that need it. In many countries remote learning is not a viable option due to the lack of access to technology and costs of data, particularly for those living in poverty. For many children with disabilities, most remote schooling methods and platforms are not inclusive and accessible. Home schooling or adequate child-care is often not feasible for millions of parents who have to continue working despite the risks due to lack of sufficient social protection and economic support.

In situations of conflict and occupation, it is critical that governments and other parties exercising effective control protect, fulfil, and respect the right to health and provision of health services to all and ensure full and unimpeded access for humanitarian and medical aid.

Governments and other parties exercising effective control must ensure that vulnerable groups can access health and other essential services without fear of reprisal, detention, or deportation.

It will be painful and costly, but we will see the other side of this pandemic. We urge States, to recommit to working together towards a more just world: to tackle underlying inequalities and ensure the full respect and fulfilment of economic, social and cultural rights without discrimination. This is not only consistent with states' human rights obligations; it also helps make us more resilient and better equipped to prevent or address another such crisis.

Thank you.

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Al Mezan Centre for Human Rights
Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain
Amnesty International
Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA)
Asian Legal Resource Centre (ALRC)
Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS)
Center for Reproductive Rights
Centre for Civil and Political Rights
Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales - CELS (Argentina)
Child Rights Connect
CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation
Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI)
Conectas Direitos Humanos
DefendDefenders (East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project)
FIAN International
Franciscans International (FI)
Geneva for Human Rights - Global Training (GHR)
International Bar Association
International Commission of Jurists
International Disability Alliance
International Federation of Human Rights Leagues (FIDH)
International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA World)
International Movement Against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism (IMADR)
International Service for Human Rights (ISHR)
Justiça Global
Lawyers' Rights Watch Canada
Nazra Feminist Studies
Right Livelihood Foundation
Save the Children
The Advocates for Human Rights
Validity Foundation - Mental Disability Advocacy Centre
World Organisation against Torture
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