

**ALL  
HUMAN**  
**ALL  
EQUAL**



# Human Rights Day — Theme: **EQUALITY**

## 10 December 2021

### KEY MESSAGES --- HUMAN RIGHTS DAY 2021

#### ■ **GENERAL MESSAGE:**

**Equality in dignity and rights for all supporting opportunities and outcomes for fairer and inclusive societies.**

#### ■ **SPECIFIC MESSAGES ON HOW WE CAN REACH EQUALITY**

##### **1. A HUMAN RIGHTS-BASED ECONOMY CAN BREAK CYCLES OF POVERTY**

**Rampant poverty, pervasive inequalities and structural discrimination are human rights violations and among the greatest global challenges of our time. Addressing them effectively requires measures grounded in human rights, renewed political commitment and participation of all, especially those most affected. We need a new social contract which more fairly shares power, resources and opportunities and sets the foundations of a sustainable human rights-based economy.**

- The COVID-19 pandemic has increased global poverty for the first time since 1998 and will push 150 million people into extreme poverty by the end of 2021. People in vulnerable situations and without social protection have been the worst affected due to entrenched discrimination, exclusion and inequality. These include people living in poverty; children and youth; older persons; persons with disabilities; people of African descent; racial, ethnic and religious minorities; indigenous peoples; migrants and refugees; and other marginalized groups. Women and girls everywhere especially in marginalised groups are even further excluded and left behind. The pandemic adds to the challenges of a triple planetary crises of climate change, pollution, and nature loss.
- Low and middle-income countries in particular are facing serious challenges to deliver on their legally binding commitments to economic and social rights. Major challenges include foreign debt burden, collapsing trade, falling remittances, capital flight, currency depreciation and limited international development assistance and environmental degradation.
- We are at a crossroads, we have a once in a generation opportunity to change course, navigating a clear way out of the complex COVID-19 crisis, and towards an inclusive, sustainable and resilient future, will be the work of this generation of world leaders – or their downfall.

- We need a new social contract that establishes more inclusive global and environmental governance, better regulations on finance, trade and investment, debt relief, progressive tax systems, and promotes productive capacities in countries most affected to address poverty, rising inequalities and environmental degradation including climate change.
- It is important to ensure that international financial institutions fully uphold human rights in their financing and conditionalities. We need to make sure development financing aligns with international norms; addresses discrimination and other root causes of inequalities; and integrates both participation and accountability.
- States should adopt a human rights-based approach to taxation to raise the necessary resources for public investments in basic social services. Measures could include progressive personal and corporate income tax, temporary COVID-19 profit taxes and wealth tax. Concrete steps to curb illicit financial flows and tax abuse by transnational corporations are needed.
- States and other actors, including international financial institutions, multilateral development banks and transnational corporations, have an important role to play in securing an enabling international environment by stepping up development cooperation. They have an obligation to uphold human rights and contribute to reducing poverty and inequalities.
- Civil society and social movements also have a pivotal role to play in reducing inequalities. Active, free and meaningful participation of poor and marginalized communities should be ensured in the formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of national and international policies combating poverty, discrimination and inequality.

## 2. REBUILDING FAIRER: A NEW SOCIAL CONTRACT

**Human rights, including economic, social and cultural rights as well as the right to development and the right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment, are central to building a new human rights-based economy that supports better, fairer and more sustainable societies for present and future generations. A human rights-based economy should be the foundation of a new social contract.**

- Rebuilding fairer requires reversing long-standing structures of poverty and inequality by strengthening the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.
- We work to reduce inequality, every day, everywhere. That vision is at the heart of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, captured in SDG 10: reduce inequality within and between countries
- Refer to the cornerstone of The 2030 Agenda: member states' commitment to leave no one behind and reach those further behind first.
- The exacerbation of inequalities within and among countries especially as a result of COVID-19 has made international cooperation and solidarity as well as a multilateral order an urgent imperative.
- Inequalities stem from policy choices. They can – and should – be dismantled.
- We need to reverse years of under- investment in ESCR, we must counter austerity budgets and be bolder in repositioning public expenditure to prioritize people and their rights.
- Even in times of crisis, all Governments are obligated under international human rights law to mobilise the maximum available resources for social spending on economic, social and cultural rights - including on the rights to health, education, food, health, housing, and water and sanitation, and to meet the minimum essential levels of these rights.
- States are required to carve out the necessary fiscal and policy space to invest in public health systems, education, care work, housing, water, sanitation, electricity, infrastructure, environmental protection and digital resources.
- Social spending on universal health coverage and social protection schemes especially during the pandemic are key to saving lives and livelihoods

- Debt standstill and relief are needed on the part of International Financial Institutions and other creditors to enable to expand the fiscal space for countries to meet their obligations on inclusive access to the rights to education, food, health, housing, and water and sanitation.
- States should promote a just transition to green and decent jobs, while safeguarding labour rights and standards. Social protection floors are key to saving lives and livelihoods especially for those in vulnerable situations including workers in the informal and precarious sectors, and women workers in the shadow economy.
- States should promote the fair and equitable distribution of the benefits resulting from development, globalization and global commons, including the common heritage of humankind.
- A **New Social Contract** needs to be designed between duty bearers or States and rights holders or the people as the current contract stands torn and tattered and has failed to prioritise a life of dignity and rights for a majority of human beings on the planet.
- Economic and social rights, and the right to development, are universal rights. They are not ordinary services with a market-set price-tag, but essential factors in building more peaceful and equal societies. And civil and political rights are equally crucial to building inclusive, participative societies. Together – regardless of the country's wealth or stage of development – steps to uphold these rights create a powerful movement of public trust.
- All policy making should be grounded in meaningful participation, social dialogue, transparency and accountability. Every State needs the broadest possible civic space. This is the core of SDG16, which is essential to unlocking the 2030 Agenda and is essential to rebuilding public trust.
- Policies that build social justice also help to develop stronger economies by driving more inclusive political systems and maintain social cohesion, deepening trust, building hope and preventing instability. Further, systems that deliver justice for victims and recognise their grievances make it easier to build or rebuild security.
- The 2030 Agenda, underpinned by human rights, provides a comprehensive blueprint for sustainable recovery from the pandemic and to further advance the realization of human rights for all people everywhere, without discrimination.
- In line with the promise of the 2030 Agenda to 'leave no one behind', monitoring efforts require greater efforts to collect disaggregated data that clearly reveals the situation of the most disadvantaged groups and those groups affected by discrimination. To response to this data challenge, associated opportunities and risks, [human rights-based approaches to data and statistics](#) will be essential.
- Human rights impact assessments and disaggregated data are key to a clear vision of policymaking. We cannot fix what we do not see.

### 3. EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUTH

**Successive financial and health crises have had long-lasting and multidimensional impacts on millions of young people. Unless their rights are protected, including through decent jobs and social protection, the “COVID generation” runs the risk of falling prey to the detrimental effects of mounting inequality and poverty.**

- The social and economic integration of young people has long been an ongoing challenge. The global financial crisis of 2007 disproportionately affected youth - especially young women - who are more likely to be employed in the informal economy in low-paid, precarious jobs. The economic fall-out of the ongoing pandemic has dealt yet another terrible blow. Urgent action is needed to secure and strengthen the futures of young people.

- A serious and seemingly insurmountable digital divide has intensified through COVID-19 lockdowns hampering the right to education of children and youth and running the risk of deepening intergenerational poverty.
- Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, around one in five of the world's youth were not in employment, education or training, and youth unemployment rates were about three times higher than the rest of the working population. The situation has further deteriorated since the onset of pandemic.
- Young people urgently need targeted and smarter investments in decent work and sustainable livelihoods, in employment and training programmes, social protection and security, and stronger mental health support.
- Young people, particularly young women and youth from lower income countries should be better represented at political and economic decision-making levels to influence solutions on youth development.
- Youth have taken a lead role in calling for government accountability in relation to the climate crisis – their rights to participation and access to information and justice in environmental decision-making should be promoted and protected.

#### 4. REVERSING VACCINE INEQUALITY AND INJUSTICE

**Vaccine injustice through unfair vaccine distribution and hoarding contravenes international legal and human rights norms and the spirit of global solidarity. The call for a common agenda and a new social contract between Governments and their people is the need of the hour so as to rebuild trust and to ensure a life of dignity for all.**

- More than 5.7 billion vaccine doses have been administered worldwide but the majority of all doses, 73 per cent, have been administered in just 10 countries. High-income countries have administered 61 times more doses per inhabitant than low-income nations.
- The availability of public health and health care facilities, goods, services and programmes, one of the cornerstones of the right to health standard, is being ignored while booster shots are being considered in high-income countries.
- The longer vaccine inequity persists, the longer the virus will circulate and evolve, the more people will become ill and die, and the longer the social and economic disruption will continue, undermining not only health and well-being but also, as the [SG's Policy Brief on Human Rights and COVID-19](#) notes, creating further hardship. If hardship is not addressed, tension will rise and provoke civil unrest and generate the security response that will undermine not only the recovery from COVID-19 but the entirety of the 2030 Agenda.
- The international cooperation and assistance in supporting the right to health and the right of everyone to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress and its applications is not a moral aspiration – it is a binding legal obligation of State parties under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.
- Universal health coverage is a keystone of global health security. Despite progress in recent years, 90 per cent of countries have reported disruptions in essential health services due to the pandemic, with the consequences reverberating beyond the health sector, including gains made on eradicating poverty, eliminating gender inequality, vaccinating children against communicable diseases and girls' and boys' education.
- States should ensure universal access to COVID-19 vaccines and treatments as global public goods, and all stakeholders should support flexibility in trade agreements and the waiver of intellectual property rights (the World Trade Organization's Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights- TRIPS Agreement) to assist in curbing the pandemic.
- The rights of all people to benefit from science and its applications must be safeguarded ensuring that solutions to global problems, like a vaccine for COVID-19, are equitably shared by all. Over the long run, inclusive, sustainable and equitable economies are more robust.

## 5. ADVANCING THE RIGHT TO A HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE JUSTICE

**Environmental degradation, including climate change, pollution and nature loss, disproportionately impacts persons, groups and peoples in vulnerable situations. These impacts exacerbate existing inequalities and negatively affect the human rights of present and future generations. In follow-up to the HRC's recognition of the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, urgent action must be taken to respect, protect and fulfil this right. Such action should be the cornerstone of a new human rights-based economy that will produce a green recovery from COVID-19 and a just transition.**

- A safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment is the foundation of human life. But today, because of human action – and inhuman inaction – the triple planetary crises of climate change, pollution, and nature loss is directly and severely impacting a broad range of rights, including the rights to adequate food, water, education, housing, health, development, and even life itself.
- Addressing the world's triple planetary crisis is a humanitarian imperative, a human rights imperative, a peace-building imperative and a development imperative.
- Extreme climate events from monumental fires in Siberia and California; huge sudden floods in China, Germany and Turkey; Arctic heatwaves leading to unprecedented methane emissions; and the persistence of interminable drought, from Morocco and Senegal to Siberia, are affecting people in every region: potentially forcing millions of people into misery, hunger and displacement.
- Pollution – which is fuelled by the same patterns of unsustainable consumption and production as climate change – is generating an estimated 1 in 6 of all premature deaths, while the extinction crisis also creates devastating impacts on human rights and ways of life.
- The interlinked crises of pollution, climate change and biodiversity act as threat multipliers – amplifying conflicts, tensions and structural inequalities, and forcing people into increasingly vulnerable situations. As these environmental threats intensify, they will constitute the single greatest challenge to human rights in our era.
- Human rights law protects the rights to participation, access to information and access to justice. It guarantees all people the rights to benefit from science and its applications, and to share equitably in the benefits of development, and it requires we protect the basic conditions necessary for life – including a safe and stable climate, clean air and water, healthy biodiversity and ecosystems; and a non-toxic environment. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which is grounded in human rights, is a roadmap for rights-based, sustainable solutions that can help to heal our planet and ensure that humanity can thrive.
- Combatting and recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic will require billions of dollars to be spent on rebuilding and supporting national economies. Policy choices can direct that spending into new, green directions that tackle inequalities and stimulate innovative environmental solutions that also uphold and promote human rights.
- Investing in a just recovery can make a critical contribution to shaping a healthy future. But this is a shift that unfortunately is not being consistently and robustly undertaken. According to a recent study by the IMF, UNEP and others, only 18.0% of the pandemic recovery spending announced by the world's 50 largest economies can be considered 'green.'
- Environmental damage usually hurts most those who are least protected – the poorest and most marginalized people, and the poorest nations, which often have the least capacity to respond. Historical exploitation and decades of unsustainable economic practises by actors in developed countries largely underpins this reality. Therefore, six years ago in Paris, States reaffirmed that developed countries should provide developing economies with greater financial and technical assistance for climate action.
- States' human rights obligations require them to cooperate toward the progressive realization of human rights globally, and this clearly should include adequate financing by those who can best afford it of climate change mitigation, adaptation, and loss and damage. The mandate of the

newly established Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights in the context of climate change represents a powerful new tool for addressing these and other issues related to human rights and climate change.

- The Council's Resolution 40/11 powerfully recognizes the contribution of environmental human rights defenders to the enjoyment of human rights, environmental protection and sustainable development. But in many regions, environmental human rights defenders are threatened, harassed and even killed, often with complete impunity. To protect the right to a healthy environment, we must protect environmental human rights defenders.

## **6. PREVENTING CONFLICT AND BUILDING RESILIENCE THROUGH EQUALITY, INCLUSION AND HUMAN RIGHTS**

**Human rights have the power to tackle the root causes of conflict and crisis, by addressing grievances, eliminating inequalities and exclusion and allowing people to participate in decision-making that affect their lives. Societies that protect and promote human rights for everyone are more resilient societies, better equipped through human rights to weather unexpected crises such as pandemics and the impacts of the climate crisis. Equality and non-discrimination are key to prevention: all human rights for all ensure everyone has access to the preventive benefits of human rights but, when certain people or groups are excluded or face discrimination, the inequality will drive the cycle of conflict and crisis.**

- As the landmark United Nations-World Bank report, [Pathways for Peace](#), showed, inequality and exclusion are major drivers of violent conflict. Risk of violence increases in line with perceptions of exclusion and injustice, rooted in inequalities across groups. When an aggrieved group assigns blame to others or to the state for its perceived economic, political, or social exclusion, then emotions, collective memories, frustration over unmet expectations.
- When people enjoy a full measure of protection through the realization of their human rights, societies are less prone to conflict, violence and crisis. But for the full preventive impact to take effect, all human rights must be protected for all. In other words, economic, social and cultural rights are as important as civil and political rights – as both structural drivers of conflict and short-term triggers – and unequal access or exclusion to rights can itself drive conflict even in societies that enjoy good general respect for human rights.
- As the [SG's Policy Brief on Human Rights and COVID-19](#) notes, the pandemic has shone new light on the importance of tackling inequality and discrimination in order to build national resilience to unexpected crisis. These lessons extend beyond the pandemic and apply to how we should prepare for and respond to other crises, such as the impacts of climate change. During the pandemic, it has been clear that discriminatory practices exclude people from the protection that States are seeking to provide to their populations. If one person is excluded, the virus has an opportunity to persist in society and all of our efforts will be undermined. Inclusion is the approach that best protects us all.
- States have a responsibility to ensure that everyone is protected from threats, whether from violence or conflict, a virus, or climate change and its impact. This may require special measures and protection for particular groups most at risk or disproportionately impacted. The response to any crisis needs to take into account multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and inequalities, including pervasive gender inequality. States also need to commit to preventing them persisting when the crisis is over.
- There is clear evidence that high levels of gender inequality and gender-based violence in a society are associated with increased vulnerability to civil war and interstate war and the use of more severe forms of violence in conflict.
- Perceptions of inequality between groups often matter more in terms of mobilization than measured inequality and exclusion. This pattern of exclusion include inequality in the distribution of and access to political opportunity and power among groups, including access to

the executive branch and the police and military. Political exclusion provides group leaders with the incentive to mobilize collective action to force (or negotiate) change.

- Human rights mechanisms, including the UPR, special procedures and treaty bodies, can contribute to identify many of the inequalities and discriminatory practices that can contribute to the risk of conflict or crisis. For example, in 1993 the SR on summary executions identified patterns of discrimination and prejudice in Rwanda that were precursors to the genocide that occurred one year later. Similar numerous treaty body reviews of countries in the Middle East identified widespread and persistent discrimination and exclusion in many of the countries subsequently affected by the so-called Arab Spring.