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**Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner  
for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the  
High Commissioner and the Secretary-General**

**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,  
political, economic, social and cultural rights,  
including the right to development**

## **Summary of the third intersessional meeting for dialogue and cooperation on human rights and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**

### **Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights\***

#### *Summary*

In its resolution 43/19, the Human Rights Council decided to organize three half-day intersessional meetings for dialogue and cooperation on human rights and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, to be held in advance of the 2021, 2022 and 2023 meetings of the high-level political forum on sustainable development.

The present report contains a summary of the first of the three half-day meetings, which was held on 14 January 2021. The meeting was the third intersessional meeting for dialogue and cooperation on human rights and the 2030 Agenda. The previous two intersessional meetings were held in January 2019 and December 2019.

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\* The present report was submitted after the deadline owing to circumstances beyond the submitter's control.



## **I. Introduction**

1. Pursuant to its resolution 43/19, the Human Rights Council held, on 14 January 2021, the first of three half-day intersessional meetings for dialogue and cooperation on human rights and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The meeting built on the previous two intersessional meetings held pursuant to Council resolution 37/24. Informed by the theme of the high-level political forum on sustainable development to be held in 2021,<sup>1</sup> the theme for the third intersessional meeting was “Building back better: integrating human rights in sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic”. The meeting was focused on Sustainable Development Goals 10, on reduced inequalities, and 16, on peace, justice and strong institutions, and emphasized the importance of mainstreaming gender in the implementation of all Sustainable Development Goals. The meeting consisted of a high-level opening session, a thematic session and a brief closing session.

2. The Permanent Representative of Thailand to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva, Sek Wannamethee, chaired the meeting. The Vice-President of the Human Rights Council, Keva L. Bain, made brief opening remarks, referring to numerous Council resolutions that highlighted the centrality of a human rights-based approach and gender-responsive measures in ensuring effective recovery from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. The Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights, Ilze Brands Kehris, also gave opening remarks, highlighting the urgency of placing human rights at the core of COVID-19 response and recovery measures. The Minister of Health and Social Welfare of Kerala State, India, K.K. Shailaja, gave the keynote statement, providing insights into the benefits of investments in public health and measures taken in Kerala State to ensure a humanized and inclusive response to and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, following an approach that also took into account the Goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda.

3. The thematic session was focused on the challenges in and opportunities for implementing Goals 10 and 16 since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants explored the interlinkages between the two Goals, particularly with regard to systemic and institutional discrimination and widening socioeconomic inequalities, which had become more apparent in the context of, and exacerbated by, the impact of the pandemic.

4. The thematic session comprised four panellists: the Chief Advisor of the Uruguayan International Cooperation Agency, Carolina Ferreira Oliveira; the Chair of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent, Dominique Day; representatives of the C19 People’s Coalition (South Africa), Tauriq Jenkins and Francina Nkosi; and the Resident Coordinator in Serbia, Françoise Jacob. Representatives of national Governments, national human rights institutions, United Nations entities, academia and non-governmental organizations spoke about their experiences and about tools used and measures taken to build forward better from the COVID-19 pandemic. The Chair moderated the thematic discussion. He also provided closing remarks, outlining takeaways from the meeting and key messages, including with regard to the importance of protecting civic space, addressing the rise in hate speech, and placing human rights and the principle of leaving no one behind at the centre of all COVID-19 recovery efforts.

## **II. Summary of proceedings**

### **A. Opening session**

5. The Chair opened the discussion by outlining the objectives, modalities and format of the meeting. Recalling the theme, he noted the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which had undermined progress across the globe in implementing the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, reversed socioeconomic gains, magnified pre-existing forms of discrimination and inequalities and jeopardized the application of the principle of leaving no one behind. He welcomed the opportunity to share good practices and make

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf/2021>.

recommendations to build back better, integrating human rights in sustainable and resilient recovery from the pandemic. He recalled the outcomes of the first and second intersessional meetings (see A/HRC/40/34 and A/HRC/43/33), on which the third meeting would build. The summary report of the meeting would feed into discussions at the high-level political forum on sustainable development in 2021.

6. In her opening remarks, Ms. Bain highlighted the timeliness of the discussion. She noted that COVID-19 remained high on the Human Rights Council agenda, given the pervasiveness of the pandemic and the resulting high numbers of deaths and cases of illness, faltering economies, persistent inequalities, threats to human rights and slowed implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. Hardest hit had been those who were marginalized and most vulnerable, including women and girls affected by an increase in domestic violence. Acceleration of the progress towards gender equality and the empowerment of women globally were of critical importance in achieving a better future for all by 2030.

7. Ms. Bain noted the increasing inequalities within and between States and called for greater support to be provided to least developed countries and small island developing States in their continued efforts to build integrated and sustainable development at the local level. The Human Rights Council had appealed to States to ensure that human rights were front and centre of national responses to and recovery from the pandemic. Thirty-six of the resolutions adopted at the forty-fourth and forty-fifth sessions of the Council contained references to the importance of a human rights-based approach, gender-responsive measures, good governance, the protection of civic space and strong national human rights institutions in COVID-19 responses and recovery. The Council would continue to deliberate the impact of the pandemic and human rights-based recovery measures at its future sessions.

8. In her opening remarks, Ms. Kehris noted that the COVID-19 pandemic had exacerbated alarming levels of poverty and inequalities, as its impacts were stratified along wealth, income, gender, race, ethnicity and other social divides. That could quickly lead to instability, begetting other human rights violations. Despite the human rights crisis caused by the pandemic, recovery represented a historic opportunity for States to build a new social contract based on human rights and equal opportunities for all. That was a key objective of the Secretary-General's call to action for human rights, which underscored that human rights must be at the core of sustainable development.

9. Addressing inequalities and building a new social contract would require renewed commitment to economic and social rights, and a shift away from economic policies that concentrated wealth and from chronic underinvestment in public services. Governments would need to mobilize domestic resources and embrace international cooperation. A global coordinated effort to ensure that COVID-19 vaccines were affordable and accessible to all without discrimination was required.

10. Rebuilding trust in institutions for a peaceful, just and equitable recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic required stronger protection of fundamental freedoms. That included measures to protect civic space, to ensure respect for people's right to freely express their views, and to ensure meaningful and inclusive participation of all groups in policy development and decision-making.

11. Stressing the importance of disaggregated data in monitoring progress and developing evidence-based responses that curbed discrimination and left no one behind, Ms. Kehris noted that the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) had promoted a human rights-based approach to data, including by strengthening collaboration between national human rights institutions and national statistics offices.

12. Moreover, OHCHR, in partnership with United Nations entities, had provided technical assistance at the field level to guide human rights-based and gender-responsive economic recovery and had worked to integrate human rights into the United Nations' response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Through its Surge Initiative, OHCHR had also deployed economists to provide advice on, among other things, addressing inequalities in the design of social protection systems, and maintaining fiscal space to meet minimum core obligations of economic and social rights.

13. In her keynote statement, Ms. Shailaja gave an overview of measures taken by the Kerala State government in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The state had been able to sustain its efforts in response to the pandemic because it had invested in a strong public health infrastructure that largely had met the targets of Goal 3 before the pandemic. The public health infrastructure consisted of well-equipped government hospitals with dedicated medical experts and a wide network of primary health centres that served as the first level of contact with the population. In 2017, a project had been launched for deliverables at the grass-roots level with a view to transforming the public health sector in the context of the 2030 Agenda.

14. The Kerala State government had designed and pursued a multipronged strategy to fight COVID-19, demonstrating commitment and accountability to the people and its capacity to work in synergy with civil society. The state engaged accredited social health activists to ensure easy access by citizens to comprehensive health-care support. Government, in collaboration with civil society, provided free health care to people living in poverty and affordable treatment to those in the middle class.

15. The lockdowns and limitations on movement in Kerala owing to the pandemic had been implemented with the participation and trust of the people. Daily press conferences by the Chief Minister had ensured regular transparent communication. The Government had also been vigilant against the spread of misinformation regarding COVID-19 on social media.

16. To counter the socioeconomic impact of the lockdowns, the government had adopted a hunger-free policy. The state government had announced an economic and social welfare package that had included free food kits and advance disbursement of social security pensions. The pre-primary child protection programme had delivered free meals to children at their homes to ensure that children had access to nutritious food. The state had also deployed thousands of volunteers to augment other relief and social support systems.

17. While migrant workers in other states had chosen to return to their hometowns during lockdowns, more than 90 per cent of such workers in Kerala had chosen to stay because they had been assured shelter and three meals a day. The state government had adopted mental health interventions, including at the community level, providing counselling and psychological support for people in isolation to help them overcome fear and anxiety caused by the pandemic.

18. The architecture of decentralized governance and an inclusive approach had served to deepen democracy and the accountability of government institutions at all levels, eliciting a positive response from the public. As the battle against the virus was far from over, countries had to ensure that they took everyone along in a unified effort to recover from the pandemic through growth and development that was sustainable and inclusive.

19. While Kerala State had the highest literacy rate and best performance on human development indicators in the country, the pandemic threatened to set back the progress made. It had also exacerbated the vulnerability of women and the most marginalized in the state. The government would set up several projects to increase their labour force participation and bring to the fore the least visible workers in the informal economy.

20. Among the sustainable development initiatives envisaged in the COVID-19 recovery strategy was a sustainable entrepreneurship programme to economically empower women and marginalized groups and communities. The government would also focus on improving gender diversity in the workplace, investing in women's leadership, and building resilient, educated and empowered communities. It would review its welfare policy for the transgender community, and implement a life-cycle approach project, entitled "Anuyathra", for persons with disabilities.

21. The pandemic had exposed the deep digital divide in Kerala State. As part of its recovery strategy, the government would introduce a free Internet connection scheme to benefit families living below the poverty line.

22. Ms. Shailaja reiterated the importance of respect for human rights in developing inclusive solutions for building back better from conflicts and crises and in promoting strong institutions and peaceful societies by preserving human dignity. The pandemic offered an opportunity for the global community to unite to focus on public health, sustainable

livelihoods, climate stability and equitable societies, which were among the most important elements of sustainable development.

23. The Chair concluded the opening session by highlighting the strategies raised by the speakers to recover better in the post-COVID-19 environment by using human rights-based approaches and strengthening Sustainable Development Goal implementation.

## **B. Thematic discussion**

24. The Chair moderated the thematic discussion, which was focused on how historic, systemic and institutional discrimination had exacerbated inequalities in the context of COVID-19 and had contributed to impeding the realization of Sustainable Development Goals 10 and 16. He opened the thematic session by inviting the four panellists to share their experiences and good practices in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. The panel members were also invited to highlight country cases, as well as measures taken and envisaged to recover better, address inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic, strengthen institutions, ensure that no one was left behind and place human rights at the core of COVID-19 recovery strategies.

25. Ms. Ferreira Oliveira began by stating that while Uruguay had achieved good results in managing the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of health services, there remained challenges with the economy. There had been an increase in unemployment, resulting in higher levels of poverty and inequality, particularly for women, children, older persons and ethnic minorities, especially people of African descent.

26. One of the first steps taken by the Government of Uruguay had been to secure supplies and equipment for national institutions to mitigate the effects of the pandemic on vulnerable and at-risk groups. The institutions targeted were the National Institute for the Social Inclusion of Adolescents, which housed juvenile offenders, and women's prisons. Rural areas and small towns had been prioritized to receive medical supplies and equipment.

27. The Government had incorporated measures to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic in its United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework for the period 2021–2025. Aimed at leaving no one behind, the Cooperation Framework and other joint United Nations initiatives had included consideration of the impact of the pandemic on women, with a focus on women heads of households and women working in the informal sector. Given the already high number of incidents of violence against women and femicide before the pandemic, the Government had accelerated efforts to address all forms of violence and discrimination against women.

28. The Government had also prioritized support for other vulnerable segments of the population, such as people living on the street, migrants living in poverty and persons with disabilities. The measures taken had included, inter alia, improved access to health, social protection and employment, including in the formal sector, and measures to support entrepreneurship among those groups.

29. Ms. Ferreira concluded her intervention by stating that it was important for Uruguay and all States to build back better and differently in order to face the challenge of increasing inequalities, realize socioeconomic rights and implement the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

30. Ms. Day indicated that predictable racial disparities had emerged since the COVID-19 pandemic began, and that they had not received adequate attention by some Governments. People of African descent faced higher rates of infection, higher severity of illness and higher mortality from COVID-19, due in part to their disproportionate presence in service professions, such as home health services, driving services and delivery services, that did not allow for quarantine or enhanced safety measures. Regrettably, few States had made allowances for that in considering how safety equipment and measures should be allocated.

31. The disproportionate impact of the pandemic on people of African descent came as a result of policy choices by Member States. Referring to bias against people of African descent, she noted that the rate of criminal prosecution and incarceration of people of African descent

was disproportionately high in the United States of America. That was particularly worrying given the risk of contracting and spreading COVID-19 in prisons and jails. Testing and vaccine roll-outs had not been focused on the risk of infection among jail populations, even as provisions had been made for corrections officers and personnel. Ms. Day also referred to bias in the distribution of vaccines and indicated that physicians of African descent had spoken out about medical negligence, disregard and denials of care they had personally experienced due to bias.

32. In addition to bias against people of African descent in COVID-19 responses and recovery, the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent had seen a consistent and systemic failure to include people of African descent in the 2030 Agenda. Recognizing the specific risks associated with denials of human rights and development in communities of African descent, the Working Group had recently published operational guidelines on the inclusion of people of African descent in the 2030 Agenda.<sup>2</sup> The COVID-19 situation had shown that familiar hierarchies, biases and systemic racism continued to drive policy and practices and determine whose lives mattered, even in a global pandemic. The operational guidelines provided an opportunity for States to rethink policies that perpetuated racial disparities and excluded people of African descent. Goals 10 and 16 offered a framework to further address inequalities and discrimination, including through the collection, analysis and maintenance of data disaggregated by race in order to understand the ongoing impact of racialized thinking and systemic racism in the COVID-19 era.

33. Mr. Jenkins and Ms. Nkosi reported that in the wake of the level 5 lockdown in South Africa, the C19 People's Coalition of South Africa had emerged as the people's collective to ensure that COVID-19 responses were rooted in social justice and democratic principles. Highlighting the impact of COVID-19, Mr. Jenkins and Ms. Nkosi reiterated the Coalition's call for recovery measures that prioritized persons from poor working-class black communities and rural communities where unemployment was high, access to water and sanitation was poor, and access to health care and social safety nets was limited. Women had borne the greater burden of health care and had suffered disproportionately from related illnesses, poverty and gender-based violence, which had been exacerbated during the lockdowns. The representatives therefore stressed the importance of prioritizing women in all recovery initiatives.

34. Given the history of apartheid, the fault lines of structural inequality, racism and gender disparities were immediately evident during the lockdowns. Moreover, the deployment of military police and law enforcement without the engagement of communities or civil society had raised concerns. The Coalition, along with other civil society organizations and with the support of the South African Human Rights Commission, had worked to monitor response and recovery initiatives in the light of international human rights standards. The Coalition representatives called for equitable non-discriminatory distribution of vaccines for all persons, including migrants and asylum seekers. They also encouraged international organizations, such as the World Trade Organization, to take steps to ensure that the vaccines were available and affordable to all States and to remove all trade barriers in that regard.

35. Ms. Jacob began by referencing the newly established Ministry for Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue in Serbia, which worked towards the full realization of human rights and post-COVID recovery. She highlighted the tensions between the restrictive measures imposed to stop the pandemic and human rights and individual freedom standards. The COVID-19 pandemic had been particularly challenging for marginalized and vulnerable groups, including persons with disabilities, Roma, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex persons, older persons and workers in informal and precarious jobs. While Serbia had acted quickly, including in collaboration with the United Nations, on both the health and the social protection fronts, the pandemic had created new vulnerabilities and insecurities, putting a larger share of the population at risk and weakening the overall functioning of democratic institutions.

<sup>2</sup> See [www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Racism/WGEAPD/Guidelines\\_inclusion\\_2030\\_Agenda.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Racism/WGEAPD/Guidelines_inclusion_2030_Agenda.pdf).

36. The United Nations had worked closely with the Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit in the Office of the Prime Minister, and with other government institutions in Serbia, to coordinate outreach, including through the socioeconomic response plan, to all groups at risk and to find practical solutions to mitigate the impact of the restrictions. Noting that COVID-19 responses must be neither arbitrary nor discriminatory, Ms. Jacob stressed the importance of a human rights-based approach to the COVID-19 vaccination rollout, centred on individuals, including in terms of access and prioritization among individuals and among countries.

37. Referring to Goal 10, Ms. Jacob underscored that it was urgent that States ensure equal access to vaccines for all groups at risk, wherever they were in the world. Regarding Goal 16, she noted that the COVID-19 recovery package for Serbia was focused on the rights agenda, gender equality, differentiated social protection schemes and the rule of law, as well as effective governance. The package envisaged investing further in and enabling a wider civic space, for true and meaningful engagement by civil society and all people in social and political processes. It also envisaged a closer working relationship with the private sector, given its potential for innovative solutions to new challenges. Large businesses and investors must be reminded of their responsibility not just to respect human rights but to act meaningfully for the benefit of their employees and not only their shareholders. Concluding, she stated that it was time to push for the full realization of human rights, during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, based on solidarity, shared responsibility and mutual accountability.

### **Impact of and responses to the COVID-19 pandemic**

38. In the interventions from the floor,<sup>3</sup> several delegations welcomed the timeliness of the topic for discussion. Given the global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, including in terms of health, socioeconomic development and a range of human rights challenges, participants stated that it was important that the Human Rights Council discuss measures to integrate human rights into sustainable and resilient recovery from the pandemic.

39. States expressed concern that in addition to exposing and exacerbating vulnerabilities and inequalities in and between countries, the pandemic threatened to accelerate democratic backsliding, weaken respect for human rights and place additional obstacles to achieving the 2030 Agenda.

40. Some participants contended that advances in responding to the pandemic must not come at the cost of weakened democracies or more human rights violations. An approach based on human rights, gender equality, respect for civic space, freedom of the press and the consolidation of democracy was the only way forward in fighting COVID-19 and realizing the 2030 Agenda. Participants recalled that the Human Rights Council had repeatedly underscored the importance of adopting a human rights-based and gender-responsive approach to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, including in the context of COVID-19.

<sup>3</sup> Written and oral interventions were received from the following: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Brazil, Canada, Chile, China, Colombia, Cuba, Denmark (on behalf of Azerbaijan, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Ecuador, Fiji, Luxembourg, Portugal, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Thailand and Uruguay), India, Luxembourg, Maldives, Niger, Norway, Pakistan, Philippines, Sweden and Switzerland; European Union; Action on Smoking and Health, Association for Trauma Outreach and Prevention, Associazione Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII, Centre for Economic and Social Rights, Child Rights Connect, Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights, HelpAge International, Indigenous Navigator Initiative (jointly with the International Work Group on Indigenous Affairs), International Disability Alliance, International Organization of Employers, International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, Make Mothers Matter, National Human Rights Commission of India, Office of the Ombudsman of Argentina (on behalf of the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions), Save the Children International and The South Centre; United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), the secretariat of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, Women's Major Group, and World Benchmarking Alliance. Some of the statements are available at [www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/IntersessionalMeeting2030Agenda3rd.aspx](http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/IntersessionalMeeting2030Agenda3rd.aspx).

41. Noting that progress on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals had already been slow and patchy before the pandemic, a number of delegations reiterated the importance of seeing the recent setbacks as a reminder of the urgency to strengthen the collective determination to implement the Goals by 2030 and promote and protect human rights. Some participants noted that the right to life, the right to health and all economic, social and cultural rights most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic should be paramount. They emphasized the need for greater investments in the areas of health, safe drinking water and sanitation, adequate housing, quality education, social protection, food access and safety, dissemination of accurate information about the pandemic, and a healthy and clean environment.

42. A number of delegations called for a move away from economic paradigms that prioritized the interests of the market, profits and extractions. Reaffirming the human rights framework as the best approach to guide inclusive and sustainable development, several participants called for a fundamental shift to people- and planet-centred economies.

43. Several participants were of the view that responses to the pandemic that respected human rights would result in better outcomes, including with regard to health and the economy. United Nations entities noted their collaboration on the United Nations framework for the immediate socioeconomic response to COVID-19, which was framed in human rights and put people at the centre of the recovery. They noted that the framework was based on the principles of participation and inclusion, accountability and the rule of law, as well as non-discrimination and equality, covering the range of Sustainable Development Goals, including Goals 10 and 16.

44. Some participants indicated that the biggest risks for States' recoveries was a return to austerity in the medium-term.<sup>4</sup> That, they maintained, would only lock in more deprivation and even starker inequality, and must be fiercely resisted if the Sustainable Development Goals were to be achieved by 2030. To effectively implement the Goals in the new COVID-19 environment, States must pursue truly redistributive economic policies and address existing inequalities. Ultimately, what was needed was a rights-based economy that addressed structural inequalities at their roots.

45. Some participants noted that developing countries, owing to inequalities between States, the unjust international order and unpayable external debt, suffered the worst socioeconomic consequences of the disease, which threatened the achievement of the 2030 Agenda. Recognizing the importance of bridging the inequality gap between States, several participants called for solidarity, global cooperation, knowledge-sharing and complementarity in response to COVID-19. Those were considered crucial in ensuring that no individual, group, community or State was left behind in the COVID-19 recovery, including with respect to access to vaccines.

46. Several delegations noted that to mitigate the impact of COVID-19, they had introduced social protection for the vulnerable, including cash-based assistance for marginalized groups. They had also targeted assistance for the most affected sectors, including emergency cash transfers for small businesses, food support and microcredit for women, children, persons with disabilities and persons from minority groups.

47. Participants noted that some States had also provided cash and non-cash assistance to its citizens overseas and had introduced a repatriation programme for their citizens whose livelihoods as migrant workers had been affected in their host countries. One State highlighted the impact of the global pandemic on migrant workers and seafarers who were often overlooked in terms of response and recovery initiatives. Those vulnerabilities should be addressed and their welfare and resilience promoted in all efforts moving forward.

48. A number of delegations stressed the importance of striving to make sure that human rights, democracy, the rule of law and gender equality were at the centre of immediate and

<sup>4</sup> The European Network on Debt and Development has shown that at least 80 countries have already made commitments to the International Monetary Fund to implement severe austerity (or cost-cutting) measures between 2021 and 2023 (see [www.eurodad.org/arrested\\_development](http://www.eurodad.org/arrested_development)).



long-term global response and recovery. Building back better and greener would require leadership and renewed efforts in achieving Goal 16.

### **Inequalities and non-discrimination (Goal 10)**

49. Many participants strongly stated that there was no place for discrimination of any kind in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic or in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, and called for the most vulnerable and marginalized in society to be prioritized in all response and recovery efforts.

50. A large number of participants expressed concern that the COVID-19 pandemic had both exposed and compounded gender-based discrimination. Many women working in the informal sector had been thrown into greater financial insecurity, without regular income or effective social safety nets. Concern was also expressed that the pandemic had reversed progress on gender equality and women's rights and further threatened the loss of decades of limited and fragile gains.

51. Quarantines, school closures and other movement restrictions to curb the spread of COVID-19 had contributed to a sharp increase in the rates of gender-based violence, and the disruption of social and protective networks had left victims without support. Many participants called for bold action to effectively respond to gender-based violence. Bold action would also be needed to implement gender-responsive economic policies and to ensure women's full, equal and meaningful participation and leadership in decision-making processes when building back better. That should include the engagement of women's organizations in national COVID-19 response planning and greater efforts to avoid gender-blind responses and provisions and ensure that women were not left behind.

52. A number of participants joined the call to stop discrimination and human rights violations in responses to the pandemic. Participants called for emphasis to be placed on ensuring non-discrimination against women, as well as on protecting children and young people, indigenous people, persons with disabilities, persons living with non-communicable diseases, older persons, people of African descent, Roma and other minorities, internally displaced persons, refugees and stateless persons, international migrants and migrant workers, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex persons and others who were disproportionately impacted by COVID-19.

53. Other groups requiring greater consideration in the context of economic recovery plans were peasants and those working in the informal sector. Regarding the particular situation of peasants, participants recalled the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas and the importance of respecting it in responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and efforts to implement the Sustainable Development Goals.

54. Several participants noted that persons living in poverty required additional support and access to social protection platforms that went beyond the COVID-19 pandemic and that should be adequately factored into recovery strategies and initiatives. Addressing the inequality crisis that had become more evident with the pandemic entailed, among other things, making the invisible visible and promoting greater disaggregation of data to strengthen the visibility of marginalized groups.

### **Peace, justice and strong institutions (Goal 16)**

55. General consensus was that building back better required renewed commitment to Goal 16 and to building effective, transparent, accountable and inclusive institutions.

56. Participants called for a multilateral response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and raised the importance of an accountable and democratic multilateral system. Specifically, States should:

(a) Support a multilateral response to the COVID-19 crisis and beyond, based on the principles of human rights, gender equality, accountability, solidarity and international cooperation;

(b) Strengthen and fund the United Nations and its entities, such as the World Health Organization;

(c) Guarantee sustainable resourcing of the international human rights system, including the treaty bodies, and ensure full, inclusive and accessible participation of civil society in all proceedings;

(d) Support and protect civil society organizations and human rights defenders in their access to information, in their exercise of freedom of assembly and speech, and in their engagements with the United Nations and its entities and processes without fear of retaliation, intimidation, or harassment;

(e) Reinforce accountability for all human rights violations;

(f) Solidify the links between the high-level political forum on sustainable development and the United Nations human rights architecture.

57. Some participants highlighted the importance of efficient and effective public services, including the functioning of judicial institutions. They noted the measures taken by the judiciary to use platforms and digital tools to conduct proceedings using video conferencing, which had allowed courts to function in the face of restrictions on mobility. Recovery strategies should consider innovative tools and methods that allowed for transparent, timely, just and equitable institutions beyond the COVID-19 situation.

58. Participants highlighted initiatives undertaken during the pandemic, including the release of persons deprived of liberty. Such release was intended to address not only prison overcrowding but also the impact of the pandemic in detention facilities.

59. Participants recalled Human Rights Council resolution 45/9 on the role of good governance in the promotion and protection of human rights, in particular with respect to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on access to public services and citizens' participation in public life, including through new technologies.

60. Some participants reiterated the call to ensure the participation and empowerment of every person to respond effectively to the challenges posed by the pandemic. Further, some participants expressed the view that a whole-of-nation mobilization plan, involving local government units and the private sector, was needed in order to move towards inclusive governance and sustainable, resilient, transparent and just recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

61. Several participants emphasized that national human rights institutions had played a pivotal part in providing rights-based responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Their role in responding to restrictive measures adopted by some Governments to protect life had positively affected the full exercise of other human rights. Such institutions had been instrumental in warning against the xenophobia and discrimination against marginalized and vulnerable groups that had emerged in the light of the pandemic. Participants also noted the important role of such institutions in information-sharing, including the correction of misinformation about the pandemic and about COVID-19 vaccines. In some States, national human rights institutions had been successful in building trust to counter reluctance to become vaccinated and in highlighting how the vaccines strengthened compliance with the 2030 Agenda.

62. A number of States reiterated the importance of civil society, including community organizations, women's groups, human rights defenders, religious organizations and other non-State actors cooperating with Governments to overcome the pandemic and build back better. It was noted that enabling businesses to fully contribute to the 2030 Agenda and supporting them in their efforts to conduct effective human rights due diligence, including in supply chains, should be an important element of the recovery initiative. Moreover, the importance of protecting labour rights and supporting the development of just and inclusive social protection systems was emphasized. The Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights provided an important road map for action by both States and businesses.

63. Many participants highlighted measures needed to ensure that socioeconomic and other inequalities did not continue to deprive so many from services and were not exacerbated by further COVID-19 recovery efforts. The focus was now on risk management, the gradual

reopening of the economy, and preparations to roll out a mass vaccination programme, including through various types of institutions, which must prepare for smooth, transparent and equitable distribution and public service delivery of the vaccine.

64. In his closing remarks, the Chair underlined that human rights and the Sustainable Development Goals were mutually reinforcing, including in the context of responding to the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure sustained recovery. He also recognized the role of human rights mechanisms in helping guide the recovery. He emphasized the value of identifying best practices and reiterated that there was no one-size-fits-all solution for responding to the impacts and the aftermath of the pandemic. Technical assistance and capacity-building must be specifically crafted to fit the particular setting of the receiving country.

### III. Conclusions and key messages

65. The following conclusions and key messages were drawn from the meeting:

(a) The commitment of States to their economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights obligations is paramount to respond effectively to the shocks of the COVID-19 pandemic, to recover better and to achieve the targets set out in the 2030 Agenda;

(b) The COVID-19 pandemic, while a human tragedy, represents a historic opportunity for States to build a new social contract, based on human rights and equal opportunities for all, departing from policies that exacerbate discrimination and inequalities;

(c) Recovery should be pursued in a holistic manner, with special attention paid to the entire spectrum of social, economic, civil, political and cultural rights, with the human dignity of each person held at the centre of endeavours;

(d) Any restrictions on the enjoyment of human rights must be necessary, proportionate, temporary, non-discriminatory and in full compliance with the State's obligations under applicable human rights law; the treaty bodies and special procedures have provided clear recommendations in this regard;

(e) In designing emergency responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, it will be essential that States use their limited resources in a targeted and tailored manner with a view to fulfilling their immediate human rights obligations to make available to all, with no discrimination, minimum essential levels of enjoyment to the right to health, food, water and sanitation, housing and education;

(f) As part of their recovery and Sustainable Development Goal acceleration strategies, and drawing on the wealth of country and thematic recommendations from the human rights mechanisms, States should commit to mobilizing and allocating the maximum resources available to progressively realize economic, social and cultural rights with a special focus on the most marginalized. Efforts should be stepped up on ensuring human rights-based budgeting, curbing inequalities and achieving greater alignment of country economic and fiscal policies with States' human rights obligations;

(g) Inequalities among States and varying capacities to effectively respond to the crisis should be taken into consideration with regard to debt sustainability, international trade and the delivery of vaccines, particularly as regards small island developing States and least developed countries. States should show international solidarity in line with the Declaration on the Right to Development, while international technical assistance should be tailored to the particular context of each country, as there is no one-size-fits-all solution;

(h) Equitable non-discriminatory access to and distribution of vaccines within and among States is crucial for effective recovery. Health is a right, and COVID-19 vaccines should be treated as global public goods;

(i) The pandemic amplified the need for States to step up investment in human rights monitoring and in collecting and analysing disaggregated data. Such

monitoring and data are vital for addressing discrimination and inequalities and ensuring that everyone is included in the design and implementation of targeted socioeconomic interventions to leave no one behind and reach those furthest behind first;

(j) The capacity of national statistical offices should be increased, and a human rights-based approach to data collection and analysis should be adopted and implemented, in order to better inform the design and monitoring of COVID-19 recovery strategies. Closer cooperation between national statistical offices and national human rights institutions should be fostered to support efforts to move towards a rights-based approach to data;

(k) Women have shouldered the greater burden of health care and suffered disproportionately from related illnesses, poverty and gender-based violence, which were exacerbated during the lockdowns. Recovery strategies must therefore be gender responsive, non-discriminatory and aimed at ending all forms of violence against women and girls;

(l) Vulnerable and marginalized groups should be protected and empowered to participate in policymaking and recovery so as to make the invisible visible and redress multiple and persistent forms of discrimination, including those affecting indigenous people, persons with disabilities, persons living with non-communicable diseases, older persons, people of African descent, Roma and other minorities, internally displaced persons, refugees and stateless persons, international migrants and migrant workers, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex persons and others disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic;

(m) The COVID-19 pandemic presents an occasion for States to rethink policies that perpetuate racial disparities and exclude people of African descent. Sustainable Development Goals 10 and 16 offer a framework to further address inequalities and discrimination in line with international human rights laws and standards;

(n) Inclusive collaborative recovery strategies involving a whole of society approach require the effective involvement of civil society, including grass-roots groups and community-based organizations, human rights defenders, national human rights institutions, the private sector, media and women's organizations;

(o) Measures are needed to enable a wider civic space for the meaningful engagement of civil society in political, economic and social life. Such measures should allow individuals and groups to access information and contribute to and participate in COVID-19 recovery policies and strategies, and should promote freedom of expression, information and association, which are essential for sustainable development and peace;

(p) States should build institutional capacity to implement human rights-based recovery strategies that are informed by the Sustainable Development Goals. This includes the commitment of States under Goal 16 to reinforce the capacity and independence of national human rights institutions. It also requires strategic investment in public services to advance the realization of rights in an inclusive and transparent way;

(q) Access to information, transparent communication, solidarity, shared responsibility and mutual accountability are crucial to the building of trust between the population and the State for effective recovery;

(r) The opportunities offered by the reform of the United Nations development system and the Secretary-General's call to action for human rights should be maximized in the context of COVID-19 response and recovery and in efforts to support a new social contract;

(s) The United Nations must work closely together with all local and international partners to facilitate outreach to marginalized groups and make their participation, protection and involvement in policymaking a priority;

(t) The Human Rights Council should continue to develop its work aimed at identifying and leveraging synergies between human rights and the 2030 Agenda,

including in the context of COVID-19 recovery, with a focus on facilitating the exchange of practical experience and peer learning;

(u) The Human Rights Council's engagement with the high-level political forum on sustainable development should be further consolidated, including through increased use of the Council's input for the annual forum session and the engagement of the Council-mandated independent experts in forum processes and discussions.

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