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**Human Rights Council**

**Forty-sixth session**

22 February–19 March 2021

Agenda item 2 & 3

**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[[1]](#footnote-2)\*

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| *Summary* |
| In its resolution 43/19, the Human Rights Council decided to organise three half-day intersessional meetings for dialogue and cooperation on human rights and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to be held in 2021, 2022 and 2023. |
| This is the summary report of the first of these three half-day meetings and is the third intersessional meeting for dialogue and cooperation on human rights and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development held on 14 January 2021. The previous two intersessional meetings were held in January and December 2019, respectively. |
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I. Introduction

1. Pursuant to its resolution 43/19[[2]](#footnote-3), the Human Rights Council held the first of three half-day intersessional meetings for dialogue and cooperation on human rights and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development on 14 January 2021. This half-day meeting built on the previous two intersessional meetings called for in resolution 37/24[[3]](#footnote-4), March 2018. Informed by the theme for the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) 2021[[4]](#footnote-5), the theme for this third intersessional meeting was ‘Building back better: Integrating human rights in sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic’. The meeting focused on SDG 10 on reduced inequalities and SDG 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions, and emphasized the importance of mainstreaming gender in these and all SDG implementation. The programme of the meeting consisted of a high-level opening session followed by one thematic session and a brief closing session.
2. The Permanent Representative of Thailand to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva, Mr. Sek Wannamethee, chaired the meeting. The Vice-President of the Human Rights Council and Ambassador and Permanent Representative of The Bahamas to the United Nations Office in Geneva, Ms. Keva L. Bain, made brief opening remarks referring to numerous Human Rights Council resolutions that highlight the centrality of a human rights-based approach and gender responsive measures needed for effective recovery from COVID-19. Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights Ms. 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, Ms. 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 humanised and inclusive response to and recovery from COVID-19, keeping in mind the goals and targets of Agenda 2030.
3. The thematic session of the meeting focused specifically on the challenges and opportunities in implementing SDGs 10 and 16 since COVID-19. It explored the interlinkages between these two Goals particularly as regards systemic and institutional discrimination and widening socio-economic inequalities, which are more apparent and exacerbated with the impact of COVID-19.
4. The thematic session comprised four panellists: Ms. Carolina Ferreira, Chief Advisor, Uruguayan Agency for International Cooperation; Ms. Dominique Day, Chair of the UN Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent; Mr. Tauriq Jenkins and Ms. Francina Nkosi, C19 People’s Coalition, South Africa; and Ms. Francoise Jacob, UN Resident Coordinator in Serbia. Representatives of national Governments, National Human Rights Institutions, United Nations entities, academia, and non-governmental organizations spoke about their experiences as well as tools used and measures taken to build forward better from COVID-19. The Chair of the meeting, Ambassador Sek Wannamethee, moderated the thematic discussion. He also provided closing remarks outlining takeaways from the meeting and key messages including as regards the importance of protecting civic space, addressing the rise in hate speech and placing human rights as well as the principle of leaving no one behind at the centre of all recovery efforts from COVID-19.

II. Summary of proceedings

A. Opening session

1. The Chair opened the discussion by outlining the objectives, modalities and format of the meeting. Recalling the theme of the meeting, he noted the devastating impact of COVID-19, which has undermined progress across the globe in implementing the 17 SDGs, reversed socioeconomic gains, magnified pre-existing forms of discrimination and inequalities and jeopardized the principle of leaving no one behind. He welcomed the opportunity for the meeting to share good practices and make recommendations to ‘build back better, integrating human rights in sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic’. He recalled the outcomes of the first and second intersessional meeting (see A/HRC/40/34 and A/HRC/43/33), on which this third meeting would build. Pursuant to resolution 43/19, the present summary report of the meeting will be presented to the 46th Session of the Human Rights Council and will feed into discussions at HLPF 2021.
2. In her opening remarks, the Vice-President of the Human Rights Council, Ambassador Keva Bain, highlighted the timeliness of the discussion on integrating human rights in sustainable and resilient rediscovery from the COVID‑19 pandemic with a particular focus on SDGs 10 and 16. She noted that COVID‑19 must remain high on the Human Rights Council agenda, given the pervasiveness of the pandemic, high numbers of deaths and illnesses, faltering economies, persistent inequalities, threats to human rights, and slowed implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. Hardest hit have been the marginalised 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 are of critical importance in achieving a better future for all by 2030.
3. The Vice-President also noted the increasing inequalities within and between States and called for greater support to Least Developed Countries and Small Island Developing States in achieving the SDGs and recovering from COVID-19. She reiterated the Human Rights Council’s appeal to States to ensure that human rights are front and centre of national responses to and recovery from the pandemic.[[5]](#footnote-6) Thirty-six of the resolutions adopted during the 44th and 45th Sessions of the Council, referenced the importance of a human rights‑based approach, gender‑responsiveness, good governance, the protection of civic space and strong national human rights institutions in COVID‑19 responses and recovery. She concluded by stating that the Council will continue to deliberate on the impact of COVID‑19 pandemic and human rights‑based recovery measures in its future sessions.
4. Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights, Ms. Ilze Brands Kehris, in her opening remarks indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated alarming levels of poverty and inequalities, as its impacts are stratified along wealth, income, gender, race, ethnicity, and other social divides. This, she said, can quickly lead to instability, begetting other human rights violations. Despite the human rights crisis caused by the pandemic, recovery represents a historic opportunity for States to build a new social contract based on human rights and equal opportunities for all. It is a key objective of the Secretary-General’s Call to Action for Human Rights, which reiterates the urgency of placing human rights at the centre of sustainable development.
5. Addressing inequalities and building a new social contract will require renewed commitment to economic and social rights, a shift away from economic policies that concentrate wealth, and the end to chronic underinvestment in public services. Governments will also need to mobilize domestic resources, embrace international cooperation and coordinate global effort to ensure that the COVID-19 vaccines are affordable and accessible to all without discrimination.
6. The Assistant Secretary-General stated that rebuilding trust in institutions for a peaceful, just and equitable recovery from COVID-19 requires stronger protection of fundamental freedoms. This includes measures to protect civic space, to respect people’s right to freely express their views without fear, and to encourage meaningful and inclusive participation in policy development and decision-making.
7. Stressing the importance of disaggregated data in monitoring progress and developing evidence-based responses that curb discrimination and ‘leave no one behind’, she noted that OHCHR has promoted a human rights-based approach to data, including by strengthening collaboration between NHRIs and National Statistics Offices.
8. Moreover, OHCHR, in partnerships with UN entities, has provided technical assistance at the field level to secure a human rights-based and gender responsive economic recovery and worked to integrate human rights into the UN’s response to COVID-19. As part of its Surge Initiative, the Office also deployed economists to provide advice, inter alia, on addressing inequalities in the design of social protection systems and maintenance of fiscal space to meet minimum core obligations of economic and social rights.
9. In her keynote statement, the Minister of Health and Social Welfare of Kerala State, India, Ms. K. K. Shailaja, gave an overview of measures taken by Kerala State Government in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. She stated that the State was able to sustain its efforts in response to COVID-19 because it had invested in a strong public health infrastructure aimed to meet the targets of the SDGs before COVID-19. This strong public health infrastructure was made up of well-equipped government hospitals with dedicated medical experts, a wide network of primary health centres with direct contact with the population and deliverables at the grassroots level. The investments in the health sector were made since 2017 with the view to fulfilling SDG 3 in the context of the 2030 Agenda.
10. The Minister also indicated that the Kerala State Government designed and pursued a multipronged strategy with strong commitment and accountability to the people while working in synergy with civil society. In this context, the state engaged Accredited Social Health Activists to ensure easy access to comprehensive healthcare support. Government in collaboration with civil society provided free healthcare to poor people and affordable treatment to the middleclass during the pandemic.
11. The lockdowns and limitations on movement in Kerala during COVID-19 were implemented with the participation and trust of the people. Daily press conferences by the Chief Minister ensured regular transparent communication and was crucial for the building of trust between the population and the State. The Government also tightened the vigil on social media against the spread of misinformation regarding COVID-19.
12. To counter the socio-economic impact of the lockdowns, the Government adopted a hunger-free policy. The State Government announced an economic and social welfare package that included free food kits and advance disbursal of social security pensions. The pre-primary child protection programme delivered free meals to children at their homes to ensure that children get nutritious food. The State also deployed thousands of social volunteers to augment other relief and social support systems.
13. The Minister stated that while migrant workers in other states chose to go back to their hometowns during lockdowns, more than ninety percent of workers in Kerala chose to stay because they were assured shelter, and three meals a day. She pointed out that the Government had adopted mental health interventions at the community level, providing counselling and psychological support for people in isolation to help them overcome fear and anxiety caused by the pandemic.
14. The Minister opined that the architecture of decentralized governance and inclusive participation has served to deepen democracy and accountability of Government institutions at all levels, eliciting a positive response from the public. As the battle against the virus is far from over, countries must ensure that they take everyone along in a unified effort to recover from the pandemic through growth and development that is sustainable and inclusive.
15. While Kerala State has the highest literacy rate and human development indicators in the country, the pandemic threatens to set back the progress made in health, education and social development and to exacerbate the vulnerability of women and the most marginalized in the State. The Government will set up several projects to increase their labour force participation and bring to the fore the least visible workers in the informal economy.
16. The Minister stated that among the sustainable development initiatives envisaged in the COVID recovery strategy is a sustainable entrepreneurship programme to economically empower women as well as marginalized groups and communities. She stated that the Government will also focus on improving gender diversity in the workplace, investing in women leadership, and building resilient, educated and empowered communities. It will also review its welfare policy for the transgender community as well as cycle approach project called “Anuyathra” for the differently abled.
17. The pandemic has exposed the deep digital divide in Kerala State. As part of its recovery strategy, the Government will introduce a free internet connection scheme to benefit the families and overcome the digital divide.
18. The Minister concluded by reiterating the importance of human rights in developing inclusive solutions for building back better from conflicts and crises and in promoting strong institutions and peaceful societies with respect for human dignity. The pandemic offers an opportunity for a united global community to focus on public health, sustainable livelihoods, climate stability and equitable societies –among the most important elements of sustainable development.
19. The Chair concluded the opening session by highlighting the strategies raised by the speakers to recover better in the post-COVID-19 environment using human rights-based approaches and strengthening SDG implementation.

B. Thematic discussion: How historic, systemic and institutional discrimination has exacerbated inequalities in the context of COVID-19 and contributed to impeding the realisation of SDGs 10 and 16

1. The Chair, Ambassador Wannamethee, moderated the thematic discussion. He opened the session by inviting the four panellists to share their experiences and good practices responding to COVID-19. 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 is left behind and place human rights at the core of COVID-19 recovery strategies.
2. Chief Advisor of the Uruguayan Agency for International Cooperation, Ms. Carolina Ferreira, began by stating that while Uruguay had achieved good results in managing the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of health services, there remain challenges with the economy. She noted that there has been an increase in unemployment resulting in higher levels of poverty and inequality, particularly for women, children, elderly and ethnic minorities, especially Afro-descendants.
3. Ms. Ferreira indicated that among the first steps taken by the Government was 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 Adolescent Social Inclusion (INISA), which houses juvenile offenders and the Women's Prison and Penitentiary Centres. Rural areas and small towns were prioritised to receive medical supplies and equipment.
4. Ms. Ferreira further indicated that the Government has incorporated measures to respond to COVID-19 in its United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework for the period 2021-2025. Aiming to Leave No One Behind, the Cooperation Framework and other joint UN initiatives have looked at the impact of the pandemic on women, with focus on women heads of households and women working in the informal sector. Given the already high incidents of violence against women and femicide before the pandemic, the Government has accelerated efforts to address all forms of violence and discrimination against women.
5. She noted that the Government has also prioritised support to other vulnerable segments of the population, such as people living on the street, migrants living in poverty and persons with disabilities. The measures taken included, inter alia, improved access to health, social protection, and employment, including in the formal sector, as well as measures to support their entrepreneurship.
6. Ms. Ferreira concluded her intervention by stating that it is important for Uruguay and all States to build back better and differently to face the challenge of increasing inequalities, realise socio-economic rights and implement the SDGs by 2030.
7. The Chairperson of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent, Ms. Dominique Day, indicated that predictable racial disparities have emerged since COVID-19, which have not received adequate attention by some Governments. She noted that 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 aides, drivers and delivery personnel, that did not allow for quarantine or enhanced safety measures. Regrettably, few states have made allowances for this in considering how safety equipment and measures should be allocated.
8. She stated that 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 criminal prosecution and incarceration against people of African descent was disproportionately high in the United States. She noted that this was particularly worrying given the risk of contracting and spreading COVID-19 in prisons and jails. She further noted that testing and vaccine rollouts have not focused on the risk of the pandemic to jail populations, even as provisions have been made for corrections officers and personnel. Ms. Day also referred to bias in the distribution of the vaccine and indicated that physicians of African descent have also spoken out about, medical negligence, disregard and denials of care they personally experienced due to bias.
9. In addition to bias against people of African descent in COVID-19 responses and recovery, the Working Group has 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 of Experts recently published Operational Guidelines on the inclusion of People of African Descent in the 2030 Agenda.[[6]](#footnote-7) COVID-19 has shown that familiar hierarchies, biases, and systemic racism continue to drive policy and practices and determine whose lives matter, even in a global pandemic. The Operational Guidelines provide an opportunity for States to rethink policies that perpetuate racial disparities and exclude people of African descent. SDGs 10 and 16 offer 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 era.
10. Mr. Tauriq Jenkins and Ms. Francina Nkosi of the C19 People's Coalition of South Africa informed that in the wake of the level five lockdown in South Africa the C19 emerged as the people's collective to ensure COVID-19 responses were rooted in social justice and democratic principles. Highlighting the impact of COVID-19, the Coalition reiterated its call for recovery measures that prioritize persons from the poor working class black communities as well as rural communities where there is high unemployment, poor access to water and sanitation, and limited access to health care and social safety nets. Women have carried the greater burden of health care and suffered disproportionately from related illnesses, poverty and gender-based violence, exacerbated during the lockdowns. The Coalition therefore stressed the importance of prioritizing women in all recovery initiatives.
11. The Coalition noted that 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 raised concerns. The C19 Coalition along with other civil society organisations worked with the support of the South African Human Rights Commission to monitor response and recovery initiatives in view of international human rights standards. They called for equitable non-discriminatory distribution of vaccines for all persons, including migrants and asylum seekers. They encouraged international organisations such as the World Trade Organization to take steps to ensure that the vaccines are available and affordable to all States and to remove all trade barriers in this regard.
12. UN Resident Coordinator in Serbia, Ms. Francoise Jacob began by referencing the newly established Ministry for Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue, which works toward the full realization of the human rights and post-COVID recovery. She highlighted the tensions between the restrictive measures imposed to stop the pandemic, and the human rights and individual freedom standards. COVID-19 has been particularly challenging for marginalised and vulnerable groups, including persons with disabilities, Roma minority, LGBTI, older persons and workers in informal and precarious jobs. While Serbia acted quickly, including in collaboration with the UN on both the health and the social protection front, the pandemic created new vulnerabilities and insecurities, putting a larger share of the population at risk and fragilizing the overall functioning of democratic institutions.
13. The UN worked closely with the Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit in the Office of the Prime Minister, as well as other Government institutions in Serbia to coordinate outreach, including through the Socio-Economic 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 neither be arbitrary nor discriminatory the Resident Coordinator stressed the importance of a human rights-based approach to the COVID-19 vaccination centred on individuals, including in terms of access and prioritization between individuals and between countries.
14. Referring to SDG 10, she underscored the urgency that States ensure equal access to the vaccine for all groups at risk, wherever they are in the world. Regarding SDG 16, she noted that the COVID-19 recovery package for Serbia focused on the rights agenda, gender equality, differentiated social protection schemes and the rule of law, as well as effective governance. The package envisages investing further and enabling a wider civic space, for true and meaningful engagement of the civil society and all people, in social and political processes. It also envisages working closer with the private sector given their 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 just their shareholders. Concluding, she stated that it is now 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

1. In the interventions from the floor,[[7]](#footnote-8) several delegations welcomed the timeliness of the topic for discussion for the third intersessional meeting on human rights and the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development. Given the global impact of the COVID-19, including in terms of health, socio-economic 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.
2. States expressed concern that in addition to exposing and exacerbating vulnerabilities and inequalities in and between countries, the pandemic threatens to accelerate democratic backsliding, weaken respect for human rights and place additional obstacles to achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
3. Some participants contended that 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 consolidating democracy is the only way forward both in fighting the COVID‑19 and realizing the 2030 Agenda. Participants recalled that the Human Rights Council has repeatedly underscored the importance of adopting a human rights-based and gender responsive approach to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and now in the context of COVID-19.
4. Noting that progress on the implementation of the SDGs 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 SDGs by 2030 and promote and protect human rights. Some participants noted that paramount among these should be the right to life, the right to health and all economic, social and cultural rights most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. In this context, they emphasized the need for greater investments in 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.
5. A number of delegations called for a move away from economic paradigms that prioritize 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.
6. Several opined that responses to the pandemic that respect human rights will result in better outcomes in beating COVID‑19, including with regard to health and the economy. UN entities noted their collaboration on the UN Framework for the Immediate Socio-Economic Response to COVID-19[[8]](#footnote-9), which is framed in human rights and put people at the centre of the recovery. They noted that the Framework is 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 SDGs including SDGs 10 and 16.
7. Some participants indicated that the biggest risks for States’ recoveries, is a return to austerity in the medium-term[[9]](#footnote-10) This, they maintained, would only lock in more deprivation and even starker inequality, and must be fiercely resisted if the SDGs are to be achieved by 2030. To effectively implement the SDGs in this new COVID environment, States must pursue truly redistributive economic policies and address existing inequalities. Ultimately, what is needed is a [rights-based economy](https://www.cesr.org/rights-based-economy-putting-people-and-planet-first), which addresses structural inequalities at their root.
8. Given the inequalities between States, some participants noted that developing countries, due to the unjust international order and the unpayable external debt, suffer the worst socio-economic consequences of the disease, which threatens 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. These were considered crucial in, ensuring that no individual, group, community or State is left behind in the COVID recovery, including with respect to access to vaccines.
9. Several delegations noted that to mitigate against the impact of COVID-19, they introduced social protection to the vulnerable, including cash-based assistance for marginalized groups. They also targeted assistance for the most affected sectors, including emergency cash transfers for small businesses, food support and microcredit for women, children, disabled persons, as well as people from minorities.
10. Participants noted that some States also provided cash and non-cash assistance to its citizens overseas and introduced a repatriation program for their citizens whose livelihoods as migrant workers were affected in their host countries. In this context, 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. These vulnerabilities should be addressed and their welfare and resilience promoted in all efforts moving forward.
11. A number of delegations stressed the importance of striving to make sure that human rights, democracy, the rule of law, and gender equality are at the centre of immediate and long‑term global response and recovery. They contended that building back better and greener will require leadership and renewed efforts on SDG 16.

Inequalities and non-discrimination / SDG 10

1. Many participants strongly stated that there is no place for discrimination of any kind in the response to COVID-19 or in the implementation of the SDGs and called for the most vulnerable and marginalized in society to be prioritized in all response and recovery efforts.
2. A large number of participants expressed concern that COVID-19 has both exposed and compounded gender-based discrimination. Many women working in the informal sector have been thrown into greater financial insecurity, without regular income or effective social safety nets. Concern was also expressed that the pandemic has reversed progress on gender equality and women’s rights and further threatens the loss of decades of limited and fragile gains.
3. Quarantines, school closures and other movement restrictions to curb the spread of COVID-19 have also contributed to the sharp increase in the rates of gender-based violence and the disruption of social and protective networks have left victims without support. Many participants called for bold action to effectively respond to gender-based violence. Bold action will 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. This should include the engagement of women's organizations in national COVID‑19 response planning and greater effort to avoid gender blind responses and provisions and ensure that women are not left behind.
4. A number of participants joined the call to stop discrimination and human rights violations while responding to the pandemic. In addition to ensuring non-discrimination against women, participants called for emphasis to be placed on protecting children and youth, 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, LGBTI persons and others who are disproportionately impacted by COVID-19.
5. 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 UN declaration on the rights of peasants[[10]](#footnote-11) adopted in 2018 by the Human Rights Council and then by the General Assembly in the response to the COVID‑19 pandemic and implementing the SDGs.
6. Persons living in poverty were mentioned by several participants as requiring additional support and access to social protection platforms that go beyond COVID-19 and should be adequately factored into recovery strategies and initiatives. Addressing the inequality crisis that has become more evident with COVID‑19 includes making the invisible visible and promoting the greater disaggregation of data to strengthen the visibility of the aforementioned marginalized groups.

Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions / SDG 16

1. Building back better requires renewed commitment to SDG 16 and to building effective, transparent, accountable and inclusive institutions.
2. 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:
3. 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;
4. Strengthen and fund the UN and its agencies, such as the World Health Organization;
5. 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;
6. Support and protect civil society organizations and human rights defenders in their access to information, freedom of assembly and speech, as well as in their engagements with the UN, its agencies and processes without fear of retaliation, intimidation, or harassment;
7. Reinforce accountability for all human rights violations; and
8. Solidify the links between the HLPF and the UN human rights architecture.
9. Some participants highlighted the importance of efficient and effective public services including the functioning of judicial institutions. In this context, they noted the measures taken by the judiciary to use platforms and digital tools to conduct proceedings using video conferencing, which allowed the courts to function in the face of restrictions on mobility. Recovery strategies should consider innovative tools and methods that allow for transparent, timely, just and equitable institutions beyond COVID-19.
10. Participants highlighted initiatives undertaken during the pandemic, including the release of persons deprived of liberty. They noted that this was intended to address not only prison overcrowding but also the impact of the pandemic in detention facilities.
11. Participants recalled the resolution on the role of good governance in the protection and promotion of human rights[[11]](#footnote-12) adopted in the 45th Session of the Human Rights Council, which focused on the impact of COVID‑19 on the sphere of access to public services and citizens’ participation in public life for new technologies.
12. Some participants reiterated the call to ensure participation and empowerment of every person to effectively respond to the challenges posed by the pandemic. Further, some participants opined that a whole-of-nation mobilization plan, involving local government units and the private sector was needed toward inclusive governance as well as sustainable, resilient, transparent and just recovery from COVID‑19.
13. Several participants mentioned the importance of national human rights institutions in playing a pivotal part of providing rights‑based responses to the COVID‑19 pandemic. Their role in responding to restrictive measures adopted by some Governments to protect life have positively affected the full exercise of other human rights. NHRIs have been instrumental in warning against xenophobia or discrimination that emerged in the light of COVID-19 against marginalised and vulnerable groups. Participants also noted the important role of NHRIs in information sharing, including the correction of misinformation about the pandemic and the vaccine against COVID-19. In some States, NHRIs have been successful in building trust in countering the reluctance to the vaccine and highlighting how the vaccines strengthen compliance with the 2030 Agenda.
14. A number of States reiterated the importance of civil society, including community organizations, women’s groups, human rights defenders, religious organisations, 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 Agenda 2030 and supporting them in their effort to conduct effective human rights due diligence, including in supply chains, should be an important element of the recovery initiative. Moreover, focus was placed on protecting labour rights and support the development of just and inclusive social protection systems. The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights[[12]](#footnote-13) provide an important roadmap for action by both States and businesses.
15. In concluding, many participants highlighted measures needed to ensure that socio-economic and other inequalities do not continue to deprive so many from services and are not exacerbated with further COVID‑19 recovery efforts. The focus is now on risk management and the gradual re-opening of the economy, while preparing to roll out a mass vaccination program, including in various types of institutions that must be prepared for a smooth, transparent and equitable distribution and public service delivery.
16. In his closing remarks, the Chair underlined that, in responding to COVID-19 and to sustain recovery, human rights and Sustainable Development Goals are mutually reinforcing. He also recognized the role of human rights mechanisms in helping guide the recovery. He resonated the value of identifying best practices and reiterated that there is no fixed solution in responding to the impacts and the aftermath of the pandemic. Technical assistance and capacity building need to be specifically crafted to fit the particular setting of the receiving country.

III. Conclusions and Key Messages

1. The meeting underscored that States’ commitment to their economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights obligations is paramount to respond effectively to the shocks of the COVID-19 pandemic, recover better and achieve the targets set out in the 2030 Agenda;
2. COVID-19, 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;
3. Recovery should be pursued in a holistic manner, with special attention to the entire spectrum of social, economic, civil, political and cultural rights and the human dignity of each person at the centre of our endeavours;
4. Any restrictions to 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;
5. In designing COVID-19 emergency responses, 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 obligation to make available to all, with no discrimination, minimum essential levels of the right to health, food, water and sanitation, housing, and education;
6. As part of their recovery and SDG 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 marginalised. Efforts should be stepped up on human rights based budgeting, curbing inequalities and achieving greater alignment of country economic and fiscal policies with states’ human rights obligations;
7. Inequalities and varying capacities between States 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 SIDS and LDCs. 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;
8. Equitable non-discriminatory access and distribution of vaccines within and between States is crucial for effective recovery. Health is a right and COVID-19 vaccines should be treated as global public goods;
9. The pandemic amplified the need for States to step up investment in human rights monitoring and in collecting and analysing disaggregated data. This would be vital for addressing discrimination and inequalities and ensuring that everyone is counted in the design and implementation of targeted socio economic interventions to leave no one behind and reach those furthest behind first;
10. In designing and monitoring COVID-19 recovery strategies, there should be greater capacity provided to national statistical offices and to adopt and implement a human rights-based approach to data collection and analysis. Closer cooperation between national statistical offices and national human rights institutions should be fostered to support efforts to move toward a rights-based approach to data;
11. Women have shouldered the greater burden of health care and suffered disproportionately from related illnesses, poverty and gender-based violence, exacerbated during the lockdowns. Recovery strategies must therefore be gender responsive, non-discriminatory and seek to end all forms of violence against women and girls;
12. Vulnerable and marginalised groups should be protected and empowered to participate in policy making 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, LGBTI persons and others disproportionately impacted by COVID-19;
13. COVID-19 presents an occasion for States to rethink policies that perpetuate racial disparities and exclude people of African descent. SDGs 10 and 16 offer a framework to further address inequalities and discrimination in line with international human rights laws and standards;
14. Inclusive collaborative recovery strategies, involving a whole of society approach, require effective involvement of civil society including grassroots groups and community based organisations, human rights defenders, National Human Rights Institutions, the private sector, media and women’s organisations;
15. Measures are needed to enable a wider civic space for meaningful engagement of civil society in political, economic and social life. Such measures should allow individuals and groups to access information, contribute to and participate in COVID-19 recovery policies and strategies, and promote freedom of expression, information and association, which are essential for sustainable development and peace;
16. States should build institutional capacity to implement human rights-based and SDG informed recovery strategies. This includes the states’ commitment under SDG 16 to reinforce the capacity and independence of national human rights institutions. It also requires strategic investment in public services to advance the realisation of rights in an inclusive and transparent way;
17. 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;
18. 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 maximised in the context of COVID-19 response and recovery and in efforts to support a ‘new social contract’;
19. The UN must work together and closely with all local and international partners to facilitate outreach to marginalised groups and make their participation, protection and involvement in policymaking a priority;
20. 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;
21. 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 input for the annual forum session and engagement of the Council-mandated independent experts in forum processes and discussions.

1. \* The present report was submitted after the deadline as the meeting was held on 14 January and the draft report had to be consulted internally as well as with Member States. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/RES/43/19>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. <https://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/RES/37/24>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf/2021>. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. A/HRC/43/L.42 – Statement by the President on Human rights implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, May 2020, <https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/43/L.42>. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. [https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Racism/WGEAPD/Guidelines\_inclusion\_2030\_  
   Agenda.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Racism/WGEAPD/Guidelines_inclusion_2030_Agenda.pdf). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Written and oral interventions were received from 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, Switzerland, European Union, Action on Smoking and Health, APG23, Association for Trauma Outreach and Prevention, Centre for Economic and Social Rights, Child Rights Connect, Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights, HelpAge International, International Disability Alliance, International Organisation of Employers, International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, Make Mothers Matter, NHRI India, NHRI Argentina on behalf of GANHRI, Save the Children, South Centre, The Indigenous Navigator and IWGIA, UNDP, UNFPA, UN Women, WHO Framework Convention for Tobacco control, Women's Major Group, and World Benchmarking Alliance. Some of the statements are available at https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/IntersessionalMeeting2030Agenda3rd.aspx. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. <https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un_framework_report_on_covid-19.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Eurodad has shown that at least 80 countries have already made commitments to the IMF to implement severe austerity (or cost-cutting) measures between 2021 and 2023Eurodad is a civil society network advocating for democratically controlled, gender just and human rights-based financial and economic systems, <https://www.eurodad.org/arrested_development>. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/73/165>. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. A/HRC/RES/45/9, <https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/RES/45/9>. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/GuidingPrinciplesBusinessHR_EN.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)