UNESCO

Contribution to **the**

Forum on Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law

on the theme

"Strengthening democracies to build back better: challenges and opportunities"

(24 - 25 November 2022, Geneva, Switzerland)

I.   Anti-discrimination: a cornerstone for democratic governance post pandemic

The fight against racism and discrimination is a pillar in building modern democracies. This edifice has been undermined by the last two years of instability which has led to an alarming resurgence of racism and discrimination in various forms. Indeed, in the pandemic context, persistent discriminatory structures, deep social and economic inequalities, and historical injustices have become increasingly apparent. Moreover, the pandemic has exacerbated inequalities with certain vulnerable populations, including the elderly, persons with disabilities, migrants, refugees, indigenous groups, and ethnic minorities, at increased risk of infection and with limited access to information, medical services, education and employment.

In this regard, the "Global Call against Racism", supported by UNESCO's Member States in December 2020, calls for action and for joining UNESCO's efforts to address this resurgence of racism. To respond to this global call, UNESCO developed a Roadmap against racism designed in the context of the COVID-19 crisis to strengthen institutional and legal frameworks against racism and discrimination. To guide the Organization's action in this field, particularly during the crucial post-COVID area, four strategic pillars have been identified. UNESCO's multidimensional actions will need to build on UNESCO's frameworks and normative action to combat racism and discrimination, strengthen UNESCO's capacity to generate and mobilize knowledge and data to combat racism and discrimination, enhance UNESCO's capacity-building action to combat racism and discrimination, and support UNESCO's advocacy activities in the fight against racism and discrimination. Finally, and with the same objective, the next Global Forum against Racism and Discrimination, to be held on 28-29 November 2022 in Mexico, will bring together multiple stakeholders and high-level decision-makers on various topics including the theme of the exacerbation of racism and discrimination by the pandemic. It will also bring together representatives of the seven regional and national coalitions of UNESCO's International Coalition of Inclusive and Sustainable Cities – ICCAR, a global platform of cities working together to foster inclusive and democratic societies. UNESCO is convinced that democracy starts at the local level and invests since the creation of this network in 2003 in empowering city authorities to foster inclusion, equality and social justice as indispensable ingredients of local decision-making and action.

The Forum on Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law will serve as an opportunity to set the stage in highlighting the intrinsic nexus between democracy and the fight against racism and discrimination, and its outcomes will contribute to the discussions at the Global Forum against Racism and Discrimination. In this regard, UNESCO will therefore continue to intensify its efforts to combat the structural causes of these social ills to better build our democracies.

II.   Gender equality: a litmus test for democracies in building back better

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated all forms of inequalities and discrimination and further marginalized women and girls at the frontlines of the sanitary and socioeconomic crisis, as well as the vast majority of

victims and survivors of the shadow pandemic of gender-based violence. Because of the pandemic, closing the global gender gap is expected to take 135.6 years –a generation longer than pre-pandemic estimates.[1] Strengthened democracies which do not leave women and girls behind require strengthened efforts to advance gender-mainstreaming and gender-transformative strategies and policies. Building back better therefore requires to:

- dedicate funds from public budgets to finance all gender-related schemes
- ensure that all national policies include a gender action plan
- ensure better access to social protection programmes for women, especially vulnerable ones
- provide better support and funding for women with care responsibilities and essential workers
- tackle all remaining forms of formal and informal discrimination in the workplace including via fair and equal pay for work of equal value
- encourage female entrepreneurship, participation, engagement and leadership in all spheres of society via positive action and quotas
- invest in targeted programmes to support girls' and women's education and participation in male-dominated and/or growing and high-profit disciplines and work environments, such as STEM, AI and the digital sector
- support women who are leaders such as scientists, health professionals, teachers and parents educating new generations, human rights defenders, artists and media professionals ensuring global access to quality sources of information and forms of creative expression
- prevent, protect from, and prosecute all forms of violence against women and girls via zero tolerance policies against harassment, violence and femicides
- ensure that domestic violence shelters, hotlines, including that of mental health support and legal aid, recognized as essential services, especially in times of emergencies, and thus remain open and receive adequate and appropriate resources
- eradicate gender stereotyping and discriminatory biases across all public documents, from national policies to school curricula since early childhood education
- adopt national parental leave policies with gender-equitable, well-paid, balanced, and non-transferable leaves for both parents of new-born and adopted children to ensure fairer sharing of family and childrearing responsibilities.

UNESCO's *Transforming MEN'talities Initiative* challenges harmful gender stereotypes which prevent women's empowerment and well-being and engages male leadership and accountability to shape alternative positive norms of masculinities that will contribute not only to gender equality, but also to more cohesive, resilient and peaceful democracies via research, collection of promising practices, capacity-reinforcement and advocacy. Its Policy Network, which steers the strategic orientations of the Initiative, will officially be launched in November 2022 on the occasion of UNESCO's Global Forum against Racism and Discrimination that will take place in Mexico.

III. The role of intercultural dialogue in strengthening democracies and building back better

Intercultural dialogue understood as transformative communication and exchange of views between individuals or groups with diverse ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds is strongly interlinked with democracy. A modern democracy, which allows living together as equals in culturally diverse societies, needs intercultural dialogue, as much as intercultural dialogue relies on democratic culture, structures and practices to be effective and sustainable. Both require a shared set of fundamental values, attitudes and skills that hold our societies together, such as valuing cultural diversity, equality, human rights and dignity; respect and openness; listening, empathy and critical thinking, inter alia. An intensification of intercultural dialogue and reinforcement of its role can lead to greater inclusiveness,

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[1] https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2021

social cohesion and solidarity, and thus strengthen mutual understanding, democratic participation, active citizenship and the ability to reach agreements.

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only claimed the lives of over 6 million people, but it has also aggravated many existing challenges and directly affected many aspects of democracy. It has undermined trust, exacerbated inequalities, provoked new forms of racism and discrimination and caused an increased number of human rights violations, thousands of hate incidents[2] and a 100% rise in online hate speech[3] in some countries. Nevertheless, this pandemic has also reminded us of our interconnectedness and interdependence. It has demonstrated that only together, by recognizing cultural diversity is a source of strength, can we tackle these challenges and build back a more equal, inclusive and sustainable world. For this, a genuine intercultural dialogue that promotes cooperation, mutual understanding and respect is desperately needed.

UNESCO, the lead agency for the International Decade for the Rapprochement of Cultures (2013-2022) within the UN system, is implementing research, capacity-building and advocacy activities to strengthen intercultural dialogue. UNESCO is building evidence concerning the impact of intercultural dialogue and the enabling conditions for its effective mobilization; conducting training sessions to build individual and institutional capacities and empower women and men with skills to understand other perspectives and interact effectively across differences; using the transformative power of the arts to advance human rights and dialogue in humanitarian contexts; and developing an e-platform on intercultural dialogue to make extensive knowledge in this field accessible online.

UNESCO's workstream is also contributing to the Roadmap against Racism and Discrimination which is being developed to address the Global Call against Racism contained in a decision adopted by Member States in December 2020. The Global Call requested UNESCO to take action and to provide cutting-edge solutions to the rise of racism and discrimination. Designed as an evolving document, this Roadmap seeks to strengthen UNESCO's actions in the fight against racism and discrimination. As part of the Roadmap, UNESCO has developed the Master Class Series against Racism and Discriminations which aims to raise awareness among young people of the causes of racism and discrimination in order to deconstruct the underlying mechanisms, change mindsets and foster intercultural dialogue.

IV.   Rethinking inclusion policies, foresight and STI ecosystems to build resilience

The pandemic has left us with deep social scars and the world is now confronted with addressing long term challenges spanning economies, societies, democracies and the environment. For a long time, people have been disconnected from the benefits of economic growth and detached from democratic processes, breaking trust in their countries' institutions. To preserve its democratic models, the world needs new models of thinking on how to deliver both resilience and inclusion. Policies must be designed to prioritize fighting inequalities and protecting vulnerable groups, and also designed to focus on long term resilience. Core to this is the rebalancing of the policy objectives to focus on equity, efficiency and sustainability, including conceptualizing redistributive expenditures on social policy, health and education as assets for future resilience. In addition, frontier knowledge is essential to devising resilient and inclusive policy solutions to achieve SDG targets and goals. UNESCO offers standing, tested, and cutting-edge programmes and mechanisms to support Member States in such work.

- To redesign policies, countries can access the Inclusive Policy Lab which is a leading world facility of its kind. Its key concern is, on one hand, crowdsourcing cutting-edge expertise and, on the other hand, supporting policy action based on the generated solutions. The online platform of the Lab is expert-driven with over 3500 registered members, 1500 experts and 140 online collaborative spaces. It is an agile, standing, cross-sectoral facility that tackles concrete policy issues as they emerge. The Lab works via an online platform and in-country, demand-driven

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[2] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/12/anti-asian-stop-aapi-hate-covid-report
[3] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021

interventions. The Lab's full capacity and expertise of thousands of members are now channeled into supporting equitable post-COVID reset, generating concrete policy options for such a recovery, and driving the new thinking that is to inform the required policy shifts. The *Lab also runs a chain of 20 in-country projects in four priority regions.* These are on-the-ground and demand-driven operations to boost equity/inclusiveness of policies and to enhance the link between expertise and policy on priority issues.

- UNESCO offers a programme that supports use of futures thinking by policymakers, facilitating a better understanding of anticipatory processes and response, which in turn promotes more resilient and integrated policy design, delivering a wide package of futures literacy activities to policymakers around the world that have generated innovative policy solutions. Futures Literacy enables a better understanding of the diversity of images of the future and can therefore influence in the ways in which policymakers perceive and therefore act in the present. This matters because it allows innovation, the application of creative leadership and the ability to embrace and integrate complexity into decision-making. This has manifold benefits: it strengthens resilience and decision-makers' agility, promotes inclusion through democratizing the use of futures, and increases adaptability and empowerment in the face of risk, uncertainty and change. Importantly, Futures Literacy is a universal capability that is accessible to all.

- In the post-pandemic period, policymakers are seeking to increase resilience by design, investing in STI to improve the ability to develop new technologies and scientific research capacity to respond to emerging diseases, and address the challenges of climate change. UNESCO's normative instruments focused on scientific research, bioethics, open science, and ethics for AI have been agreed by more than 190 countries and provide a solid policy foundation for emerging investments in STI. The 2017 Recommendation on Science and Scientific Researchers and its 10 key areas cover a wide scope and form the basis for a rights-based approach to STI while the newly adopted 2021 Recommendation on Open Science and the Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence zoom in on two areas that will be crucial for STI policymaking in the years to come. UNESCO is currently working with six countries in Africa to strengthen their STI systems, based on the norms and standards of the 2017 Recommendation. Through this innovative approach to STI, which goes beyond the traditional thinking of STEM and economy-driven incentives and which encompasses all the sciences focusing on rights and responsibilities in research and the well-being of research stakeholders, several countries are now in the process of reviewing, revising or drafting new and inclusive STI policies.

V. **Youth perspectives on democratic governance and overcoming the pandemic**

a) **The role of youth in democratic societies' efforts to build back better**

In every democratic society, the rights and responsibilities of youth are framed (and constructed) by legislation and societal practice. Often, such legislation and practice are not sufficiently encouraging or permissive for youth to contribute, take action and provide innovative solutions to challenges affecting their societies. This may lead to (i) young people being disillusioned or demotivated from engaging (as is for example demonstrated through their limited interest in traditional politics and elections) ; (ii) young people engaging in mainstream action that is permitted for, and/or expected of, them (e.g. by engaging in political parties, contributing to civil society work, volunteering) ; or (iii) young people finding and establishing innovative (and often "unconventional" and challenged by lack of regulatory frameworks to support them) ways to propose solutions and lead change in their societies (e.g. through leveraging new technologies, engaging in -formal or informal- entrepreneurialism or through creative ways of mobilizing and advocating).

Conflated with ongoing crises (socio-economic, political, environmental), conflicts and spread of disinformation, the pandemic has shed new light to these realities. On the one hand, the pandemic has further aggravated the challenges youth face, leading to 38% of young people globally being uncertain of their future prospects, with high uncertainty in the jobs and education sectors. Young adults (aged 18 to

29) have experienced high levels of distress since the onset of the pandemic. This is particularly the case for youth from low socio-economic backgrounds, and for young women who are identified as the more vulnerable group when it comes to violence since the pandemic. Yet, on the other hand, youth have also been proving their resilience and inventiveness in the face of adversity. Youth have been participating in social activism, with a global 31% volunteering, and 27% making donations towards the pandemic response.[4] A meta-analysis of impacts of the pandemic on youth found that youth have changed the way they approach civic action through innovation and adaptation, especially in digital engagement.[5] In addition, a number of storytelling and communication initiatives throughout the pandemic have been showcasing how young people have been engaging, online and on site, to provide responses to various challenges.

These trends in youth civic activity were confirmed by the findings of <u>UNESCO's Youth As Researchers (YAR) on COVID-19,</u> a 2-year initiative which explored the impact of the pandemic on youth. YAR findings point to increased civic activity by young people, with young respondents feeling safe online (79%) and able to identify misinformation (73% reported receiving misinformation and only 4.2% could not identify it as such). Much of their civic activity was directly aimed at spreading awareness about COVID-19 and supporting community safety and, that, in spite of limits in digital literacy, language issues, internet access and costs, and access to finance. To state a few examples, 74% of respondents in South Asia, 65% of respondents in Brazil reported being active around relief projects. In the Arab States, motivations for civic action included altruism, desire to enhance their careers, networking with like-minded young people, while also strengthening skills, such as critical thinking and problem solving. Such levels of civic activity – in spite reported barriers – reveal the inventiveness and solidarity of youth, in the face of adversity.

In conjunction with these increased levels of civic activity, the YAR initiative has also uncovered that a majority of young respondents believe that there are limited avenues for youth engagement in public life and decision-making at all levels. They also recognized the lack of opportunities (e.g. limited funding and capacity-building) for young innovators and entrepreneurs, as well as challenges with the legal recognition of informal youth-led grassroots initiatives[6].

In view of the above, the Forum could provide an excellent opportunity to:

- present data and experiences on how youth view their engagement in building back better, post-pandemic;

- discuss how legislation, policies and practices affecting the rights and responsibilities of youth in democratic societies may impact/influence the ways in which youth engage in, and contribute with, positive solutions towards building back better;

- explore to what extent democratic societies need to review pre-existing legislation, policies and practices so that they can encourage and enable youth to more actively contribute to, and drive, solutions to build back better.

UNESCO would be pleased to contribute to this discussion with evidence and insights from its Youth As Researchers on COVID-19 global initiative, as well as from debates with youth conducted in the context of the UNESCO Youth Fora. UNESCO could also recommend young activists, experts and advocates to

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[4] /aug/12/anti-asian-stop-aapi-hate-covid-report
: From disruption to recovery." https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse
– United Nations. 2020. "UN Policy Brief: COVID-19 and the Need for Action on Mental Health."
– OECD. 2020. "Youth and COVID-19: Response, recovery and resilience."
– OECD. 2020. "Learning remotely when schools close: How well are students and schools prepared? Insights from PISA."
– ILO. 2020. "Youth & COVID-19: Impacts on jobs, education, rights and mental well-being."
[5] EU & COE. 2020. "Meta-analysis of research on the impact of Covid-19 on the youth sector."
[6] All data and information on the findings of the Youth As Researchers on COVID-19 initiative is sourced from the UNESCO Global Policy Brief - Youth As Researchers - Exploring the Impact of COVID-19 on Youth (UNESCO, 2022).

engage in this discussion, as well as scholars and experts on these issues from the UNESCO Chairs' network.

b) **Youth-led knowledge production as a means for democracies to grasp the pulse (voices, perspectives, grievances) of youth**

At 1.2 billion, youth have been severely affected by the pandemic: in their perspectives in life; education and school-to-work pathways; trust in institutions; economic empowerment and access to quality jobs; identity-building and civic engagement; with a massive increase of mental health issues. At the same time, the pandemic has challenged existing data and knowledge on youth. More than ever, due to the complex reality imposed by the pandemic, statistical data need to be analyzed in conjunction with qualitative and youth-generated knowledge, perspectives and stories. In line with the Agenda 2030 call to "Leave No-One Behind", youth-led research opens the space for youth to voice their perspectives, engage in action and inform policy-making. It is invaluable to complete scientific research and render the production of knowledge more inclusive and representative of the perspectives and experiences of youth. It is also a novel approach to informing policy-making in areas affecting youth.

In line with the UNESCO Recommendation on Science and Scientific Researchers, UNESCO's "Youth As Researchers (YAR) on COVID-19" recognized the need for youth insights and invested in youth-led research to support and bring new insights to data and scholarly knowledge on how the pandemic has been impacting youth. Launched in 2020, it has become the largest youth-led research initiative undertaken with, by and for youth on COVID-19. It has built the capacities and opened the space for youth to collect data and generate gender-responsive knowledge on the impact of COVID-19 on youth wellbeing; rights; learning; youth-led action; and the role of technology.

Among its findings, of particular interest is that while young respondents overwhelmingly recognized the value of youth-led research as a means to channel youth voices into decision-making, a majority of them, also perceived that there are limited avenues for youth engagement in public life and decision-making at all levels. As such, one of their key recommendations was to "Establish consistent and inclusive institutional frameworks and funding mechanisms to build capacities, support, upscale and ensure the policy uptake of youth-led research, as a means to guarantee inclusive policy-making and channel youth perspectives in public debate". Within that, they specifically called for greater opportunities and inclusive spaces that enable young researchers to meaningfully engage with parliamentarians and government representatives at national level.[7]

In view of the above, the Forum could provide an opportunity to discuss how youth-led research could be leveraged and supported as a means to inform public law-making, policy design and decision-making to build back better post-pandemic. In addition, the Forum could provide the space to debate, share experiences and practices, as well as brainstorm on how to create efficient and inclusive spaces for young researchers to engage with, and influence, the work of parliamentarians and government.

UNESCO would be pleased to contribute to this discussion with evidence and insights from its Youth As Researchers on COVID-19 global initiative, as well as from debates with youth conducted in the context of the UNESCO Youth Fora. UNESCO could also recommend young activists, experts and advocates to engage in this discussion, as well as scholars and experts on these issues from the UNESCO Chairs' network.

VI. **Ethics of AI and its key role to strengthen information and democracy**

Democracy implies that people with different views should be able to come together to find common solutions through dialogue. While AI technologies have the potential to strengthen democracy through mechanisms for civic participation in important processes, and by enhancing accountability, they also

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[7] UNESCO Global Policy Brief - Youth As Researchers - Exploring the Impact of COVID-19 on Youth (UNESCO, 2022).

embody great risks. AI technologies can be used to interfere with the processes of democracies and undermine democratic institutions. The massive growth in the spread of fake news and misinformation, as well as attempts to interfere with election results are just the tip of the iceberg. The use of AI, and its potential for abuse by governments and private corporations, poses a real threat to the democratic institutions, processes, and norms.

As concrete examples from the COVID-19 pandemic, by determining what information individuals will be seen and when, certain AI platforms, are contributing to the wide spread of misinformation and hate speech. The business model driven by commercial interests promote extreme views that polarize societies and incite violence and create "echo chambers" that lead individuals into a state of intellectual isolation. These "echo chambers" erode critical thinking and disrupt democracy. The lack of responsibility allocated to the platforms by law creates this vague space where content published is not submitted to the same rigor as traditional editorial boards.

The protection and the promotion of human rights and human dignity is the cornerstone of the Recommendation, based on the advancement of fundamental principles such as transparency, accountability, privacy, safety and the rule of law. It aims to achieve fair and inclusive outcomes and sets clear limits on the use of these technologies, including banning mass surveillance and social scoring. It also includes extensive policy areas developed as a guidance for policymakers to translate the core ethical values and principles into action with respect to data governance, algorithm transparency, communication and information, among other spheres, to address challenges linked to growing use of AI-related technologies on democracy of our society and their implications for transparency, rule of law and accountability.

At the level of values and principles, transparency and explainability is an important principle anchored in the Recommendation and applied throughout in different policy areas and contexts, and in case of harm providers of AI systems will be required to expose information about the algorithm. The Recommendation provides that "enforceable transparency protocols should be implemented, corresponding to the access to information, including information of public interest held by private entities."

The Recommendation calls for a strong governance mechanism as an overarching approach, stressing that AI governance mechanism should include possibility of mitigation and redress of harm across boards, requiring Member States to ensure that harms caused through AI systems are mitigated and redressed and that "Member States, private sector companies and civil society should investigate the sociological and psychological effects of AI-based recommendations on humans in their decision-making autonomy.". It requires Member States to enact "strong enforcement mechanisms and remedial actions to make certain that human rights and fundamental freedoms and the rule of law are respected in both the digital and physical world." In particular, the Recommendation calls for undertaking ethical impact assessments for AI systems, which monitor the effects of the AI system over its entire life cycle, with both ex-ante and ex post assessment and reveal information about the system.

Furthermore, the Recommendation has a strong policy area on Communication and Information (policy area 9). This policy area calls on Member States to ensure access to information and knowledge, protect freedom of expression, and promote digital literacy. It also stresses that "Appropriate frameworks, including regulation, should enable transparency of online communication and information operators and ensure users have access to a diversity of viewpoints..." and require "evaluation of both the positive and potentially harmful effects of the recommender systems" being used by digital platforms.

In view of the above, delivering on the Recommendation will strengthen democratic processes within the implementing countries, as the development of strong national ethical framework on AI will guide the decisions that are increasingly influenced by AI-driven systems, including by the governments, to be fully compliant with human rights norms and the rule of law.

In line with the mandate given by the Recommendation to UNESCO, and in consultation with the Member States and partners, UNESCO is launching a comprehensive programme to support the implementation of the instrument. The Social and Human Sciences Sector of UNESCO would be pleased to contribute to this discussion with evidence and expertise generated through the implementation of the Recommendation and to showcase the critical role Recommendation is playing in the process of strengthening democracies to build back better.