**DHC’s opening remarks for**

**the Intersessional workshop on the implementation of the right to participate in public**

**affairs in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and the post-pandemic recovery**

**31 May 2023**

Mr. President,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The exercise of the right to take part in the conduct of public affairs is a central feature of democracy.

The inclusive, meaningful and safe participation of all individuals and communities in public affairs enables the advancement of all human rights. It forms a central component of rights-based strategies that target the eradication of discrimination, marginalization and inequalities.

Non-discriminatory and equal participation in public affairs is crucial for the promotion of an effective and resilient democracy, also the rule of law, social inclusion, economic growth, and sustainable development, as well as of course the advancement of gender equality.

Participation is key to secure public health. It empowers individuals and communities to take responsibility for their well-being and also enables the identification of health risks and challenges. It serves to reduce health inequalities, foster trust in public health institutions and strengthen health system resilience and accountability.

As the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated, health workers’ participation, in decision-making processes, with their technical advice and inputs, is essential to ensure a comprehensive, coordinated health-care response to crisis.

Yet many people continue to face persistent challenges in their right to participate - including facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, as well as the enjoyment of other enabling human rights, such as the rights to free expression, to access to information and to peaceful assembly and association.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the measures taken to contain it, exacerbated these challenges. Notably, this manifested itself in the misuse of health-related measures in the context of elections, such as unjustified restrictions on electoral monitoring, and a lack of transparency, of open debate and participation in decision-making concerning responses to the pandemic.

Further, some governments misused emergency measures with a view to hampering the work of civil society organizations, human rights defenders, journalists, and other media workers. These measures included sweeping emergency laws that gave law enforcement broad powers of surveillance; duplicitous measures ostensibly to combat “fake news” and disinformation vaguely worded have been used to silence and intimidate dissidents, human rights defenders, and activists; and of course, measures to ban peaceful gatherings.

Meanwhile, the undue temporary suspension of oversight mechanisms, including parliaments and judicial institutions, significantly impaired transparency, accountability and access to justice and remedies for those whose rights had been violated, as well as undermining parliamentary scrutiny over the executive measures taken.

In many countries, disproportionate measures during the COVID-19 pandemic, together with misinformation and disinformation, eroded public trust in institutions and governance structures.

This erosion in trust has weakened social cohesion and the social contract between governments and people – and it is essential to rebuild that trust. We need to promote meaningful participation in public affairs to ensure its place at the heart of long-term recovery, and thereby ensure preparedness for future health or other emergency crises.

In keeping with the promise made by the UN Member States to “leave no one behind”, I would highlight the importance of including the voices of those most affected and most underrepresented, including women and youth, persons with disabilities, Indigenous Peoples, minorities, refugees and internally displaced persons, LGBTQI+, and persons belonging to marginalized groups in general.

They need to be empowered to play an active role in decision-making at all levels to enable the crafting of more appropriate and more meaningful responses to crises that truly reflect people’s contexts and needs.

We have had many lessons learned and there are many areas for further reflection, including what we have understood about the vulnerability of institutions to unexpected and widespread health crises; the importance of having in place appropriate legislative frameworks and operating procedures; the priority of safeguarding of democratic institutions, and the innovative use of information and communication technologies to promote and encourage public participation.

Excellencies,

Whether a public health emergency or any other global crisis, democracy might have to adapt but it should never be weakened. Indeed, resilient institutions, inclusive, meaningful, and safe public participation, free civic space, and the rule of law are key to sustainable recovery from all crises.

I trust that this intersessional workshop will provide an opportunity for shared insights, for good practices and for collaborative initiatives to support truly sustainable recovery and renewal especially as we meet in the wider context of the Human Rights 75 initiative – an opportunity to remind of the catalytic universality and indivisibility of human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration, and to reclaim these rights as the best tools we have for solving the many problems that we face together.

Thank you very much.