

Promoting and protecting economic, social and cultural rights within the context of addressing inequalities in the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic (OHCHR workshop 6-8 February 2023)

## **A human rights-based approach to pandemic risk: Addressing cascading risks through anticipatory action and work at the humanitarian-development nexus**

This contribution introduces a human rights-based approach to pandemic risk. It does not identify best practices, but rather points towards the development of a methodology that integrates human rights principles and standards (including a recognition of the interdependence of human rights) into work at the humanitarian-development nexus. It is informed by ongoing research collaboration between the Raoul Wallenberg Institute, Danish Church Aid, and the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Disasters are not events that happen suddenly. Rather, they reflect the point in time when a hazard emerges in the context of exposed and vulnerable social conditions. The social dimension of disaster risk emerges over time and reflects failures to realize a range of interconnected and interdependent human rights. Even before the hazard emerges, a cascade of adverse human rights effects is foreseeable. Integrating a human rights perspective into work at the humanitarian-development nexus, and with a focus on anticipatory action, can improve programming and save lives as disasters, including pandemics, become more frequent and intense as [planetary boundaries](#) are exceeded.

Following our initial [review of legal and policy responses to COVID-19](#), our research has examined the cascading adverse human rights effects of the COVID-19 pandemic at the local level in one country. Informed by focus group discussions with members of residents associations in each five municipalities, the research traced the progression of vulnerability to pandemic risk by integrating a human rights-based approach into the well-established Pressure and Release (PAR) Model.<sup>1</sup> We examined root causes, dynamic pressures, and unsafe conditions, including the history of colonial town planning, climate change, corruption, and political conflict to examine the emergence of conditions of vulnerability relating to the right to health, the right to work, the right to social security, the right to adequate food, and the right to adequate housing. Insights from this research will soon be available in a project report and an academic article that explores the contribution of a human rights-based approach to anticipatory action and work at the humanitarian-development nexus.

Building on [an analysis](#) commissioned by the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, which traced the cascading effects of COVID-19 and associated containment measures and identified the Sustainable Development Goals as ‘a clear way forward’, our approach takes on step further. It integrates 75 years of normative and operational insight to frame a human rights-based approach to building resilience to pandemic risk that is firmly anchored within the 2030 Agenda, including the Sustainable Development Goals, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, and the Agenda for Humanity.

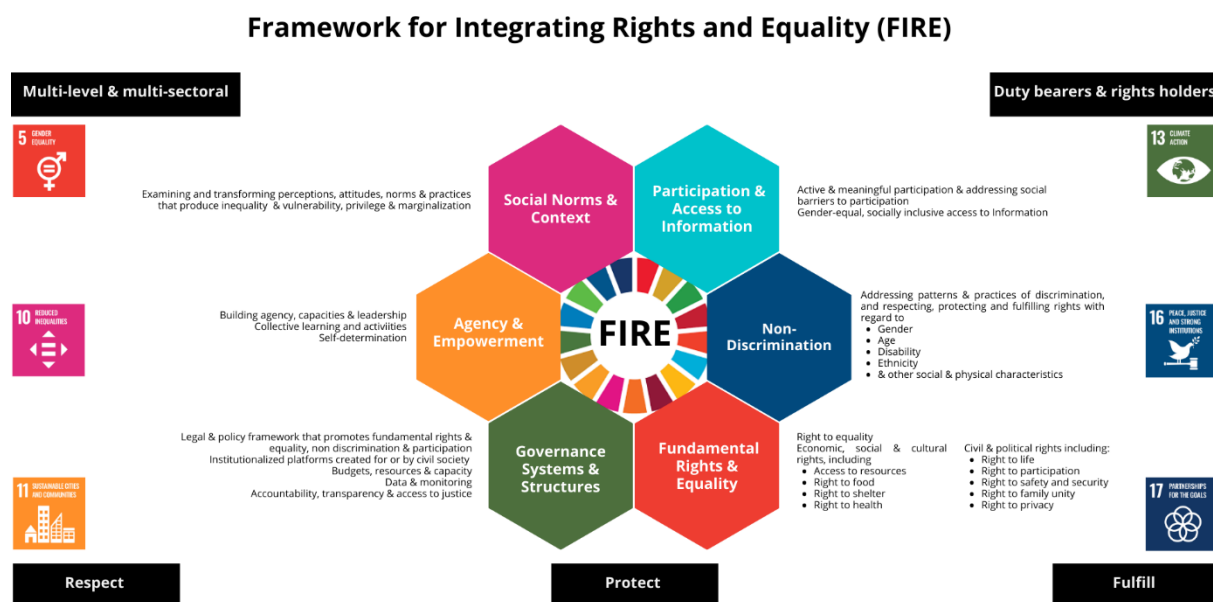
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<sup>1</sup> See Ben Wisner et al. (2004) *At Risk: Natural Hazards, People's Vulnerability and Disasters*

A starting point for a human rights-based approach to addressing the progression of vulnerability is the notion of progressive realization, which reflects the duty of all states to ‘take steps, to the maximum of available resources’ in order to gradually achieve the ambitions reflected in international human rights commitments like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. This framing aligns clearly with the 2030 Agenda. As the UN Secretary General observes in [Our Common Agenda](#), ‘The 2030 Agenda is a plan of action for people, planet, prosperity and peace, that seeks to realize the human rights of all and to achieve gender equality.’

Another component, which is reflected in the [UN Common Understanding of a Human Rights-Based Approach to Development Cooperation](#), is the recognition of the interdependence of human rights. This recognition connects closely with the understanding of cascading risks, where impacts on one right can have adverse cascading effects on multiple other rights. In our research, we have learned how containment measures, and in particular lockdowns, reflected an initial interference with the right to liberty of movement, which in turn had adverse cascading effects on rights to health, work, adequate food, adequate housing, access to education, protection from violence, amongst others. The recognition of the interdependence of human rights is built into the core of individual human rights, as reflected, for instance, in how the [right to health](#) is understood as entailing not only access to health care, but also accounts for the social determinants of health, including adequate food, adequate housing, decent work, and so forth. This normative depth complements the SDGs, whose targets and indicators focus exclusively on healthcare outcomes.

Other dimensions of a human rights-based approach that are relevant to addressing cascading risks are captured in the [Framework for Integrating Rights and Equality](#) (FIRE), that the Raoul Wallenberg Institute developed in collaboration with partners:



This framework is informed by a [systematic review](#) of existing international standards and guidelines developed by UN treaty monitoring bodies as well as more operational actors like the Inter-Agency Standing Committee and Sphere. FIRE has been used to analyse law and policy,

train professionals in disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation, and conduct empirical research, including in relation to the pandemic.

This approach can contribute to anticipatory action and wider work at the humanitarian-development nexus in three ways.

First, FIRE can be used to develop a human rights-based understanding of the progression of vulnerability by drawing attention to the non-discrimination obligation, raising questions about participation and access to information, and focusing on governance systems and structures that, together with prevailing social norms, lay the foundation for risk distribution within society. This approach can assist in identifying entry points for development actors at all levels to address root causes, dynamic pressures and unsafe conditions in a manner that reflects international standards and guidelines.

Second, FIRE can be used to enhance anticipatory action by supporting analysis of cascading risks, guided by the normative international human rights law framework that articulates the interdependence of substantive rights. Existing approaches to risk assessment often fail to take into account the full range of potential rights impacts that result when hazard events interact with exposed and vulnerable social conditions, and critical engagement with the full catalogue of rights can facilitate identification of risks that might otherwise have been ignored. Important work remains to be done to develop a methodology for integrating FIRE into existing approaches to multi-hazard risk assessment, including the identification of trigger-points for anticipatory action.

Third, FIRE can help to guide efforts to build back better as communities take steps to begin to recover from disaster. Informed by human rights-based insights into the progression of vulnerability and cascading risks, initiatives that take place at the humanitarian-development nexus can help transform recovery into resilience.

We have developed a range of tools that are relevant to work at the humanitarian-development nexus and anticipatory action, but further research, development and piloting of tools is required. Our priority is to replicate the research that we have recently completed in a larger cohort of 5-10 countries. In addition to listening to the voices of affected people, we plan to interface closely with development and humanitarian actors to understand existing practices and explore opportunities for innovation in partnership. Our goal is to develop a range of integrated human rights-based tools for anticipatory action and work at the humanitarian-development nexus that can be piloted in partnership with humanitarian and development partners.

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