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**UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR POLICY**

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**Video message for the OHCHR workshop on promoting and protecting economic, social and cultural rights within the context of addressing inequalities in the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic**

**Geneva, 6-8 February 2023**

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear colleagues,

I am pleased to speak at this workshop on how to ensure that economic, social, and cultural rights are at the centre of our efforts to create a fairer and safer world.

Three years after COVID-19 became a global pandemic – a global *crisis* – we are facing immense challenges as a global family.

Through tragedy, the pandemic exposed the devastating consequences of chronic underinvestment in public health, social protection, housing, education, gender equality, water, sanitation, food, and other economic, social, and cultural rights.

The virus itself causes illness and death.

But the lack of adequate social safety nets is what led to the mass devastation that continues to impact lives and livelihoods today.

School closures, surging domestic violence, increased poverty and food insecurity, strained healthcare systems, destructive misinformation, mass unemployment, and loss of income. These consequences will have cascading long-term implications for decades to come.

And these are not self-contained issues. They threaten social cohesion, heighten the risk of violent conflict, and hinder sustainable development.

Many instances of social unrest that we see today reflect historically low institutional trust, discontent over structural and entrenched discrimination, rising inequalities, and falling living standards.

Many of those already left behind have fallen even further behind because of the pandemic.

We all know that women and girls, the poor, minorities, those living in conflict zones and humanitarian crises, and other vulnerable groups, have been disproportionately affected.

Profound, longstanding, inequalities – both within and between countries – are getting worse, not better.

Since the onset of the recovery, employment growth trends in low- and middle-income countries have remained significantly below those observed in richer economies, owing largely to unequal fiscal capacities, disparate vaccination rates, and the digital divide.

The impact has been particularly serious for developing nations that experienced higher levels of inequality, more divergent working conditions, and weaker social protection systems, even before the pandemic.

Our failure to address these worsening inequalities would risk them becoming enduring legacies of the pandemic, built into the fabric of our societies and our international community.

As the Secretary-General noted at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, it was – and *is* – a crisis of human rights.

Too often, human rights have been inconsistently integrated by Governments and international institutions into their policies and practices.

These glaring gaps in human rights protections have created enormous fragilities in our societies, leading to the situation we face today.

But achievable solutions do exist.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Human rights provide a road map to achieving more stable, inclusive, equal, green, and prosperous societies.

Through socially inclusive measures to close these gaps and specifically address inequalities, we have the potential to rebuild a world that is more resilient, more just, and more sustainable – including with respect to vaccine access, debt restructuring, and facilitating a green transition.

Building this world will require multilateral and multistakeholder action, and global solidarity in the immediate term.

If it is to succeed in the long-term, it *must* be guided, strengthened, and protected by human rights.

Human rights provide a comprehensive blueprint for such a world, free from fear and want – indeed this is exactly what was captured in the Universal Declaration for Human Rights, 75 years ago.

And in this spirit, the Secretary-General’s Call to Action for Human Rights spells out the central role of human rights in each of our many contemporary challenges – many of which have been further compounded by the pandemic – such as gender inequality, shrinking civic space, the climate crisis, growing online harms, and our race to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Efforts to mitigate the COVID-19 crisis and its social and economic consequences have been unprecedented. It has been estimated that without these efforts, the damage brought by the pandemic would have been three times greater.

And yet, we find ourselves in a dark chapter of history, scrambling to put the pieces back together, knowing that the losses are in fact immeasurable.

What if we had systems in place that prevented the fallout from a crisis such as a pandemic?

What if we protected ourselves *before* the crisis hit?

Creating a recovery that is rights-based, inclusive, and sustainable, *must* become a top priority for public policy.

Each and every one of us has a role to play in realizing this entirely achievable future.

I trust that this workshop will equip you with tools, ideas, and inspiration to spur concrete action – individually, collectively, and globally.

I hope it will serve as a launching pad for us to realize the moral and political aspiration of leaving no one behind.

With hope and optimism, I wish you good luck.

Thank you.