**Session 5: Strengthening the capacity of OHCHR to operationalize economic, social and cultural rights**

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Good morning dear excellencies, Madam Chair, distinguished colleagues.

Thank you very much to the office of the high commissioner of human rights for the invitation to participate in this discussion.

These past two days, we have heard a great deal about the indivisible and interdependent nature of all human rights, and the obligation of the international community to treat human rights in a fair and equal manner. Indeed, human rights can only be protected in their fullness – civil, cultural, economic, environmental, political, and social.

Despite this awareness, economic social, cultural and environmental rights tend to receive less attention in practice. In conversations with states and IFIs, delivering public services such as water or education continues to be treated largely as a development goal or welfare program, rather than human rights. And although most of the world’s constitutions recognize ESCR today, it has not led to sufficient action and implementation in most states.

The lack of attention can help explain why the progress in protecting ESCER is limited, at best. According to the latest UNDP data, 1 in 5 people globally, live in multidimensional poverty. More than 1 billion are estimated to live in slums or informal settlements, without adequate infrastructure and services, such as waste collection, water and sanitation, and transport. Data from the World Food Programme suggest that as many as 828 million people are unsure of where their next meal is coming from.

But people have been speaking up and pushing back. This last year alone, we have seen an uptick in protests around the world, often in response to the failure of governments to protect people’s rights. In October 2022 BBC news established that between Jan – September, people in more than 90 countries took to the streets over the price or availability of goods and services essential to the realisation of HR. The Carnegie Endowment Global Protest Tracker shows that more than half of last year’s protests were triggered by economic issues. People are frustrated with economic structures that don’t work for them, and policies that reinforce the status quo in favor of the wealthy and corporations.

The perhaps most notorious case last year was Sri Lanka, where massive protests against economic mismanagement, corruption, and human rights abuses eventually led to the ouster of president Gotabaya Rajapaksa.

In Pakistan, this week traders have threatened with protests if the government increases further taxes based on IMF recommendations.

States and internat actors need to take people’s demands and frustrations seriously.

Against this backdrop, OHCHR can play a key role in shifting the needle and operationalizing ESCR in at least three ways.

**First, prioritize the response to economic inequality in addressing ESR**

As we have heard from previous panelists, economic inequality is one the challenges of our time, and a major threat to human rights. Highly unequal societies not only have higher levels of conflict and crime, and worse outcomes in areas such as health and education, they fundamentally undermine the existence of a human rights community enjoying equal rights.

Academics, the UN, and civil society have raised alarm about rising inequality for many years, and the situation has since deteriorated. We cannot go back to business as usual, but will need a bold response that stands up to the power of vetted interests and corporate powers. This means standing up to corruption and elite capture of govt institutions. It means challenging power structures in a way that addressing poverty does not.

**Second, play a convening role and provide expert HR guidance.**  - An indivisible HR framing requires an indivisible response. But many of the actors essential for the fulfilment of ESCER don’t speak to one another, or worse, point fingers at who is to blame for the lack of implementation. Social affairs ministries blame finance ministries for insufficient funding, who blame IFIs for imposing spending limits.

We see this also in internat organziations. It’s almost as if you need a visa to go from the WB to the UN. It would be crucial for OHCHR to share their expertise on HR in other fora usually frequented by other actors, IMF, WB, regional development banks, Finance in Common.

**Third, focus on funding of ESCER,- tax justice and fiscal policy.**

A common concern among states are fiscal resources in delivering on ESCER. But there is no lack of wealth and resources, there are more than enough resources globally to eradicate poverty and realise everyone’s equal ESCER. The problem lies largely in the abysmally unequal, untransparent, and unaccountable distribution of resources.

Some countries have started the search for alternative ways to address budget shortfalls, including by introducing taxes on the wealthiest people to pay for relief measures.

In closing, until ESCER are given their full due, we struggle, both in terms of addressing poverty and inequality as a human rights issue, and of restoring faith in the human rights endeavor whose hold on the popular imagination is very much at risk. At the same time, civil and political rights are absolutely also essential for realizing ESCER, as people must be able to exercise their rights to free expression and association in order to claim ESCR.

Thank you.