



# General Assembly

Distr.: General  
10 September 2021

English only

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## Human Rights Council

### Forty-eighth session

13 September–1 October 2021

Agenda item 3

**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,  
political, economic, social and cultural rights,  
including the right to development**

### **Written statement\* submitted by Associazione Comunita Papa Giovanni XXIII, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[21 August 2021]

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\* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.



## On deepening inequalities exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic

APG23 is eager to take part in the half-day panel discussion on deepening inequalities exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

We understand that the economic and social crisis, triggered by the virus, has caused unprecedented harm to the global economic activity and, more extensively, to those people that are close to the verge of (or below) the international poverty line. However, we rely upon the faith that its impact is not irreversible as long as international cooperation is fostered, especially with regard to the implementation of the right to development and the principle of international solidarity.

As a matter of fact, the pandemic has already revealed its devastating effect on the distribution of common goods and has widely deepened inequalities within and among countries. Nonetheless, this is the result of well-known pre-existing conditions, which have not been addressed in due time. Occupational differences, either resulting from educational, gender or racial disparities, are structural features of labour markets that were present in pre-pandemic times and have worsened in the last two years.

The 2030 Agenda considers the reduction of inequalities within and among countries under the Sustainable Development Goal 10. Despite some pre-existing issues regarding the significance and fitness for purpose of the relating targets and indicators (for example the target 10.1 and its indicator focus on the bottom 40% of the population but does not take into consideration the gap which exists between the bottom 40% and the top 10%), the achievement of SDG10 has been heavily affected by the pandemic, reversing most of the progress made so far. In fact, COVID-19 is considered responsible for having increased the average Gini Index for emerging markets and developing countries by 6%.

A variety of intersecting factors compounded each other, creating an explosive combination for low-skilled/low-income workers. These have been more exposed to vulnerable conditions such as unemployment, risk of infection, and the lack of access to benefits and welfare policies. On the other hand, high-income workers have been able to keep their well-paid jobs, minimise the risk of contagion by working remotely, benefit from higher housing prices and increase the value of their financial investments in a stock market spurred by Governments' interventions.

It is also important to note that women/girls and members of ethnical minority groups have been the most affected by the pandemic, owing to both their higher infection rates and to the higher risk of unemployment. This might in turn have a domino effect on the inclusion of entire generations and, in the world's poorest countries, it could lead to practises of forced labour and arranged and/or early marriages.

An additional issue that is currently contributing to broadening the gap between wealthy nations and developing countries is the distribution and availability of the COVID-19 vaccines. According to a recent press release of the WHO: "COVID-19 vaccine inequity will have a lasting and profound impact on socio-economic recovery in low- and lower-middle income countries without urgent action to boost supply and assure equitable access for every country".<sup>1</sup> This claim is echoed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Administrator, Achim Steiner, who has emphasized the risks of the current global two-track approach to recovery, whereby everybody remains exposed to the mutations of the virus.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, the Strategic Advisory Group of Experts on Immunization (SAGE) has stated that "high-income countries have administered 69 times more doses per inhabitant than low-income countries".<sup>3</sup> Besides that, the unfair distribution of vaccines entrenches already existing imbalances, i.e. categories such as refugees and migrants are oftentimes deliberately

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.who.int/news/item/22-07-2021-vaccine-inequity-undermining-global-economic-recovery>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2021/6/24/getting-sdgs-back-on-track-a-conversation-with-undps-steiner>.

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/laninf/article/PIIS1473-3099\(21\)00344-3/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/laninf/article/PIIS1473-3099(21)00344-3/fulltext).

excluded from vaccine campaigns and medical supplies in general, thus perpetuating the precarious hygienic conditions and the shortage of medical supplies of refugee camps that constitute the perfect environment for the spread of diseases such as the SARS-CoV-2.

In this dire scenario, APG23 welcomes the resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council on October 6, 2020 (A/HRC/RES/45/14), whereby the Member States recognize that “the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately affects the poor and the most vulnerable people, with repercussions on health and development gains, in particular in low- and middle-income and developing countries, thus hampering the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals”.<sup>4</sup> However, we urge the international community to not limit itself to mere declarations but to do more in that regard, as in times of emergency urgent efforts are required.

The COVID-19 pandemic has unveiled the increasing need to move States’ resources to social investments. The healthcare system is the first and foremost infrastructure in need of major investment. Discrimination and stigma on the bases of race, class, sex profession and social network are still ongoing structural issues to address in order to promote the enactment and successful implementation of human rights for all. States are invited to ensure the reduction of harmful information and asked to foster accessibility and accountability to health structures and medicines.

We believe that inequalities are deeply interlinked with the implementation of the right to development. They create gaps in the access to health, education, housing and other services essential to the enjoyment of economic and social rights. Indeed, inequalities represent the major obstacle to sustainable development, affecting not only economic growth but also threatening democratic life, social cohesion and resources’ redistribution.

In our opinion, given the rise in inequalities within and across countries, the implementation of the right to development would play a fundamental role in addressing this crisis. Moreover, it is important to stress that the framing of the right to development also encompasses the concept of equity, to be distinguished from equality as it calls for equal opportunities, far beyond the sheer redistribution of wealth and benefits.

On this note, we would like to emphasize that development, through the reduction of inequalities within and among countries, should be people-centred. Individuals should be empowered and become protagonists of their own development rather than remaining objects of assistance and charity that, in the long run, create dependency. Justice and equity are the driving forces that lead to equality and development accordingly. Participation, empowerment and accountability must become components of the development process necessary to address inequalities.

Against this backdrop, APG23 would also like to make the following further general recommendations:

- To grant access to development processes to vulnerable people and groups, otherwise excluded from them, by realizing concrete solidarity actions that contribute to the reduction of inequalities between and within countries, between groups and peoples;
- To foster global partnerships to assist least developed countries in addressing inequalities and to determine better indicators to measure progress accurately;
- To incorporate active, free and meaningful participation, accountability and empowerment of individuals and marginalized groups in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of development programmes;
- To encourage businesses to develop products and services accessible to poor customers, moving away from the logic of profit and consumerism;
- To accept the proposal promoted by India and South Africa to temporarily waive some of the World Trade Organization provisions on intellectual property rights during the pandemic;

<sup>4</sup> Human Rights Council, Forty-fifth session, Resolution 45/14, Eliminating inequality within and among States for the realization of human rights.

- To seek for voluntary licensing arrangement between COVID-19 vaccines manufacturers and laboratories in order to increase production, and thus, distribution (including towards often neglected categories such as refugees and migrants);

In conclusion, we must point out that while the COVID-19 pandemic might hopefully be relatively close to an end, given the extensive vaccines' rollout and the upgrades in treatment of the disease (even though the emergence of variants still constitutes a risk), the effects it generated on an economic and social level will not disappear anytime soon. The impact that this event is still having on inequalities across the world will be perceived for years to come and it might be in danger of becoming irreversible unless the international community takes swift action.

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