

th session of the Human Rights Council Oral update on the
human rights impact of the COVID-19 pandemic Statement by
Michelle Bachelet, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

Madam President,
Excellencies,

This is a valuable opportunity to discuss with our distinguished participants how human rights-based policies can help to shape the impact of this pandemic – taking stock of some of the good practices that have demonstrated their efficacy to date. The world has rarely experienced a simultaneous, global shock as complex as COVID-19. No country has been spared, yet the pandemic’s medical, social and economic consequences vary widely. I am convinced that for countries across the income spectrum, human rights-based policies can help to shift these impacts from devastating, to manageable; and contribute to a recovery with better protection and greater resilience.

Although COVID-19 continues to spread, temporary furlough arrangements and other income-support measures are coming to an end in several States, as they struggle to re-open schools, training programmes, and entire sectors of the economy. But while some countries seem to be emerging out of at least the first stage of the pandemic, ready to begin building back, others have been far worse hit – and their prospects for recovery are not the same. A number are living through something like a second wave.

A number of States were able to count on adaptable human rights based systems for key services, such as healthcare and social protections. I cannot overstate the importance of these pre-existing systems for the delivery of fundamental rights, shielding people from the worst impacts of temporary crises; and helping them get back on their feet.

To learn from what went right, we must look at what went wrong. Today’s multifaceted crisis has unmasked the strong link between race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status and health outcomes. Pre-existing inequalities should be contextualized within historical, political, social and economic spaces, and be effectively addressed to build back better with equality and quality.

In today’s context, social protection represents a critical tool for facilitating access to health care, protecting people against poverty and ensuring the satisfaction of basic economic and social rights. In 2017, ILO showed that a universal social protection scheme that includes allowances for all children; maternity benefits for all women with newborns; benefits for all persons with severe disabilities; and universal old-age pensions [will cost an average 1.6 per cent](#) of a developing

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country's GDP. The facts are clear, and lives – everywhere – are on the line. States should be encouraged and assisted to provide universal systems to deliver quality healthcare and social protection to all.

International cooperation and support can be extended to facilitate the expansion of fiscal space for States, by extending stimulus packages to save lives and livelihoods. This is building capacity at the national level, to enable countries to build back by financing their healthcare and social protection systems with public funds. Fiscal space can be further expanded by pursuing progressive taxation and ruling out austerity policies and privatization of public services.

Madam President,

Even in the initial weeks of a very complex, dangerous and fast-moving crisis, many decision-makers chose to be guided by human rights principles. They extended access to healthcare for people previously excluded – whether due to cost, migration status or other factors. They took action to safeguard older people and others in long-term care institutions. They provided immediate, effective income support for people whose jobs were threatened; emergency food supplies; temporary housing for the homeless; and protection from eviction, as well as moratoria on some mortgage payments.

They adopted alternatives to imprisonment of criminal offenders; gave temporary settled status to asylum-seekers; provided medical assistance through telemedical technologies to indigenous peoples in remote areas; implemented community support programmes; improvised Zoom schools; and distributed free face masks, soap and gloves.

All these were human rights-based policies – although many measures could, and should, have focused much more strongly on the most vulnerable and marginalized.

Women, for example, are being severely impacted. Earlier this month, a [study](#) by UNWOMEN and UNDP estimated that by 2021, around 435 million women and girls will be living on less than US\$1.90 a day — including 47 million who have been pushed into poverty by COVID-19. According to the report, differences in vulnerability to the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic could mean that next year, there will be 118 women in poverty for every 100 men. The very sharp rise in domestic violence which has been reported across every region is also profoundly alarming.

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Excellencies,

No country has been spared the blows of this pandemic. And as the Secretary-General has noted, «at a time when we desperately need to leap ahead, COVID-19 could set us back years, and even decades».

There is an enormous range of work ahead, and much of it will rest on global solidarity and cooperation. We all share an interest in ensuring that everyone has access to a safe and affordable vaccine, universal health coverage, social protection and other fundamental rights.

To date, some States have demonstrated deep mistrust of their people – repressing criticism, limiting freedom of information and cracking down on the civic space. These and other human rights violations have undermined public health, as well as human rights and the prospect of a strong and sustainable recovery.

But the more far-sighted leaders of States, and communities, have sought to preserve their peoples' rights and future. They have informed and empowered people and have helped them to weather this crisis.

As we have learned from experience in many other viral epidemics – from HIV to Zika and Ebola – these measures to support and promote human rights make for much more effective policies for public health. They are also the most powerful drivers of peace, security, social stability, healthy environment and the continuation of sustainable development

Thank you.

ENDS

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