



Preparing for pandemics: Lessons from COVID-19 for human rights-based changes

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Abstract. COVID-19 exacerbated prevailing structural power inequalities and worsened fundamental human rights of vulnerable groups. Three sets of priorities are identified for the future. They concern 'old normal' prevention, lessons sharing, and mobilisation promotion, in order to advance rights-based changes.

With nearly 700 million cases and 7 million deaths, the COVID-19 pandemic was and continues to be a [global health crisis](#). It has, however, also exposed human rights crises stemming from structural inequalities and hierarchies inherent in prevailing neoliberal policies. Income inequalities increased and the rich, and especially the super-rich, became richer with the 10 richest men [doubling](#)

their fortunes from \$700 billion to \$1.5 trillion -at a rate of \$15,000 per second or \$1.3 billion a day— during the first two years of a pandemic that has seen the incomes of 99 percent of humanity fall and over 160 million more people forced into poverty.

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Vulnerable groups, particularly in developing countries, were often denied adequate health facilities, decent work, social protection, food, housing and education —fundamental human rights enshrined in international treaties and often in national constitutions. Precarious workers, informal traders, domestic workers and small businesses lost their sources of income, while indigenous peoples, refugees, asylum seekers and those living in conflict-related contexts experienced [dire circumstances](#).

COVID-19 has also intersected with other prevailing unequal power relations in society, such as gender, gender identity, age, race, colour, ethnicity, and religion. According to UN Women, limitations on resources and institutional capacity meant that women and girls [experienced](#) 'face disproportionate impacts with far-reaching consequences that are only further amplified in contexts of fragility, conflict, and emergencies'. According to the UNDP [Human Development Report 2020](#), the pandemic at its peak resulted in some 86 percent of children being out of school in countries with low human development index ratings, the equivalent figure being 20 percent of those in high human development countries, with girls and young women being vulnerable to early pregnancy, child marriage and gender-based violence.

Human Rights Watch [noted](#) how disadvantages are compounded for vulnerable groups, as those

living in poverty are more likely to have health complications, live in crowded or poor-quality housing, and lack the resources to stay at home for long periods or follow hygiene recommendations. And low-paid jobs force them to choose between risking their health or losing their income. (June 2020)

The Oxfam Briefing Paper '[The Inequality Virus](#)' highlighted that COVID-19 'has exposed, fed off and increased existing inequalities of wealth, gender and race', which were the results of a 'flawed and exploitative economic system, which has its roots in neoliberal economics and the capture of politics by elites' that intensified patriarchy and structural racism, and resulted in injustice and poverty.

As [noted](#) by the UN Secretary-General António Guterres,

COVID-19 has been likened to an X-ray, revealing fractures in the fragile skeleton of the societies we have built. It is exposing fallacies and falsehoods everywhere: The lie that free markets can deliver healthcare for all; The fiction that unpaid care work is not work; The delusion that we live in a post-racist world; The myth that we are all in the same boat. Because while we are all floating on the same sea, it's clear that some of us are in superyachts while others are clinging to the floating debris.

Even earlier, several critical economists, such as Nobel Prize winner Joseph Stiglitz, had emphasised the importance of 'rewriting' the rules of the American (2015) and European (2020) economies to promote a fairer, more just and security systems —that are at the core of socio-economic human rights concerns.

States have to uphold fundamental human rights. International non-governmental institutions such as [Human Rights Watch](#), as well as treaty bodies such as the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (see for instance its [statement](#) in 2020), called on states to uphold related obligations to all. Unfortunately, most governments, often under pressure from international lending institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, had focused for decades on promoting the 'free market' model of development, including cutting down public sector expenditure on social and related services, often at the cost of the basic human rights of the vulnerable.

The debate within the Global Campus network

These issues were highlighted during the 2021 Global Classroom [Conference 'COVID-19 Pandemic and Economic and Social Rights'](#). During this four-day event, researchers from seven regions in the world (East Europe, West Europe, Caucasus, Asia-Pacific, Arab states, Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean) presented their findings, participated in discussions, and debated with keynote speakers on a variety of concerns related to the experience of COVID-19. Using the cases of Cameroon, Kenya and South Africa, the GC African group [detailed](#) the challenges faced with regard to the right to social security. The GC Asia-Pacific group [paid](#) attention to the experiences of vulnerable groups like orphaned children, Dalits in Nepal, migrants in the Philippines, and older adults in China. The GC Caucasus group [dealt with](#) the right to education of children, using the cases of Armenia, Georgia, Russia and Belarus. The GC South-East European group [discussed](#) access to healthcare services of Roma and older people (65 years or older) in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Croatia prior to and during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and how these intersected with class, age, ethnicity, gender inequalities. The GC Latin American and Caribbean group addressed the situation of sexual and reproductive rights of women, elaborating the case of Colombia. The GC European group [analysed](#) the labour policy responses on women's right to work in Germany, Italy, Ireland and Portugal from a feminist perspective.

Significantly, the first keynote speaker, [Ignacio Saiz](#), focused on the scale of the problems of rights violations under COVID-19, stressing the disparities that were experienced between the rich and poor, globally and nationally. He emphasised the need to promote dignity, solidarity, equality and accountability, particularly on the part of states and international financial institutions to resource a 'just recovery'.

[Joshua Castellino](#) took on a more political perspective, noting how there was a pandemic of hate that pre-existed COVID-19, which involved scapegoating a community – a form of structural discrimination experienced often by minorities and indigenous groups. He spoke of two crises prior to COVID-19, which worsened during the pandemic. The first was linked with the environment which has been systematically exploited by big business and the second was associated with the development of forms of technology that took away jobs. Both these crises were linked to increasing profits for a small group at the expense of the planet, and the majority of the people.

Moreover, [Tlaleng Mofokeng](#), [Meskerem Geset](#) and [Kalliope Agapiou Josephides](#) focused on the significance of promoting a gender/feminist perspective towards understanding how rights were challenged during the pandemic, using the examples, among others, of the LGBTQ sex workers. They also highlighted the need for gender/feminist perspectives on fiscal policies and gender-based budgetary practices.

Lessons and the way forward

It is urgent to challenge inequities in the prevailing pattern of neoliberal growth that has compromised social and economic rights, as well as political and civil rights, of vulnerable people. The end of the pandemic should not result in a return to the old normal, but the human rights communities should use COVID-19 as an opportunity to create a 'new normal' where the rights of all are respected, recognising the close links that exist between social and economic rights and other human rights. It is also essential to recognise the power of language and discourses in framing reforms, rights and development.

Information on local and relevant solutions during the pandemic needs to be shared. Tremendous resilience has been demonstrated by individuals, communities and NGOs, in caring and sustaining lives in the contest of COVID-19. There is an important inspiration to be found in these experiences. They provide us with new perceptions, visions and concepts on how human rights can be sustained, even under dire circumstances.

People in power are not likely to be persuaded to change just because they know their policies harm people and the environment. Non-governmental, social-media, consumer-based groups as well as religious-based and grassroots organisations need to mobilise within and across countries to demand accountability from corporations and politicians with regard to their policies and practices.

Three sets of priorities are identified for the future. First, it is necessary to prevent the return to the 'old normal' and rewrite rules of dominant neoliberalism to embed just and rights-based policies. Second, it is crucial to learn from and share positive experiences during the pandemic which can inspire new theoretical and practical frameworks. Third, it is urgent to promote social and political mobilisation at local and global levels in order to uphold accountability and bring about rights-based changes.