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SDG 16 Conference 2021: Transforming Governance for a more Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Future: SDG 16 as the roadmap to respond to COVID-19 and build back better

Plenary 2.1 Implications of the pandemic for the relationship between citizens and States Statement by Michelle Bachelet, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

29 April 2021

Assistant Secretary-General,
Distinguished panellists,
Excellencies,
Colleagues and friends,

The need to transform governance has been among the major lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic, in every region of the world. Our discussion today is of urgent relevance to policymakers around the world, be it in terms of civil, political, economic, and social human rights; public health; economic and social resilience; sustainable development; a healthy environment; or conflict prevention.

The pandemic has shown how high levels of discrimination, injustice and inequality have harmed not only those individuals directly targeted – but also everyone else. They have undermined our resilience to shocks, and public trust in institutions.

It has also demonstrated how people's access to information and capacity to participate in decisions; and their trust in science, the authorities and institutions of society, make for better outcomes. This is not only in terms of compliance with medical advice and lockdown restrictions, but also much more broadly, in the context of social cohesion. As the Secretary General's [Progress Report on the SDGs](#) points out, this could lead to "an increase in social unrest and violence" that would "greatly undermine" our ability to meet the targets of SDG 16."

We can see now, far more clearly than we did even just 18 months ago, exactly why it is essential that States accelerate efforts to advance institutions and policies that are inclusive and just. The way in which our governance systems provide justice for all – especially those furthest behind – will be crucial to getting through this crisis and ensuring more peaceful, sustainable, and resilient societies in the future.

SDG 16 captures well this interlocking relationship between justice, peace, public trust, inclusive institutions, and sustainable development. Justice, including social justice, is vital to enduring peace – and it rests on accountable governance, a vibrant civil society and impartial, independent rule of law.

Countries where people trust their institutions consistently show higher levels of political participation,

according to research – and certainly, inclusive institutions are vital to democracy and to building forward better.

Secretary-General Guterres has consistently [called](#) for a new social contract that should "create equal opportunities for all and respect the rights and freedoms of all." As he points out, this respect for people's human rights is essential to advancing development: it is "the only way that we will meet the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Paris Agreement and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda – agreements that address precisely the failures that are being exposed and exploited by the pandemic."

The pandemic is an unbearable human tragedy. But in highlighting the urgent need for greater respect for people's rights, and their trust in government, it can also be a powerful catalyst for work to build societies that are more fair, more equal – and therefore more sustainable.

How can human rights guide the renewal of public trust?

I suggest that firstly, universal social protection should be institutionalized and made permanent.

Over the past 15 months, many governments have adopted new measures that strengthen or set up key social protections, in line with the [universal human right to social security](#). There is no longer any doubt about their power to reduce economic, social, and political exclusion, and their profound benefit across communities and social classes.

These innovative and powerful recent measures include introducing new cash transfers for informal workers, people working in the "gig" economy and others often excluded from the social protection system; easing eligibility requirements to widen coverage – and include undocumented migrants, among others: increasing the amount and duration of benefits, to ensure that beneficiaries can afford basic goods and services in the context of the current crisis. They need to be institutionalized for the longer-term, to avoid the sudden shocks that harm individuals, economies and societies – eroding public trust in political systems, justice institutions and the social contract, and leading to grievances and potential conflict. States should aim at putting in place universal and comprehensive social protection in which everyone is protected.

Secondly, action must be taken to eradicate discrimination of any kind.

"Leaving no-one behind" is not an empty slogan: it is an action plan. The discrimination that holds back millions of people, on the basis of their racial, ethnic, linguistic, or supposed caste origin; their sex; their disability status or for any other perceived reason is deeply unjust, illegal and damaging to everyone. Discrimination against women and girls damages their equal enjoyment of human rights, hampers their participation, and results in [lower levels of trust](#) among women. Cultivating public confidence in government decision-making, and development that improves life for all, requires the key human rights principles of non-discrimination and equality to be effectively upheld. Only by ensuring inclusion of all voices can trust be restored.

My third point: the right to participation is crucial to building trust.

Experience demonstrates that responsive, accountable, participatory, and inclusive institutions at all levels will build more peaceful and just societies; and that they will steer development that is more sustainable because it is deep, broad, and self-regenerating.

When people can freely seek out information and shape decision-making by voicing their needs and views, policies will be better adapted to the lived realities on the ground. Better policies, achieved through more respectful processes, strengthen the public trust. Similarly, positive feedback loops are created when governance is not only participatory but also transparent and accountable.

Concrete action to increase people's participation in decisions should include recognizing the value of civic space and the legitimacy of critical voices; promoting dialogue and engagement with the widest possible range of voices; and protecting and supporting human rights defenders – including women – as well as journalists, trade unionists and activists for social justice.

Fourthly, tackling corruption should be viewed as a human rights goal.

SDG16.5 commits Member States to "substantially reduce corruption and bribery in all forms."

The theft or misuse of what should be public goods, and public funds, is a profound abuse of trust. It violates the core human rights principles of transparency, accountability, non-discrimination, in every aspect of society. It exacerbates inequality, weakens governance, undermines the provision of services and the rule of law, impedes investment, and erodes public trust. Secretary-General Guterres [has termed it](#) "criminal, immoral and the ultimate betrayal of public trust... a long-standing source of distrust and anger against their leaders and governments."

The [UN Convention against Corruption](#) is the principal legal framework for combating corruption worldwide, and it is complementary to International human rights law. The first ever Special Session of the General Assembly on Corruption, to be held in June this year, will be an opportunity for a landmark commitment that centres anti-corruption efforts on human rights.

Yes, fighting corruption may require sweeping reforms that clash with deeply rooted special interests. It requires an effort of political will. But it is an investment that can pay massive economic, social, and political dividends.

Excellencies,

Human rights provide a framework to understand the roots of people's distrust in governance and take effective action to correct those causes.

This is why the 2030 Agenda so explicitly recognises human rights: because they are the levers that will ensure truly broad-based and sustainable development.

Effective, accountable, transparent, and participatory institutions are necessary building blocks. Without them, any economic growth risks leaving huge numbers of people behind – exposing societies to sudden and drastic shocks.

As our countries continue to combat COVID-19, and ultimately recover from the damage it has caused, I trust that all of us will act on these clear lessons of our experience.

Thank you.

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