

Your Excellency Chair of the United Nations Economic and Social Council; Ladies and gentlemen,

I am very pleased to participate in the 2021 session of this important main body of the United Nations. The theme that brings us together is “Sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic that promotes the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development: building an inclusive and effective path for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda in the context of the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development”.

This is a crucial issue for the affirmation of human dignity in the current context of international relations. Especially if analyzed in the light of GA resolution 74/298 and the Sustainable Development Goals 1 on no poverty, 2 on zero hunger, 3 on good health and well-being, 8 on decent work and economic growth, 10 on reduced inequalities, 12 on responsible consumption and production, 13 on climate action, 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions, and 17 on partnerships in depth.

Within this correlative analysis, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural rights has a lot to contribute. There are several documents produced by the Committee that are closely related to this theme (general observations; declarations; open letters; conclude observations; among others). All of these are available for consultation on our web page. In its recent Statement on the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and economic, social and cultural rights, the Committee noted that:

1. The COVID-19 pandemic vividly illustrates the importance of the indivisibility and interdependence of all human rights. This pandemic is essentially a global health threat. Nevertheless, it has multiple implications for the enjoyment of civil and political rights because some of the measures taken by States to combat it impose severe restrictions on the freedom of movement and on other rights. Thus, it is essential that the measures adopted by States to combat this pandemic are reasonable and proportionate to ensure protection of all human rights.

2. Health-care systems and social programmes have been weakened by decades of underinvestment in public health services and other social programmes, accelerated

by the global financial crisis of 2007–2008. Consequently, they are ill equipped to respond effectively and expeditiously to the intensity of the current pandemic.

3. Disadvantaged and marginalized groups are severely affected by the current crisis. Older persons, persons with pre-existing health conditions and those with compromised immune systems are particularly vulnerable to serious health consequences if infected by COVID-19. Other groups are at great risk of contagion, such as those in residential care facilities or communal living arrangements, prisoners and persons in detention facilities, and residents of informal settlements or other areas where adequate access to water, soap or sanitizer is lacking. Certain categories of workers, such as delivery workers, garbage collection workers, manual labourers and workers in the agricultural sector, are exposed to heightened risks of being infected, as the nature of their work does not allow them to take advantage of dispensations to work from home using digital technology. Many health-care workers, who are performing heroic work on the front lines, responding to the pandemic, are being infected as a result of inadequacies in or shortages of personal protective equipment and clothing. Several groups are severely disadvantaged by the economic consequences of measures adopted in a number of countries to contain the spread of COVID-19. These include precarious workers in the “gig economy” or the informal sector, along with other groups of workers who face retrenchments or loss of wages and social benefits, including domestic workers in many countries. Informal traders and a number of small businesses can no longer ply their trade or conduct business, resulting in profound economic insecurity for themselves and their dependants.

4. Inadequate public goods and social services also deepen global income and wealth inequalities. Those living in poverty cannot afford to purchase essential goods and social services in the private market, and they bear the disproportionate burden of the economic consequences of quarantines, lockdowns and the adverse national and international economic situation.

5. In countries where schools, technical colleges and higher educational institutions are closed, efforts are being made to continue teaching and learning online. These are important measures to mitigate the impact of the closures on the right to education. Nevertheless, they also carry the risk of deepening educational inequalities

between rich and poor learners owing to unequal access to affordable Internet services and equipment such as computers, smart phones and tablets.

6. The COVID-19 pandemic also threatens to deepen gender inequalities as the burden of caring for children at home and for sick or older family members falls disproportionately on women, given the still deeply embedded gender stereotypes and roles in many societies. In circumstances where families are in lockdown or quarantine, women may be additionally vulnerable to domestic violence, and have limited recourse in these circumstances.

7. Indigenous peoples, refugees, asylum seekers and those living in conflict-affected countries or regions are particularly vulnerable during this pandemic. Many of them lack adequate access to water, soap or sanitizer, COVID-19 testing facilities, health-care services and information. These populations frequently suffer higher rates of chronic illnesses and underlying health conditions than others, which places them at greater risk of developing severe health complications from COVID-19.

All of these 7 previous points are in close relationship with the integrated, indivisible and interlinked nature of the SDGs as a result of the 2030 Agenda. In this sense, CESCR is in close relationship, participating in the pertinent instances created for that purpose, with the other human rights treaty bodies of the UN system to shape these premises in the different decisions and documents that build the joint effort to face the pandemic of Covid-19. Also, the Committee has a working group that looks at a future document that deals specifically with sustainable development. The time will come when the draft proposal will be available on our website for any and all comments prior to its approval by CESCR. At this point, we invite everyone to send us their analysis and comments.

In addition to these efforts, it is also important to know and promote the Statement on universal and equitable access to vaccines for the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) approved by the Committee on 27 November 2020. Every person has a right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, which includes access to immunization programmes against the major infectious diseases. Every person also has a right to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress, which

includes access to all the best available applications of scientific progress necessary to enjoy the highest attainable standard of health. Both rights imply that every person has a right to have access to a vaccine for COVID-19 that is safe, effective and based on the application of the best scientific developments.

Both documents will be able to illuminate the paths to be followed by ECOSOC in building an inclusive and effective path for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda in the context of the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development at this time of hard in intense challenges as a result of the pandemic.

In this sense, the unconditional support of ECOSOC to CESCR is fundamental for these premises to be based on constructive dialogues and official documents prepared by the Committee to the States parties to the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Now, more than ever, this confident and unconditional support will be necessary to face the gap created by the imperative need to reschedule constructive dialogues with the States parties and the technical difficulties created by the exclusive obligation of virtual meetings as a result of the covid-19 pandemic. Exceptional moments, demand exceptional actions and solutions. But we are sure that these are momentary obstacles and that they will be overcome, because finally the luck of each one of us is inexorably connected.

I am very grateful for this honorable invitation and at CESCR we are available for whatever is necessary. Thank you very much! With my highest esteem and consideration.

Renato Zerbini Ribeiro Leão – Chair, Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
