



ECOSOC

United Nations Economic and Social Council

TAKING ACTION TO IMPROVE LIVES

2021 ECOSOC Special Meeting

Reimagining Equality: Eliminating racism, xenophobia and discrimination for all in the decade of action for the SDGs

18 February 2021

Background

Reducing systematic inequality and eliminating racism, including its contemporary manifestations, are at the heart of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its central pledge to leave no one behind. In 2015, world leaders envisaged a world of respect for race, ethnicity and cultural diversity; and of equal opportunity permitting the full realization of human potential and contributing to shared prosperity”¹. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development not only includes a dedicated SDG to eliminating inequalities (SDG 10) but is also strongly grounded in international human rights standards and strives to reach those furthest behind first.

In its contribution to the 2017 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination called on the HLPF to place the elimination of racial discrimination and reduction of inequalities at the forefront of efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda, with a particular focus on reaching the furthest behind first.² During its review of SDG10 on reduced inequalities, the 2019 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), convened under the auspices of ECOSOC, cautioned that inaction in this area risked derailing progress on the 2030 Agenda and underscored that effective policies to reduce inequalities required partnerships and political will.³

Following some brutal racially motivated events last year, the world has witnessed an unprecedented global reawakening of anti-racist movements. This has led to growing realization of the ways in which racism colors almost every aspect of lives, from everyday interactions to domestic and international policy. There is a vocal demand for urgent action to eliminate structural and systemic racism and injustice in all spheres of life. There is a need for renewed commitment to implement the Durban Declaration and its Programme of Action.

In September 2020, on the occasion of the United Nations 75th Anniversary, world leaders committed to “address the root causes of inequalities, including violence, human rights abuses,

¹ A/RES/70/1

² https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/14579OHCHR_Comm_on_the_Elimination_of_Racial_Discrimination.pdf

³ E/HLPF/2019/8

corruption, marginalization, discrimination in all its forms, poverty and exclusion, as well as lack of education and employment”⁴. The actions identified in various international human rights instruments on countering racism, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the 75th Anniversary Declaration and other relevant documents are more relevant today than ever.

Addressing the root causes of all kinds of discrimination, systemic inequalities and leaving no one behind, as envisioned in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, require transformational changes in deeply entrenched economic, social and political system, manifested in the unequal distribution of wealth, decision-making power, and access to opportunities for education, health care, and personal advancement. To this end, it is important to acknowledge, measure and take action to eliminate the structural and systemic racism that leads to such inequalities in opportunities and outcomes.

Inequalities in exposure, vulnerabilities and coping capacity related to COVID-19 are differentiating the impact of the pandemic. Its impact has further exposed racial discrimination and exacerbated existing inequalities. The pandemic is disproportionately impacting certain marginalized racial, religious, national or ethnic communities and population groups making them vulnerable to higher rates of infection and mortality, to harsh treatment by law enforcement in the context of emergency measures and to unequal access to adequate medical care.⁵ There have also been instances where people belonging to racial, religious or ethnic minorities were subjected to hate speech and vile conspiracy theories accusing them for spread of the virus. The pandemic is also posing a new threat to the health and survival of indigenous peoples, who often experience widespread stigma and discrimination in healthcare settings.

The UN Secretary-General, in his various policy briefs on the impact of COVID-19, underscored the need for public policies to address asymmetrical health and socio-economic impacts of the pandemic and combat racism, xenophobia and discrimination, based on human rights in the fight against COVID-19.⁶ The High Commissioner for Human Rights issued policy guidance to effectively document and address manifestations of racial discrimination in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic⁷. The UN Secretary-General also called for a new social contract for a more equitable, just and sustainable way forward in line with the Sustainable Development Goals.⁸ In his appeal to address and counter COVID-19 hate speech, the Secretary-General called on “the media, especially social media companies, to do much more to flag, and in line with international human rights law, remove racist, misogynist and other harmful content”.⁹ UNESCO, which adopted the Declaration on Race and Racial Prejudice in 1978, continues to foster rights, inclusion and non-discrimination¹⁰.

⁴ Declaration on the commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the United Nations ([A/RES/75/1](#))

⁵https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un_policy_brief_on_human_rights_and_covid_23_april_2020.pdf

⁶<https://www.un.org/en/coronavirus/un-secretary-general>

⁷https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Racism/COVID-19_and_Racial_Discrimination.pdf

⁸<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/a-new-social-contract-for-a-new-era/>

⁹<https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2020-05-08/appeal-address-and-counter-covid-19-hate-speech>

¹⁰ <https://en.unesco.org/themes/fostering-rights-inclusion>

The United Nations has several mechanisms to monitor and assess issues related to racial equality and racial discrimination, including the special rapporteurs and committees on equality and anti-discrimination. The General Assembly decided to establish a permanent forum on people of African descent, which will serve as a consultation mechanism for people of African descent and other interested stakeholders aimed at improving the quality of life and livelihoods of people of African descent¹¹. In 2020, the Human Rights Council requested the preparation of a report with a global scope on “systemic racism, violations of international human rights law against Africans and people of African descent by law enforcement agencies, especially those incidents that resulted in the death of George Floyd and other Africans and of people of African descent, to contribute to accountability and redress for victims”¹².

The Economic and Social Council is mandated to promote integrated policies and activities to implement the 2030 Agenda, including its principle to leave no one behind, and other internationally agreed development goals. It also has a mandate to review the comprehensive implementation of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action. Twenty years after Durban, the ECOSOC should consider how it can best contribute to combating racism in all its forms and promote integrated implementation of the 2030 Agenda and other related agreements and principles.

Objectives

The ECOSOC special meeting will address the links between structural racism, discrimination, inequalities and the pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals. The meeting will focus on building on those interlinkages as we respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts. It will also contribute to the thematic reviews of SDG 10 on reducing inequalities and SDG16 on peace, justice and strong institutions by the high-level political forum on sustainable development in July 2021. It will aim to generate wider political support for the UN and global action.

Outcome

The special meeting will be organized as a four-hour meeting on 18 February 2021. Its outcome would be a Presidential Statement highlighting key messages and recommendations emanating from the discussions.

¹¹A/RES/73/262

¹²Human Rights Council resolution 43/1