



PRESIDENTIAL STATEMENT

on the occasion of the ECOSOC Special Ministerial Meeting on

Reimagining Equality: Eliminating racism, xenophobia and discrimination for all in the decade of action for the SDGs (18 February 2021)

The Economic and Social Council convened a Special Ministerial Meeting on “*Reimagining Equality: Eliminating racism, xenophobia and discrimination for all in the decade of action for the SDGs*” on 18 February. I am pleased to share the key messages and recommendations that emerged from our discussions:

- Racism is the repudiation of our common humanity. The pursuit of equality underpins the ideals enshrined in the United Nations Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the principle to leave no one behind of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Despite our efforts, inequalities in the economic, social and political spheres, however, continue to permeate institutions, social structures and everyday life.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing inequalities. It has devastated lives and livelihoods of people around the world, pushed millions into poverty and marginalized communities. The disproportionately negative effects of COVID along racial, religious and ethnic lines has been clearly seen across the globe in infection and mortality rates. Racial and ethnic discrimination has been further compounded by other forms of discrimination based on gender, age, disability, class, caste, religion, minority status, migratory status, economic status, and legal status. In some cases, the effects of racial and ethnic discrimination during COVID has manifested itself through food insecurity, housing insecurity, income and job loss, and the devastating loss of a year of education for millions of children.
- Countries have taken concrete actions to address racism and discrimination, including through policies, programmes, strategies and action plans that address structural racism and tackle inequalities in social, economic and political institutions. But promoting racial, ethnic and religious equality and addressing historic injustices, including those rooted in legacy of colonialism, should also be an integral part of our responses to COVID-19 and our efforts to recover better. Dedicated actions are needed to ensure equality and improve the economic situation for people of African descent and other disadvantaged groups.
- Investment in strong social inclusion and social cohesion policies can help address structural inequalities and discrimination. Special measures, including positive/affirmative action programmes and targeted financial assistance, would be instrumental in addressing historical and current racial, ethnic and religion-based discrimination and disadvantage.
- Further efforts are needed to expand laws and regulations forbidding hate speech, incitement to violence and other types of hate crimes offline and on-line. Strengthening anti-discrimination measures, including grievance redress mechanisms, is of utmost urgency. Law enforcement culture, policies and practices which violate human rights need to be addressed.
- Concerns were expressed about tsunami of hatred and global resurgence in violent nationalism, ultranationalism, xenophobia, neo-nazism, religious discrimination such as Islamophobia and other forms of intolerance. Social media platforms too are being exploited to spread hatred and disinformation particularly amidst the pandemic.

Technology companies need to play a stronger role to ensure that technology design and use is consistent with universal values as reflected in international norms and standards.

- We need to work on setting agendas, priorities and standards on frontier issues – for example UNESCO is in the process of elaborating a Recommendation of Ethics of Artificial Intelligence. Emphasis is placed on addressing discrimination, including racial bias and stereotyping, in the design, development and use of new AI technologies.
- Hatred and discrimination exist in the mind of men – it is a learned attribute. We still need to build stronger defences for peace, respect for human dignity and equality in the minds of all of us. We need greater investment in eradicating harmful stereotypes through global citizenship education and intercultural dialogue.
- Building of a global alliance was proposed to fight against the rise and spread of Islamophobia and anti-Semitism and other violent nationalist and racist groups. This is critical for safeguarding the values of the enlightenment -- the primacy of reason, tolerance and mutual respect. Broadening alliances is important for instance intensifying work with local authorities, but also by empowering and mobilizing teachers, religious leaders, media professionals, artists and activists, including youth.
- Addressing inequality and racism requires challenging the status quo as well as own biases. The UN Secretary-General has called for action to identify, prevent and address racism and racial discrimination within the United Nations, including at the country level. In this regard, efforts are underway to equip UN country teams to support countries rebuilding from COVID-19 in a way that results in more just, equal and resilient societies.
- The Secretary-General reiterated his calls for a “new social contract” and a new global deal. These can transform systems and institutions to build a more inclusive, equal and sustainable world, and make peace with nature. More efforts are needed to ensure meaningful participation by those often left behind accountability and access to justice.
- Twenty years after the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, the promotion of equality and non-discrimination must remain a priority for the international community. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development must remain our blueprint to promote inclusion, justice and dignity for all and combat racism in all its manifestations. To this end, the Sustainable Development Goals could be instrumental in measuring progress.
- The pandemic has also underscored the need for a strengthened and renewed multilateralism. The international community needs to ensure a global and coordinated effort to address inequalities in access to a COVID-19 vaccine.
- Economic and financial models, priorities and assumptions need to be people-centered and serve humanity. Systems that perpetuate racism and inequalities must be dismantled. Recovery plans and finance must be aligned with the 2030 Agenda. In this regard, Professor Sachs called for an urgent emergency financial package in order for developing countries to recover from pandemic.
- In conclusion, it is vital to address the structural drivers of racial inequality including those rooted in the history and legacy of colonialism – the greatest obstacle to the full emancipation and progress of people of the developing countries.