



**We the peoples:
a renewed social
contract anchored
in human rights**

II. We the peoples: a renewed social contract anchored in human rights

16. COVID-19 has brought new urgency to the choice before us. Even before the pandemic, solidarity had dwindled in many societies. Governance has become more difficult against the backdrop of a heightened sense of unfairness and a rise in populism and inward-looking nationalist agendas that peddle simplistic fixes, pseudo-solutions and conspiracy theories. There is a growing disconnect between people and the institutions that serve them, with many feeling left behind and no longer confident that the system is working for them, an increase in social movements and protests and an ever deeper [crisis of trust](#) fomented by a loss of shared truth and understanding. There has been questioning of how we share our societies and this fragile planet, of the fundamental ties that connect us, and of how we engage with those who disagree, who feel unjustly treated or who feel excluded.

17. At the heart of this is a frayed social contract: the understanding within a society of how people solve shared problems, manage risks and pool resources to deliver public goods, as well as how their collective institutions and norms operate. The exact nature of these reciprocal norms varies, but their existence is universal.

WHAT WE MEAN BY *SOCIAL CONTRACT*



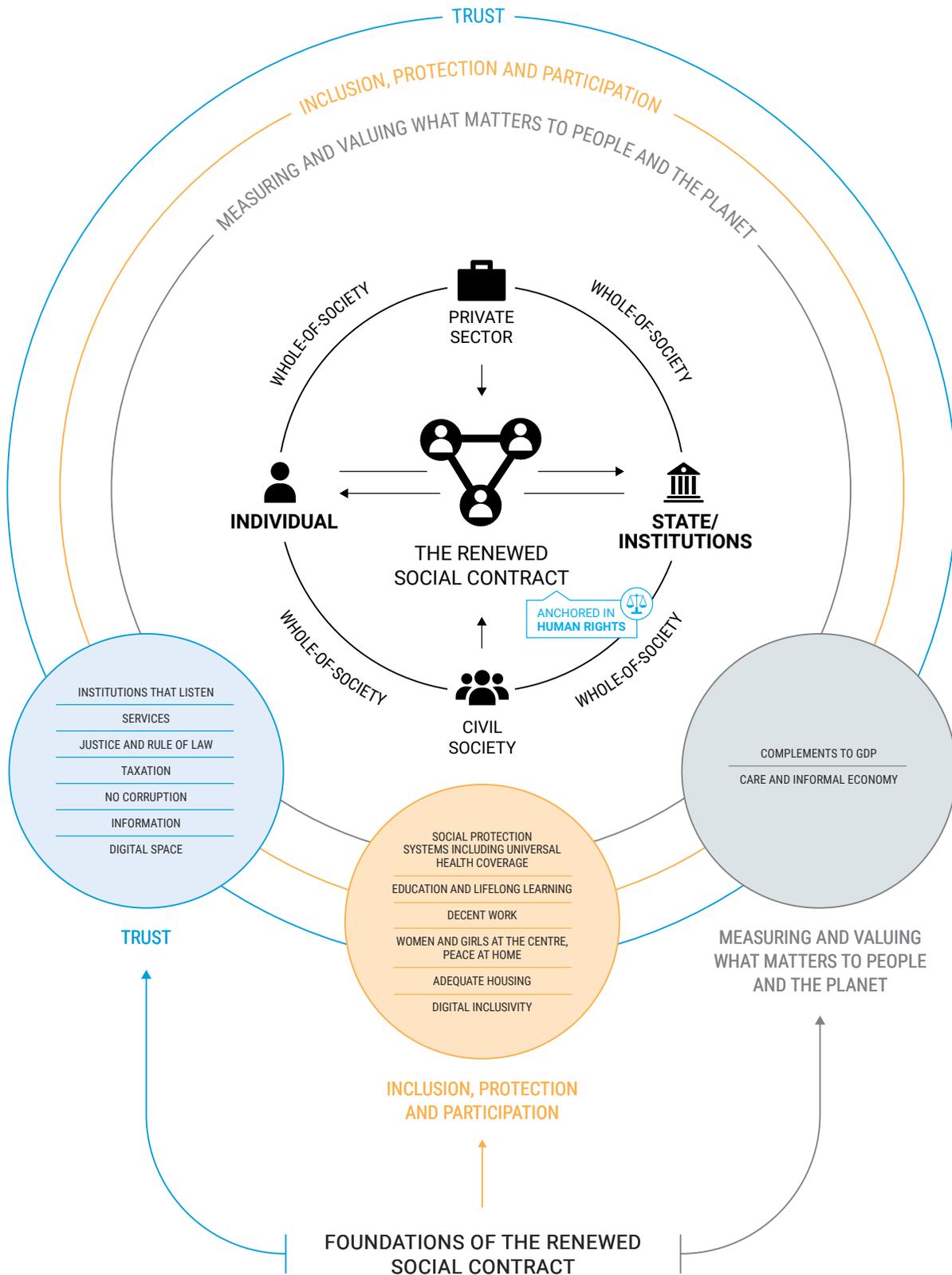
The term “social contract” is often understood to have its origins in Western or European philosophy. However, related concepts reflecting the reciprocal obligations between people, households, communities and their leaders exist across regions and religious traditions, including in Africa, the Americas, Asia and the Middle East.

18. A social contract needs to evolve to respond to changing circumstances. A revolution, war, economic collapse or other cataclysm puts the social contract under immediate pressure, leaving a society vulnerable to disruption if it is unable to adapt fast enough. For the first time in decades, all countries have experienced a dramatic change in their circumstances because of COVID-19. This shock has happened at a time when we were already failing in many ways in our duty of care to each other and the planet we share. We urgently need a renewed social contract, anchored in a comprehensive approach to human rights, in the light of the pandemic and beyond, one that allows many more actors to tackle increasingly complex and interconnected problems.

A. Foundations of a renewed social contract

19. The social contract originates at the subnational and national levels, and its exact architecture is unquestionably up to each society to determine. However, any social contract also has a global dimension. All societies face and are affected by global pressures, while solidarity within countries provides the foundation for our cooperation internationally. I will therefore mobilize the whole United Nations system to assist countries in support of a renewed social contract, anchored in human rights. Drawing on the consultations for Our Common Agenda, I see three foundations for a renewed social contract fit for the twenty-first century: **(a) trust;** **(b) inclusion, protection and participation;** and **(c) measuring and valuing what matters to people and the planet.** These ideas are articulated in different ways across societies, regions and cultures, but the international community has generated consensus on them through the United Nations by

THE RENEWED SOCIAL CONTRACT



enshrining core principles, such as solidarity, respect for human rights, accountability and equality. The 2030 Agenda gives practical expression to these principles through its commitment to leave no one behind.

B. Trust

20. Building trust and countering mistrust, between people and institutions, but also between different people and groups within societies, is our defining challenge. Both **interpersonal and institutional trust** are important and mutually reinforcing, but the recommendations below focus largely on the latter. There has been an [overall breakdown in trust](#) in major institutions worldwide due to both their real and perceived failures to deliver, be fair, transparent and inclusive, provide reliable information and make a difference in people's lives. For example, public distrust of governments and government distrust of publics made it harder to maintain consensus behind public health restrictions on COVID-19. Conversely, countries with higher levels of trust in public institutions (along with higher levels of interpersonal trust) did better at managing the pandemic. The types of challenges that we will face in the future will require similar, if not greater, levels of trust in each other and in our institutions.

21. People wish to be heard and to participate in the decisions that affect them. Institutions could establish better ways of listening to people whom they are meant to serve and taking their views into account, especially groups that are frequently overlooked, such as women, young people, minority groups or persons with disabilities. As an initial step, I invite Governments to conduct **national listening and "envisioning the future" exercises**. These can be done digitally to ensure breadth and inclusivity, albeit with commensurate measures to reach those 3.8 billion people who are still offline. I also commit to ensure that the United Nations builds on recent innovations in listening to, consulting and engaging with people around the world.

22. Failing to **deliver what people need most**, including basic services, drives mistrust, regardless of how open institutions are to public participation. Societies vary in terms of which **public goods** are delivered publicly and which are delivered privately, including health, education, the Internet, security and childcare. However, regulatory frameworks that ensure effectiveness and accountability can be provided and kept up to date by States. Moreover, a key [lesson](#) from COVID-19 is the importance of the State as a provider of trustworthy information, goods and services, especially in times of crisis. Institutions can analyse and reduce administrative burdens that make it hard for people to gain access to their services. Making government services digital can enhance transparency and accessibility, if provision is made for communities that currently do not have access to the digital world. At a time of rapid change, I encourage societies to discuss what are the most essential and valued public goods and the best means of ensuring their delivery, bearing in mind the roles of both the public and private sectors and building on the Sustainable Development Goals. I would also urge **investment in public systems and ensuring quality public servants**, as the main point of contact between the State and people. The international system needs to better support countries that lack the capacity and funding to make such investments.

23. **Justice is an essential dimension of the social contract**. In all parts of the world, distrust is fuelled by people's experience of inequality and corruption, and by their perception that the State and its institutions treat them unfairly. The 2030 Agenda promises to promote the rule of law and provide access to justice for all (target 16.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals), but many justice systems deliver only for the few. It is estimated that 1.5 billion people have unmet criminal, civil or administrative justice needs. They are unable to use the law to defend themselves from violence and crime, protect their rights or resolve disputes peacefully. In a number of countries, the law still actively discriminates against women, who in effect [enjoy](#) only three quarters of the legal rights of men.



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When security and justice actors are abusive and act with impunity, they exacerbate grievances and weaken the social contract. Distrust is also fuelled by people's experience of **corruption**, which has a disproportionate impact on **women**, exacerbates inequality and costs the world trillions of dollars annually. During our consultations, I **heard** from Member States about the potential for transforming justice systems in ways that strengthen the bonds that hold our societies together. In support of efforts to put people at the centre of justice systems, I will promote a **new vision for the rule of law**, building on Sustainable Development Goal 16 and the [2012 Declaration of the High-level](#)

[Meeting](#) of the General Assembly on the Rule of Law at the National and International Levels (see resolution 67/1). We will examine how our rule of law assistance can support States, communities and people in rebuilding their social contract as a foundation for sustaining peace. In this vein, it will also be important to accelerate action to **tackle corruption**, in line with the United Nations Convention against Corruption.

24. **Taxation** is one of the most powerful tools of government, critical to investing in public goods and incentivizing sustainability. Governments should consider using taxation to reduce extreme

inequalities in wealth. This would be an important signal in the wake of a pandemic in which millions of people lost their jobs and governments around the world faced declining fiscal space while the wealth of billionaires saw a massive jump. Taxation can also drive a sustainable and just transition, as governments shift subsidies from activities that damage the environment to those that sustain and enrich it; tax carbon emissions and other polluting activities rather than people or income; introduce fair royalty regimes in extractive activities; and channel resources to sustainable investments. These reforms can have different impacts on different countries, sectors and people, however, and it is especially important to ensure that they do not create new inequalities and to compensate and support any perceived to lose out. Countries across

different income categories also face challenges in terms of domestic resource mobilization. Addressing this is an integral part of financing for development and crucial in supporting the efforts towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Any new approach to taxation will need to embed the principles of sustainability while also considering the views and capacities of developing countries.

25. More broadly, a reformed **international tax system** is needed to respond to the realities of growing cross-border trade and investment and an increasingly digitalized economy while also addressing existing shortcomings in fair and effective taxation of businesses and reducing harmful tax competition. The G20 has agreed on



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a new international tax architecture that addresses the tax challenges arising from globalization and digitalization and introduces a global minimum tax for corporations, with a blueprint in place for broader implementation under the [auspices of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development \(OECD\)](#). As discussions continue, the perspectives of all countries must be heeded, including the potential for asymmetrical impacts on countries at different stages of development. Consideration could also be given to measures to tax the value of the digital economy, taxation of financial technology innovations, including cryptocurrencies, and a digital development tax, whereby the companies that have benefited for decades from a free and open Internet contribute to the connectivity of the 3.8 billion people who are still offline and to a safer digital world. I also propose stronger international cooperation to tackle tax evasion and aggressive tax avoidance, money-laundering and illicit financial flows, including through a **new joint structure on financial integrity and tackling illicit financial flows**, with membership centred around the United Nations, international financial institutions, OECD, major financial centres and expert civil society organizations. Its role could include promotion of transparency and accountability through the provision of data and other information, as well as fostering agreements to address illicit financial flows.

26. The **Internet** has altered our societies as profoundly as the printing press did, requiring a deep reimagining of the ethics and mindsets with which we approach knowledge, communication and cohesion. Along with the potential for more accessible information and rapid communication and consultation, the digital age, particularly social media, has also heightened fragmentation and “echo chambers”. Objectivity, or even the idea that people can aspire to ascertain the best available truth, has come increasingly into question. The goal of giving equal balance to competing points of view can come at the expense of impartiality and evidence, distorting the public debate. The ability to cause large-scale disinformation and undermine

scientifically established facts is an existential risk to humanity. While vigorously defending the right to freedom of expression everywhere, we must equally encourage societies to develop a common, empirically backed **consensus on the public good of facts, science and knowledge**. We must make lying wrong again. Institutions can be a “reality check” for societies, curbing disinformation and countering hate speech and online harassment, including of women and girls. I urge acceleration of our efforts to produce and disseminate reliable and verified information. The United Nations plays a key role in this regard, which it can continue to strengthen, building on models such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the World Meteorological Organization [Scientific Advisory Panel](#) or the Verified initiative for [COVID-19](#). Other steps include support for public interest and independent media, regulation of social media, strengthening freedom of information or right to information laws and ensuring a prominent voice for science and expertise, for example through representation of science commissions in decision-making. A **global code of conduct that promotes integrity in public information** could be explored together with States, media outlets and regulatory bodies, facilitated by the United Nations. With recent concerns about trust and mistrust linked to technology and the digital space, it is also time to understand, better regulate and manage our **digital commons as a global public good** (chap. IV).

C. Inclusion, protection and participation

27. A vibrant social contract guarantees the conditions for people to live a decent life, leaving no one behind and enabling all to participate in society, as promised in the 2030 Agenda. This means measures to address discrimination and to ensure that human rights are protected and people can meet their basic needs. Food, health care, water and sanitation, education and decent work are basic human rights. We must ensure a broad sharing of opportunity and human security

across society as we work towards a greener, more sustainable future. When people are left behind, this can be a profound driver of division, both within and between communities, ethnicities and religions, and of instability nationally, as well as in the international order.

28. **Social protection systems** have demonstrated their value during the COVID-19 pandemic, saving lives and backstopping economies at large. Without the surge in State-provided social protection, economic damage [could have been far worse](#). This is also the case for [previous crises](#). We must not lose this momentum. A new era for social protection systems would be a foundation for [peaceful societies](#) and other measures to leave no one behind and eradicate extreme poverty. I urge States to accelerate steps to achieve **universal social protection coverage**, including for the remaining 4 billion people currently unprotected, in line with target 1.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals. While the types and modalities of coverage may vary, [at a minimum](#) this means access to health care for all and basic income security for children, those unable to work and older persons. The gradual integration of the informal sector into social protection frameworks is also essential if we are to move towards universal coverage. To support this new era for social protection, I will ask the United Nations system to work with Member States to identify resources to invest in their systems where needed, including by **ring-fencing and setting spending targets** as a percentage of GDP, reallocating public expenditure, using proven techniques to combat corruption and illicit financial flows, deploying progressive fiscal policies and increasing budget transparency, participation and accountability. The establishment of a Global Fund for Social Protection, being explored by the International Labour Organization (ILO), could support countries in increasing levels of funding devoted to social protection over time. Efforts by international financial institutions and States to achieve a fairer and more sustainable global economy and to provide liquidity to high-debt vulnerable countries would also increase fiscal

INVESTMENT IN SOCIAL PROTECTION

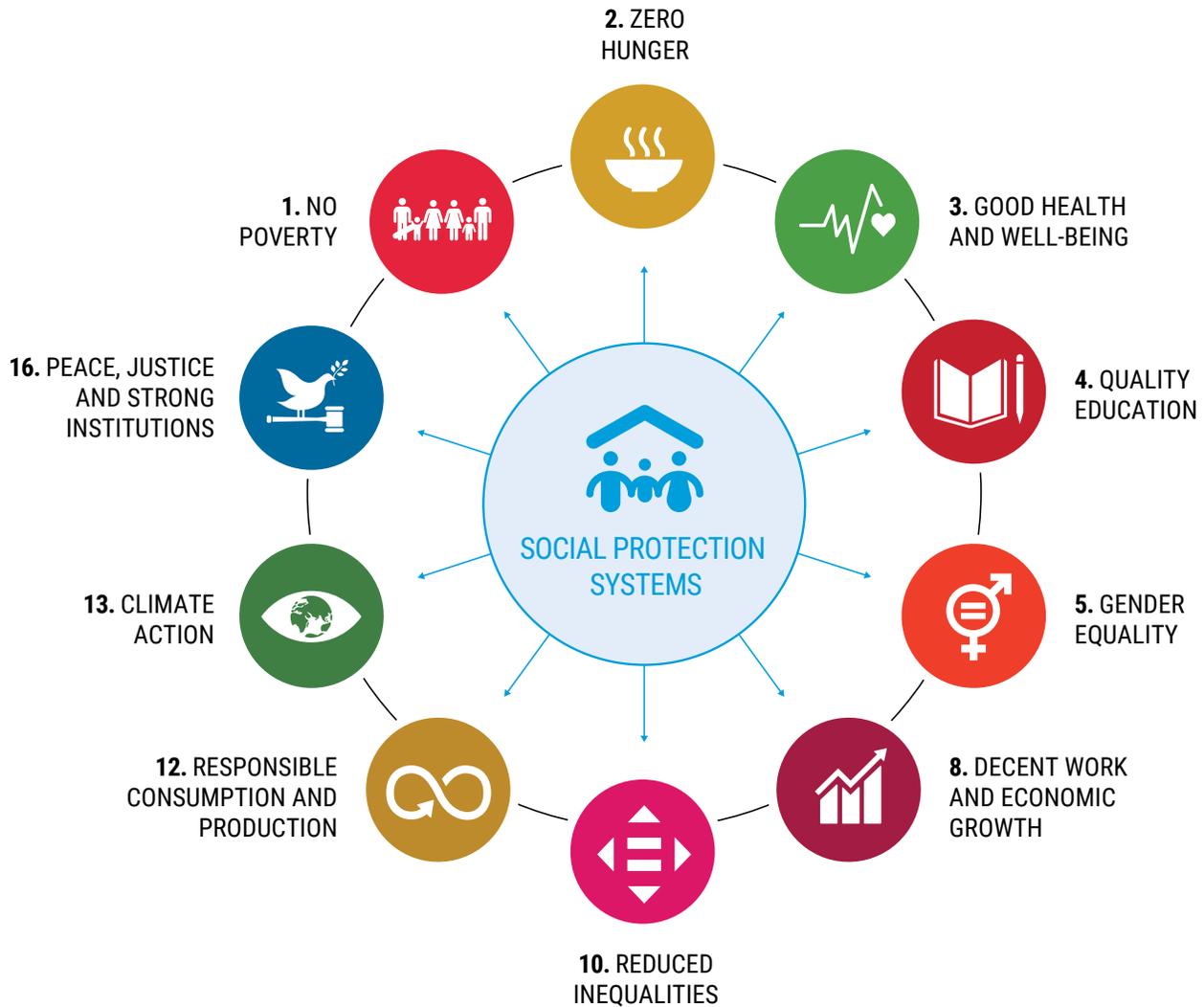
- [The wealth of billionaires increased by over \\$3.9 trillion between March and December 2020](#), while 4 billion people are still without any form of basic social protection.
- [92 per cent of African women are in the informal economy](#). This keeps them outside of social security systems.
- [A total of \\$78 billion would be needed for low-income countries](#) to establish social protection floors, including health care, covering their combined population of 711 million people.

space and ensure that money can be spent on vital social programmes (chap. IV). Similarly, if all donors met the official development assistance target of 0.7 per cent of gross national income, the ability of many countries to finance their human development, including social protection, would be radically transformed.

29. I encourage States to forge a post-pandemic consensus on other measures that speak directly to the social contract. **Education** (chap. III) and skills development must better support people's capacity to navigate technological, demographic, climate and other transitions throughout their lives. I would urge formal recognition of a **universal entitlement to lifelong learning** and reskilling, translated into practice through legislation, policy and effective lifelong learning systems. **Decent work** opportunities for all are also needed for shared prosperity. With the nature and types of work transforming rapidly, this requires a floor of rights and protections for all workers, irrespective of their employment arrangements, as laid out in the [ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work](#). Workers should not shoulder all the risks when it comes to their income, their hours of work and how they cope if they are ill or unemployed. Investment

SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEMS

SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEMS ARE CRITICAL TO ACHIEVING THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



in sectors with the greatest potential for creating more and better jobs, such as the green, care and digital economies, is key and can be brought about through major public investment, along with incentive structures for long-term business investments consistent with human development and well-being. In particular, we need road maps to integrate informal workers into formal economies and to benefit from women's full participation in the workforce. The advancement of the human right to **adequate housing**, in line with target 11.1 of the

Sustainable Development Goals, proved its value in the public health measures taken in response to the pandemic. Impressive actions taken to house people have demonstrated what is possible with sufficient political will.

30. To take stock of these commitments and progress made as the world seeks to recover from COVID-19, consideration should be given to holding a **World Social Summit in 2025**. This would be an opportunity to hold a different form of global deliberation and to live up to the values, including



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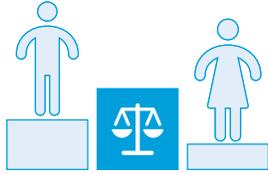
trust and listening, that underpin the social contract. The Summit outcome could be an update of the 1995 Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development, covering issues such as universal social protection floors, including universal health coverage, adequate housing, education for all and decent work, and give momentum towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

31. Perhaps humanity's greatest resource is our own collective capacity, half of which has historically been constrained as a result of gender discrimination. No meaningful social contract is possible without the active and equal participation of **women and girls**. Women's equal leadership, economic inclusion and gender-balanced decision-making are simply better for everyone, men and

women alike. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and [the Global Acceleration Plan for Gender Equality](#) point the way. I urge Member States and other stakeholders to consider five related and transformative measures: (a) the full realization of equal rights, including through repeal of all gender-discriminatory laws (target 5.1 of the Sustainable Development Goals); (b) measures to promote gender parity in all spheres and at all levels of decision-making, including quotas and special measures; (c) facilitating women's economic inclusion, including through large-scale investment in the care economy and equal pay, and more support for women entrepreneurs; (d) greater inclusion of the voices of younger women; and (e) an **emergency response plan** to accelerate

GENDER INEQUALITY

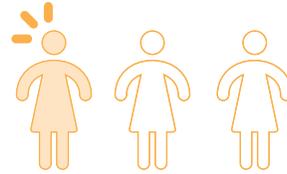
DISCRIMINATION



On average, **women have only 75%** of the rights of men.

Source: World Bank, 2021.

VIOLENCE



1 in 3 women are subject to **sexual or physical violence by an intimate partner or sexual violence from a non-partner** in their lifetime.

Source: WHO, 2021.



In 88 countries, **laws restrict the jobs and hours that women can work**, affecting **1.6 billion** women.

Source: World Bank, 2021.



>1.4 billion women **lack legal protection from domestic sexual or economic violence**.

Source: World Bank, 2018.

ECONOMIC LOSS

Gender inequality causes **major losses in global GDP**.



Sources: World Bank, 2018; OECD, 2016; World Bank, 2019.

the eradication of violence against women and girls, as a priority, which the United Nations will support, backed by a global campaign to eliminate any social norm that tolerates, excuses or overlooks violence against women and girls, in line with target 5.2 of the Sustainable Development Goals. This will also be central to the multi-stakeholder effort to significantly reduce all forms of violence worldwide (chap. IV).

32. I encourage Member States to strengthen efforts towards gender equality in all United Nations intergovernmental processes. The review of the working methods of the **Commission on the Status of Women** in 2021 could include a reassessment of the role of the Commission in relation to other intergovernmental mandates, and consideration of how to build on the multi-stakeholder momentum of the [Generation Equality Forum](#). The United Nations itself [will ensure gender parity](#) at all levels within the Organization by 2028. We will also undertake a review of United Nations system capacity – staffing, resources and architecture – to deliver on gender equality as a core priority across all entities.

33. Underpinning the social contract is an unequivocal commitment to human rights. In my [Call to Action for Human Rights](#), I set out seven domains in need of particular attention, which are reflected across Our Common Agenda. Implementation of the **full spectrum of human rights** is at the heart of our capacity to recover from the pandemic, renew the social contract and more. Civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights are mutually reinforcing, indivisible and universal, not ordinary services with a market-set price tag but essential factors in building more inclusive societies. Promoting and protecting civic space makes societies stronger and more resilient, building on the right to participate and freedom of expression, association and assembly. While upholding human rights is an obligation for all States, beyond that it is also time to treat rights as **problem-solving measures and ways to address grievances**, not just for individuals but for communities at large. We have a growing body of evidence that shows how institutions can be

THE CENTRALITY OF HUMAN RIGHTS

“Human rights are universal and indivisible. We must see human rights with a **vision that speaks to each and every human being** and encompasses all rights: economic; social; cultural; civil and political.”

- Secretary-General's Call to Action for Human Rights

Human rights are vital problem-solving tools that **safeguard lives and livelihoods** and can prevent grievances from arising.



92% of all the **Sustainable Development Goals** are linked to human rights and labour standards.

Human rights serve the **whole of society** – not only the individual – and are central to the **social contract**.

designed to prevent human rights abuses. We also know that rights-respecting institutions strengthen the social contract, protecting societies as well as individuals.

34. **Racism, intolerance and discrimination** continue to exist in all societies, as seen during the pandemic with scapegoating of groups blamed for the virus. As a start, the adoption of comprehensive laws against discrimination, including based on race or ethnicity, age, gender, religion, disability, and sexual orientation or gender identity, is long overdue. New approaches to proactively support the participation in public affairs of those who have traditionally been marginalized, including minority and indigenous groups, are also necessary. Fuller use could be made of human rights mechanisms, including the universal periodic review, in this regard, and I support the update of the modalities of the universal periodic review by the Human Rights Council as part of the new guidelines.

35. In 2023, we will commemorate the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and 30 years since the adoption of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action on human rights. As this milestone nears, the time has come to take stock, rejuvenate our shared values and update our thinking on human rights. Consideration should, for instance, be given to updating or clarifying our application of human rights frameworks and standards to address **frontier issues** and prevent harms in the digital or technology spaces, including in relation to freedom of speech, hate speech and harassment, privacy, the "right to be forgotten" and neuro-technology. The right to a healthy environment also warrants deeper discussion. It may be time to reinforce universal access to the Internet as a human right, with accelerated steps to connect the remaining 3.8 billion people offline to the Internet by 2030, notably those most often left behind, including women, along with indigenous and older people. The United Nations stands ready to work with Governments, businesses and civil society to find alternatives to disruptive blanket Internet shutdowns and generic blocking and filtering of

services to address the spread of disinformation and harmful life-threatening content, in line with international human rights law.

36. Finally, to ensure that everyone is seen and recognized, measures to prove legal identity (target 16.9 of the Sustainable Development Goals) and end **statelessness**, including by [closing legal loopholes](#), and disaggregating data by age, gender and diversity are urged. People on the move require special attention, support and protection. While COVID-19 pandemic restrictions had severe consequences for human mobility and left many refugees and migrants stranded, [displacement continued to grow](#). Measures to protect, assist and find solutions for **the internally displaced**, benefiting from the High-level Panel on Internal Displacement, are essential to leaving no one behind. I urge Governments and other stakeholders to make progress in putting the Global Compact on Refugees and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration into practice, including through respect for the fundamental principle of non-refoulement and measures to provide access to asylum for refugees, by protecting and upholding the rights of all persons on the move, regardless of status, by supporting host countries and through the inclusion of **refugees and migrants** in essential public services.

D. Measuring and valuing what matters to people and the planet

37. Even with our planet undergoing rapid and dangerous change, economic models continue to assume endless expansion and growth and overlook the broader systems that sustain life and well-being. We need a pathway that protects people and the planet, allowing for sustainable development. This means broad shifts in what prosperity and progress mean, how to incentivize and measure them, and how to evaluate policies.

38. We must urgently find measures of progress that complement **GDP**, as we were tasked to do by

2030 in target 17.19 of the Sustainable Development Goals. We know that GDP fails to account for human well-being, planetary sustainability and non-market services and care, or to consider the distributional dimensions of economic activity. Absurdly, GDP rises when there is overfishing, cutting of forests or burning of fossil fuels. We are destroying nature, but we count it as an increase in wealth. Such discussions have been ongoing for decades. It is time to collectively commit to complementary measurements. Without that fundamental shift, the targets that we have fixed in relation to biodiversity, pollution and climate change will not be achievable. I will consult the Presidents of the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council to determine how to advance this issue. Any process would need to bring together Member States, international financial institutions and statistical, science and policy experts to identify a complement or complements to GDP that will measure inclusive and sustainable growth and prosperity, building on the work of the Statistical Commission. In addition to identifying complementary measures, the process would also need to agree on pathways for national and global accounting systems to include additional measurements, and to establish systems for regular reporting as part of official statistics. In the interim, I urge Member States

and others to already begin implementation of the recent System of Environmental-Economic Accounting (SEEA) [Ecosystem Accounting](#) and the system for population and social conditions, and to consider existing complements or alternatives to GDP, such as the [human development index](#), the inclusive wealth index, the Genuine Progress Indicator, [the multidimensional poverty index](#) and the [inequality-adjusted human development index](#).

39. In rethinking GDP, we must also find ways to validate the care and informal economy. Specifically, most of the care work around the world is unpaid and done by women and girls, perpetuating economic inequality between genders. COVID-19 also had deeply gendered economic and job impacts that highlighted and exacerbated the trillions of dollars that are lost owing to billions of hours of unpaid care work performed every year. Rethinking the care economy means valuing unpaid care work in economic models but also investing in quality paid care as part of essential public services and social protection arrangements, including by improved pay and working conditions (target 5.4 of the Sustainable Development Goals). More broadly, we also need to find new ways to account for and value the vast informal economy.