

The COVID-19 Wake Up Call:

We The People Resist Being Left Behind

**Declaration of the
Global People's Assembly
21-23 September 2021**

"We are at a pivotal moment. The choices we make now could put us on a path towards breakdown and a future of perpetual crisis; or breakthrough to a greener and safer world."

~ United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres

*"Let us continue to do what is possible, and soon,
when we look back, we will realise that we have done the impossible!"*

~ Dalit Ancestral Proverb

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PREAMBLE

We the People who resist being left behind – in order to promote a more equanimous union of Peoples and Nations, one of solidarity and respect for every person's human rights, to protect the planet from environmental degradation and anthropogenic climate change, to eliminate poverty and inequalities, and emerge from this pandemic into a just, equitable, resilient and sustainable world – do ordain and establish this Declaration of the Global People's Assembly.

We call on those who have left us behind to listen and act for their sake, as well as ours, because we are one global community.

COVID-19 “has been like an X-ray showing up the horrific, systemic, institutionalised fault-lines of our egregiously unjust world,” writes the novelist and activist Arundhati Roy. “COVID-19 is a wake-up call – and we are oversleeping,” adds the Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres.

COVID-19 has revealed the fundamental inequities of a warped global order. But it is hardly the first crisis to affect the billions of people whose rights to health, security, food and a life of dignity are routinely denied on a daily basis.

Since the pandemic began in December 2019, more than 200 million people have contracted COVID-19. Four and a half million individuals – sisters, brothers, parents, neighbours and friends – have died from the disease. These are the official numbers. The actual tally is likely much higher, since many communities simply do not have the resources or the will to provide a full accounting.

COVID-19 is an Inequality Virus. The disparities are all around us. Pharmaceutical CEOs are among nine new COVID-19 billionaires, whose wealth has skyrocketed from a system that rewards monopolistic profiteering. Simultaneously, nearly 100 million people have been pushed into extreme poverty.

Women and girls, in all their diversity, are at the frontlines of the response, all the while keeping homes, communities, and economies afloat through paid and unpaid labour. Individuals from marginalised communities are pushed into dangerous, frontline jobs – clearing carcasses from the roads, cleaning dead bodies prior to cremation – without being provided personal protective equipment like masks or gloves. For those who fall ill, there is no or little social safety net to support them. Refugees and migrants – fleeing violence, injustice and poverty – live in overcrowded sites, without protection, due process, proper hygienic products or facilities, and are accused of spreading the virus, all the while often being denied vaccination.

Yet, **We the People** resist being left behind. Even as we are systematically marginalised, exploited and persecuted, we are not victims. We understand the problems and their causes. We are innovative and we have solutions for the systemic and structural disadvantages experienced primarily by women and girls, indigenous peoples, as well as individuals marginalized for their age, sexual preferences, belief systems, work or descent.

People have power in a myriad ways: we are rights bearers; we have voices and votes; we can harness our wealth as holders of bank accounts and assets; our consumption of energy, food and information; our creative participation as artists, custodians of ancient wisdom and shapers of values and beliefs; and our autonomy as citizens, volunteers, advocates of transparency and shapers of our own destiny.

Those who would leave us behind - the architects and beneficiaries of systems that encourage greed, discrimination, ethnical, racial and gender injustice, ageism and violence - claim that the price tag to honour their commitments, to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, tackle the climate crisis and to end this pandemic that is now nearly two years old - is simply too high, as if the resources do not exist. But the pandemic highlights once again that when crises hit the rich and powerful, vast amounts of resources can always be found and mobilised.

We are over 950 delegates, representing thousands of people's movements and organisations, and millions of people across the world.

We the People, who will not be left behind, envision a fair, rights-based, equitable and ecologically-just new world, and will not rest until it is reality.

I. Public Health: A People's Vaccine

Nowhere is the moral failure of the world's leaders to contain the pandemic, reverse rising inequalities and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals more evident than in the international community's approach to public health over the past two years.

Universal access to healthcare, without discrimination, is a human right. Yet in an age when access to a COVID-19 vaccine is critical for individual and public health, this fundamental right is being denied to billions of people and harming communities across the globe. Health appears to indeed be for sale, with too many governments supporting the prioritisation of short-term private returns over long-term, global public good.

We are nearly two years into this pandemic. Seventy-five percent of all COVID-19 vaccine doses have gone to just ten countries. This vaccine apartheid is testament to the failure of current policy.

Our Demands

- Free and universal access to the COVID-19 vaccine through the approval of the TRIPS waiver under the auspice of the World Trade Organisation – as well as the tools required to control the pandemic, including diagnostic tests; drugs, oxygen and other therapeutics; plus masks and personal protection equipment – for all, as soon as possible. This can be achieved by C-TAP, the COVID-19 Technology Access Pool, a program setup by the World Health Organisation to enable the licensing and transfer of the technologies needed for vaccines to be manufactured worldwide.

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- Invest immediately in Public Health as a basic human right and reverse the privatisation trend. Large-scale investment is urgently needed to manufacture the vaccine, implement vaccination programmes and distribute medicines, test kits and personal protective equipment.
- While the world focuses on COVID-19, governments and the international institutions must also recall their responsibility to strengthen investments in the prevention, treatment and eradication of all maladies, including malaria, dengue and neglected diseases that primarily afflict people in low- and middle- income countries.
- Ensure that no one is left behind. Provide additional resources and focus on reaching communities that routinely face exclusion and discrimination, including Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent, indigenous populations, LGBTQI+, migrants, people with disabilities and refugees.

It is not enough to simply recover from this COVID-19 disaster. We must prevent similar tragedies from occurring again in future.

Is history repeating itself? The HIV and AIDS pandemic demanded a response that would not have been taken, had it not been for civil society activists and their resilient pressure. Once a treatment was developed, it became a moral and legal imperative to establish universal access. Licenses to produce generic versions of the medications were provided and the pandemic was contained. Today, it is equally clear what needs to be done, and **We the People** who resist being left behind will not rest until it is.

The Gender Dimension: A 'shadow pandemic' of gender-based violence has emerged in COVID-19's wake. Countries across the globe are reporting sharp increases in calls made to helplines, at the same time that public health services are compromised by an overload of COVID-19 cases. Tens of millions of girls from low- and middle- income countries are unable to participate in home-based learning. Child Marriage is on the rise, as the economic toll of the pandemic leads families to marry off children at a young age.

Age and COVID-19: Older people, particularly those without access to vaccinations, are the most susceptible to serious cases of COVID-19. In low-income countries, COVID-19 mortality rates appear to be higher among men, creating a new generation of widows, many without financial support. At the same time, high unemployment resulting from the COVID-19 economic downturn disproportionately impacts youth, who are already under pressure from automation and labour market precarisation.

Marginalisation: The COVID-19 virus may not discriminate, but people do. Communities that have traditionally borne the brunt of xenophobic hatred, ethnical and racial discrimination, caste bigotry and modern-day slavery suffer higher COVID-19 infection and death rates, due to inadequate, inferior access to health care and lower vaccination rates.

II. Social Protection

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the decrepit state of existing social protection systems. Decades of broken promises, policies that prioritise profits over people and planet, and austerity programmes have gutted social protection, emergency safety nets and essential public services.

While emergency programmes provide relief in times of crisis, they are stopgap measures. The international community and national governments must create a comprehensive, social protection system if the Sustainable Development Goals are to be achieved and bring the ideas of “Leave No One Behind” and “A Life of Dignity for All” to life.

Social protection systems are a proven, direct and fast-acting mechanism to end poverty and reduce inequalities. They unleash individual creativity and capacities, provide resilience in the face of ‘natural’ calamities, pandemics and economic crises, and are an investment in the long-term economic and social growth of countries and communities. Social protection is a universal public good and a human right!

Our Demands

Create and ensure a Universal Social Protection Floor for all, which ensures:

- Access to quality, essential health care, including maternity care
- Income security for children, including access to quality education and nutrition
- Cash transfers for people who are unable to earn sufficient income, including the unemployed, people with disabilities and individuals on parental leave.
- Pension payments for older persons

To realise a Universal Social Protection Floor, the international community must:

- **Recommit to achieving SDG 1.3.** Countries must “implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable”. Indicators to measure the achievement of SDG 1.3 include disaggregated data showing the proportion of various sectors of the population, including women, children, older persons and vulnerable, covered by social protection systems.
- **Establish a Global Fund for Social Protection** to provide the technical, advisory and financial resources that low-income countries need to establish and maintain Social Protection Floors. The fund will also support capacity building within and between nations so that countries can learn from each other and put in place sustainable systems that are resilient against external shocks. More details in this [Civil Society Call for a Global Fund for Social Protection](#).

While international funding and technical support is important, it does not replace the responsibility of national and local governments to establish and finance rights-based, national social protection floors.

Governments must:

- Recognise that social protection is a right and public good that must not be politicised.
- Put cash into the hands of people who need it the most, including excluded and marginalised communities, migrants and refugees, older persons, parents on parental leave, people with disabilities, those living in rural areas, indigenous populations, those unable to work and individuals who face gender, ethnical, racial or other forms of discrimination.
- Allocate the resources needed to strengthen existing entitlement programmes and establish a sustainable social protection floor with sustainable financing.
- Remove bureaucratic hurdles to access social protection and prioritise accountability from the bottom up.
- Ensure Decent Work and living wages for workers to reduce inequalities; recognise and deliver social protection to informal workers; establish a benchmark for unpaid care labour.
- Ensure access to education by providing internet connectivity for low-income families and marginalised communities and scholarships for individuals who face discrimination based on work and descent.

The Gender Dimension: The pandemic has made it clearer than ever that developing and resourcing gender-responsive social protection systems is central to combating poverty among women and girls. Social protection systems must cover informal sector workers, including those in unpaid care work. Social protection health schemes must include and cover services specific to the needs of women and girls, in all their diversity, including sexual and reproductive health (SRH), maternal and infant health services, sexual and gender-based violence services and safe abortion care.

Age: Social protection is essential to reduce vulnerabilities in old age. In many countries, older women are more likely to be impoverished than men, a result of lower wages, unpaid care work and longer life expectancy . . . Youth must be provided opportunities to be partners, as well as beneficiaries, in the development of policies and processes that affect their lives.

Marginalisation: Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent face intergenerational discrimination, exclusion from public resources and entitlements, and are routinely segregated despite constitutional and legal protective measures. Individuals from these communities are disproportionately affected by hunger, food insecurity and poverty. Cultural practices, child slavery and trafficking deny millions their right to quality education. Marginalised communities, including persons with disabilities, must be represented in local governments to ensure that their voices are heard and right to social protection realised.

III. Pathways to Peace from Conflict

COVID-19 has exposed a sad and profound type of violence borne of injustice. Even prior to the start of the pandemic, though, violent conflict has spiked dramatically over the past decade. Nearly 80 million people fled war, persecution and violence in 2020.¹

No society can develop in an environment of fear and insecurity. Development is impossible without peace, just as peace is not possible without development. Violence and conflicts are often driven by greed and lust for natural resources, lack of decent work and livelihoods, inequalities, failed structures and corporate interests.

Peace is both a goal and the means to achieve it. Peace is reliant upon justice, equity, and solidarity and requires sacrifice, selflessness and true courage at both the individual and the institutional level. Peaceful societies cannot be built on pillars of injustice, yet, despite our demonstrable interdependence, policies and actions that privilege some over others and deepen the status quo continue to be the order of the day.

Despite the promise of the United Nations Charter and Sustainable Development Goal #16, it is clear that the current peace architecture is unable to meet the security challenges of today. Whether it is the overt violence that makes headlines from Afghanistan to Venezuela or the insidious domestic violence prevalent the world over, every community and nation has work to do.

Our Demands

We call on the nations of the world to

- Reduce military expenditure by at least 3 percent annually (25% by 2030) and channel the savings towards peacebuilding and development.
- Support consequential reform to the international peace architecture as articulated in “Our Common Agenda” and ensure women have equal decision-making in peace and post-conflict processes. Strengthen and universally ratify the International Criminal Court. Prosecute the perpetrators of war crimes, including those who use rape and other forms of sexual violence as a weapon of war, and exclude such acts from conflict-resolution amnesty provisions.
- Include meaningfully, diverse perspectives in consultations and seek consensus among diverse opinions. If you want to go fast, go alone - but if you want to go far, go together.
- Promote a culture of peace and non-violence through education and teach conflict resolution in schools.
- Fulfil commitments. To establish true peace and human security, governments must ensure the realisation of all human rights, enshrined in the International Bill of Rights, which includes the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International

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Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

We condemn violence worldwide. While there are too many conflicts to list, we note the following injustices:

- **Afghanistan.** Nearly two decades after the United States intervened in Afghanistan to remove the Taliban from power, the world has collectively failed the Afghan people. World leaders and the UN institutions should establish immediate access and safe havens for the millions of civilians fleeing unjust rule, especially those coming from Afghanistan where the Taliban's brutal policies are being reestablished. They should also ensure appropriate support and protections, especially for women and girls, for those remaining in the country.
- Military coups in **Guinea, Mali** and **Myanmar** have undermined democracy, human rights and peace processes. **China** has reportedly detained over 1 million Uighurs and other Muslim minorities in internment camps.² **Syrians** in Aleppo live in daily fear of car bombings, while a decade-long civil war has displaced more than 13 million people.
- For the past 14 years, Israel and Egypt have engaged in an illegal, deadly blockade of Gaza. Restrictions of movement have prevented families from obtaining critical medical care. Israel demolishes homes in the occupied territories of **Palestine**. It has opened fire on fisherman and farmers in Gaza, tortured detainees and engaged in unlawful killings.³ Palestinian armed groups have also committed unlawful attacks, launching more than 4300 unguided rockets and mortars toward Israeli population centers, violating the prohibition against deliberate or indiscriminate attacks against civilians.⁴

Despite these horrendous examples, peace is not only possible, but inevitable. Political courage and political will is needed. Whether it is a decision by choice, in advance of the fruition of existential threats, or if we find it only after further calamities drive humanity to the precipice of survival, remains to be seen.

We the People who resist being left behind commit to working to advance the peaceful will of the people the world over and demand that governments join us in this endeavor.

The Gender Dimension: COVID-19 responses in many countries have been characterised by aggressive policing and punishments that disproportionately impact criminalized and marginalized populations, including LGBTQI+ and sex workers. These policies may discourage women from accessing health services, traveling to work, or leaving violent situations . . . Militarized approaches to peace and security, which are unfortunately the norm, consistently exclude and undermine women's participation, protection and human rights. Ensuring women's full and active participation at the peacemaking table leads to more sustainable solutions.

Age and Violence: Acts of violence, neglect and abuse committed against older persons, occurring in homes, institutions and online, must be stopped and prevented . . . Governments must also protect youth from armed conflict and all forms of violence,

including human trafficking, forced labour and sexual and gender-based crimes. Older persons and youth have an important role to play in conflict resolution. All stakeholders should provide them with equal and full participation in peace and decision-making processes.

Marginalisation: Attempts to challenge discriminatory practices are often met with severe and extreme forms of violence. Women from marginalised communities are too often the targets of vengeance killings directed at their families and communities . . . Higher judicial courts must hold lower courts accountable in cases of atrocities, discrimination and violence against marginalised communities.

IV. Climate & Environmental Justice

While global attention is focused on the COVID-19 pandemic, the climate and biodiversity crises continue unabated. We are coming to a point of no return.⁵ Unless we act now, humanity will be the cause of a 2.7 degree warming by the end of the century. One million species are at risk of extinction.⁶ Food security could collapse.

During the pandemic, when populations were already suffering from its effects, 140 million people have been through the devastating impacts of floods, droughts, storms, and wildfires. A further 660 million older people and children, under the age of five, live in areas hit by heatwaves and suffered illness and death disproportionately, as a result.

Biodiversity loss and climate crisis exacerbate existing inequalities. Those least responsible for contributing to the loss of biodiversity and climate change are hit the hardest, in particular indigenous peoples, small scale farmers, fisherfolk, older people, women and children. Indigenous knowledge, skills, rotational agriculture and crop cultures are lost. All the while, companies and people profiting from the status quo derail climate action through misleading disinformation campaigns that deny and ignore science in support of business as usual.

Climate Justice is anchored in human rights, including the right of all present and future generations to a safe, clean, healthy, and sustainable environment.

Our Demands

- Put people and planet before profits and respect the rights of animals and Mother Earth. Recognize the interdependent relationship between people and nature, and the rights of indigenous peoples to territories and resources as they are the custodians of biodiversity and healthy ecosystems. Strengthen actions to stop the illegal wildlife trade, which is not only immoral but may also be an origin of the COVID-19 pandemic. Environmental action must be consistent with UN declarations on the rights of indigenous peoples, peasants and other people working in rural areas (UNDRIP and UNDROP).

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- Meet and exceed the Paris Agreement commitments. Work to ensure that global temperatures do not rise more than 1.5° C by immediately enacting policies to curb a carbon intensive global economy.
- Leave fossil fuels in the ground. Eliminate and reallocate subsidies going to fossil fuels and deforestation, such as industrial agriculture commodities. Stop building new coal plants and retire the existing fleet.
- Finance the energy transition, climate adaptation and prevention and recovery from loss and damage, with a focus on low and middle-income countries as well as marginalised communities everywhere. Rich developed countries must honour their commitment made at COP15 in 2019 to provide at least US\$100 billion annually for climate financing, while also acknowledging their historical responsibility as the primary source of greenhouse gas emissions. These resources must be provided as non-concessional finance, not debt-inducing loans.
- Focus on green recovery and low-carbon investment. COVID-19 recovery packages present a major opportunity for the world to 'build back better' by addressing the climate crisis and biodiversity loss, whilst ensuring a 'just transition' towards decent jobs in sustainable and local economies.
- Adopt an inclusive, gender-responsive and equitable Post-2020 Global Biodiversity framework at the upcoming biodiversity COP15 and enact policies to respect, protect and pursue the rights of environmental defenders, taking action against threats to their lives and wellbeing by providing access to justice and effective remedy when their rights are violated.
- Establish inclusive democratic governance of our environment, climate and biodiversity by ensuring decision-making power for rights bearers, including refugees, migrants, indigenous peoples and local communities in all levels of policy design, decision-making, implementation and management. Enact immediately all necessary measures to mitigate climate-related migration under the human rights framework.
- Ensure accountability and effective remedies to human and environmental rights harms caused by hazardous substances, biodiversity and habitat loss and formally adopt the right to a healthy environment, which has been recognized by more than 150 UN member states.⁷

A catastrophic future due to the climate emergency does not have to be our destiny, although that is our current path. Addressing the climate and pandemic together will lead to a more economically resilient and equitable recovery and create the conditions to avert intensified disasters.

The Gender Dimension: Women are among the most adversely affected by climate change and environmental degradation, as a result of structural, historical and socioeconomic factors. But they are also at the forefront of change, offering solutions and demanding accountability. Governments must increase gender-responsive financing for

gender-just climate solutions and resource the transformative solutions driven by women and girls globally.

Age and Climate: Older persons, particularly those with disabilities, are among those most affected by climate-related harms such as the increasing spread of vector-borne diseases, heat stress, and the sudden- and slow-onset disasters which can impact physical and mental health and wellbeing. At the same time, older persons possess vast reserves of knowledge, experience and resilience, making their participation, inclusion, and leadership key to human rights-based global efforts to adapt to and mitigate the adverse effects of climate change.

Marginalisation: Calamities discriminate; so too does disaster relief. People who face discrimination based on work and descent are pushed to live in locations that are the most likely to flood or be affected by landslides and other climate change induced disasters. When governments provide compensation, they may replace the boats of fisherfolk, but provide nothing for the labourers who do the fishing; similarly, insurance companies and governments may reimburse large farmers for lost cattle, but impoverished families who cannot afford cows receive nothing for their lost goats and pigs.

V. Financing for Development: Towards a New Global Economic Architecture

While wealthy countries pursue recovery through large stimulus packages and vaccine hoarding, the rest of the world is faced with unbearable restrictions on their policy and fiscal space, suffocated by illicit financial flows, unfair trade and investment regimes, unsustainable debt burdens and policy conditionalities that have narrowed their capacity to focus on people-centred, rights-based socio-economic transformation strategies.

The COVID-19 and climate crises reinforce the urgency of redirecting resources to strengthen social protection systems and reverse the decades-long pursuit of fiscal austerity, privatisation and public-private partnerships.

Demand for International Action Now: Convene FfD4

There is an urgent need to bring democratic accountability to global finance. These systemic issues cannot be addressed at national or regional levels alone and require an ambitious multilateral response under the auspices and leadership of the United Nations. We call for a UN Economic Reconstruction and Systemic Reform Summit to discuss and implement transformative pathways to a new global economy.

A. Debt Justice

The indebtedness of countries of the South is both a consequence and a tool for domination – subverting the ability of countries and peoples to shape their own economic programs and undermining sovereign institutions and democratic processes.

Lower tax revenues and currency depreciations, coupled with higher expenditures to fight COVID-19 and address natural disasters and socioeconomic emergencies, have led to a sharp increase in impoverished country debt. A portion of this debt is with multilateral institutions, such as the IMF, the World Bank and Multilateral Development Banks, and countries like China or the Paris Club's twenty-two members, while a significant part is owed to private sector lenders through the issuance of bonds.

- Public debt levels in global south countries soared from 40% to 62% of GDP between 2011 and 2020.
- Nearly a quarter of this increase, equivalent to US\$ 1.9 trillion, was accrued in the last year as a result of the pandemic.
- Public debt increased in 108 developing countries in 2020.
- Governments in at least 32 countries allocated more than 20% of revenues to debt service in 2020.
- In 62 countries, governments allocate more resources to meet creditor claims than health care in 2020.
- Alert on new wave of austerity - 60 developing countries will reduce their expenditures below pre-crisis levels to meet creditor claims over the next five years.

Our Demands

- Unconditional cancellation of public external debt payments by all lenders – bilateral, multilateral and private lenders – for all countries in need for at least the next four years, as an immediate step and a clear program towards the unconditional cancellation of outstanding debt. Borrowing governments also have it within their power to stop making debt payments, but they should not suffer any form of penalties for doing so.
- National debt audits – by governments and civil society – to critically examine existing debt, propose changes to prevent the re-accumulation of unsustainable and illegitimate debt and assess reparations for the damage caused by such debts.
- A fair, transparent, binding and multilateral framework for debt crisis prevention and resolution, under the auspices of the UN, to address unsustainable and illegitimate debt.

Read and endorse this [Open Letter](#) calling for Global Action for Debt Cancellation.

B. Tax Justice

While most people struggle with the burdens of the pandemic and climate crises - including job loss and lower wages – the earnings and assets of financial traders, many corporations and billionaires have literally skyrocketed over the past year. Unless the failures of the international tax system are urgently addressed, countries will continue to lose billions of public revenue dollars from tax abuse by multinational corporations and other illicit financial flows.

Our Demands

- Establish a universal, intergovernmental tax body at the United Nations and negotiate a UN tax convention to comprehensively address tax havens, tax abuse by multinational corporations and other illicit financial flows to ensure a fair global tax system.
- Implement progressive rights-based tax systems on income, wealth and trade. Levy extra-profit taxes on corporations and wealthy individuals profiting massively from the crisis. Scrap tax incentives that benefit elites. Implement multi-jurisdictional Financial Transaction Taxes on currency trading, stocks, bonds and derivatives.

C. Aid

Nearly 51 years ago, OECD nations made a commitment to spend 0.7 percent of their Gross National Income as Official Development Assistance (ODA). While donor countries have reaffirmed this pledge several times over the years, including in 2015 when they signed on to the Sustainable Development Goals, they do not come anywhere close to realising their commitments. In 2020, ODA (including loans) rose to 0.32 percent of Gross National Income, not even half of what has been promised. Their broken promises have cost impoverished nations US\$5.7 trillion in lost aid over the past half-century.⁸

Our Demands

- Keep your Promises! Meet and exceed the 0.7% aid target. Provide quality aid, without strings attached. ODA must reach the most marginalised communities and benefit women, youth, older persons and differently-abled.
- Local needs and participation are paramount to ensure inclusive development: Nothing about us, without us! Be transparent and accountable. Uphold the integrity of ODA and Aid Effectiveness.

D. Trade Justice and Systemic Risks

Low- and middle-income countries must have the right to determine their own trade and investment policies, putting peoples' interests first. However, most trade rules are neither fair nor free. International trade rules and national trade policies should support

sustainable livelihoods, promote the rights of women, children and indigenous people, and lead to poverty eradication and reduced inequalities.

Demands

- **A moratorium on Investor-State-Dispute-Settlement (ISDS) cases.** The severity of development challenges generated by bilateral investment treaties and free trade agreements is acutely highlighted by ISDS mechanisms, which allow transnational companies to sue governments in closed-door international arbitration cases for extraordinary financial sums. In a growing number of cases, companies are using ISDS to halt health and environmental regulations, because they affect profits. In a world made unstable by climate change and pandemic, this is completely unacceptable.⁹
- Do not enforce IP rights violations if these conflict with public health and economic recovery objectives during the pandemic. Regulate and hold corporations accountable for human rights violations with a UN Binding Treaty on Business and Human Rights
- All too often Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) privatise profits, while socialising risk. The World Bank's 'Private Finance First' policy shifts risk and costs to taxpayers; it must be rejected. Instead, the centrality of public policies and investments should be upheld. There should also be a moratorium on new PPPs until an independent review into their development outcomes is completed.
- As the world grapples with how to regulate digital technologies, there is an urgent need for broad, transparent, inclusive and participatory deliberations on how these technologies impact the environment, workers, livelihoods and society. Technology governance is not simply about regulation, but rather ensuring that the common good is the ultimate goal and takes precedence over profits.
- Global agreements, under the auspices of the United Nations, are needed to regulate and supervise financial institutions, credit rating agencies and hedge funds as well as to prevent capital flight and limit speculative trading.
- The August 2021 allocation of 650 billion IMF **Special Drawing Rights (SDRs)** presents a new source of funds that can be used for vaccinations, social protection and climate action.
 - Rich countries do not need the additional reserves and often do not use them. They should re-channel their SDRs to low- and middle-income countries in a manner that is transparent, accountable, without conditionalities and with debt-free financing. More SDRs are needed and the cost of issuing them is low. The IMF should issue a second tranche of 3 trillion SDRs.
 - Low and middle-income countries must invest SDRs in their people, particularly in marginalised communities, by financing vaccination

programmes, public health initiatives and social protection. They must avoid a new Debt Trap and refrain from using SDRs to borrow more.

E. The Risk of Rising Austerity

Austerity is a deadly policy. Never has this been more clear than today, when we find countries and communities ill-equipped to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, in part because health budgets and other social programmes have been gutted during previous calls for fiscal restraint.

Yet budget cuts are expected in 154 countries in 2021 and several more nations in 2022, as they come under pressure from the International Monetary Fund to balance budgets and pay debts. If these programmes are implemented, eighty-five percent of the world's population will be living under austerity conditions, with budget cuts expected to be twice as large, in percentage terms, as during the austerity waves that followed the 2008-2009 financial crisis.¹⁰

This stands in stark contrast to the United States, Europe and Japan, where governments are spending more than ever to cushion the blow of the pandemic and ensure that their economies fully recover. Austerity programmes undercut economic recovery, undermine the Sustainable Development Goals and are likely to violate people's rights as access to quality health care and education is cut. To achieve SDG 10 and demonstrate a commitment to tackling inequalities, governments must develop and finance national inequality reduction plans to end extreme economic, gender and intersectional inequalities.

Our Demand: Multilateral institutions must stop imposing austerity programmes and national governments should not implement them.

The Gender Dimension: Women make up a large share of workers in the industries hit hardest by the COVID-19 crisis, hold less wealth than men, have lower pensions and often have more difficulty finding re-employment after layoffs. They are, as a result, particularly vulnerable to austerity measures. Austerity threatens gender-related poverty reduction gains and presents a direct violation of the principle of non-retrogression. Yet, few governments seek to understand the gendered impacts of austerity or reverse such policies . . . Governments and multilateral institutions should instead pursue processes that do not place the burden directly on the shoulders of women and girls and that remake our economic systems to facilitate just transitions to sustainable economies with decent work for all.

Marginalisation, Older People and FfD: Women, children, people with disabilities, sexual minorities, older people and individuals from CDWD face exclusion in access to civic amenities including education, health care and other entitlements. Within countries, there are inherent biases in public finance management and access to development that infringe on their rights. Governments must revamp spending structures and implement targeted, gender-responsive budgeting to address the needs of marginalised communities. When these funds are invested in public health and social protection programmes, individuals from excluded communities must be involved in the programmes and processes, from start to finish, to ensure their success.

VI. Curtailing Human Rights and Closing Civic Space to fight the Pandemic

Governments are using the COVID-19 pandemic as an excuse to restrict democratic activities, limit press freedom, crack down on human rights defenders and challenge civic freedoms.

Across the globe, political leaders have taken extraordinary measures and enacted emergency legislation, with the stated aim of protecting people's health and lives. Unfortunately, these measures often come at the expense of respect for human rights and civic space. While international law allows for some limitations in response to health emergencies, any restrictions must be proportionate, necessary and non-discriminatory.

In some repressive states and fragile democracies, these restrictions could become permanent, with those in power taking advantage of the pandemic to establish or preserve their authoritarian regimes.

Even prior to the pandemic, civic space in many communities has been shrinking as opposition voices and independent media are jailed, exiled, intimidated or worse. In some cases, sharing the 'wrong' social media post is sufficient cause to end up in court, or worse.

These attacks on democratic rights and spaces have not only eroded the space in which civil society organisations operate, but also undermined their position as development partners, watchdogs and independent actors. In many cases, policies have outrightly repressed the voices of CSOs. Military solutions, with state terror unleashed with impunity, particularly on marginalised and impoverished communities, are totally unacceptable as a response. Anything that violates human rights, jeopardises democracy and perpetuates inequalities cannot be the answer.

Cyber attacks are also an increasingly pressing problem for civil society, particularly when governments exert unilateral control over the digital space.

Our Demands:

- Recognise that human rights are universal and indivisible; they underpin any development agenda and are central to the world's most pressing issues, including peace and security, ending gender inequalities and creating a healthy environment for future generations.¹¹
- Do not use COVID-19 as cover to attack human rights and constitutional liberties, or to constrict civic space.
- Do not criminalise speech under the guise of preventing the dissemination of 'fake news' or block internet and social media usage to prevent the dissemination of critical information

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- Strengthen mechanisms for civil society participation in multilateral bodies and institutions of global governance.
- Ensure transparent, accountable and inclusive governance of the digital sphere and recommit to human rights conventions in the digital era to ensure progressive, rights-first digital usage.

The lack of adequate regulation and more democratic governance of digitisation around the globe has the potential to significantly undermine civic space, human welfare, freedom, dignity and justice. This must not happen. As governments and societies embrace transformative digital technologies, and key policy and decision-making processes move online, digitisation must expand the civic space necessary for CSOs to operate effectively.

The guarantee of a well-regulated and democratic digital space is essential to promote the functioning of a healthy civil society. To this end, digital inclusion supported by enabling legislative frameworks is paramount.

In the 2019 Belgrade Call to Action, civil society leaders demanded that governments protect Human Rights and Civic Space. These demands – *to protect and enable space for civil society, embed inclusion and meaningful accountability to people in development practices, implement and respect democratic country ownership of national development plans and implement transparency and accountability for inclusive SDG delivery, challenge major human rights violations, and to recognise the importance of the inter-connected themes in achieving the 2030 Agenda – civil society voice, eradicating poverty, women's empowerment, fighting inequalities, decent work, climate action and environmental justice* – ring truer now than ever and are urgently required in the face of a global pandemic.

The Gender Dimension: Women and LGBTQI+ individuals are excluded from decision-making that affects their everyday lives. There has also been a rapid increase in violence against women who are environmental and human rights activists, LGBTQI+ defenders and peacebuilders. This is unacceptable. Governments and institutions must enable safe spaces for women and girls in all their diversity to be heard and to shape policy.

Age and Participation: Civic space is essential to ensuring a better future for coming generations. The UN Secretary-General's Our Common Agenda recommendations to create a Youth Envoy, hold a Summit of the Future and draft a Declaration on Future Generations and "Strategic Foresight and Global Risk Report" must be realised . . . At the same time, ageism and discrimination render older persons invisible. The shocking neglect of older people in care settings and at home during the COVID-19 crisis is a stark reminder of the consequences of inaction and the absence of public policy to protect the rights of older people. Countries must take a full life course perspective when developing and implementing policies. This must include the meaningful participation of older persons and youth representatives in planning, decision-making and politics.

Marginalisation: Marginalised communities demand to be heard, despite generations of repression. The Global Forum of Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent, established in 2019, is one such venue for expression . . . Representation of marginalised communities in local government is essential as well. Anti-discrimination laws and prevention of atrocity laws must be enacted and implemented to ensure the safety and

protection of individuals who are vulnerable to exploitation, violence and discrimination, while also holding governments to account.

VII. UN Reform

The continued spread of COVID-19 despite the availability of a vaccine; the growing inequalities leading to the suffering of billions and the increased wealth of dozens; the tremendous setbacks on SDG achievement all represent key data points indicating that the system of global coordination we have is insufficient to meet the needs of the day. These, and many more issues - from nuclear proliferation to human trafficking - are but the prelude and testing ground for the inevitable disasters and extinctions resulting from humanity's abusive relationship with the environment.

Disheartening though the circumstances are, effective and coordinated global institutions and regulations *could* do much to stave off the worst effects of our hubris. And here, a revitalized, networked, and effective United Nations will be key.

In this regard, we welcome the Secretary-General's recent report "Our Common Agenda" and commend his vision for a more networked, inclusive and effective multilateralism. We agree that humanity faces a stark and urgent choice: breakdown or breakthrough. The question is: what will it take to generate the political will needed to achieve and exceed the 2030 Agenda, Paris Agreement and UN75 Declaration?

While we support many of the proposals outlined by the Secretary-General in his report, gaps remain. We endorse the call for a renewed social contract anchored in human rights, support the focus on the future and intergenerational solidarity and the need for bold actions to establish an institutional architecture to deliver on our global commons and global public goods. We welcome the call for a Summit of the Future in 2023 and World Social Summit in 2025 and commit to ensuring that the diverse voices of civil society and the most marginalized are fully included in their preparatory processes.

Yet all this notwithstanding, the elephant in the room remains: self-interested state-sovereignty represents the greatest barrier to meaningful action. The systems in place, which reflect (and did not meet) the needs of humanity 75 years ago, must be profoundly re-thought. The state-centric model of governance – in which the actors who make decisions about the future of the entirety of humanity do so with the interests of their own borders taking precedence – leads inevitably to the crises we see today.

Our Demands

If global solidarity is to be meaningful, We the People who resist being left behind call on Member States to:

- Advance the many elements of the Secretary-General's report mentioned above which will serve to benefit present and future generations.

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- Move beyond the scope of that report to institute meaningful reforms to make global institutions representative and inclusive, including limiting the use of the veto in UN Security Council meetings and penalising member states who do not pay their full dues.
- Support the creation of a UN Parliamentary Assembly, a UN World Citizens' Initiative and the office of a high-level UN Civil Society Envoy. These specific, doable institutional improvements will increase the United Nations' openness and inclusivity.

ENDNOTES

¹ [United Nations](#)

² Human Rights Watch, "[Break Their Lineage, Break Their Roots](#)", 19 April 2021

³ [Amnesty International, Israel and Occupied Territories 2020](#)

⁴ [Human Rights Watch](#) (27 July 2021)

⁵ IPCC, "[Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis](#)"

⁶ UN, "[Secretary-General calls for bold action to end biodiversity crisis](#)"

⁷ [Joint Statement of United Nations entities on the right to healthy environment](#), 08 March 2021

⁸ Oxfam, "[50 years of Broken Promises: The \\$5.7 trillion debt owed to the poorest people](#)", Oct. 2020.

⁹ [C20 Policy Pack 2021: Building a Sustainable Future for All](#).

¹⁰ Isabel Ortiz and Matthew Cummins, "[Global Austerity Alert: Looming Budget Cuts in 2021-25 and Alternatives](#)", IPS, ipsnews.net/2021/04/global-austerity-alert-looming-budget-cuts-2021-25-alternatives

¹¹ See also the UN Secretary-General's [Call to Action for Human Rights](#).