

The Day After Tomorrow: Confronting Systemic Injustices, Advancing Human Rights

ESCR-Net Global Call to Action
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The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and intensified grave systemic injustices all over the world. People are being required to stay at home without secure housing, wash hands without access to clean water, and fill gaps in failing public healthcare and social systems with disproportionate impacts on women. Governments and corporations are imposing false choices, such as between contagion and starvation, hazardous work and unemployment, corporate bailouts and ruin, personal security and public health. As resisting communities, social movements, human rights organizations and defenders, we demand economic, social and political alternatives that make human rights and social justice a reality for all. A return to the status quo is not an option.

Communities in every part of the world have long resisted impoverishment despite abundance, increasing levels of inequality, undue corporate influence over public decision-making, and accelerating climate crisis and repression amid deepening authoritarianism. Our [Common Charter for Collective Struggle](#) - led by social movement members and endorsed by fellow members across 77 countries - articulated these common global conditions. The Charter ties these conditions to the dominant capitalist system—which prioritizes profits over people and the planet—intertwined structures of oppression, including patriarchy, racism and long histories of colonialism and imperialism. Building on the Charter, member discussions over the past several weeks concerning the pandemic have yielded [analyses](#) based on lived realities of people and communities around the world and demands on a range of issues, which provide the basis for this call to action.

Impoverishment, dispossession and inequality have worsened in the past few decades. Neoliberal policy reforms have weakened labor protections, increased extraction, facilitated capital to flow to wherever human rights and environmental protections are weakest, privatized and commodified basic necessities, undermined food sovereignty, built regressive tax systems and imposed austerity on the majority while providing subsidized prosperity for the elite few. These reforms have been imposed and manipulated for corporate and financial interests, including by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and trade and investment agreements. Despite decades of so-called corporate social responsibility, corporations commit consistent abuses of workers' rights and wider environmental and human rights, refuse to pay their fair share of taxes and continue to capture government institutions and public policy-making. The failure of governments to urgently address the climate crisis is perhaps the most glaring example of corporate capture. This has laid the groundwork for the pandemic to spiral into devastating public health, economic and social crises, as well as environmental deregulation.

The current focus on “saving the economy” instead of ensuring human rights and environment protection is an alarming echo of longstanding trends, including misguided approaches in response

to the 2008 global financial crisis. Despite recognizing the severity crisis, the IMF and World Bank continue to largely operate as usual by offering emergency loans instead of meaningful debt cancellation and long overdue reparations for decades of policies that left people poorer and replaced colonialism with economic imperialism. Undue corporate influence has led to states providing massive corporate subsidies and bailouts with little oversight, rollbacks of environmental protections, and redefinitions of essential business to include mining operations and commercial construction companies, among others. Corporations have secured clearance for controversial projects, often amid repression of participatory rights of local communities and the right of Indigenous Peoples to free, prior and informed consent. When Indigenous Peoples exercise their recognized rights to self-determine their own economic, political and cultural models, they continue to face development aggression and criminalization.

Even as the pandemic has revealed what is truly essential work, those performing it continue to be systematically undervalued. In many countries, particularly in the Global South, most workers—including domestic and agricultural workers—are employed in the informal sector with no access to social security and employment insurance. Many workers are forced to work in increasingly precarious conditions, without adequate protective gear, paid sick leave and health insurance (in the absence of universal health care), or risk losing their jobs permanently. Women, migrant and minority workers in particular have experienced a disproportionate loss of jobs and livelihoods due to being heavily represented in the informal sector and precarious occupations. For some, the inability to work amid the closure of local markets, fishing bans, movement restrictions, and other social isolation measures threaten eviction, starvation, and impoverishment as many governments have failed to ensure public provision of necessities.

Inequalities within and between countries make many public health recommendations inherently discriminatory, as they require a certain standard of living such as access to clean water and sanitation and adequate housing. Furthermore, these recommendations often fail to take into account intersecting forms of discrimination present in society. Many groups with already limited access to adequate healthcare and other public services—including refugees, internally displaced people, LBGTQI communities, persons with disabilities, persons deprived of liberty, and sex workers—face greater obstacles amid the pandemic. In some contexts, evictions and displacement through house demolitions have continued in informal settlements and conflict-affected areas. In addition, digital solutions designed to ensure access to essential services, including education, medical advice and work opportunities disproportionately exclude groups with no internet connectivity and digital literacy.

Further, gaps in social protection systems have translated into intensified care burdens for women, who bear the brunt share of unrecognized and unpaid care work due to persistent gendered norms. This is worsened by increased incidents of domestic violence and challenges in seeking remedy due to restricted access to courts, as well as violence and harassment against women healthcare workers.

In addition, marginalized and impoverished communities are frequently located near polluting and extractive projects, leading to respiratory health issues that make them more vulnerable to COVID-

19. This environmental injustice is heightened by narratives that celebrate temporarily improved air quality and reduction of emissions, upholding human versus environment paradigms that divert blame from our economic and political systems while ignoring the suffering of the impoverished, migrants and Indigenous Peoples.

Many governments are using the crisis to repress dissent and target already marginalized groups, including through emergency powers, anti-terrorist legislation, religious fundamentalism, increased surveillance and militarization. Human rights defenders have been attacked, as security strategies are undermined by strict shelter-in-place mandates. Multiple governments have targeted doctors, journalists, bloggers and HRDs who have reported on the pandemic. HRDs and political prisoners have often been excluded from prison releases that are inadequate regardless, with many trapped in pre-trial detention by the closure of courts. These threats are especially compounded in contexts of conflict and occupation, while being facilitated by arms manufacturers that continue to fuel violence. The rhetoric of ‘war’ in confronting the pandemic further intensifies the climate of fear and praise for authoritarian responses, thereby drastically limiting space for public scrutiny, participation and accountability. As states are marshaling unprecedented resources to address the crisis, there is a glaring lack of transparency and accountability around decision-making, exemplified by grave limitations to access to information in many countries. At the same time, they are using surveillance tools to gather personal data, often in breach of the rights to privacy and security and in close partnership with the growing technology sector.

This is the moment for long-needed systemic transformations, building a global struggle to make human rights and social justice a reality for all. Our Common Charter articulates a vision for systemic change focused on reclaiming human rights as a shared framework for analysis and demands, emerging from popular struggles for well-being, dignity, participation and substantive equality. This vision centers the experience, analysis and leadership of Indigenous Peoples, affected and resisting communities, organized workers and grassroots human rights defenders. Further, in confronting systemic injustices, the aim of reinventing the “normal” requires articulating and advancing inclusive alternative models. These have long existed among Indigenous Peoples, rooted in traditional knowledge, care networks, and recognition of the interconnection of all life. Other models of reciprocity, mutual aid and cooperation exist—often developed out of necessity—in many impoverished urban, peasant and fisherfolk communities and related social movements. Feminist movements have long advocated alternatives based on principles of equality, non-discrimination and respect for the people and the planet. While confronting immediate human rights violations, our demands necessarily address “the day after tomorrow” and insist on a future that prioritizes the rights of people and nature over profits, radically rethinking our economic, social, ecological and political relationships.

Our Demands

We call for COVID-19 responses to center human and environmental rights, in line with principles of universality, participation, transparency, substantive equality, and accountability. All such measures should be designed and implemented with the meaningful participation of affected communities and social movements and apply a feminist analysis in working to overcome overlapping, structural inequalities and inequities. States must utilize maximum available

resources to carry out these measures and fully realize economic, social, cultural, and environmental rights for all people. Alternatives to the dominant status quo are viable and urgently needed.

Just responses require states and international bodies to respond immediately to the public health emergency (as outlined in our first three sets of demands below); adopt interim measures to ensure a just recovery and address the impacts of measures imposed to contain the pandemic; and take and support transformative actions that will lead us to a new normal:

Ensure care

- Guaranteeing the universal, equal right to healthcare, including ensuring COVID-19 testing, treatment, and prevention are available to all;
- Protecting healthcare and other essential workers with equipment, testing, training, relevant health advice, and paid sick leave;
- Implementing full labor protections for all workers, including non-healthcare essential workers;
- Recognizing, supporting, and redistributing unpaid care work and adopting family-work conciliation measures, as well as adopting urgent measures to stop the rise of domestic violence and femicides;
- Halting evictions, land disposessions, utilities cut offs, and related rights violations;
- Ensuring dignified provision of universal basic income, food, water, housing, sanitation, and other necessities, especially for those in situations of heightened vulnerability, such as the unemployed, informal and low-paid workers and informal settlements residents;
- Protecting human and environmental rights defenders and political prisoners, including by releasing those incarcerated for exercising their right to defend rights, and ensure an enabling environment for the defense of human rights;
- Gathering disaggregated data, including by gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, in relation to health, social and economic impacts of the crisis on different groups, making it available to the public and using it to develop responses that address the needs of all;
- Ensuring national and international justice mechanisms (courts, commissions, national human rights institutions, special procedures, and others) are accessible--especially to those most vulnerable--and that they, on their own initiative (*suo moto*) and in processing cases, monitor and redress state and private violations, both with immediate remedies and with systemic guarantees to prevent recurrence and to fully realize human and environmental rights; and
- Redistributing global wealth in line with human rights obligations of international cooperation and assistance, as well as respecting self-determination.

Defend hard-earned rights

- Maintaining, enforcing, and strengthening—rather than suspending or revoking—human, environmental, and workers' rights, including by holding corporations accountable domestically and extraterritorially;
- Respecting Indigenous Peoples' rights to self-determination and free, prior, and informed consent, as well as meaningful participation of broader communities;

- Upholding internationally recognized sexual and reproductive rights, and blocking any attempt at curtailment
- Ensuring transparency over resource allocation and decision-making over measures to address the crisis, including the use surveillance tools, and expanding, rather than restricting, access to information and freedom of expression to strengthen participation and accountability;
- Ensuring personal data gathered be made anonymous and under no circumstances be shared publicly;
- Preventing increased securitization and militarization and ensuring accountability for harsh treatment, arrests and abuse of surveillance related to lockdowns and emergency powers, including against racial minorities and impoverished and other marginalized communities; and
- Ensuring any restriction of rights, including on the right to privacy, is strictly necessary, time-bound, lawful, reasonable, proportional, and compliant with international standards.

Ban profiteering off the pandemic

- Prohibiting corporate capture of government institutions and policymaking, including through lobbying, image-washing donations and revolving door practices;
- Prohibiting price gouging and other profiteering;
- Upholding collective bargaining rights and workers' meaningful participation in shaping employment policies;
- Mandating that any COVID-19 testing, treatment, and vaccine be not subject to patent and ensuring fair and equal access among countries;
- Ceasing all extractive activities and processing of permits that could negatively impact the rights of communities, workers and the environment;
- Honoring the global calls for cease fires, including by enforcing a moratorium on all arms sales;
- Providing no assistance to polluters and other industries that violate environmental and human rights, while ensuring just transitions for workers and communities reliant on these industries;
- Prohibiting any increase in commercialization or privatization in connection with the pandemic, including for technology companies providing digital services; and
- Suspending negotiations of new World Trade Organization agreements.

Provide for a just recovery

- Substantially taxing and ending subsidies for big corporations globally, eliminating illicit financial flows, introducing wealth taxes, and ending tax loopholes, havens, and holidays;
- Canceling debts of low- and moderate-income countries and communities, and ensuring that all lending policies and safeguards of international financial institutions give primacy to human rights obligations and environmental protections;
- Prioritizing human rights of people and environmental protections over the narrow interests of corporations in governmental and international economic recovery packages (including the G20 package), including by promoting care-based/regenerative economies that advance substantive equality and just energy transitions from fossil fuels to zero-carbon; and

- Supporting an international legally binding instrument and national laws to regulate corporate power.

Reinvent the “normal”

- Centering alternative models grounded on solidarity, cooperation, mutual support and participatory economies, which value the social contribution of care and other forms of work and the mutual well-being of people and nature, already envisioned and implemented by Indigenous Peoples; social movements; grassroots women leaders and feminist organizations; impoverished, peasant and other affected communities;
- Justly transitioning economies in line with climate science, post-2020 biodiversity standards, and human rights;
- Nationalizing healthcare systems and supply chains, such as pharmaceuticals, in order to reverse the commodification of and guarantee the universal right to healthcare;
- Ensuring food sovereignty, including by prioritizing public funding to support subsistence and sustainable farming and strengthening land rights, restitution and redistribution to address dispossession and inequality;
- Guaranteeing the right to housing for all, including by providing resources towards building social housing solutions, regulating the private rental sector and eliminating financialization of the real estate market;
- Creating universal systems for the public provision of care, ensuring its recognition and fair distribution to address gender inequality and discrimination, supporting responsive and sustainable community-based care networks;
- Ensuring access to free, quality, public education at every level for all, including accommodations to address lost educational time and opportunities; and
- Adopting comprehensive social protection systems, such as universal basic income, non-contributory schemes and other measures beyond emergency relief.