

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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JOINT OPEN LETTER TO G20 FINANCE MINISTERS

AMNESTY, CIVICUS AND TRANSPARENCY INTERNATIONAL CALL FOR CONCRETE ACTION FOR A BETTER FUTURE THROUGH A JUST RECOVERY

Dear G20 Finance Ministers,

As you meet this week, we are writing to you to encourage you to take concrete actions in order to build a better future through a just recovery by investing in people and ensuring that funds being made available reach those that need them the most.

The human cost of the COVID-19 pandemic has been immense. As of early October, nearly 35 million people are estimated to have been infected and more than one million have lost their lives. The economic cost is only starting to be felt, but it is estimated that between six and eight per cent of the global population could be forced into poverty as a consequence.

As a global community, we are dealing with a crisis unlike any in the last century. A crisis that knows no boundaries and that calls for global leadership. The G20 is uniquely placed to lead the way to a just and inclusive recovery that puts the wellbeing of people and the planet at the centre.

While the G20 has adopted some measures in order to address the various aspects of the COVID-19 crisis, including the endorsement of an Action Plan and a Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI), through which a temporary suspension of debt payments from the poorest countries was agreed, much more needs to be done in order to ensure, in the G20's own words, a transparent, robust, coordinated, large-scale and science-based global response.

Provide transparent and sustainable international assistance

While the DSSI is a first step, it has become clear that many of the poorest countries are spending more on servicing debt payments than they are on life-saving public services. In other words, obligations to repay existing sovereign debt are preventing states from ensuring people's right to health, livelihood, and other human rights are fulfilled.

During the pandemic and in the recovery period, debt repayments should not come at the cost of denying the rights to health, livelihoods and adequate standard of living, in essence the right to live a life in dignity as human beings. Accordingly, **we call on G20 to cancel existing debt until at least the end of 2021 for all countries that need such relief to respond to or recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly the 77 poorest countries.** Future debt repayments must also be subject to robust human rights impact assessments, with the possibility of further cancellation. **This will ensure longer term debt sustainability and enable debtor countries to guarantee the human rights of all without discrimination.**

In addition, new financing must not be accompanied by conditions or prescriptions that undermine human rights protections, such as harmful austerity measures introduced without adequate safeguards and due regard for human rights. G20 countries must also ensure that no sections of society are left behind by the economic recovery from the pandemic. A growing number of reports show that women are disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. The G20 must ensure that all measures meet the specific needs of women and girls and are adequately resourced.

Strengthen transparency to improve delivery

Properly used, the resources being made available through grants, loans, and debt service relief and cancellation provide an opportunity for countries to not only prevent more deaths and protect livelihoods, but also to strengthen healthcare systems, safeguard jobs and boost economic recoveries. This opportunity cannot be wasted.

Corruption risks do not disappear in a crisis. A recent initial assessment of media reports about cases where money dedicated to fighting the pandemic had been lost to corruption or subject to malfeasance has exposed the magnitude of

these risks. The results were astonishing: in just 19 media stories where a reliable estimate was provided, spanning 17 countries, the total amount lost came to USD 1.1 billion. At current rates, this could have bought 50,000 ventilators or 220 million COVID test kits. Investing in transparency safeguards has the power to save lives. Moreover, the return on investment for these measures will far outweigh the cost incurred.

Since 2010, the G20 has done much to promote transparency, including setting up a specific working group on anti-corruption and developing more than 60 reports, toolkits and other resources that address the key areas G20 countries must take into account to reduce the risks of funds being misused. At this time of unprecedented crisis, this groundwork can and must be taken advantage of to ensure that funds are safeguarded from corruption.

In addition, the magnitude of this crisis requires the G20 to take further action. Not only should the G20 include anti-corruption measures in the resources countries are receiving, but **governments receiving assistance should include specific mechanisms to ensure transparency, accountability and tackle corruption as part of the COVID-19 response. In addition, the G20 should provide dedicated funding to support these measures.** This would help ensure that relevant national authorities are sufficiently funded to perform their oversight duties so that dedicated resources for the COVID response are not lost.

Empower the civil society watchdogs to protect relief funds

In recent months there has been a growing recognition of the role CSOs and human rights defenders (HRDs) can play in supporting accountability, including in this time of the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, even before COVID-19, civil society groups in many countries faced challenges in and reprisals for performing their watchdog function. In recent months, the pandemic has provided an excuse to further restrict the space of civil society and attack activists.

Civil society organisations and HRDs can play a key role in monitoring and tracking the use of COVID-19 funds, but they need to be acknowledged as playing a vital role in a broader system. The G20 should be **doing all it can to ensure the enabling conditions that allow civil society groups and human rights defenders to do their jobs**, including by publicly recognizing that:

- civil society organizations and human rights defenders are key allies to address the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, and will be protected without discrimination at all times;
- physical or verbal attacks against human rights defenders and/or civil society representatives will not be tolerated and, where applicable, those responsible will be brought to justice in fair trials.

In addition, human rights defenders and civil society organizations on the frontline of the pandemic must be given the necessary information, the tools and the protective equipment they need to carry out their human rights activities in safety.

We thank you in advance for your consideration and are looking forward to constructively engaging with you in these exceptional circumstances.

