

## The G20 must put human rights and the public interest at the heart of its response to the COVID-19 pandemic

In the COVID-19 outbreak, the global community is facing one of the most challenging crises for decades. As of mid-March 2020 more than 200,000 people have been infected and over 8,000 people have lost their lives. The economic impact is only starting to be felt, and will likely affect the livelihoods of millions worldwide. This is a global crisis that needs to be addressed with clear, fair, coordinated and concrete measures - measures that the G20 can and should implement.

The policy response to the previous global financial crisis a little over a decade ago was widely seen to have been lopsided and to have led to socially unfair outcomes, including increasing poverty, the loss of millions of jobs, and stagnating or dropping incomes for workers.

### **Economic and Social Rights**

The indications are that the coming economic downturn will be even swifter and more severe than in the previous crisis. In addition to dealing with the public health crisis, a decisive policy response from governments will be essential to provide social security – including sick pay, health care and parental leave – to all members of society, including those in insecure forms of labour who are suffering the brunt of many of the control measures introduced to date. Coordinated international cooperation and assistance is also vital to ensure that states with fewer resources are also able to respond effectively to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this context, we welcome the announcement of a G20 extraordinary virtual Summit and urge G20 Leaders to urgently adopt and implement concrete and measurable policies and plans in order to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic at home and abroad, protect people's health, and reduce its economic impacts, while ensuring a just and human rights-centred transition to a zero-carbon economy. Such measures must guarantee access for all to preventive care and good quality and affordable treatment, including those most at risk or less able to implement preventive measures through poverty, homelessness, or living and working in environments where they are more exposed to the virus. In doing so, G20 Leaders should guarantee:

### **Access to information**

All affected individuals and communities are entitled to easy, accessible, timely and meaningful information concerning the nature and level of the health threat, possible measures to mitigate risks, early warning information of possible future consequences and information on ongoing response efforts.

Information should be available in the languages necessary to meet the various needs of those affected, and through media and in formats that can be easily understood and accessed, so that those affected can take informed decisions and fully participate in the response efforts.

As has already been recognized by the G7, public access to reliable and real-time information is key to prevent and mitigate public health crises. G20 leaders should commit to real-time information sharing and to publish gender-disaggregated data on how the virus is impacting women, and ensure access to protection from domestic violence and to sexual and reproductive health services.

## **Civic space and media freedom**

Both the human rights of individuals and media freedom are essential in times of crisis. Responsible journalism can help arrest the spread of misinformation and thereby shore up public trust in government, which is key to effective crisis responses. Input and oversight by civil society organizations is also critical, both to strengthen overall accountability and to boost the quality and inclusiveness of public decision-making.

We are already seeing international battles for control of the narrative around the virus, in particular between the world's two largest national economies - the USA and China. Such attempts to "compete" over the truth have to stop. It is vital that the media, domestic and foreign, are able to report freely on the crisis, to present the public with facts – even if these facts are uncomfortable to those in power. For lessons to be learned from this crisis and applied to the prevention and mitigation of the next, the public must remain informed of the truth throughout.

## **Transparency around decision-making**

In an environment of unprecedented pressure and uncertainty, there is a high risk that public decisions will be captured or distorted by vested private interests for their own gain. Governments must provide reasoned justification for the choices they make, both to contain the pandemic and to boost their economies. A public health emergency should not be taken as an opportunity to bypass accountability. Now, more than ever, government decisions must be "open by default". As the Council of Europe has affirmed, "fundamental safeguards to the rule of law, parliamentary oversight, independent judicial control, and effective domestic remedies, must be maintained even during a state of emergency."

Already before the current crisis, it was clear that governments must strengthen checks and balances, limit the influence of big money in politics and ensure inclusive and broad input in political decision-making. Public policies and the allocation of resources should not be determined by economic power or political influence, but by fair consultation and impartial budget allocation. That is why governments must urgently tackle the channels through which private interests can gain undue leverage over public decision-making.

Over the years, G20 countries have committed to put in place a wide range of policies, from tackling conflicts of interest to protecting whistleblowers. What they have not yet done is adequately implement these in practice. If implemented in an effective and complementary way, existing commitments can address many aspects of the challenge that undue influence will pose to an effective and sustainable long-term response to the current crisis.

In addition, parliaments, governments and international organizations should postpone any ongoing non-emergency related measures that require public consultation, until they have put in place effective alternative measures to ensure public participation in the decision-making process.

Furthermore, to avoid abuses of power, any state of emergency declared by national governments should be limited in duration and scope, and emergency powers should be exercised only for the purposes for which they were granted.

We call on all governments and other actors involved to ensure that all responses to the COVID-19 outbreak are in compliance with international human rights law and standards, taking into account the specific needs of marginalized groups and people and those most at risk, and that the specific human rights risks associated with any particular response are addressed and mitigated.

