



## HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM 2021

### Building back fairer: Equality in a post-COVID world

Thursday 8 July 2021, 1.15-2.45pm (New York time, EDT)

Virtual Side Event to the HLPF 2021 on SDG 10

#### SUMMARY

On 8<sup>th</sup> July 2021, speakers gathered for a side event of the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development to address the topic “Building back fairer: Equality in a post-COVID world”. The event was organised by the UN Inequalities Task Team of the High-level Committee on Programmes, which is co-chaired by UN Women and OHCHR, and took as its focus the multiple and intersecting inequalities that have been amplified during the pandemic.

In opening remarks, Ignacio Saiz, Executive Director of the Center for Economic and Social Rights, was clear that “none of these inequalities are accidental”, and that “economic policies have fuelled inequalities, not mitigated them”. He framed this moment as one that has surfaced the necessary interconnection of different policy struggles, with for instance, campaigns to resist austerity being connected more strongly with campaigns for debt relief and fiscal reform at the global level. He pointed to recent remarks made by Michelle Bachelet, who asserted the need for a “rights-based economy”, and argued that more and more people are questioning the morality of the current economic system.

Jayati Ghosh, Professor of Economics at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, built on these remarks through emphasising the stark differences between developed and developing countries’ policy responses to COVID-19. She pointed out that the vast majority of additional spending since March 2020 has been for rich countries, and that many countries continue to spend more on debt servicing than on health. Jayati spoke of a “lost generation” of young people, in terms of their access to education, employment and capabilities. She also highlighted the particular impacts of the pandemic upon women, who have disproportionately lost formal employment and experienced wage cuts, while at the same time coping with a huge increase in unpaid care work. She argued that an increase in well-paid public employment is essential to address inequalities, especially given women’s disproportionate representation in the public sector, including in care services.

Building upon the discussion of economic and fiscal responses to COVID-19, Isabel Ortiz, Director of the Global Social Justice Program at the Initiative for Policy Dialogue at Columbia University, spoke about the alternatives to austerity at this time. She revealed that IMF fiscal projections suggest a majority of countries (154 out of 192) will cut public spending this year—a larger range of cuts than after the global financial crisis, and meaning that an estimated 85 percent of the world’s population will experience austerity measures either this year or next. These kinds of cuts are expected to be wide-ranging, and could include cuts to the number of public employees, fuel and food subsidies, social protection and social security. However, Isabel emphasised that “these projections do not

have to happen”, and that “there are still actions that can be taken”. She pointed to multiple financing options that governments could turn to instead of austerity, all of which are fully endorsed by the UN. These could include an increase in progressive taxation, an increase in social security coverage, illegalising illicit financial flows such as money laundering, restructuring or reducing debt, and reallocating public spending from sectors with no social benefit, for instance from the defense budget towards health.

As the Head of Inequality Policy at Oxfam International, Max Lawson also highlighted the economic inequalities that have defined the crisis, including the sharp increase in billionaire wealth while the vast majority of the world’s population are one paycheck away from destitution. He stressed the need for progressive social movements to come together as a coherent political project, unified by the desire to reduce inequalities. He noted that “there is no shortcut” to a more progressive society that is not aligned with such social movements, since it is this politics that enables us to address all challenges together. Specifically, Max condemned the issue of deep inequities in global pharmaceutical production and patents, which he critiqued as echoing colonial paths of dependency, and called for progress on “the people’s vaccine” for COVID-19. He posed a rhetorical question to attendees, asking, “If we can’t fix a relatively simple question of vaccinating the world, how can we fix the incredibly complex question of climate change?”

In closing, Jayati Ghosh also spoke to the issue of global vaccine inequalities, and critiqued proposals of so-called “vaccine passports”, which would privilege those who are already vaccinated. Emphasis should instead be upon lifting patent restrictions to ensure more equitable access to vaccines. Isabel Ortiz urged that it is a “generational duty” to move a progressive agenda forwards at this time, and that now is a critical time for renewed commitment to multilateralism. All speakers converged around support for a “rights-based economy” as an umbrella to bring together different social movements, and generate momentum for a future based on the realisation of human rights, and not on capital.

#### About the UN Inequalities Task Team

The purpose of the UN’s [Inequalities Task Team \(ITT\)](#) is to strengthen the leadership, coherence, coordination and visibility of the UN system in confronting the challenges of inequalities, through joint analysis and advocacy, knowledge sharing, and improved coordination. It leads the UN system implementation of the [UN System Framework for Action on Equality](#). The ITT is made up of representatives from 22 UN organizations and entities,<sup>1</sup> co-chaired by UN Women and the UN’s Human Rights Office (OHCHR). It was established in 2019 under the [High-level Committee on Programmes](#) of the [UN System Chief Executives Board for Coordination](#). In March 2020, the ITT came together to agree an ambitious workplan to achieve these broad aims, which included a commitment to organize a high-profile event on inequalities in the margins of the High-Level Political Forum on the SDGs in July 2021.



**United Nations System  
Chief Executives Board  
for Coordination (CEB)**

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<sup>1</sup> OHCHR (co-lead), UN Women (co-lead), DCO, DESA, FAO, IFAD, ILO, IOM, ITU, OSGEY, PBSO, Regional Commissions, UNCTAD, UNDP, UNDRR, UNEP, UNESCO, UNFPA, UN-HABITAT, UNICEF, UNODC, WHO