



Evolving Perspectives in Human Rights

The Shifting Global Paradigm

Introduction

The pandemic and subsequent confinement, although severely hampering usual work practices, in fact proved very rich in outputs through introspection, analyses, projections and pathways for the future. During the four months from April to July, the Geneva Centre¹ participated in, and prepared and widely distributed reports on 57 webinars dealing with several subjects of interest in the domain of human rights². These provided a better understanding of the complex and transformative scope of the unprecedented impact of the coronavirus pandemic on international relations, democratic governance, social interaction and the protection of human rights. The world is at a critical juncture, for the old is dying and the new is yet to be born.

In its capacity as a think-tank, the Geneva Centre is pleased to share with you the main ideas expressed during the rich webinar discussions, together with its own analyses and reflections, on lessons learned and the ways forward to enhance respect for human rights.

Redefining Multilateralism

The rapid spread of the pandemic has highlighted the interconnectedness of today's globalized world and the consequent need for a fully functioning and universally supported multilateral system based on the fundamental principles of human rights, in particular equity, justice and non-discrimination, and on the bedrock of solidarity.

It has become increasingly vital to propose new types of leadership that are needed today, which would strengthen multilateral processes based on solidarity and inclusivity to effectively fight the pandemic and, beyond, equally effectively attain the SDGs. Covid-19 is the defining crisis of our times, which has highlighted our forces and weaknesses. The present world context is characterized by a steady retreat from democracy, a renewed arms race, a global leadership vacuum, a loss of trust in global and national governance, a resurgence of unfettered nationalism and the consequent rise of barriers to international solidarity, all of which is compounded by a lack of political will to address these challenges.

The question is how to convert these challenges into opportunities and develop a new model of leadership promoting global interaction, inspired by the framework and direction provided by the SDGs. There needs to be engendered in the global community a sense of belonging, empowerment for all to participate in global debate and action in view of shaping a future

¹ The Geneva Centre for Human Rights Advancement and Global Dialogue is an independent think-tank having consultative status with ECOSOC. Established in 2013 in Geneva, it is dedicated to the promotion of a universal, value-driven human rights system, anchored in the principles of equity, non-discrimination, inclusiveness and solidarity. The Centre thus offers a platform to foster inter-cultural, inter-religious and inter-civilizational dialogue, aimed at enhancing mutual understanding, cooperative relations between peoples and the celebration of diversity. It also closely follows, and produces analytical reports on meetings, events and developments in the field of human rights.

² Reports available upon request: [CLICK HERE](#)



that belongs to everybody. This is in fact happening, for the world's population is able to participate virtually, in real time, in major events and issues, in particular on abuses of fundamental citizens' rights. The world-wide unrest today, as a reaction to the use of police force against citizens, shows that future leaders will have to bow to the pressure of public opinion once a critical mass of public conviction is reached. Drawing lessons therefrom, global leadership will have to find inspiration to build the critical mass of goodwill combined with enlightened self-interest. Today, leadership has to look at people, not power, and build eco-systems, not ego-systems. Leadership patterns have to change. We have been witnessing reactionary leadership, while what is needed is transformational leadership, with clear lines of accountability anchored in civil society.

We also need a radical change and reorientation of international institutions. This change is necessary in order to evolve and to adopt a planetary approach to the existential risks to humanity, which are climate, health, food and migration, and in which the most vulnerable are at the front line.

All challenges have a potential for opportunity, and crises bear the seeds of change. Covid-19 is the greatest experiment we have seen in human behaviour. We need to tap into the new consciousness geared by Covid-19, to design effective and universal resilience to confront future shocks. International institutions will need to be much more at an interface with people, understand and develop links with non-State actors, not just in power games but with actors from all disciplines and human activity, comprising peace and security, governance, human rights, health, well-being, finance, economy, employment, education, climate, technology. And these links ought not to be translated into just isolated interventions, what is needed is a systemic and cultural consciousness shift, to reidentify and redefine us all as planetary beings. We thus require to reinvent multilateralism in international and inter-social terms.

The importance of collaboration cannot be understated, for facts have proven that the lack of a systemic response has been principally responsible for the multiplication of crises. Thus, international and cross-sectoral collaboration has become an acute necessity in support of the new multilateralism, if it's current upsurge due to the pandemic is not to remain a "cosmopolitan moment" in history but represent a watershed in the fundamental transformation of international relations, built on the foundations of ethics, economics, human rights and sustainable development. Furthermore, anticipation of crises and their spill-over, together with crisis prevention coordination mechanisms, need to be institutionally and effectively factored into the multilateral architecture.

It is also vital to note the rising forms of alternative collective action as complements to, and often substitutes for, traditional intergovernmental action. These forms represent new parameters of the emerging multilateralism, rapidly gaining ground on a variety of themes such as climate, women's rights, racism, economy, trade practices, among others. Thus, extensive policy coordination is occurring within parallel frameworks that are *ad hoc* and temporary rather than formal and permanent. Cooperation is based on loosely structured peer to peer ties, consolidated through frequent interaction, rather than on formal negotiation. Bottom-up initiatives are coming to play a crucial role. Recourse to civil society



institutions, in particular think-tanks, has become increasingly important, as they are comprised of creative and independent individuals and are merit-based institutions that possess the credibility to inform the public and policy-makers about major problems and potential solutions, translating theory into practice.

Inclusive leadership is fuelled by trust. To build this, it is vital to obtain a change in the mind-sets of the major owners, the creators of the United Nations, if the Organization is to remain relevant. The new leadership has to move from the individual to the collective, based on the founding stones of interdependence and collaboration.

Civil Society and Youth: New Strategies for Transformative Impact

Civil society actors are very varied and different culturally and thematically, in terms of the issues they address. The question of crucial importance is how can they bring about the necessary change to offer a positive future for humanity. For, following the pandemic, the door behind is shut and the path ahead is dark. We need to find confidence in each other's abilities and in sharing our aspirations. Change is a driving force in society and it is youth who have the greatest potential, they form the largest part of the world population, a tremendous powerhouse that needs to be harnessed and channelized. It is therefore vital to elaborate appropriate and ambitious strategies. These could comprise the following: Develop innovative forms of democratic internal decision-making to build trust; Strengthen the positive narrative around the need for transformation; Bridge gaps between global goals and local action; Provide support with modular training, tool kits and access to technology; Reorient approaches from discourse transformation to a transformation of practice; Consider civil disobedience to express dissent instead of blaming and disruptive strategies; Use global media to publicize exemplary local transformative action; Create partnerships with academic actors to reflect latest research in transformative efforts; Build alliances with the media, corporate, finance and state actors.

To carry these strategies forward, we need to involve and engage the next generation, which is our post-Covid responsibility. Such efforts ought to be undertaken with transparency and integrity, and with approaches both critical and innovative, to generate trust and increase a currently shrinking civil society space.

Education for societal transformation

Human beings have a universally recognized inherent right to education. Furthermore, education is crucial for the social construction of reality. In this regard, as a vehicle for social transformation, education has to become a service for the massive changes required in our civilization, in particular with regard to intolerance, apprehension of diversity, climate change affecting all, intrusive technological developments, which constitute the prevailing negative and destructive trends. Education can programme new skills, set up new human norms, play the role of a safe space for social innovation and solutions, add an ethical dimension to collective self-responsibility. To be able to do so effectively, it is necessary to make education more transparent with regard to its fundamental values and essential goals.



The major problems inherent to the existing educational system are huge inequalities in access, differences in skills and competencies in both teachers and students, disparate and incoherent policies to address these issues, and a cruel lack of the investment needed to reform the system.

Education is not about teaching. It is about learning. And there is not enough emphasis on personal education, in terms of human values. There is need to cultivate inspiration in students and youth as contributing members of the well-being of society and the planet, not just as pawns subject to market forces in the unique aim of finding jobs. We have to unlearn the assumption that cognitive development is the critical element of education. Emotional and value development must be front and centre with real intention. Education is to prepare children for the future. But the future is already here, following the pandemic, and the prevailing educational system has not fulfilled its fundamental role. A transformational, value-driven education is vital for the protection of human rights.

Trust, Media and Society

The issues in this regard are the right to access to information, freedom of expression, reliability and accountability. At present there is a huge decline in the trust in media, especially in the aftermath of Covid-19. Media is being rated as incompetent and unethical, the latter in relation to its perceived collusion with political forces in elaborating narratives on global issues of concern. The accent is increasingly on drawing attention, which restricts true freedom of the press and results in self-censorship often on human rights issues, selectivity and biased narratives. There is a vital need to fend off manipulation and, in parallel, ensure adequate access to reliable data.

Media can play a catalysing role towards improving social equity, notably by depicting prevailing inequalities and injustice with regard to marginalized and vulnerable groups such as children, women, migrants, refugees, and by avoiding stereotyping. There is equally a need for accountability of the media, which can best be offered by civil society members who are the media consumers. Initiatives need to be taken to establish a benchmark of ethics in view of restoring trust in the media. Furthermore, a higher level of professionalism is needed in the media world. Media is above all a witness rather than an actor. In this regard, media ought to incorporate greater respect for objectivity and state facts without biases. In so doing, it could highlight abuses of human rights, gaps in their protection and mobilize society for their promotion.

Climate change, environment and Covid-19

The interconnections between the Covid-19 pandemic and climate emergency are becoming increasingly evident. Both Covid-19 and climate change have their roots in the same detrimental economic behaviour, both have proven to be deadly for people, both are disruptive. Yet, many governments keep considering them as separate and unconnected phenomena and do not coordinate their responses, failing to integrate a coherent climate policy into the Covid-19 response.

Significantly, both climate change and Covid-19 related risks include negative impacts on people and their lives, health, and livelihoods. Vulnerable groups and individuals, including



women, children, elderly people, people with disabilities and migrants are more likely to be disproportionately affected during the climate emergency as well as during the global health pandemic. The risks are also amplified for those who live in informal settlements, refugee camps or hazardous areas, that often lack essential infrastructure and adaptive capacity.

Both Covid-19 and climate emergency affect a whole range of fundamental human rights, including the right to life, the right to health, the right to an adequate standard of living, the right to adequate housing, the right to food, the right to water and sanitation as well as the right to education and the right to mobility, among others. Furthermore, climate and Covid-19 emergencies are exposing and exacerbating the frailties and inequalities of our societies, pushing millions of people to fall into poverty.

Massive job losses resulting from the effects of the pandemic have forced a vast number of the newly unemployed, in particular in countries of the Global South, to turn back to non-urban traditional sectors of earning livelihoods, such as agriculture and fishing. However, due to the devastating effects of climate change, conflict, compounded by environmental neglect, in many regions of the world these sectors are no longer capable of providing livelihoods, thereby negatively impacting on a number of fundamental human rights of such populations.

Worldwide, countries should urgently tackle structural inequities connected to climate change and Covid-19, and ensure the protection of the most vulnerable. Covid-19 should not give governments a pretext to roll back or relax environmental protections, but rather to ensure that the stimulus packages governments are announcing are used wisely. These measures could not only reverse the climate disaster, but also minimise the risk of new pandemics breaking out. The hardest challenge, however, will remain not just to usher in a more environment-friendly and sustainable world, but also more just and equal.

Covid-19 and Employment

The Covid-19 pandemic is having an immense impact on the situation of employment worldwide. A recent report from the World Bank estimates that the crisis could push between 70 and 100 million people below the international poverty line³. 93% of the world's workers continue to live in countries with some sort of workplace closures and among them, migrant workers are the most directly affected group, due to their amplified vulnerabilities.

Millions of migrant workers face a cruel dilemma: either going back in their home countries and face unemployment and poverty or staying in their host countries with no access to social protection nor adequate housing or health facilities. Their living conditions, usually in cramped quarters, increases their potential of mutual infections, leading to job losses. Indeed, for migrant workers, the labour crisis resulting from the pandemic has quickly turned into a human rights crisis.

Among the world's workers, other groups of population are also seeing their human rights threatened. Vulnerable groups such as women, people living in poverty and children, have been particularly affected by the employment and labour crisis resulting from the pandemic.

³ THE WORLD BANK, *Projected poverty impacts of COVID-19 (coronavirus)*, June 8, 2020
<http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/461601591649316722/Projected-poverty-impacts-of-COVID-19.pdf>



Women are more exposed to the pandemic in their jobs: 75% of frontline workers – including in the healthcare sector – are women. People living in poverty do not have equal access to health facilities and social protection and rely on the informal economy for their basic needs. Children will be directly impacted by the loss of jobs and opportunities, as the economic and employment crisis will have long term consequences.

Generally, the vast majority of these vulnerable groups work in the informal economy, which accounts for half of the labour force worldwide. The informal economy is a sector more directly affected by the current crisis, in which workers are less protected by labour rights. Article 23 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that labour rights are human rights. Thus, as the current pandemic is having drastic consequences on the labour rights of millions of people, it will subsequently affect their human rights, notably the rights to life, physical and mental health, food, and adequate housing, leading in turn to poverty, inequality and discrimination

The recovery from the current crisis must be seen as an opportunity to establish resilience for all communities and to protect the poor and most vulnerable segments of the population. It is necessary to give targeted attention to preserve jobs and support incomes. It is equally necessary to consult with the workers themselves, as part of the solution, to give them a voice in joint committees, as beneficiaries, in the formulation of current and long-term policies and solutions.

One avenue is to implement universal social protection, which is called for in SDG 8 “*decent work and economic growth*.” Governments will have to play an essential role in this. We have seen positive examples of countries with robust social protection systems and constructive employment relationships which managed to tide over the crisis. The huge need for jobs that the crisis has given rise to also provides an enormous opportunity to focus attention on sustainable development and build towards a carbon-neutral economy.

Human security

Human security is not a stand-alone concept. It is rather a holistic approach to better transform the relations between society, the State, the economy and the planet. It is a framework that should be used to address both the direct and the root causes of insecurity, to protect and preserve freedom from want, from fear, freedom to live in dignity and in peace. Human security is a shared responsibility. It is a human right and a basic need of all peoples. It concerns global issues such as inequality, vulnerability, poverty, immigration, economy, environment, employment, education. It involves all major actors: political authorities, international organizations, financial institutions, civil society, academia, media.

The present challenge is to put human security at the heart of all our efforts towards sustainable development. This necessitates collective exploration of innovative strategies to nourish the emergence of dynamic leadership to address this huge and complex challenge. The concept of human security can provide humanity with a unifying lens to place people, their well-being and dignity at the epicentre of all our actions and thereby restore trust in our systems of governance.



‘Love people, use things. Never love things and use people’. Things include institutions and policies created to promote and protect values. In this they include nations, corporations. At present, the global order in pursuit of security, both economic security and security of the State, is based on several myths. One is that the security of States can mainly be pursued through military means, which explains the astronomical budgets allocated to it. This is to ensure strategic stability, aimed at dissuading adversaries to use force against you or risk mutually assured destruction. Secondly, multinational corporations have a mandate to operate that is bereft of human conscience. This mandate is based on the premise of infinite growth and attendant profits. Such a mandate is in fundamental contradiction with the regenerative growth on which planet Earth is based. There is therefore an urgent and vital need to re-focus strategies of growth on the UN Charter, which represents the collective will of peoples, not States. This points to the final myth, which consists of the notion that sovereignty is vested only in the State. The modern Westphalian nation-State was created in 1648 to protect and promote the values and needs of the people. The current notion of State sovereignty thus needs to be tempered through progressive realism. And it ought to be widely understood and accepted that global cooperation to deal with and promote human security is not a derogation of sovereignty. It rather constitutes the fulfilment of the very basis of sovereignty itself, which begins with the people, as do institutions and the State. The fundamental challenge is thus to re-focus the purpose of institutions from their self-serving needs to basic human needs. For the original goals of institutions and laws is to direct society towards a flourishing state, through satisfaction of needs, aims and freedom.

There is the potential to build back better after the Covid-19 crisis by using the conceptual lens of human security, to elaborate new and re-define existing policy frameworks. The crisis has demonstrated the need and offered the opportunity to move from the slow, historical and inevitable process of social evolution into a faster, conscious and planned process of social transformation. In this regard, the integration of human security into the prevailing education system is vital, for the existing system is predominantly geared towards competition and material success. It needs to be infused with the values of compassion, empathy and cooperation, drawing upon the inter-connectedness of humanity which Covid-19 has dramatically brought to the fore.

Solidarity, even through enlightened self-interest, Inter-cultural Dialogue, Inclusiveness and celebration of Diversity, are the pathways towards a universally enriching humanity.