

Expert Seminar
Building Back Better – With Human Rights and SDGs at the Centre
The Role of UN Special Procedures and Treaty Bodies

5 October 2021 – ONLINE

The global COVID-19 crisis is exposing and exacerbating existing human rights violations and inequalities with a devastating effect on vulnerable groups and societies. The challenges brought about by the pandemic have placed even greater strain on the delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), at the start of the Decade of Action. Despite these negative developments, human rights and the SDGs provide substantial guidance for immediate crisis response and for long-term recovery strategies towards fair, resilient and sustainable societies that leave no one behind.

United Nations (UN) human rights mechanisms responded quickly to the COVID-19 crisis, described by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights as a ‘colossal test of leadership’ requiring coordinated action. They are well placed to guide these efforts and to enhance the trust and legitimacy that are needed to ‘build back better’, with human rights and SDGs at the centre.

In April 2020, for example, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ESCR) issued a statement on COVID-19 and ESCR in which it described the deep negative impacts of the crisis on the enjoyment of the rights to health, social security, work, food, housing and education, and in which it called States to take measures to prevent, or at least to mitigate, these impacts, giving priority to the most marginalized. The Committee on ESCR underlined that no one should be left behind in taking the measures necessary to combat this pandemic, and it called upon States to ensure that the extraordinary mobilization of resources to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic provides the impetus for long-term resource mobilization towards the full and equal enjoyment of ESCR, to make sure that the world is better prepared for future pandemics and disasters.

In July 2020, for example, in a contribution sent to the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in New York, the CEDAW Committee called for joint action in the times of the COVID-19 pandemic. For the CEDAW Committee: ‘Merely expressing human rights concerns in such an unprecedented situation is not enough. [...] If COVID-19 teaches us only one lesson, this should be that solidarity is neither optional nor is it an act of charity. [...] In their response to the crisis, States [...] must be guided by its principles of non-discrimination and gender equality, as well as by the principle of ‘Leave no one behind’ of the SDGs. Ultimately, States should emerge from the COVID-19 crisis with increased solidarity, by adhering to human rights norms, promoting inclusive governance, social justice and peace.’

Several UN special procedures also issued statements on the need to protect ESCR, keep the promise to reach the SDGs, and leave no one behind in response to the COVID-19 crisis. On 1st May 2020, for example, the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Olivier De Schutter, released a statement in which he underlined that COVID-19 highlights the urgent need to transform global economy. For him, ‘in line with the SDGs, we must move away from a development paradigm that puts economic growth first, while hoping to wipe out the environmental damages and to compensate for the social impacts of increased inequalities afterwards. The model of growth itself should incorporate environmental sustainability and social justice from the start’.

In one of the most recent initiatives on human rights, the SDGs and responses to the COVID-19 crisis, a coalition of States launched in June 2021 the Sustainable Recovery Pledge, through which they committed to build a better future for all, with human rights at its heart. They committed to build back better from the pandemic, using the 2030 Agenda, grounded in States' human rights obligations, as well as the Paris Agreement, as the blueprint.

- How can UN human rights mechanisms monitor pandemic recovery programs to ensure that they sustainably combat inequalities made evident during the crisis?
- How can they contribute to "building back better", with human rights and SDGs at the centre?

These are only some of the questions that will be discussed during this expert seminar. This expert seminar builds on previous workshops organized by FES Geneva and the Geneva Academy, such as a joint expert seminar on 'ESCR and Sustainable Development – Strengthening the Role of UN Human Rights Mechanisms in Monitoring the SDGs that Seek to Realize ESCR' put together in 2018.

The expert seminar invites UN special procedures mandate holders, treaty body members – as well as OHCHR staff – to discuss their role in pushing States and other stakeholders to build back better, or to build a new social contract for a new era, with human rights and SDGs at the centre. The expert seminar will provide opportunities to discuss links that can be made with the Sustainable Recovery Pledge launched in June 2021, and to discuss recommendations made by the Geneva Academy in its [Practical Manual on ESCR and the SDGs](#), released in June 2020.

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13:00 – 13:15	Welcome by the organizers Felix Kirchmeier, Geneva Academy Hajo Lanz, FES Geneva
13:15-14.45	Session 1 - The Role Played by UN Special Procedures and Treaty Bodies in Monitoring SDGs and ESCR during the COVID-19 Crises (2020-2021) <i>Facilitator: Ira Gibson, FES Geneva</i> This session will discuss lessons learned from the role played by UN SPs and TBs in monitoring ESCR and SDGs since the start of the COVID-19 Crises
14:45 – 16:00	Session 2 - The Role to be Played by UN Special Procedures and Treaty Bodies in Pushing States and Other Stakeholders to Build Back Better, with Human Rights and SDGs at the Centre <i>Facilitator: Christophe Golay, Geneva Academy</i> During this session, UN SP mandate holders and members of UN TBs will discuss the role that they can play in the future in pushing States and other stakeholders to build back better, with human rights and SDGs at the centre.
16:00	<i>Conclusion to the Expert Seminar</i>

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