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High Commissioner and the Secretary-General**

**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Written statement* submitted by Franciscans International (FI), a non-governmental organization in general consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.



Human rights, COVID-19 and the fight against poverty

Introduction

Franciscans International (FI) wishes to take the opportunity of the present written submission to acknowledge the work of Mr. Philip Alston during the past six years on the mandate of the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights. FI congratulates and thanks Mr. Alston for his contribution to tackle some of the most burning human rights issues of our times. FI also wishes to warmly welcome and congratulate Mr. Olivier De Schutter on his appointment as the new Special Rapporteur on this mandate of extreme poverty and human rights. FI is confident that Mr. De Schutter will pursue and strengthen the important work done by his predecessors, as the world is entering a profound and multifaceted crisis.

Indeed, human rights, inequalities and poverty have been brought back to the fore by the COVID-19 pandemic. FI, through its global network of Franciscans and other partners working with and supporting people living in poverty, has been gathering information on people's struggles against the virus and, even more so, against the severe impacts that many State actions and omissions in response to the pandemic have on people and the planet. This work of collecting testimonies and information has unsurprisingly shown how people living in poverty, and even more those living in extreme poverty, are the most affected by the health crisis while often the least protected by state measures against it. Too often as well, people living in poverty have seen their rights disproportionately abused and violated by responses to the health crisis. FI provides examples of this in the present submission.

However, while the diagnosis of the crisis and its causes is becoming clearer and clearer, the cure is still very much to be shaped. In this regard, FI agrees with the statement made by Mr. De Schutter that *"the shock provides a once-in-a-generation opportunity to rethink the development model on which the current organisation of the economy is based."*¹ The link between COVID-19 and poverty illustrates the need for global governance, international cooperation and solidarity, concerted and coherent action, and for systemic change.

COVID-19 and poverty

In many ways, the COVID-19 pandemic has acted as a magnifying glass on structural human rights issues. As the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights put it: "No country was prepared for this shock, which in every State has been exacerbated by inequalities, particularly in access to health-care, social protections and public services."²

While it does not want to deny the gravity of the direct consequences of COVID-19 on health and lives, FI wants to highlight the situation of the 'indirect' victims of the virus: the ones who may not die because of the virus itself but from the impacts of State policies that are at best inefficient to reach them or worse directly targeting and killing them.

One example has been presented in a recent statement by Mr. Alston, in collaboration with the UN Independent Expert on human rights and foreign debt, who denounced Brazil's irresponsible economic and social policies in response to the crisis for putting "lives at risk."³

¹ "Tackling extreme poverty in times of crisis: Key challenges facing the fight against poverty and thematic priorities for the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights", Background note published by Mr. Olivier De Schutter on taking up his new function as UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, accessible at: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Poverty/Pages/SRExtremePovertyIndex.aspx>.

² COVID-19 pandemic - Informal briefing to the Human Rights Council - Statement by Michelle Bachelet, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 9 April 2020, accessible at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/newsevents/pages/media.aspx>.

³ See <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25842&LangID=E>.

The situation that has been described by FI's partners in the Philippines is also particularly illustrative. The Philippines government has decided to provide 18 million families with emergency cash assistance through the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) to help during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴ However, there have been several allegations with regard to the lack of transparency in the distribution of these funds. FI received information that the distribution was based on the latest population census, conducted in 2015, even though the population has increased since then. As a result, many people are not registered and therefore cannot receive financial assistance.

The current health crisis hits the poor the hardest and exposes the gross inequalities in access to food, shelter, and health care⁵ and exacerbates existing human rights issues in the Philippines, including those arising from the ongoing 'war on drugs', that has already often been described as a 'war on the poor' by FI's partners. While it might be considered necessary to implement a lockdown to slow the spread of the coronavirus, the government has not taken sufficient measures to mitigate the impacts of closures on the people living in poverty. This has especially affected those living in slum areas or who are homeless, and who are unable to work and earn money to purchase food, and in some cases are left out from this list of beneficiaries for government assistance.

As results, the poorest are also among those who are most severely affected by the pandemic. Non-governmental organizations, church institutions, civic groups, and private initiatives have stepped in to help people to meet their basic needs. However, in certain cases priests who help to feed people living in poverty have been accused of being part of "leftist organizations" and for "misusing" the distribution of food aid to recruit people to campaign against the government. Some priests have even been arrested under this pretext.⁶

There are about 4.5 million homeless people in the Philippines out of a population of about 106 million, about 3 million of them in Manila, according to the Philippine Statistics Office.⁷ Their main sources of income include begging and collecting and reselling plastic and metal scraps.⁸ While the government has officially provided some temporary shelters during the pandemic, FI has received a report that a significant number of them still move around the city during the lockdown, looking for work or food to survive. In several testimonies, people living in poverty said that they are more likely die of hunger than from COVID-19.

Again, the example of the Philippines is only one among many. Similar situations have been reported in other countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where FI's partner is concerned that hunger in the poorest areas would cause more deaths than the virus. In the past few weeks, a number of articles have been published showing that the poor are more likely to be negatively affected by the virus due to the higher prevalence of chronic health conditions, which put people at increased risk of developing severe forms of the disease. Low socio-economic status is among the three risk factors for COVID-19, together with old age and pre-existing health conditions.⁹ This has already been concretely seen in various countries including Spain and the United States (USA).¹⁰

The disproportionate impacts of the pandemic are not only linked to inequalities within countries but also raise the issue of blatant inequalities between countries globally and even in the same region. As our partner in Vanuatu wrote: "We have only two respirators in a

⁴ See the official website of the Philippines Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD): <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1101711>.

⁵ See, for instance, The Interpreter: Philippines: Covid-19 will devastate the poor: <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/philippines-covid-19-will-devastate-poor>.

⁶ See <https://gulfnews.com/world/asia/philippines/philippines-teeming-manila-slum-chafes-under-covid-19-lockdown-1.71028464>.

⁷ See <https://www.pna.gov.ph/opinion/pieces/230-day-of-the-homeless-poor->.

⁸ See <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/poverty-punished-philippines-tough-virus-pandemic-200413063921536.html>.

⁹ See <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/15/world/europe/coronavirus-inequality.html>.

¹⁰ See, for instance, on Spain: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/01/poor-and-vulnerable-hardest-hit-by-pandemic-in-spain>; on the USA: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/racial-ethnic-minorities.html>.

country of 307,145 people.”¹¹ Similarly, the capacities of public health systems in Africa are generally too limited to absorb a pandemic. However, these capacities also drastically vary from one country to another. This, combined with other external factors such as the density of urban areas and the situation of displaced persons, enhance inequalities between countries within the same region.¹²

The World Bank estimates that, as a consequence of the COVID-19 crisis, “the number of people pushed into extreme poverty will be roughly between 40 and 60 million. In the more pessimistic scenarios, global poverty in 2020 would be close to the level in 2017—meaning that world’s progress in eliminating extreme poverty would be set back by three years.”¹³

Just as poverty is linked to a range of other human rights issues, so too is environmental justice. Both are very much intertwined as the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment highlighted recently, “(...) The global pandemic highlights the vital importance of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment.”¹⁴

FI therefore greatly appreciates the relationship that Mr. De Schutter is underscoring between the fight against poverty and the just transition towards a “greener” path, mitigating climate change and preserving and enhancing biodiversity”¹⁵ that the world needs to engage in.

Conclusions and recommendations

Against the backdrop of the situation described above, FI urges Members States and the UN itself to draw lessons from this crisis and take them into due consideration while they work towards a future UN, including with respect to the institutional architecture that is needed to face such crises and to effectively prevent and better address them. This should thus have an impact on the upcoming UN reforms, towards more articulation and coordination between human rights, development and peace with human rights playing a fundamental role as per the Call to action for Human Rights of the UN Secretary General.

As in previous crises, the creation of operational/funding entities that should ensure interagency work and coordinated response is important. However, the UN Human Rights Council and its Members will have to ensure that this coordination and ability of the various relevant agencies to act are not side-lining human rights but are integrating them fully and thus that the OHCHR can play the role it should play.

FI’s priority demand remains in favor of increased policy coherence in compliance with human rights. With a growing call, especially by top UN officials, that the Agenda 2030, its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and its core principle of “leaving no one behind” are our best tools in these times, FI underscores the effective link that still needs to be made with the corresponding human rights standards. If States continue to ignore human rights standards and principles like accountability and rule of law, there will be no accountability for the progress or lack thereof towards SDG 1 and eradicating poverty. If States continue to delegate measures to achieve the SDGs to the private sector, while simultaneously failing to hold businesses accountable for their human rights records or obstructing UN processes which seek to eliminate such impunity, public services will continue to be dismantled, inaccessible to many, and unable to respond to future shocks. If SDG 8 and its aspirations for more “economic growth” are yet another pretext to continue business as usual and pursue the

¹¹ “How to help climate-vulnerable nations during the Covid crisis”, W. Missack and Fenton Lutunatabua, accessible at: <https://www.newsroom.co.nz/2020/04/23/1140213/how-to-help-climate-vulnerable-nations-during-a-double-crisis>.

¹² See, for instance, an analysis of risk factors in African countries, accessible at: <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mapping-risk-factors-spread-covid-19-africa/#health>.

¹³ Estimates by World Bank Development and poverty experts, published in World Bank Blog: <https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/impact-covid-19-coronavirus-global-poverty-why-sub-saharan-africa-might-be-region-hardest>.

¹⁴ See <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25794&LangID=E>.

¹⁵ See the Call for input by Mr. De Schutter for his upcoming report to the 75th session of the UN General Assembly, accessible at: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Poverty/Pages/CallforinputGADigitalTechnology.aspx>.

same model of economic development that is still heavily dependent on unsustainable industries and the extraction of natural resources, then the Agenda 2030 will not help.

FI is convinced that the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights can significantly contribute to both ensure that the rights of people living in poverty play a concrete and operational role in the UN responses to the crisis and to its long-term consequences; and to guide States towards the systemic change that the world needs.
