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

Written statement* submitted by The Next Century Foundation, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

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

[20 August 2020]

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

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The need for updated anti-trafficking measures and victim support during the Coronavirus crisis - specifically regarding forced criminality and sexual exploitation in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

In April 2020, the United Nations [UN] Special Rapporteur on migrants, Felipe González Morales, and UN Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, Maria Grazia Giammarinaro, urged all countries to adopt inclusive measures aimed at helping victims of modern slavery and migrants in their national response to the Coronavirus crisis. The Next Century Foundation would like to raise specific concerns in regard to issues that currently affect the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland [UK].

During periods of lockdown, and during the current re-opening phase, there are high risks regarding access to shelters and other support structures for trafficked people, such access being increasingly limited. This greatly concerns us. The crisis exacerbates the gap between the wealthy and the poor. Many people are being pushed into financial distress and need acute help in order to survive. This applies especially to people vulnerable to trafficking or those already trapped in a situation of modern slavery.

The Next Century Foundation is worried that debt bondage, and financial dependency on the trafficker, is increasing for many human trafficking victims worldwide, clearly including those in the UK.

In July 2020, the Bishop of Bristol asked in the British House of Lords, “What assessment they have made of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Human Trafficking in the UK?” The Next Century Foundation recognises that Her Majesty’s Government is aware of the greater levels of vulnerability of potential victims and that it has allocated £1.73 million of additional charities’ funding towards providing emergency support to victims of modern slavery who have been impacted by the Coronavirus outbreak.

However, we think that measures currently in place are still not sufficient and should be revised. Our particular concern consists of two main elements:

- The factors regarding county lines and forced criminality,
- The factors regarding sexual exploitation and forced prostitution.

During the Covid-19 outbreak, the UK County Lines for drug distribution have adapted their strategies and operating methods. Young drug couriers now tend to either dress as joggers, or wear false National Health Service badges or disguise as delivery drivers. In terms of transportation, private car or taxi hire is currently preferred over the use of public transport.

We are also concerned with the consequences of children using more social media at home, as grooming and recruitment of underage victims has shifted almost exclusively online during lockdown in the UK. Generally, older gang members can distance themselves from the dealing bases at the lower end of the gang hierarchy through this mechanism and can transfer the riskiest activities onto young and vulnerable people.

The Next Century Foundation would also like to mention that youth centres, referral mechanisms and other professional help services have been partially shut down or are now operating remotely which can affect their performance.

So far, the County Lines Taskforce [CLT], has arrested numerous people in regard to drug offences and violent crimes. However, as the county lines are using different working patterns now, stop and search operations become more difficult. We are also concerned with the fact that although this task force is operating nationally, current policing models are still often too fragmented and there is too little cross-border cooperation between such units.

The Next Century Foundation appeals to the British Transport Police to prioritise cases of underage drug couriers and ensure they are covered by the National Referral Mechanism [NRM] for trafficked people, that they use more telecommunication restriction orders through the CLT, and actively encourage railway staff to continually look out for signs of potential criminal exploitation.

We base these concerns on the assumption that while the disruption of county lines might be easier during times of travel restrictions, the prevention is far more difficult. Although some updated tactics of the organised crime groups are mainly meant for the Coronavirus period, others will persist long-term. We hope Her Majesty's Government considers this when allocating resources for policing and support services.

The Next Century Foundation agrees with Ms. Giammarinaro in her demand in June 2020 that child protection services should be considered an essential service that must be adequately resourced, and social services should keep supporting vulnerable children who are at risk of being drawn into criminal activities and exploitation by criminal bands. She also mentions that states should ask technology companies to keep children safe online and guarantee free access to child helplines. At the same time, Mr. Valiant Richey, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe [OSCE] Special Representative and Co-ordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings, recommended in April 2020 that investigators should increase their online enforcement presence and use advanced investigative instruments (for example detecting suspicious financial flows).

An issue we are especially concerned with is the role of females in the gang business and how they need the special attention of Her Majesty's Government as they are extremely vulnerable. As young women tend to look less suspicious to law enforcement officers, they are frequently used to replace young men as drug couriers during Covid-19. However, disturbingly, only a small minority of the people safeguarded by the CLT are female.

The girls affected by this problem are, in our opinion, very prone to be recruited or forced into other forms of trafficking in the future. Since they are already in contact with traffickers and have suffered from (at least) psychological harm, the Next Century Foundation worries they could easily be exploited in other ways as well, for example by being forced into prostitution. We urge support services to pay special attention to this issue and ensure as many victims as possible are introduced to the NRM.

Prostitutes are another group of vulnerable people about whom we are concerned regarding the influence of Covid-19 in the UK. Charities frequently report that sex workers are being pushed into working underground, regardless of how they act (or are forced to act) in reaction to this public health crisis. As many of them illegally continue to work, their safety is highly at risk. Others are just being abandoned by their traffickers and are in urgent need of shelters.

However, the Next Century Foundation also expresses its concern about the lack of availability of such support for those forced into prostitution. In the first place, emergency accommodation services do not know where the victims are actually located and cannot reach out to them. More importantly, those that offer emergency accommodation usually rely on private funding which is problematic now. The lack of funding and information or guides on how to handle these issues is an acute problem for centres that normally help prostitutes in need. Her Majesty's Government has not yet provided sufficient help to support the services in adapting their strategies.

The Next Century Foundation, therefore, appeals to Her Majesty's Government to increase awareness that trafficking is more underground now and to help developing strategies on how to reach victims of this crime during Covid-19. There should be a clear focus on empowering institutions and structures that can strengthen exit pathways for affected people and help break the cycle of exploitation, as Mr. Richey proposed.

We also wish to see a rise in the funding for anti-trafficking support services and charities so they can adapt to new circumstances more swiftly. They urgently need to be able to reach out to donors and the general public regarding the increased need for trafficking prevention and response in light of the pandemic, as highlighted by Ms. Giammarinaro.

In order to identify more victims, help hotlines should be widely promoted and given more funds and staff to make them more efficient. This is vital, in our opinion, to keep the connection with the NRM and law enforcement officers so they can remain alert regarding forms of trafficking that are likely to increase in the near future, such as online sexual exploitation or grooming.

The Next Century Foundation hopes that Her Majesty's Government recognises the risks of an upcoming second wave of coronavirus and ensures that assistance facilities, courts,

investigations and protection services will be adequately functioning under such future circumstances or possibly even another lockdown.

This pandemic is a moment of historic change. We now have the opportunity to steer our future in a positive direction. The Next Century Foundation hopes that we will see a turning point regarding the human rights of tens of thousands of modern slavery victims in the UK. We urge Her Majesty's government to do everything in its power to ensure that happens.
