

Exacerbated crises in many countries

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The COVID-19 pandemic has made people around the world literally sick, tired, and also afraid, and therefore angry. Humans are social animals, and the virus takes advantage of that condition to spread. The balance between blockading and tearing the very social fabric that makes us humans while fighting the pandemic is a delicate one. Our common global problem is being dealt with by nations in many different, uncoordinated, and often selfish ways.

Civil society organizations from around the world are actively caring, struggling and even reporting about their findings to the international bodies that should be overseeing human rights and sustainable development.

They report on the consequences of the pandemic and the economic responses to it, but also on the (lack of) progress and obstacles to achieving the SDGs in their countries. Some reports serve as shadow reports (or spotlight reports) to the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) on their governments' implementation of the 2030 Agenda. They give an impression of the very different challenges people face in the respective countries.

Here are a few snapshots from some of these reports:¹

State support is not trickling down: France

France has deep pockets and the government decided early on to subsidize all companies unable to work normally because of the pandemic, explains Geneviève Defraigne Tardieu, from the antipoverty organization ATD Fourth World. Workers were paid 70 percent of their salaries as “partial unemployment” when unable to work from home. In 2020, partial unemployment took 27 billion euros from the State vaults. Exemptions from social security contributions granted to employers further subtracted 4 billion euros. Additionally, 16 billion euros went to a solidarity fund.

In 2021, the French government is expected to spend along those lines some 32 billion euros, thus contributing to the deficit and debt reaching “historic” levels, according to Public Accounts Minister Olivier Dussopt in a March 2021 interview with Agence France Presse. Yet, the French State plans to keep supporting businesses as long as they are unable to function normally.

Have inequalities been reduced by that unprecedented spending? Have the poor been protected from the pandemic? A study by the French National Institute of Health and Medical Research (INSERM) has proven the contrary. The measures to fight COVID-19

¹ The full reports, including all bibliographic references, can be found at <https://www.socialwatch.org/node/18613>

may have effectively slowed the spread of the virus, but the social inequalities that deeply structure French society have been exacerbated. The people in the most precarious situations live in the highest density municipalities and in the most overcrowded housing. This inequality of exposure to the virus is compounded by the fact that the most precarious workers could not do remote work, and have often had essential jobs (personal care, medical care, cleaning) that have exposed them more than others. Most often, they could not afford childcare and overall they have suffered the most from loss of income, to the point of being forced into debt.

The compensatory action of the State has not offset the social inequalities, especially for the working classes, whose financial situation has deteriorated sharply. The forced isolation was difficult to live with, even if it was not strictly speaking a new experience for people experiencing poverty all year around. Stay-at-home orders are not something new. Indeed, being confined to their home, with little leisure time and limited freedom, is the daily life of people who are unemployed, socially excluded and experiencing poverty. The health crisis only exacerbated the problems of access to food, work, and visiting rights for children or parents in care. “We have no say. We have fewer and fewer rights, and life is getting more and more difficult” is how a woman living in poverty described her own situation.

Incoherent policies: Spain

The lack of coherence between government sustainable development commitments and actual policies is the main concern reported by “Futuro en Común” a coalition of over 50 organizations and social movements fighting poverty, inequalities and environmental destruction in Spain. The need to design coherent policies is seen by Futuro as “a necessary condition for a transformational 2030 Agenda through all government actions” and it insists on the need for adequate targets and indicators.

For example, while they commend the Spanish strategy for addressing poverty reduction and inequalities, they demand concrete targets and suggest that to meet the objectives of the 2030 Agenda the Palma

Ratio (the gap between the income of the richest 10% and the poorest 40%) should be less than 1 (in Spain it was 1.32 in 2017; and 1.24 in 2019).

Similarly, the civil society organizations demand targets for the reform of the tax system as a key instrument to redistribute wealth and reduce inequalities and propose an increase in health, education and social services public spending from 15.4 percent to 17.6 percent of GDP by 2030, following ILO recommendations.

The coalition additionally proposes gender equality indicators and strongly emphasizes that, in line with SDG target 17.19, the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness should account for the country’s wealth using additional indicators that complement GDP and proposes as a target the reduction by half of the environmental footprint of the country by 2030.

Migrants have rights too: Malta

The need for policy coherence, particularly in relation to migrants, is also highlighted in the report on Malta by Kopin (Koperazzjoni Internazzjonali), a Maltese development cooperation NGO. According to the study, authored by Lara Bezzina, the country strategy document for 2050 mentions asylum seekers and immigrants as groups at risk of poverty, but poverty-reduction measures do not specifically address them. Migrant integration is also not addressed in the Malta 2018 VNR report, which only mentions migrants with regard to the setting up of an Integration Unit and to labour market needs. The latter area – being one where migrants face ample discrimination and weak law enforcement- lacks policies that aim at curbing illegal employment and discrimination by employers. To be sure, the national employment agency Jobsplus inspects workplaces and takes action against abuses related to work; it also provides the opportunity to anonymously report situations of undeclared work through a free phone number and website. Such reporting measures, however, work under the assumption that all workers have access to the internet, know English or Maltese, are literate, and are aware of their rights and of the existence of these measures.

Furthermore, the impact of policy measures relating to migrant workers is not measured or monitored. In practice, migrant integration is also far from ideal. Derogatory public discourse by various politicians against foreign workers as well as Muslims are examples of the lack of such integration. And while a Hate Crime and Speech Unit has been set up, this is targeted at supporting victims of hate speech, rather than prosecuting perpetrators. On a positive note, Jobsplus, among other initiatives, also launched a project for migrants which offers guidance and job brokerage services to asylum seekers and migrants with protection status. However, this project does not train employers or raise awareness on migrant discrimination (although the project will include a publication targeting employers, highlighting various services and information on current misconceptions).

Decoupled growth – not yet: Germany

In Germany, VENRO, the Association of German Development and Humanitarian NGOs, highlights that governmental support for short-time work has been an important social and economic factor during the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, poverty numbers have been going up in recent years as economic growth and increased wealth does not benefit society as a whole. Fully 15.9 percent of Germans are at risk of poverty, especially vulnerable groups and people working in low-wage jobs. Germany is one of the richest countries in the world. It is unfathomable that people are living in poverty in Germany at all. COVID-19 has also shown how the privatization of care and health has taken its toll: hospitals are closing, especially in rural areas, while compared to other OECD countries, nurses have to care for a much higher number of patients, and the lack of nursing staff ranges between 63,000 to 120,000.

On top of such social injustices, the German civil society organizations are highly critical of the German Sustainable Development Strategy, as it “tends to list selected policies that are going well in great detail, but inadequately deals with negative effects of unsustainable policies”.

The German VNR on implementation of the 2030 Agenda states that “growth needs to be decoupled from

resource use”. However, this recognition is not reflected in German policies at all. Security of supply for German industry is still the main driver behind German resource policies, and German industry is the fifth largest consumer of metal resources worldwide. The country’s waste production is yet another example of unsustainable practices that keep getting worse. Germany produced 417 million metric tons of waste in 2018, each German uses 16,000 kg of resources annually, of which only 12 percent is from recycled materials. “We need to drastically change this resource waste, stop exporting our trash to the Global South and introduce ambitious circular economy policies,” concludes VENRO.

Privatizing sustainability: Switzerland

Can sustainability be achieved by market forces? The report by the Swiss CSO Platform for the 2030 Agenda, authored by Eva Schmassmann and Israel Mariano, describes the country’s sustainability strategy as one of “privatizing sustainable consumption” and it concludes that “it will not work”.

According to their report, “the strategy relies too heavily on the assumption that informed and sensitized consumers will also behave sustainably”. However, experience shows that, on the contrary, behavioural changes will only come about if accompanied by clear guidelines.

For example, we have known for decades that our activities negatively impact the climate. But our behaviour in front of the shopping shelf is influenced by various parameters: values, price, convenience, advertising. It is impossible to convey all the information regarding sustainability on the product: from water and energy consumption to working conditions in production and profit distribution in the company.

Privatizing sustainability through responsible consumption is doomed to failure and overburdens consumers. The State is called upon to set rules and minimum requirements - and thus the framework for sustainable development. Regulations and sanctions are needed to take action against companies that behave in a way that violates human rights and is harmful to the environment. Voluntary action is not enough.

In November 2020, after many years in the making, an initiative on responsible business that would introduce mandatory human rights due diligence requirements for Swiss companies was brought to a referendum. The initiative got a 50.7 percent majority of votes, but it failed to pass because it did not win also in a majority of the 23 cantons, as the Swiss constitution requires.

Hunger in a rich country: United Kingdom

Across the UK, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated food insecurity. In response, there has been a grassroots movement of towns and cities declaring themselves to be “right to food areas”. These areas include Liverpool and the Liverpool Combined Authority, Manchester and the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, Rotherham, Totnes, Brighton and Hove, Haringey, St Helens, Newcastle, Portsmouth and Durham. By declaring themselves to be right to food areas these places have committed to taking a rights-based approach to ending hunger as well as calling on the UK government to take similar steps including through incorporating the right to food into domestic legislation.

A report by Jasber Singh, Associate Professor at Coventry University’s Centre for Agroecology, Water, and Resilience, and Imogen Richmond Bishop, from Sustain, the Alliance for Better Food and Farming, shows how the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted and reinforced serious inequalities and failings in the UK food system, and has crucially shown the serious deficiencies of reliance on a market based and profit oriented food system that ignores the needs of the people and the planet that make food production possible in the first place.

The food system in the UK has failed to address the challenges of poor employment terms and conditions, inequalities in food security and environmental degradation. Strengthening environmental protections within the food system is therefore urgently needed. The pandemic also exposed how the food system is a site of poor pay and working conditions, failing to protect its workers, and showed how food insecurity and malnutrition outcomes dramatically increased, especially for young people, single mothers with children, and ethnic minority groups.

Negative impacts of the food system speak to broader structural problems in the UK. Analysis of food insecurity reveals entrenched inequalities based on race, gender, disability, age, immigration status and intersectional deformations. As such, food insecurity exposes an undercurrent in the UK of ableism, racism and sexism, which are generally made invisible or not considered as drivers of hunger.

Growth at any cost: Cyprus

Cyprus is a case where coherence around sustainable development was explicitly abandoned in favour of the pursuit of economic growth. The civil society alternative report to the Cyprus official VNR was written by Theocharis Michail, Antonis Foukaras, Alexandra Taylor, Andreas Georgiou, Charalambos Vrasidas, from CARDET, a leading development NGO.

The first VNR was published in 2017, stating that Cyprus did not fully subscribe to the SDG framework due to the economic crisis. The Cypriot government focused instead on improving socio-economic indicators through its traditional growth strategy and through the automatic mechanisms of European legislation, overlooking the environmental sphere. Years later, in the 2021 VNR, there has been an apparent trade-off between an unrestrained focus on growth policies and an observable de-prioritization of SDGs, including affordable and clean energy, decent work, reduced inequalities and climate action.

Armed cooperation: Czech Republic

A key indicator of development partnership is the willingness to cooperate with poor countries and regions in their inclusive development. The Czech Social Watch Report 2021, edited by Magdaléna Šipka and Tomáš Tožička finds the Czech Republic has been lagging in this respect, failing to meet its obligations based on its membership in the European Union, specifically, allocating at least 0.33 percent of GDP to development cooperation. The Czech Republic has been providing the second lowest contribution of the OECD countries: 0.13 percent of its GDP. And these monies have been hardly assisted those “left behind”. The largest beneficiaries of Czech support are Bosnia and Herzegovina, followed by Turkey, due to its

suppression of migration at the EU borders. The list continues with Ethiopia, Moldova, Georgia, Iraq and Afghanistan. The largest multilateral beneficiary is UNHCR (the UN Refugee Agency).

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has clearly no concept of international affairs other than national economic interests. The majority of Czech foreign ministers' travels abroad have been conducted with the intention of promoting foreign markets for selected goods and services, including arms.

The acquisition of the weapons manufacturer New Colt Holding Company by the Česká zbrojovka Group in 2021 was repeatedly depicted by the Czech media as a great success by a major Czech company. The official statistics of the Ministry of Trade and Industry, published in 2020, make it clear that this "success" is due primarily to exports to Mexico, Brazil, China, the Philippines, Vietnam, the Russian Federation, Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Many of these countries have less than perfect human rights records.

The export of Czech arms material shows a rising tendency – from US\$ 98 million in 2001, to US\$ 750 million in 2019.

One of the major scandals of 2020 was the quiet lift of the arms embargo imposed on Turkey by the European Union following the Turkish invasion of Northern Syria. In April 2020, statistics published by the Netherlands showed more than 10 million units of ammunition exported to Turkey via Rotterdam. The Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs provided a weak excuse that the exports went to the areas, where "there are no longer clashes between the Turkish and the Kurdish forces".

The Czech Social Watch coalition strongly recommends cutting down arms expenses and putting exports of arms and military material under parliamentary control.

A hate-based society: Hungary

The Hungarian ruling party FIDESZ incites and exploits hatred against refugees, the poor and Roma

people. The government is sharply opposed to the idea of basic income and basic social care. The country is becoming a hate-based society, concludes the Hungarian Social Watch report 2021, after assessing the latest trends in many areas.

According to European Union statistics, overall poverty is decreasing, and the risk of exclusion has fallen below the EU average in Hungary in 2018. But the number of people living in extreme poverty - and here the Roma are very strongly represented - is rising, and they are forced to take on low-paid, uninsured, illegal jobs.

Inequalities have increased to an unusual extent and the most vulnerable are becoming more and more distant from the rest. Those in the bottom income decile in the country receive HUF 200,000 (approx. US\$ 700) per year in overall State financial support and those in the top decile receive HUF 700,000 (approx. US\$ 2,456). This is scandalous.

Economic growth over the past decade, government family support measures and EU support programmes had led to expectations that the gap would narrow. This has not been the case. Rather, the data suggest that income gaps have only been preserved. In reality, the situation is even worse, as the income of the fastest-growing strata are only partially included in the statistics, as much of it is realized abroad.

While wages have risen by almost 100 percent in nominal terms since 2010, pensions have increased by only 33 percent and social benefits have risen almost not at all. This is mainly because most of these benefits are tied to the current minimum pension, which has remained unchanged at HUF 28,500 (US\$ 100) since 2010. This means that the most vulnerable, pensioners and those in need of social benefits, are being pushed further and further away from the rest. They are the main losers in the vision of a "work-based society", with most of them sliding down the income ladder after 40 or 50 years of work while constant changes to the Labour Code are taking more and more rights away from workers, and the trade unions are weakened.

Global obstacles: Bangladesh

The Bangladesh civil society report on sustainable development, prepared by the Equity and Justice Working Group Bangladesh (EquityBD) with the consultation of Development Synergy Institute, Coastal Livelihood and Environmental Action Network (CLEAN), highlights the main obstacles imposed by the global system on the country.

Among these is climate change, and the report highlights the fact that Bangladesh “is one of the most affected and vulnerable countries, even being one of the least carbon-emitting countries”.

To face the impact of climate change, the government has adopted different policies and established two funding mechanisms, namely, the Bangladesh Climate Change Trust Fund (BCCTF), and the Bangladesh Climate Change Resilience Fund (BCCRF). Studies and reports are alleging corruption and mismanagement in both of these funds. Studying the governance practices of the World Bank-led BCCRF project, a report by Transparency International Bangladesh revealed several challenges including faulty disclosure of information, nominal involvement of affected people in the project implementation process, political influence in selecting contractors, violation of public procurement rules, lack of accountability and proper monitoring, poor quality of construction and absence of effective complaint redresses mechanisms. Apart from these irregularities, the study also identified project finance being disbursed as credit assistance, contrary to the principles of climate finance.

Along with such allegations, CSOs of Bangladesh also alleged that the government’s national budget doesn’t pay proper attention to protect the 25 million coastal people, which is about 15 percent of the total population, vulnerable to natural disasters.

Of 5,700 km of dams, about 2,100 km have been damaged in the last 14 years. But in the last five years, only 59 km of new dams have been built, while Cyclone Amphan in May 2020 damaged 255 km of embankments.

There are several allegations about the transparency and accountabilities of the respective institutions responsible for the embankment building and repair. Lack of public involvement is another complaint from the CSOs.

Unquestionably Bangladesh has made several praiseworthy achievements in terms of development. Bangladesh has gained financial ability in mobilizing internal resources, dependence on development partners has been reduced drastically. But corruption, especially illicit financial flows, are the big blow to its development efforts. Amounts equal to over a third of Bangladesh’s total tax revenue illegally flowed out of the country in 2015, according to UNCTAD’s LDC (Least Developed Countries) Report 2019 (see Box).

The arrogance of capital, even under occupation: Palestine

COVID-19 and the resulting lockdown measures are having tremendous social effects in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, according to the report of the Social and Economic Policies Monitor (Al Marsad), authored by Abdalaziz Al-Salehi. The number of women working in the private sector decreased from 109,000 in 2019 to about 98,000 in 2020. Additionally, the informally employed, who do not benefit from rights such as paid annual leave, or paid sick leave, constituted 62 percent of the workers in Palestine.

Lacking labour and social protection funds, the Palestinian government established a “Waqfet Ezz Fund” in April 2020, run by Palestinian private sector leaders. The fund sought to assist the thousands of Palestinian families made vulnerable because of the crisis, workers who lost their means of livelihood and sources of income, in addition to supporting the needs of the Palestinian health sector, in terms of medicines, devices and medical equipment.

The total donations to the fund amounted to approximately 12 million Jordanian dinars (some US\$ 17 million) as of May 2020, a little over half of the 20 million dinars target. This experience revealed that there is no alternative to having an effective social protection system, and there is no alternative to social security, as Palestinian capital and the private sector refrained

Illicit financial flows from Bangladesh

The 2019 Global Financial Integrity report on illicit financial flows to and from developing countries showed that at least US\$ 5.9 billion flew out of Bangladesh in 2015 through mis-invoicing in international trade with advanced economies. The country lost the second-highest amount of illicit financial flows after India among the South Asian nations. Bangladesh tops the list of least developed countries for illicit financial outflow and ranks 40th among the top 100 countries. The amount of finance transferred unlawfully from the country over the past 10 years exceeds the current fiscal year's budget.

The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) of Bangladesh has been taking strict actions against corruption, but the government is also encouraging black money holders by providing opportunities to whiten/laundry these assets. According to the national budget passed recently by the national parliament, undisclosed money holders have yet another year to legalize their dirty money without facing any question about sources of income through investments in almost all sectors.

One of the reasons for illicit financial flows is the lack of governance in the country's banking sector. The sector is burdened with sky-high default loans and over time, it has become a curse. Bangladesh tops in default loans in South Asia, due to a culture of squandering public money in the name of bank borrowing.

Countries like Bangladesh can't stop illicit financial flows without the support of the countries that are the main destination of these flows. Resources are being smuggled, illicit funds are being transferred to rich countries like Canada, the USA, UK, Switzerland, Malaysia. According to data presented by the Swiss National Bank (SNB) annual report, "Banks in Switzerland 2019", the total amount of deposits of Bangladeshi people in different Swiss Banks in 2019 was 603.02 million Swiss francs. About 80 percent of money laundering occurred through trade-based money laundering. In Canada, there is a luxurious residential area in Toronto known as Begum Para (area of wives) where many Bangladeshis have bought luxurious residences where mainly the wives and children of Bangladeshi millionaires live.

from playing a role in overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. This is mainly because the fund was of a voluntary nature, and repeated appeals and calls by NGOs for companies to donate 10 percent of their annual profits. But many major companies and businessmen hesitated to donate to the fund at all.

The continuation of the occupation and its colonial policies are among the main issues undermining the lives of the Palestinians and depriving them of freedom, progress and prosperity. Nonetheless, the absence of social security and protection funds under the Palestinian Authority makes the life of workers in the occupied West Bank and the besieged Gaza Strip additionally hard. While it is true that the occupation impedes the work of the Palestinian Authority, this

does not mean that we lose sight of the rights of a segment of Palestinian society that are the workers. The labour unions in the occupied West Bank and the besieged Gaza Strip need to be reformed in a democratic manner to ensure the protection of workers.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, labour unions were unable to lobby for solutions and secure from the Ministry of Labour and the employers an equitable agreement on the rights of workers during the emergency. The Palestinian authorities, trade unions and the employers signed a non-binding agreement, but thousands of workers were dismissed, as the Palestinian Ministry of Labour was visibly weak in obliging the private sector to implement the agreement in the face of the arrogance and dominance of Palestinian capital.

A lost opportunity: Bahrain

“The challenge to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic could have been an opportunity to envisage a strategy and policies that unify the people and the State, but unfortunately this did not happen,” reports the Bahrain Transparency Society (BTS).

The government of PM Shaikh Salman Alkhalifa undertook a wide range of measures to counter COVID-19, such as tests, vaccination, medication, lockdowns, restrictions on gatherings and travel to minimize the health hazards and the damages, but it acts unilaterally, without engaging with people or listening to their concerns.

Bahrain was quickly contaminated with the Delta variant of the virus and at the peak of the wave it ranked among the first in deaths per population worldwide, but the government continued to open the country to travellers while closing some economic sectors, in stark contradiction between the care for population health and influential economic interests.

The COVID-19 pandemic aggravated the crises that Bahrain has been undergoing even before the pandemic. There have been appeals by Bahrain prominent personalities, CSOs and respected institutions and similarly by international parties for the government to embark on national reconciliation so as to mobilize all resources to counter COVID-19 and its ramifications. The economic demise, and high unemployment could lead to disturbances. COVID-19 and its ramifications have facilitated the assumption of more unilateral authority by the government while other State institutions such as the Parliament and civil society, have become more marginalized.

Freedom of expression and opinion have been restricted more while civil society organizations have been curtailed further. More of those organizations using social media, especially twitter, have been prosecuted for critical writings.

Great concern has been aroused about the imminent danger to the lives of thousands of detainees and prisoners susceptible to COVID-19 infection in custody. Despite wide protests, campaigns and

appeals to release prisoners of conscience through a Royal Amnesty nothing happened. The death of two inmates, Abbas *Malallah* and Husain Barakat, incited more protests, but the government did not release the inmates most susceptible to infection such as those with chronic diseases and old age. The demand for respect for human rights sparked wide protests and more arrests, violence and instability in June 2021.

Sovereign space needed: Puerto Rico

In 2016 Puerto Rico lost most of its economic autonomy, when Governor Alejandro García Padilla declared the island was unable to pay US\$ 72 billion of debt nor the pensions owed by the government. The US federal government applied its procedures for bankrupt local governments and bought Puerto Rican bonds to replenish the island's vaults but imposed a Financial Oversight and Management Board, known locally as *la Junta*, which since then determines economic (and therefore social) policies.

“While countries progress towards a global minimum corporate tax and even mainstream economists recommend active government participation in the economy and more public investment, to counter the impact of the pandemic, the Junta keeps applying public policies that privatize and eliminate essential public services, reduces public expenditures and promotes further indebtedness while keeping corporate taxes low” denounces the report by Martha Quiñones Domínguez and Iván Elías Rodríguez, from the Observatorio de la Deuda – University of Puerto Rico.

The report proposes that recovery from COVID-19 and natural disasters must be based on:

- Ecological transition: to shift into renewable energies, rehabilitate houses, protect and restore ecosystems.
- Digital transition: to close the digital gap and develop norms for home work and distant education and improve working conditions and salaries of workers that have increased their productivity thanks to their mastering of the new information and communication technologies.

- **Gender equality:** to reduce gender gaps in the labour market, fight gender-based violence and reform the educational system with a gender perspective.
- **Social cohesion and welfare:** to strengthen public health and education, actively promote employment, support the care economy and strengthen social security to correct the externalities generated by capitalism.

To implement these policies, the report argues that the structural limits imposed by the colonial condition need to be lifted and thus they demand sovereign powers and the elimination of *la Junta*.

Assistance or rights: Mexico

In Mexico the SDG targets lack the necessary resources to be met, as evidenced by recent natural catastrophes and the COVID-19 pandemic, concludes the Informe Luz (Spotlight Report) 2021 written by Laura Becerra Pazos (Equipo Pueblo) and Roberto Pérez Baeza (The Hunger Project Mexico) on behalf of 18 major civil society organizations.

The victims of the 2017 earthquakes have not been properly cared for yet, and while the government has announced a strategy to place “the poor first”, both for cash transfers as well as for vaccinations, the different needs of various groups are not always considered. As a result, some programmes have positive impacts while others end up discriminating by omission.

The report recognizes that the Mexican government has had to face the COVID-19 pandemic with a health system that has been abandoned and dismantled for two decades. In that context the right decision was made to buy vaccines and distribute them free of charge, in a context where most developing countries are paying for them three times more than developed countries or will only have access to vaccines in 2022.

The government has initiated direct support programmes for vulnerable populations, such as working mothers; primary, intermediate, and higher-level students; agricultural populations, and older adults. In addition, microcredit and no-guarantee credit programmes have been launched to allow small and

medium-sized urban and agricultural entrepreneurs to sustain their activities, while another programme encourages the labour participation of young people.

Yet, the impact of these efforts is difficult to assess, as they are not adequately supported by capacity building to enable the targeted groups to become active citizens. In 2018 the government promised “a new development paradigm, centred on the well-being of the population, understood as effective access to all their human rights”. But in implementing this vision, the engagement of local organizations, communities and direct participation of civil society have not been included. Lots of people living in forests have been left out of programmes for community forest management and payments for environmental services. Girls, boys and teenagers are still considered as family property and not rights-holders and the lack of effective control of gender-based violence leaves behind many girls and women. A debt towards the population in rural and marginalized areas, victimized by decades of presence of a narco-state remains unpaid. The struggles for human rights, to defend the environment or against gender-based violence continues and is often stigmatized. In the first half of 2021, 477 women, 15 environmental defenders, 24 human rights defenders and 6 journalists have been murdered.

Debt is the main obstacle: Argentina

In Argentina, the social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic met the already devastating impact of the external debt crisis, increasing poverty, unemployment and structural inequalities. Over one third of households and 44 percent of people were living under the poverty line by the end of 2020, according to the Social Watch report by Agustina Carpio and Hernán Medina. “And the numbers would be much worse if it wasn’t for a strong set of governmental assistance measures put in place,” they add. By September 2020 Argentina re-negotiated most of a then pending debt of US\$ 324 billion, around 90 percent of its annual income. Yet a debt of US\$ 52 billion with the IMF is still to be negotiated. Beyond this, the COVID-19 pandemic has made the urgent need for structural changes more visible, for instance in the national care system of Argentina (see Special Contribution 2.4).