



25 September 2021 | Speech by Matthias Boehning at ISHR's virtual Annual General Assembly

“Human Rights are under pressure globally “

76th session of the UN General Assembly, Sustainable Development Impact Summit, UN Food summit – our meeting today takes place against the backdrop of these and other gatherings this month alone. 2020 was a year like no other. The pandemic revealed and deepened existing social, economic, and political fault lines. Heads of states have been meeting this September in the different hybrid meetings just like us today with pressing needs in mind such as vaccine equity, climate crisis, gender, and racial equality and with the urgent need for greater cooperation. These issues also represent areas where the human rights situation globally has deteriorated in the last 12 months.

Vaccine equity/ Health and social protection

According to the WHO, to-date COVID-19 has killed at least 4.7 million people worldwide. The pandemic exposed health and social protection systems which were weakened by decades of underinvestment and a lack of preparedness. Instead of the pandemic being the great equaliser as touted by some, vulnerable and marginalised communities have been hard hit in almost every way. Worker's incomes were affected by loss of jobs. “In mid-2020, the ILO warned that 1.6 billion workers in the informal economy—nearly half of the global workforce—stand in immediate danger of having their livelihoods destroyed. And remittances to developing countries had already fallen by 20%. “

The pandemic tested political institutions and most were found wanting. Alongside the inadequacies of health and social systems, the international cooperation that was needed to respond to a global challenge was not forthcoming. Instead, many governments especially in the global North asserted self-interests which led to the dismal practice of vaccine nationalism. Disparities in vaccination rates between the wealthy countries and the rest has meant that the value of human life is determined by the place of birth which no one ever chooses. The world continues to be divided

between the vaccine haves and the vaccine have nots. So far, 80% of doses given around the world have gone to high and upper-middle-income countries while only 0.4% have been given to people in low-income countries. While Europe and much of the Western world experience a semblance of normalcy, other parts of the world remain locked in long-term restrictions on freedoms and economic strife.

Climate crisis

A few months into the pandemic, researchers mentioned that due to lockdowns in early 2020, [carbon emissions fell by 17%](#) because of cuts in the transport and industry sectors. However, scientists also noted that this only marginally slowed down the overall rise in concentrations of carbon emissions. Fast forward to this year and climate activists have been sounding the alarm from the Arctic to Australia to the Amazon forest. The climate is in crisis and the existential threat is affecting the most excluded people.

"As these environmental threats intensify, they will constitute the single greatest challenge to human rights of our era," said [Michelle Bachelet](#), referring to recent "extreme and murderous" climate events such as floods in Germany (some 60km from where my family lives here in Germany) and California's wildfires. She continued by saying: "We must set the bar higher – indeed, our common future depends on it."

UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres convened yesterday (24 September) a high-level dialogue to promote the transition to clean, affordable energy. It's the first global gathering on energy held as part of the General Assembly since 1981.

Moreover, the climate crisis also feeds into dynamics in many regions because of its direct impact on livelihoods and human security issues. It is estimated for example that about 270 million people are expected to face acute food shortages this year compared to the 150 million before the pandemic. The economic fallout of COVID-19, effects of climate crisis and natural disasters are all factors that contribute to the rise in food insecurity.

Civic rights/democratic freedoms

In the last 12 months, we have also witnessed a backlash in the civic rights of citizens in different parts of the world. The first instinct of many presidents and prime ministers last year was to act as though the pandemic threatened their power and rolling out repressive measures instead. Some states introduced rights restrictions that curtailed freedoms such as the right to self-expression and access to information. Many rolled out official propaganda under the guise of controlling information and criminalised legitimate inquiry and commentary including attempts to hold them accountable and whistleblowing by healthcare workers. China for example

on top of controlling narratives and suppressing protests which enabled the virus to become a pandemic, expanded surveillance measures and trampled on the right to privacy on the grounds of preventing the spread of the virus.

In the Philippines, people were locked up in dog cages for breaking pandemic regulations. In several Middle East and North African states, including Bahrain, Egypt, Iran and Saudi Arabia, civil society activists were imprisoned for their work to defend rights remained in crowded jails, putting them at risk of contracting the virus and with little hope of access to adequate healthcare.

International law states that restrictions introduced for health reasons should be timebound and proportionate. However, there is growing concern that for some states, these laws were passed without an expiry date and continue to prevail. This was not the only model. States such as Taiwan, South Korea and New Zealand got the situation under control and won public trust whilst respecting rights and democratic freedoms. Repressive tactics were not a necessity but a choice.

Gender and racial inequalities

[According](#) to the Sustainable Development Goals report 2020, the pandemic has affected communities disproportionately. It has also entrenched the existing patterns of discrimination and stigma with reports emanating from many countries of discrimination against different groups.

As a result of COVID-19, said former Director of UN Women Ms. Mlambo-Ngcuka, “[47 million](#) more women have been pushed into living on less than \$1.90 per day, 10 million more girls are anticipated to be at risk of child marriage over the next decade, and women are “under siege from gender-based violence”, suffering the highest rates of intimate partner violence ever seen, over the last 12 months.

Furthermore, violence against women in public life is a major deterrent to political participation and affects women in all parts of the world. “under-representation of women is a factor in the slow progress in all aspects of gender equality”.

Women also account for nearly 70 percent of health and social workers and have been on the frontlines in fighting the coronavirus pandemic. The burden on women has grown heavier also as result of school closures. More so, up to 60 percent of women work in the informal sector with little security which puts them at greater risk of falling into poverty.

In nearly all countries it's clear that indigenous peoples are in the most vulnerable to COVID-19 health category. People of African descent are likely to be poorer and have fewer opportunities in many parts of the world and in most cases women and girls are more impacted than men. A UN report based on discussions with more than 300 experts and people of African descent was also backed by Michelle Bachelet

who [urged](#) “all states to stop denying and start dismantling – racism and to listen to the voices of people of African descent.”

Myanmar and Afghanistan

The Taliban takeover in Kabul last month also sparked concerns about respect for human rights and women’s rights as well as the fate of at-risk Afghans who are afraid of being targeted by the Taliban after the close of a chaotic international evacuation effort.

Earlier this year on the other hand, Myanmar’s military overthrew the country’s civilian government leading to months of widespread and peaceful protests which were unfortunately met with violent military crackdowns that killed hundreds of people.

In closing there is an urgent need for leaders to build back and build better global cooperation between world leaders that has been eroded by the pandemic.

The right to peaceful assembly must be defended and respected so that people can mobilise in numbers to demand change. Looking back at major historical transformations such as the right to vote or decolonisation, these only came about after mass mobilisations. Temporary restrictions imposed due to the pandemic must be timebound and lifted at the earliest opportunities.

We are living in times in which Human Rights are under pressure globally. That is why the imperative of watching together, observing/monitoring together, speaking out together, acting together and - what I always particularly like with regard to ISHR – practically helping/assisting communities in need together is more important than ever. Thank you very much for your attention.

Other sources:

CIVICUS: State of Civil Society Report 2021

The New Humanitarian