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**Input for Report on COVID-19 and Multilateralism**

ActionAid International submits the following in response to the [Call for Input to inform the IE's thematic report to be presented at the Human Rights Council \(HRC48\) and General Assembly \(GA76\)](#) in 2021 based on ActionAid's latest research reports on [Democratising Global Governance and Multilateralism](#) and [Who Cares for the Future](#).

**Qstn. 1. What are the key obstacles to a more effective, inclusive, and networked multilateralism to handle the COVID-19 pandemic, in terms of both health response and economic recovery? States, anti-rights groups, and corporate interests and alliances undermine multilateralism by hampering democratic participation, transparent rule making and accountability.**

- Elite and corporate influences on multilateral negotiations. For instance, fossil fuel and agriculture companies responsible for the climate crisis participate in UN climate negotiations. Transnational corporations are creating parallel processes alongside multilateral systems of governance. For example, the World Economic Forum (WEF) is placing itself on a level footing with the United Nations. [The UN itself](#) has warned that 270 million more people are on the brink of starvation because of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, as the UN Secretary General's Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) seeks 'to renew global commitment to eliminate hunger and malnutrition', hundreds of small food producers and civil society organisations have accused the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS) of ignoring human rights, aligning to the WEF, and prioritising the interests of corporations while sidelining the small-scale producers, many of whom are women who produce 70-80% of the world's food.
- Disproportionate and undemocratic veto power of nations within the UN Security Council membership poses an existential threat to global citizens, ethnic groups, and indigenous peoples. It has profoundly disastrous impacts on the rights of survivors seeking healthcare during a global health pandemic; living under occupation and apartheid; in war zones; and in protracted crises and poses a serious threat to the democratic ideal of the multilateral system.
- Disproportionate power wielded by global north wealthy nations that make up the G7 perpetuates a colonial geopolitical infrastructure that undermines democratic multilateralism, national sovereignty, and international cooperation. For instance, the recent

decision to adopt a global minimum tax of 15% for corporations on a country-by-country basis serves the interests of the rich and is illegitimate. Due to regressive tax policies, unjust tax rules, tax evasion and illicit financial flows, many countries of the global south have been unable to adequately respond to COVID-19 and mitigate its effects on people, see [The Centre for Economic Rights](#)

- As [The People Vaccine Alliance points out](#), refusal of some G7 countries to support a TRIPs waiver, prioritising profit and wealth at the expense of peoples' lives, and human right to health, not only creates vaccine apartheid and needlessly perpetuates a global health crisis, but further shrinks political space, and exacerbates the crisis of multilateralism by preventing people from participating in multilateral spaces as borders are closed to un-vaccinated people.
- Going online for key UN meetings, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, exacerbates power differences. Civil society and governments from the global south with less reliable or lesser access to the internet are likely to miss key information and opportunities to intervene. Individuals and organisations have also faced increased technological surveillance and harassment. Both trends disproportionately impact women and young people in the global south.
- Inclusion of civil society is not the norm in all UN agencies and mechanisms. For example, the SDGs' Voluntary National Reviews, national reports on review of states' commitments to global climate change agreements as well as the UN Commission on the Status of Women do not formally recognise civil society inputs.
- Young people make up most of the world's population and are inheriting the long term and future impacts of the multiple and intersecting crises of today yet are largely excluded from multilateral processes and are not meaningfully engaged in decisions-making spaces within the multilateral system.
- The Bretton Woods Institutions (BWIs) and the World Trade Organization – effectively have a separate and dominant jurisdiction over economic policy making – prescribing unequal and unjust macro-economic policies on countries at odds with UN human rights goals. They are encroaching on policy spaces outside their mandate as well. Austerity, debt, loan conditionalities, and policy advice they prescribe have fundamentally curtailed the capacity of states to respond to the pandemic and to fulfil their human rights obligations. For example, ActionAid's research report [Who Cares for the Future](#) shows that countries who spend more than 12% of their budgets in debt servicing are forced to cut their spending on public services. It further shows in all low-income and many middle-income countries the IMF holds down

public spending by imposing low inflation targets (in 80% of countries) and deficit targets (in 96% of countries) and by freezing or cutting of public sector wage bills (in 78% of countries). Consequently, most governments cannot employ more teachers, doctors, nurses, or care workers, this worsens the already unjust burden of unpaid care borne by women.

- Growing backlash against women's rights and gender equality led by the anti-gender movement, supported by right-wing governments and fundamentalist groups is the greatest threat and setback to feminist agendas and activism in multilateral spaces. This has led to a negative impact on the human rights framework and the progressive interpretation of human rights standards, especially those relating to gender equality and sexuality.

**Qstn. 2. What are the solutions to overcome such obstacles in a fair and sustainable manner (including targeted reforms)?**

- Urgent systemic and structural transformation to address multiple global and intersecting crises through international cooperation and solidarity a multilateral system that guarantees democracy, human rights, and dignified lives now and for future generations. Young people, who make up most of the world's population, are best positioned to re-envision and re-imagine the world and civil society in all its diversity, especially women and excluded people from the Global South, need to be part of framing and leading debates on this transformation.
- Urgently protect and expand civic space at multilateral levels for strengthening and rebuilding democratic multilateral institutions and mechanisms anchored on advancing human rights as a defence against future global threats - ensure an environment in which civil society organisations, citizens, and people's movements, particularly women and young people from excluded communities, are considered valuable participants of sustainable development processes.
- A regulatory framework for UN-corporate interactions with minimum standards, including the shape and composition of UN initiatives involving the private sector. These standards should prevent undue corporate influence on UN policies and prevent companies that violate internationally agreed environmental, social, and human rights standards from participation in UN partnerships, events and from eligibility for UN procurement.
- Strict regulations on corporate lobbying at the multilateral level including stringent disclosure and reporting laws regarding corporate lobbying, political donations and access to policymakers and policy processes at international level and more sweeping reforms regarding corporate financial transparency.

- Ensure meaningful participation to address the inequities that disproportionately affect global south governments and civil society, including language barriers, time zones and the digital divide. Bridge the digital divide to promote reliable and unfettered access to the Internet. Governments should have clear limits to avoid shutting down and controlling social media and ensure Internet access is available to all including those living in rural areas, women, young people, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples etc.
- Countries hosting UN conferences, especially the USA and Switzerland, should ensure that all relevant officials are aware of the host country's obligations to issue visas to participants attending UN meetings.
- UN processes should provide mechanisms for independent civil society review that is not mediated via member states under review including the SDGs Voluntary National Reviews and national reports presented at the UNFCCC Conference of Parties.
- Reform the UN's NGO Committee to restrict member states from unilaterally using their position on the Committee to defer NGO applications for UN accreditation indefinitely.
- The UN Secretary General should consider appointing a Special Envoy for civil society, tasked with ensuring civil society contributions are recognised with meaningful and consistent participation across the UN system.
- The UN should uphold the international human rights obligations of states to eliminate discrimination against women in all fields, including their sexual and reproductive rights and their right to equality and non-discrimination and resist all attempts to derogate from them, including by conservative or religious lobbies.
- Establish an Intergovernmental UN Tax Convention and Body as a mechanism that can comprehensively address tax havens, tax abuse by multinational corporations and other illicit financial flows. Without the democratization of global tax governance system, we will not challenge the entrenched inequality and asymmetrical power relations between states. Resources generated to be directed at redistributing women's disproportionate burden of unpaid care and domestic work by strengthening universal gender responsive public service delivery including GBV services.
- Establish a *New Framework for a Just Debt Cancellation and Workout Mechanism* because the current debt crisis threatens to worsen for many due to the economic devastation wrought by COVID-19.
- Host an *Economic Reconstruction and Systemic Reform Summit* under the auspices of the UN to restore economic decision-making power to the UN and to remedy the democratic deficit

and structural issues within the current global economic governance. Central to this proposal is the primacy of human rights and the democratization of global governance by carrying out long overdue institutional reforms re-establishing decision-making within the UN where developing countries are at the table with more equal voice and vote.

**Qstn. 3. What are your views on a new international treaty for pandemic preparedness and response?**

- The use of binding instruments to promote and protect health in the context of pandemics is needed.
- The [Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction](#) should be at the centre of any recovery and rehabilitation pandemic policy given the close link between health and disaster risk reduction. Thus, the need to increase investments for the implementation of the health aspects of the Framework. See the 2020 General Assembly [resolution](#) and the [fact sheet](#)
- Ensure participation and leadership of women and girls –and their respective networks and youth rights organizations – in responding to the pandemic for an effective response and recovery. Gender, together with other factors including age, sexual orientation and gender identity, ethnicity, disability, education, employment, and geographical location intersect to further compound individual experiences in emergencies. Women are the ones losing most of the COVID-19-affected jobs. Girls and young women are abandoning school in greater numbers and are the most likely not to return to school after the crisis – with a spike in child marriages.
- Linked to the above we also reiterate our call for all UN financing for development to be risk informed and gender inclusive.
- The treaty process and content should address several issues if it will address current gaps and needs. We highlight some here, as pointed out by The [South Centre](#):
  - a. Include provisions that effectively advance the right to health over commercial interests of the healthcare industries.
  - b. Negotiations on the pandemic treaty should only take place among UN member States. The multinational pharmaceutical industry should not engage in the negotiations.
  - c. Ensure that any new functions in the treaty remain within the WHO. In every health crisis, be it HIV/AIDS or now COVID-19, WHO Member States have chosen to allocate funding and the power to act outside WHO, leading to fragmentation of the global health governance with the creation of parallel agencies or mechanisms and the

consequent marginalization of the role of WHO. This has weakened rather than strengthened the organization.

- d. First review and identify aspects of pandemic preparedness and response that the current crisis has revealed are not working and how to build up on the existing International Health Regulations (IHR) if WHO Member States decide that an international treaty is the way forward. Such as:
  - i. Making available pandemic-related health supplies as global public goods (without limitations imposed by the enforcement of intellectual property rights).
  - ii. Establishing mechanisms to enable open access to technologies, including know-how, for scaling up of local manufacturing of pandemic-related health supplies.
  - iii. Coordinating the supply of vaccines and other health products to all countries, including to developing and least developed countries, based on equality and health needs.
  - iv. Lifting unnecessary regulatory barriers for the market entry of generic manufacturers, by establishing abbreviated regulatory approval pathways for faster marketing approvals and promoting inter-agencies cooperation.