

The Third Session of the Expert Mechanism on the Right to Development

Tuesday, 30th of March 2021, 11:00am EST

Opening statement by

Mr. Craig Mokhiber

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of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

Madam Chair,

Distinguished experts,

Excellencies and delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to the third session of the Expert Mechanism on the Right to Development.

The right to development is a human right, which is dear to my heart. I have followed its trajectory closely from the early days of its advocacy until the present.

Indeed, earlier in my UN career, I had the honour to serve as the Secretary of the Open-ended Intergovernmental Working Group on the Right to Development,

which was conceived of as a follow-up mechanism to the United Nations Declaration on the Right to Development, as one part of a twin-structure, jointly with the then Independent Expert on the Right to Development.

It is encouraging to see that the Council is eager to inject more substantive expertise into the discussions on the right to development, both in the work of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Development and in its complement, this new Expert Mechanism.

I particularly welcome the topicality of the themes you have chosen for the first five studies that you plan to undertake during this term of the Mechanism.

Here in the New York Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, our mandate is to work with Member States and other partners to effectively integrate human rights norms and standards in the decision-making, policy, and operational activities of inter-governmental and inter-agency bodies based at United Nations Headquarters in New York.

In this, we are guided by the Declaration on the Right to Development, by our human rights-based approach to development,

itself derived from the terms of the Declaration, and by the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development.

We follow closely the proceedings of the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council, as well as those of the High-level Political Forum,

and participate in a host of inter-agency mechanisms, such as those on development, on inequalities, and on financing for development.

We know that the work of each of these is critical to the realization of the right to development for millions around the world.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is the most elaborate and ambitious global development policy to date.

It is explicitly informed by the right to development, based in the full range of human rights, and targeted to addressing inequalities both within and between countries.

As such, the UN human rights office is deeply invested in advancing the 2030 Agenda.

But implementation of the 2030 Agenda is lagging, with prior delays and losses now further exacerbated by the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the world confronts the pandemic, we are seeing an unfair distribution of the impacts and hardships of Covid, with older persons, minorities, and the poor disproportionately affected,

and vaccine nationalism is becoming an ugly reality, leaving millions of people behind.

Despite the call for a temporary TRIPS waiver from many sides, including this Expert Mechanism and human rights advocates across the globe,

regrettably, some of the wealthiest countries and companies in the world have blocked efforts by poorer nations to speed access to Covid-19 vaccines and treatments by temporarily lifting World Trade Organization rules protecting intellectual property.

In this context, and with over 200 million confirmed cases and some 3 million deaths caused by the pandemic, the urgency for solidarity and a cooperative approach to the production and distribution of vaccines could not be more compelling.

Indeed, vaccines of this kind should be seen as a global public good, a matter where public health concerns and human rights must take precedence over the financial interests of any individual, company or country.

This is not only commanded by common sense. It is also rooted in the letter and spirit of the declaration on the right to development and, indeed, in the entire corpus of human rights law.

States have agreed to co-operate with each other in ensuring development, in eliminating obstacles to development, and in protecting the right to health.

Moreover, States have agreed to co-operate with a view to promoting, encouraging and strengthening universal respect for and observance of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without any distinction as to race, sex, language or religion.

In the face of this crisis, States must not shy away from this commitment. As Secretary-General Guterres recently said: “The global vaccination campaign represents the greatest moral test of our times.”¹

What’s more, COVID-19 has exacerbated pre-existing inequalities within and among countries, and with unequal access to vaccines and to the means for financing recovery from the pandemic, this inequality is bound to further increase.

This is disproportionately impacting the economies of LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS, with devastating impacts on human health, education and other vital sectors.

We now have the chance to “build back better” to construct more equitable, sustainable, and human rights-based economies and societies, nationally and internationally, with the right to development at their core.

This was the vision of the Declaration some 35 years ago, and, today, the Secretary-General’s call for a New Social Contract and a New Global Deal is remarkably aligned with the call for a new economic order, contained in the Declaration on the Right to Development.

We can do better. And we must.

Your work is crucial to advancing this agenda.

As such, we wish you well, and we pledge our continued support.

I thank you.

¹ <https://www.un.org/en/coronavirus/only-together-can-we-end-pandemic-and-recover>