**Intersessional workshop on the implementation of the right to participate in public affairs in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and the**

**post-pandemic recovery**

**Wednesday 31 May 2023,** **10:00 – 13:00 CET & 15:00 – 18:00 CET**

**Opening remarks of the President of the HRC and the Permanent Representative of the Czech Republic H. E. Václav Bálek**

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to address you this morning at the opening of this intersessional workshop as the President of the Human Rights Council. At the same time, as you know, this workshop is organised based on the mandate stemming from the resolution 48/2 on “Equal participation in political and public affairs” introduced at the 48th session of the HRC in October 2021 by a group of countries comprising the Czech Republic, Botswana, Indonesia, Peru and the Netherlands and adopted by the Council by consensus. Therefore, it is my double pleasure to welcome you here today, as it was my own country, the Czech Republic, which - together with the other members of the core group – initiated this event.

The purpose of this workshop, as defined it the above mentioned HRC resolution 48/2, is to discuss the challenges, good practices and lessons learned in implementing the right to participate in public affairs, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and post-pandemic recovery, including the role of participation in ensuring public health.

Across the world, people continue to face persistent obstacles in the enjoyment of their right to participate in political and public affairs. These obstacles, such as exclusion and discrimination, also limit the enjoyment of other human rights that enable it, namely the freedom of expression and opinion, including the right to access to information, freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association.

The COVID-19 pandemic generated unparalleled and simultaneous crises, bringing unprecedented challenges to our daily lives. The various measures taken by countries in response to the pandemic adversely affected all segments of society around the world. It is true that barriers in law and practice to the full, equal and meaningful participation of people in political and public affairs existed prior to the pandemic. Nevertheless, some disproportionately restrictive measures during the pandemic combined with the absence of pre-established, inclusive and meaningful participatory mechanisms further hindered participation. This has been especially experienced by women, persons with disabilities people living in poverty, ethnic minorities and other marginalised groups.

Many lessons have been learned, and continue to be learned, from the array of crises stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic. It led us to reflect on the vulnerability of our health systems and institutional infrastructures. It also encouraged us to examine the resilience of our democratic procedures and institutions and find ways to strengthen our systems and overall democratic governance. The pandemic additionally underscored the importance of continuing our efforts to ensure full, equal, meaningful and broad participation of communities and civil society actors in decision-making, so that recovery efforts meet real needs and leave no one behind.

The crucial role of participation in securing public health was also highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic, as we notice how profound an impact public health policies and measures can have on our daily lives. It is essential that these policies and measures accurately reflect the needs and aspirations of all population groups, especially those at risk of being left behind.

The Human Rights Council has considered the widespread and multidimensional impact of the pandemic on many occasions through various resolutions, reports, and panel discussions. Many of the resolutions adopted by the Council since June 2020 refer to the COVID-19 pandemic and recognise the essential role of meaningful participation for a sustainable recovery.

Today’s intersessional workshop builds on the Fourth Session of the Council’s Forum on Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law, held last September. A key conclusion from that Forum was that strengthening democracy is key for sustainable recovery from crises and for increasing resilience in the face of ongoing and future emergencies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change. I believe that today’s event and the recommendations that will come out of this workshop will be instrumental in taking forward some of the issues that were also discussed last September at the Forum.

Today’s workshop, with its programme set to cover the various aspects of the implementation of the right to participate in public affairs in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the post pandemic recovery, could also provide a platform for furthering the Council’s future consideration of equal participation in political and public affairs in all contexts.

I wish you successful discussions and look forward to hearing the summary report during the Council’s 54th session.

Thank you.