

Everyone has the right to a good life – during and after COVID-19

GENEVA (15 March 2022) – Governments must ensure every person has an adequate standard of living, irrespective of COVID-19.

“Governments have an obligation to fulfil the right to social security, including through budget allocations, as well as to protect and respect these rights through laws, policies and plans,” according to feminist economist Savi Bisnath.

Bisnath is working with OHCHR Geneva and covers the Asia Pacific region on the developing area of the so-called human rights economy. Governments must meet their obligations to provide for their people – a particularly relevant duty during the current COVID-19 pandemic, she says.

Specifically, that means the need for “responsible decisions” to use the maximum available resources, through means such as tax, to progressively realise everyone’s economic, social and cultural rights.

Those rights include access to quality health care during times of crisis. Dr Bisnath also says governments have a duty to be transparent and accountable for their actions so its population can assess performance. It also needs to collect data to better understand the needs of different individuals, groups and communities.

“We need to understand what the impacts of the pandemic have been on the budget and the lives of people. We need to calculate how much investment in social spending is necessary now, in the time of crisis, and project for when the pandemic is over how much investment will be necessary.”

A focus on women

This also means ensuring groups who face discrimination are specifically looked after. According to an Oxfam report, in 2020 women lost more than 64 million jobs as a result of COVID-19 – a 5 percent loss, compared to a 3.9 percent loss for men. In Cambodia, women have been likewise more adversely impacted than men; a [gender analysis of COVID-19 in Cambodia](#) showed women and girls’ unpaid work burden had increased due to COVID-19, further exacerbating the 10 times greater unpaid care work they were already doing.

“Women are often paid less than men for the same work. In some countries they are paid as much as 30 per cent less, so it’s conceivable that in a crisis women will be the first to fall through the cracks,” Dr Bisnath says.

“If we have a government that is mindful of this we’d have a government looking at where women are in society and the economy, how they are being impacted by COVID and what additional resources they need through the social security system to ensure they’re not falling further behind,” she says.

This means the government must be proactive in looking after such groups.

“We need the laws in place for issues of equal pay to better ensure that women will have enough income for health, education and housing, to live a decent life and to have an adequate standard of living.”

These rights are enshrined in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, ratified by Cambodia, and the milestone Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states:

“Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself [or herself] and his [or her] family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services.”

Dr Bisnath says economic policy and human rights policy are interconnected and “do not operate in silos”.

“This is a new area of work that we’re forging. The work on civil and political rights is longstanding...with the work that we’re doing on economic and social rights we’re building that body of knowledge and practice.”

The human rights economy in Cambodia

Representative of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Cambodia Pradeep Wagle says such standards should be introduced and enforced outside of the most progressive countries, including in Cambodia – and this kind of shift in thinking is much more important now than in a pre-pandemic world.

“It is important that people who have suffered during the pandemic and ensuing socio-economic hardship are looked after properly by their respective governments. Support must be provided to those who are in need, irrespective of their political, social and economic position,” he says.

He says the UN in Cambodia is moving towards collecting data that helps to diagnose, anticipate and target socio-economic vulnerabilities, discrimination and wealth and income inequalities. This human rights information is now being used to identify marginalised communities and drive UN advocacy and programmes in Cambodia, including the UN’s COVID-19 impact and risk assessments.

In other countries, there have been progressive examples of the use of international human rights norms and standards in judicial decisions under national jurisdictions where issues like the right to adequate housing, right to health and right to food has been described as an “enforceable human right”.

“We need to start looking at the world through a pro-poor and people-centric economy instead of continuing to perpetuate antiquated feudal structures of debtor and creditor; landlord and rentpayer,” Wagle says.