

Human Rights Council 44th session (22 June – 10 July 2020)

Joint written statement submitted by the World Council of Churches on behalf of the Geneva Interfaith Forum for Climate Change, Environment and Human Rights (GIF)¹

States must protect human rights in the wake of Covid-19 and the climate crisis

Covid-19 and climate change

The Covid-19 pandemic and human-induced climate change are rooted in an unjust and ecologically unsustainable economic system, and have profound implications for people and their enjoyment of human rights.

Originally a global health pandemic that has subsequently caused economic crisis worldwide, the Covid-19 pandemic has infected millions of people around the world and resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths. Climate change, on the other hand, is essentially an environmental phenomenon, but is projected to increase malnutrition, respiratory illnesses, malaria, dengue and other vector-borne diseases, heat stress, and new epidemics through its destructive effects on biodiversity. Both are adversely affecting people's enjoyment of the human right to health and SDG 3. Initial studies indicate that droughts caused by climate change and poor air quality aggravate Covid-19 illness and confirm that vulnerable and disadvantaged groups such as the income-poor, women, people from minorities, Indigenous Peoples, migrants and refugees are suffering the brunt of sickness and loss of lives.²

While economic shutdowns and other unparalleled measures to contain the spread of Covid-19 have triggered a fall in climate-change causing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, these have also led to soaring joblessness and therefore rising poverty and hunger in both the developed and developing world. Similarly, climate change is already eroding bases of sustenance and decimating livelihoods, especially of farmers, fisherfolk and Indigenous Peoples; and is projected to undermine on a massive scale the rights to food and water,

¹ The Geneva Interfaith Forum for Climate Change, Environment and Human Rights (GIF) is composed of the following organizations: World Council of Churches, Lutheran World Federation, Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University, Soka Gakkai International and Dominicans for Justice and Peace.

² <https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.04.05.20054502v2>;
<https://www.apmresearchlab.org/covid/deaths-by-race>

among other economic, social and cultural rights (ESCR). Again, those with scant socio-economic means and living in the margins are hardest hit.

Both crises place heavy burdens on women who are disproportionately represented in the healthcare sector and the care economy as well as account for the majority of the poor.³ Women have less access to basic human rights like the ability to move freely, acquire land and secure employment, and face systematic discrimination and sexual and gender-based violence that escalate during periods of instability, such as a pandemic or a climate-related disaster.

In some countries, lockdowns in response to the Covid-19 pandemic have been brutally imposed by military and police with adverse impacts on people's political and civil rights. Likewise, climate activists and other environmental defenders - in many of the same countries that have developed militarized responses to Covid-19 as well as in other countries - face intensified vilification, harassment and even threats to life.

Key learnings

As faith groups comprising the Geneva Interfaith Forum on Climate Change and Human Rights, we join all peoples in expressing profound care and concern over the horrendous suffering of human beings, especially the poor and the marginalized, all living creatures and Mother Earth, as result of the convergence of the Covid-19 and climate crises.

More than anything, the crises have clearly exposed our interconnectedness as one humanity and how we are part of a larger community of life. Moreover, the crises reveal the indivisibility and interdependence of all human rights – none can be fully enjoyed without the other – as well as highlighting the need to invest deeply in systems of care and resilience to protect these rights.

We see in this moment of intertwined emergencies a window of hope and rare opportunity to open a deep discussion on values in our societies as well as to radically reshape economic policies and systems so as to promote human rights and nurture the health and wellbeing of people and planet. This entails coordinated, coherent and transformative interventions by States in partnership with all sectors of society.

³<https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en.pdf?la=en&vs=1406>

Calls

Against this background, we call upon the Human Rights Council at its 44th Session and States to:

- Recognize, monitor and address the intersections between the Covid-19 pandemic, climate change and human rights.
- Support the creation of a special procedure on climate change and human rights to take stock of climate impacts on human rights and to ensure coherence between climate actions and human rights obligations.
- Recognize the human right to a safe, clean and healthy environment for all not least by protecting biodiversity and bolstering Nationally Determined Contributions to cut GHG emissions under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change with a view to meeting the goal of keeping global warming at 1.5 Celsius.
- Ensure the protection of human rights in measures and programmes to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Ensure the full and equal enjoyment of economic, social, cultural, civil, and political rights and the transition to a sustainable, resilient, and net zero-carbon economy and society in a post-Covid-19 world. In this regard, States must significantly bolster investments in public health and social protection, agro-ecology, and renewable energy as well as ensure access to decent work, adequate housing, water, and sanitation to enable people to live in a healthy environment.
- Promote debt cancellation for low- and middle-income countries and global tax reform to support States in fulfilling their human rights obligations in line with the Guiding Principles on Human Rights Impact Assessments of Economic Reforms.