



21 April 2020

Dear colleagues,

The COVID-19 pandemic affects a plethora of human rights and presents a serious threat to the rights to life and health everywhere. It is a test of our societies' resilience and human rights should be at the centre of our response.

I want to take this opportunity to acknowledge and commend the critical role that National Human Rights Institutions have been playing in responding to these extraordinary circumstances. The work that you and your staff have played at the front-line in responding to these challenges has been inspiring. This has led to the identification of a number of good practices, and I encourage you to continue to share these experiences and lessons learned with your networks and my staff. This letter and the attached "aide memoire" have been provided in recognition of this, with the aim of assisting your work with some further guidance as you consider how to continue to effectively engage in efforts to promote and protect human rights in the face of the pandemic.

International human rights standards provide a crucial legislative framework that can strengthen the effectiveness of our interventions. It brings attention to people often left behind, such as persons with disabilities; indigenous peoples and minorities; migrants, refugees and internally displaced people; people in conflict zones; and, in particular, older people. This is crucial if we are to combat the virus effectively. People living in institutions, including many older people and people deprived of their liberty, are likely to be more vulnerable to this infection.

All public health measures should be implemented without discrimination of any kind, with an emphasis on transparency and information sharing that can empower people to meaningfully participate in protecting health. Accurate, clear and evidence-based information is also important for eradicating stigma, discrimination, racism and xenophobia.

Emergency measures, which restrict the right to freedom of movement, should be proportionate to the risk, time-bound, and safe. The rights of those under quarantine must be protected, including rights to food, water and sanitation, and health.

As I mentioned in my recent briefing to the Human Rights Council, in every stage of this epidemic – including the recovery – efforts should be made to involve National Human Rights Institutions, as well as civil society and human rights defenders. I welcome the work of those National Human Rights Institutions already engaged on the challenges presented by COVID-19.

.../

To All Heads of National Human Rights Institutions



Many countries, through their national health authorities, have developed national plans that take a multi-sectoral approach. I encourage all National Human Rights Institutions to reach out and integrate their mandate and activities in those national plans, as wherever appropriate, in order to make a contribution, through advocacy, monitoring and investigating, the handling of complaints, legal assistance, advice to Government and others as well as support to human rights defenders.

Please note that OHCHR is actively engaged with UN Resident Coordinators and Country Teams on the ground who are working with national partners on these response and recovery measures. Your support in this context will be crucial to expand our outreach and achieve the impact we are targeting. The Secretary-General is issuing a Report on human Rights and COVID-19 this week, and we are already looking ahead to the long-term socio-economic impact, which I fear will also take enormous toll on countries in many different ways.

COVID-19 is a new virus and an unprecedented situation for many. We are all learning and finding new ways to combat the disease and minimise its impact. OHCHR staff at the headquarters and in the field stand ready to support you and all other stakeholders in addressing the challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic together and in solidarity.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Michelle Bachelet', written over a horizontal line.

Michelle Bachelet
High Commissioner for Human Rights

CC: Permanent Missions
to the United Nations Office and other International Organizations
Geneva