COVID-19 HAS REVEALED THAT APPROPRIATE DISTRIBUTION, USE AND OVERSIGHT OF POWER ARE THE CORNERSTONE FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT.

Power dynamics is at the heart of the emerging trends on SDG 16, including the relationships between citizens and state, between different arms of government, between state and non-state actors and between states at the global level. In many contexts, the social contract between the state and its population is under strain, with diminishing levels of trust in governance systems, democratic political processes being disrupted as the pandemic is used to centralize and consolidate power. To recover from COVID-19 and to “build forward better” and more equitably, we must put people at the centre and reinforce the aspirations for peace, justice and inclusion as articulated in the 2030 Agenda.

THE ROLE OF THE PUBLIC SECTOR IN MANAGING THE PANDEMIC AND FACILITATING ACCESS TO SERVICES IS FUNDAMENTAL TO AN EFFECTIVE RESPONSE.

The need for investment in effective and responsive governance in order to facilitate more equitable access to health, education, social protection and other public services has been highlighted by the pandemic. The role of local government and investment in the systems that provide accessible and quality services are crucial to building resilience for future pandemics. The pandemic has demonstrated that not addressing bottlenecks such as corruption and mismanagement of the public sector can result in devastating loss of lives.

THE PANDEMIC CANNOT BE AN EXCUSE TO ABUSE STATE POWER AND RESTRICT CIVIC SPACE.

COVID-19 policies have accelerated some authoritarian trends that existed prior to the pandemic and have been used to undermine dissent, target human rights defenders and the media, and erode oversight institutions, including the judiciary, legislative and national human rights institutions. While States have responsibility for exercising their powers to manage the pandemic, there is concern across all regions that in some cases states have abused the use of emergency laws as a means of actively closing civic space. At the same time, the pandemic has also brought about new forms of collaboration among civil society actors, inspiring social movements and promoting solidarity to resist abuse of state authority. Government willingness to collaborate with civil society has been a successful strategy to respond to the pandemic.
SOCIAL EXCLUSION HAS BEEN INSTRUMENTALIZED AS A POLITICAL STRATEGY.

Inequalities and social exclusion have increased over the last year due to COVID-19. This is in part due to policy decisions that have disenfranchised targeted communities. This includes reducing social protection programmes and other social services, enabling corruption at all levels and promoting political fragmentation. Exclusion and marginalization have been active strategies to perpetrate everyday violence on poor and marginalized populations. For example, overzealous enforcement of pandemic measures disproportionately affects those who live in the margins of poverty, such as migrant workers and indigenous peoples. Particular attention needs to be paid to the brand of politics that have silenced opposition voices and attacked minority rights.

THE CURRENT RISE IN INEQUALITY AND POVERTY CAN BE ROOT CAUSES OF FUTURE CONFLICTS.

There have been reversals across the board on targets related to peace, justice and inclusion, especially in crisis settings. While there are signs of resilience within communities and of reduction in violence in some cases, there are high levels of mistrust of governments that can lead to social unrest. These remain potential drivers for future conflict as some communities may be disproportionately affected by the pandemic and the government is not able to respond to those communities' priorities.

THE FALLOUT FROM THE PANDEMIC IS AFFECTING WOMEN SIGNIFICANTLY.

Gender-based violence has increased worldwide due to the pandemic and to justice systems' struggle to provide the necessary access to legal services. It is also important to look at what the increased burden of labour and the economic repercussions of the pandemic mean for women's participation in the economy and in public life. At the same time, women have been at the forefront of many of the protest movements calling for accountability and social justice. The impact of the crisis on women and their role in leading responses and recovery at local and national level needs to be further recognized.

THE RAPID MOVE TO ONLINE SPACES DURING THE PANDEMIC HAS HIGHLIGHTED THE ENORMOUS POTENTIAL, BUT ALSO THE RISKS, OF DIGITIZATION.

Digital spaces have become an alternative, yet potent, tool for political participation. Young people, in particular, have been able to effectively use the digital sphere and social media to politically mobilize and to be part of the political discourse. Although digital spaces can be used to improve transparency and access to information and services and to promote debate, it can at the same time be used to promote misinformation or disinformation, to attack and target opposition, activists and civil society, particularly women, and to disempower and silence them. The digital divide remains a challenge and reinforces inequalities, pushing those furthest behind even further as access to technology is an additional stumbling block to accessing services or political participation.

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