

**Opening meeting of the 66<sup>th</sup> session of the  
UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights  
30 September 2020  
Oral Statement by the  
Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights**

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today at the Opening of this extraordinary Committee session. I would like to start by congratulating the Committee on its important and timely Statement on economic, social and cultural rights and the COVID-19 pandemic.

We welcome the holding of this virtual session of the Committee, despite its limited nature and especially given the challenges faced in bringing together all Committee members in the online environment. We welcome also the work of the inter-Committee Working Group on COVID-19. The postponement of State reviews due to the unique situation created by the COVID-19 pandemic and the UN financial crisis, is leading to a concerning protection gap for economic, social and cultural rights. Given the range and scale of ESC rights restrictions and violations arising from the pandemic, it is crucial for rights holders that this Committee can fully acquit its mandate to assess States' compliance with the Covenant and its Optional Protocol.

We appreciate the enormous efforts of Committee members and the Secretariat to continue many activities with increased workloads, but we remain concerned, as I imagine you are, that there are still significant challenges and a lack of clarity as to what work the Treaty Bodies will be able to carry out in 2021.

***Civil society letter – online work of the Human Rights Treaty Bodies***

In this regard, together with TB-Net, we will be publishing this week a joint civil society letter urging the Treaty Bodies and their Secretariats to begin **scheduling State reviews no later than 2021**, and if necessary, to take a pragmatic approach which allows online State reviews on a temporary and exceptional basis. The letter has a current sign on of 545 CSOs from the national, regional and international levels, indicating the high level of interest in, and valuing of, the work of the Treaty Bodies.

The letter emphasizes that in this unusual period, special efforts must be made to ensure the continued engagement of civil society in the Committee's work. **Predictability, transparency, inclusivity, and accessibility** are essential conditions to enable the **full participation of civil society**, in the work of the Treaty Bodies, in particular if online reviews are organised. Civil society organisations require advance notice of the up-coming work of the Treaty Bodies, to enable them to undertake human rights monitoring, prepare

alternative reports, plan briefings and raise the funds to undertake this work. In addition, sufficient time allocation and technical requirements, including accessibility for persons with disabilities relying on screen readers and sign language, should be ensured for online private briefings with civil society.

The letter concludes by pointing out that in fact, the very **relevance of the Treaty Bodies is at stake**, if they are not able to continue to perform their fundamental mandate in the midst of a human rights crisis.

GI-ESCR stands ready to support efforts to find appropriate and effective ways to conduct State reviews moving forward and we likewise stand ready to support the Committee and its Secretariat in managing working methods during this period. We will also continue to support the Committee and the Treaty Body Chairs by calling for increased availability, accessibility and predictability of resources and appropriate support for the functioning of the Treaty Bodies in the current context and in the long-term.

#### ***CESCR elections***

I would also like to mention the recent CESCR elections which had been significantly delayed due to the pandemic. We were very concerned about the **lack of transparency for the holding of the elections**. Information about the rescheduled date was not made publicly available until shortly before the elections, meaning that there could be no advocacy or scrutiny of the elections. This is crucial to ensure that the elections result in membership that is independent, diverse and has relevant expertise.

We were also very concerned by the results which will see a very **disappointing decrease in the number of women on the Committee**. For a Committee that is mandated to monitor the equal right of men and women to the enjoyment of ESC rights, under article 3 ICESCR, the decreasing gender balance from 2020 is disturbing. We also continue to hold the view that there should be **term limits for membership of the Committee**.

#### ***2019 Yearbook***

Finally, I am delighted to announce the **publication of the 2019 CESCR Yearbook**. This is the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of the CESCR Yearbook published by GI-ESCR. It is now available on our website and a link has been sent to you by email. You will see that it has a new format which we think increases the accessibility of the Yearbook and an introductory page that explains the main functions of the Committee. It also has a message from your esteemed Chair, statistics about the state reporting and communications procedures, case summaries and summaries of the concluding observations for each State reviewed in 2019. We hope you like it and would welcome your feedback.