



NGO Global Dialogue - Impacts of the pandemic on vulnerable groups (people and other living beings in our shared environment)
Hosted by Environment Friends Society, Bahrain September 29, 2021

Khawla Al-Muhannadi, Host and Moderator:

Good evening. Good afternoon, Good morning. Thank you for joining us today. This is Khawla Al-Muhannadi, President of the Environment Friends Society who's hosting this event, and Ambassador of the NGOs Stakeholder Group of the ISO 26000 SGN, the Stakeholders Global Network, who's organizing this discussion.

This is the Global NGO Dialogue “Impacts of the pandemic on vulnerable groups, people and other living beings in our shared environment.”

This event is organized to understand about what's happening to people, communities, and other living beings during this strange and difficult time the world is facing. The news have kept us informed about the officials, some big corporations, views and news related to the pandemic.

[But] what we feel as individuals concerned about social responsibility, principles, effects, subjects, and values, and as NGOs, the conscience of the world in particular, that's what we need to discover. We need to hear the voices of the vulnerable groups, those who are often not heard and in crisis like this, the more likely to be pushed aside as they were never the priority for anyone.

These are just overall comments. The facts I wanted to share with you is something that I read recently. And I just felt that I was really touched by it. And with all my knowledge and social responsibility, I never thought of it this way. Did you know that 5.1 billion people lack meaningful access to justice? That's 5.1 billion people, people living in extreme conditions of injustice. We have one of them with us today, at least one of them.

The most vulnerable populations find it the hardest to access justice, which increases the risk they will continue to be left behind. Worryingly, around the world the conditions of civil rights have been increasingly restricted, 12 consecutive years of decline in global freedom, with 71 countries suffering complete decline in political rights and liberties.

With this, I have set the introduction of this dialogue. We're looking forward to hear our panelists, and we're looking forward to every detail of this dialogue.



Carolyn Schmidt – “Vulnerable Groups in ISO 26000”

Greetings and welcome to all. I am very glad to be with you today to give a framework of how ISO 26,000, the global guidance standard on social responsibility, can be useful to NGOs.

For me, ISO 26,000 starts with the seven core subjects. Everyone should pay attention to all of these. For us today, I'll highlight human rights and the environment.

Vulnerable groups of people are defined as those who have suffered persistent discrimination, leading to entrenched disadvantages. They should get additional attention in terms of protection and respect. You see the range of examples of vulnerable groups. We should each act to protect and respect the specific vulnerable groups in our own communities.

Turning to the environment, the most obvious vulnerable groups are the endangered species and their habitats. ISO 26,000 stresses the survival of terrestrial and aquatic species, genetic diversity and natural ecosystems. Obviously these are all interconnected.

Now we get to the hard questions. Most of us have identified vulnerable groups in our own contexts that we work with and work for. But how exactly do we go about protecting them? Especially when much “business as usual” involves making money through exploiting vulnerable people, for example, low wage

workers, and vulnerable species, for example, habitat destruction by mining industries.

How do you get the leverage, the starting point, the influence to advocate for change to help these vulnerable groups?

ISO 26,000 really does give us a lever - stakeholder involvement. Stakeholders are those who are affected by, or can affect, a business or other organization. Credible groups seeking to protect such interests - in other words, NGOs like us - can represent stakeholders who don't have voices or access on their own.

Here are some global trends today connected to the model of stakeholder engagement to ensure that the voices of the vulnerable groups are heard.

“Build Back Better” after COVID-19: In the United States, the idea of “Build Back Better” has empowered advocates for improving our public sector services, including healthcare, so they do a better job for the people most at risk. The inequalities revealed by the impact of the pandemic are now so obvious that there's more public and political will to improve these services.

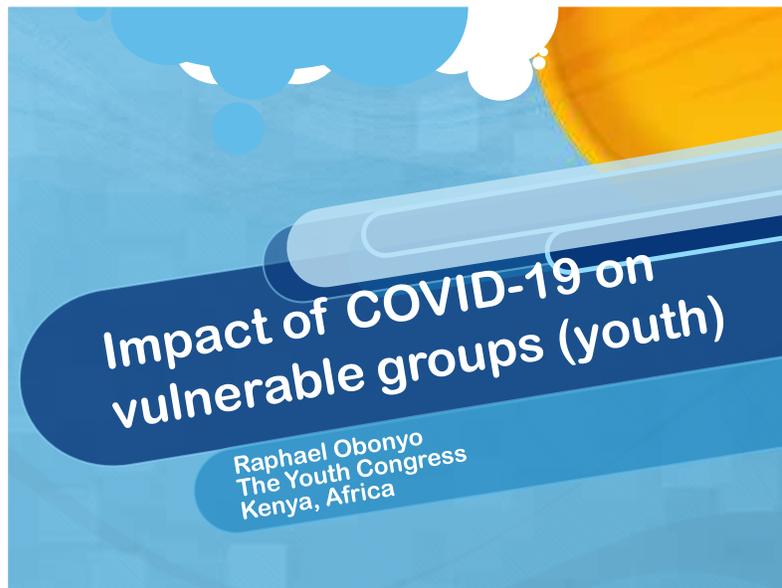
For our non-human relatives and the habitats they depend on, one growing global trend is the movement for legal rights of nature, giving legal protections to beings in the natural world similar in spirit to the legal status of corporations. So for example, a river can go to court - represented by human advocates - to argue for its right to flow and be healthy. Polluters should pay to clean it up.

In conclusion, ISO 26000 has moral strength from its position as a global consensus document from ISO, which has strong name recognition in business communities around the world. Stakeholder involvement is becoming a more widespread expectation throughout the world. NGOs and other spokespeople have the backing of ISO 26000 to speak and act in support of vulnerable groups.

This is not any guarantee of success for any of us, but it does give us a pathway for action, and global consensus support from the social responsibility movement, including obviously the people who are gathered here today.

Thank you very much.

Khawla Al-Muhannadi: So [*now*] the panel discussion is between NGOs from different parts of the globe. They will be dialoguing about the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on vulnerable groups, including people and the environment, drawing from their own experience and work on the ground.



Raphael Obonyo, The Youth Congress, Kenya: "Impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable groups (youth)"

My name is Raphael Obonyo, the Convener of the Youth Congress, and I'm going to present on the impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable groups. I'll specifically be looking at youth in their informal settlements. Here, we are basically looking at youth as a vulnerable group.

I'm sure many people are still wondering if youth is a vulnerable group, but extreme poverty and lack of social support and other enablers like economic opportunities does make youth the vulnerable group in the sense that, it exposes youth to abuse, indignity and other challenges. But COVID-19 has indeed had a deep and disproportionate impact on a young people and most specifically on young people who live in the informal settlements, or if you like low income areas, or if you like, they're called slums or, if you'd like, informal spaces in the urban centers.

The second slide is on the Youth Congress. This is the NGO that I represent; it's a youth serving organization in Kenya. And it seeks to promote youth leadership and participation, looks at how youth can be engaged in decision-making and how youth can be involved in development. We've been involved a lot in different interventions to support youth and to support communities.

We all know that COVID-19 has affected people differently, and continents differently. Of course, COVID-19 cases in Africa have not been as many, but there's been huge social and economic impact, negative impact on people and on environment in Africa. For example, economic growth has been affected, and in some cases it's predicted, it's estimated that it's going to fall through by about

1.4% in GDP. And, depending on the size of the economy, of course, small economies would be affected more.

But I want to move to the impacts of COVID-19 on youth. Two quick references:

One is the International Labour Organization has done a survey on the impact of COVID-19 on youth. It's an important report that I think we should all look at. It's brought out that COVID-19 has had a huge impact on jobs, livelihoods, education, rights, and wellbeing of young people. The other reference I want to make is my own, The Youth Congress, a youth-serving organization in Kenya that works a lot with youth in urban centers, in the informal settlements or low income areas. Also did a mapping of youth entrepreneurs, but also youth in the informal settlements and looking at the impact of COVID-19 on youth livelihoods. And again, it brought out that youth has been extremely impacted by COVID-19.

Let me point out a few ways in which youth have been impacted. One is on youth and jobs: COVID-19 did affect the informal sector and 80% of youth in Africa – the working youth population in Africa - are actually in the informal sector. And that means that if COVID-19 hits the informal sector, youth are hugely, hugely affected. So many young people lost their jobs, lost their associates, their livelihoods. Financial hardships: many young people are not able to cater for their basic needs, whether we know about food , shelter and, in housing, because their source of income has been hugely, affected. And a great increase in stress and anxiety.

And many young people have been affected in a way that, because of the lockdowns, because of certain challenges and limitations, many young people find themselves in situations of stress, anxiety, and sadness. The other one is on digital inclusion in terms of education. Many young people, many families, especially in the informal sector and informal settlements, do not have access to technology.

The short-term nature of the government interventions has not been quite helpful. And then lastly is the issue of access to the things that are required to fight the pandemic, for example soap, sanitizer, water. Many young people in the informal sector, and informal settlements, are not being able to access these kind of items. In fact, I remember when one time we were distributing sanitizers and soap to young people who are grateful, but they were also talking about the issue of livelihoods that, yes, we've washed our hands, but what are we going to eat?

So it means that COVID-19 has had a huge impact. On livelihoods, on jobs, on the wellbeing of young people, on education and, on mental health. And also in the area of rights; things like lockdown and curfews have really affected the youth

rights in terms of freedoms, in terms of interactions, in terms of engagement, in terms of high-handedness of some governments . And so young people have experienced a lot of challenges.

So thank you so much. And in terms of call for action, I'm just urging that the interventions must be targeted. Look at youth, not just as youth, but youth in their diversity, because youth are not homogeneous.



Nur Al-Aagha, Gaza Strip, Palestine: Situation of Gaza Strip dealing with COVID-19 crisis

Okay. So hello everyone. Thank you very much for this great discussion. I'm Nur Al-Aagha, we're from Gaza. I'm a teacher and translator here, and I will be talking about the situation in my city, in the Gaza Strip, which is as you know, in Palestine, in the south of it. As you know, Gaza Strip has not been suffering with coronavirus only, but also from the Israeli occupation, from the imposed seige that the Gazans have been living under since more than 10 years. So adding an insult to the injury, they are fighting more than one enemy at once. In the already deteriorated situation, in already a densely populated area.

The Palestinians in Gaza were fighting the Israeli occupation and the COVID-19 pandemic, as you see here in the illustration. This reality raises questions about the role of these factors in advancing social collapse in Gaza, and the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable groups in Gaza.

The socio-economic crisis that are amassing as a result of Israel's ongoing closure and the blockade on Gaza have only been made more profound by the Coronavirus outbreak.. So all of the Gazans, we can consider them as a vulnerable group; however, there are some groups who are affected more than the other, so that is kind of social injustice here.

We can see some statistics and more of the devastating impacts of the coronavirus that are made worse by the Israeli occupation. So they - the Israeli regime - restricts the import of medical test kits into Palestinian territories. Imagine how these things are, when what was needed, the Palestinians in Gaza were not able to enjoy them, to have these rights because of this occupation. So as a result, there was a shortage of food and non-food items and supplies, especially medical supplies.

There were social inequalities that have increased while the marginalized and disadvantaged in society no longer have rights. And were living in limbo. They have also limited access of water, that affects hand-washing and raises the risk of disease, particularly for children, which is especially dangerous in density areas like Gaza. Like, during the coronavirus pandemic, we were hearing a lot “wash your hands” and “keep social distance” . But was this possible in Gaza? Because most of the families or many families would not able to have access to clean water, to wash their hands in order to protect themselves from this virus.

So looking at the numbers more than 56% of Gazans were living under poverty before the pandemic, but now it's expected today, it's already driving and expected to rise more. Statistics say that has been 64% while the unemployment rates were 45%. There was less food and security, which has become 68% and 80% of families that depend on food aid, the externalities. And also more than 45,000 workers have lost their jobs during the pandemic, especially the daily workers and the breadwinners, who had to stay home and not go to work. So simply put, Palestinians in Gaza are haunted by social misery, violence and wars. With this account of their life, you can see one of these, here's a family living in Gaza. You can see the conditions of their home.

One of the workers who is affected by this, how he suffered in his family because of the shortage of water. As I mentioned before, he says that we can no longer store water in the roof tanks because there was no electricity to pump this water. And as a result, they have to spend days without water, which was the most basic and much needed thing at all times and official may in this sense they make, okay.

So this is to make the situation worse. In May Gaza, was having an attack from the Israelis airstrikes, who targeted one of the very few laboratories in Gaza. Here, you can see as the Israeli air strike hit the streets and sent shrapnel into the clinic, shattering windows, shattering doors and furniture, computers. And maybe it could be the only one, the only coronavirus directory in Gaza. So during times of war, people need more treatments than usual. Once the administrator at the clinic said, now we can't give people medicine.

Also, during the last upheaval in Gaza, - now, thankfully we have a cease fire, but in May, people were seeking refuge. So imagine everywhere we hear “keep social

distance, stay away by two meters from each other, so that you don't get infected", but the situation in Gaza: imagine this highly densely populated area.

And to add insult to injury, people were seeking refuge by big numbers. It was impossible to keep the social distance, imagine how many families are in only one classroom in order to escape the air strikes of the Israeli occupation in some areas that were highly affected.

So finally, here's a call to action. What can we do as individuals and NGOs in order to help the situation? Palestinian Authority and concerned agencies, which is NGOs and international bodies, have to supply support for residents whose lives are threatened by the unprecedented coronavirus outbreak and improve the living conditions in Gaza and support the municipalities here. The international communities also have to exert pressure on Israel in order to immediately and, unconditionally lift the blockade, the closures, and seek alternative measures.

The Gaza Electricity Distribution Corporation has to cooperate with the municipalities to ensure water supply that is more regular and efficient to households, and prioritize the provision of power supply to municipal wells and networks to better equip residents with the amounts and quality of water necessary to fight the COVID-19 outbreak. Of course, this can be possible with the help of the international communities and NGOs.

Finally, as you know, the majority of Palestinian organizations have adjusted their strategies to cope with the situation, providing the maximum support to the community in this difficult period. Globally, a rising number of funding opportunities are being given to researchers and entrepreneurs to invest their intellectual abilities and innovation to find solutions and to come up with studies about this pandemic. So you know this now, it is your time to invest your capabilities and be innovative!

This is the end of my presentation. Thank you very much. I hope you found this beneficial and learned something about the situation here in Gaza and hopefully it will be seen in Gaza and everywhere else.

Khawla Al-Muhannadi: Thank you Nur. We feel sad for what we hear, but again, this is what this dialogue is about, to hear the real voices of vulnerable people,

So Nur, our question is, what is the one thing that you can say that in this difficult, almost impossible situation where you, as you put it, you're not facing one enemy; you're facing two enemies. So it's not just the COVID, it's the occupation at the same time, and with all the suffering that comes with it and the

attacks together and the destruction of everything - like you don't have much, but even that not much that you have is getting lost. If I ask you, what is the lesson learned? You are known as the Palestinian Nation, as a nation that is able to survive the impossible. So please give us a lesson from there. What have you learned, Nur?

Nur Al-Agha: Actually every time I get amazed of how people of Gaza are able to be resilient and to fight back, they never give up. And they were many real cases and stories of this, we can see how the medics and the nurses, the doctors, survive their life and, dedicate all their knowledge and time to improve the situation. However, despite all of these problems, the seige and occupation, the airstrikes, et cetera, how well do we see them work day and night on blue, the situation we find, we find we see them innovate and always invent new things. And those are to help people, those who can't have easy access to hospitals and other supplies. There are many applications. They use digital very wisely. So for me, my office, I can use many applications to contact the doctors and the medics, if check for my sister, for example. Yes, the lesson learned to how we will, how these people are resilient. We have to continue fighting back and being resilient.

Khawla Al-Muhannadi: So resourcefulness and resilience, amazing lesson. Carolyn, would you like to ask any question before we move to the next speaker?

Carolyn Schmidt: What has been the most useful support for you from NGOs in the international community? NGOs in other countries - have they been able to help at all?

Nur Al-Agha: Oh, yes, actually. We have received many medical supplies from NGOs in Egypt and Turkey and other countries. So thankfully many families were able to survive because of this aid. Actually many families are mainly depending on these aids received from the international NGOs and the international communities. So yes, the more NGOs we have supporting the Palestinians, the more it helps the situation to be better, the more it helps those people survive during these hard times.

SGN NGO Dialogue Event

Impacts of the pandemic on vulnerable groups AAR Response to COVID-19 for PWDs in Japan

29 September, 2021
HORIE Yoshiteru
AAR Japan

HORIE Yoshiteru, AAR-Japan: Impacts of the pandemic on vulnerable groups: AAR Response to COVID-19 for People With Disabilities in Japan

Hello, this is Horie from Japan. So, my presentation is on the impact of the pandemic of Covid-19 on vulnerable groups, especially PWDs – People With Disabilities- and AAR response in Japan. AAR-Japan is an international NGO that reaches out to the most vulnerable populations around the world. And we are guided by the principles of neutrality and impartiality.

And we are mainly focused on emergency response and support for persons with disabilities, landmine action, and water and sanitation, and so on.

Today, I'm going to talk about the AAR response to the pandemic in Japan. Since last April, we have been conducting support for persons with disabilities affected by COVID-19. The pandemic was declared last March and data show in published papers, disability conservations during the COVID-19 outbreak on last March. It pointed out that persons with disabilities were more susceptible to the effects of COVID-19 and called for additional conservations for them.

Impacts of the COVID-19 to PWDs – persons with disabilities. Some people have respiratory diseases, kidney diseases, diabetes, incurable diseases, requiring medical care and support. If these people are infected with COVID-19, there's a very high risk that their lives may be in danger. In addition, many are in residential facilities and welfare facilities, such as group homes, the places where they live in groups. So measures to prevent infection within the facilities are extremely important. And part of that public support was a little bit limited to these facilities.

This [slide] is an example that shows the risk to dialysis patients. As you can see the percentage of deaths of dialysis patients: in fact, it is nine times higher than among the total number of infected in Japan. So they are very high risk groups. . And these stations, what AAR-Japan has done: so far, we have two main activities. Firstly, the distribution of infection control supplies like masks, disinfectant solutions that were in short supply in the market. And the second is the improvement of IT infrastructure for organizations for PWDs. And we did this, this activity to all areas of Japan.

This is a photo of distribution of masks to kidney disease patients; many kidney disease patients have diabetes, which is a factor in the aggravation of COVID-19, and many of them are elderly. And they need to go to hospitals about three times a week for dialysis treatment. So they desperately needed masks.

And this is another photo of the distribution of infection prevention supplies to welfare facilities for PWDs, in order to prevent cluster infections in welfare facilities for PWDs: rubber gloves, non-contact thermometers, and the protective clothing. All were in short supply in the market.

And this is a photo of the provision of information and communication equipment to organizations for PWDs. We have provided the web conference camera to their organizations. and, what we have done by today was we have supported, 2,771 organizations and facilities and delivered supplies to about 161,000 people. Since support funds tend to flow to the medical fields, support for the people in poverty and the persons with disabilities are often left behind. So AAR-Japan will continue to support them to protect their lives and the places of their daily living. Thank you, that's all of my presentation.

Carolyn Schmidt: Thank you very much, Horie. I have my question for you. I am struck by the fact that I think of Japan as a very, very wealthy and very industrialized society. I am really surprised that your government was not stepping in to do this kind of work for the people with disabilities. Can you comment on your role as an NGO in this situation?

Horie Yoshiteru: Okay, I can, thank you, Carolyn. Yes, I think Japan's governmental assistance to the persons with disabilities is very limited. So much depends on NGOs. So, I think that Japan is a kind of advanced country, but, at the same time, there are many in the pandemic situations, there are so many people who need support. But the main supports are allocated, and *always* the persons with disabilities are left behind. So also we are taking up advocacy to the government and this is changing, gradually, but it still needs more support.

Pandemic implications on Environment

Khawla AL-Muhannadi
President of Environment Friends Society – Bahrain



Khawla Al-Muhannadi: Pandemic implications on Environment

So my presentation is about the pandemic implications on the environment. So I'm not representing Bahrain and I'm not representing my NGO. This presentation is actually a summary of a paper that I published this year. And it's about the pandemic implications on the environment. \$2.5 trillion dollars is what is expected to be needed in order to cope with the damage. And you can expect that with that, there is a huge loss of jobs. According to ILO [International Labour Organization] 25 million people around the world have lost their jobs and 81% have their jobs impacted one way or another. So this is almost everyone.

If you look at the economy, you can see clearly from all what's happened that the linear economy has fallen. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed businesses and societies to the shortfalls of the normal patterns of production, consumption and the long-lasting impact on supply chains. So you would expect that the whole world would want to change to a sustainable business, to circular economy!

Yet, you can see that the initiative, the policies to get us out of the situation, it's still protecting business as usual, sidelining waste management and resource concerns, and creating even more challenges for the environment. But if you look at the principles of circular economy and sustainable economy, you can see that it can mitigate the over-consumption of raw materials and overproduction of waste. And you can see that there are growing small groups who are going in this direction, but more important, there are conversations happening all over the world, mainly amongst NGOs, about the post-COVID reprogramming of linear economy towards a more circular one, where entrepreneurs can play a vital role.

From my study that I made, I was comparing what has been published in 2020 and 2021, about the impact of COVID-19. So when you look at the first glance, the whole world was cheering actually, and thinking that COVID-19 was good for the environment.

So some pollutants, the emissions have got better. There is a decrease in air pollutants, like the NOxes and the SOxes. Yes, there is a change, but is it permanent? Or was it just temporary? And there is a reduction in greenhouse gases globally, but is that permanent?

If you look at the positive externalities, huge decrease in air emissions for some pollutants, improving vision like, people from India will confirm this, that some places we're seeing for the first time by bare eyes. People from Saudi Arabia – Hanouf - can confirm that they were able to see Bahrain from over the bridge from over the sea for the first time, because simply the 2 million cars that used to cross the bridge from Saudi to Bahrain every year have stopped.

We have recorded in the Arabian Gulf and in the specific region, more nesting of turtles, more nesting of birds, good for the environment.

People have seen wildlife in many places that has not been seen before. Greener economy is discussed more, awareness about food security and agriculture for food, more vocal conversation about the shift to circular economy, less travel and more digitization or virtualization. But there is a conflicting phenomenon on this fixture. You can see Bahrain. And this is Bahrain from the side of Saudi Arabia for the first time by bare eyes. People in the Katmandu valley have seen the Mount Everest for the first time.

So this is a slide when I was saying that the world does not want to hear or to see or to understand that the business as usual is not the solution. So if we look at the other side, the environmental impact: okay we have seen some positive impact. The whole world have recorded it. but we know that the global plastic packaging has moved from 909 billion in 2109 US dollars into 1012 .6 billion in 2021. Very good news for the business, 5.5% growth. But what does this mean? It means more plastic, more plastic waste. After all the effort the whole world was doing and fighting the plastic pollution and the plastic bags and moving to a world without plastic.

Protected Areas – Well, protected areas need protection. If we don't have enough attention, enough budget, then wildlife crimes are likely to increase with less surveillance, ,with less financial support. Actually the activities to conserve ecosystems and biodiversity have been restricted. Furthermore less evaluation staff are available. So even if there are more nesting birds, more nesting turtles, we don't have enough people to record that.

So this is the list of the main negative impacts that I found. There is a huge increase in waste, especially plastic. Weakening previous environmental advancement with plastic pollution, weakening existing environmental policies and implementation, and increase in chemical pollution, especially medical waste and new type of medical waste. Weakening existing waste management processes, delaying decisions and global conservation agreements. We have seen this in UNEP [*United Nations Environment Programme*].

Halting research and conservation opportunities, decrease in protection and monitoring, loss of continuity of campaigns like “stop plastic pollution.” Actually we're asked to use plastic. We're asked to use it just one time and throw it away. Huge increase in virtualization, but it has its impact, not just in health, but on the environment. We have huge digital waste. More packaging, loss of agricultural projects due to disruption of the transport and supply chain, especially at the beginning.

The pandemic could result in monthly global consumption and waste of 129 billion face masks. Can you believe that? Billion! 129 billion face masks and 65 billion gloves. And can you guess where all of this will go to? I think The Plastic Ocean and the other amazing films have taught us where all of this will go to.

There are recordings of birds that are entangled in the masks. So it's not just plastic in the ocean and all what we know about the microplastic and polluting the ocean and the food chain and all of this. But, you know, the lining of the masks have managed to entangle the legs, the beaks of birds and kill them slowly. It did the same with crabs. We've seen pictures and records of monkeys dealing with the masks. The masks are made of plastic, and the instruction is use it once and throw it away. We are asked to use plastic gloves. We are asked to package and package and double package. And for safety, we have to use plastic stuff at restaurants. We are ordering food from home and it's coming to us and packaging and packaging, and all of this goes as waste.

So in conclusion, all the procedures and instructions that we have received as people from all over the world about how to deal with the pandemic, it did not have the environment at all as a priority. Not even as a respective sector of how we should be careful not to harm the environment, environment has never been priority in any decision. And in this pandemic, it's suffered even more than what we think. that was my first published paper. I'm writing now, the second one, the situation is even worse than what we knew.

Thank you very much for your attention. And I hope that you will be careful in dealing with the environment in your everyday life actions.

PEDRO CUNHA - LACEMOS

Impacts of the pandemic on vulnerable groups



Brazil

Pedro Cunha: Impacts of the pandemic on vulnerable groups, Brazil

So, first to introduce myself, I'm Pedro Cunha, I'm from Brazil and I'm 31 years old. I used to work with youth for all the last decade, and nowadays I work at civil society and stakeholders engagement. I'm from LACEMOS. LACEDMOS is a platform for Latin America and the Caribbean. and mechanism of involvement for civil society for Latin America and the Caribbean. Our main purpose is to work on info management and to promote participation into decision-making agendas. And I do implementations.

So my first slide, as you can see, we can understand that the diseases like COVID make no distinction, between those who they affect. So in theory, they cause the same disease in the rich and in the poor. But in practice the pandemic has widened the gulf between vulnerable groups and other populations, all over the world.

People at the beginning, there was some doubt that the crisis would affect everyone. And it was like, something that we'll all see and react to the same way. But as also was presented [*in Khawla's presentation, earlier*], the pandemic can sometimes show us how we still think in the old state of mind of understanding the economy, understanding the resources, understanding the way to deal with problems.

People who were marginalized before, now appeared. And something that I will also say that lately, most of the ones that we haven't even heard are mainly because they do not have internet. So nowadays at the moment that we are

living, you probably have seen in different zoom meetings and in different ways, the low and bad [*internet*] connectivity for the poor, especially from those vulnerable places. And how the [*internet*] connectivity is important to promote the assistance, to promote the spread of the word.

Now I will say a bit more about Brazil. We understood that, especially regarding vulnerable groups, there needs to be institutionalized rights, because most of what we faced in regarding COVID and this process after it, were the depression of human rights. We faced a moment in the humanity, again, that the human rights [for different people] were treated by different circumstances.

And some people say, for example, as in Palestine, which was presented about the density of the population and not being able to make social distancing. We had a study that was just launched this week here in Brazil, especially in Rio de Janeiro, saying that the people from these lands were not able to do social distancing. So social distancing, some ways were possible for rich people. And when we see people doing quarantine, we have seen workers with the public transport full of them with a big density inside the bus. Completely unbelievable that in this circumstance that we are living, we still face things like that.

And that their state of mind is, what is worse? To get the COVID or to lose your job, and then to have the family hungry? So Covid was an opportunity to show humanity, but in fact, we have seen some bad things.

In Brazil especially, the public policies and the - I'm not going political here inside this presentation; it's not my purpose to go political -but the system's way, how the vulnerable populations in Brazil were dealing with that. The Indigenous in Brazil, they entered a process in the International Criminal Court with crimes against humanity, because the policies and the assistance that Brazil did against indigenous were like understanding, promotion of genocide. Something that we also faced, especially these indigenous peoples in Brazil, is that as the same way that the poor people were not able to do social distancing, the land grabbers, the people who make deforestation, the environmental impacts that were historically in Brazil comes worse in the COVID. So the people - Carolyn said also about mining - and here in Brazil it's much worse during the pandemic, but not the legal workers, but also the criminals.

This is something that we said here, a lot in Brazil, the criminals didn't learn quarantine, they didn't do social distance. They use that opportunity to go right on with their interests. And, also an environment minister in Brazil, in interview, he said, by these words, that "at this moment that the media is taking a lot of attention to Covid. It's the time to pass a lot of [*changes weakening*] environmental [*regulations*] into the court. " So they make it legal. It's completely

unbelievable. But there was more, that we can see more that lived in the worst scenario here in Brazil, are the Indigenous.

We can see some lessons learned and sometimes not what to do, but what to not do!

So one of them is communication and we saw the meaning and the importance of communication.

Here in Brazil, we, again, face a different scenario. We have people that until now in Brazil, do not believe in Covid, do not believe that Covid is real, you have to do social distancing and you have to take care. So communication has a crucial role, but in Brazil, the fake news also got a diseased circumstance to the collapse that we live in. I put it here in a bigger word, the access, because the access of information is something that you see, in the second comment: the poor internet connection, and also the opportunity to dialogue with the world. The vulnerable places, for example, Indigenous, they have their own languages. You find information, they can find information, but then full of fake news. And then they are not in touch with the world, what is happening in English.

So we can see connectivity and language as two great barriers from Brazil, from Latin America, from the Global South, and the places that not speak English to follow the information and to go by own narratives of fake news, because that was what happened in Brazil.

About coordination. We also see a lack of coordination and the government interpretations that were not useful, but the things that we see people going for themselves in a neighborhood, in a community, in a city, but regarding, for example NGOs. NGOs have that expertise to coordinate the actions, to coordinate the systems. And in Brazil, most of that were done by people that had to do something for their community. They were not able to wait for the government. They were not able to wait for NGOs.

They did not have so much follow-up, they did not have integration. They didn't change the reality of the social network in their territory. I don't know how to say in English, the social network in the territory becomes very punctual, but not us the networks.

And in the end, the worst thing that you can see, as I said, we had the opportunity to show humanity, but we have seen the worst of humankind sometimes. And this regards about corruption, many of the buying - the public, the government buying - were done as emergency needs. ...

But the thing that I would like to bring here is about COVID was not planned. We were not able to plan for COVID and we give the wrong responses, but we are also facing climate change collapse. We are at the climate crisis, and we are also facing the biodiversity extinction. So we could then enact more because we have been advised for decades that the climate, that the biodiversity, will have a setback. We need to change our way to respond to problems. So thank you so much.



JHEP FOUNDATION (INDIA)
RESHMA SAMBARE
(FOUNDER-PRESIDENT)
PRASAD ZAWARE (TRUST
SECRETARY)
WWW.JHEPFOUNDATION.ORG

NGO GLOBAL DIALOGUE -
IMPACTS OF THE PANDEMIC
ON VULNERABLE GROUPS
(PEOPLE AND OTHER LIVING
BEINGS IN OUR SHARED
ENVIRONMENT)
SEPTEMBER 29, 2021

Reshma Sambare, Jhep Foundation, India: Impacts of the Pandemic on Vulnerable Groups

Okay. Great. Well, hello everyone. Thank you for this opportunity to present what we're doing in India, with respect to COVID impacts on vulnerable population and what type of groups. Jhep Foundation is a very new foundation. It's only two years old. So our work is just literally a small drop in the ocean, but there are tens of thousands of NGOs doing amazing work in India since March of 2020. And the work continues at all levels.

Of course the government, it [COVID-19] caught the government agencies off guard. So, they were not ready. They were not expecting the extent and the size of the impact, but the NGOs were the first to get on the ground and start their work to combat and to mitigate the impact of COVID-19.

A little bit about Jhep: - Jhep primarily focuses on education, empowerment and environment issues, in the rural and tribal areas of India. But since March 2020, we have also added our focus area of COVID-19 relief work. Under COVID-19 relief work our other work, we primarily focused on food distribution,

distribution of masks and sanitizers, and also making smartphones available to certain poor rural areas. Again, as I said, this was just a drop in the ocean with what we are doing, but there are other NGOs that are doing this work at a much, much larger scale. And without the NGOs' work, the impact of the COVID in India would have been thousand times bigger, if not more. This is just a glimpse here.

Here, what I'm doing is, this is not just about what Jhep's work is, but to our observations and to our research. And these are just highlights to show how the impact on education has been and continues to be in India. Basically in India, the access to digital devices, internet, computers is still pretty, pretty rare. You will be surprised to hear the numbers that the latest survey among all over India, the school going students, has been the access to internet and smart phones has been listed between 4% to 6%, only 4% to 6% of students currently have access to smartphones or internet or some other device. So basically everybody else is left at the mercy of some other form of learning, while the schools continue to remain closed for the past 20 months almost. Then another survey has shown that the learning for these rural tribal area school kids, and also poorer area kids has gone back by as much as four years.

So they've lost now four years worth of learning. And even fourth and fifth and sixth grade students are unable to read or write, in many areas of India. So that was a very unfortunate survey and hopefully a lot more efforts are put in there by the government and other NGOs going forward.

Another big impact on school kids - It's not just on the learning, but also close to 116 million children in India also were in those schools to receive midday meals. So most of them used to go to school to get their meals. And if some learning happened on the side, that would be a bonus. So because of the school closures for the first few months, until the government agencies and school administrations were able to figure out how to get these meals to the students, for many months, they had no access to these midday meals, Which has direct impact on their health, naturally.

Later on the schools have figured out how to get at least the groceries, if not actually cook meals. So even at this point, as of today, dry groceries are being distributed to these kids who were subscribed or enrolled into this midday meal program. So I believe these groceries are distributed maybe twice a month, which are then given to their family members. So hopefully it reaches the kids, but again, that's not guaranteed when you have family of seven or eight. So kids could be the last to receive, especially girl children.

And the very last point here on this slide is about 30 million children between three to six years were also benefited by these integrated child development centers, which is like a daycare, early childhood care program that they were

enrolled in. So of course with the school closures, and these centers still remain closed, so these kids between three to six years are completely missing out on this care. That has also impacted the mothers who couldn't go out to their work, or if they had to go out to work, then the kids were perhaps left home unattended, and all of these will come out probably in few years to see how many generations will be impacted by this lack of care at these early ages of the kids.

This table this time really shows the very stark digital divide between urban and rural areas of India. And you can see the numbers for yourself. How, if the numbers are at a single digit or double digit, then the access to internet for kids is perhaps much lower, because even in the family, if one smartphone is available, first it will go to a father or mother, then a male kid, a male child, and then a female child, if at all, if the time is available on data plan.

Here again, continued impact on education is of course that, even though the government is now working on how to restart or reopen the schools, there is a huge shortage of qualified teachers. What happened when the schools finally came around and decided that, okay, we cannot remain closed forever, but at least we should start offering online teaching. Very, very, very small percentage of teachers were trained to even use technology or teach online or get used to how to do all of these things. And then that's one side of it. Second side, of course, is lack of access to technology, low technology, lack of access to internet. So that's also a big factor, but the teachers themselves are not equipped and they just don't seem to have the capacity. So those percentages are still ranging between 10% to 25%, 10% being in government schools and 25% in private schools where the teachers seemed to know are, seem to have professional qualifications to handle the online teaching. Those are also very troubling numbers.

And lastly, I want to say that, earlier, Pedro mentioned that many places don't even have wash facilities, right? So if you are supposed to reopen the schools, but if you don't have water with this facilities such as even drinking water, functional toilets or even hand wash facility, then even if you reopen the schools just to continue the learning, that will create additional risk for these kids who are first not vaccinated, and second, this new variant seems to impact the kids in a much stronger way than adults. This will only create a much higher risk for the kids, if the schools reopen at this time.

This slide particularly highlights the impacts on girls, transgender children and women. The surveys here in India are showing with evidence that just the school closures alone will result in additional 1 million more girls and transgender children dropping out of school before they complete their education. And this is because once the school closures happen, these kids already did not have much. They have much more struggle to get family to support them, to go out. Because

again transgender is still looked at as a big taboo, not much support in the family or the society.

End of the panelists' presentations

Khawla Al-Muhannadi: We will now give the chance to three of the participants who have asked us the floor

Dr. Khalid Alwahli: Thank you for giving me the opportunity to talk at your global NGO discussion. I would like to highlight the following points on the restrictions on movement in Palestine. Restricting movement is one of the main tools that Israel employs to impose its regime of occupation over the Palestinian population in the Occupied Territories. Israel restricts the movement of Palestinians between the West Bank and Gaza Strip, into Israel, and abroad. Only Palestinians are restricted in this manner, while settlers and other civilians are free to travel.

As you know, in March and April, 2020, while much of the world was adjusting to a new normal of lock downs and curfews, many Palestinians experienced the recovery of familiar circumstances when the first few COVID-19 cases were identified near Bethlehem. Moreover, Jordan closed the main entry and exit point for West Bank Palestinians. So in addition to the restrictions of movement due to COVID, they were still living under military type closure. Can you imagine that over 700 road obstacles controlled Palestinian movement within the West Bank, including the military, permanent and flying checkpoints between the villages and towns? And all these measures of course affected all aspects of our life. The travel movement within the West Bank and even to Jerusalem during the COVID 19 is considered the worst period of movement restrictions under Israeli occupation. Thank you so much.

Khawla Al-Muhannadi: Thank you very much, Dr. Khalid. Now, Afnan will represent the children who are attending today with us, and we are very proud of having this young generation with us.

[Afnan Dawoud presented in Arabic; Khawla then summarized in English]

Khawla Al-Muhannadi: Afnan said about children's contribution during the COVID 19. She is a Palestinian who lives in Jordan. What they did is when they learned about the masks and what they do of harm to the environment, she and her colleagues in the Reem Program for little environmentalists took their own masks, they did not throw them away. They wash them, they dry them under the sun, and then they turn them into hair clips, into flowers that they use at home. And she said, maybe this is not too much, but this is our little contribution,

because we don't want the environment to be polluted by something we are forced to use every day and forced to throw away.

So I would say congratulations, you have done something that others did not do. So this is amazing to hear.

[Now] Rashid represents the pastoralists in Kenya, those people who live in the deserts and facing droughts at the time of corona, and they are most definitely vulnerable groups. And we want to know how they coped with that.

Mohamed Rashid: My name's Mohamed Rashid, and I'm very glad to attend this meeting. I represent an organization based in Northern Kenya region. Thank you, and I want to share, briefly, the impact of COVID-19 on a pastoralist community.

Just to tell you, pastoralists are communities that mainly rely on livestock for livelihood. And therefore immediately after the pandemic of COVID-19 the initiative of putting in place measures to stop COVID-19 had also impacted on our way of life, especially how we do our livestock trade. Because in a bid to stop the spread of COVID-19, for example, the closure of farmers' livestock markets was imposed, and this really affected the buying and selling of our livestock, including the camels the goats, the sheep. And this to the pastoralist community is, this is where they get their income; basically the income of pastoralists' communities emanates from livestock keeping.

So you can imagine the impact it had on them, especially on their daily life and how they progress in terms of economic empowerment. Especially women play a very key role in our livestock economy, because the sale of livestock products, especially milk is income-generating for our livestock farmers. This particular production, women play a key role in the sale of these products. So, different populations of course were affected. And you can imagine from here how different segments of pastoralist communities were affected including women. And of course, again, there today also come in here.

Livestock, as I said, play a very significant role in terms of improving, the economic status of our society. Thank you all. And that's all I wanted to share.

Khawla Al-Muhannadi: Thank you very much, Rashid.

Carolyn Schmidt: Well first thank you, Rashid for sticking with us and being able to get your message, of the pastoralist situation in Kenya, out to this much larger global audience. We really appreciate you and everyone sticking with us through all the technical issues to make this global discussion happen. We will be

doing our best to share this whole presentation in a way that people can access it. Khawla and I will discuss it before we end today.

But I wanted to say, I guess the main thing I've gotten from all these presentations is the impact of COVID-19 having magnified the problems for the vulnerable groups. And I am wondering, struggling with in my own mind, just how we can all best work to deal with this situation. I'll put that out as a thought question for all of us. And in the interest of time, we should probably turn it back to Khawla for the closing comments.

Khawla Al-Muhannadi: Actually, when I look at it, and I remember what has been said in this dialogue, I think many voices who have not been heard in such a conference are heard for the first time. I'm so happy to hear them. Although most of them are very painful and I think I won't sleep tonight thinking of how can we help? How can we make things better? But then that was the idea.

I just want to remind us all that the reason why we came out to the idea of having this dialogue is for us as the NGOs, the conscience of the world, people who care about social responsibility, who care about others, about human rights. We want to understand, we want to know, because we don't know it all. No one knows it all.

It's only those people who are living it. They know how it is. How does it feel? What are the implications? And how other people can help them? How other NGOs can help? So I'm really very much grateful for every speaker who has shared parts of their daily suffering, their daily agony in these difficult times. Everyone is having their share, but vulnerable groups, people and other living beings in our shared environments are suffering the most. And we need to know it. We need to do something about it. I'm so glad that Afnan, our dearest dearest Afnan, has given us hope by telling us how children have found an opportunity to make a difference. And they went and they did it. This is amazing. This is an inspiration for all of us. And as Carolyn said, it doesn't end here....

Through these Global Dialogue events, we discover more and more, how are people living, how are other beings living, and how can we be better human beings? How can we care more? How can we look around us and be responsible for everything we do. Are we responsible consumers? Do we know how it was made? Do we know if people were enslaved in the process of making it? Do we know if environments have been destroyed for making it. Is it necessary? Do we really cannot live without it? Is everything we use, because we really need that, or do we use it just because we can, and we can afford it? Do we think of the consequences of our decisions, of our actions, and even of our words, because sometimes words have more consequences than anything else. I'm so happy that I hear the voice of Palestine today, strong and loud. And I would say, keep it up.

You taught us today about resilience, about persistence and about resourcefulness. I think, yes, all of us have to be resourceful. All of us have to use everything that we can use to make life a better place.

Not just for us, not just for our direct family, not just for our direct community. That we as NGOs are saying that we represent them for the whole world, everything, every human being, every other living, being in our shared environment.

With these words, I would like to thank you all for being with us today. And I would like to invite you for our next event..... So we want to know, what are the countries that are with us tonight? And I can see dots almost all over the world. Thank you very much, especially for those that the time for them now is very inconvenient, but they still stay with us midnight or early morning. We are from all over the world, which means that we have more responsibility. ...

So with that, I wish you all peace. We say in Bahrain Salaam, which means peace. I hope that each one of you will carry the peace with them. Peace for you, peace for the people around you. And when we talk about vulnerable groups and other countries, please just look close, look at the vulnerable groups in your country, in your community. Maybe you don't see them because you've been used to treating them like they are less, they're not equal, they don't have rights. And it's easy to fail there. It's easy to see the injustice when it happens far away. It's really difficult to see it when it happens in your own home. So my last word to all of us is look close, look at the people who are close to you, because really you can make more impact on those people. They will appreciate it, and you will be able to make the world a better place, if you did something tonight, today, as soon as you can. Peace to you all and good night. Good evening. Good afternoon. Good morning. Thank you very much for being with us.

[Note: This transcript was compiled and edited by Carolyn Schmidt; please call to my attention any mistakes, as they are my responsibility to fix. Email: cschmidt@ecologia.org]