United Nations
Interregional Crime and Justice
Research Institute

Inputs on the Thematic Review of the High-Level Political Forum 2021

I. *Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the implementation of the SDGs under review in the 2021 HLPF from the vantage point of your intergovernmental body, bearing in mind the interlinkages with other SDGs*

The pandemic has significantly affected progress toward goal 16 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Instead of sprinting towards its achievement, this crisis calls for a renewed effort on SDG 16 to achieve more peaceful, just and inclusive societies as the pandemic had a direct impact on its implementation.

Although, in some respects, the crisis ostensibly appears to be even-handed in nature, affecting all segments of the population, all sectors of the economy, and all regions of the world, the pandemic exacerbates pre-existing vulnerabilities of certain groups, including the youth. Indeed, the pandemic has made inequalities in societies even more evident, with severe disparities becoming evident within and across countries, for instance with respect to access to basic goods, health care, social protection, employment opportunities, education and justice. Vulnerable groups, including minors, women, migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, elderly, people with disabilities, detainees in correction facilities, people with substance use disorders or affected by mental illness, etc. find themselves exposed to risks, not only those derived from the exposure to the virus itself, but also in terms of the discrimination, exploitation and violence. These risk may even be unintentionally generated by the measures implemented in an effort to contain the spread.

As a consequence of the pandemic, the fragility of the economic sector was exploited by organized crime to expand business and influence. Criminal groups have demonstrated how opportunistic they have been during the pandemic, particularly in the area of counterfeiting and infiltration into the legal economy. Organized criminal groups have exploited the vast amount of resources allocated and distributed by States in response to the pandemic, and have used this dynamic to corrupt public officials, siphoning funds away from key sectors, such as health care, education and social protection services.

There are indications that the COVID-19 pandemic has been integrated into terrorist groups' narratives and propaganda, that these narratives have spread across social media platforms and that young people – with increased time spent online – have been impacted by extremist ideas. The pandemic has exacerbated the use of social media as a breeding ground for the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation by non-state actors. The proliferation of misinformation and disinformation has jeopardized the efficacy and credibility of governmental responses to the

pandemic. It has been demonstrated how the most vulnerable – including women and children – have been disproportionately affected by the crisis, subjecting these groups to a greater incidence of human trafficking.

Human trafficking has opened up economic opportunities for organized criminal groups, in light of pandemic-induced limitations on criminal justice responses. Support services for victims have also been inhibited during the pandemic. Although traditional systems and venues of exploitation were thrown into disarray due to movement restrictions and the interruption of numerous economic activities, traffickers identified other modalities to maintain their revenue through new or expanded forms of exploitation.

Trafficking and online sexual exploitation are examples of how traffickers have kept their revenue intact and have enhanced their control over victims, particularly women and girls. Online child sexual exploitation has drastically increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, creating a dangerous enclave for pedophiles, abusers and other malicious actors. Many children across the world have become "at risk" to criminal predators who have adapted to the crisis and exploited the vulnerability of young people, generating a parallel pandemic.

Basic human rights, including the right to education, have been impacted during the pandemic. For many, family life during lockdowns has been highly stressful: schools have closed, and socialization has been significantly limited. This has exacerbated the harm of the crisis on young people and children. Increased stress at home for entire families has served to exacerbate already-unstable relationships, with implications on children's well-being.

The pandemic has impacted gender inequality; this has posed serious human rights challenges, principally evidenced by increases in domestic violence. Considering that a significant percentage (40%) of all employed women work in key sectors most affected by COVID-19, women have become more dependent on public resources and require more urgent access to a limited supply of essential goods.

Equally, emergency measures taken by Member States to cope with the pandemic have, in some cases, negatively impacted individuals, sometimes violating some human rights, such as the right of access to justice and the right to a fair trial in a timely manner. Other liberties have been curtailed, including the freedom of assembly and the freedom to peacefully protest. In some cases, governmental responses to the pandemic have had a disproportionate impact on citizens' ability to obtain or maintain gainful employment (and income), as well as their ability to access many needed social and health care services.

The pandemic also created crises within justice sectors. Courts, justice systems and security systems experienced a significant slowdown, with interruption of activities, reduction of available staff and suspension of hearings; this dynamic occurred with a concomitant rise in family disputes, gender-based violence, labour disputes, increased obstacles in access to social security benefits, housing disputes, evictions and bankruptcies. In many countries, overloaded justice systems face an increasing backlog of cases, and individuals and businesses seeking resolution of their cases

are becoming increasingly frustrated with the inability of justice systems to address their grievances.

For people in prisons and detention centres, the suspension or limitation of court activities has resulted in extended stays in detention and has affected the right to a fair and timely trial. Access to lawyers and legal aid has also been affected. Basic health and safety requirements of physical distancing, in already-congested detention centres and prisons, have not only jeopardized the health of detainees, but have brought into question how to handle such dynamics in the future. Governmental responses to the pandemic have meant that prison systems and incarceration centres have taken measures to restrict visiting rights, imposing greater isolation and mental health challenges on detainees, as well as their family members.

II. *Actions, policy guidance, progress, challenges and areas requiring urgent attention in relation to the SDGs and to the theme within the area under the purview of your intergovernmental body*

The importance of bolstering support to vulnerable groups in times of major health crises, the sharing of lessons learned and good practices, and the need to further strengthen international collaboration to ensure the provision of continuous support and technical assistance to Member States (particularly to Member States with fewer means to protect vulnerable groups) should be emphasized. It is crucial that Member States continue to allocate proper resources to prevent the dynamics mentioned above, and to seek the assistance and support of the private sector as well as local communities and civil society organizations in a joint effort to build resilience, and to support conflict resolution. In times of crises, optimization of resources and complementarity of actions and responses from key actors and stakeholders is of utmost importance, as well as the need to collect reliable data and context-based information, as this latter tool will inform and guide decision-making processes.

In this context, COVID-19 should be considered as an opportunity to emerge from the pandemic with improved tools and greater resiliency, particularly with respect to gender equality and child-sensitive interventions. Policy and decision-makers must take into account holistic approaches to protecting – in normal times and during crises – vulnerable groups when considering access to justice and social protection policies and programmes, as well as empowering women and youth to become engaged members of society. Participatory approaches are essential to increase interaction between institutions and civil society in order to ensure that policies and measures adopted reflect local realities, as well as to ensure that there is community "buy-in" and a sense of unity.

III. *An assessment of the situation regarding the principle of "ensuring that no one is left behind" at the global, regional and national levels against of background of the COVID-19 pandemic in achieving the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, within the respective area addressed by your intergovernmental bodies*

As individuals and communities practice social distancing in response to the pandemic, the principle of "ensuring that no one is left behind" faces perhaps its greatest test to date. With inequalities in societies and severe disparities within and across countries becoming increasingly evident, progress toward SDG 16 is undermined. At the same time, growing inequality and discrimination furthermore serves as fertile ground for violent crime, radicalization and conflict to take root.

IV. *Cooperation, measures and commitments at all levels in promoting sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic*

The COVID-19 pandemic has served to reinforce a notion that the United Nations system has long stood for, namely that multilateral cooperation is the key to overcoming global challenges. As Member States struggle to address the health and economic impacts of the pandemic, collective action is required to tackle the far-reaching and common threats that arise as ancillary effect of the pandemic. In this regard, UNICRI has recommitted throughout the pandemic to continue to work with its partners, in particular those within the United Nations systems in an "All-of-UN" approach, to implement its Strategic Priorities and contribute to the realization of SDG 16. Newly forged and redefined partnerships, as well as official statements, remarks and actions to this effect from UNICRI's senior management all the way down to programme staff have served as a testament of this.

V. *Various measures and policy recommendations on building an inclusive and effective path for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda in the context of the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development*

- It is important to consider that States' responses to the pandemic could have, in the long term, negatively affected the existing counter-terrorism and CVE programmes, jeopardizing progress and improvements achieved.
- Promoting trust between institutions and communities is particularly important during this time of crisis, considering that increased vulnerability can make people more exposed to misinformation and propaganda conducive to violent extremism and radicalization leading to terrorism.
- It is essential to engage local communities, including grassroots organizations, independent civil society organizations and women's civil society organizations, to build resilience and support conflict resolution and development during the crisis.
- Civil society needs to be supported by States through more sustainable and long-term measures that integrate the roles and involvement of communities, religious leaders, educators, psycho-social care providers, local governments, media, and parents.
- A participatory approach is essential to increase interaction between institutions and civil society in order to ensure that policies and measures adopted reflect local realities.
- COVID-19 should be considered as an opportunity to build back better by promoting gender equality and child sensitive interventions in a comprehensive and inclusive manner, ensuring

access to justice and social protection policies and programmes, as well as empowering women and youth to become engaged members of society.

- It is important to promote child-sensitive approaches, based on multidisciplinary and multisector interventions, including social protection measures and the strengthening of judicial system through the adoption of community-based alternative measures for young offenders.
- Particular attention must be paid to the recruitment of children by criminal groups, which leads to their exploitation and has consequences on the well-being of the children's families, communities and society at large. This issue has deep economic and social origins, so it cannot be addressed only as a crime problem. In this regard, priority measures should be focusing on prevention, taking into account the role of the families. Such programmes should include three categories: families, children without families and children already in conflict with law.
- The potential role of new technologies in safeguarding vulnerable communities should be explored.
- Leveraging technology, and especially big data tools, can be of great support to implement effective strategies to prevent and counter online disinformation and misinformation, to monitor organized crime activities, including human trafficking-related activities, and to identify potential scenarios.
- The vaccine will also become a huge opportunity for organized crime, especially if the demand will exceed the offer. Organized crime will be ready to infiltrate the market with the counterfeit vaccine.
- Anti-corruption measures should be prioritized in all Response and Recovery plans, strengthening, integrating and mainstreaming the expertise and work of encryption bodies.
- Clear, feasible emergency response frameworks should be developed, while ensuring that institutions have the necessary capacity to fulfil their functions; these plans should ideally engage in public consultations to make sure that the needs and interests of vulnerable groups are being recognized and incorporated.
- It is necessary to engage in international donor coordination to harmonize methods of disbursing funds and ensure that funds reach countries and populations most in need.
- It is essential to address vulnerability at a systematic level to prevent a public health crisis from becoming a human trafficking crisis;
- Any measures taken to limit the spread of the virus must show respect for human rights, the rule of law and international standards. They must be transparent, and our governments must remain accountable for them. Communication is also very important.
- The rule of law and respect for human rights must be upheld despite the safety and health challenges related to the pandemic. The crisis highlighted the important role of justice systems when managing the pandemic, as well as the need for continuity of justice services and responsive and fair systems in order to maintain public trust.