

## RESPONDING TO COVID-19: KEY ADVOCACY MESSAGES

The COVID-19 pandemic is a world-changing event. It is first and foremost a human tragedy affecting hundreds of thousands of people. It is also taking a toll on the global economy exposing and magnifying different forms of inequalities. The full scale of the impact of the virus is hard to predict, but even just these two facts should suffice for global leaders to reconsider how priorities have been set and what those priorities should be. Now is the moment to build on lessons from the past and to think constructively about the future so as to 'build back better'. CONCORD Europe believes the following elements are important for EU leaders to consider in order to shape our common future.

### Solidarity first

Solidarity should be the guiding force for the EU at all stages and as plans for recovery are developed, the EU - and the global donor community - should not lose sight of its commitment to work with and to support partner countries **to achieve a prosperous and sustainable future for people and the planet**, in line with 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement. Strengthening the resilience of societies, economies and the environment and reorienting policy and funding to ensure that our systems are geared to benefitting all people and the planet should be a primary focus of the EU's long-term support. Solidarity is needed with **all regions in the world** - Africa, Asia, the Neighbourhood, Latin America, and the Caribbean and Pacific regions.

For more information, please see: [If we can save banks to the tune of trillions of dollars, how much are human lives and livelihoods worth?](#)

### Tackling inequalities

The COVID-19 pandemic is affecting both the developed and developing world and has exposed and amplified fragilities and inequalities in our societies. Existing inequalities affecting women and young people and discrimination of other marginalised groups, such as persons with disabilities and those in extreme poverty, have been particularly worsened. The design of policy responses must take this into consideration.

Efforts aimed at tackling inequalities should be a clear priority, both via targeted actions and mainstreaming in all policies, geographic and thematic programmes and bi-regional partnership agreements. Other actions needed include: boosting aid levels in support of partner countries, with long-term, massive investment in human development; focusing on the rights of women and girls; promoting labour rights and environmental standards; supporting the progressive collection of taxes, closing loopholes and addressing tax

avoidance; working with EU Member States in the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and G20 to ensure debt cancellation; safeguarding and increasing direct and flexible support to civil society; and tackling the drivers of nature loss and climate change.

For more information, please see: [Responding to COVID-19: Forging a path to an equitable future](#)

### **Gender equality**

Disease outbreaks affect women and men differently, and pandemics make existing inequalities for women and girls worse. In addition, women often work on the front lines of a crisis (for example, in healthcare services and in retail). The pandemic is already causing a rise in sexual and gender-based violence, while limiting at the same time the access to sexual and reproductive health and rights services. **Engagement of girls and women should be ensured and promoted, in all stages** of the response, including in health, education, economic recovery and taxation.

For more information, please see: [Analysis of EU Gender Action Plan strategy](#)

### **Social protection**

The lockdowns and the closure of borders have had an immediate, negative impact on the income of the poor and of vulnerable households. The COVID-19 pandemic re-emphasises the urgent need, already stated in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, to promote massive **investments in public services** and in **access to social protection**. This is crucial to providing a safety net to ensure that no one is left behind.

### **Universal access to health services**

It is in everyone's interest to **ensure universal access to health services, without discrimination**. Investing in good quality and resilient public health systems accessible to all is as important as ever, not only to respond to COVID-19, but also to ensure the continuity of other life-saving and public health interventions. The EU must prioritise funding to health systems strengthening and ensuring that its support to partner countries is coordinated across all its institutions and with Member States.

### **Education**

In the face of unprecedented school closures, many children are out of school; some of them (especially girls) will never return. In contexts of extreme poverty, marginalisation or crisis, where accessing education has already been a struggle, it is necessary **to ensure every child and youth can continue their education and learning**. Special consideration should be given to the most excluded children such as those with disabilities. Teachers, non-formal education providers and communities must be supported to ensure inclusive methods of distance learning and minimise the digital divide, with particular attention paid to accessibility and gender issues.

### Food security

COVID-19 has exposed the strengths, fragilities and weaknesses in our food systems. The policy response must address **food and nutrition security, as well as water and sanitation, particularly among the most marginalised and those in extreme poverty, including women and girls**, by empowering women farmers and food producers, and protecting territorial markets. It is important that the EU supports local initiatives, notably led by local authorities and producers' cooperatives, to connect local consumers and producers. Stabilising food prices on local markets and providing an enabling and stable context for smallholder farmers and other small-scale food producers is critical. Support for food reserves, and cash or in-kind transfers depending on the local situation, should also be considered.

For more information, please see: [EU's path to a strategy with Africa in uncertain times](#)

### Sustainable economic model

The EU and Member States should take this opportunity to steer away from gross domestic product (GDP) growth as the main objective for the economy, given that it does little to create wellbeing for all, has not supported investment where it is clearly needed and is highly vulnerable to shocks. This crisis offers an opportunity to pursue **sustainable and inclusive economic development**, to prioritise local micro, small and medium-sized enterprises as well as mission-driven enterprises and demand more from companies in social and environmental terms.

The pandemic highlights the importance of supporting partner countries' efforts to increase **domestic resource mobilisation**, which would enable the delivery of quality and universal public services. Therefore, much greater importance must be given to **fighting illicit financial flows**, promoting **progressive tax systems**, **lowering remittances costs** and reviewing tax treaties.

### Green recovery (consideration of climate and environment)

Any mid- to long-term recovery plans should maintain and **strengthen existing environmental and climate standards and policies**, and should avoid environmentally harmful activities. A transparent and complete screening of the environmental impacts of stimulus measures in partner countries would add significantly to the coherence of those measures and avoid creating perverse and unintended environmental consequences that could damage the future resilience and environmental health of societies. Further, the EU's response packages in partner countries aimed at stimulating the economy should be aligned with **ambitions on climate change, biodiversity and wider environmental protection**, as well as addressing inequalities, and should be screened for unintended negative environmental impacts.

### Support to civil society organisations

Restrictions on civil society space are an obstacle to development and humanitarian work, stifling a successful recovery after an emergency. The EU must promote **enabling frameworks for civil society organisations (CSOs)** to participate in the decision-making and complement governments' efforts to overcome this crisis and its socioeconomic consequences. Civil society organisations are key to reaching and supporting local communities.

Where countries have instituted lockdowns, the staff and volunteers of CSOs, who are providing vital community services, should be included in the list of key workers. To carry out these services, **freedom of operation, movement and access to affected communities** should be enabled, including respect of protective measures and the provision of protective materials for CSOs workers. To ensure coherence of action, the participation of local CSOs in national response plans, clusters and other coordination structures will be of paramount importance.

### Civic space and human rights

Freedom of expression, access to information, transparency and civic participation are more important than ever in times of pandemics, where states of emergency and exceptional restrictions on fundamental rights are being adopted in the name of protecting public health. **Support to human rights, civic space, the rule of law and participatory democracy** therefore needs to be maintained, during and after the crisis. Civil society should also have the space to support greater accountability of state institutions towards people, demanding that the authorities fulfil their obligations with regards to the emergency, including the protection of human rights.

Worldwide, many important political processes are being either cancelled, or turned into virtual assemblies or meetings, with the risk of excluding many parts of the population. It is key to ensure that COVID-19 does not exacerbate the 'shrinking space' phenomenon, by stepping up efforts to organise **meaningful consultations** with civil society.

For more information, please see: [The Future of Civil Society organizations](#)

### Financial solutions

With the focus on addressing the immediate issues of post-COVID-19 recovery, the EU and Member States must maintain, or where not achieved, realise, their current **official development assistance (ODA) commitments**. CONCORD sees a risk that donors may wish to prioritise post-COVID-19 domestic recovery plans, to the detriment of international solidarity. To make a real difference, we call for an increase in ODA.

Any multilateral efforts should focus on providing **debt relief** and aid with the **highest degree of concessionality, prioritising grant-based finance** over loans for highly indebted countries and ensuring that there are no grant/loan conditionalities that would impose or result in further cuts in public services. At all stages, the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and its economic impacts, should respect the development effectiveness principles and ensure there is no tied aid, in particular concerning the purchasing of medical supplies, medication and vaccines.

Support provided with blending facilities, guarantee funds and other incentives to the private sector should address the needs of local, small-scale economic actors and producers and should not contribute to the privatisation of public services such as health and education. Lastly, CONCORD Europe strongly encourages the European Commission to redirect some of the private finance instruments towards grant-based support for countries most in need.

For more information, please see: [It's not the end, it's just the beginning: With COVID-19, now is the time to boost aid](#)

### **Policy coherence**

In the context of COVID-19, CONCORD Europe urges the EU to focus on developing a common strategy to make stronger linkages and **ensure policy coherence** between the various levels and spheres of action, including in its external responses. With COVID-19 being a global pandemic affecting many aspects of life, **the 2030 Agenda must guide us through a just recovery**, with all policies being aligned to it. The absence of policy coherence for sustainable development (PCSD) is a significant threat to the successful implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and to achieving a healthy and equitable future leaving no one behind. PCSD must be used as a key framework to address policy challenges caused by COVID-19. All EU internal and external policies should be aligned with SDGs across all sectoral policies and programmes.

*This note is based on the advocacy messages developed by different working structures of CONCORD Europe. For a more comprehensive analysis, please contact the Policy and Advocacy Team at CONCORD Europe.*

***Financing and Funding for Sustainable Development*** - Ms. Zuzana Sladkova

***Official Development Assistance and CSOs space*** - Mr. Riccardo Roba

***Inequalities and Sustainable Business models*** - Ms. Lonne Poissonnier

***Regional relations with Africa and Latin America and Global Citizenship Education*** - Ms. Francesca Minniti

***Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development and Gender*** - Ms. Alexandra Rosen

***Trends and Civil society response*** - Ms. Kasia Hanula-Bobbitt



As members of CONCORD, Caritas Europa and CIDSE support the collective work of the Confederation, but do not (fully) endorse the SRHR language used in this statement.