



FORUM OF CATHOLIC INSPIRED NGOs
FORUM DES ONG D'INSPIRATION CATHOLIQUE

Turning vulnerability into opportunity:

Reflecting upon the impact and effects of the pandemic

An invitation to dialogue and collaboration

COVID-19: Turning vulnerability into opportunity

The COVID 19 pandemic has affected our lives, our views and modes of living. It generated new vulnerabilities, pointed in more dramatic ways at existing inequities and questions humanity in its vision and organization. The time has come to decide upon the future we want. In continued efforts to contribute to global fraternity, over 110 Catholic inspired organizations and global networks shared their viewpoints on the first lessons learned by the pandemic and on the ways forward.

1. Global guidance of a different kind to build another future

Various major fields of economic and social activity have been altered or simply put on hold because of the pandemic and the related regulations. Responsive policies mainly focused on reducing the economic impacts and on the evolving health situation in at times controversial ways. Priority has been given to national approaches and to the development of local responses instead of opting for more regional and global approaches. This concurs with the image of the past years which consistently shows how much government responsibility still anchors in outdated definitions limited by national borders and its respective populations even when the nature of the crisis calls for international and global solutions. The more than 10 months of global pandemic crisis have highlighted the inadequacy of a national approach in many ways and even evidenced competitive attitudes between nations. Identifying the origin of the pandemic; obtaining the required sanitary masks, developing procedures limited by borders which repeatedly proved to be irrelevant for such purpose; prioritizing the deliveries of vaccines on national grounds thus also increasing the divide with poorer countries, are all examples of a non-coordinated approach at times ill-presented in comparative and competitive ways. Yet, there is no denying that ever since the second world war and the creation of the United Nations, major efforts at global and regional levels have been made to develop coordination and overcome such attitudes. Today's armed conflicts, ecological concerns and global migration challenges are important international heralds for the need to further strengthen and redesign these efforts. The pandemic adds to this list recapping the fact that health is not just a national good and that there is an undeniable need for a review of the global collaborative models in this and various other fields. Too many policies have been developed based on national perspectives instead of building on a globally shared concern for durable conflict resolutions, ecologic balance, migratory movements, increased levels of equity and global health.

Reviewing the intergovernmental institutions and procedures has been on the agenda for the past years but these efforts mainly started from structural points of view without opting for the more fundamental change in focal points. A shared vision on the common future of global humanity is not to be built on the sum of nations, but by the nations. This very perspective had been acknowledged in terms of protection of humanity after the Second World War, then resulting in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It appears however that actions and implementations over the past decennia tend to unravel, divide and demote this global conscience. Today, the pandemic highlights the urgent need to further enhance and implement the concept of protecting humanity but even more so to prepare for next steps in building the future of global humanity.

2. It takes more than economic recovery to protect humanity

The pandemic also reveals that restoring the economy and a return to previous models will reveal an amplified magnitude in the former divides, inequities and vulnerabilities. Yet, the

overall desire to restore the previous “normal” is frequently heard. Most prescribed procedures mirror this anxiousness and build on these feelings to offer perspectives and paths of return. Billions of dollars and euros have been injected to safeguard the economy and support scientific research for possible cures. Even the announcement of a life-saving vaccine is today much more understood as a key to re-establish the way back to former securities and relations. Yet history learns that there is no way back but only a way forward. Post-crisis situations rarely picture a restored past to be identical to the pre-crisis situation but rather illustrate how much post-crisis developments have integrated the facts, considerations and consequences of the crisis. Both individual and community-based memories then help reconfigure a new but already different social cohesion. All social nuclei, ranging from family, education systems, labour market and the many kinds of socio-cultural gatherings, are essential in such a process. Social dynamics should therefore be given higher consideration and be promoted in genuine efforts to help bend the river. Feelings of hope and shared vision are crucial in such a process. The more these efforts grow to become a well integrated part of the ways forward, the more the profit-oriented paradigm of the past can be adapted to include a sustainable person-centered approach.

3. The need to reassess priorities and revive social dialogue

The pandemic generated new concerns and raised an infinite number of uncertainties on the next move forward. It has exacerbated inequities and widened many of the already existing gaps. The concern for global ecology - though better understood than ever - became less of a priority; vulnerabilities increased and pictured in sharper ways the need for more solidarity; human loneliness intensified and occasioned existential fears, trauma and mistrust; poverty, malnutrition and hunger affected many more people than ever before; development and humanitarian aid programs were reduced; individualism, nationalism and self-defensive attitudes increased; migrants and refugees found closed borders and were denied access by self-protective communities and minds; some of the former systems and processes revealed their non-sustainability; precarious social and economic situations including debt bondage of nations raise major questions for future global development models. Concerns have also grown over the increase of government power: democratic debates and the principle of subsidiarity were at times overstepped. Some states decided on new measures or laws affecting legal protection of life, parental rights, education and religious freedom.

The vulnerability of the elderly augmented showing disproportionate numbers of virus affected patients; jobs could not be found or were lost; family income was reduced plunging many more to live below minimum standard levels thus generating feelings of isolation and despair; informal economy actors are left destitute; reference contacts and points faded; spiritual care and religious freedom were reduced while the search for more in depth empathy has become evident; inadequate and contradictory communications on the evolving situation furthered doubts and anxieties. All of the above contribute to the risk of dropping out, to hopelessness, increased violence and drug abuse.

Consequences will only gradually become fully measurable which is to say that there is still time to reassess priorities and to revive social dialogue. Without positive and corrective responses that will provide for new perspectives and give new hope, the risks for a further increase of individualism and for conflicts and violence are intensified. The pandemic thus emphasizes the need to promote and support the efforts of the many volunteers and committed social actors: their messages and actions of fraternity and solidarity contribute to enhance the hope and resilience essential to build a future perspective.

4. *Positives to build on*

Apart from developing the necessary corrective models, there is a need to accompany and further strengthen the positive dynamics that have emerged during this crisis: families have suffered but in so many cases also proved to be a supportive nucleus to counter and protect. Their role as primary educators has clearly emerged not to be ignored again. International communications have improved and actually widened connecting even more people sharing the same concerns and hope; new competencies were developed opening perspectives for a people centered mentality; earlier civil society proposals such as the cancellation of debt and the lifting of economic sanctions were given new impetus and urgency. The interconnection of human existence, ecologic systems and the pandemic increased consciousness on the need to care for our common home. All of these promising elements are clear signs of a genuine search for more collaborative ways forward and for the awakening of a new mentality. The 2020 Christmas star is born and today's kings of all nations are invited to saddle their camels and horses to follow the path. Recovery efforts need to go beyond the economic focus and aim at inclusion, sustainability and global unity. As this search for change is concurrent with the UN motto to *leave no one behind*, the United Nations is expected to revive and revalue dialogue including civil society in concerted efforts to help delineate clear objectives and targets and to actively promote a culture of care and solidarity in globally organized and better shared responsibility.

5. *Towards a modified structural build up of our societies*

The Forum of Catholic inspired NGO's therefore chose to consider the pandemic as an opportunity to redesign a future based on unity and global fraternity. They therefore intend to further promote the paths to social inclusion¹, person centered approaches and awareness of the interactions between human existence and ecology. Their communications and actions will aim at communion, further intensified care for all and for our common home, and at the better understanding of global humanity as one fraternity. They fully realize new pandemics are likely to appear in the future for which all populations and their leaders urgently need to reconsider the interrelations and the social cohesion of a future global community. Their commitments in the respective fields of education, human rights, development, migration, health, family, and the valorization of youth's responsibility in contributing to a global process, will seek to value and preserve fraternal relationships, promote the need for global interaction of leaders, experts and social actors, and lead to revive social dialogue without which any future remains crippled and non-sustainable.

It is believed humanity is once again at a cross-roads: we either choose to restore the former human, commercial and institutional relations or we gradually build on new ways of thinking and being in shared responsibility, peace and fraternity.² The second may seem less certain and less securing in the short term, but it offers hope, essential for mankind's future.

Johan Ketelers
January 1st, 2021

¹ See the 2020 publication *Toward a More Inclusive Society* by the Forum of Catholic-inspired Organizations.

² Cfr. the message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the celebration of the 54th World Day of Peace – January 2021, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/fr/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco_20201208_messaggio-54giornatamondiale-pace2021.html.