



ANNUAL REPORT



CENTER FOR ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RIGHTS

SOCIAL JUSTICE THROUGH HUMAN RIGHTS

2019



NOTE FROM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR IGNACIO SAIZ

“I never intend to adjust myself to the tragic inequalities of an economic system which takes necessities from the masses to give luxuries to the classes.” –Martin Luther King Jr.

These words capture two essential features of extreme economic inequality: how deliberately it is engineered and how easily it risks being naturalized. In 2019, fifty years on from King’s death, they took on a renewed resonance, as millions took to the streets from Santiago to Beirut in outrage at growing inequality and precarity, at a time when the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few billionaires reached a historic new high.

Throughout this turbulent year, CESR worked to expose the roots of inequality in tax and budget policies designed to enrich the few at the expense of the many. We used human rights tools and strategies to challenge these unjust policies, standing with those most affected by them – from Indigenous communities in the Andean region to mine-workers in Botswana. And we made inroads in securing commitments from influential institutions such as the IMF to take human rights duties seriously in economic decision-making.

At the end of the year, we began a process of reflection and consultation aimed at designing a new organizational strategy for 2020 – 2023 to build on these efforts and enhance their impact. We surveyed the state of socioeconomic rights abuses and inequalities, and asked ourselves and others some tough questions about how to shift the systemic failures giving rise to them. The COVID-19 pandemic that unfolded in early 2020 brought these failures – from precarious labor markets to depleted public services – starkly to the fore, and made the need to address them all the more urgent.

The new strategy emerging from this process has [Envisioning a Rights-Based Economy](#) as its goal. We are now working to catalyze action towards that vision, in collaboration with others striving for economic, social and environmental justice. We believe cross-movement alliances – anchored in a progressive vision of human rights that embraces their socioeconomic and egalitarian dimensions – can play a critical role in achieving this. A just recovery from the pandemic should not “adjust” to the unequal system King railed against, but disrupt it. We urge you to join us in this existentially important task.



OUR VISION, MISSION AND VALUES

The Center for Economic and Social Rights (CESR) is an international nongovernmental organization dedicated to ensuring that everyone has access to health, education, food, housing, work and other economic and social rights to which all human beings are entitled.

Our vision is of a world in which a just distribution of resources and power enables current and future generations to live with dignity, in full enjoyment of these rights.

In pursuit of that vision, our mission is to harness the power of human rights to inspire fairer and more sustainable economies.

We work with partners around the world to use international human rights standards and strategies to challenge economic policies that fuel deprivation and inequality. We produce cutting-edge collaborative research on how unjust policies and systems undermine people’s rights. We use this research to advocate for rights-responsive alternatives, and to build the body of skills, knowledge and tactics that others in the human rights, economic and environmental justice fields can draw on in their work.

The values we seek to reflect and hold ourselves to in our work, our partnerships and our workplaces include: *Collaboration, Creativity, Mutual learning, Solidarity, Intersectionality, and Boldness.*

Our international and interdisciplinary staff team based in New York, Johannesburg and Bogota is drawn from the human rights, development and social justice movements in different parts of the world.



Photo by CESR



CESR'S WORK IN 2019: FIGHTING INEQUALITY THROUGH HUMAN RIGHTS

2019 saw a global wave of popular protests demanding an end to extreme social and economic inequalities and urgent action against climate breakdown. Mass mobilizations from Chile and Ecuador to Lebanon and Baghdad showed how popular discontent boils over when governments are unresponsive to their socioeconomic rights obligations.

OUR APPROACH

For decades, CESR's work has challenged many of the same disturbing trends the protests called attention to. In collaboration with many partners and allies, we've documented the human rights impacts of rising wealth concentration—exacerbated by austerity measures—and called out the chronic underfunding of public services essential for people to realize their rights.

In 2019, the need for interdisciplinary and human rights-based approaches to tackle the root causes of inequality was plain.

In this context, we challenged ourselves and others in the human rights movement to adopt a stronger critique of neoliberal economic and political systems, and squarely address the inequalities and rights deprivations these bring about.

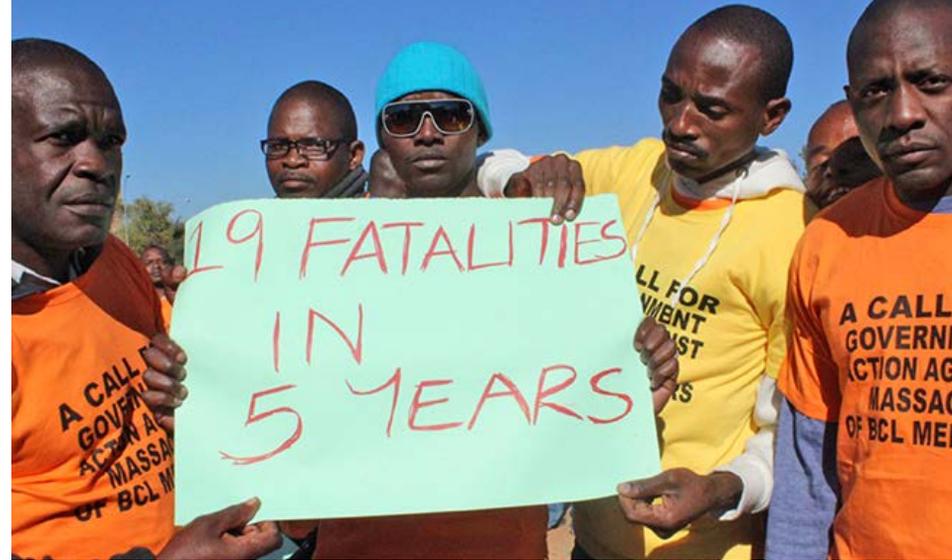


Photo by Botswana Labour Migrants Association

We intensified efforts to strengthen skills and capacities to establish the connections between economic inequality and human rights—a blindspot within our field. We also supported environmental defenders from the Global South who are taking on the power structures that have long privileged private profit over the public good, ensuring their voices are heard in global debates on sustainable development models.

"CESR is an important global anchor in the human rights movement. At a time when many are reluctant to confront economic inequality as a human rights concern, CESR has done pioneering research and campaigning on it, making a big difference."

—Irene Khan | UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression



OUR ADVOCACY

Our advocacy drew on in-depth research conducted in several countries, showing how unjust fiscal policies fuel inequality and deprive people of their basic rights. In Peru, our findings showed that regressive tax and budget policies were underfunding State initiatives to respond to cancer and guarantee the right to bilingual, intercultural education, leading to harmful inequalities among Indigenous peoples, women and low-income populations. In Egypt, our analysis of indicators related to nutrition, water and sanitation revealed critical gaps in the data necessary to properly judge the country's human rights performance on these issues—nationally and between particular groups.

OUR COLLABORATIONS

We fostered cross-movement collaborations to challenge inequality on the regional and international levels. For example, we established new alliances with Indigenous and Afro-descendant leaders in the Andean Region; convened human rights and fiscal policy experts in Latin America to draft a set of principles and guidelines that translate normative standards into clear prescriptions for the design of tax and budget policies; and we brought together activists from the development, trade union, and tax justice movements during the High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) to discuss the human rights aspects of their struggles. These efforts were instrumental in prompting greater institutional commitments to addressing inequalities, from human rights oversight bodies and from powerful policy influencers, such as prominent economists working for global tax reform.



Fiscal Policy and the Rights of Indigenous and Afro-descen...

"WHAT WOULD IT MEAN TO HAVE NON-RACIST FISCAL POLICIES?"
INDIGENOUS AND AFRO-DESCENDANT VOICES ON FISCAL RACISM IN COLOMBIA AND PERU



CLICK ON
THE **VIDEO**

"When we learnt about CESR's tools for monitoring fiscal policy we wanted to see how these could be applied with an ethnic-racial focus, so that our Indigenous communities could adopt them to engage with budget processes, which can be so hard to understand and assess."

—Lina Marcela Tobón Yagarí | Director, Comunidad de Juristas Akubadoura

"CESR's cutting edge work in the field of economics and human rights has been enormously useful to our work in South Africa. The Center is a thought leader in this field and successfully deploys human rights to tackle issues of the economy and socio-economic inequalities. This has amplified our local work greatly."

—Gilad Isaacs | Co-director, Institute for Economic Justice



WHERE WE WORKED IN 2019

Click on each country or region to learn more



● LATIN AMERICA & THE CARIBBEAN

CESR collaborated with leading human rights and economic justice organizations from Mexico, Colombia, Brazil and Argentina as well as high profile experts from the region to draft a set of forward-looking principles and guidelines designed to ensure rights-affirming fiscal policies are adopted in the most unequal region in the world.



● ECUADOR

CESR and partners called on the IMF to stop prescribing austerity measures fueling indigenous-led protests in the country.



● COLOMBIA

CESR and partners convened a workshop in Bogota with 15 Indigenous and Afro-descendant leaders from Peru and Colombia, to collectively identify practical tools and strategies for linking racial and ethnic discrimination, environmental injustice, and fiscal policy.



● PERU

CESR's in-depth research traced disparities in women's access to cancer care and Indigenous communities' access to bilingual education to regressive fiscal policies, producing compelling evidence of how these lead to gross inequalities in socioeconomic rights enjoyment.





● EUROPE

CESR was asked by the European Network of National Human Rights Institutions to help expand the skill set for monitoring economic and social rights of members from over 25 national human rights institutions from across the continent.



● MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

CESR contributed to debates on issues affecting civil society across the region, including leading sessions on accountability tools for restricted civil spaces at RightsCon and the inaugural meeting of the EuroMed Rights working group on economic, social and cultural rights.



● SCOTLAND

CESR taught at a hands-on masterclass on the “what, why and how” of human rights budgeting for public servants and civil society representatives, as part of an ongoing collaboration with the Scottish Human Rights Commission.



● EGYPT

CESR and partners published unique datasets on health; education; and food, water and agricultural land gathered through the Egypt Social Progress Indicators (ESPI) and used them to present a truer picture of Egypt's economic and social rights situation.



● BOTSWANA

CESR collaborated with the Botswana Labour Migrants Association and the Center for International Human Rights at Northwestern University to conduct extensive interviews and focus groups with diamond miners and their communities, documenting the rights violations they suffered due to hazardous work conditions.



● SOUTH AFRICA

CESR joined the Institute for Economic Justice and SECTION27 to produce data analysis, scrutinizing the country's uneven record on inequality and the fulfillment of the rights to health and education.



● INDIA

CESR launched a collaborative research project with Nazdeek, a legal empowerment NGO in India, and Harvard University's International Human Rights Clinic, to assess the impacts of the climate crisis on the rights of deprived communities in India.



Click on
each country
or region to
learn more

Photos by César Muñoz/Andes; CESR; Descrifando la Guerra @descifraguerra; Luke Holland @Assume_Media; CESR; ENNHRI; Socialist Party Scotland; FAO/Jordi Vaqué; BoLama; REUTERS/Mike Hutchings; Nazdeek



EXPOSING THE FISCAL ROOTS OF INEQUALITY

In 2019, we made significant progress in framing fiscal policy as a human rights issue and raising awareness about how fiscal austerity measures harm people's rights. We produced much-needed tools for actors in civil society and social movements to use in advocating against policies that worsen inequality. This included [Dismantling the Dogmas](#), a summary of key points for debunking common misconceptions about austerity in Latin America. The briefing draws on empirical evidence, interviews with experts, and regional and international human rights standards. It challenges false narratives about fiscal consolidation and argues for progressive, redistributive tax reforms that guarantee rights and promote sustainable development. These messages continued to find a wider audience; in Colombia an episode of the popular satirical web series [La Pulla](#) attracted over 300,000 views as it drew on our research on tax injustice in the country.

Photos by Carlos Cárdenas; La Pulla



**LOS BENEFICIOS
FAVORECEN A LOS RICOS**

We continued to deepen the evidence base for advocacy on the importance of fiscal policy for realizing rights. In [Peru](#), we worked with civil society organizations and researchers to use [OPERA](#), our analytical framework, to expose gross inequalities in the rights to health and education. The research highlighted the role of regressive fiscal policies in limiting access to bilingual education and adequate cancer care, particularly among Indigenous peoples, women and low-income populations.



We also contributed to important standard setting efforts. The initiative to develop [Principles and Guidelines on Human Rights in Fiscal Policy](#) garnered significant media attention and served as the basis for influential national and regional discussions about putting human rights and social justice at the heart of tax and public spending priorities. CESR steers the project with ACIJ and CELS (Argentina); Dejusticia (Colombia); Fundar (Mexico); INESC (Brazil); and Red de Justicia Fiscal de América Latina y el Caribe (regional).



Translating human rights standards into specific policy proposals is another important strand of this work. CESR served on the Steering Committee of the Independent Commission for the Reform of International Corporate Taxation (ICRICT)—a coalition of leading economists, tax experts and public intellectuals seeking to rewrite the rules of global taxation so they redress inequality and promote sustainable development. We helped bring a stronger rights-based lens to ICRICT's influential proposals, such as for a global minimum effective rate of corporate taxation.

"CESR's work marrying human rights and fiscal policy is tremendous. It uniquely combines solid research on human rights fiscal issues with advocacy in different forums—spanning human rights and development. A really valuable hallmark of its work is a willingness to address human rights as political, not technocratic issues."

—Bhumika Muchhala
Third World Network



STRENGTHENING SKILLS TO ANALYZE INEQUALITY

In 2019, we expanded the range of topics covered in the [Egypt Social Progress Indicators \(ESPI\)](#). ESPI measures rights realization and sustainable development, using an [innovative methodology](#) that benchmarks progress against a four-color scale. CESR coordinated this initiative with partners in Egypt, including the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights and the Social Justice Platform. Its data has helped CESR and partners build a rigorous, evidence-based narrative contesting Egypt’s self-promotion as a global development leader, as well as the IMF’s account of the “success” of austerity policies in the country. For example, data from the tool helped inform recommendations made by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing following an official mission to Egypt, as well as by Human Rights Council members in the context of Egypt’s Universal Periodic Review.



Rights-based budget analysis was a continued focus of our skills-sharing efforts in 2019. CESR supported the Scottish Human Rights Commission to develop and share practical tools for [using human rights standards to scrutinize Scotland's budget](#), in collaboration with the Health and Social Care Alliance and a range of academic and other partners. This enabled the Commission and its partners to engage with stakeholders in government, parliament and civil society to center human rights in critical public financing debates.

[The "Next Act" for OPERA](#), a discussion paper, shared insights about who is using our analytical framework for rights-based monitoring of socioeconomic policies, and how. Based on a series of consultations with the economic and social rights community, the paper shows we’ve armed partners and allies with new information; offered a critical perspective on analyzing rights fulfillment; and informed their approach to research and advocacy. It also highlighted various ways to make resources on OPERA—and its related tools—more accessible for and more responsive to the diverse activities being undertaken by civil society groups.



Photos by FAO/Pedro Costa Gomes; Craig MacLean; CESR



INCREASING COLLABORATION TO CHALLENGE INEQUALITY

With [Akubadoura](#) and other partners, CESR built crucial new alliances with Indigenous and Afro-descendant leaders from Peru and Colombia, sharing skills to support their efforts to connect fiscal policy concerns to their struggles against extractivism throughout the Andean Region. These alliances highlighted the importance of applying an ethnic and racial justice lens when analyzing fiscal policy—particularly as it relates to the extractive industries—in order to claim rights and demand reforms.



For the third consecutive year, we co-published the [Spotlight Report](#), the most authoritative and influential civil society audit of progress towards the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Widespread uptake of the report’s findings and analysis, plus successful advocacy around the High-Level Political Forum, have created greater alignment in messaging among civil society groups. In particular, CESR’s long-standing messages on the centrality of human rights, accountability and redistributive fiscal policy to the fulfillment of the 2030 Agenda are being increasingly embraced. Spotlight Report partners included Arab NGO Network for Development; Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era; Global Policy Forum; Public Services International; Social Watch; Society for International Development; Third World Network; and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation.

We saw particular consensus emerging around the need to confront stark power imbalances that plague global governance and feed extreme inequality. [Time to be Bold: How to Tackle Inequality, Realize Human Rights and Achieve SDG 10](#), was a popular panel discussion CESR co-organized with the Fight Inequality Alliance and Oxfam. Concrete, strategic analyses and ambitious proposals provided a counterpoint to the sterile High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development happening nearby. Visionary activists from the development, trade union, and tax justice movements focused their attention on the human rights aspect of their struggles. Participants decried power monopolies within international organizations, calling for strengthening cross-movement alliances under the leadership of people who actually experience the impacts of inequality.



Photos by Luke Holland @Assume_Media; REUTERS/Hannibal Hanschke; CESR



FOSTERING COMMITMENT TO ADDRESS INEQUALITY

Our work on the relationship between human rights and fiscal policy has encouraged human rights oversight bodies to pay more attention to issues related to socioeconomic inequality, and the factors driving it. For example, our long-standing engagement with the European Network of National Human Rights Institutions has prompted such institutions in the region to more vocally [champion economic and social rights](#) as they tackle inequality. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) has also drawn on our work as it teased out the connections between poverty, tax, corporate accountability and human rights.

We also brought human rights analysis and arguments to advocacy in global development spaces around austerity, tax, and economic policy. This helped to shift the discourse about inequalities among civil society organizations as well as development finance institutions and UN agencies.



Our tireless critiques of IMF conditions and advice that promote austerity have helped push key decision makers there to change their rhetoric. As mass protests against IMF-imposed austerity measures rocked Ecuador, Chile, and Brazil, among other countries, CESR and partners from Latin America issued an appeal asking the Fund to take responsibility for its loan conditions leading to regressive fiscal policies and rights erosion in various countries. A senior IMF official made the rare acknowledgement that there is an intersection between human rights deprivations and the Fund’s mandate. The IMF also made moves towards incorporating a stronger gender equality dimension into its guidance to country teams and exploring ways to include a gender dimension in its new Tax Policy Assessment Framework.

We also took our advocacy on socioeconomic rights inequalities to the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, which oversees implementation of the 2030 Agenda. With South African partners the Institute for Economic Justice and SECTION27, CESR produced analysis for South Africa’s Voluntary National Review at the HLPF, giving a rights-based snapshot of the obstacles and opportunities in play while tackling inequality and the fulfillment of commitments on the rights to health and education. Such initiatives have allowed us to integrate human rights more prominently into the HLPF agenda and have led to the incorporation of our messaging on tax, austerity, and wealth concentration in recommendations to governments and UN agencies in the Agenda 2030 context.



Photos by ENNHRI; CONAIE REUTERS/Mike Hutchings



CENTER FOR ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RIGHTS: 2019 FINANCIAL SNAPSHOT



- Anonymous | 46%
- Open Society Foundations (OSF) Human Rights Initiative | 22%
- Ford Foundation | 9%
- Oxfam Novib | 9%
- Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs | 4%
- OSF Public Health Program | 3%
- Christian Aid | 3%
- Partnerships, individual donations and other | 4%



- Programs | 42%
- Operations | 31%
- Communications | 17%
- Development | 10%

"I think the role that CESR plays in bridging across the human rights and social justice movements is one of the most valuable things you can do as an anchor organization in this field. Its approach to partnership is not extractive but meaningful."

*—Rosalind McKenna
Team Manager | Open Society Foundations
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CESR's work would not be possible without the generous support of our funders, including:



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"CESR plays a crucial role within our movement, from the development of ground breaking methodologies, to exploring how rights can be effectively operationalized within economic policy making. CESR's contribution—both intellectually and politically—has been immense. Like many NGOs, Amnesty has benefited enormously from CESR's pioneering work."

—Ashfaq Khalfan
Director | Law & Policy Programme
| Amnesty International





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