



REMAKING A SYSTEM IN CRISIS

LEARNING FROM OUR COMMUNITY

**HOW ACTIVISTS ACROSS MOVEMENTS
ARE MOBILIZING FOR
A JUST RECOVERY TO COVID-19**



CENTER FOR ECONOMIC
AND SOCIAL RIGHTS

SOCIAL JUSTICE THROUGH HUMAN RIGHTS

WHAT DID WE DO?

In late March and early April, the Center for Economic and Social Rights (CESR) organized two community calls with partners and allies from across the social, economic, and environmental justice movements. The goal of the calls was **to learn from each other's work to transform the economy in the wake of COVID-19; share insights about working in virtual spaces; and explore ideas for how we can stay better connected and engaged with each other to advance common goals.**

The idea was to come together in a more informal way; to collectively reflect on shared challenges and opportunities; and to create space for more open conversations and spontaneous connections. **More than 50 people joined the two calls—a diverse group of activists and advocates from around the world, whose works spans a range of issues from the local to global level.**

WHAT DID WE LEARN?

We painted a collective picture of the advocacy landscape we're in, by reflecting on shifts in the way demands for justice have been framed as the pandemic has unfolded and mapping out where there was receptiveness and resistance to rights. The trends we identified—as shown on the following pages—are of course context-specific and by no means static. But, in general, there was consensus that while growing demands to transform our economy to guarantee all of us the right to a dignified life had resulted in (sometimes significant) rhetorical shifts, **concrete action was still lacking.**

Where are we seeing receptiveness to rights?

In demanding an equitable recovery

- **Economic, social and cultural rights seem to be getting more attention**, at least rhetorically, and there have been some more ambitious demands and even significant policy shifts in line with rights.
- More recognition of **'overlapping' disadvantages and forms of discrimination** – possibly even the indivisibility of rights.
- Space to **debate what an 'adequate' standard of living and a 'healthy community' means** and a striking increase in demands that link health and environmental impacts.

In reconceptualizing worker's rights

- More discussion on assigning economic value to (or strengthening support for) **women's care work**.
- Seeing various informal workers (e.g., domestic workers, waste-pickers, home-workers, and street vendors, etc.) as bearing the greater risk of COVID exposure and being "essential" for the recovery is an opening to highlight their precarity and to push for the **right to better working conditions and compensation**.
- Though less visible, conversations increasing around migration and migrant workers; irregular migration experiences highlighted as legitimate, even by

unusual suspects; may need to **push harder for migration to be reimagined** in more inclusive ways.

In framing specific policy proposals:

- As governments figure out how to finance recovery, **momentum is growing around a number of progressive policy proposals** related to wealth, excess profit, and corporate taxes; debt cancellation; development finance; fiscal transparency, cracking down on tax avoidance etc.
- But opinions differed on the **degree to which rights are reflected in the framing of such proposals**.
- Some saw **promising examples of a more robust response to rights**, such as debt sustainability indicators integrating human rights; anti-austerity arguments stressing the impact of fiscal consolidation on rights; a depth of civil society analysis and advocacy connecting economic justice to binding human rights frameworks; and human rights treaty bodies addressing macroeconomic issues more rigorously in their assessments.
- Others thought the **human rights and fiscal justice discourses were "still quite far apart"** and noted that policymakers and businesses are still "quite silent" on rights in their COVID-19 responses.

Where are we seeing resistance to rights?

To protect the status quo

- **The global system hasn't changed**; rich countries have managed the crisis, while poorer countries struggle to. The economic recovery will likely follow the same logic, meaning a new era of austerity may be looming.
- Little has changed in terms of rich countries' and **international financial institutions' refusal to understand** their role structuring an unjust global order that harms rights around the world

To silence dissent

- A number of people raised concerns about **punitive measures, criminalization, and violence** being carried out by the state in the name of preventing the spread of COVID-19.
- People are organizing over social media questioning the accountability and transparency of governments. But **democratic spaces are slowly shrinking** due to fear/arrogance/apathy.
- The digital world is slowly being controlled by the state to increase **surveillance** on its citizens.

To put rights on the defensive

- The pressing situation of many—be that health-related or economic—have made **claims “very need-based”**. While there's good reason for that, it may have the downside of “reducing our focus on structural change”.
- As a result, concessions made by governments during the pandemic—like providing shelters for those living on the streets or access to vaccines and testing ‘free of charge’—are viewed as **more “radical” than they actually are**.
- Further, **rights have not featured all that prominently in discussions around cuts** to other social services (education, social services, public transport) that are on the chopping block due to declines in tax revenue.

To ignore implications for particular groups

- Distinctive implications of the pandemic on the rights of persons with disabilities are rarely taken into account. There's a **lack of debate on how the rights of persons with disabilities fit into a just economic recovery**; there tends to be an assumption that as long as economic policies address income inequalities, that's enough to address disability-based inequalities too.

These trends can be seen in a context where advocacy opportunities are constantly shifting and, sometimes, appear to be both opening and closing at the same time.

On the one hand, the pandemic has “laid bare” the injustices of the current system in a way that “cannot be ignored anymore”.

There’s “no way to hide” the sharp increase in care needs while we’re all staying at home, for example, while geopolitical power is “more visible than ever” in the austerity measures being pushed by the IMF. As many people noted, **the pandemic coincided with growing critiques of neoliberalism over the past decade.** As these critiques have become more “systemic” and “intersectional”, people are “more easily able to connect the dots between economic inequalities, the climate crisis, racial injustice, etc”. **The impact COVID has had on the most marginalized highlights the cruel ways that “structural, systemic inequalities in exposure to environmental hazards compound vulnerability to public health crises”.** In some countries, this has prompted policymakers to focus on trying to figure out how this recovery can be equitable—i.e., one that puts the most marginalized at the center.

On the other, governments are having “a hard time opening up to new perspectives” while they’re in “firefighting mode”, which means **deep systemic changes are not a priority.** Instead, they’re committed to “trying to stabilize the old broken system”. This commitment, a number of people noted, is partly about political expediency. But it also stems from the deep entrenchment of and “undying commitment” to laissez-faire approaches and orthodox economic logic among politicians and policymakers in national finance ministries and international financial institutions—a logic that is “blind to the realities” and “goes against the logic of rights”. In practice, this translates into rhetoric that “reform is underway” and that we need to “give it time” because current approaches “are as progressive as the circumstances allow”.

In this context, factors shaping receptiveness—or resistance—to human rights include:

- Institutions that govern the global economy are not yet convinced that they’re **responsible for the human rights impacts of their conduct** or that they’re bound by human rights frameworks.
- Recognizing that human rights “are not a politically neutral tool”, some **progressive allies “don’t see rights as a powerful counterweight to neoliberalism”.**

- The human rights movement hasn't traditionally been great at communicating and has often been too legalistic. Adding human rights to already very technical macroeconomic issues creates another layer of complexity that can "overshadow concepts of justice and equity". It's important to **demystify human rights concepts and terminology and connect them to those used by other social justice movements**.
- Macroeconomic issues such as debt have gone from marginal to central on the agendas of civil society organizations and social movements worldwide. But **it takes a lot of work to align newcomers around more ambitious and systemic proposals**.
- It's difficult to bring a more regional perspective to general concepts; **global narrative needs to be tailored to regional realities**.
- Awareness about what human rights can **concretely contribute to identifying policy solutions—beyond just setting out general principles**—remains fairly low.
- Despite its rhetoric, **UN leadership has been weak on its rights mandate**—including in negotiating agreements; in designing response plans; in country-level programming and implementation.

- Some progressive donors are starting to see the relevance of rights in their work to reimagine the economy. But, **extraterritorial rights challenges and the global dimensions of government's rights commitments have been less addressed**.

Ultimately, however, resistance to rights has to do with power dynamics.

As a number of people flagged, **there hasn't been a significant shift in power structures** within the institutions that make up the global economic governance system.

Nationalism is rampant, making it difficult to promote international cooperation and solidarity as a human rights duty. The **strength of corporate power** is making much-needed reforms (e.g., an independent multilateral framework for debt resolution) seem politically impossible. **Spaces for civil society advocacy—and opportunities to confront power holders—have shrunk** and this narrowing is a huge risk for advancing an intersectional rights-based agenda. For activists, the challenge is to **present a reform agenda that is sufficiently focused** to convince policymakers of its feasibility, but that represents "first steps" towards broader more transformative shifts in power.

Shifting from strategy to tactics, we also grappled with the realities of cross-movement mobilizing in virtual spaces.

Sharing examples of successful and not so successful efforts highlighted a number of opportunities and challenges for amplifying efforts that align social, economic, and environmental justice:

- With restrictions on people gathering, we've seen some **interesting examples of "hybrid" activism that mix virtual and on-the-ground actions**. Major protests over the last year didn't originate online, but digital activism played a role in amplifying them. In some cases, this has helped attract media attention and increase engagement "beyond the usual suspects".
- **Online visibility has become critical**; many people spoke about boosting their efforts to create infographics and other content that is sharable on social media, which has had some impact.
- A key to success for digital activism is ensuring that **it "touches" people and "brings people to the frontlines of struggles"**. Examples shared include a campaign run by the Fight Inequality Alliance protecting the faces of people affected by the World Economic Forum

onto its empty meeting venue in Davos; virtual rallies organized by the Build Back Fossil Free coalition in the US that demonstrated collaboration between youth and Indigenous Peoples.

- In some ways, **the shift to virtual advocacy "can level the playing field"**. Not having to travel, and using cellphones and other tech, means different, often unheard, voices can be brought into debates in ways that "we couldn't afford in person".
- There's been a **stronger appetite for collaboration, and working online can make synergies easier**. This has helped mobilize people around campaigns they wouldn't previously have supported. Examples shared included: a global call against austerity, which the IMF reacted quickly and defensively to; the "Campaign of Campaigns", involving feminist activists working on development financing and people from different movements; work on public services, which has brought together economic justice, human rights, feminist, labor movements; and collaborations between energy justice and the feminist movement, generally, and efforts to link sexual and reproductive health with climate change economics, specifically.

- At the same time, **there are still missed opportunities to create crossovers**. Work among debt and climate activists was one example shared. In some circumstances, working virtually has siloed people even more; they're concerned about protecting their own issues and avoiding setbacks.
- Some key ingredients for breaking down silos include: **opportunities for information sharing**, which are "very important in enriching thinking" even when they don't necessarily lead to cross-movement mobilization; **combining different ways to engage and at different levels**—an approach used in the global week of action for tax justice and women's rights; and **foregrounding intersectionality** and using an "**abundance framing**" to underscore that we don't need to compete for resources, because there's enough for all of our priorities.
- Shifting research and training online has posed **particular challenges, particularly for groups doing participatory action research**. It's involved a lot of learning as you go; experimenting with new tools; and uncertainty about their appropriateness, especially when feedback on improving is limited.
- Of course, **online spaces are not accessible to all**, due to disparities in internet connection; language barriers; and safety concerns. This makes it critical to dedicate resources to finding user-friendly apps, providing data, etc.
- A lot of online activity has been quite "surface level". But **it's harder to go deeper than just discussions, letters, petitions, etc.** A number of people felt listservs and emails were more productive than calls, but, because trust and safety are key, they could be more difficult to open up to newer people.

Overall, it was observed that the "spike of more ambitious demands for justice" early on in the pandemic "has ebbed". That's not a surprise. But, it's important **not to get disheartened and to build on that groundwork with "clever coalitions" and "strategic demands"**.

WHAT NEXT?

Overall, **we heard resoundingly positive feedback about the calls**. The main benefit people shared was the opportunity to **meet and get to know new people**, which was “refreshing”, “energizing”, “cathartic” and fostered a sense of community that helped “**reduce isolation**”.

Others noted that the calls gave them new information; raised unexpected and thought-provoking issues; suggested lessons about how to address shared problems; and more. But others noted that **they’d hoped they would create more space to focus on intersectionality**.

The **interactive methodology created a “different dynamic”**, a “more relaxed atmosphere” and “a shared cultural space”, which was “completely refreshing”, “extremely engaging and stimulating” and “felt safe and warm”.

We heard a **strong appetite for convening again**. Describing experiences and observed challenges and successes had given this group a concrete overview of the context we’re working in.

In terms of what people felt would be a good use of further time together, three themes came out strongly:

- **more in-depth discussions** that drill down on specific problems or thematic issues;
- further **mapping of advocacy strategies and tactics** to identify opportunities for coordinated or collective action in this virtual context
- more **space to hear about people's work** and find intersections between different groups and between different movements

We’re so grateful, again, to everyone who shared their wisdom so generously. Taking into account this feedback, we’ll plan a number of follow up calls in the coming months. Pleas stay tuned!



May, 2021

Center for Economic and Social Rights

This work is licensed under CC BY-NC 4.0

