

September 2020 - A different session at the UN in Geneva

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The 45th regular session of the Human Rights Council (HRC) took place in September 2020. Ahead of the session, as *SERVAS International* representatives to the UN in Geneva we submitted a written statement¹, in which we laid emphasis on the increase of racism during the Covid-19 crisis and the way the pandemic hits already marginalized people. We then decided our participation during the session should focus on the points raised in our written submission. During the Covid 19 crisis however, participation became almost as challenging as the crisis itself.

Due to the restrictions of the Covid-19 crisis, only one *SERVAS* speaker (out of usually five) was allowed to attend the HRC discussions in person, which - other than in the past – took place in the Assembly Hall of the *Palais des Nations*, instead of the renowned room XX. In September I therefore was the only representative who could attend the session in person and was in charge of the preparation and delivery of our statements, yet everything was discussed and aligned with the team.

The agenda of the Human Rights Council consists of 10 items, each of them focused on a different aspect. Some speaking slots are limited, so we decided to focus on General Debates, where usually all NGO speakers are accepted. In line with our statement a couple of months earlier², we took what appears to be a challenge, as an opportunity to reflect on what kind of world we want for the future.

Oral statements

Item 3 of the Human Rights Council's agenda is about the promotion and protection of all human rights, including the right to development. In our oral intervention we warned that after centuries of colonialism, the gap between the global North and the Global South is still growing and that the COVID-19 crisis is again disproportionately affecting marginalized cultures. We called to make the end of global inequalities a priority and ensure that measures to combat COVID-19 contribute to a just recovery and a fair economic share.



¹ <https://servas.org/en/news/written-statement-submitted-si-reps-hrc-september-2020-session-geneva>

² <https://servas.org/en/news/servas-and-covid-crisis-statement-servas-international-un-representatives>

Item 7 deals with the Human rights situation in Palestine and other occupied Arab territories. It is the only country-based situation with a permanent item on the Human Rights Council's agenda. The item therefore is sometimes criticized, yet it is important to understand that the item is not about bashing or singling out one country, but about the issue of prolonged occupation and the ensuing implications for international peace and security in general, which stands symbolic for other country situations around the world. The issue of particular interest for the UN, which was both, venue and player in the process that led to the partition of the country. Abstention from item 7 therefore undermines both, respect for the promotion and protection of Human Rights, as well as the mandate of the Human Rights Council.

The impact of our oral intervention lay on the human suffering and Human Rights violations related to the prolonged occupation and the increasing despair especially during the COVID-19 crisis. We warned that an escalation would have a serious impact on the entire region and reminded the Council that only justice and equality can guarantee lasting peace and security for all parties.



Item 8 on the Human Rights Council's agenda addresses the Vienna Declaration and its program of action (VDPA). It is a human rights declaration adopted in 1993 that calls for cooperation in the field of human rights, underlines the connection between poverty and human rights and reaffirms the need to strengthen the right to development.

In our oral statement SERVAS International warned that the COVID-19 crisis has exposed and deepened the gap between the vision and implementation of the VDPA. It is the last straw for millions of people already struggling with the impact of conflict, climate change, inequality and broken food systems, we stated, and called on the Council to use the crisis as an opportunity to develop action plans for an end of global inequalities.

Item 9 focuses on the issue of racial discrimination, including the Durban Declaration and its Program of Action (DDPA). Adopted in 2001, the DDPA addresses issues related to the rights of peoples of African descent, indigenous peoples, migrants, refugees, and others. Unfortunately, there are countries that, for political reasons, do not fully support the implementation of the DDPA and the commemoration of its 20th anniversary. Though the declaration may not be perfect, Amnesty International stated in the past, it provides a "basis for the concrete measures to combat racism and discrimination that are so sorely needed". Attempts to undermine the DDPA therefore increase tensions between the global North and South.

In our statement under item 9 we held that as an international peace NGO we have witnessed the benefits of bringing people together and overcoming cultural differences by meeting in person across borders. We therefore welcomed initiatives to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the DDPA but expressed concern about the fact that the annual resolution on combating racism and implementing the DDPA will not be presented this year. We called on the Council to stand firm in its resolve to combat racism and that both, States and the UN, must invest the necessary resources for public education and information.

Item 10 is about technical assistance and capacity building to assist countries in improving the promotion and protection of human rights. In our statement we called to better include civil society actors in this process, as even in Geneva we witness a continuously shrinking space for NGO participation. Twelve other organizations expressed their support for our statement, and we were lauded by many for raising the issue.



Despite the special challenges related to Covid-19 we, as SERVAS International representatives to the UN, look back on a successful session. Special thanks go to Danielle Serres, Servas International UN Coordinator, and main representative to the UN in Geneva, who has supervised our participation from the distance, as well as to Helga Merkelbach from SERVAS Germany, who has added valuable feedback.