

Servas and the Covid-19 crisis

A statement from Servas International Representatives at the United Nations



Since the beginning of 2020, our world is struggling to address a pandemic which has dramatically affected political, economic, and social life across the globe. For Servas members, that has many implications.

For most people, the most direct and visible consequence of the Covid-19 crisis has been the restriction of movement. Being part of an organization founded in the firm belief that bringing together hosts and travelers around the world is an important contribution to peace, many Servas members may feel disheartened.

Many of us are at home, with no possibility of travelling abroad, and it might well last for some time.

Times like this however might also give us a moment to reflect on what has led our world to the present situation, what kind of a world we want for the future and what we can do to contribute.

It might make us think about how other people feel who, for various reasons, have been facing impediments to freedom of movement in their lives before. They may be refugees living in camps, prevented from crossing borders, living behind walls, incarcerated ... While goods can cross borders, in many parts of this world, human beings cannot. The wall in Palestine, the US border to Mexico, European countries refusing migrants, are only few examples.

Servas is based on freedom of movement. The present crisis does not allow freedom of movement, we are all stuck where we are. It is an opportunity to reflect on our lifestyle and how we can make a difference inside our community.

Being a member of Servas means the opportunity to travel around the world, but above all it means implementing values of sharing, mutual aid, and solidarity. We can bring this spirit and these values to life by demonstrating solidarity with neighbors and supporting each other. We can offer our assistance to our community, by helping isolated or homeless people, young people left without access to education, and individuals struck by poverty. Further, we can engage in activities to promote a more just and peaceful society including but not limited to addressing issues related to climate change.

We know that the Covid-19 crisis disproportionately affects the most vulnerable. To put things in perspective, we may recall the large number of people dying from hunger, various diseases, or conflicts around the world. Worldwide, 821 million people do not have enough food and every year approximately 3.1 million children die from hunger. Estimates of how much money it would take to end world hunger range from \$7 billion to \$265 billion per year.¹

At the same time, in 2019, according to SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute), global military expenses were almost \$1.7 trillion, 3.6% higher than 2018! As Servas members, we reject war as a solution to global issues – so we must call for reallocation

¹ <https://www.globalgiving.org/learn/how-much-would-it-cost-to-end-world-hunger/>

of resources from war to peace (i.e. urgent attention to global warming and guarantee of universal health care).

Fear of the coronavirus has also led to increased racism, hate speech and discrimination. Instead of reflecting about what has brought us to this point, we are pointing at others. The virus is the threat, not the people. We have further seen authoritarian regimes seize the opportunity to expand their power, threatening human rights, and heard some leaders using military language. This is a time for cooperation, solidarity, and an end to ongoing conflicts.

Recently António Guterres, UN Secretary-General, emphasized that “*people and their rights must be front and centre*”, and that human rights “*can and must guide COVID-19 response and recovery*”.

Global cooperation and solidarity are urgently needed to open the borders and to resolve critical issues of health, poverty, hunger, homelessness. This is not the world that the UN envisioned 75 years ago, nor that Bob Luitweiler imagined when he founded Servas. This is the time for Servas members to reflect on what we want for the future and move toward that goal.