**UNESCO Regional Office for Southern Africa**

**The Social and Human Sciences Sector**

**Highlighting the Ethical Dimensions in COVID-19 Responses**

1. **Emergencies, Decision-making, and Ethical Considerations**

As the COVID-19 pandemic has put states, public health systems, economies, societies, communities, and individuals under utmost pressure, many questions have arisen about the norms and criteria that could help sound decision-making process in response to the emergency. Michelle Bachelet, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights stated in this regard, "As a medical doctor, I understand the need for a range of steps to combat COVID-19, and as a former head of government, I understand the often difficult balancing act when hard decisions need to be taken”.[[1]](#footnote-1) Ethical questions and sometimes dilemmas, in a context of emergencies where human lives and human dignity are threatened, are part of all attempts to address them. This is a time when ethical principles and standards are direly needed to inform our understanding, and to guide our actions.

In as much as the COVID-19 is a “global health” challenge, it indeed also raises fundamental and difficult questions pertaining to human rights, social justice, codes of ethics, and environmental ethics. The ethical, social and sometimes political implications of the (sometimes very strict) measures taken – or the absence of such measures – in responding to the pandemic in various countries are now emerging. And just as a “whole-of-society” action is required, “multidisciplinary” analysis and advice are also key to understand and address the pandemic itself, as well as its short term and long term side-effects on the society and family structure.

In this context and as part of its mandate to foster global reflections and standards on the Ethics of sciences and technologies and Bioethics, UNESCO is mobilizing prominent experts to shed light on the ethical and social dimensions of the responses now put in place in different countries to fight the COVID-19. The objective is to provide an ethical framework as advice and guidance to decision-makers and professionals who are presently at the frontline in fighting the pandemic, by putting the emergencies they are dealing with into perspective from an ethical point of view.

1. **COVID-19 from the Ethical and Social Perspectives – Addressing the Complexity of the Crisis**

Ethical considerations applied to health services and research on genetic and the living (bioethics) are substantially linked to the human rights frameworks. The bottom line is to protect human dignity in all operations, be they technical, or political. This is the reason why UNESCO has adopted in 2005 the [Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights](https://en.unesco.org/themes/ethics-science-and-technology/bioethics-and-human-rights), which is to date, the only global normative framework that should guide human interventions on the living.

More recently in 2017, UNESCO adopted a new [Declaration on the Ethical Principles in relation to Climate Change](https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark%3A/48223/pf0000260129). This Declaration explicitly highlights for the first time the fundamental ethical obligations that fall on state and non-state actors in taking actions to mitigate and adapt to the effects of Climate Change. Here, the ethical reflections and considerations are closely linked to the responsibility to protect the most vulnerable in societies. The Principles of “No-harm”, “Precaution”, and of “Solidarity” for instance call on all actors to take the concrete contextual situations of the most vulnerable populations into account when deciding to act – or not to act – on the effects of Climate Change. This means that ethical reflection on climate change cannot ignore principles that address the social dimensions of the phenomenon. Considering the global dimension and also the debates around the scientific evidence of Climate Change, the ethical principles enshrined in the 2017 Declaration can help us address the current COVID-19 pandemic as well, as this is also another global phenomenon, where scientific evidence has a critical role.

The recent and constantly evolving developments of the COVID-19 pandemic raise major ethical questions that will, in one way or another, transform our habits, practices, and theories. As stated by the UNESCO International Bioethics Committee (IBC) and the UNESCO World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology (COMEST), “a bioethics and ethics of science and technology perspective, rooted in human rights, should play a key role in the context of this challenging pandemic”.[[2]](#footnote-2) In this context, UNESCO considers it is vital to provide solid grounds for collective reflections on some of the following ethical and social dimensions, pertaining both to the medical treatment, and to the prevention and containment policies put in place by various states, including in the Southern African countries:

* **Precautionary Principle and Scientific Uncertainty**

The Novel Coronavirus is a novel pathogen and there is to date no certainties as to its causes or treatment. Therefore, amidst scientific uncertainty, societies and medical workers in particular should adopt the Precautionary principle that requires preventive and anticipatory measures to try to save lives. But by doing so, what are the margins of manoeuver and of interpretation that should be considered? Who would define them, and to what extent is it acceptable to use temporary measures to *try* to save lives, while there is no confirmed scientific evidence? How does the principle of proportionality should apply here?

* **Human Dignity and Treatment of Pandemics**

COVID-19 is affecting all countries, regardless of their level of development and Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The latest developments have shown that even in high-income countries such as Italy, France or the UK, the public health systems are swamped with severe cases, needing sophisticated medical assistance and ICU services. Therefore, in a time of scarcity of resources and health equipment, how should pandemics be dealt with in a way that does not infringe upon the individual dignity of *all* patients? What ethical principles should guide health workers in taking the right decisions when they are faced with the difficult choice of having to *prioritize* among patients? How do they deal with the notion of degree of “usefulness” of *some* individuals, versus the human dignity of *all*? And what kind of support should be provided to patients who are excluded from intensive care, and thus are effectively left to die? How should the families of such excluded patients be supported?

* **Autonomy, Restriction of Freedom, and Solidarity**

In facing the rapid outbreak of the pandemic, many States have put in place complete “lockdown” of their countries, as a strategy of containment. This entails severe restrictions of movements of all, temporary shutdown of schools, systemic control of the public – and sometimes private – spheres by the police or the army, etc. In such a context, there can be risks of abuses of authority, as well as tensions between the principle of individual autonomy, and the collective solidarity to contain a new disease that has no medical treatment. How shall states deal with such a dilemma? Does the precautionary principle allow Law enforcement authority to restrain the fundamental freedoms to reduce risks, including by using “force”? How can ethics and law interact in such a context? How could public communication, community engagement, and democratic deliberations serve to guaranty both respect for the fundamental rights, and the efficiency of such measures?

* **Most Vulnerable People and Public Actions**

Lockdown and strict containment measures have severe consequences on the livelihood of the most marginalized and disenfranchised groups of populations, as they have no means to confine, to stock food, to pay rentals in urban areas, and to take all hygiene measures that are needed. This is particularly true for populations who earn their living from the informal sector of the economy, for persons with disabilities, for homeless people, for elderly persons who live in isolation, for refugees and asylum seekers, for poor single women with children, etc. Therefore, can public actions such as total lockdown be efficient and fair in terms of public health management, and compliant with respect for human dignity in developing countries such as those in Southern Africa? If measures such as strict lockdown are taken, what kind of supplementary social protection assistance is needed?

* **Communication in times of Public Health Crisis**

Public communication in times of crisis – even more so during global crisis – is key to accompany collective response, especially in emergencies. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that communication in 2020 has to be manifold, spanning from scientific communication, to institutional, community, and social media communication. The rapid spread of fake news, as well as the need to contact-trace potential cases, have exposed individuals and communities to fear, discrimination and stigmatization, as well as mistrust in institutions. In this context, how can states and non-states actors find the just balance between the fundamental freedom of expression on the one hand, and the critical need on the other hand to ensure medical efficiency, and people’s trust in state institutions that are supposed to protect the community?

* **Ethics of the Environment and Global Health**

COVID-19 outbreak has been declared on 11 March 2020 as a “pandemic”, implying global consequences on societies and requiring global, concerted and coordinated responses from nations across the globe. It has very sharply revealed the necessity of states and social actors to act as one, considering the planet to be our shared and unique habitat. Such a realization also strikingly relates back to the longstanding but polemic conversations on protecting the environment and mitigating the effects of Climate Change as a collective and global priority. At least two ethical aspects can be highlighted in this regard. Firstly, all states and the international communities have been able to take swift, urgent and radical “whole-of-society” actions to curb the virus outbreak, including by locking down economic activities. Such an endeavor has not been done when it comes to taking measure to mitigate Climate Change, even though the latter, in a less spectacular way, endangers and jeopardize many more individuals and nations. Hence, what kind of hierarchy of values and ethics underlies such a discrepancy? Secondly, some hypothesis have been put forward that the massive destruction of biodiversity may be one of the causes of the recent major pandemics, such as COVID-19, SARS, or Ebola. By destroying (e.g. deforestation) the natural habitats of many species over the years, humans may have caused the release of various viruses that where meant to stay inoffensively in animal species, as the latter have fled to settings that are closer to human settlements, thus exposing human individuals and society. The ethical question here therefore is: What kind of responsibility do human beings individually and collectively have vis-à-vis environmental protection, including the protection of biodiversity? How shall we revisit our relationship to animals, notably in our food patterns and habits? To what extent do our responsibilities to safequard global health overlap with our duties to protect the environment? To what extent can the principles of the 2005 and the 2017 Ethics Declarations of UNESCO be brought into relation and conversation with one another?

1. **Production of a Series of Videos addressing the Ethical and Social Perspectives of the COVID-19 Global Crisis**

Considering the emergency the world is facing, UNESCO Regional Office of Southern Africa is stepping up to produce awareness-raising videos in which prominent researchers on ethics provide ethical frameworks in order to support and capacitate decision-makers who are on the frontline of this global fight against the pandemic. These videos do not give instructions – they underline the vigilance points and blind spots that, if ignored in the prevention, containment or treatment stages, can generate negative impacts when emergency measures are implemented.

The National Bioethics Committees – where they exist – are important stakeholders in this operation, as they serve as a counselling body for the state and non-state actors facing major ethical dilemmas in their work and contexts. The members of UNESCO’s International Bioethics Committee (IBC) and World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology (COMEST) will be also important contributors to this work.

**Objective**: To emphasize ethical and human rights principles to decision-makers and other professionals in the prevention and treatment of the pandemic. UNESCO will disseminate the videos in its national, regional and global networks, targeting decision-makers, health care providers, the media and NGOs.

**Content**: Drawing on the UNESCO Declarations on Ethical Frameworks, in order to apply them to the COVID-19 crisis, the videos should unpack the ethical and social dimensions listed above. The Statement on COVID-19: Ethical Considerations from a Global Perspective from the UNESCO International Bioethics Committee (IBC) and the UNESCO World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology (COMEST), 26 March 2020, is a central reference in this undertaking.

**Speakers**: Professors and experts in health and environmental ethics, bioethics, human rights, sociology, UNESCO networks.

**Target Groups**: Ad hoc Task Force responding to COVID-19 at the national level, Ministry of Health and Health workers, the medias, CSOs working with the communities at the local level, and the general public.

**Formats**: 1 minute 30 seconds video, filmed individually by the speakers themselves.

Tips for recording videos:

1.   Record in a well-lighted place, making sure the person who’s going to speak isn’t in the shade.

2.  Test the sound. Film for a few seconds and listen to the video to make sure the sound was good. If it isn’t, get closer to the person. Make sure there are no noises around you or other people speaking at the same time.

3.  The video will be cut to a square (1:1) format. Whether you film horizontal or vertical, make sure that the person is always in the center of your frame.

4.  Ask the person to repeat the question as she/he starts answering your question so that the viewers will know what she/he is going to be talking about right away.

5. Keep the videos short. One-minute or less is preferable.

The first batch of the videos can be viewed here: <https://en.unesco.org/news/unesco-provides-ethical-frameworks-covid-19-responses>

1. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25668&LangID=E>, 6 March 2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. STATEMENT ON COVID-19: ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS FROM A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE, Statement of the UNESCO International Bioethics Committee (IBC) and the UNESCO World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology (COMEST), 26 March 2020, [https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373115](https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark%3A/48223/pf0000373115) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)