



United Nations  
Office for South-South Cooperation

Summary of Discussion for Webinar on:

**Spotlighting Women Leadership in Responding to COVID-19 in Developing Countries**

*Thursday, 25 June 2020*

**Background:**

On 25 June 2020, the webinar: Spotlighting Women Leadership in Responding to COVID-19 in developing countries, this webinar, organized by the United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation (UNOSSC), brought together women champions from southern governments of Costa Rica, India, South Sudan and Thailand to share their experiences in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic in their countries.

During the webinar, speakers discussed (1) their experiences in supporting their country and local communities in addressing the impacts of COVID-19; (2) why and how to place women's needs and leadership at the heart of effective responses to COVID-19; and (3) the role of South-South and triangular cooperation in advancing women's voice and decision-making in COVID-19 preparedness, response and recovery. The aim of the webinar was to contribute to South-South exchange of experiences; spotlight women's leadership and representation in COVID-19 decision-making and to raise awareness about incorporating gender-responsive actions during and after the crisis through cooperation amongst countries, including South-South and triangular cooperation.

Moderated by Ms. Xiaojun Grace Wang, Deputy Director, United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation (UNOSSC), the discussion featured:

- Mr. Jorge Chediek, UNOSSC Director and Envoy of the Secretary General on South-South Cooperation (opening remarks)
- H.E. Mrs. María del Pilar Gonzalo Garrido, Minister of National Planning and Economic Policy, Costa Rica
- H.E. Smt. K. K. Shailaja Teacher, Minister of Health, Social Justice, Women and Child, Government of Kerala, India
- H.E. Elizabeth Acuei Yol, Minister of Health, South Sudan
- Dr. Soawapak Hinjoy, Director of Office of International Cooperation at Department of Disease Control, Thailand

**Discussion summary:**

**Ms. Xiaojun Grace Wang**, set the stage for discussion, highlighting a few statistics on health and socio-economic issues posed by COVID-19: women are the most vulnerable as nearly 60 percent of women around the world work in the informal economy and at greater risk of falling into poverty due to the unemployment caused by the lock down, also exponentially burdened, providing 75 percent of the unpaid care work

About 70 percent of the global health care system is comprised of women, which puts them in the frontline as responders and exposes them to a higher risk of infection. Yet women, are still under-represented in positions of power Strategic planning of emergency response and recovery is.

overwhelmingly dominated by men. There is need to improve gender equality in policy making and to work together to advance women's leadership and empower women.

**Mr. Jorge Chediek, UN Envoy on South-South Cooperation and Director of UNOSSC**, highlighted that for the first time in 30 years, the world is going to witness a decline in human development and hence the challenge related to gender dimension of the response becomes most relevant. It important to find the best practices that will ensure the progress of women is maintained, consolidated and advanced –taking this crisis as an opportunity. He thanked the panelists for their participation. He further reiterated committed of UNOSSC to supporting the efforts of knowledge sharing within the global south in minimizing the effects of the crisis, and making this an opportunity to advance gender equality around the world.

**H.E. Ms. María del Pilar Gonzalo Garrido, Minister of National Planning and Economic Policy, Costa Rica** shared actions the government put in place that range from cash transfers, prioritizing pregnant women, temporarily freezing fuel prices and using the price differential to inject more resources into the social protection program, and reducing the public utility payments particularly water and electricity to alleviate the cash flow of households and SMEs –as most SMEs are run by women. The payment of value-added income tax and custom duties were reduced by 75% and the government injected those resources directly to the social protection and Social Security. Other initiatives include flexibility in regulations for payment of credit, decreased interest rates to help people with their cash flow, translating those payments into longer periods promoting conditions to improve liquidity in the financial system. A long-term strategy for 2050 will link recovery to focus on social inclusion, taking advantage of gender and carbonization, and better adaptation and mitigation to climate change.

Programmes launched by the government include supporting enterprises with potential to export and finding new global chains of commerce with competitive advantage; injecting investment to the most effective companies particularly tourism which accounts for nearly ten percent of the total GDP; building up an accelerator works that can generate employment for the most vulnerable in areas of infrastructure and public transportation worth of 1.9 billion; looking into compensating extra hours spent in the care economy by women and providing them technical assistance in terms of training, capacity development; and further explore areas of

STEM science technology, engineering, arts and mathematics South-South and triangular cooperation can be key in promoting learning and creating a community of best practices can help in the long run and recover better, specifically mentioning sharing best practices in dealing with issues of general domestic violence - that has emerged as a result of confinement measures, looking at how gender equality and equity can be accelerated, and also learning in the context of SDGs, Paris Agreement, human rights and human development to build better together.

**H.E Elizabeth Acuei Yol, Minister of Health, South Sudan** highlighted that South Sudan has been a vulnerable country as it has recently come out of years of conflict. The country is now coping with the COVID-19 pandemic with limited social services infrastructure including in areas of health and education. She acknowledged the support that the UN has been providing during the conflict and post-conflict and stressed the continued support in health infrastructure and services, especially for girls and women, given the devastation the country has faced due to decades of war. She highlighted the impact of covid-19 affecting women as most of the are widows and orphan young girls without any access to economic opportunities – which further aggravates the issue of gender equality. Hence the support provided by the UN and other international organizations through South-South Cooperation is much needed

**Dr. Soawapak Hinjoy, Director of Office of International Cooperation at Department of Disease Control, Thailand, talked** about the evolving role of women over the years from behind-the scene workers during the influenza epidemic to being in the frontlines today as policymakers, epidemiologists, scientists etc.. To respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, Ministry of Public Health, Thailand assigned women with the primary responsibility on the investigation team in sample taking and preliminary diagnosis. She shared concrete examples on how government engaged women, wives and families, in tracking the local transmission and took measures necessary to deal with the crisis and spoke about the community level mechanisms in which 80% of the health volunteers are women. These health volunteers work on healthy literacy, adapting it to the local context including raising community awareness to prevent COVID-19 infections and other health problems, and also encouraged communities to comply with disease control measures. This mechanism was effective in minimizing the local transmission. She also gave an overview of her own department i.e. International Corporation, other departments and partners that encourage adequate representation and full engagement of women in the COVID-19 response. Dr. Hinjoy specifically mentioned the characteristics of empathy and working together, and systematic thinking as strengths that make women effective as leaders at all levels, not only at the frontline but also at the community level.

**H.E. Smt. K. K. Shailaja Teacher, Minister of Health, Social Justice, Women and Child, Government of Kerala, India** shared the strategy that Kerala state adopted soon after WHO declared the virus in Wuhan, China. To minimize the infection, the Government of Kerala proactively adopted the strategy of trace, quarantine, test, isolate and treat. They started to prepare the public health system and as part of early preparedness, the Rapid Response Team was formed, trainings were held, and mock drills were undertaken in anticipation of the virus. A control room was also set up along with 18 expert groups that were assigned different responsibilities and trainings.

The early screening and quarantine procedure enabled them to identify infection cases coming from China and yielded good results in stopping the local community spread at an early stage. The Government also launched a campaign called “break the chain” giving awareness to citizens on the preventive measure for the virus. Another campaign launched, through civil society organizations was called “Soap, Masks, and Social distancing” (SMS) to mobilize the citizens to follow the standard procedures and it yielded good results together with the virus tracing in the community. These measures helped to keep the infection rate below the rate of 11 percent and local spread rate under 10 percent and maintained positive tests rate below 2 percent.

A robust Q&A discussion followed the presentations. Ms. Wang wrapped up the event with a summary of key points and a huge vote of thanks to the speakers.