

*** embargoed until July 27, 2021, 1 pm UTC time ***

PRESS RELEASE

Unhealthy Silence: new report exposes how development finance institutions failed to protect those who reported on or criticized COVID-19 responses

July 27, 2021 - Since the beginning of the pandemic, doctors, nurses, journalists and other frontline workers have courageously criticized or scrutinized the inadequate responses to COVID-19 supported by governments, public development banks and other actors. For doing so, many of them have been threatened, attacked or arrested.

The report "[Unhealthy silence: Development banks' inaction on retaliation during COVID-19](#)", published on July 27, 2021 by the Coalition for Human Rights in Development, ARTICLE 19 and IFEX, sheds light on the vicious retaliations faced by those who have raised questions around the responses to the pandemic and exposes how development banks failed to take actions to prevent and address reprisals linked to the COVID-19 projects they supported.

In May 2020, six people were [killed](#) in Guinea during a protest against movement restrictions and police extortions at checkpoints during the lockdown. In September, in Guatemala, indigenous rights defender Anastasia Mejía Tiriquiz was [arrested and charged](#) after reporting on a peaceful demonstration against the lack of economic support for those most affected by the pandemic. At the end of December, Jordanian journalist Jamal Haddad was [arrested](#) after raising questions about government officials receiving the vaccine when it was not yet available to the general public. That same week, in China, citizen journalist Zhang Zhan was [sentenced](#) to four years in prison and tortured for having reported on the outbreak in Wuhan.

While the perpetrators of retaliation have primarily been governments and their proxies, these violations have taken place amidst the complete silence and inaction of development banks that are playing a crucial role in shaping and funding those COVID-19 responses that journalists and defenders are reporting on.

David Banisar, Senior Legal Counsel and Head of Transparency for ARTICLE 19, said:

"The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated how vital it is for people to be able to speak out and share information. And yet medical professionals, journalists, activists and others who have informed the public or questioned the way the crisis has been handled have faced harassment and attacks. International development banks, in particular, have failed to ensure that their loans are not being used to undermine the right to freedom of expression and information. We call on these institutions to protect freedom of expression by holding governments accountable, and to speak out when these and other freedoms are violated."

The report presents eight emblematic case studies of reprisals and statistical analysis on 335 other cases of people attacked for criticizing or scrutinizing COVID-19 responses, demonstrates how development banks have failed to uphold their own commitments, and presents a set of recommendations to address reprisals. In particular, it calls on development banks to take a preventative approach and require client governments to develop a plan for how to address civic

space concerns and ensure meaningful stakeholder engagement; to respond effectively to reprisals; and to make public commitments, condemning reprisals and recognizing the importance of press freedom and civic space.

Siddharth Akali, Director of the Coalition for Human Rights in Development, said:

“Doctors, nurses, journalists and other frontline workers want a global pandemic response which is guided by the needs of local communities, where those who are most vulnerable are protected, and where there is free and effective flow of information about the virus and what we can do collectively. Development finance must amplify these voices from the frontlines of the global COVID-19 response, not look the other way as they are systematically silenced”.

Note to the editor

An embargoed copy of the report is available upon request.

As of June 15, 2021, International Finance Institutions (IFIs) have earmarked US\$ 150.54 billion to finance responses to COVID-19, through 1,332 projects, according to data gathered through [Early Warning System](#), a database managed by the International Accountability Project.

The report identifies cases of retaliation affecting at least 335 people (journalists, human rights defenders, bloggers, and medical personnel among others), who raised questions around the state response to COVID-19. Cases were reported in 35 countries that received or are receiving financial support from DFIs for their COVID-19 responses.

The report will be officially launched and presented in a public webinar on July 27th, at 1 PM UTC time. You can find details about the webinar [here](#) and register [here](#).

About the authors

The report is a joint publication of the Coalition for Human Rights in Development, ARTICLE 19 and IFEX. It is an initiative of the **Defenders in Development Campaign**, which engages in capacity building and collective action to ensure that communities and marginalized groups have the information, resources, protection and power to shape, participate in, or oppose development activities, and to hold development financiers accountable.

The [Coalition for Human Rights in Development](#) is a global coalition of 100 social movements, civil society organizations, and grassroots groups working together to ensure that development is community-led and that it respects, protects, and fulfills human rights.

[ARTICLE 19](#) works for a world where all people everywhere can freely express themselves and actively engage in public life without fear of discrimination.

[IFEX](#) is a diverse, worldwide network of over 100 non-governmental organisations that advocates for the free expression and access to information rights of all.

Press Contact: Lorena Cotza, Coalition for Human Rights in Development
lcotza@rightsindevelopment.org, +39 3285761056

