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**Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner
for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the
High Commissioner and the Secretary-General**

Written statement* submitted by Aid Organization, a non- governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[22 August 2021]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.

Aid Organization statement to the Secretary General on the occasion of the forty-eighth session of the Human Rights Council at the United Nations Office at Geneva.

Aid Organization is honored to provide this statement to the Half-day Panel Discussion on deepening inequalities exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and their implications for the realization of human rights, such as was specified in Resolution 45/14 adopted by the Human Rights Council on 6 October 2020.

Aid Organization is an NGO in Special Consultative State to the UN ECOSOC since 2017. We support the intention of the Human Rights Council in their objective to have a “clear line of sight with respect to inequalities as States “build back better” after the pandemic. We support the intention of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in her work on a summary report on this topic and it’s eventual presentation at the Fifty First Session of the Human Rights Council. We are pleased to contribute to this multi-stakeholder effort as a member of civil society, noting our practical efforts and grassroots efforts to address these inequalities “on the ground” via civil society and official partners in Bangladesh, including partners in the UN-family (UNICEF, UN Women and UNDP).

Aid Organization is particularly well-situated to comment on this matter. Since our foundation in 1997, we have worked hand-in-hand with various Ministries of the Government of Bangladesh, and with NGO partners to address inequities faced by citizens of Bangladesh, and resident migrants, including refugees. We have run successful programs to help address the lack of availability of water, including a program to dig wells, programs to provide “WASH” (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene) training, programs to prevent child marriage and to promote the education of girls – including teaching women and girls to read, and training to encourage young girls to stay in school, programs to prevent domestic violence, programs to help train women how to gain access to work, and facilitation of small business loans to women so that they might start independent business ventures. We partnered with Grameenbank to provide bank accounts for street children. In more recent years, as climate change has come to the forefront, creating important risks for Bangladesh – for her people and for the economy, we have partnered with a group of NGOs to work on the creation of “polders”, small dams to prevent flooding; Aid Organization has cooperated with the government on a tree-planting program to minimize climate change effects. Aid Organization has been active in national disaster-response, notably after hurricane AMFAN in May 2020. Since 1997, Aid Organization programs have touched the lives of over 25,000 persons in Bangladesh, in over 26 upazillas. In this light, we were so proud to have been accredited to the UN ECOSOC as an NGO in Special Consultative Status in 2017. As a matter of course, Aid Organization work is supportive of 2030 UN Sustainable Development Goals. In recent years, Aid Organization has partnered in projects with UN organizations, including UN Women, UNICEF and UNDP.

Aid Organization strives to help the people of Bangladesh to “build back better” on an ongoing basis: indeed, the objective of addressing inequalities are part of our mission-statement of providing support and aide to the most vulnerable members of Bangladesh society, with special focus on women and girls.

For this reason, we are keen to participate in this Half-day panel.

On 9 April 2020, in a briefing to the United Nations Security Council, the Secretary General stated that the COVID-19 crisis is the gravest test for the world since the founding of the United Nations. Since 2020, 25,143 people have died of COVID19 in Bangladesh. The country is in it’s third-wave of the pandemic, and since July 23 2021, the country has mobilized a strict lockdown. New impetus has been given to vaccination efforts. To-date, over 22 million persons have been vaccinated against COVID-19. On August 3 2021, the Foreign Minister of Bangladesh, Mr. AK Abdul Momen, announced plans to vaccinate 10

million persons per week. In August 2021, vaccinations have begun in refugee settlements in Cox's Bazar.

The World Economic Forum, in a 2020 report noted that in addition to being a public health crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on poverty levels and inequality. Women, alongside the poor, elderly, disabled and migrant populations, have borne the brunt of the fallout from the pandemic. Minorities have been hit harder and are recovering more slowly from the downturn. We note that before COVID19, Bangladesh lowered the poverty level from 44 per cent of the population in 1991, to 13 percent of the population in 2017): Bangladesh was set to graduate from LDC status in 2024: this graduation has been postponed until 2026.

Bangladesh is the world's second largest garment exporter; over 80 percent of national export earnings are attributable to garment exports. In the first months of the pandemic, U.S. and European lockdowns resulted in Bangladesh factories losing around \$100 million per day. Workers in the garment industry, rickshaw pullers and hourly contract laborers in Bangladesh faced immediate loss of income. In the first months of the pandemic, Bangladesh has lost around \$1.5 billion in canceled orders by foreign brands, which has impacted some 1.2 million workers. This recalling that Bangladesh is a country of 170 million persons of which only 15 per cent (25.5 million) Bangladeshi workers earn more than \$6 a day. The economic shutdown sparked by COVID-19 terminated millions of livelihoods in the country, creating sudden unemployment and lack of money.

The Government of Bangladesh, through the Bangladesh Bank, responded as early as April 2020 with a series of relief and stimulus packages for the small business sector and a series of subsidiary stimulus packages to the banking sector. Special means were created to facilitate access to letters of credit for exporting companies and relief to banks. Exporting companies were allowed to operate during lockdowns, as long as special health measures.

On April 13, 2020, the Prime Minister Sheik Hasina announced direct cash assistance of BDT 7.6bn (approx. USD91mn) for informal sector workers; health insurance of BDT 5-10 lakh for health workers (doctors, nurses and others) and bankers, to cope with COVID-19 infected workers and BDT 25-50 lakh in case of death, total fund allocated BDT7.5bn (approx. USD89mn). A special honorarium of BDT 1bn (approx. USD12mn) was allocated for bankers, health workers and others. On 14 May 2020, the Prime Minister launched the disbursement of cash aid: Prime Minister launched the disbursement of BDT 12.5bn (approx. USD 142m) cash aid for 5 million poor families. Each family received BDT 2,500 (USD 30) cash through mobile financial services (MFSs). Other employment-related measures including state compensation schemes have been implemented. European Union countries contributed have more than 100 million euros to a Bangladesh welfare programme to aid thousands of garment workers hit by job losses and pay cuts.

Aid Organization has a strong relationship with the Government of Bangladesh, and has partnered, and plans further partnerships, with various Ministries of the government, on projects as diverse as capacity building on social distancing, handwashing ("WASH" training), facilitating isolation of the sick, and developing creative means to social distance in a highly-impacted population (notably in slum-areas) as coping with providing WASH training for citizens, migrants and refugees, who lack-access to water. Work is needed in Bangladesh to make available masks and protective equipment for citizens and medical personnel, as well as in the distribution of food and other resources is needed to prevent hunger. This bearing in mind that the lockdown exacerbates situations of violence towards women, and risks to child rights, as well as creating further challenges to the rights of women and girls to education.

In 2020, officials of the World Bank estimated that 38 million children in Bangladesh are missing out on the opportunity for formal education. The study also found a digital divide between rich and poor households; 9.2 percent of the poorest had access to televisions in comparison to 91 percent for the richest; similar trends were found across alternative learning platforms. Another survey shows that of the 21 percent of households with access

to online learning programs, only 2 percent used them. Pre-pandemic estimates showed 58 per cent of Bangladeshi children did not achieve minimum reading proficiency by grade 5. It's estimated this figure will increase to 76 per cent as a result of COVID19-pandemic-related school closures.

During 2020 and 2021, our NGO has commenced with a project partnered with "Save the Children", focused on provision of humanitarian response to children who face deprivation due to the COVID19 pandemic. In 2021, Aid Organization seeks to provide access to the poor and vulnerable members of Bangladesh society, to provide hope and help so that the Bangladesh economy, society, and culture can "build back better". We are currently working to expand our efforts, in coordination with our partners in Bangladesh and in the international community. We strongly support this panel work, as we provide in-country technical assistance.
