

Philip Alston: COVID-19 exposed deep flaws in Spain’s poverty programs

New York (6 July 2020) – Spain’s social protection net was utterly inadequate before COVID-19, but the pandemic has since exposed just how deeply it is failing people, said Philip Alston, the former United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, whose [report](#) from an official visit this year was released today. The adoption of a national minimum income scheme is of huge symbolic importance, but it is just the first of many measures that urgently need to be taken.

Alston [visited](#) Spain from 27 January to 7 February 2020, and found “appalling levels of poverty and exclusion, government policies failing to reach people in need of support and shockingly high levels of inequality.”

Even before the pandemic, 26.1 per cent of people and 29.5 per cent of children were at risk of poverty or social exclusion in Spain, among the highest rates in Europe. More than half had some degree of difficulty making ends meet and 5.4 per cent experienced severe material deprivation. The unemployment rate stood at 13.78 per cent.

“Poverty in Spain is rooted in a social protection system that is broken, underfunded, impossible to navigate and not reaching the people who need it most,” Alston said. “The need for deep reforms is even clearer since my visit. COVID-19 has shined a light on the serious weaknesses in the anti-poverty programs of the central government and autonomous communities, as millions unable to work have encountered delays, glitches and inadequate support.”

“The government has fortunately reacted to the pandemic with a number of positive steps to protect people in precarious situations, including new measures to secure jobs and housing, extending protections to domestic workers, and a new national minimum income scheme to support 850,000 vulnerable families. This is a vast improvement over the response to the last recession, which entrenched poverty and led to an explosion in inequality.” Since Alston’s visit, the Government has also moved to investigate the conditions of migrant workers, reverse a steep decline in corporate tax revenues, and publish an index of nationwide rental prices.

“The national minimum income scheme is an ambitious and impressive achievement that could go a long way to supporting people in poverty now and in the future,” the former Rapporteur said. “The government should ensure that it is not plagued by the same issues that undermine the schemes of many autonomous communities, which often reach very few people, provide low amounts of support, have onerous requirements and limit eligibility.” Alston’s successor, Olivier De Schutter, has [called](#) on Spain to widen coverage and eligibility for the new national scheme while reducing bureaucratic requirements.

“But these reforms to the social safety net will do little without meaningful action to uphold people’s social rights to housing, education and an adequate standard of living,” Alston said.

“Spain is in a housing crisis, with skyrocketing costs, privatization of public housing and widespread evictions, yet low cost housing is almost non-existent. A quarter of households with children at risk of poverty have great difficulty paying for education, and there are still gaps in access to health care for low-income people and recent migrants.”

“Some groups are particularly affected by poverty in Spain. Women have higher rates of poverty and are worse off on nearly all labour market indicators, while almost a third of children live at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Roma people face staggeringly high rates of poverty and disadvantage, and severe de facto segregation in the education system.”

Alston travelled to Madrid, Galicia, Basque Country, Extremadura, Andalucía and Catalonia, and met with individuals affected by poverty, government officials at the municipal, autonomous community and central level, as well as activists, academics and representatives of civil society organisations. He visited numerous community centers and schools, NGO offices, a center for people with disabilities, a social services office, an informal settlement for migrant workers, a privatized housing block, a domestic worker center and several Roma communities.

“Despite the truly outrageous conditions I observed during my visit, the government’s actions in response to the coronavirus pandemic are encouraging,” Alston said. “I hope that the governing coalition will double down on this direction and live up to the ambitious commitments made to fulfilling the social rights of all people in the country.”

Alston’s successor, Olivier De Schutter, is scheduled to [present](#) the report to the UN Human Rights Council on 7 July.

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Photos from the visit to Spain are available for journalists’ use at <https://srpoverty.org/country-visits/spain/>.

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