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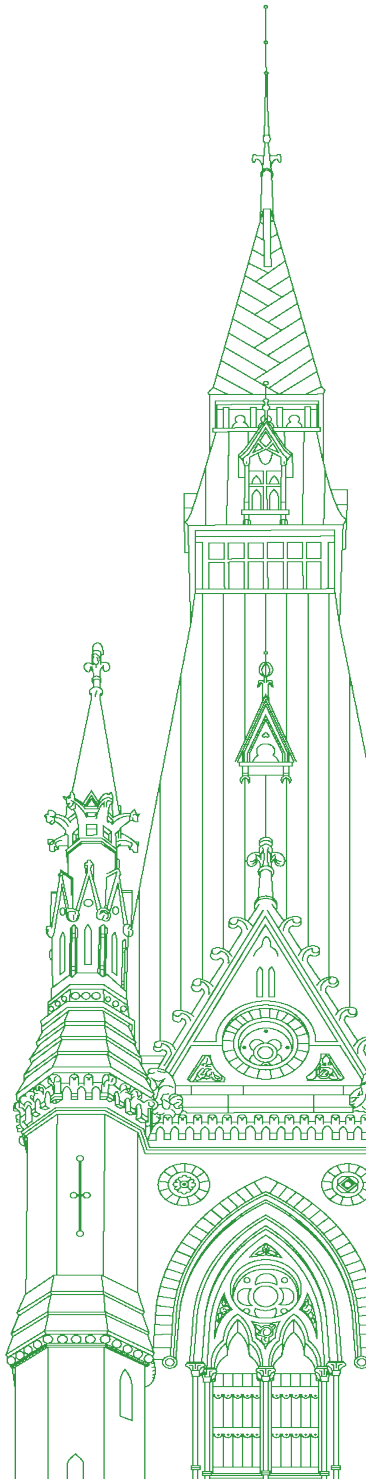

Chair: Mr. Sven Spengemann

Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

Thursday, November 26, 2020

● (1535)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. Sven Spengemann (Mississauga—Lakeshore, Lib.)): My fellow colleagues, I call the eighth meeting of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development to order.

[*English*]

Pursuant to the order of reference of October 22, the committee will resume the study of vulnerabilities created and exacerbated by COVID-19 in crisis- and conflict-affected areas.

To ensure an orderly meeting, I would encourage all participants to mute their microphones when they are not speaking and to address comments through the chair.

When you have 30 seconds left in your questioning or speaking time, I will signal you with this yellow piece of paper.

Interpretation services are available through the globe icon at the bottom of your screen.

[*Translation*]

I want to welcome our first panel of witnesses.

We're joined by Gillian Triggs, assistant high commissioner for protection at the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees; and Peggy Hicks, director of thematic engagement, special procedures and right to development division at the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

[*English*]

Ms. Triggs, I will ask you to open today's discussion with five minutes of prepared remarks.

Please go ahead. The floor is yours.

Ms. Gillian Triggs (Assistant High Commissioner for Protection, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you to all members of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development for this opportunity to speak to you about the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on the over 80 million who are within the mandate of the United Nations Refugee Agency.

These 80 million include 26 million asylum seekers and refugees and 47 million people displaced in their own countries. Perhaps the most powerful illustration of the impact of COVID-19 on people of concern to UNHCR is demonstrated by the fact that this year the agency has had the lowest number of resettlements in 20 years—a historic low—with as many as 20,000 departures this year, barely a third of the usual resettlement numbers.

To begin, I'd like to thank Canada for the recent announcement of an increase of 4,300 places for resettlement and for private sponsorship over the next couple of years, and also for Canada's support for COVID responses with very generous additional funding for humanitarian and development work, with a special focus, as we will see in a moment, particularly and importantly on women and girls.

UNHCR very much appreciates Canada's leadership throughout the pandemic, being one of the first countries to restart resettlement departures after the temporary suspension of the program under the influence of COVID. Canada also, importantly, employed technology such as remote interviews—and of course we're doing this now—for settlement cases to ensure continuity of the program.

Canada has also pioneered labour mobility to refugees as a complementary or regular pathway to settlement. Canada supported education pathways through a sponsorship model, and in a very significant initiative has developed the global refugee sponsorship initiative.

This is by way of saying that the continued leadership of Canada in this time of COVID is vital.

The impact of COVID on the lives of so many refugees and displaced people has been a pandemic exacerbating and compounding long and pre-existing crises, being a protection crisis that in its magnitude and probable lasting effect reflects the root causes of global movements throughout the world. People flee violence and persecution from international and intercommunal conflict, poverty, inequality and gender discrimination, environmental degradation and climate change. The numbers are now unprecedented and rising fast.

When so many vulnerable people are disproportionately affected by COVID, you might reasonably ask why we should focus on refugees and other displaced people when nations are rightly concerned to protect their own citizens and residents. An answer lies in the fact that displaced people are especially vulnerable and are the most at risk in the communities where they find protection. They rely on the informal economy. Without legal status, refugees are the first to lose their jobs, to suffer eviction and to become homeless.

Since the start of the pandemic, UNHCR has received consistently alarming reports of sharp increases in gender-based violence, trafficking, sexual exploitation, child pregnancies and marriages, xenophobia and stigmatization.

Eighty per cent of the world's refugees are hosted by poor and developing countries where health systems are rapidly becoming overwhelmed and people live in crowded and unsanitary conditions. Older people and those with disabilities are less able to get medical services in lockdowns, and displaced children are more likely not to return to schools once they reopen, especially girls, setting back advances hard won over recent years.

In addition to the social and economic impacts of COVID, we've seen that at the height of the pandemic 168 countries closed their borders—nearly 90 making no exception for asylum seekers, risking refoulement to danger. We've also seen push-backs of boats carrying asylum seekers with denial of rescues at sea or of disembarkation of those who have been rescued.

UNHCR has been clear in saying that a nation has a responsibility both to protect the health of its citizens and to protect asylum seekers. One does not exclude the other.

I'll conclude by saying that a solution lies in the global compact on refugees to build back better, as the Secretary-General has proposed. The compact makes a very simple principle—equitable sharing of the responsibility of displaced and stateless people. May I suggest, Mr. Chair, that it provides a road map for the future, one that, in this globalized world, we understand we must act together on, and we applaud Canada's efforts as a leader in its humanitarian responses.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Triggs, for your opening remarks.

I'll now turn the floor over to you, Ms. Hicks, for five minutes for your opening remarks.

Ms. Peggy Hicks (Director of Thematic Engagement, Special Procedures and Right to Development Division, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you so much for the invitation to speak on this important topic.

COVID-19 has acted as a stress test for our societies. It draws into sharp contrast the weaknesses that we know are there but that might not always be visible or that at least might be only at the periphery of our vision. Nowhere are those vulnerabilities more pronounced and the consequences more severe than in fragile and conflict- or crisis-affected societies.

The pandemic has resulted in a massive and multi-faceted human rights crisis. It would, in fact, be easier to name the rights that have not been significantly affected than it would be to name those that have, so profound are the consequences. Globally, we see an enormous surge in gender-based violence, nearly a doubling of the millions of people globally suffering from acute hunger, and disturbing impacts across the entire range of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights.

All of these impacts are further amplified in contexts of fragility, conflict, and emergencies, where social cohesion is already undermined and governmental institutions are weakened and sometimes dysfunctional. Indeed, we see that in many contexts, chronic underspending on health, water and sanitation, housing, and social protection has created immense vulnerabilities. Those gaps are all the more apparent and deep in conflict and crisis settings.

Let me focus more intensively on five areas in which the human rights consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are particularly disturbing.

First, there is the impact of COVID-19 on already vulnerable people, as Ms. Triggs has already emphasized. Older persons, people with disabilities, migrants, and children already bear enormous and disproportionate impacts in crisis and conflict. COVID-19 has amplified those effects, acting like a cruel version of a heat-seeking device that targets those most in need already.

Second, there are the consequences of fault lines within our societies, based on race, ethnicity, or minority status. In different ways in different locations, time and time again, we see that marginalized groups are triply harmed, facing greater exposure to the virus due to their jobs and living situations, facing more severe outcomes of the disease itself, and struggling more significantly to respond to the impact of COVID-19 on their livelihoods and lives.

Third, there are devastating effects of the pandemic on women. The manifold harms women are suffering during the pandemic are being felt from the richest to the most conflict-affected countries. We have seen tens of millions of additional cases of violence, a ratcheting up of already disproportionate burdens for child-rearing and household work, a larger share of women leaving the workforce, and women at greater risk due to their prevalence in health and service jobs.

Fourth, there is the impact of a lack of access to adequate water and sanitation and adequate housing. In March, as campaigns grew across the globe telling us all to wash our hands and stay at home, the reality remained that more than two billion of the world's population are homeless or have grossly inadequate housing, and a similar number lack access to water and sanitation. Of course, those gaps are felt most particularly in conflict- and crisis-affected areas.

Fifth and finally, there are the outsized effects of the digital divide. About half of the world's population has no access to the Internet. That digital gap, which is more profound for women and older persons, has always been a significant obstacle to development. Since the pandemic, we've seen how crucial digital access can be to education and health, and the life-threatening and altering impact of lack of connectivity. We also know that in situations of tension or crisis, even more people suffer through deliberate restrictions on access to the Internet, including shutdowns.

Not only are these impacts more severe in fragile and conflict-affected countries, but they themselves serve to fuel conflict and social unrest and to create greater obstacles to stability and peace. It is a vicious circle in which violence and instability aggravate COVID-19 impacts, and inversely the pandemic feeds conflict, violence and instability.

In light of those facts, the path forward today should be clear. This is a moment when support to countries in crisis or conflict has never been more important. The impact of the economic downturn in the developed world no doubt makes that commitment more challenging, but failing to meet this challenge will certainly be the more costly choice, both in lives and in resources.

Just as the pandemic has been fuelled by gaps in social protection, health, housing and sanitation, conflicts are fuelled by failures to address the root causes of violence, insecurity and conflict, including human rights violations and inequalities. The conflicts we face, in many if not most cases, are preceded by decades of human rights violations and built-up grievances, often documented by human rights mechanisms but not sufficiently taken up by concerned states or by regional or international organizations.

● (1540)

We speak a great deal about early warning, but the real shortcoming has been our inability to truly invest the resources and political capital needed before situations reach a breaking point. It is not warning, but more effective early action that we need.

The pandemic has provided a road map for building greater resilience to both pandemics and conflict. We build back better by investing in human rights.

Thank you.

● (1545)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Hicks.

We will now go into our first round of questions. These are six-minute time slots, the first of which goes to Mr. Genuis.

The floor is yours.

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Thank you, Ms. Triggs and Ms. Hicks, for your testimony, but more importantly for the important work that you do.

I am particularly concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on people facing arbitrary mass detention, the impact that the virus could have in those circumstances, especially, as we've talked about before at this committee, the Uighur Muslim community and what they're facing in China.

My first round of questions will focus on Ms. Hicks and on that particular issue.

Ms. Hicks, Canada's ambassador to the United Nations has proposed a UN investigation into whether or not the treatment of Uighurs constitutes genocide. In your view, are the acts being committed against Uighurs by the Chinese government constitutive of genocide?

Second, is the forcible confinement of people in close quarters, in concentration camps, during a pandemic, without the ability to socially distance and without proper access to health care...? Would that confinement and the associated circumstances be constitutive of genocide or of other definable international crimes?

Ms. Peggy Hicks: Thank you very much for your question, a very relevant and important one in the current circumstances.

Our office has done extensive work on looking at the issues of mass detention and incarceration during the pandemic, and in fact issued human rights guidance on some of the critical steps that should be taken to avoid the most severe consequences. The high commissioner herself has strongly urged for early releases in a broad range of cases in which continued detention was unnecessary.

We have also emphasized that now more than ever, it is a moment where all those who are arbitrarily detained in violation of international human rights law should be released, because they now face obviously not only the risk of the loss of their liberty but the risk of loss of life, given, as you've commented, the extent to which the pandemic has an even more devastating effect within prison and detention facilities.

You've asked specific questions about our work relating to China and the Uighur community. I'm sorry, sir, but that's beyond my brief within our office and isn't within the remarks that I'm able to make to the committee today. However, I'm sure our office would be happy to submit further statements in response to the questions, if that would be helpful.

Thank you.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you very much for that response. One of the things we do here often is that we ask for written follow-up, so could you, through your office, provide written follow-up to the committee about the specific questions around genocide and whether mass detention under the conditions of the pandemic could be seen as constitutive of genocide?

I have a follow-up question—and feel free to let me know if it doesn't fit within your brief, but I'd be curious to know. Our Canadian ambassador has called on the UN Human Rights Council to investigate China's behaviour in this respect. Unfortunately, China is actually a member of the Human Rights Council, as are Pakistan, Cuba, Saudi Arabia and Russia.

I know, Ms. Triggs, that in your previous work for Human Rights Watch you had made some comments about the Human Rights Council and its capacity to investigate human rights abuses in light of the presence of states with very poor human rights records on it. I wonder if you could speak to the role of the Human Rights Council. Is it capable of conducting a proper investigation in the case of the Uighurs, and then more broadly, what role is it able to play or not able to play in light of the current circumstances?

The Chair: Mr. Genuis, just before we go to Ms. Hicks, we have a request from our interpretation service.

Ms. Hicks, would you just continue to keep your mike as elevated as possible? I have hit the pause button, but I will now turn the floor back to you.

Thank you so much.

Ms. Peggy Hicks: Thank you, and apologies for that.

Thank you, sir. Yes, I'm happy to speak a bit on the role of the Human Rights Council in addressing a crisis such as that which you've described. The Human Rights Council does...and has been effective in putting in place mandates relating to investigation in a number of situations that were not favoured by the states that were going to be investigated.

It certainly is within the remit of the council and the potential of the council to be able to put in place a mechanism such as that. I'd refer you, for example, to the Syria commission of inquiry, which has been in place for seven years now, despite the objections of the Syrian government and others. Those resolutions are voted on, typically, but it is the case that there have been a number of mechanisms of that sort, and they do very important work in investigating and exposing rights abuses throughout the globe.

The council has 47 members, so it is not within the power of any one member to be able to block that type of action if there is a majority vote.

● (1550)

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Perhaps I could just quickly sharpen that question. It's one thing with Syria, which doesn't have a lot of friends around the world; it's another thing with China, which has a concerted neocolonial program to influence other states and influence the direction of international human rights deliberations.

Are China's efforts to control deliberations, not just of the Human Rights Council but in human rights bodies in general, hampering the UN's ability to respond to human rights crises around the world?

Ms. Peggy Hicks: What I can speak to is what I see in my own experience, and that is that my office does not feel we are hampered in that way. We are able to pursue our mandate to the full extent of the mandate. We speak out on crises across the world. We speak out on China as we do on other countries when we see the need to do so.

As I said, it is not the area in which I specifically work, but the high commissioner is and has been discussing the possibility of an investigation and mission to China. We can submit further information on the status of those discussions with the Chinese government and would obviously appreciate support in having that type of work go forward in the future.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you very much.

I would quickly say that we welcome that follow-up.

The Chair: Thank you for that.

The next round goes to Dr. Fry for six minutes, please.

Hon. Hedy Fry (Vancouver Centre, Lib.): Good morning, and thank you for coming to this meeting. I'm in beautiful, sunny Vancouver, so it's just noon for me.

The idea that there are 80 million refugees or people who are displaced around the world was a cause of concern before COVID began. COVID has now exposed all of the vulnerability. You're absolutely right, and everything you said is of great concern to us.

Thank you for congratulating Canada. I am pleased with the work we are doing, but the point is that we still have the real problems. Putting out money, helping to get people food security, helping to give them housing, helping with education, all of these are essential things. However, we have, for instance, in the OSCE region, which is the second-largest region outside of the United Nations, countries that have closed their borders to persons who are stateless and who are displaced. There is nowhere for everyone to go.

We know that today countries are using COVID-19 to actually deny sexual and reproductive health and rights to women around the world. We understand everything you say; we've heard it from everyone else.

My question is simply this. Other than giving emergency funding, which Canada is pleased to do, what are the really practical actions that we can take to move forward to sustainability? This is not our last pandemic. Pandemics are going to come and go. How do we look at building sustainable infrastructure in these countries—health care systems, food security systems? How do we deal with this so that we don't have to each time treat every new pandemic or every new issue as an emergency? There are more people displaced today than in World War I, World War II, Vietnam and the other conflicts put together.

I would like to ask both of you to answer, and I will let the chair decide who goes first because that's his prerogative. What are the really sustainable, permanent things we can do so countries can be self-sufficient, so people do not have to leave? Of course, I could ask you what to do about conflict, but I think that's eluding everyone right now.

Could you please answer? Thank you.

● (1555)

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Fry.

We'll let Ms. Triggs and Ms. Hicks answer in the sequence of opening remarks. That's probably the easiest.

Ms. Gillian Triggs: Thank you very much for the question. I think it's one that people across the world are asking, as we see conflicts continue, new ones emerge, and old ones seemingly irresolvable. Although we are in peace discussions in relation to Afghanistan, it's been going on for 40 years. The Syrian conflict is in the 10th year. We've had countries like Turkey hosting four million refugees, generously, for many years. Some are very long-term.

In answer to your question, I would go back to the reason for the refugee convention, which was six years after the Second World War, in 1951. At that time, the convention was dealing with about two million displaced people. It was thought that the refugee convention would essentially solve the problem, that it would find resettlement and a home for those two million.

Here we are, 70 years later, with much to celebrate in terms of those core constants of the refugee convention, but dealing with 80 million and, frankly, rising as we speak.

The question, of course, must be the one you're asking: What are sustainable solutions, rather than temporary ones, which are ones of allowing access to claim asylum and denying, of course, any form of refoulement to danger?

The answer, we think, lies in sharing responsibility, which is what the Global Compact on Refugees is designed to achieve—a shared, equitable responsibility for assisting those host countries that are taking the burden. In fact, 80% of refugees and displaced people are in developing or very poor countries, so the burden is disproportionately faced, particularly at the moment in Africa, where huge numbers of people are subject to the generosity of hosting countries in the near area.

What are the solutions? “Sharing” is a big word, but what does it actually mean? We're looking now for financial support, but also for investment. UNHCR is an emergency agency. We can provide billions of bars of soap and the emergency housing in Idlib. We can do the emergency work, but we're also moving now toward working much more closely with investment banks and governments, broadening the base of support to get investment to deal with what we all know are the underlying root causes, such as poverty and inequality. We need investment, and we need engagement by the community as a whole.

The Chair: Dr. Fry, you have limited time. We'll turn the floor over briefly to Ms. Hicks for additional comments, but then we'll have to close this round.

Ms. Peggy Hicks: Thank you. I'll be brief, then.

I think there are a couple of points that haven't come through entirely.

These aren't solutions that any one country, obviously, is going to put on the table by itself. We feel strongly that part of what's been shown here is the need for multilateral solutions, and for further engagement in a co-operative way, across borders and across regions, to be able to come up with approaches that work and are sustainable. We do see human rights as one of the key elements in making sustainable peace and development work, as I've said in my remarks.

I would also emphasize, as a final point, that we often do not have the data and the information that allows us to intervene and act as effectively as possible. More work is required, looking at the indicators and the data. Monitoring is also a key point, disaggregated data in particular, on race, gender and other criteria.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Hicks.

[*Translation*]

I'll now give the floor to you, Mr. Bergeron.

You have six minutes.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron (Montarville, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the witnesses for joining us. Your presence is very much appreciated. Your contribution will be invaluable to the work of this committee.

Yesterday was the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. One thing noted was that reports of domestic violence against both women and children have decreased significantly during the pandemic. We're seeing that the family home is a comfortable and safe place, but that it's also a very secretive location where things happen. More extensive studies show that the level of violence has likely increased, although the reports have decreased.

I want to know whether a parallel can be established at the international level. Ms. Triggs pointed out that there have been fewer resettlements during the pandemic. Can we assume that, likewise, during the pandemic, there may be fewer indications of potential human rights violations?

If we look deeper, can we say that, on the contrary, human rights violations have increased since global attention is focused on dealing with the pandemic and not on the international community's usual efforts to ensure respect for human rights or the well-being of refugees?

● (1600)

[*English*]

Ms. Peggy Hicks: Gillian, did you want to go first on that? I think it was directed at you.

Ms. Gillian Triggs: Peggy, would you like to go first? I sincerely apologize, but I'm afraid my French is not good enough to understand that question.

Ms. Peggy Hicks: Sure. I'm happy to come in.

Thank you, sir. We certainly agree with your question. In fact, as you've said, we've seen a rise in human rights violations during the pandemic in a variety of different ways. You emphasized the fact that women at home in close quarters are sometimes more vulnerable. We have seen an upsurge in violence in the home. It has been well documented.

That applies as well, I would say, to people in care in a variety of ways: older people, people with disabilities and others. We've also seen it happen with LGBT people who may not have a happy home situation. That may also increase the risk of violence for them.

There's plenty to be worried about in terms of a rise in human rights violations during the pandemic.

I would also emphasize the extent to which the use by governments of emergency measures is something that of course we understand and has been very necessary and that human rights law clearly allows for, but what we have also seen is that there have been numerous instances where states have abused those measures in an overbroad or a pretextual way to abuse rights in various ways: by cracking down on dissent, by going up against civil society and by taking measures that might have been more visible in other circumstances but are now hidden behind the pandemic.

I think you're absolutely right that this is something we need to watch much more carefully.

The Chair: Mr. Bergeron, I'm just hitting the pause button for one second to tell Ms. Triggs this. If you select English in the interpretation feature at the bottom of your screen, you should, hopefully, be receiving the interpretation, which would allow you to comment on questions in either language. Let us know if that's not the case. If you have trouble, we will see if we can get our technical team involved in this.

[*Translation*]

I'll now give the floor to Mr. Bergeron.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Ms. Triggs, I'd be very interested in your response. As Mr. Genuis said earlier, if you want to send us your written comments on this issue afterwards, I'd greatly appreciate it.

That said, a number of things have been rolled out as a result of the pandemic. We can assume that these things are having a tremendously positive impact. However, one thing initiated as a result of the pandemic is the collection of information on people, particularly health information. New practices have been developed. We can clearly see this on a technological level.

Do you have any concerns about this technological development and these new measures for collecting data on Canadians in terms of possible human rights violations?

● (1605)

[*English*]

Ms. Peggy Hicks: We have been following that issue pretty closely. As in many cases, when you roll out something quickly in the midst of a pandemic, it's not always the best way to make good policy. I think we have learned a lot about the use of contact-tracing apps and what are appropriate ways to safeguard privacy and data more effectively, through using data localization, through making sure that the process is transparent and that there are limits to how long data can be saved. All sorts of measures need to be in place when that type of technology is rolled out. Unfortunately, in a few places, we have seen the consequences when they haven't been in place.

Therefore, I do think those lessons learned really need to be put in place. There's also such a diffusion of the different contact-tracing apps and the ways they are being used that it would be good to have some cross-fertilization of that learning across contexts to make it easier for people to ensure that this technology is something they can rely on in terms of their privacy and their rights.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bergeron.

[*English*]

Ms. Hicks, thank you very much.

The final series of questions in this round goes to Ms. McPherson, for six minutes, please.

Ms. Heather McPherson (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much to both of our witnesses. This has been very interesting. I have the pleasure of going fourth, so many of my questions have already been addressed.

I'm going to focus a little on what my colleague from the Bloc Québécois has brought forward in terms of the impacts that COVID-19 has had on women.

Ms. Hicks, you were very eloquent when you spoke about those impacts, about the violence, the failure of women to be able to go back to work, the burden of house care and child care. What I'm interested in is how you would predict or how you would see Canada doing a better job, improving our role in addressing this, both domestically and internationally, because as my colleague Mr. Bergeron mentioned, this is not something that happens elsewhere; this is something that also happens in Canada. Could you comment on that?

Ms. Triggs, if you wouldn't mind, I might get you to comment on that as well.

Ms. Peggy Hicks: Thank you for the opportunity.

I do think this is an area where more attention has been paid, but there's never enough engagement on these issues. Therefore, it is really important that we look at what's happening and try to outline clearly what types of responses are effective.

One of the things we've emphasized is that when there is a crisis such as this, we know there is a need immediately for more referral services and more access for people for shelter. People need other options even in the midst of a pandemic, and I think we were somewhat slow to roll those out and to recognize that need. Both in Canada and through Canada's support elsewhere, those types of solutions are very important.

As we've also seen, and this has been well documented, women's access to health care during the pandemic has been greatly diminished. For example, women have not been able to easily access sexual and reproductive health and care, which has an enormous impact on their lives as well. Emphasis in that area is a second piece that I would urge Canada and other governments to look at.

Ms. Heather McPherson: That's wonderful. Thank you.

Ms. Triggs.

Ms. Gillian Triggs: Thank you very much.

I think the question of gender-based violence in the context of COVID has really been one of the most disturbing impacts of COVID, because it has existed, of course, as we all know, in all our societies, but COVID has shone a light on this and expanded our understanding. However, also, the lockdowns have increased family tensions and we've seen an exacerbation of an existing situation.

What do we do about it? Perhaps before I mention what one might do, one thing that has been so interesting is that within weeks of COVID we were getting reports from our call centres in many parts of the world, but particularly Africa and Latin America, where in one instance we were getting 10 times the number of calls on gender-based violence in these countries. It has been true all over the world. It's not particular.

It's a very worrying phenomenon. What do we do? At UNHCR, one of the things we're doing is developing call centres. We're massively or very significantly increasing call centres to give greater access to women to call in. We can then provide mechanisms for getting out to legal advice, to health centres, to psychosocial support where necessary and to other social services. We think that's one way of achieving it in the context of a COVID that continues.

As Peggy said, people need options, shelters, but perhaps what it comes down to ultimately is greater funding and stronger advocacy to ensure that this funding is in place, not just as a temporary measure but something that becomes a significant feature of the social safety net of all systems and includes women in the environment of a pandemic. This won't be the last pandemic. There will be others, and this is a continuing and societal problem.

● (1610)

Ms. Heather McPherson: Absolutely.

I might ask you my next question as well, Ms. Triggs. That was particularly focused on what we can do in terms of violence against women and protecting women around the world, particularly during this COVID time.

In terms of refugees, do you feel that Canada is doing enough? Do you feel that we are doing our fair share? If you aren't comfortable commenting on that, what could we do more of? I suppose that would be another way of looking at it.

Ms. Gillian Triggs: I would be reluctant to answer that question in many cases, but in the case of Canada, I have to say that I am delighted to answer. You really are one of the top leaders in the world. There's no question about that. We've all watched with great delight as Canada has held the line. You've understood the problem and you've stood by your understanding of the need for resettlement and for monies—that aren't always being expended in your own economy, but you've been prepared to provide funds in the COVID context internationally. That's been vitally important to UNHCR.

What more can you do? I've listed a number of things that you're doing so well for us. I won't go through them again. My reason for raising them is that you have a leadership position globally. You've stayed and delivered. You've been good to your values and you are known for that. We at UNHCR would greatly value your continued advocacy. You have a credibility on this question that very few countries have. We would like to see that developed and maintained. Continue, if you could, your advocacy on community sponsorship, on alternatives to dealing with these issues but also advocacy for investments, for dealing with the root causes that we were talking about a little earlier.

In the end, to achieve sustainable solutions, we have to have a maintenance and development nexus. We must invest, and we must deal with the root causes of, as you yourself raised quite clearly, such things as violence against women.

Thank you.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you so much.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Triggs, and thank you, Ms. McPherson.

We'll go into our second round now. I'll keep a fairly close eye on time. There should be sufficient time for a member from each party to ask an additional question in accordance with the negotiated times. The first two are five-minute rounds, and the next two are two-and-a-half-minute rounds.

I would encourage you, witnesses and members, to watch the time frame as carefully as you can.

The first round goes to Mr. Genuis for five minutes, please.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Hicks, thank you for your earlier responses. I would welcome written follow-up from your office on the situation in China as well as the challenges you are experiencing as a result of the Chinese government's efforts to redefine international doctrines around human rights. I would like to see Canada play a constructive role, pushing back against efforts of authoritarian states to redefine established doctrines of international human rights. The advice of your office on how to do that would be very helpful. I would just note as a general comment that obligations under the genocide convention are for states. Regardless of the actions of UN bodies, states have obligations under the genocide convention, including the responsibility to protect.

My remaining questions are for you, Ms. Triggs. We hear a lot in Canada from communities that are particularly following the human rights situation of members of their own community who are in other parts of the world, and they often raise concerns about the challenge of accessing the UNHCR certification process. There are a number of cases where this would apply. It would apply, for instance, to individuals who are not yet refugees but still face persecution, people like the Sikh and Hindu minority community in Afghanistan, where there are big challenges. There are efforts to sponsor members of those communities, but they have a greater challenge accessing our refugee system. If they are still in country, they are not formally qualified as refugees.

I'm thinking also about the situation of Pakistani minorities in Thailand, who are often quite vulnerable. Sometimes they're in detention camps. I know you have limits operating there, because Thailand is not a signatory to the refugee convention. As well, we hear about challenges from religious minority communities in the Middle East that may not actually feel safe in refugee camps.

I think this is important for you to hear, because when some of the world's most vulnerable refugees, persecuted people, have trouble accessing the UN certification system, it leads to greater pressure for us to draw refugees from outside of that process. I would appreciate your thoughts on this challenge and any feedback on what steps the UNHCR can take to better ensure that a larger proportion of vulnerable people can actually be identified and certified as refugees.

● (1615)

Ms. Gillian Triggs: Thank you.

You raise a critically important question. I mentioned that there are 47 million internally displaced people. Internally displaced people are not refugees. There are two completely different regimes. One is under the refugee convention for those who have fled their countries. They are outside their countries of origin and in need of protection. The overwhelming majority of people now—persons of concern to UNHCR—are in fact the very group you're describing. They're internally displaced within their own countries, where of course they're the responsibility primarily of their own states.

Because there isn't much time, I'd like to perhaps respond in writing to you on this question to make the point of the distinction. They are part of the UNHCR mandate, not because they're refugees, but because they are internally displaced. We have a strong responsibility, of course, to protect them.

I will, if I may, get back to you in writing shortly.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you.

I would welcome further information in writing, but I do want to clarify that my question was not just about internally displaced people. It included internally displaced people, but I also mentioned the case, for instance, of Pakistani minority communities, like the Ahmadiyya Muslims and Christians in Thailand who struggle to access the certification process, at least based on the testimony I've heard from many people in those communities. I'm sure best efforts are being made.

It's not just internally displaced people. From what we hear, it's also people who are refugees and who, in certain contexts—either because of the policies of states, challenges with UNHCR or questions of safety in camps—have trouble accessing that certification process. That has implications for us, because if some of our refugee systems require people to be certified by the UNHCR, then they can't access those refugee systems and it creates a greater pressure for us to not rely on the UNHCR certification process.

I've almost eaten all of my time, but I'd welcome further comments in writing. We probably have about 15 seconds, if there's anything you want to say verbally now.

The Chair: Briefly, Ms. Triggs, you may make an additional comment if you'd like.

Ms. Gillian Triggs: We will certainly come back to you on the particular question that you've raised in relation to Thailand and we'll come back to you more clearly on exactly what the limits are on access to the refugee status determination process.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Genuis. Thank you, Ms. Triggs.

The next round goes to Mr. Fonseca for five minutes, please.

Mr. Peter Fonseca (Mississauga East—Cooksville, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Hicks and Ms. Triggs.

Ms. Hicks, the Office of the High Commissioner released COVID-19 policy guidance for governments in April 2020, stating, "Some safeguards must be put in place including the respect of some fundamental rights that cannot be suspended under any circumstances."

Ms. Hicks, would you be able to detail for us what some of those fundamental rights are?

Ms. Peggy Hicks: Certainly. Thank you very much.

Yes, you're referring to a guidance note that we did that looks at emergency measures and their impact. There are two different ways that states can derogate from human rights. There's the formal way—which is what you were referring to—under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which allows certain rights to be derogated when there is a state of emergency in place that has been notified under the convention.

Most places that declared emergencies did not actually go to that limit and did not try to officially declare a state of emergency and move towards derogation. The types of rights that can't be derogated, for example, include the right against torture—things that, under most circumstances, there couldn't be a justification for.

Most states instead relied on the provisions of human rights law that do allow for restrictions that are necessary for public health. It is the case that restrictions exist for security and health under existing law. You just have to be transparent, non-discriminatory and put in place measures to ensure that those steps do not overreach the necessity of the public health emergency.

It's that type of guidance that we've tried to provide, to make sure that states do not move in a direction that over-utilizes or is overly broad in the ways in which they restrict rights. We've obviously seen that many of us have had our rights restricted by lockdown measures and other things that are consistent with human rights law. We've also seen, as I mentioned earlier, that there have been instances where states have used such measures to disadvantage opposition groups, civil society and others in ways that were not necessary.

● (1620)

Mr. Peter Fonseca: Have you seen that happening during this pandemic?

Ms. Peggy Hicks: Yes, our office has documented instances where there were arrests and roundups of people pretextually. I could get back to you with additional information. We've issued statements on those issues.

Thank you.

Mr. Peter Fonseca: Thank you.

Ms. Triggs, in a news release on November 19, the UNHCR warned that 2020 will be a record low for refugee resettlement. You mentioned that current rates point to one of the lowest levels of resettlement witnessed in almost two decades, which is a blow for refugee protection.

In which areas of the world are you seeing the greatest challenges with regard to resettlement, and what do you believe Canada's role in aiding these resettlement efforts should be?

Ms. Gillian Triggs: You're quite right. This is one of the lowest years we've had in more than 20 years, obviously in part because of COVID. One of the significant problems is that the resettlement countries are very few. We have to broaden the base. We need more countries. We have something like 25 countries that currently allow resettlement, but the numbers are declining, although we have high expectations in some jurisdictions. I think it would be fair to say that overwhelmingly we do not have resettlement through much of the world; we have about 25 countries. One of the challenges for the future is to expand that.

What is Canada's role? Again, I think it's very much one of advocacy. If Canada were able to talk to those countries with resources and capacity to encourage them to set up resettlement programs or complementary pathways through education, labour, mobility, family resettlement, reunion and so on, then we would see that as really a key function that Canada could play.

The Chair: You have about 45 seconds.

Mr. Peter Fonseca: Ms. Hicks, could you tell us a little bit about how marginalized groups and individuals are disproportionately affected by COVID-19? What's being done to tackle these inequalities?

Ms. Peggy Hicks: We've seen different problems in different places. Sometimes it's the case that minority groups don't have as much access to services or to information about the pandemic.

We've also seen, I believe in Canada and in other western countries and elsewhere, that groups that have had less access to health care have had disproportionate impacts in terms of the virus. The racial disparity that's been found in COVID response and impact statistics is really profound and is something that needs a great deal of additional care and attention in terms of why it's happening and how we can best address it.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Hicks.

Thank you, Mr. Fonseca.

[*Translation*]

I'll now give the floor to Mr. Bergeron for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Hicks, for your responses earlier.

I'll now turn to Ms. Triggs.

Unfortunately, I have very little time. I'll ask you three questions at once. If you don't have enough time to answer the three questions, I would appreciate it if you could send us additional written comments.

Ms. Triggs, we know that the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees works with various sister agencies, including UNRWA, the agency for Palestinian refugees. Some agencies, including this one, are experiencing funding issues that pose a threat to their operations.

How is this funding issue being addressed for a number of agencies working with refugees on the ground?

We saw that people tried to leave Hong Kong by sea, but were intercepted by the Chinese authorities. How does the Office of the High Commissioner anticipate possible population displacements in order to ensure the safety of people who want to leave Hong Kong and seek refuge elsewhere?

What can you tell us about the displacement of people following the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh?

● (1625)

[*English*]

Ms. Gillian Triggs: I'm very sorry, but I'm afraid I do not have translation services, and I can't answer that question. What I will do is ask that the questions be interpreted for me, and I'll make sure you get a proper written answer in due course.

My apologies again.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mr. Bergeron, you have 30 seconds left.

Do you have any other comments or questions?

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Now that I know that Ms. Triggs is completely unable to hear or understand the questions that I'm asking her, we'll simply wait until the questions have been translated for her so that we can receive answers.

The Chair: Okay.

Thank you, Mr. Bergeron.

[*English*]

The last round goes to Ms. McPherson, for two and a half minutes.

The floor is yours, please.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I just want to follow up on what my colleague Mr. Fonseca asked about.

Ms. Triggs, you spoke about the role that Canada has in terms of advocating and speaking to certain countries. Could you talk a bit about which countries you are referring to? If you could be blunt and name them, please, what are those countries that we should be prioritizing?

Ms. Gillian Triggs: I am reluctant to be naming countries. I think that's really not appropriate.

What I can say is that we have 25 or 26 countries in the world that provide resettlement services, for example, and that most of those are with very small numbers. We really need to broaden the base to get more support. The base is far too small. I think there are obviously many countries in the world that don't have the capacity, but there are many in Europe, in the northern hemisphere in particular, that do have the capacity, and some in the southern hemisphere.

I think this is where we need to give real effect to the principle of sharing in the Global Compact, to which 181 countries agreed. That's really where we would see a potential for Canadian advocacy.

Ms. Heather McPherson: For us to do more of that effort.... Thank you so much.

The next question that I will put forward is around human trafficking, the impact that COVID-19 has had on human trafficking and whether or not that trafficking has been exacerbated during the pandemic.

Perhaps, Ms. Hicks, you could talk a bit about that.

Ms. Peggy Hicks: Thank you.

Our expert on human trafficking has been concerned about the impacts, and we are working to see more documentation of that, but there is a concern that, as one of the earlier questions put it, some of this activity moves to the background in a way that makes it more difficult to address the problems that are being faced by people who are being trafficked.

As well, there is a concern that any time there is an economic downturn and greater risk, there's more potential for people to be pulled into trafficking. There are certainly very big risk factors, and from our perspective it's certainly an issue that deserves further attention.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you very much.

I believe that is the end of my time. I will pass it back to you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Ms. McPherson, thank you very much. That's perfectly timed.

Colleagues, on our collective behalf, I would like to thank our two witnesses, Ms. Triggs and Ms. Hicks, for their time today, for their expertise and, very importantly, for their service on these very important issues around the world. Also, indirectly through you, our thanks for the service of your teammates, who we know are doing tremendous work.

We will revert with some requests for written information, and we will now allow you to disconnect, with our thanks and gratitude.

We'll allow our next panel to connect and be sound-checked. We'll suspend for a couple of minutes.

Thank you so much.

● (1630)

_____(Pause)_____

● (1640)

The Chair: Welcome back, everyone.

For the benefit of our new witnesses, I encourage all participants to please mute their microphones when they're not speaking and address their comments to the chair. I will signal when you have 30 seconds left in your questioning or speaking time with this yellow sheet of paper. Once again, interpretation is available at the bottom of your screen through the globe icon.

[*Translation*]

I now want to welcome our second panel of witnesses.

[*English*]

We have with us, from Plan International Canada, Tanjina Mirza, chief program officer.

[*Translation*]

We're joined by Michael Messenger, president and chief executive officer of World Vision Canada; and Lindsay Gladding, director of fragile and humanitarian programs.

[*English*]

From the Canadian Foodgrains Bank, we have Paul Hagerman, director of public policy; and Stefan Epp-Koop, program development officer.

Without further ado, and with my thanks for your patience, I will turn it over to Ms. Mirza for her opening comments of five minutes.

The floor is yours.

Dr. Tanjina Mirza (Chief Program Officer, Plan International Canada Inc.): Thank you so much for inviting me to speak to the committee today.

COVID-19 has really increased the vulnerability, especially for children and girls, in situations of conflict and displacement. Plan International is one of the largest international child rights organizations. We strive to end gender inequality and promote children's rights everywhere. We work in contexts that are heavily burdened by crisis and conflict.

As a global organization, Plan International's COVID-19 response has reached over 72 million women, men, girls and boys with life-saving programs in developing countries and countries that are facing crises and conflict.

Today I want to highlight three key points. Number one, COVID is deepening inequalities with a disproportionate impact on young girls and eroding the progress that has been made so far on children's rights and gender equality. Number two, the magnitude of the problem we are facing in this COVID pandemic requires global, holistic, system-wide approaches and solutions. Number three, this is the time, more than ever before, to ask for Canada's leadership to advance the rights of children, especially girls.

Let me elaborate the first point. Plan International is deeply concerned about the pandemic's impact on children, especially girls. The consequences of the pandemic have been grave. Over 13 million children are refugees and there are 17 million internally displaced children living in camps and often in very overcrowded settlements. Girls in crisis are telling us that COVID has further worsened the existing vulnerabilities that children have been facing. The risk of transmission of disease is very high in these overcrowded places. The education system is often inadequate. Even basic services like water and sanitation infrastructure are inadequate. Sexual and reproductive health rights are threatened, and we are seeing gender-based violence increase at an exponential rate in this COVID pandemic.

Around the world, Plan has adapted its programs to respond to this pandemic in communities where we work. Our response aims to prevent transmission, mitigate the impact of COVID among the world's most vulnerable children in refugee camps, displaced settlements and conflict environments.

My second point is that the pandemic is shining a light on the fragmented system we have. A well-thought-out response requires a coordinated, integrated, system-wide strategy, a whole-of-government strategy. This may seem like a tall order, but we all know that this is the effective way forward.

Let's take an example. The education system is a lifeline for children in a crisis context. It is estimated that more than 128 million children are out of school because of conflict and disasters. Every day a girl in crisis is out of school she is at a risk of physical violence, sexual violence and psychological distress, and lacks adequate nutrition. She faces an increasing risk of early marriage, often forced marriage, child labour, trafficking and armed conflict.

Having been a refugee myself who has gone through crisis as a young girl, I can tell you that it changes the course of one's life. But I was fortunate. Through it all, my education remained constant, but for most of the refugee girls and children, that is not the case. If the current trend continues, by 2030 only one in three girls in crisis-affected countries will ever get to complete secondary school. During times of crisis, all actors have to redouble their efforts to ensure that we have a robust system to protect and safeguard children, especially girls.

My final point is that Canada's leadership is needed now more than ever. Canadians can be proud of our global response to COVID. Global problems like global pandemics require robust, bold solutions. The pandemic has heightened awareness that the planet is truly interconnected. The prosperity of Canadians is linked to people around the world.

● (1645)

Plan Canada welcomed the Speech from the Throne commitment to increase official development assistance. We look forward to seeing this commitment being actioned in the next budget. This investment is urgently needed, and with a timetable.

In closing, as the world grapples with the crisis, new gender transformative pathways are needed to build back better. Plan Canada stands ready to ensure that Canada's international COVID response carves a path that positively impacts the lives of millions of children globally, especially the girls who need it most and were often left behind.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Mirza, for your opening comments.

I'll now turn the floor over to team World Vision Canada.

Mr. Messenger and Ms. Gladding, the floor is yours for five minutes.

Mr. Michael Messenger (President and Chief Executive Officer, World Vision Canada): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair and members of the committee, for inviting World Vision to contribute to this important and timely study. I'm joined by my colleague Lindsay Gladding, our director for fragile and humanitarian programs.

By way of background, World Vision is a Christian relief, development and advocacy organization. We're working with children, families and communities to overcome poverty and injustice. We're working in nearly 100 countries on the basis of need, with no strings attached. We're grateful for the support of more than 650,000 Canadians and partners.

[*Translation*]

Our presentation refers to the first segment of this study focusing on the humanitarian response along with the upcoming second segment. We're very pleased to see you looking even more closely at the effects on children.

[*English*]

In April 2015, I was in Nepal less than 24 hours after the devastating earthquake that caused so much destruction in that country. As I travelled around the region for the next couple of weeks, seeing how the disaster had caused pain, heartbreak and need in so many places, every so often we would feel the earth move under our feet again. We experienced many aftershocks, some nearly as powerful as the initial quake. Every time it happened, I knew that more families would lose their homes, more deaths would occur, more children would be left vulnerable. Even after the main earthquake was over, the aftershocks amplified the impact.

I am telling that story because, as we think about the earthquake that is COVID-19 causing incredible hardship around the world, we know that the initial health impacts, which are so significant, are only part of the story. Vulnerable populations, especially girls and boys in some of the world's toughest places, can expect to experience ongoing aftershocks that will continue, and secondary impacts on health, well-being, education and livelihoods that may be worse than the initial waves. In fact, as we've done our work and research on this, we have titled our research series "Aftershocks" for that reason.

With that story, I want to convey two key messages today. First, COVID-19 is setting back the critical progress being made for the most vulnerable girls and boys through the pandemic and its secondary impacts. Second, Canada, like other donors, can play a critical role in the response, through more agile, flexible and integrated programming and funding, and by stepping up to the increased needs with higher levels of funding for urgently needed humanitarian and development efforts.

I'll share briefly World Vision's global response. In March, immediately after the pandemic was declared, we started the largest humanitarian response in our 70-year history, building on our long-term community presence. The $350-million U.S. response has already reached 55 million women, men, girls and boys by focusing on prevention measures, strengthening local health systems and supporting children affected by COVID-19 through education, child protection and livelihood interventions.

We worked closely with bilateral and multilateral donors, including Global Affairs Canada. For example, Global Affairs provided an additional $5 million to an ongoing consortium, a five-year health grant in Bangladesh, Kenya, Tanzania and Myanmar. Being there on the ground with the pandemic allowed us and our partners to respond quickly. Because of the additional funding, we were able to pivot and scale up rather than create new projects from the ground up. Canada certainly should be commended for supporting pivots like this, and we should do more.

A key part of our COVID-19 response has been to address the pandemic's impact on children. We know that, over eight months into the global pandemic, evidence shows that while children may not be at the most immediate risk from the virus itself, they are experiencing indirect negative impacts. These are the aftershocks.

We've had a chance to hear from children themselves, and we want to make space for their voices to be heard. A recent consultation we did across 50 countries showed, for example, that violence has surged in the past year. Of those interviewed, 81% said they have seen or faced violence in their homes, communities or even online since the start of the pandemic. As we learned from the Ebola outbreaks in West Africa or the DRC, and certainly following up on what Ms. Mirza was saying, girls are particularly in jeopardy. Child and forced marriage is on the rise, as is sexual violence and unwanted pregnancy. These and other challenges aren't limiting their impact.

I will conclude with three recommendations.

First, Canadian support for programming and interventions must prioritize and address the pandemic's indirect impacts on children. As you conclude your study, I urge you to not only address the immediate health crisis, but also consider the aftershocks.

Second, the Government of Canada can continue to lead the way by being more agile and flexible, quicker and effective in responding to a global crisis. We're dealing with the silos of a short-term humanitarian response on the one hand, and long-term development on the other, with different funding mechanisms, support and expectations that are inadequate to recognize the shift as we address changing situations. We have had to pivot and adjust on the fly, but the funding systems often don't keep up, so we think there's work we can do to break down those bureaucratic hurdles, and it is a critical opportunity.

● (1650)

Third, increased needs require increased funding. While Canada has provided much-needed additional funds for COVID-19 efforts and we've recently heard encouraging promises, the long-term challenges we see will require even more ambition. Specifically, we urge the government to provide clarity on Canada's funding for international development by including a timetable of year-over-year increases to the international assistance envelope. It's all because we simply cannot allow the gains we've made together to fight extreme poverty shrink or disappear because of a lack of resources to support the most vulnerable. Canada has been a leader in standing up for the needs of the vulnerable, and we should support our ambition with increased funding that will drive global impact to fight the earthquakes like COVID-19, as well as their terrible aftershocks.

Mr. Chair, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today.

[*Translation*]

Thank you for your attention.

[*English*]

We look forward to your questions.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Mr. Messenger.

Our final set of opening remarks will be from the Canadian Foodgrains Bank.

Mr. Hagerman and Mr. Epp-Koop, the floor is yours for five minutes. Please go ahead.

Mr. Paul Hagerman (Director, Public Policy, Canadian Foodgrains Bank): Thank you.

I'll be speaking on behalf of the Foodgrains Bank, and Stefan will be available for questions, if necessary.

Good afternoon, everybody. Thank you for the opportunity to appear. I'm so glad the committee is studying this important issue.

I work with the Canadian Foodgrains Bank. We provide food assistance and we support livelihoods by working through partners in about 30 countries around the world. Most of our experience with COVID comes from partners in 12 countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Our partners tell us that the impact of COVID on people's health has not been as severe as we initially feared, due to quick action by many governments and other factors. But things could worsen without continued vigilance.

However, the knock-on effects of the pandemic and the government responses have been significant impacts on economies and on food security. In the first few months, we saw impacts across the food system. Farmers and traders lost income. Perishable food went to waste. Food prices rose. Many households struggled to buy enough. Also, food assistance programs were disrupted.

By now, some of these problems have been resolved. Our partner organizations have changed the way they work so that they can still do food assistance and still distribute food without increasing [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

● (1655)

The Chair: Madam Clerk, I think we've lost Mr. Hagerman.

Mr. Epp-Koop, do you want to jump in and take over, or should we see if we can get him reconnected quickly? Is there any sense of what the issue is?

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Erica Pereira): Mr. Chair, he is frozen. Our technicians are working on it right now.

The Chair: Mr. Epp-Koop, if you'd like, you can jump in and make a couple of points from your end, and then we'll reconnect to him when he's reactivated.

Mr. Stefan Epp-Koop (Program Development Officer, Canadian Foodgrains Bank): Sure.

The Chair: Hold on. I think you're off the hook. He's back with us.

The floor is back to you, Mr. Hagerman.

Mr. Paul Hagerman: How much did you hear? Can you give me an idea of where I should pick up?

The Chair: I think you were about two minutes into your remarks, if that's helpful.

Mr. Paul Hagerman: That is helpful. I apologize for the unstable connection.

Some of the initial problems that we saw with the food system have been resolved. Our partner organizations have changed the way they do food assistance to reduce COVID risk, but they're still distributing food. As in Canada, they've shifted from in-person meetings to communication by telephone and other means, but they're still keeping in touch with the people who need help.

Nevertheless, the economic impact continues to be experienced by many households. From surveys of multiple African countries, we know that nearly 80% of households have lost income because of COVID. For example, that could be an Ethiopian man who used to work in Saudi Arabia and send money home, but his job disappeared with the lockdown. It could be a female small-scale trader who used to buy in Uganda and sell in Congo, but can't now because of the border restrictions. It could be a pastoralist who normally sells animals to people celebrating festivals, but the festivals have been cancelled.

This loss of income has increased food insecurity. For many who were struggling to eat before COVID, it has pushed them to crisis level. It's often worse for women, because their jobs in the informal sector have been harder hit.

COVID has brought another layer of stress on families, on communities and on countries that were already facing multiple stresses, including conflict, which is the primary driver of food insecurity in many contexts, or the desert locusts and weather extremes. People who were already vulnerable now face another big shock.

The economic downturn is having significant impacts on government finances. This will increase the debt burden, slow economic activity and constrain the ability to reduce hunger in the coming years. COVID may be a short-term crisis, but it will have a very long tail, as many millions of people are pushed into extreme poverty.

To respond to COVID, here are three recommendations for what Canada could do. The first is, don't think of this pandemic as a stand-alone crisis. The people dealing with COVID impacts are also dealing with other stresses. Our support should help them deal with as many of those stresses as possible. That means better linkages between humanitarian and development programming. Knowing how much hunger is caused by conflict, Canada should also seek ways to support both humanitarian and development work, with an eye to reducing conflict and building peace.

Second, Canada should support programming through local partnerships. This is important now, when travel is restricted, but it's also important over the long term to build local capacity to ensure robust and ongoing support to respond to acute hunger in conflict and crisis contexts.

We know that Canada has already committed over $1 billion in new aid spending to respond to COVID impacts. We applaud this action, but we also recognize it's not nearly enough. At the same time, Canada has re-profiled hundreds of millions of dollars that were already in the aid budget for the COVID response. While this quick pivoting of aid resources was appropriate, Canada's aid budget is at its lowest point in 50 years, and the other needs have not diminished.

My third recommendation is that Canada should ramp up aid to help people overcome the crises that they were dealing with before COVID and commit new and additional resources to the COVID response.

Thank you for your attention. I would be happy to deal with any questions from the floor.

● (1700)

The Chair: Mr. Hagerman, thank you very much.

We will now go into our first and what may end up being our only round of questions. They are six minutes each.

The first round goes to Mr. Diotte, please.

The floor is yours.

Mr. Kerry Diotte (Edmonton Griesbach, CPC): Thank you.

Thanks to all the folks for being here and doing the good work that they do.

Mr. Hagerman, I just want to talk about your remarks right off the top.

Everybody on this committee knows that Canada has a great reputation internationally, but you did bring up the issue, as did Mr. Messenger and Ms. Mirza, that we could do better. Right now we know that foreign aid has declined 10% under our current government, but we also know that there are great demands on finances right now for this country.

To any and all of you, what do you think would be the benchmark we should be meeting?

Mr. Hagerman, you could lead off since you had the last word.

Mr. Paul Hagerman: Well, I think we know that the gold standard is 0.7% of GNI. Canada is far from that now. We're at around 0.26%, at around a third. We're at about half the level of other OECD countries.

I'm not suggesting that we should go to 0.7% next year, but I would love to see a timetable and a commitment to reach that over time. I think it's certainly reasonable that Canada should try to be at least average within the OECD in the next couple of years.

Mr. Kerry Diotte: Does anybody else have an opinion on that?

Mr. Michael Messenger: I'm happy to weigh in, Mr. Chair.

We certainly agree. I think another aspect of that, of course, is that for us the actual numbers should be determined by the impact that Canada is hoping to have. It's key to clarify what additional funds would accomplish, in addition to just looking at standards. As just a very practical piece, sometimes it's challenging even in the current envelope, or as we look toward the future, to determine what's new funding and what's additional funding.

That's why we think that it's not only important to look for a standard that we can aspire to going forward, but also to get a crystal clear, forward-looking sense of the direction we can go in, rather than perhaps just an announcement-based approach to international assistance, and more with a direction as to where we go. Certainly, you've heard all of us mention just how an increase in aid is going to be needed as we look at the impact on extreme poverty that we've seen as a result of COVID.

Dr. Tanjina Mirza: May I answer as well?

It's a great question. Thank you for that.

Following up on what two of my colleagues have responded with, it's really important that we are not doing it piecemeal. It's not just the amount. It's how we actually deliver the aid, because some of these issues are root causes that have long been festering, and this pandemic is not the last. There are more to come.

I think it's important that we look at multipronged, multi-year approaches to funding, instead of piecemeal distribution and piecemeal funding. If we want to address the root causes of systemic challenges, such as the lack of good-quality...health systems strengthening, education systems strengthening, especially with the gender lens, having a gender transformative approach so that girls especially are not left behind, we need to look not just at the amount of funding, but at how we are funding it and how can we bring a multipronged approach to it.

Hopefully, when there's another crisis, Canada will be proud to say that we were able to address the root cause and this will not happen again, because the current systems are fragile. We need something more resilient.

Thank you.

Mr. Kerry Diotte: I have a more specific question on COVID-19. How has it impacted your organizations? Do you have a shortage of international aid workers?

I also have just another quick question. I know that we don't have a lot of rapid testing here yet in Canada, but do you have access to it for your foreign aid workers so that they're healthy in the fight against COVID-19?

● (1705)

Mr. Paul Hagerman: Let me jump in there first with just a quick answer.

We don't actually have Canadians working overseas. We work with local partners, and we have no shortage of people, because they've been on the ground all the time anyway. We've actually seen increased resources because Canadians who donate to us have stepped up and have been very generous. We're continuing on in trying to respond to the greater needs, but the health impacts have not particularly slowed us down.

Mr. Kerry Diotte: Is there anybody else?

Mr. Michael Messenger: From World Vision's perspective, there's no doubt that it has affected our work internationally as well as here in Canada. Like the Foodgrains Bank, 99% of our staff are from the countries in which we're working, so they're deeply committed there and committed to their communities. Their work is going on, but, like here, they are subject to some pretty incredible restrictions. It has made logistics very challenging for us.

Here in Canada, Canadians continue to support us. We have had to stop and freeze a lot of our ongoing fundraising at the moment, so it has been a challenge for us, but Canadians are indeed generous and understand the cause.

Mr. Kerry Diotte: Thank you.

Dr. Tanjina Mirza: Do you want me to respond?

Mr. Kerry Diotte: Absolutely.

Dr. Tanjina Mirza: Like the other two speakers, I can say that our staff on the front line are all local. They have been impacted, because in the countries where the COVID cases are rising, it's quite difficult to provide aid, so there have been some restrictions. The programming oftentimes continues, then stops, and then continues, so we have to be very creative in how we reach the most vulnerable communities. We have thousands of volunteers who live in those communities. It makes it easier, but nevertheless they do have restrictions.

It has impacted many other organizations. Plan has also been impacted, because we do rely on the generosity of Canadians. They have been very generous, but the need on the ground is so much that we do need a lot of support. As we have all said, the numbers are huge. The impact, especially on the children in fragile, conflict-affected countries, has been so bad. We have the capacity to scale up, so we definitely need more resources to do much better.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Mirza.

Thank you, Mr. Diotte.

The next round goes to Ms. Sahota for six minutes, please.

Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.): Thank you.

I'm going to start with Mr. Hagerman. All of the organizations do incredible work. I've been following your work for some time and am really amazed.

Mr. Hagerman, I know your organization's funding was renewed by Treasury Board in 2016 to previous levels of $125 million over five years. I guess next year it might be set to expire. With this funding, I know you have also done really great fundraising work. I think campaigns where the government matches the donations or quadruples the donations that you receive are always a great tactic.

How has that fundraising strategy worked? What different types have you had to use? You said your fundraising has actually gone up even through this pandemic. That's really great to hear. Have there been other tactics that you have used in order to do that?

Mr. Paul Hagerman: Thanks for that question.

You're correct. Our funding from 2016 will end next year. We're currently in conversations with the government about renewing that. We are optimistic about that continuing.

On the fundraising from the public, one of the great motivators for the public is to say that when they donate to us, that funding is matched by the government for the work overseas. As you said, for many types of programming it's 4:1. That is a huge motivator. Canadians are generous. They also feel motivated by the fact that the government is doing this as well. That's a strong part of our fundraising pitch.

Not all of our overseas work is matched by the government. That's mainly our humanitarian work. We also do a lot of long-term development work. Depending on the source of funding, some of that might be matched 1:1 by government, or not. That is still a key part of what we do. We just try to demonstrate the effects of how this work has made a difference in people's lives in the field, and that seems to be very effective in mobilizing people to donate.

● (1710)

Ms. Ruby Sahota: In your introductory remarks, you talked about supporting programs through local partners. I know you do a lot of your work in developing countries through locally based organizations.

What advantages has this given your organization or what difficulties have you had throughout this pandemic with getting food to where it needs to go? We are hearing alarming numbers. Ms. Mirza also mentioned the doubling of the need for food at this time.

Mr. Paul Hagerman: I'm going to ask my colleague, Stefan Epp-Koop, to answer that, because he works directly with programs and is much more familiar with the work on the ground.

Stefan.

Mr. Stefan Epp-Koop: Thank you, Paul.

Yes, we do almost all of our programming through local partner agencies. These local partners experience many of the same restrictions as anybody else in those societies does, but the fact that those local partners are there means that we are not dealing with international travel restrictions. They're working with local suppliers, so by and large not having to deal with cross-border transportation of food assistance, let's say, and as a result also have good relationships with their local governments, with their local health departments and so are able to get good, up-to-date information on how to best implement their programming. What we've seen is that local governments that are working across the country recognize that the food assistance that's being provided is an essential service and that there is a need that must be met, and they have been very supportive of the work of our local partners to implement that.

We've seen relatively few disruptions on the humanitarian side in terms of our ability to implement. With some more disruptions on the development side, just given restrictions on group gatherings and so on, we have also seen our partners be really innovative and learn and identify new ways of implementing their programming through text messaging, through radio, through other means to reach the target audience. They're finding new ways to implement programming because they know that context best.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: I don't have a lot of time. I do have some more questions for you, but I also want to ask Ms. Mirza about the Because I am a Girl campaign. I think it's a fantastic campaign. I've spoken to many of your young advocates for the organization before in my role. Can you speak a little bit about the results and the impacts that this program has had, and what countries have had the best impacts?

Dr. Tanjina Mirza: I think our program targeting girls and women actually is everywhere, because this is our basic strategy. In the over 50 developing countries where we work, it is critical to empower girls and give them a voice and work with them to provide all kinds of empowerment overall for the girls.

Education is a big program for us. If there's one really strong program that can bring the girls out of poverty—their families and their communities—it's about girls' education. It's a tremendous motivator. It helps enable girls to get agency to fight on their own and it empowers them to do so. The girls' education program is one of the best programs that we see.

The sexual reproductive health and rights program has also been very powerful, and of course the economic empowerment for jobs creation for both girls and boys, but targeting girls.

My time is up, so I will cut it short.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: If we had to put most of our eggs in one basket, do you think it's education, since you listed it off first?

Dr. Tanjina Mirza: Yes, education is, I would say, definitely one of the best, most powerful programs ever, not just for poverty alleviation for girls, but also for empowerment and agency.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Sahota and Ms. Mirza.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bergeron, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the witnesses.

Your presentations will once again be invaluable to this work.

As representatives of non-governmental organizations and other organizations, you're probably the best observers on the ground to report on the effectiveness of our responses. There hasn't really been a budget and we have updates, including one scheduled for next Monday. However, estimates suggest that the federal government has invested up to $800 billion to deal with the pandemic since it started. We don't know the exact amount. We're talking about four to five times more money than we invest in a typical fiscal year.

The Minister of International Development appeared before us on November 17 and told us that Canada supposedly allocated an additional $1 billion to respond to the impact of the pandemic internationally. One billion dollars is one-fifth of what the government normally spends on international development in the budget, according to the latest appropriations that we passed recently. This $5 billion also includes Canada's contribution to the United Nations system.

If Canada, in response to the crisis, invested four to five times more than what it normally invests and allocated only one-fifth more than what it usually allocates to international development, would you say—as you observe the situation on the ground—that some of the development assistance has been drained away to deal with the pandemic in developing countries?

● (1715)

[*English*]

Mr. Paul Hagerman: I was waiting for another to go first. I don't want to steal the limelight, but let me just start off briefly.

Thank you, Mr. Bergeron, for your question.

I agree that Canada's response to COVID, while strong, hasn't been strong enough. There has been a campaign by a number of organizations within Canada, but also in other countries, that the global response for COVID should represent at least 1% of the domestic response.

COVID has demonstrated far better than anything in the past the interconnectedness of the world. We're not going to solve this problem in Canada unless we also solve the problem around the world.

The $1 billion that has been invested so far is a very good start, but there's room for improvement. We know the needs are great, and we know that, compared to what Canada is spending domestically, it is not nearly a good mark to reach only $1 billion. It really should increase.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Do the other witnesses have anything to add?

[*English*]

Mr. Michael Messenger: We certainly think it's positive that the COVID funds that have been committed are above existing commitments, but I join my colleague Mr. Hagerman in saying that we need to do more. It's a reflection not only of the fact that it's the right thing to do, as we think about where the most vulnerable are in the world today, but also.... We are pleased to see that Canada stood up to say that we need to address things internationally as well as locally, because we are all connected.

Increasingly, as we think about the interdependence that's necessary in response, COVID is giving us an example of where our typical relief and development responses, for example, blend together. The normal kinds of responses.... It's going to require us to be agile and flexible. It's not just going to be enough to repurpose the existing funding. Additional funding is going to be necessary for us to make that kind of input that we have, always focused on what the long-term impacts are and how we are helping those most vulnerable.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: I must say that I'm not surprised that you want to see more assistance to deal with the pandemic in developing countries.

My question goes a little further. Given that the additional contribution to address the pandemic was paltry and not enough to meet needs, I'm concerned that some of the usual international development assistance has been drained away to deal with the pandemic in developing countries, which has prevented the ability to meet basic needs other than the needs for which the money was originally intended.

Are you seeing this on the ground?

● (1720)

[*English*]

Mr. Michael Messenger: First of all, I think at the moment all of us would say, in our humanitarian development response, that the line between what is COVID response and what is not COVID response is pretty blurred, because everything is so interconnected as we think about what this looks like. It not only speaks to the need for additional funding, but I think you're actually raising a question that speaks to the way our system is built, where it's difficult sometimes to be flexible in the funding that we have allocated to be able to respond so that we can not only focus on the initial needs—and we're fairly locked into that in our agreements with governments and donors—but also be able to be agile as well.

It's both the amount, the impact, as well as flexibility within the envelope available.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Do other witnesses want to add to Mr. Messenger's response?

If not, I want to address a comment made by the director of the Canadian Red Cross, Mr. Sauvé. He told us that we should stop being firefighters and build fire stations instead. That's another way of saying that we should stop giving people fish and instead teach them how to fish. It's a matter of strengthening the local capacity for development.

In your opinion, has the pandemic made it easier to strengthen local capacity or, on the contrary, has it been an additional barrier to the growth of local capacity in developing countries?

[*English*]

The Chair: We have time only for a very brief answer by one of the witnesses.

Ms. Lindsay Gladding (Director for Fragile and Humanitarian Programs, World Vision Canada): I'm happy to jump in here, if that's okay.

The Chair: Sure, just answer very briefly, Ms. Gladding.

Thank you.

Ms. Lindsay Gladding: Thanks, Mr. Bergeron.

I would say that our response to COVID-19 has highlighted the significant strength and capacity of our local partners and our local staff on the ground. We recently completed a real-time learning. We interviewed more than 3,000 local staff members, more than 500 external partners, and thousands of community members. What we are learning is that we were able to adapt to the situation on the ground very quickly, that we were able to build skills and humanitarian response in places that we would normally consider to be stable development contexts where that humanitarian capacity may not have been built.

COVID-19 and our response have enabled us to really strengthen our local capacity to respond to emergencies. I'm very confident that this work will enable us to be more responsive to the next pandemic or the next emergency that hits.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gladding. We'll have to leave it there.

The final intervention this afternoon goes to Ms. McPherson, for six minutes.

The floor is yours.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

It's such a pleasure to have our guests with us today. I've had the great pleasure of working with all of your organizations in my previous life, so this is wonderful. I have way too many questions to ask you for six minutes, so I may call you and ask some questions later on.

To start with, I want to talk to Mr. Hagerman.

Paul, you talked a little about the gold standard being at 0.7%. I want to make it very clear that I don't actually consider that to be the gold standard. There are many countries around the world that have ODA at 1%. The 0.7% is actually what we committed to do. As you mentioned, we have gotten nowhere near that, and it is shrinking.

One thing that I think is also important when we talk about the level of ODA is where that ODA goes. I think it's so vital that it is used to support Canadian CSOs, for a number of reasons. One is that it actually engages Canadians.

The Canadian Foodgrains Bank works a lot in Alberta, in my province. Perhaps you could talk about the value of investing in Canadian CSOs, as opposed to international multilaterals.

Mr. Paul Hagerman: Thank you, Ms. McPherson. I'd be very happy to talk to you about the value of investing in Canadian NGOs or Canadian civil society organizations.

I think there are a number of benefits for working through Canadian CSOs. One, of course, is that with our long-term partnerships on the ground and our strong capacity, we're working with people in the country who know deeply over generations, over long time periods, what the issues are and have their own ideas for solving them, so we get to the localized and long-term solutions.

Another is that as Canadian civil society organizations with a strong support base across Canada, we can help to educate Canadians about the causes of poverty and some of the solutions through international development and try to build support and understanding for the program. In talking with many MPs, I know they often say that Canadians just don't understand the problems of international development, and that's one of the things we try hard to overcome as we build that understanding and support.

I think we're efficient at what we do. I think the cost factor is positive in our favour, but that's not to say that all money should go through Canadian civil society organizations. I think there has to be a balance. There are certain things the UN systems do well. There are certain things that work best if they're done bilaterally, government to government, but we need that balance.

● (1725)

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you. That's wonderful, Mr. Hagerman.

I guess that goes a little to how Canadians perceive international development and humanitarian assistance.

Mr. Messenger, we have some polling results from a poll that World Vision did at the beginning of this pandemic through Abacus Data. It talks about how 88% of Canadians agree that our world is interconnected and that until COVID is taken care of across the globe, it's going to impact Canadians. Can you talk a little about how you see Canadians recognizing this, yet we don't seem to see our government recognizing the value of investing in international development to a greater level at this point?

Mr. Michael Messenger: You're absolutely right that not only are we seeing anecdotally that Canadians are generous and are interested in what's going on beyond their borders, but we have data like the survey that you referenced. Canadians understand that the needs are significant, thinking about the needs of a girl in a refugee camp in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or other places. They have recognized the need and want to respond.

We have been hoping that through this moment—and this is playing out in terms of our support for the commitment that our donors are making to continue to give—Canadians are not seeing this as a moment to turn inward and just to be looking at what's on our table, or where we are, but perhaps understanding for the first time, for many, what it means to go into a grocery store and see empty shelves, understanding for a moment what food insecurity might feel like, or perhaps the lack of access to education, which so many millions of girls and boys around the world face every day, or a lack of the ability to access clean water. Things that we take for granted, like being able to wash our hands.... If you're in a Rohingya refugee camp in Bangladesh, trying to find a clean-water station is very challenging.

What we're seeing is that Canadians aren't turning inward. They are willing to expand more. The poll is showing that they understand that the world is smaller. The challenge is being able to make those connections, to say, let's understand that when we think about response, it has to.... Our understanding of neighbour or family has to extend beyond our border. It helps us in the long run. A more stable world makes a more stable Canada. It's also the right thing to do, and people are understanding what it means to walk in someone else's shoes.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Perhaps it's not necessarily that Canadians don't understand the value. Perhaps it's the politicians who don't necessarily understand the value. I'll do my job to try to convince them to understand that.

I have very little time, but I do want to ask Ms. Mirza a question. I know the incredible work that Plan International does. Could you talk a little about how, during this very difficult, challenging time, your programming is aligning with our feminist international assistance policy?

Dr. Tanjina Mirza: We truly believe, and we are seeing from data that's come out recently, that COVID has exponentially affected girls and women much more. This is no different in developing countries. As Michael said about school closures, people can see it here, but when that can put millions of girls at risk of early marriage....

One of the biggest issues with school closures is that when the girls cannot go back, there can be early marriage. As well, access to services for reproductive and sexual health and rights is stopped. The school is not just an education system; it's a protective environment for children. I think more than ever we all understand that.

At Plan International, we have very strong gender transformative programming and measurement. We talked about accountability, not only demonstrating but also measuring and seeing the actual change happening among girls and boys, especially girls. We are able to demonstrate even during COVID that gender transformative approaches can actually be applied. We are very pleased and very happy to see the feminist international assistance policy of the Government of Canada, not only because it is the right thing to do for an NGO, but also because it is good economically for the country and for the organization.

Thank you.

● (1730)

Ms. Heather McPherson: Let's get a feminist foreign affairs policy now, shall we?

The Chair: Thank you so much, Ms. McPherson.

Ms. Mirza, thank you.

That brings us to the end of our scheduled time with our witnesses this afternoon.

I would like to remind colleagues that it's perfectly open to them to direct, in light of the short time we've had today, written questions through the clerk's office to witnesses. If there's any follow-up that you have or anything interesting that you would like to ask more questions on, please send them in writing. The answers then become part of the committee's work.

On our collective behalf, I would like to thank our witnesses from Plan International Canada, World Vision Canada and the Canadian Foodgrains Bank for their time this afternoon, for their expertise and, very importantly, for their incredibly important work around the world. Thank you so much for being with us.

With that, we stand adjourned until our next meeting. Thank you, colleagues.