

As we begin a new year and celebrate world leprosy day, I would like to start this message by recalling the conception of time, as it is formulated by the indigenous Kichwa people from Ecuador, the country in which I live. Unlike what I was taught while growing up in the Western world, according to the Kichwa people, time is not lineal, nor runs irreversibly towards the future. In the Andean region, time is cyclical, which means that it goes by in a spiraling movement that takes human beings back to the same patterns of experience over and over again.

During 2020, the world knew the disruption of social ties and livelihoods due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The world discovered the unbearable pain of separation from family members, friends and social environments. The world realized that inequalities can kill and witnessed how the State can either protect or violate the right to life. Humanity shared one same experience of longing for a cure and a vaccine.

All this had been known for decades and centuries by persons affected by leprosy. For persons affected by leprosy, 2020 embodied a cyclical time that exposed once more the frailties of human life. The in-depth human experience of persons affected by leprosy should teach us to look back in order to look ahead and to build back better by breaking up the walls that separate the privileged from the vulnerable, by giving voice to those who have been systematically silenced by discrimination, violence or simply by paternalistic approaches that disregard their agency, and by enabling all people to have a choice in how we rebuild our societies. If we fail to do this, the same socioeconomic and political structure that got us where we are now will be reproduced and will continue to produce crisis such as the one we are now facing.

The Global Appeal initiated by Mr. Yohey Sasakawa nearly two decades ago invites us to take a moment to pause, reflect and change the way we act. Its call to stop discrimination against persons affected by leprosy it's in fact a call to leave no-one behind. It tells us that if we really want to break with the spiraling chain of disadvantage within which persons affected by leprosy have been trapped for too long, we must put persons affected by leprosy at the centre of our actions and make sure they have access and control over important decisions and resources.

Systemic violations have placed persons affected by leprosy outside the formal labor market, leaving them to unreliable casual labour, low wages and unsafe and degrading working conditions. Persons affected by leprosy have been historically denied the right to freely choose one's work and to enjoy just conditions of work that can be considered decent. For the same reason, the majority of persons affected by leprosy do not enjoy social protection's rights. Such gaps have exacerbated vulnerabilities and poverty among many persons affected by leprosy and their families in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The right to work is a fundamental right for securing other rights and promoting human dignity. It is with great personal honor that I join this Global Appeal to end stigma and discrimination against persons affected by leprosy. Let's make sure that those who have been systematically left behind are at the centre of a new and hopefully brighter future.