



# Global Information Society Watch

## 2016



## Global Information Society Watch 2016

Economic, social and cultural rights and the internet

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# VENEZUELA

## THE USE OF THE INTERNET AND SOCIAL NETWORKS TO SECURE FOOD AND MEDICINE IN VENEZUELA



KEYWORDS: **health, food security**

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### Introduction

This report is an exploratory investigation into the problem of food and medicine shortages in Venezuela in 2016. The impact of the use of the internet by the government to control and limit the purchase of goods was considered, as well as the use of social networks by civil society to help citizens access food and medicine. We identified the most important legal instruments impacting on the crisis, and suggest actions that are necessary to deal with the crisis to ensure that the economic, social and cultural rights (ESCRs) of the people in Venezuela are met.

### Legal framework

The Venezuelan legal framework includes a number of laws that guarantee the ESCRs of citizens. These include Articles 3, 80, 83, 84, 85, 86, and 305 of the country's constitution,<sup>1</sup> which provide that the state must guarantee the right to health and food security, among others.<sup>2</sup> ESCRs are reflected in legislation protecting children and adolescents;<sup>3</sup> legislation dealing with food security,<sup>4</sup> including guaranteeing food at schools<sup>5</sup> and food and medicines for pensioners and retirees;<sup>6</sup> social security<sup>7</sup> and social services laws;<sup>8</sup> a special law on health crises;<sup>9</sup> and the telecommunications law.<sup>10</sup>

The government has also implemented a “Socialist Productive Economic Model”, which has encompassed three plans: 1) the Plan for Economic and Social Development of the Nation 2001-2007,<sup>11</sup> 2) the Plan for Economic and Social Development of the Nation 2007-2013,<sup>12</sup> and 3) the Plan for Economic and Social Development of the Nation 2013-2019.<sup>13</sup> These plans seek to create a balance in the country's economy, and to develop strategies and policies<sup>14</sup> to ensure that the country's food and medicine supplies are not dependent on international food and pharmaceutical monopolies. These include: the Barrio Adentro Mission,<sup>15</sup> the Food Mission,<sup>16</sup> Great AgroVenezuela Mission,<sup>17</sup> Great Mission of Sovereign Supply,<sup>18</sup> the Local Committees of Supply and Production (CLAP),<sup>19</sup> and the activation of 14 Productive Economic Engines.<sup>20</sup>

Internationally, Venezuela is committed to defending ESCRs in a number of pacts, treaties and declarations such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR),<sup>21</sup> the Universal Declaration on the Eradication of Hunger and Malnutrition,<sup>22</sup> the Declaration on the Right to Development,<sup>23</sup> the Millennium Declaration,<sup>24</sup> the

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2 Article 305 of the CRBV: Food security is understood “as the sufficient and stable availability of food at the national level and the timely and permanent access to it by the public consumer”.

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14 Public policies to deepen comprehensive health care, expand and strengthen timely and free healthcare services, and promote food and pharmaceutical security and sovereignty in Venezuela.

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19 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h65evk7kHnM>

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22 [www.derechos.org/ve/pw/wp-content/uploads/desc\\_06.pdf](http://www.derechos.org/ve/pw/wp-content/uploads/desc_06.pdf)

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24 [www.derechos.org/ve/pw/wp-content/uploads/desc\\_12.pdf](http://www.derechos.org/ve/pw/wp-content/uploads/desc_12.pdf)

Quito Declaration,<sup>25</sup> the American Convention on Human Rights,<sup>26</sup> Amnesty International's Universal Declaration on Human Rights,<sup>27</sup> the Treaty of Vienna,<sup>28</sup> and International Labour Organization conventions, among others.

However, despite these commitments, in September 2012 Venezuela withdrew from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR)<sup>29</sup> of the Organization of American States (OAS),<sup>30</sup> and in July 2016 ruled against a request by the United Nations Human Rights Commission to protect internet access and the right to freedom of expression.<sup>31</sup> The UN has also downgraded the Ombudsman of Venezuela to category "B" for not being prepared to defend human rights in Venezuela.<sup>32</sup>

## Analysis

Venezuela's recent shortages of food and medicine deepened alarmingly in 2016, seriously affecting vulnerable groups such as children, the elderly and indigenous peoples. There were cases of malnutrition and deaths in the Guajira,<sup>33</sup> infants and children died from the lack of medicines and medical supplies, including in hospitals,<sup>34</sup> and shelters for street children and the elderly that lacked food or medicine<sup>35</sup> became a daily reality in Venezuela.<sup>36</sup> According to Freddy Ceballos,<sup>37</sup> the president of the Pharmaceutical Federation of Venezuela: "Drug shortages in the country stand at about 85%, while the cost of some medicines has risen 75%." He

further states: "Patients are dying not because of the diseases that are occurring, but because of the lack of medicines." Moreover, Oscar Meza, the president of the Centre for Documentation and Social Analysis of the Venezuelan Federation of Teachers (CEDASFVM)<sup>38</sup> stated: "Food shortages increased from 31.03% to 43.10% between April 2015 and April 2016. The shortage is widespread and what we are seeing is people desperate for food everywhere in the country. This is an extraordinary situation, similar to a country after a war."<sup>39</sup>

Meanwhile, international bodies put out statements on the situation in Venezuela, such as Erika Guevara Rosas, director of Amnesty for the Americas: "Venezuela is at a serious crossroad, a historic crossroad for the country, a crossroad that can lead to this serious crisis becoming a worse crisis, a catastrophic crisis."<sup>40</sup> The Special Rapporteur on health at the United Nations, in a statement dated 20 July 2015, said the following: "We would like to express our grave concern about the reported shortages of drugs and medical supplies in Venezuela, which has a serious impact on the right to health of the population, and in particular on the reported total lack of Prednisone, essential for transplant patients and for those with lupus, arthritis and cancer."<sup>41</sup> The international media reported on the crisis as well.<sup>42</sup>

The crisis also led to a response from various civil society sectors in the country in a number of ways, including staging public protests,<sup>43</sup> drafting statements to the authorities,<sup>44</sup> and using social networks to source both food and medicine.

In a shadow report during the Universal Periodic Review of Venezuela,<sup>45</sup> submitted to the ESCR Committee by the Venezuelan Observatory of Health,<sup>46</sup> Bengoa Foundation<sup>47</sup> and the ULA Centre for

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Agrifood Research,<sup>48</sup> it was reported that: “The food situation in Venezuela is characterised by a significant contraction in domestic food production and... imports, which recorded a fall in recent years. These two features together produce a permanent shortage and, as a result, a situation of high vulnerability with regard to protection against hunger, since existing programmes are not able to reach the areas that need it most.” According to this report, the reason leading to the fall in domestic production<sup>49</sup> is a gradual dependence on commodity imports.

For its part, the Venezuelan government is engaged in an internal “economic war”, characterised by shortages and inflation that are driven by the political interests of some sectors seeking to destabilise the national economy and weaken the revolutionary model established in the country since 1999. In the study “Shortages and inflation in Venezuela”,<sup>50</sup> Pasqualina Curcio, an economist and professor at Simon Bolivar University, says that the causes of the decrease in the supply of essential goods in the domestic market resulting from the economic war include: a) a relative decrease in imports – the private sector is not using all the hard currency assigned to it by the state to import the goods; b) hoarding; and c) the smuggling of goods to other markets across the Colombian-Venezuelan border, among others. According to the manifesto<sup>51</sup> issued by the Marxist Tendency of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), Chapter 1: “The economic war we are currently facing is nothing other than a new slow-motion coup carried out by the ruling classes to try to defeat and crush once and for all the revolutionary Bolivarian process.”

In this context, the government is implementing measures to address the economic emergency, including: a) an economic emergency decree,<sup>52</sup> b) establishing Local Committees of Supply and Production (CLAP), which distribute food directly to

families,<sup>53</sup> c) fining stores for hoarding food,<sup>54</sup> d) assigning 18 senior officials of the National Armed Forces to handle the production, distribution and marketing of staple foods,<sup>55</sup> and e) distributing drugs through an outpatient network,<sup>56</sup> among others. The government has also set up computer systems connected to the internet to control the acquisition of and access to food and medicine in a number of different supermarket chains and pharmacies in the public and private sectors, such as:

- Biometric food supply system:<sup>57</sup> This is a state-controlled system which interconnects all public and private food distribution networks via the internet. It limits the purchase of products, and prevents hoarding. The government says this mitigates food shortages. Through this system the purchase of regulated products is only possible with an identity card.<sup>58</sup>
- Integrated system for access to medicines:<sup>59</sup> This system prevents the hoarding of medicines with the aim of ensuring that medicines reach patients with diseases classified as “chronic non-communicable” diseases. To access the system the patient must register with a prescription and identity card at a pharmacy. After being registered, patients are sent a text message confirming their registration and will be alerted when the drug reaches the pharmacy. To take part in the system, pharmacies must be connected by the internet to the Ministry of Health.
- Comprehensive drug control system:<sup>60</sup> This is a system where the government and pharmacies share an interactive record of drug supply and receive early warnings when the supply of medicines is running low. Pharmacies must register product prices, which are regulated, and report on retail sales.<sup>61</sup>

48 [www.saber.ula.ve/ciaa](http://www.saber.ula.ve/ciaa)

49 Reasons for the decline in domestic production: a) price controls, a large amount of raw materials and goods, b) rising costs in domestic raw materials, c) the exchange control, d) the nationalisation of the main supplier (Agropatria), e) electricity rationing, f) the difficulty to access foreign exchange for new machinery, g) emphasis on the process of expropriation and “rescue” of land, among other things. Venezuela imports in 2011 were USD 5.139 billion, and in 2013 they were USD 9.756 billion, which decreased to USD 9.045 billion in 2015.

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60 [minci.gob.ve/2013/02/sistema-para-registro-de-precios-de-medicamentos-estara-activo-a-partir-del-jueves](http://minci.gob.ve/2013/02/sistema-para-registro-de-precios-de-medicamentos-estara-activo-a-partir-del-jueves)

61 [www.sicm.gob.ve](http://www.sicm.gob.ve)

While the government is implementing the measures described above, organisations such as the Venezuelan Episcopal Conference, through Caritas Venezuela, asked the vice presidency for permission to source the food, medicine and other supplies needed. It offered to undertake what was effectively a humanitarian mission to secure the supplies; however, no official response was received. According to Janeth Marquez,<sup>62</sup> director of Caritas Venezuela: “We believe that cooperation has to happen right now on a large scale. However, the solution is not the Church’s responsibility. The solution is a change in state policies.” Similarly, the Health Commission of the National Assembly<sup>63</sup> took the initiative to ask the Strategic Revolving Fund at the World Health Organization (WHO) to help the country offer subsidised medicines. However, José Manuel Olivares, a parliamentarian, said: “The application must be made by the Executive, which has said it will not do it.”

Given their initiatives, the government has stated that there is no crisis and that the measures being implemented will ensure the supply of medicines and food. Luisana Melo,<sup>64</sup> the minister of health, told the IACHR that “if there were shortages in some medical category it was ‘a particular case’, but that overall access to medicines was guaranteed to all Venezuelans.” Delcy Rodríguez,<sup>65</sup> the foreign minister of Venezuela, told the OAS that “the corporate media have manipulated the issue of shortages in supermarkets, and there was photographic evidence that shortages do not exist.” She even said that “Venezuela imports so much food that it could supply three nations.”

With regard to other initiatives to secure food and medicine, NGOs and civil society organisations have created ways to do this using the internet and social networks. Here are some examples:

- Mobile applications: The NGO “Networks Help”<sup>66</sup> created an application for Android mobile devices that records the real-time availability of food and medicine in Venezuela.

- Using Facebook, Twitter and Instagram: Facebook and Twitter groups have been created to barter medicines and food, and even to help people locate places for treatment.<sup>67</sup> A report written by Andres Rodriguez for the portal El País in Spain explains that “social networks are the new pharmacy in Venezuela as a result of the alarming shortage of drugs that exists in the country.”<sup>68</sup> The phrase “Application for medicines” is a recurring one on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, and campaigns to collect and donate medicines through Facebook have increased significantly. These include “One Medicine for Venezuela”<sup>69</sup> and “Donate your medication”.<sup>70</sup> Currently, employees of “One Medicine for Venezuela” work with the Coalition of Organisations for the Right to Health and to Life,<sup>71</sup> in order to create ways to distribute medicines to those most in need.
- Using WhatsApp: Citizens are also kept informed about the delivery of essential products that the government supplies to different supermarket chains through WhatsApp. These include groups such as “LUZ Products”<sup>72</sup> where teachers at the University of Zulia use WhatsApp to help locate products and avoid queues, and “Mommies and Daddies Looking for Diapers”,<sup>73</sup> a group where parents take turns every week to queue, making the purchases for the whole group. Among other initiatives, these kinds of groups have proliferated in recent years in Venezuela.

Social networks and mobile applications have been an efficient way to organise citizens, and have served as a channel to complain about ESCR violations. As noted above, various organisations have tried to engage international mechanisms to find solutions; however, the government claims that its measures are sufficient to deal with the crisis, and refuses international assistance.

62 [www.lapatilla.com/site/2016/05/27/gobierno-aun-no-deja-a-la-iglesia-traer-medicinas-y-alimentos-a-venezuela](http://www.lapatilla.com/site/2016/05/27/gobierno-aun-no-deja-a-la-iglesia-traer-medicinas-y-alimentos-a-venezuela)

63 [sumarium.com/maduro-nego-solicitar-ayuda-de-medicinas-para-venezuela](http://sumarium.com/maduro-nego-solicitar-ayuda-de-medicinas-para-venezuela)

64 [efectococuyo.com/principales/ministra-melo-ante-cidh-acceso-a-medicamentos-esta-garantizado-en-venezuela](http://efectococuyo.com/principales/ministra-melo-ante-cidh-acceso-a-medicamentos-esta-garantizado-en-venezuela)

65 [impactocna.com/canciller-rodriguez-venezuela-es-amenazada-por-factores-de-la-oea](http://impactocna.com/canciller-rodriguez-venezuela-es-amenazada-por-factores-de-la-oea)

66 [t.co/SyCJkrJqOY](http://t.co/SyCJkrJqOY); [www.talcualdigital.com/Nota/123838/escasez-de-medicinas-convierte-a-las-redes-sociales-en-las-nuevas-farmacias-del-pais](http://www.talcualdigital.com/Nota/123838/escasez-de-medicinas-convierte-a-las-redes-sociales-en-las-nuevas-farmacias-del-pais)

67 [www.talcualdigital.com/Nota/123838/escasez-de-medicinas-convierte-a-las-redes-sociales-en-las-nuevas-farmacias-del-pais](http://www.talcualdigital.com/Nota/123838/escasez-de-medicinas-convierte-a-las-redes-sociales-en-las-nuevas-farmacias-del-pais); [www.bancaynegocios.com/venezolanos-acuden-a-redes-sociales-para-abastecerse](http://www.bancaynegocios.com/venezolanos-acuden-a-redes-sociales-para-abastecerse)

68 [informe21.com/economia/el-pais-las-redes-sociales-una-farmacia-para-venezuela](http://informe21.com/economia/el-pais-las-redes-sociales-una-farmacia-para-venezuela)

69 <https://www.facebook.com/Una-Medicina-para-Venezuela-470449466460135>

70 <https://www.facebook.com/groups/donatusmedicamentosoficial>

71 <https://coalicionporlavida.wordpress.com>

72 [www.panorama.com.ve/ciudad/Docentes-de-LUZ-crean-grupo-en-Whatsapp-para-evadir-las-colas-20150302-0095.html](http://www.panorama.com.ve/ciudad/Docentes-de-LUZ-crean-grupo-en-Whatsapp-para-evadir-las-colas-20150302-0095.html)

73 [www.bancaynegocios.com/venezolanos-acuden-a-redes-sociales-para-abastecerse](http://www.bancaynegocios.com/venezolanos-acuden-a-redes-sociales-para-abastecerse)

The growing economic crisis requires national consensus and commitment from the public and private sectors and civil society. The difficulties being experienced in Venezuela relate both to production processes and distribution, a situation which in many instances leads to public disorder. Between January and May 2016, looting occurred in supermarkets and vehicles that distribute food were hijacked in various states of Venezuela.<sup>74</sup> In some instances, people who were ill were queuing to buy food,<sup>75</sup> leading to disquiet among citizens. The National Assembly has held debates on the violation of the right to food,<sup>76</sup> organisations have issued reports on the risks of violating ESCR rights in Venezuela (such as PROVEA<sup>77</sup> and the Bengoa Foundation),<sup>78</sup> and Amnesty International has warned of the violation of human rights generally.<sup>79</sup> Civil society organisations have requested hearings at the IACHR, diplomatic missions at the OAS have presented cases of violations of ESCRs,<sup>80</sup> and the Secretary General of the OAS has presented a report on the Venezuelan crisis to its Permanent Council.<sup>81</sup> Despite these interventions, Venezuelans are demanding even more effective solutions to the crisis, which continues to impact on the most vulnerable groups in the country.

## Conclusion

Venezuela is experiencing one of the most difficult economic crises in its democratic history. In this context, various actors in society have spoken out against the violation of ESCRs, in particular when it comes to shortages of staple foods and medicine. Venezuelans have tried different ways to secure food and medicine, including the use of the

internet. Social networks and mobile applications offer an easy way to exchange and locate products, including expensive drugs for the chronically ill. Social networks have also allowed campaigns promoting the collection of medicines for distribution to the needy and the sharing of information through official campaign channels. Criticism of the handling of the crisis has also happened online, in various ways, including news articles, interviews and videos. These have been developed by citizens, human rights organisations and the media, with the aim of alerting the international community to the crisis.

For its part, the government has used the internet to control the access and distribution of food and medicine, and monitor the use and sale of products. The government is also implementing information campaigns on the economic crisis using both traditional media and the internet. For example, it uses online video to report on the measures being implemented, such as the effectiveness of CLAP. However, citizens are increasingly finding it difficult to obtain food and medicine, and are waiting for a concrete solution, which unfortunately remains to be seen.

## Action steps

A number of steps need to be taken by both the government and civil society to deal with the crisis in Venezuela.

The government should:

- Promote a national dialogue with different actors and sectors in Venezuela. This dialogue should include both those who support the socialist model as well as those who resist a national agreement to overcome the crisis that threatens the ESCRs of citizens.
- Take into account the recommendations to address the economic crisis made by the National Assembly;<sup>82</sup> the UN Human Rights Committee, regarding Venezuela's Universal Periodic Review;<sup>83</sup> the OVS, Bengoa and CIAAL in the shadow periodic review;<sup>84</sup> the Secretary of the OAS in the report submitted to the Permanent Council; as well as those contained in PROVEA annual reports, among others.
- Evaluate the implementation of laws and public policies that aim to mitigate the economic crisis,

74 [www.2001.com.ve/en-la-agenda/131549/en-lo-que-va-de-2016-se-han-registrado-166-saqueos-en-venezuela.html](http://www.2001.com.ve/en-la-agenda/131549/en-lo-que-va-de-2016-se-han-registrado-166-saqueos-en-venezuela.html); [www.miamidiario.com/politica/saqueos-en-venezuela/venezuela-crisis-economica-venezuela-600-bultos-arroz-tachira/359630](http://www.miamidiario.com/politica/saqueos-en-venezuela/venezuela-crisis-economica-venezuela-600-bultos-arroz-tachira/359630)

75 [www.venezuelaawareness.com/2015/10/09oc-dos-muertos-en-colas-para-comprar-comida-en-anzoategui](http://www.venezuelaawareness.com/2015/10/09oc-dos-muertos-en-colas-para-comprar-comida-en-anzoategui); [www.venezuelaawareness.com/2015/08/28ag-mujer-murio-aplastada-por-estampida-humana-en-barinas](http://www.venezuelaawareness.com/2015/08/28ag-mujer-murio-aplastada-por-estampida-humana-en-barinas)

76 [www.elimpulso.com/correo-diarios/enterate-debate-la-violacion-al-derecho-alimentacion](http://www.elimpulso.com/correo-diarios/enterate-debate-la-violacion-al-derecho-alimentacion)

77 [www.derechos.org/ve/2015/01/16/violacion-del-derecho-a-la-alimentacion-forma-parte-de-la-situacion-generalizada-de-retrocesos-en-derechos-sociales](http://www.derechos.org/ve/2015/01/16/violacion-del-derecho-a-la-alimentacion-forma-parte-de-la-situacion-generalizada-de-retrocesos-en-derechos-sociales)

78 [anales.fundacionbengoa.org/ediciones/2012/2/?i=art4](http://anales.fundacionbengoa.org/ediciones/2012/2/?i=art4)

79 [www.panorama.com.ve/politicayeconomia/Amnistia-advierte-sobre-violaciones-de-derechos-fundamentales-en-Venezuela-20160606-0107.html](http://www.panorama.com.ve/politicayeconomia/Amnistia-advierte-sobre-violaciones-de-derechos-fundamentales-en-Venezuela-20160606-0107.html)

80 [www.lapatilla.com/site/2015/03/16/casos-de-violacion-de-ddhh-en-venezuela-seran-presentados-ante-la-cidh](http://www.lapatilla.com/site/2015/03/16/casos-de-violacion-de-ddhh-en-venezuela-seran-presentados-ante-la-cidh)

81 [www.el-nacional.com/politica/PresentacinDelSecretarioGeneraldeLaOEAante\\_NACFIL20160623\\_0001.pdf](http://www.el-nacional.com/politica/PresentacinDelSecretarioGeneraldeLaOEAante_NACFIL20160623_0001.pdf)

82 [8oonoticias.com/asamblea-nacional-pide-a-maduro-aceptar-ayuda-humanitaria-en-tema-salud](http://8oonoticias.com/asamblea-nacional-pide-a-maduro-aceptar-ayuda-humanitaria-en-tema-salud)

83 <https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#search/ondrodrig%40gmail.com/156bf20d7e368f50?projector=1>

84 [tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CESCR/Shared%20Documents/VEN/INT\\_CESCR\\_CSS\\_VEN\\_20440\\_S.pdf](http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CESCR/Shared%20Documents/VEN/INT_CESCR_CSS_VEN_20440_S.pdf)

as well as the use of technology as an efficient way to reach citizens and promote economic emergency measures.

- Assess and periodically adjust the emergency measures that are being implemented to prevent corruption and favouritism by officials who produce, market and distribute food and medicine to the population.
- Establish formal channels of information using the internet (e.g. thematic portals) and social networks to inform citizens of the distribution of food and medicine through centres, parishes, and municipalities.
- Create online mechanisms (e.g. through relevant ministries and the ombudsman) that allow citizens to complain about violations of their ESCRs.
- Use the internet, including social networks, to share useful information with the public so that people can access food and medicines.
- Promote the development and use of mobile applications to help citizens access food and medicines.
- Be vigilant about the veracity of content disseminated by social networks and ensure timely and accurate information by fact-checking this content.
- Evaluate opportunities to organise various sectors in the country to create multisectoral groups that advocate for the protection of the ESCRs of citizens. A national project to promote the sustainable development of the country is necessary, with the internet as one of its fundamental pillars.

Citizens and organisations should:

- Document and establish mechanisms to report cases involving the violation of the ESCRs of Venezuelans and present them to local and international bodies concerned with citizen protection.

# Economic, social and cultural rights and the internet

The 45 country reports gathered here illustrate the link between the internet and economic, social and cultural rights (ESCRs). Some of the topics will be familiar to information and communications technology for development (ICT4D) activists: the right to health, education and culture; the socioeconomic empowerment of women using the internet; the inclusion of rural and indigenous communities in the information society; and the use of ICT to combat the marginalisation of local languages. Others deal with relatively new areas of exploration, such as using 3D printing technology to preserve cultural heritage, creating participatory community networks to capture an “inventory of things” that enables socioeconomic rights, crowdfunding rights, or the negative impact of algorithms on calculating social benefits. Workers’ rights receive some attention, as does the use of the internet during natural disasters.

Ten thematic reports frame the country reports. These deal both with overarching concerns when it comes to ESCRs and the internet – such as institutional frameworks and policy considerations – as well as more specific issues that impact on our rights: the legal justification for online education resources, the plight of migrant domestic workers, the use of digital databases to protect traditional knowledge from biopiracy, digital archiving, and the impact of multilateral trade deals on the international human rights framework.

The reports highlight the institutional and country-level possibilities and challenges that civil society faces in using the internet to enable ESCRs. They also suggest that in a number of instances, individuals, groups and communities are using the internet to enact their socioeconomic and cultural rights in the face of disinterest, inaction or censure by the state.

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