

**2021 HLPF Thematic Review  
Expert Group Meetings  
Virtual, 18-20 May 2021**

***Meeting Summary for Cross-cutting session on “How do we get on track for building more peaceful, equal and inclusive societies? (SDGs 3, 10, 16, 17 and interlinkages among those goals and with other SDGs)***

## **Introduction**

During a session held on 20 May 2021, a multi-stakeholder group of approximately 100 experts met virtually to share their perspectives and discuss progress, gaps and challenges towards achieving SDG 3 (Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages), SDG 10 (Reduce inequality within and among countries), SDG 16 (Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development and provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels) and SDG 17 (Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development) from a cross-cutting perspective.

Experts reported that the continuing COVID-19 pandemic threatens to increase inequality both within, and among, countries along many dimensions. Income inequality within countries has widened, with lower income households bearing a disproportionate burden of the impact of the global pandemic in terms of lost jobs or greater exposure to the virus. Across countries and within countries, differences in recovery trajectories – due to unequal access to COVID-19 vaccines, as well as constrained fiscal space – threaten to further widen gaps in per capita incomes between developed and most developing economies.

Experts noted that forms of inequality that pre-date COVID-19, including unequal care burdens at home and the digital divide, now stand to set the most vulnerable such as women, ethnic minorities, children and rural communities back decades. Even past progress in many areas of health and well-being including in maternal and newborn mortality and childhood vaccinations stand to be reversed. Many of these inequalities and deprivations weaken social cohesion and further heighten social tensions and polarization. Furthermore, in many cases, institutions intended to promote more peaceful, just and inclusive societies have fallen short including during COVID-19 related lockdowns, increasing risks of unrest, conflict and violence.

At the same time experts were hopeful that the stresses being experienced could motivate new partnerships and initiatives to reduce inequalities, advance good health and well-being and promote justice. It was agreed that exploring the interlinkages among SDGs 3, 10, 16 and 17 could help to identify ways forward toward more peaceful, equal and inclusive societies.

## Agenda

- I. Opening
  - Moderated by Mr. Shantanu Mukherjee, Chief of Integrated Policy Analysis Branch DSDG, UN-DESA
  
- II. Reporting back on key messages from in-focus sessions:
  - Ms. Lucy Fagan, SDG 3 focal point for the Major Group for Children and Youth
  - Mr. Gilberto Duarte Santos, Programme Management Officer, Strategic Planning and Inter-Agency Affairs Unit, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
  
- III. Panel on cross-cutting approaches to SDGs 3, 10, 16 and 17:
  - Ms. Najat Maalla M'jid, Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children
  - Ms. Liv Torres, Director, Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies, Associate Director, NYU Center on International Cooperation
  - Mr. Enrique Restoy, Head of Evidence, Frontline AIDS
  - Mr. Gerald Abila, Attorney and Founder, Barefoot Law
  - Ms. Lynrose Jane D. Genon, Member of the Executive Council of Young Women+ Leaders for Peace
  - Mr. Kartik Sharma, Chief, Office of the Director General, Chief, Strategy and Policy Planning, International Development Law Organization

### Guiding questions:

- What has the pandemic revealed about how deep-seated inequalities determine lifetime opportunities and outcomes including in good health and well-being?
- Has the pandemic introduced new forms of inequality within and across countries that now also need to be addressed?
- How can countries make effective and enduring changes towards more equitable, inclusive and just societies?
- What are the opportunities to be realized (and pitfalls to be avoided) in the immediate and medium terms towards these ends? How can international cooperation support?

## Successes and challenges<sup>1</sup>

This cross-cutting session was framed by evidence being reported back from the in-focus SDG sessions on SDG 3 (ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages), SDG 10 (Reduce inequality within and among countries) and SDG 16 (Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels). The UN system co-leads for the EGM sessions reported back on the progress related to each of these SDGs: UNFPA and WHO nominated rapporteur reported back on SDG 3, UNDESA reported back on SDG 10, and a UNODC and SRSV-VAC nominated rapporteur reported back on SDG 16. Some of the key facts raised regarding progress, successes and challenges around this group of SDGs are as follows.

Experts highlighted that prior to the COVID-19 crisis, progress was being made in improving maternal health with increases in skilled childbirth care and decreasing adolescent birth rates. Reductions were seen in child and infant mortality rates and communicable diseases, and there was increasing immunization coverage, albeit not always fast enough to meet SDG 3 targets by 2030. The pandemic threatens to halt and, in some cases, reverse past progress with interruptions to care and vaccination distribution. It was reported that a survey one year into the pandemic indicated that 90 per cent of countries are still reporting one or more disruptions to essential health services. Among the most extensively affected health services are those for mental, neurological and substance use disorders; neglected tropical diseases; tuberculosis; HIV and Hepatitis B and C; cancer screening, services for other noncommunicable diseases including hypertension and diabetes; SRH services including family planning and contraception; urgent dental care; malnutrition; immunization and malaria. Improvements in the provision of essential health services as measured by the universal health service coverage index increased from 45 (of 100) in 2000 to 66 in 2017, but with slower progress after 2010 and with rise in out of pocket expenditures. While low- and middle- income countries had experienced the greatest progress (mainly driven by interventions for infectious diseases. COVID-19-related services disruptions, however, could interrupt access.

Where there has been progress, there are regional variations with developing countries being left behind for different reasons. For indicator 3.8.1, for example, which measures universal healthcare coverage, progress was lower in Asia and Africa than in other regions. Additionally, indicator 3.8.2 which is the cost of health care has seen mixed results. Expenditure was increasing in some areas leading to a higher cost for care even though more care might be available. As poverty rates increase, there is an urgent need ensure that health care costs are not prohibitive to the poor.

Inequalities, including in exposure and susceptibility to disease, access to healthcare, and capacities to cope, have been headline issues during the COVID-19 crisis – the inequalities that are so visible

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<sup>1</sup> Data are from the Report of the Secretary-General on SDG Progress 2021 (advance, unedited copy) [https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/27610SG\\_SDG\\_Progress\\_report\\_2021.pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/27610SG_SDG_Progress_report_2021.pdf)

today are based on persistent, multiple divides that pre-date the pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, modest gains had been made in reducing inequality in some areas covered by SDG 10, for instance, income inequality was reduced within some countries.

The bottom 40 per cent of the population saw their incomes grow in 73 of the 90 countries with comparable data during the period 2012 to 2017. Moreover, in slightly more than half of those countries, the bottom 40 per cent experienced a growth rate of income that was higher than the overall national average. Still, in all countries with data, the bottom 40 per cent of the population received less than 25 per cent of the overall income or consumption, while the top 10 per cent of the population received at least 20 per cent of the income.

The World Economic Outlook October 2020 estimates that COVID-19 is increasing the average Gini index for emerging markets and developing economies by more than 6 per cent, with an even larger impact for low-income countries. COVID-19 is deepening divides in education and access to and demand for other services as access to digital technologies become a prerequisite for economic and social inclusion with the potential to set back an entire generation of children. Women face deepening inequalities as the care-work burden and gender-based violence both increased. Data from 44 countries and territories from 2014-2020 show that almost one in five people reported having personally experienced discrimination on at least one of the grounds prohibited under international human rights law. Moreover, women are more likely to be victims of discrimination than men. These divides are being reflected in individuals socio-economic and health conditions under COVID-19.

Between countries there had been some progress toward reducing inequality, especially before the pandemic. In 2019, total resource flows for development to developing countries from members of the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC), multilateral agencies and other key providers were 400 billion (USD?), of which 164 billion (USD?) were ODA. Initial assessments by the OECD indicate that ODA in 2020 rose 3.5 per cent in real terms from 2019, boosted by additional spending mobilised to help developing countries grappling with the COVID-19 crisis. The global average cost of sending a 200 (USD?) remittance decreased from 9.3 per cent in 2011 to 6.5 per cent in 2020, which is closer to the international target of 5 per cent.

At the same time, there are signs that inequality among countries could begin to widen. From 2017 to 2020, the proportion of products exported by LDCs and developing countries that receive duty free treatment has remained stagnant at 66 per cent and at 52 per cent, respectively. The IMF's World Economic Outlook 2021 estimates that in the medium-term GDP losses are expected to be higher in emerging market and developing economies than in higher income economies. Globally, refugees were at the highest absolute number on record in 2020. Even amidst strict COVID-19 mobility restrictions across the globe, thousands of migrants died along the migratory journey.

As access to digital technologies becomes a prerequisite for economic and social inclusion, there is the potential to set back an entire generation of children. Women face deepening inequalities as the

care work burden and gender-based violence both increased, and many social protections and labour market responses have been gender-blind. Data from 44 countries and territories from 2014-2020 show that almost one in five people reported having personally experienced discrimination on at least one of the grounds prohibited under international human rights law. Moreover, women are more likely to be victims of discrimination than men.

Achieving the goal of peaceful, just and inclusive societies (SDG 16) faces many challenges. Millions of people are still living in fragile and conflict affected states – also places with poorer access to health care. At the end of 2019, 79.5 million people had been forcibly displaced worldwide, translating to 1 per cent of the global population. In 2020, five civilians per 100,000 population were killed in armed conflicts; one in seven of those deaths was a woman or child. Furthermore, more people have been killed by homicide than by armed conflict in recent years.<sup>2</sup> In countries with available data from 2012 to 2020, 8 in 10 children aged 1 to 14 years of age were subjected to some form of psychological aggression and/or physical punishment at home in the previous month and violence against children stands to grow due to COVID-19. Increases in unemployment rates with COVID-19 are likely to increase trafficking in persons half of whom are trafficked for sexual exploitation or forced labour. In 2020, the UN tracked an 18 per cent increase in killings of human rights defenders over 2019 in 32 countries. 62 journalists were killed in 2020, compared to 57 in 2019. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed inequalities and discrimination, testing and even weakening rights and protection systems in countries.

It should also be noted that corruption presents a significant risk to recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic. The current situation exposes the various ways in which corruption can exacerbate inequalities in access to health services. The speedy allocation of resources for the provision of emergency equipment and health services present corruption risks which may, in turn, lead to further inequalities, with lack of access to these services for those who are most vulnerable. The production and distribution of vaccines is also vulnerable to corruption undermining not only vaccination programmes, but also further exacerbating the lack of trust in public institutions more broadly.

The importance of renewing the social contract was emphasized as a means of ensuring participation and engagement of the most marginalized, promoting an inclusive economy, a greener development model and multi-level governance. The discussion also highlighted the need for strengthening provision of integrated health (including mental health), education, justice and child protection services built on a strong social protection foundation to achieve the SDGs.

The lack of disaggregated, reliable and up-to-date data was mentioned as an additional challenge as it hinders effective monitoring. Although progress has been made since the last review, in terms of enhancing capacity to analyse trends through increased local level data and improved methodologies,

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<sup>2</sup> UNODC, Global Study on Homicide (2019): <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/global-study-on-homicide.html>.

conceptual clarity is needed to develop better common indicators required to operationalize SDG 16. For example, in relation to Target 16.1 on violence and related death rates reduction, gaps persist in the quality and quantity of data on the different forms of violence, preventing an accurate evaluation of the impact of the pandemic on new or continuing trends. In terms of Target 16.2, even prior to the pandemic, it was estimated that more than 1 billion children experience sexual, physical or emotional violence each year. And 1 in 3 women experience physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime. The COVID-19 pandemic-related lockdowns have increased children's and women's risk of violence in their homes, communities and online, and has compromised the ability of systems and services to promptly detect and respond to incidents of violence. Mitigation measures, such as lockdowns, taken in response to the pandemic have intensified violence, making those already at risk even more vulnerable. At the same time, these measures have also driven workarounds to social distancing and advanced electronic forms of accessing justice.

Investment in children and youth as agents of positive change was mentioned as crucial with further emphasis on recognizing youth as leading forces towards the achievement of SDG 16. Although the perception of the role of young people in conflict has improved from one of victims, or perpetrators, to one of peacebuilders, more investment is required to build their resilience by equipping them with the capacities to overcome challenging situations, such as the pandemic. Building such resilience in young people must start early and have a lifecycle approach, taking into consideration the evolving capacity of children growing into youth and adulthood.

### **Interlinkages, synergies and trade-offs**

This cross-cutting session included several presentations about the interlinkages among goals 3, 10, 16, and 17; and how to leverage these interlinkages to manage trade-offs and tap into synergies. Speakers included Ms. Najat Maalla M'jid, Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children; Ms. Liv Torres, Director, Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies, Associate Director, NYU Center on International Cooperation; Mr. Enrique Restoy, Head of Evidence, Frontline AIDS; Mr. Gerald Abila, Attorney and Founder, Barefoot Law; and Ms. Lynrose Jane D. Genon, Member of the Executive Council of Young Women+ Leaders for Peace. Mr. Kartik Sharma, Chief, Office of the Director General and Chief, Strategy and Policy Planning, International Development Law Organization was lead discussant reporting back on key messages from the Rome conference on SDG 16.

The speakers commonly emphasized that ensuring good health and wellbeing, reducing inequality, and promoting peaceful, just and inclusive societies are interconnected processes where strong synergies can be leveraged and trade-offs mitigated across the 2030 Agenda. Acting on evidence about such interlinkages, especially as countries weigh different spending and policy options for COVID-19 recovery, can help to generate multiple positive outcomes for a recovery that is both inclusive and sustainable. For example, efforts to prevent violence and psychological abuse against

children can translate into better health and wellbeing throughout the lifecycle; and considering how inequalities can generate unrest, violence and conflict there are strong synergies to be leveraged between reducing inequality and furthering progress toward peaceful communities.

The COVID-19 pandemic puts into stark relief how closely linked the advancement of SDGs 3, 10 and 16 are. The health challenges imposed by the pandemic can directly affect inequality and crime. Existing inequalities, social and economic exclusion, and fragile health systems, including a lack of universal health coverage and adequate social protection floors in many parts of the world worsened the impacts of the global pandemic. Various forms of crime and illicit activity also threaten the recovery.

The COVID-19 crisis was recognized as an opportunity to recover better; its devastating consequences have been an impetus to innovation and good practices and taught valuable lessons that can help ensure a better recovery and reconstruction and prepare better for future pandemics.

Strong political will and adequate funding, as well as sound and timely evidence to guide action, is needed to address the inequality and exclusion that can generate and perpetuate violence. Moreover, effective design and implementation of policies and programmes requires the active participation of children and youth, whose engagement is only possible through the creation of safe and enabling environments. Prevention of and responses to inequality and violence must entail law enforcement, and large-scale provision of integrated health, mental health, education, justice and social protection services that are sustainable during and beyond pandemics.

Transparency and accountability and an equitable, timely and effective delivery of social services is essential to building greater public confidence and trust in government. A whole-of-society, rights-based and adequately-funded approach to social protection is essential to enhance progress on all SDGs and to ensure that no one is left behind in the recovery.

### **Recommendations for action: Mechanisms and partnerships to accelerate progress**

The interactive dialogue during the cross-cutting session followed several strands which point toward action oriented and collaborative efforts to recover from COVID-19 and achieve the SDGs building equity and inclusivity for peaceful societies. It was clear that specific solutions will depend on the country context, but there were some points of consensus emerging around clusters of actions that can shift societies in more inclusive, just and sustainable directions.

Partnership and collaboration in all of these areas will be key to the decade of action and delivery on the SDGs; the international community must work together to address challenges bringing together governments, the private-sector, civil society and the science community, and leveraging individual and collective action for sustainability. Solutions that work need to be shared, scaled up and adjusted to address context specific conditions. Where the way forward is less clear, sharing information and

identifying ways to fill knowledge and data gaps to support evidence-based decision-making will be key. Some of the specific areas for action that were raised include the following.

First, it is essential that **health service disruption during COVID-19 is reduced** with emergency efforts to ensure that progress on vaccination provision, NCD reduction, maternal and newborn care, family planning, HIV and AIDS prevention and other health related areas continues uninterrupted. At the same time progress toward the universal provision of quality healthcare (UHC) must be accelerated, including the removal of any barriers financial or otherwise for vulnerable groups. UHC will also assist in achieving SDG 1 to eliminate poverty. Reducing NCDs can be in tandem with vaccinations, for example by extending healthcare services when providing vaccines by screening for NCDs during the appointments. In regards to vulnerable groups such as women and persons with disabilities, expenditure needs to be accelerated to meet the particular needs of these groups.

For good health and overall well-being with synergies across the 2030 Agenda, ensuring access to COVID-19 vaccines will be fundamental. The slow pace of vaccine distribution to developing countries could lead to lengthening the recession for developing countries, and increased divergence between countries. There are also considerations within countries about who has access to vaccines – for example, some marginalized groups including migrants and refugees may have difficulties with access. Some experts raised that intellectual property protections on vaccines may need to be reviewed to ensure rapid, equal access to vaccines.

Second, **inequality must be addressed with full commitment** including in areas exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic linked to the digital divide, the growing pressures on women and most certainly in terms of enabling access to COVID-19 vaccines in all countries. Addressing the chronic underfunding of already weak health systems, and social sectors more generally is needed to shift toward more equitable paths and build resilience at the individual and community levels. Strengthening social protections systems and integrated social services must be recognized as economic and social investments and the foundation for an inclusive and sustainable recovery for the whole of society. Austerity measures that cut back on social protections during recovery from the crisis will deepen poverty and inequality, and could risk intensifying public discontent, further weakening trust in institutions, and leaving people vulnerable to risks of future shocks.

The impact of the COVID-19 crisis on access to education and the ensuing deepening of inequalities in learning among children was introduced by many of the experts; especially as they relate to the digital divide and the rapid transition to digitalization brought about by the crisis. Impacts have been especially severe for girls, poor households, and in rural areas with the potential for lifelong setbacks that could leave these groups behind across generations. There was a call that in building back from COVID-19, the digital divide must be changed to a digital dividend where access is equal enabling progress in reducing inequality and achieving other SDGs. It is likely that digitalization will continue to accelerate given the success of remote economic and social activity during periods of social distancing;



digital technologies can be leveraged to expand services like health and education including for disadvantaged groups. The increased risk of sexual exploitation and abuse of children as they spend more time online was also highlighted, as were strategies to mitigate these threats.

New pressures on gender equality related to COVID-19 were also raised by many experts. It was noted that the pandemic is widening the structural inequalities that pre-dated the pandemic linked to gender (unequal care work distributions, unequal labour force participation rates, disproportionate reliance on work in the informal economy among them) with women's economic gains being set back decades due to the pandemic. There have also been increases in domestic violence and child marriage, which have direct implications on girls and women throughout their entire life cycle. The conditions call urgently for rethinking the borders around paid and unpaid work, and how norms around reproductive care and childcare limit women's potential. Investments to overcome data limitations (lack of data disaggregated by gender, sex, age) are also needed to support efforts to monitor and identify emerging or deepening areas of inequality.

Finally, efforts must **focus on bolstering institutions that are in place to prevent violence and corruption**; reducing inequalities that threaten to undermine stability, social solidarity and civil peace; and ensuring that disinformation does not fuel conflict and division. In this regard, promoting the rule of law was stressed as necessary to tackle the multiple intersecting and overlapping layers of discrimination, and empowering people to claim their rights. The justice gap can only be narrowed if legal systems are reoriented towards justice for all, not just a few. A people-centred approach, sound laws and enforcement mechanisms depend on well-equipped public institutions with qualified staff who have the right mindset and an anti-corruption ethic. Targeted, mission-oriented reforms in these aspects are needed to empower justice seekers and to promote fairer and more satisfactory outcomes. Responses to violence should be evidence-based, inclusive, coordinated, harmonized, and properly funded to have a long-term impact and ensure that no one is left behind.

The active participation of children and youth in the prevention and response to violence must be encouraged and capacities needed to strengthen their resilience needs to be built. Resilience to shocks and crises cannot be achieved without policy coordination and a whole-of-society approach that addresses discriminatory norms and social practices and aims to reduce inequalities.

Within all of these, partnerships, cooperation and breaking down silos will be imperative. Sharing information, thinking about the environment and future generations, embracing technology to address trade-offs, and involving governments and other stakeholders at all levels in this process will help to advance progress toward the SDGs.