



HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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The SDGs in time of crisis: A sustainable, inclusive and resilient recovery from COVID-19 as an opportunity to realize the SDGs Tuesday, 6 July 2021, 10:00 A.M. - 12:00 P.M.

Secretariat Background Note

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, undermining decades of sustainable development efforts. In 2020, over 100 million people were pushed back into poverty and hunger; an equivalent of 255 million full-time jobs were lost; and an additional 101 million children and youth fell below the minimum reading proficiency level, wiping out the education gains achieved over the last two decades. Violence against women and girls has intensified and child marriage is also expected to increase. The pandemic has reinforced and exacerbated existing inequalities and increased expressions of racism and xenophobia, hate speech, divisive populism and protectionism, misinformation and disinformation, magnified by unethical use of digital technologies. Furthermore, the economic slowdown associated with COVID-19 has done little to slow the climate crisis. All these factors threaten the achievements of the SDGs and the vision of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development for the future we want.

At the same time, the pandemic led to scientific breakthroughs with the development of effective vaccines, demonstrating the power of science, innovation, and public-private partnerships. Yet, developing countries' equitable access to vaccines remains a major challenge due to political, technical and economic hurdles. This has elicited strong calls for COVID-19 vaccines to be a global public good. While COVAX, the vaccines pillar of the Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator, has delivered over 87 million doses to 131 countries as of 17 June 2021, a more concerted effort is needed due to the challenges posed by bilateral deals and limited financial resources. Vaccine equity remains a prerequisite for a sustainable, inclusive and resilient recovery from COVID-19 everywhere.

The pandemic has forced and propelled many governments and businesses to accelerate the adoption of digital solutions, with the increased demands for remote work, distance learning and e-commerce, as well the need for new digital tools to support social distancing and contract training. At the same time, the pandemic has also exposed harsh fragilities and digital divides that have been allowed to develop for far too



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long. Due to the widening digital divides, the adverse impacts of the pandemic have unevenly affected developing countries and vulnerable communities, exposing the wide chasm and unlevel playing fields between the connected and the unconnected, and revealing just how far many are being left behind – and left further behind.

Even before the pandemic, close to half of the global population – an estimated 3.6 billion people – remained offline. And most who are unconnected today live in low-income countries and communities, where an average of only two out of every ten people have online connections. The consequences are immense and far-reaching – as a lack of digital connectivity means fewer education opportunities, fewer job opportunities, less access to healthcare, and less government transparency and accountability. The pandemic has, therefore, not only exposed digital divides but also added urgency to close the digital gaps.

Countries are still struggling to find the appropriate response to the pandemic and its social and economic impacts. While important stimulus packages have been implemented, the measures taken so far have often fallen short of the response required to overcome the impacts of the pandemic and move to a track to realize the SDGs. They have not boosted long-term investments in the SDGs, nor created new jobs or sufficiently supported transitions to carbon neutrality and environmental sustainability and supported the furthest behind.

Economic resilience with new fiscal and debt sustainability frameworks, societal resilience with universal social protection schemes and climate resilience with greater investments in sustainable development overall, including in sustainable infrastructure, are key building blocks of a resilient recovery. Such efforts need to be bolstered by international solidarity and universal access to the vaccine so that the world can move to the trajectory of sustainable development. Strengthening health systems and advancing towards universal health coverage would help countries be better prepared and become more resilient against future pandemics.

The pandemic has put a spotlight on the poor and most vulnerable, including women, older people, young people, children, low-wage earners, informal workers, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, people in situations of conflict, people living in rural areas, refugees and migrants. Countries need to enhance social protection and access to essential services for the poor and most vulnerable to ensure an inclusive recovery and that no one will be left behind. Human rights principles and standards must underpin the sustainable and resilient response to and recovery from the pandemic. Furthermore, concerted actions are needed to mainstream a gender perspective into COVID-19 response and recovery efforts.



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It is important that consideration is given already at this juncture to the post-stimulus period. Previous crises have shown that stimulus packages are often followed by fiscal tightening and further economic and social hardship. The momentum that has given rise to multiple initiatives of debt relief and extended funding facilities to developing countries is a recognition of the multiplicity of vulnerabilities that COVID-19 has amplified and the limited fiscal space that these countries have to roll out stimulus packages fully financed by domestic resources. It will thus be crucial that these financial arrangements be undone in a piecemeal manner, adjusted to national economic and social conditions. This will help avoid exacerbating economic vulnerabilities and social hardships.

The response and recovery from the pandemic will also depend on the availability and use of timely and high-quality data to inform policy and decision making. The pandemic has highlighted the crucial importance of high-quality data and statistics and well-functioning agile and resilient data and statistical systems, as well as the demands on skills and expertise for data standardization, integration, and robust analysis to allow policy makers to see things sooner and act faster. The use of new data solutions, including the integration of geospatial information, can help countries produce and manage data, and contribute to bridge the digital data gap across many communities and sectors. Statistical offices around the world embraced innovative approaches and forged partnerships, improving the availability of data for evidence-based decisions. Such partnerships will need to be furthered, accompanied by the appropriate level of political support and financing to invest in foundational statistical programmes, data innovation and data-related skills and expertise. Increased investments in national data and statistical systems and the mobilization of additional international and domestic resources will be imperative if we are to build back better from the crisis and accelerate implementation of the SDGs.

Achieving the SDGs will depend on the collective response over the coming 18 months; whether the COVID-19 crisis serves as a much-needed wake-up call that spurs a decade of truly transformative action that delivers for people and planet is still to be seen. Countries in special situations, including the least developed countries (LDCs), landlocked developing countries (LLDCs) and small island developing states (SIDS), as well as middle-income countries, would require a tailored approach that takes into account their needs and priorities. The 2030 Agenda and its 17 SDGs remains unquestionably the best available blueprint for a sustainable, inclusive and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, and to profoundly improve the lives of all and transform our world for the better.

The pandemic is a global problem that demands a coordinated global response built on partnership and solidarity. COVID-19 showed us in a very real way that we all live in the same planet and no one will be safe



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until all of us are safe. A sustainable, inclusive and resilient recovery from COVID-19 thus provides a unique opportunity to bring us back on track to reach the SDGs and the future we want as envisioned in the 2030 Agenda during this decade of action and delivery.

The HLPF reviews is expected to take into account the different impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic across all Sustainable Development Goals, consider progress in implementing the 2030 Agenda in its entirety and address the interlinkages between Goals, to promote integrated actions cutting across economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. It will thus discuss actions that can create co-benefits, address synergies and trade-offs and meet multiple objectives in a coherent and integrated manner, leaving no one behind. The review will also place emphasis on the targets of the Sustainable Development Goals with a 2020 deadline.

Building on the report of the Secretary-General on “Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals” and the relevant General Assembly and ECOSOC meetings related to the COVID-19 pandemic, this session will take stock of the SDGs overall progress taking into account the impact of the pandemic and the experiences and responses of countries at various development levels. The session will focus on exchange of experiences on policies and integrated approaches that are being implemented to address the socio-economic impact of the pandemic, while ensuring that the recovery from pandemic is sustainable and resilient, putting countries back on track to realize the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Guiding Questions

- Where do we stand on the SDGs given the dramatic impacts of COVID-19?
- What can we learn from the different country experiences in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What mix of integrated policies have been more effective in addressing COVID-19’s impacts while putting countries back on track to realize the SDGs?
- What are immediate and mid- to long-term actions that countries should consider addressing the socio-economic impact of the pandemic on the most vulnerable?
- What should be done to ensure the availability of timely and reliable data and improve the resilience of the statistics offices/operations to make informed decisions for recovering from COVID-19 and achieving the SDGs?



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