

Input by the International Anti-Corruption Academy (IACA) to the 2022 High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF)

Overview

The General Assembly in resolution 75/290 B defined the theme of the 2022 HLPF to be “Building back better from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.” The 2022 HLPF will review progress towards SDG 4 on quality education, SDG 5 on gender equality, SDG 14 on life under water, SDG 15 on life on land, and SDG 17 on partnerships. The Forum will also take into account the different impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic across these SDGs and the integrated, indivisible and interlinked nature of the Goals.¹

This submission from the International Anti-Corruption Academy (IACA) to the 2022 HLPF addresses these issues:

- A. Progress, experiences, lessons learned, challenges and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the implementation of SDGs 4, 5, 14, 15, and 17.
- B. Assessment of the situation regarding the “leaving no one behind” principle in the COVID-19 pandemic and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.
- C. Policy recommendations on SDGs 4, 5, 14, 15, and 17 in the context of COVID-19 as well as key messages for their suggested inclusion into the Ministerial Declaration of the 2022 HLPF.

A. Progress, experiences, lessons learned, challenges and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the implementation of SDGs 4, 5, 14, 15, and 17

1. The International Anti-Corruption Academy (IACA) was founded to facilitate the implementation of the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC). IACA, in its dual role as both an international organization and an institute of higher learning, has been fighting corruption for over a decade. In that time, the Academy has developed the expertise and experience needed to fulfill its unique mandate of providing anti-corruption education and technical assistance to those most in need. The success of the SDGs is linked to the full implementation of effective anti-corruption, compliance, and integrity frameworks at the national level and strong international cooperation in the fight against corruption.

2. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the international community witnessed once again that “Corruption thrives in a crisis.” Countries mobilized to save lives and speed was prioritized over transparency. Corrupt individuals took advantage of rushed procurement procedures and funds with little oversight in place.

3. Corruption undermines all aspects of human development. It poses a threat to peace and security, undermines institutions, and jeopardizes sustainable development and the rule of law. Every minute the equivalent of \$3 million is paid as a bribe worldwide. The absence of effective mechanisms to secure the return of stolen assets has led to the parking of \$7 trillion in safe havens. This illustrates the appalling magnitude of stolen funds and a massive drain on resources that greatly undermines developmental progress. Against this background, it becomes apparent that the 2030 Agenda will not be met if corruption is not fought effectively.

¹ Letter from ECOSOC President, 26 November 2021 inviting submissions to the 2022 HLPF

4. Given that governments need to invest considerable resources to undertake the steps necessary to fulfil the SDGs, it is essential to stop and reverse the losses to the economy caused by grand corruption, as well as to recover funds and put them to better use. IACA is seeking to provide an evidence-base for tackling illicit financial flows through the development of new indicators of corruption, including grand corruption, and to assess the costs of corruption. In addition, IACA is helping build global expertise in financial intelligence through capacity development programmes.

5. The special session of the UN General Assembly Against Corruption (UNGASS 2021) adopted the Political Declaration last year as a blueprint to help countries tackle corruption. The Declaration calls for strengthening anti-corruption research, education and training as a key driver of change to build a culture of integrity and provide the basis for a corruption-free society. In this context it also calls on all international and regional organizations concerned, such as the International Anti-Corruption Academy (IACA), to strengthen their cooperation with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and other relevant United Nations entities.

6. In line with the UNGASS 2021 Political Declaration, IACA is devoted to working in close partnership and complementarity with the United Nations system. To help foster this partnership, IACA has recently established its Permanent Observer Office to the UN headquarters in New York.

7. It is of primary importance to carefully identify lessons learned from the pandemic regarding anti-corruption so that the world is better positioned to shield itself from this scourge when the next crisis strikes. From IACA's perspective the main lessons are:

8. *Lesson #1:* Effective anti-corruption measures and preparedness save lives in crisis situations. Significant loss of life could have been avoided during the pandemic had there been better governance and anti-corruption measures in place. Petty bribes were used to avoid quarantines. Ventilators and other medical equipment were the subjects of corrupt transactions, leading to the loss of lives of those in need. Anti-corruption preparedness is key to ensuring effective and early response to crises.

9. *Lesson #2:* Investing in anti-corruption education is crucial to building a fit-for-purpose workforce and promoting a culture of integrity. To fight corruption, we must provide our practitioners and front-line workers with the tools they need. Considerable political and economic capital in anti-corruption education and training will be required to build necessary capacities in both the public and private sectors, and to foster a culture of integrity in societies.

10. *Lesson #3:* Partnerships and international cooperation are vital for tackling corruption and the pandemic. Neither the pandemic nor corruption can be contained within national borders. We need strong international cooperation, robust international institutions, and monitoring mechanisms. Governments, international organizations, civil society, academia, and citizens must work together to find collective solutions to jointly build a society free of corruption.

11. *Lesson #4:* The COVID-19 pandemic has substantially changed education. The pandemic has caused schools and universities to close worldwide, which triggered a rise in e-learning. IACA was also forced to scale up our e-learning services for anti-corruption-focused master's programmes and capacity-building training. It resulted in making anti-corruption education more accessible and cost-effective worldwide. E-learning is surely here to stay – and may point us towards a perspective of building back better.

12. SDG 4 on quality education. Corruption in education threatens the well-being of every country and society because it undermines social trust, exacerbates inequality, and exposes children to unethical

behavior. It erodes SDG 4 on inclusive and equitable quality education and sabotages the development of competent and ethical future generations and its accompanying workforce. Young generations exposed to corruption from an early age runs the risk of accepting corruption as a way of life. Schools which are expected to equip children with ethical values, norms, and behaviors, often become unsafe environments which expose girls and boys to corruption, abuse and loss of public trust.

13. In the education sector, bribes may take several forms. Mothers may have to pay bribes to get their children registered in school. Embezzlement or diversion often drains already underfunded school resources. In many countries, nepotism and favoritism lead to the hiring of unqualified teachers, which in turn results in poor quality education outcomes. The education system may also be adversely affected by corruption in procurement, from the construction of schools to the procurement of textbooks and school supplies. When bribes and fraudulent fees are paid for education services which are meant to be free of charge, it puts poor children at a disadvantage and drives inequity while undermining the core meaning of equal access to education.

14. Teacher management and professional misconduct is certainly a major area affected by corruption. This includes corruption in recruitment, posting, teacher misconduct, including absenteeism, sextortion, and school related gender-based violence, and exploitation of child labor. Some school systems have ghost teachers, who are permanently absent or do not even exist, yet their salaries get paid to someone. Children who are harassed for sex by teachers will be traumatized and often drop-out, while the perpetrator – their teacher – remains unpunished. Corruption in schools leaves millions of children left behind without protection and safety.

15. SDG 5 on gender equality. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the role that corruption in public services deepens gender inequalities and undermine gains in women’s empowerment. Corruption harms people of all genders in different ways. However, corruption has a larger negative impact overall on women than men, and perhaps more so, on non-binary individuals. Women’s equality is eroded by the negative impacts of corruption on those with less power and by gendered forms of corruption, such as, a woman’s body as a currency where sexual favors are requested or paid as a bribe.

16. Providing adequate and safe spaces will ensure adherence to applicable laws and policies for everyone to report corruption. Gender-sensitive reporting of corruption and whistleblowing mechanisms are key in both the public and private sector to enforce gender equality and women’s empowerment. Current reporting mechanisms for corruption are often designed for and by men which requires rethinking.

17. Gender equality and countering corruption cut across all 17 SDGs and their mainstreaming across sectors has a catalytic impact that triggers positive multiplier effects across the spectrum of development. Both are fundamental to the achievement of the SDGs and are enablers to their sustainability. Despite their inter-connectiveness, there has been a separate evolution of international anti-corruption instruments and gender instruments. Still, nearly all signatories of CEDAW are also State parties to UNCAC. To ensure the realization of SDG 5 and its targets, gender and anti-corruption actors need to strengthen their cooperation to jointly prevent and combat corruption undermining gender equality and women’s empowerment.

18. SDG 14 on life under water. Conservation and the sustainable use of oceans, seas and marine resources are essential for our existence. They cover 70 percent of our planet and provide lifelines to communities in terms of food, energy, and water. Our oceans are undoubtedly the main source of life on Earth, containing 97 percent of its water and representing 99 percent of the planet’s living space by volume. Exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, corruption significantly erodes progress and the achievement of SDG 14.

19. The fishery industry is a good example which illustrates corruption undermining the realization of SDG Goal 14. Today the world's fisheries resources are under threat. The global fish stocks face an uncertain future, and more than 30 percent of global fish stocks are already fished at biologically unsustainable levels. The complexity of the fisheries sector which often involves long supply chains and multiple jurisdictions, makes it particularly vulnerable to illicit activities, such as illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, money laundering, human rights violations, tax avoidance, and other crimes. One factor that can be transversal to these crimes is corruption.

20. Implementation of new digital technologies and transparent procedures in the process of distribution fishing quotas, anti-corruption measures, capacity building and training in customs and border control agencies, exchange of information on foreign vessels and quantities of fish and other marine bioresources arriving in foreign harbors are crucial for the protection of the oceans, seas, and marine resources.

21. **SDG Goal 15 on life on land.** With corruption thriving and the ongoing pandemic, the 2020 targets of SDG 15 are unlikely to be met, land degradation continues, biodiversity loss is occurring at an alarming rate, and invasive species and the illicit poaching and trafficking of wildlife continue to thwart efforts to protect and restore vital species and ecosystems.

22. Corruption is a key enabler of wildlife crimes, including poaching and illegal trade, as well as an important source of resilience for organized criminal groups involved in such crimes. Bribes and extortion may play a role in the process of issuing licenses for hunting which otherwise would not be issued. Bribery of public officials may lead to the issuing of false documents or may skew procurement outcomes. Government officials and forest patrols may be paid to turn a blind eye to illegal hunting. Corruption can be used to influence policymakers' decisions related to wildlife protection. It is also considered one of the main obstacles to effective law enforcement and exacerbates the culture of impunity. Wildlife crimes illustrate the need for anti-corruption reform and SDG 15 implementation, as, in fact, all SDG 15 targets are eroded by corruption.

23. **SDG Goal 17 on partnerships.** The COVID-19 pandemic underlined the importance of global partnerships in sustainable development for the implementation and realization of the 2030 Agenda. IACA will continue to apply the knowledge, skills and experience of its staff to help Member States reach the SDGs and their targets. Fighting corruption is not a stand-alone goal; it cuts across the entire SDG framework. The goal is critical to the entire 2030 Agenda because corruption undermines progress towards the realization of all other SDGs. Whether the focus is ensuring gender equality, ensuring access to quality education, protecting life under water or life on land, fighting corruption is an essential pre-condition for advancing the 2030 Agenda.

24. Hence, tackling corruption is vital to achieving the SDGs, particularly SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions). The importance of fighting corruption is explicitly highlighted in the SDG 16 targets:

- (4) By 2030, significantly reduce illicit financial and arms flows, strengthen the recovery and return of stolen assets and combat all forms of organized crime.
- (5) Substantially reduce corruption and bribery in all their forms.
- (10) Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements.

25. IACA recalls the importance of Goal 16 and the mainstreaming of the counter-corruption measures throughout all 17 Goals. It urges States and international partners to recognize anti-corruption as the driving force of sustainable development and to adopt relevant policies and strategies to that effect. IACA stands ready to support global partners in the fight against corruption across sectors to ensure the success and realization of all 17 SDGs.

B. Assessment of the situation regarding the “leaving no one behind” principle in the COVID-19 pandemic and for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda

26. As the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres emphasized, corruption is criminal, immoral and the ultimate betrayal of public trust. It is even more damaging in times of crisis – as the world is experiencing now with the COVID-19 pandemic. The UNSG emphasized that “corruption in the time of COVID-19 has the potential to seriously undermine good governance around the world, and to send us even farther off-track in our work to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.” The COVID-19 crisis reiterates that the poor and marginalized, especially women and children, are disproportionately affected by the way corruption restricts economic growth, exacerbates inequality, erodes rule of law and justice, and distorts resource distribution. Fighting corruption is essential to ensure the success of the “leave no-one behind” principle embedded at the heart of the 2030 Agenda.

27. COVID-19 has affected people regardless of sex, gender, geography, ethnicity, religion, disability, national or social origin, birth, property, or any other status. However, the consequences of the pandemic and corruption have impacted the most vulnerable groups of society in a disproportionate and more severe manner. The SDG 16 Agenda includes commitments to fight corruption, increase transparency, tackle illicit financial flows and improve access to information.

C. Policy recommendations on SDGs 4, 5, 14, 15, and 17 in the context of COVID-19 and corruption as well as key messages for suggested inclusion into the Ministerial Declaration of the 2022 HLPF.

28. **IACA calls on States to accelerate the implementation of the UNCAC Convention and make it a roadmap for achieving corruption-free societies in the context of the Vision of the 2030 Agenda.** IACA stresses anti-corruption instruments/approaches could support countries in combating corruption related to all 17 SDGs, including SDG 4 on quality education, SDG 5 on gender equality, SDG 14 on life under water, SDG 15 on life on land, and SDG 17 on partnerships. The UNCAC sets a comprehensive benchmark for anti-corruption laws, institutions, and actions. Many of these provisions could help fight corruption more efficiently and effectively, as well as foster international cooperation to support the achievement of all SDGs.

29. **In the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, IACA calls for joint action in the fight against corruption and solicits participation from all key partners,** including Member States (not solely of UNCAC, but of the United Nations), national anti-corruption institutions, the United Nations system and regional organizations, and civil society. The 2030 Agenda is everyone’s business, and as its realization depends on effectively addressing corruption; *ergo*, fighting corruption is everyone’s business. IACA stands ready to support governments, the United Nations, and other partners promote and strengthen measures to prevent and combat corruption more efficiently and effectively, especially in the areas of research, education, capacity development, technical assistance, and international cooperation.

30. **IACA recommends that States strengthen their national institutions advancing effective prevention and fight against corruption** to enable the attainment of the SDG Agenda, and to effectively respond and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

31. **IACA recommends that States strengthen the integrity, accountability and proper management of public affairs and public property.** It provides the following key priority areas of policy recommendation to States to:

- **Restructure human resources management systems:** Public officials, including teachers, customs officials, judges, should be hired and promoted based on merit and selection criteria to

avoid nepotism and cronyism. Rotation of staff might be helpful to avoid conflicts of interest. Remuneration levels should be adequate to avoid low salaries encouraging corruption.

- **Establish effective control mechanisms:** There should be a code of conduct, conflict of interest regulations, clear mechanisms to detect corruption, and prosecution of public officials involved in corruption.
- **Institute information technology and automatization:** Use technology and standardization of procedures to reduce the discretionary power enjoyed by public officials.
- **Establish audit mechanisms:** Regular internal and external audits may support the detection of corruption.
- **Strengthen law-enforcement addressing corruption and establish an effective gender-sensitive whistleblowing system:** Effective law-enforcement ensures perpetrators of corruption are prosecuted, while gender-sensitive whistleblowing mechanisms promote accountability by encouraging the disclosure of information about misconduct and possibly corruption while protecting the whistle-blower from retaliation.
- **Provide training and education to public service officials as well as anti-corruption and compliance professionals:** Enhanced technical capacity and trainings are key to enhancing integrity and promoting trust within societies.

32. **IACA calls on States to include public integrity education in schools** as a measure to promote ethical behavior and equip children with knowledge and skills to resist corruption. School public integrity programs will engage children, young people, and teachers in an inclusive dialogue and exploration of how they as citizens can protect public integrity and uphold ethical values.

33. IACA recommends that the States and international organizations further their support to targeted global, regional, and inter-disciplinary research on anti-corruption, compliance, and collective action to facilitate informed decision-making in the public and private sectors.