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Interconnected goals

COVID-19 has shown the SDGs are a solution to, not a casualty of, the current crisis, but only if they are taken as an interconnected strategy for transformation

By **Enyseh Teimory**, Communications Officer, United Nations Association – UK (with case studies by UNA-UK staff)

We have heard time and again during the COVID-19 crisis that this pandemic has shone a light on the fault lines in our global system and laid bare the enduring inequalities that exist among and between our communities. COVID-19 knows no borders and the reality that our world is deeply interconnected has never been more evident. We have seen in the face of global crises, global solutions are needed more than ever.

At the heart of the 2030 Agenda is the notion that collective action can ensure that 'no one is left behind'. COVID-19 has brought into sharp focus the state of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), agreed by world leaders just five years ago. There have been calls to 'revise' and 'reset' the SDGs, and it has been suggested that the targets set five years ago are outdated, incompatible with the political and economic state of our world today. But, as argued in the *Nature* article, 'Speaking truth to power about the SDGs', the targets are still affordable, and critics have not demonstrated any technical or

operational barriers. The SDGs still provide the framework for transformation. What is lacking is political commitment and accountability.

Holistic transformation
At their core, the SDGs seek to redress the fundamental imbalances of our global system, and in doing so ensure that quality of life and dignity for all is no longer a game of geographical chance. If this agenda is faltering, as recent reports indicate, it is because the same imbalances the SDGs seek to redress are undermining this collective process.

▲ Hanoi, Vietnam pictured in April, with the roads virtually free of traffic. Globally, in April, daily CO_2 emissions were down 17 per cent year-on-year

And this is just one way in which the sustainable development agenda is fundamentally interconnected. The devastating consequences of COVID-19 further demonstrate that holistic policies that harness this interconnectedness will be required to shape the architecture of a post-COVID recovery. This necessity was readily apparent even before COVID-19, and has been evidenced by research such as the 2017 report from the International Science Council, *A Guide to SDG Interactions: from Science to Implementation*. But, as our case studies show, the case is now even more clear.

The recent *Sustainable Development Report 2020* (SDR2020) highlights how far the pandemic has set the world back on its path to achieving the targets of the SDGs. Decades of positive action are at risk of being undone. For example, data indicates that poverty – the

Air quality: health (SDG 3) and climate (SDG 13)

By Ben Donaldson

Carbon dioxide (CO_2), nitrogen oxides and other emissions fell by 10–30 per cent globally between February and June during the lockdown, and the health benefits were immediate.

During the first month of lockdown, a study from the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air estimated that there were 11,000 fewer deaths in Europe as a result of reduced industrial and vehicular emissions. The study also showed 1.3 million fewer days of work absence, 6,000 fewer children developing asthma and 6,00 fewer preterm births in the same period.

According to the London Air Quality Network, reduced air pollution from road traffic led to a 55 per cent reduction in nitrogen dioxide levels in the UK's capital. And a survey by the British Lung Foundation found that one in six people with chronic lung conditions had experienced improvements in their lung health during lockdown. In children it was even higher (one in five), and for asthmatics it was one in four.

Other benefits are harder to quantify. Across previously smog-ridden cities, clear, blue skies prevailed. Residents of Jalandhar in Punjab could see the Dhauladhar mountain range for the first time in years. As road traffic evaporated, we breathed more freely. People turned to walking and biking to move safely through previously congested streets. Bike use boomed across the world, in many cases incentivised by improved infrastructure such as in Europe where, according to the European Cyclists' Federation, by July more than 2,000 km of new cycle lane and 2,700 individual infrastructural measures from almost

400 cities and communities had been announced. As well as benefits around fitness and reducing obesity, active travel replaces polluting journeys, in turn further improving air quality and incentivising yet more active travel.

Clearly a global lockdown is not the answer to environmental or health concerns. But the pandemic has shown that behaviours that are good for our planet are often also good for our health. Progress towards SDG 3 is accelerated by progress towards SDG 13 and vice versa.

Air pollution is also marked by environmental injustice. The worst air pollution is found in the most deprived neighbourhoods, where individuals are least likely to own a car. Reduced emissions and active transport will help relieve harm, which disproportionately affects marginalised groups, contributing to SDG 10 (reducing inequality).

Incentivising change

But the positive knock-on effects of lockdown could be short-lived. CO_2 levels and vehicle use have bounced back rapidly as restrictions have been lifted. Public transport is being shunned and, in many cases, temporary cycling incentives have dried up. Hard-and-fast action by governments and city authorities is essential to bank the improvements that have been glimpsed and to incentivise sustained behavioural change.

Stopping subsidies for fossil fuels, expanding green energy and redesigning cities to make it easier to make healthy choices will help us capitalise on the lessons of this pandemic and make essential progress towards the SDGs and the Paris Climate Agreement. ●

very first goal – is on the rise as a result of the pandemic and could increase by as much as 8 per cent, the first time in three decades that global poverty has increased.

It is not only the scale of our response that needs to change. Various reports have

highlighted that it is unhelpful to assume that the SDGs are a project dependent solely on financing. Instead Agenda 2030 is predicated on the fact that sustainability is built, not bought. More money is needed, but the ends to which it is used are as

important as the quantities in which it is available.

COVID-19 has made this clear, "notably in high-income countries that were thought best prepared to face epidemics", in the words of SDR2020. This has been exemplified in the devastating figures from the United States, a country that spends nearly 20 per cent of its GDP on health has had one of the least effective and deadly responses to COVID-19.

As of writing October 2020, the US has had more than 8 million confirmed cases, and over 200,000 deaths. In comparison, South Korea, which spends around 8 per cent of GDP on health, has had approximately 25,000 cases and fewer than 500 deaths. The SDR2020 Pilot COVID-19 Index for OECD countries ranks South Korea number one, whereas the US ranks 28. Their reporting also shows South Korea on a positive trajectory

on more SDG targets. Clearly, a holistic societal transformation based around the SDGs is worth many hundreds of billions of dollars in additional spending.

Indeed, if progress towards the SDGs in the last five years had been on target, responses to contain and control the outbreak and its impacts could have been swifter and more effective. This is evidenced in part in the SDR2020's reporting that Asian countries have made the most progress in the last five years. It was those countries that have responded to COVID-19 most effectively.

By recognising the interrelatedness of the SDGs more cogently in policy and practice, there is the potential for action at local, national and international levels to better mobilise across sectors and develop integrated approaches to targets. Interconnectivity doesn't just transmit risk, it can create synergies: see Ben Donaldson's focus (page 43) on how the response to COVID-19 impacted rates of air pollution in London, and more widely the short-term climate relief that has been observed in different forms across the planet. National lockdowns caused great, if necessary, hardship but also demonstrated the viability of more sustainable methods of living and working, leading to observable changes to local environments.

The consequences of taking positive actions for our planet – and finding practical responses such as the kilometres of new cycle paths that have been created – reminds us that one of the primary benefits of the SDGs as an interconnected system of responses is the positive feedback loops that this creates.

The fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic thus far has demonstrated that the roadmap set out in 2015 is the best guide we have to not only realise a sustainable and equitable global future that protects people and planet, but also tackle and prevent crises of this very nature. As the latest SDG report notes, the SDGs can "frame long-term strategies towards more resilient and sustainable societies". In doing so we will not only build back more sustainably, fairly and equitably, but with renewed momentum towards achieving these vital targets. ●

Brazil: health (SDG 3), biodiversity (SDG 15) and inequality (SDG 10)

By Lauren Muir

COVID-19 has struck the world at a time of widening inequalities, an accelerating climate crisis, and when the international community is worryingly short of achieving global development targets. The pandemic has exacerbated the very challenges that the SDGs seek to resolve. Healthcare and political systems are at breaking point and the focus on a 'global partnership' has taken a back seat as countries battle the virus. While this global crisis has impacted the lives of people in all corners of the world, the devastation has been far from equal, with already-fragile communities facing disproportionate catastrophe.

Brazil is the most biodiverse country in the world, hosting more than 17 per cent of the world's biological diversity and the greatest number of endemic species. Yet, the country is facing a climate catastrophe and persistent and deepening inequalities between its communities.

The year 2020 has produced continuous challenges for Brazil – fires, flash flooding, continuing deforestation, static economic growth, political uncertainty – all compounded by the effects of COVID-19. At the time of writing, Brazil has the third highest global case total, with over 150,000 recorded deaths. Within this context, indigenous communities are disproportionately affected by the virus. This disparity is in part a consequence of their remoteness,

there are few doctors and great distances to hospitals. Moreover, limited access to life-saving medical equipment means that even if the virus is identified, rates of survival are low.

Studies have shown that indigenous groups are at greater risk of contracting the disease and have lower survival rates. According to the Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil, there have been 30,000 cases and 785 deaths within 110 communities, whose populations total over 900,000. Limited testing means that numbers could be higher.

The pandemic's full impact on Amazonia will not be clear for some time. Brazil faces losing an entire generation of indigenous leaders to COVID-19 – losing knowledge not only about their communities and cultures, but about the biodiversity and natural landscape with which they are so entwined.

This reality demonstrates the interconnectedness of the SDGs. Poor health, climate change and disrupted biodiversity increase inequality and heighten the vulnerability of remote populations. COVID-19 has highlighted this chain reaction by showing that these communities are the most vulnerable to this effect. By realising the connectedness of these particular SDGs, more can be done to protect indigenous lives and their environments. When one area – health, climate, biodiversity or inequality – is neglected, it has a degrading impact on others, challenging the achievement of the SDGs. ●

Lebanon: health (SDG 3), food (SDG 2) and peace (SDG 16)

By Rianna Nayee

Lebanon hosts the world's highest number of displaced persons per capita. With conflict in Syria now in its 10th year, it hosts an estimated 1.5 million Syrian refugees as well as more than 200,000 Palestinian refugees.
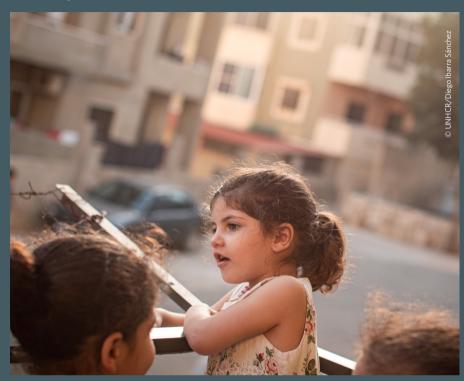
The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) describes the situation in Lebanon as one of the worst humanitarian crises of our time, now exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The World Health Organization (WHO) has reported 44,482 cases in Lebanon as of 5 October. The pandemic has thrown several interconnected issues into sharp relief, such as a lack of good governance and inclusive institutions, a weak economy and poor management of vital staples.

An integral link between SDG 2 and SDG 3 is money. Access to both food and healthcare is heavily affected by income. While this translates to serious consequences for the majority of Lebanon's population – 55 per cent of people in Lebanon qualify as poor, and extreme poverty is now at 28 per cent – the situation is even more severe for Lebanon's refugees and is exacerbated by weak institutions.

Overlapping crises

Analysis conducted by Oxfam in 2017 has found critical gaps in minimum wage and social protections, and entrenched discrimination against refugees. The resulting figures are staggering: the Norwegian Refugee Council found that 83 per cent of Syrian refugees in Lebanon face extreme poverty, and in 2020 UNHCR reported that 92 per cent of displaced Syrians experience some level of food insecurity.

The World Food Programme, in Lebanon since 2011, now assists more than 800,000 severely vulnerable Syrian refugees. Additionally, UNHCR's 2019 vulnerability assessment for refugees in Lebanon found that cost was now the most significant barrier to healthcare access.

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▲ **Three-year-old Syrian refugee Yasmine Al Sham plays with her sisters at their home in Barja, Lebanon. Her family fled from East Ghouta in 2014. Their resettlement to Norway has been delayed by the pandemic**

The close relationships between these goals are perhaps most clearly illustrated by the explosion that occurred at the port in Beirut in August 2020. Nearly 200 people were killed and more than 6,000 injured in the explosion, which has been attributed to the unsafe storage of some 2,750 tonnes of ammonium nitrate in a warehouse at Beirut's port. Experts in good governance have expressed alarm that the chemicals were stored so close to residential areas and the national wheat reserves for nearly seven years, but senior officials ignored warnings. Some 85 per cent of Lebanon's food is imported, coming through Beirut's port. The explosion destroyed 15,000 metric tonnes of wheat – exacerbating food insecurity. It also devastated Lebanon's healthcare system, which was already under significant strain. WHO reported six hospitals and 20 clinics were damaged in the blast.

Amid these overlapping crises and COVID-19 travel restrictions, UNHCR and UNICEF expressed "deep concern" at the spike in attempts by refugees to move onwards to Cyprus. The seven-day journey is extremely dangerous: on 14 September, the UN Peacekeeping force in Lebanon UNIFIL's Maritime Task Force rescued a boat off the coast of Lebanon, where several passengers died during the journey.

While the deportation of refugees was suspended as Lebanon closed its borders to combat COVID-19, in his 21 September address to the UN General Assembly, Lebanon's President Aoun stressed that they cannot continue hosting so many. Due to overcrowding, social distancing is often practically impossible. Though UNHCR has made significant strides to respond to the pandemic, reporting that 82 per cent of refugees are informed of preventative measures against COVID-19, they stress that "the biggest challenge for refugees is simply to survive". ●