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The SDGs can guide our recovery

Our post-pandemic world must be built on sustainable foundations, not compromised by excessive haste to 'return to normal'

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The global COVID-19 pandemic is a massive setback for both the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Agreement. As documented by leading multilateral economic institutions such as the IMF, World Bank and OECD, countries are experiencing unprecedented economic contractions and rising inequalities. As often in such crises, the poor are hit particularly

◀ Students attending school in Southeast Gobi, Mongolia. The region is benefiting from a coordinated urban development project to improve and extend water supply, sanitation services, district heating and road networks

hard, enduring sharp drops in income and rising hunger.

The pandemic has laid bare that some of the richest countries, such as the US and many European states, were unprepared for coronavirus. These countries and many others had not pursued SDG target 3.d, which calls for “early warning, risk reduction and management of national and global health risks”. There is strong evidence from the United States Center for Disease Control that zoonotic diseases like COVID-19 are enabled by environmental degradation, which SDGs 13 (climate action) to 15 (life on land) aim to curb. Other SDG priorities, including better social protection systems, reduced income inequalities, and enhanced multilateral coordination and partnership, would have further increased countries’ resilience. So, the tremendous costs of the pandemic are also the result of insufficient progress towards the SDGs.

Some recent articles in *Nature* have suggested that in the wake of COVID-19, the SDGs have become unachievable. They call instead for lowering the ambition of the Goals. These criticisms are misguided, as they conflate two issues. One is whether the SDGs remain technically achievable and affordable, and the other is whether governments and other stakeholders will do what it takes to meet them. According to reports by the SDSN and IMF, the available evidence suggests that the Global Goals, including the objectives of the Paris Agreement, can be financed at a relatively modest cost of 2 to 3 per cent of world gross product. Detailed technical roadmaps, available for most of the SDGs, also show that the Goals can still be achieved if governments and stakeholders stay focused on them.

Unfortunately, most rich countries – with the notable exception of Denmark, Norway, Luxembourg, Sweden and the UK – have not been meeting their commitment to

provide 0.7 per cent of gross national income in official development assistance.

Some countries have high levels of corruption and mismanagement, which similarly put the Goals out of reach. Meanwhile, many poor countries are simply resource constrained. So, calls for renegotiating the SDGs are misguided and naïve, given the lack of trust among countries. Instead, experts should speak truth to power on how the Goals can still be achieved.

Reaffirming the SDGs

The SDGs are not only achievable, they are also necessary to promote shared, integrated approaches for economic, social and environmental development, including the international collaboration and solidarity that poor countries and global challenges like climate change require. Without such cooperation, it will become much harder to raise the level of ambition and to mobilise the global expert communities for the practical problem-solving that each SDG requires.

The Goals are vital to underpin this multilateral approach, particularly as it is being undermined by the US withdrawals from the Paris Agreement and the World Health Organization (WHO), as well as by ‘populist’ governments in other countries.

So, a critical enabler for the COVID-19 recovery is the reaffirmation of the SDGs. One practical step could be to re-launch the ‘Decade of Action’ to deliver the SDGs initiated by the United Nations early in 2020, just as coronavirus was spreading in China and other countries. Given the depth of the current crisis, the world needs a ‘Decade of Recovery and Action’ that uses the SDGs as the shared global framework for meeting essential social, environmental and economic objectives enabled through a global partnership.

Unlike with earthquakes or other natural disasters, there is no clear ‘before’ and ‘after’ moment with COVID-19. The disease continues to spread fast in many parts of the world. Some countries that had managed to suppress transmission of the virus are now facing a second wave. Even under the most optimistic scenarios, effective vaccines will only be available to all those who need

Also in this section

Decent work 77

Is capitalism broken? 80

Private finance 82

Empowering women and girls 86

Black Lives Matter and the SDGs 89

Circular economy 91

Biodiversity 94

Sustainable energy 97

The right to water 100

Aid transformed 103

Taking action 106

Conserving resources 108

Feeding the world 112

Sustainable mobility 116

them in the coming years. We will therefore have to live with the virus for a while. An effective response requires three areas of action that are equally important and must be pursued concurrently:

- suppress the disease with minimal social and economic damage;
- support the poorest countries and strengthen multilateral cooperation;
- invest in building back our societies to make them prosperous, resilient and sustainable.

First, countries cannot choose between curbing the spread of the virus and the health of their economies. Asian countries, like South Korea, Taiwan and Vietnam, have shown that strong public health measures (social distancing, widespread testing, comprehensive contact tracing, rigorous quarantine measures for infected individuals, and effective treatment) can suppress the virus without the need to lock down an economy. Countries that do not put in place these essential public health measures will sustain massive economic and social costs from the pandemic.

Second, poorer countries need more solidarity and support from the rest of the world. There will be no safety and no return to any semblance of normality for rich countries if poor countries are not assisted and instead become large reservoirs of COVID-19 infections from which the virus could strike back at any time.

Several multilateral health-financing institutions are coordinating their support for countries to fight COVID-19, and the European Union has launched international appeals for more financing. Notably, Germany has announced a large COVID-19 emergency programme with a focus on supporting poor countries in Africa and elsewhere, but few other rich countries are following this example. The coronavirus-related financing needs for Africa, as identified by the UN Economic Commission for Africa and African finance ministers, remain largely unmet.

While the sums are impossible for poor countries to finance themselves, they fall well within the volume of development assistance promised by rich countries. And

they are a tiny fraction of the financing that these rich countries are mobilising to restart their own economies. It is therefore not only urgent and in the interest of rich countries to close the financing gap for poor countries, but it is also entirely affordable.

Finally, countries need to chart out long-term recovery strategies from COVID-19. Such strategies must first do no harm, so they must not foster environmental degradation that raises the risk of zoonotic diseases, accelerates climate change, or undermines human health (for example, through air pollution). They must also

invest in information and other modern technologies to accelerate the shift towards sustainable development. Together, these six transformations will achieve the SDGs.

The European Union and a few countries in Asia have recently announced ‘green deals’ that pursue many of these SDG transformations. In particular, Europe’s determination to place the European Green Deal at the centre of policymaking and international diplomacy sets an example for others to follow. China has also announced plans for a green recovery from COVID-19 and is working to green its infrastructure

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not increase inequalities or undermine social safety nets, as this would reduce their societies’ resilience to shocks like COVID-19. The *Oxford Review of Economic Policy* suggests that many recovery strategies from the 2008–10 financial crisis failed this essential do-no-harm test, so governments will need to think more creatively this time around.

The *Sustainable Development Report 2020* outlines how six SDG transformations can guide strategies for building back better from COVID-19. The first transformation focuses on investments in education and lowering inequalities. Second, countries should prioritise policies and investments in health systems and human well-being. Third, energy systems and industry must be decarbonised and become sustainable, which will help boost employment and avoid catastrophic climate change.

Next, land use and food systems must be transformed to ensure healthy and sustainable food, ensure rural prosperity, curb climate change and halt the loss of biodiversity. Fifth, cities around the world must become sustainable and productive. And, finally, countries need to

investments, including under its Belt and Road Initiative. The upcoming EU–China summit offers a unique opportunity for these two players to forge a shared approach that can also give new momentum for next year’s climate and biodiversity conferences in Glasgow and Kunming, respectively.

The COVID-19 pandemic has become the most severe and widespread shock to human development in recent memory. Fortunately, we know how to suppress the virus, and many countries have shown how to do so at low economic and social costs. We also have the institutions and promises in place to extend support to poorer countries. In the interest of everyone, this support must now materialise and needs to go hand in hand with efforts to strengthen multilateral institutions like the WHO and frameworks such as the Paris Agreement.

Finally, the SDGs provide us with a powerful, shared roadmap to guide countries’ recovery strategies and promote multilateral cooperation. Over the next six months, every country should put forward its strategy for turning the SDGs into the ‘North Star’ for building back better from COVID-19. ●