

Addressing a historic SDG reversal in the developing world

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For the first time since 1990, global human development dropped due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the poorest and most vulnerable being hit the hardest. The reversals we are seeing on SDG progress due to COVID-19 are profound – spanning poverty, incomes, jobs, schooling and gender equality among key dimensions of well-being. They build upon pre-existing inequalities and exclusions affecting young workers and women in the labour force, excluding informal workers from social protection, reinforcing polarity and exclusion, undermining an inclusive social contract, and reinforcing pre-existing structural discrimination.

Since April of 2020, the United Nations Development Programme led the UN's socio-economic response to COVID-19 across the globe. Such support helped countries to rapidly procure life-saving medical supplies and Personal Protective Equipment. UNDP also helped Governments to leverage vital digital solutions such as e-health and e-government platforms to ensure business continuity – so that they can continue to provide vital services to citizens.

As countries address the pandemic, UNDP assists them in “building forward better” towards a greener, more sustainable future. We are acutely aware that *navigating* this unprecedented disruption is incredibly difficult. We need to untangle and unpack the consequences of the pandemic to help countries make informed decisions – as the choices that are made at this *global tipping point* could take the world in very different directions.

This brief note reviews the ways in which a response and recovery pathway is emerging. We cover three pieces of the SDG response, and end with a glimpse of the future from UNDP's perspective on the ground across the globe.

First response: UNDP's integrator role

The SDGs were designed for a crisis such as COVID-19, which is systemic, riven by multi-faceted, emergent, and dynamic intersections across development challenges which cannot be addressed in silos.

We recognize that development efforts to date might not be adequate for our futures which are going to be far more complex and uncertain than before. Traditional approaches to development are not evolving as quickly as we need – to address the emergence of large-scale dynamic risks that are cut across all dimensions of sustainable development, and the conditions in which these changes are occurring.

As a trusted development partner, UNDP provides strategic integration services, working with UN Country Teams and supporting Governments in their formulation of national development strategies and initiatives that are geared to respond to complex, manifold development challenges and achieve the SDGs, utilizing a range of global assets, tools and services tailored to country contexts. Globally, the UN system repurposed close to \$2 billion of own resources and mobilized an additional \$3 billion from partners.

This scale of resource mobilization cannot happen without integration. ‘Strategic integration’ therefore relies on a shared understanding of the SDGs, their interlinkages and the ability to transform independent, specialized/sectoral interventions into cohesive and synergistic development offers, based on the demand of partner countries.

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Our intention is to better understand the intricacies and interconnections of development challenges and take a forward-looking lens to see what is emerging, how are needs changing, and implications of systemic shifts to future generations and future issues of equity, justice, and wellbeing.

Second response: Advanced SDG analytics to drive evidence-based policy making

In December 2020, we launched a flagship initiative with the Fredrick S. Pardee Center for International Futures at the University of Denver – to better leverage the incredible power of data, analytics, bold policy ambition and broad stakeholder coalitions to help countries make the *best possible choices* at this incredibly fluid time.

That first report, released in December 2020, reverberated across the globe. It found that COVID-19 could drive the total number of people living in extreme poverty in the world to over 1 billion by the year 2030 - *one-quarter billion* as a direct result of COVID-19.

While numerous studies exist on the near-term impact of COVID-19 – this set of studies takes a *unique approach*. This model exposes the close interlinkages between poverty and its cascade effects. It is also possible to drill down into the so-called “deep drivers”: for instance, how investment in human capital (e.g. education and health) and in the ongoing digital transformation (including universal access to affordable broadband) – can drive progress on the SDGs.

The results of this research are stark. The long-term social and economic impacts of COVID-19 is likely to *widen* the gap between people living in rich and poor countries.

Eight out of 10 people that could become poor by the end of this decade as a result of the pandemic will live in countries with low or medium human development, as ranked by the Human Development Index.

However, a widening poverty gap, for instance, is not a foregone conclusion. Our analysis offers an alternative scenario. A combination of policy choices and investments in govern-

ance, social protection, the green economy, and digitalization – the four areas of which the authors call an “SDG Push” in line with UNDP’s COVID 2.0 offer – could lift approximately 100 million people in low- and medium- human development countries out of poverty by the year 2030.

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In Malawi, for example, which ranks 174th on the Human Development Index (or HDI) – extreme poverty could drop by approximately nine percentage points by the year 2030 with an *SDG Push*². And Timor Leste, with a 2020 HDI ranking of 141, could register a poverty drop by seven percentage points³.

By defining such clear pathways, we can co-create spaces where national partners can weigh options and define evidence-based solutions that best meet their ambition and context.

These cutting-edge tools, hosted on UNDP’s new Data Futures platform reflect our integrated approach to the SDGs. These insights will help countries to drive forward the systemic change that is now needed. They will also help to inform UNDP’s projects and programmes – so that we can provide the best possible development support to communities and countries.

² 174 out of 189 in the HDI rank.

³ The Human Development Index (HDI) is a composite index measuring average achievement in three basic dimensions of human development -- a long and healthy life, knowledge, and a decent standard of living. A total of 189 countries are ranked. The cutoff points to identify the human development grouping for countries are the same as established in the 2020 Report, namely a) Very high: HDI at 0.800 and above; b) High: HDI at 0.700-0.799; c) Medium: HDI at 0.550-6.999 and d) Low: HDI below 0.550. For more information see http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr2020_technical_notes.pdf

Third response: Vaccine Equity, Hyperlocal Insights to Leave No One Behind

While demographic, economic, social, health, and other data is available in most countries, this data is aggregated up to administrative levels. This data can be visualized on geospatial platforms at this aggregated level, but to be truly actionable and to inform community-level decision making it needs to be available at a more granular level.

UNDP, in partnership with WHO, has developed a hyperlocal vaccine analytics tool using Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning (ML) algorithms to leverage data that provides unprecedented insights in supporting the COVID-19 vaccination rollout.

With advanced analytic techniques, we can generate hyperlocal insights from several data sources spanning demographics, socioeconomics, and environmental data to better understand community risk, movement of people, and the spread of disease.

The pandemic response signals the importance of combining deep-time horizons with short run political cycles - moving beyond easy win tactics to long run sustainable strategies

To plan an effective vaccination roll-out, having detailed information on vulnerability of the population (exposure risk, health, prior vaccinations, health facilities, communication risk and affordability) is crucial to ensure timely decisions are informed by validated information.

Through Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning (ML) algorithms, it becomes possible to produce custom geospatial data critical for informing a COVID-19 vaccination role out and analyze this data to produce comprehensive geospatial maps that highlight and quantify where populations are both most in need of and least likely to receive a COVID-19 vaccine.

This approach will leverage data to provide actionable insights to answer crucial questions for a successful COVID vaccination programme such as: (1) how to identify high exposure risk populations to prioritise during vaccination campaigns?; (2) how can we identify exposure hotspots to ensure vaccination is targeted at most impactful locations?; and (3) learning from past vaccination patterns, who are those that are least likely to be vaccinated due to lack of information, issues of affordability and accessibility?

Looking forward: Policy Dialogue and Unprecedented Collaboration

The pandemic response signals the importance of combining deep-time horizons with short run political cycles - moving beyond easy win *tactics* to long run sustainable *strategies*. For this, UNDP is putting the emphasis on facilitation of country level dialogue to address complex issues in each country's transformative pathway: who wins, who loses, and how can we build cross-cutting political and distributive coalitions for humanity's greatest challenges?

The sequence of policies adopted by public authorities are diverse, but they share a need to move beyond business-as-usual and engage a broad range of stakeholders. The SDGs and Paris Agreement have set the course, providing the "what", but there is much work needed on the "how", the particular sequence of interventions needed to protect people and planet.

What are the fiscal, political and institutional challenges faced by countries once they make decisive steps towards de-carbonization, nature-based solutions, circular economy measures, reducing fossil fuel subsidies and inching towards carbon pricing? And how can they manage broad-based ownership of the agenda, as well as the trade-offs and public opinion?

We resolve to build a better future for all people, including the millions who have been denied the chance to lead decent, dignified and rewarding lives and to achieve their full human potential. We can be the first generation to succeed in ending poverty; just as we may be the last to have a chance of saving the planet. ●