



HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Building back better after COVID-19 and acting where we will have the greatest impact on the SDGs

Protecting and advancing human wellbeing and ending poverty

(Most closely related SDGs: SDG 1, SDG 3, SDG 4, SDG 6, SDG 16, and SDG17)

Tuesday, 7 July 2020, 2:00 PM-3:00 PM

Secretariat Background Note

Introduction

Advancing human well-being is at the heart of sustainable development and is about upholding human rights, eradicating poverty and deprivations across multiple dimensions, closing opportunity gaps and expanding capabilities – including those needed to cope with the Covid-19 pandemic and its consequences. Protecting the well-being of all people is also about safeguarding the natural environment on which everyone depends including future generations and tapping into synergies across the SDGs. COVID-19 has laid bare shortfalls in many areas and threatens to push millions of people back into poverty. Pandemic response efforts and long-term development plans must work to eliminate poverty and hunger; reduce inequalities in opportunities; ensure access to quality health care and reduce exposure to disease; increase access to quality education and other services; and address persistent gender inequality. All of this is demonstrably possible, but recovering and building back better will require cooperation at all levels, collaboration and dialogue among multiple stakeholders to ensure no one is left behind, including the most vulnerable.

Successes and challenges¹

The world has made substantial advances in human well-being in recent decades, but extreme deprivations linger, and progress remains uneven. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the pace of global poverty reduction was decelerating. After a decline from 15.7% in 2010 to 10.0% in 2015, the pace of reduction of extreme poverty slowed down with a ‘nowcast’ rate of 8.2% in 2019. The pandemic is

¹ Data are from the Report of the Secretary-General on SDG Progress 2020 – forthcoming.



HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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reversing the trend of poverty reduction. The global extreme poverty rate is projected to be 8.4-8.8% in 2020, which is close to the level in 2017. This means that an estimated 40-60 million of people may be pushed back into extreme poverty, causing the first increase in global poverty in more than 20 years. Wealth and income inequalities have worsened and there are large disparities in development outcomes by geographic areas and population groups. Women and girls still face persistent inequalities in access to assets, education and larger freedoms.

Based on 2016 data, 55% of the world's population—about four billion people—did not benefit from any form of social protection, which is critical to help the poorest and the most vulnerable in this crisis. One third to half of the global population is covered by essential health services, only 22% of unemployed workers were covered by unemployment benefits, 28 per cent of persons with severe disabilities receive disability cash benefits, 35 per cent of children worldwide enjoy effective access to social protection and only 41 per cent of women giving birth receive maternity cash benefits. Close to 90 million people are pushed into extreme poverty each year because of out-of-pocket spending on health.

Disasters with tragic impacts on human lives often lead to a downturn in the trajectory of socioeconomic development, exacerbating poverty and existing gender inequalities. Hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, wildfires and other extreme natural disasters exacerbate poverty. Some 80 countries reported on disaster-related losses for 2018. Over 39 million people were reported as affected, of whom 29 million saw their livelihoods disrupted or destroyed. In terms of direct economic losses, \$23.6 billion were reported by countries. Covid-19 will have global impacts on health and poverty alike.

Non-communicable diseases, mental health and environmental health put many at greater risk during the COVID-19 crisis. The probability of dying from cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes or chronic respiratory disease between ages 30 and 70 saw only a small decrease from 19% in 2010 to 18% in 2016. Based on 2016 data, close to 800,000 people died due to suicide every year, and 79% of global suicides occurred in low- and middle-income countries. More than 80 per cent of people experiencing mental health conditions, are without any form of quality, affordable mental health care. This is despite mental health conditions leading to more than US\$ 1 trillion per year in economic losses. In 2016, air pollution led to some 7 million deaths worldwide. And inadequate water, sanitation and hygiene led to a total of 870,000 deaths in the same year.

Billions of people around the world still lack access to safely managed water and sanitation services and to basic handwashing facilities (WASH) at home, critical to preventing the spread of COVID-19. Water



HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

#HLPF #SDGs #GlobalGoals sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf/2020

and sanitation are also critical to a continuum of care throughout the life course. In 2017, 2.2 billion people were without safely managed drinking water, including 785 million without even basic drinking water; and 4.2 billion were without safely managed sanitation. Of these, 673 million people still practiced open defecation. In 2016, one in four health care facilities around the world lacked basic water services, and one in five had no sanitation services. In 2017, three billion people lacked soap and water at home. In 2016, 47% of schools worldwide lacked handwashing facilities and 40% of health care facilities were not equipped to practice hand hygiene at points of care.

Achieving human well-being is also about building human capabilities through education and there are positive developments, but progress still to be made – especially given COVID-19 related school closures around the world. In 74 countries with comparable data for the period 2011-2019, around seven in ten children aged three and four were developmentally on track in at least three of the following domains: literacy-numeracy, physical development, social-emotional development and learning. Yet, 55 per cent of children and adolescents of primary and lower secondary school age are not achieving minimum proficiency levels in reading and 60 per cent are not reaching these levels in mathematics. And despite the steady rise in literacy rates over the past 50 years, there are still 773 million illiterate adults around the world, two thirds of whom are women.

Interlinkages, synergies and trade-offs

The goals and targets in the 2030 Agenda are interlinked and advancing human well-being and building back better from the COVID-19 crisis will require policies that respond to the interactions among goals and targets, and across geographies, finding opportunities to build synergies and mitigate trade-offs. There is already a significant amount of knowledge about important interactions in systems to advance human well-being where interventions around one goal or target can alter the possibilities of meeting other goals. Acting on evidence about these interlinkages can help **harness synergies** to generate multiple positive outcomes (ie. actions that increase girls' access to schooling and reduce infant and maternal mortality rates); **mitigate trade-offs** between Goals (ie. actions that reduce poverty while also supporting a shift towards sustainable consumption); and accelerating progress towards achieving the overarching objective of **'leaving no one behind'** (ie. actions that eliminate legal barriers to access to services). Advancing human well-being should be pursued in ways that generate synergies with other sets of goals and are inclusive of vulnerable groups and regions (see table).



HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

#HLPF #SDGs #GlobalGoals sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf/2020

System	Closely related SDGs selected for HLPF	Selected SDGs with synergies to harness	Selected SDGs where trade-offs need to be mitigated
Advancing human well-being: ending poverty in all its forms and dimensions	1, 3, 4, 6, 16, 17	3, 10	8, 12

Recommendations for action: Mechanisms and partnerships to accelerate progress

Going forward, transformative actions in advancing human well-being are needed to simultaneously reduce deprivations and expand capabilities and opportunities, while also reducing inequality and unsustainable natural resource consumption. In the context of the Decade of Action, the international community must work together to address challenges in an integrated way. For this, sustainable solutions are available and the future looks positive given the substantial knowledge about interactions around approaches to advancing human well-being and in relation to the SDGs, and there are promising new partnerships that enable collaboration among important levers of action – governance, business and finance, individual and collective action, and science and technology. Sharing information and identifying ways to fill knowledge and data gaps, scale up actions, and address context specific conditions will be the key to successful transformation.

Guiding questions

- What are some promising actions to support progress toward advancing human well-being that generate synergies across Sustainable Development Goals and Targets? Are there trade-offs from these actions and if so, how can they be mitigated?
- What challenges and opportunities does COVID-19 present for protecting human well-being and ending poverty?
- What are the most critical interventions and partnerships needed over the next 2 years, 5 years, 10 years to protect and advance human well-being and end poverty?





HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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- Which groups are especially vulnerable to poverty and lack access to capability enhancing services?
- What are ways to ensure that actions leave no one behind? How might COVID-19 facilitate or complicate efforts to reduce vulnerabilities among marginalized groups?
- Are there examples of successful partnerships and initiatives for advancing human well-being? Can these be scaled up or adjusted to fit other contexts?
- How can science and technology support well-being in the context of COVID-19 and in the future?