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POLICY BRIEF

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Turning the Page on 2020

A Wake-up Call for Multilateral Cooperation to Protect People and Planet



Executive Summary

This short policy brief seeks to take stock of 2020 by analysing the unfolding of the COVID-19 crisis and how it makes the 2030 Agenda and multilateral cooperation ever more relevant. The first section briefly looks at the unprecedented political significance of the 2030 Agenda to frame the ensuing reflection. The second section highlights the consequences of the crisis on our path to sustainable development. The third section explains how the UN is seeking to lead the response to the crisis. The fourth section makes a case for a socio-economic recovery based on the SDGs and stronger multilateral action. Finally, the conclusions share some of the results of the global conversations held on the occasion of the 75th Anniversary of the UN, giving food for thought on the way forward. Throughout its sections, the paper highlights the importance of partnerships with other key global actors like the European Union (EU).

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Introduction

If 2020 were a book, it would tell a dramatic story of loss and deprivation, but also of solidarity and hope. Most importantly, it would have an open ending. One that remains to be written by the almost 8 billion characters in its pages.

The year 2020 was planned as a crucial milestone for the realization of the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agreed by the leaders of 193 countries in 2015 (UN, 2015). The past year opened the "decade of delivery" that separates us from 2030, with still many goals that are far behind on the roadmap, especially those related to climate and environmental action, fighting socio-economic inequalities and protecting human rights in all countries. The year 2020 also marked the 75th Anniversary of the United Nations, which was the occasion for a world-wide survey of what people expect from global cooperation to safeguard their wellbeing and that of our planet.

Of course, the COVID-19 crisis heavily affected our initial plans, but also gave them a new relevance and purpose.

The pandemic is affecting all aspects of our lives and is having terrible health, humanitarian and socio-economic consequences putting us further off-track for the achievement the SDGs. It is also highlighting the importance of

strengthening multilateralism and global cooperation to solve the current crisis, prevent future ones and achieve a systemic change towards a more resilient, greener and fairer world.

For this reason, the 2030 Agenda, its political commitments and objectives need to become the compass guiding all response and recovery efforts, sustained by stronger multilateral and global partnerships.

The 2030 Agenda: an unprecedented political commitment to a better future

The 2030 Agenda is an all-encompassing guide to ensure better lives to all people and protect our planet. It is also a fulgid example of global and multilateral cooperation, the only path to address worldwide challenges like climate change, inequalities and pandemics, which escape individual national solutions.

The SDGs are rooted in their predecessors, the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which already highlighted the transformative potential of defining a clear set of goals (8 at the time) for sustainable development endorsed by all Heads of State and Government. Global mobilization for the MDGs was unprecedented in scale and brought to many advances. The MDGs helped lift more than a billion people out of extreme poverty, decrease world hunger,

enable more girls in developing countries to go to school, and protect our planet (UN, 2015a). However, this process has not been uniform, and many inequalities within and between countries have remained unresolved. One of the shortcomings of the MDGs was their almost exclusive focus on developing countries, which made them more of a development cooperation agenda than a global agenda.

This changed with the 2030 Agenda adopted by world leaders in New York in 2015. The SDGs are the result of the largest and most inclusive consultation process in the history of the United Nations. The SDGs are more ambitious, seeking to eliminate rather than reduce poverty, and setting the bar higher on health, education and gender equality. SDGs are more encompassing, as they recognise that all dimensions of sustainable development, including economic growth, social integration and environmental protection, are interconnected and need to be addressed together to attain lasting results. SDG importantly include governance (SDG 16) as the strength of institutions, democracy and peace is fundamental in achieving change. SDGs are universal, applying to developed and developing countries alike, and call for larger partnerships for their implementation.

This last point is fundamental, and Europe presents a strong case in point. The current President of the European Commission (EC), Ursula von der Leyen, included the

implementation of the SDGs in the mission letters of all European Commissioners. The EC President has also specifically tasked the European Commissioner for the Economy Paolo Gentiloni with integrating the SDGs in the European Semester (EC, 2019), the framework for the coordination of economic policies across the EU Member States. This represents an important sign of how the 2030 Agenda has become, and increasingly needs to become, a guiding framework for policy worldwide. This is true especially in our increasingly interconnected world, where one country's choices heavily affect other countries' development prospects.

The COVID-19 crisis has been a tragic reminder of the universality of this agenda, striking in developed and developing countries alike.

The COVID-19 crisis and its tragic human consequences

The global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has an evident health dimension, with more than 65 million cases and 1.5 million deaths reported worldwide as of 8 December 2020 (WHO, 2020), the consequent strain on health systems more generally, and side effects like a mental health crisis for many. Nonetheless, the crisis we are living goes well beyond health. The world risks losing many of the hard-won improvements towards sustainable development. COVID-19 is bringing about the

worst collapse in per capita GDP since 1870 (World Bank, 2020). Countries have been seeking to respond and protect lives and livelihoods, but the crisis has worsened existing debt sustainability and created new debt crises, leaving many low and middle-income countries with limited fiscal space to plan ahead (see UN 2020). UNDP estimates that some indicators of Human Development have gone back to mid-1980s levels (UNDP 2020). COVID-19 could push the number of people living in extreme poverty to over 1 billion by 2030 (UNDP, 2020a). The crisis is leading to tens of millions of new people unemployed worldwide (ILO 2020), and hundreds of millions suffering from acute hunger (WFP 2020). The crisis is striking the most vulnerable hardest: women, children, disabled, people lacking social protection and those in the informal sector. It is a human rights crisis, with both the pandemic and the restrictive measures in the past months affecting livelihoods and security, their access to health care (not only for COVID-19), to food, water and sanitation, work and education (UN, 2020a). For example, 188 countries imposed countrywide school closures during the pandemic, affecting more than 1.6 billion children and youth and engendering a learning and education crisis that will last beyond the pandemic (UNICEF 2020). This humanitarian and socio-economic crisis does not take place in a vacuum but in long-standing shortcomings in achieving sustainable

development and resilience. As highlighted by the UN Secretary-General António Guterres, the devastating impact of COVID-19 can be attributed to past and present failures in taking the SDGs seriously, including address inequalities, investing in resilience, achieving gender equality, protecting the environment and enhancing international cooperation and solidarity (IISD 2020). This applies to both advanced economies and the developing world, both to Europe and to third countries, reminding us of the universality of the 2030 Agenda.

The opposite is also true. Evidence strongly suggest that the progress of the SDGs is linked to the success of countries in addressing the pandemic. For example, the countries that had obtained better access to clean water (SDG 6); reduction in the number of people living in slums (SDG 11); and the decrease in pre-existing adverse health conditions such as noncommunicable diseases (SDG 3) have been more successful in mitigating the COVID-19 risk (UN DESA, 2020).

This means that the 2030 Agenda should serve as a compass for the continued response to COVID-19 and for the recovery efforts. The next section gives a short overview of the short-term response, while the following one projects us into the recovery phase, which needs to be unrolled in parallel.

The UN response and the importance of global cooperation

Since the early stages of the COVID-19 crisis, the UN system has been providing its technical knowledge and operational capacity in every country to help governments and citizens prepare and respond to the infections and to their consequence. The UN is delivering a three-point response (see UN, 2020b). First, a large-scale, coordinated and comprehensive health response guided by WHO. Second, an immediate response to address the devastating socioeconomic, humanitarian and human rights aspects of the crisis with attention to the most vulnerable. Third, a recovery process that builds back better, leading to more equal, inclusive and sustainable economies and societies that are stronger and more resilient.

As the pandemic hit different countries at different stages, the UN has been supporting countries at risk before the infections would hit them, by pre-positioning Protective Personal Equipment (PPE), medical and other essential goods and by strengthening healthcare systems. UN agencies have also worked in supporting authorities to ensure multi-sectoral crisis coordination in the country e.g. among government level, Civil Protection and rescue Coordination Bodies and other stakeholders. A fundamental socio-economic aspect has been supporting and preparing for the delivery of

social protection mechanisms and drafting socio-economic impact assessment and recovery plans together with governments in more than hundred countries (UNDP, 2020b).

A few numbers can describe the extent of this health, humanitarian and short-term socio-economic response. In September 2020, the UN had shipped or was in the process of shipping more than 452 million items of PPE to affected countries. 172 countries received medical supplies from the Global Supply Chain system with logistical help from the UN World Food Programme. The UN assisted 227 million children with distance or home-based learning. Also, 36 million households have been benefiting from additional social assistance provided by governments with UN family support. The focus has particularly been on fragile categories, including millions of migrants, refugees, women and children.

The UN Secretary-General has also been using its political clout to call for a global ceasefire silencing the guns in all persisting conflicts to focus on ending the covid-19 pandemic, which has received overwhelming support by world governments.

This global response is enabled by the support provided to the UN system by its Member States and by key partners like the EU. The EU and the UN have been working hand-in hand at the global level and in developing and fragile countries to redirect most existing resources to

the pandemic response and to identify new ones. For example, in Nigeria, where the EU and other partners have supported the UN response plan to COVID-19, to coordinate and align collective efforts together with the government, civil society, private sector and other international and national actor to boost COVID-19 response services in the country (EC 2020).

These enlarged multilateral partnerships are much needed for the continued response but are also at the heart of a socio-economic recovery that can help us transition to a greener, more just and resilient world.

THE SDGs as a compass for recovering better

Facing these challenges, the end of 2020 and the start of the new year gives us an historical opportunity to redefine our socio-economic development models and to leapfrog towards more sustainable, just and inclusive societies.

Despite the setbacks caused by COVID-19, it is possible for the world to regain momentum, but we need to redouble our efforts to achieve the SDGs, turning them into the compass of the economic recovery plans that many countries and organizations have been adopting in recent months. Countries across the world have taken up recovery measures amounting to over 10 per cent of world gross product, but still much remains to do, also given the debt crisis and

shrinking fiscal space faced by many fragile economies.

In the short term, we need to ensure a fair and equitable distribution of the COVID-19 vaccines, ensuring access among developing countries and fragile populations, and avoiding that the cure becomes monopolised by high-income countries. For the broader recovery, UN DESA (2020) suggested to focus on a number of priorities: the establishment of robust universal healthcare and social protection systems; stepping up climate and environmental commitments; providing countries with more resources to face the debt crisis, like concessional financing and debt relief. Keeping and boosting our capacity to look at problems through the lens of inequality is a fundamental tool to design inclusive recovery measures. Similarly, UNDP estimates that targeted and coordinated investments in governance, social protection, green economy, and digitalization would not only minimise the impact but could exceed the pre-COVID-19 development trajectory (UNDP, 2020a).

This progress cannot be achieved by single countries but requires global action and innovative partnerships. The role of Europe and other major economies will be particularly important on the front of climate and environmental action. The ambitious European Green Deal and the EU recovery plan which are being defined in the European Union have the

potential to set an example of how growth can be decoupled from unsustainable climate, environmental and social practices. But this can only work if advanced economies support and accompany emerging and developing ones in the process, as the latter are often the least responsible for climate change or inequalities but face higher economic and social costs in the transition. Also, we must keep in mind that climate action should take place while addressing the whole 2030 Agenda, where all goals are interconnected, and any improvements should include assistance and adaptation measures to ensure we leave no one behind.

To do this, strengthened multilateral partnerships, more financial resources and innovative initiatives are needed both at global and country level.

At global level, new initiatives are taking shape. Speaking at the *UN High-Level Event on Financing for Development in the Era of COVID-19 and Beyond* in late May, the EC President proposed "a global recovery initiative that links investment and debt relief to the SDGs". This proposal aims at a global recovery based on the green and digital transition and strengthened resilience, strongly in line with the UN's calls to recover better. The follow-up work to this High-Level event has led to drafting a menu of Policy Options for the consideration of Heads of State and Government, presented at the 75th UN

General Assembly (UN 2020c). These policy options put forward tools to support and finance the sustainable recovery and might define solutions to the current crisis if endorsed and taken up by governments.

At country level, the work done by the UN, its Member States, partners and other stakeholders need to be continued and strengthened. As the delivery of the mentioned socio-economic assessment and recovery plans proceeds speedily, it creates the premise for localized solutions for sustainable recovery. Several initiatives already have a transformative potential and should be expanded. A promising example is the work done by the UN to support countries in stepping up their climate ambitions and Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) under the Paris Agreement and define development solutions accordingly (see UNDP, 2020c).

Conclusions and reflections on the future

The path ahead of us is challenging, particularly in an historical phase when multiple voices have attacked the multilateral system and at times resorted to unilateral gains at the detriment of long-term solutions.

At the 75th UN General Assembly in late September, the UN Secretary-General (UNSG, 2020) said that the United Nations is facing a foundational moment, a moment comparable

to 1945, when the hope of global cooperation emerged from the suffering of the two World Wars. The recovery requires two macro transformations. At national level, a New Social Contract aimed at transitioning towards renewable energy to achieve net zero emissions by 2050; ending exclusion, discrimination and racism; and establishing Universal Health Coverage and even a possible Universal Basic Income. Worldwide, a new Global Deal to make sure power, wealth and opportunities are fairly shared. A new Deal rooted in fair globalization, with sustainable development principles integrated into all decision-making.

Positive signs are coming both from governments and the people, which might lay the foundations for transformational change.

At the 75th General Assembly, the world governments adopted a *Declaration on the Commemoration of the Seventy-fifth Anniversary of the United Nations* (UNGA, 2020) which pledges to reinvigorate global action and multilateralism through mobilizing resources, strengthening efforts and showing 'unprecedented political will and leadership.' The declaration pledges to 'upgrade' the UN, including reforming its three principal organs. The UN Secretary-General has been requested to report back before the end of the 75th session of the General Assembly with recommendations 'to advance our common

agenda and to respond to current and future challenges.'

People have also sent positive messages. On the occasion of its 75th Anniversary, the UN organized a global conversation with more than 1,000 dialogues held across the world, a one-minute survey that was filled in by over 1 million people in all UN Member States, and two large independent polls (UN, 2020d). What came out of these surveys is that 87% of respondents believe global cooperation is vital to deal with today's challenges, and that the pandemic has made international cooperation more urgent. Also, 74% see the UN as "essential" in tackling the challenges. People across the world expect their leaders to deliver answer the big challenges of our time collectively, with the immediate priority of improving access to basic services and enabling global solidarity in the COVID-19 crisis, and the longer-term commitment to finding solution to the climate crisis, ensuring greater respect for human rights, settling conflicts, tackling poverty and reducing corruption.

In conclusion, there is a possibility to use this crisis to transform our world for current and future generations. But the moment needs to be seized and managed by our leaders and by the citizens of all countries. The activism of millions of young people that have voiced their concerns about our planet and called out persisting inequalities during these recent years are

probably the stronger evidence to look at the future with hope. As we turn the page on 2020, let us work to have another 1945 moment and come together as one for a more peaceful, sustainable and just world.

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