



COVID-19 AND THE PROGRESS ON SDGS

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



The Covid-19 pandemic has shaken the world to the core, disturbing the agendas for development, like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), commonly known as the Agenda for Development 2030. On July 7, 2020, UN Department of Economic & Social Affairs launched the Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020 which gives an insight into the progress on the 17 global goals as determined by the United Nations in 2015. The report gives a very detailed and comprehensive overview of the progress on each goal and also how the pandemic has affected the progress on each one of the global goals.

The SDGs Report 2020 reveals that even before the Covid-19 pandemic, progress on the achievement of the SDGs was uneven and the world was not on the path to achieving the SDGs by 2030. There have been some gains, like the decline in the spread of contagious diseases, the increase in the access to safe drinking water; women empowerment as well as the participation of women in leadership roles has seen progress in the past few years. The table below reveals the key findings.¹

¹ The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020, The United Nations, <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2020/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2020.pdf>

Sustainable Development Goals	Progress Pre COVID	Post-COVID 19
1. No Poverty	Poor progress	71 million people pushed into poverty.
2. Zero Hunger	Food insecurity already on the rise	Likelihood of 40% to 85% small farmers being hit.
3. Good Health and Well-being	Some progress seen globally	Covid-19 revealed the weaknesses of the health systems globally.
4. Quality Education	Poor progress already	Covid-19 has reversed years of learning.
5. Gender Equality	Poor progress	Increased cases of violence against women.
6. Clean Water and Sanitation	Millions living without access to clean water and sanitation	3 billion people worldwide lack clean water.
7. Affordable and Clean Energy	Progress remains poor	789 million people lack electricity.
8. Decent Work and Economic Growth	Global economic growth was slowing down and GDP per capita decreased to 1.5% from 2.0% in 2018	GDP per capita is expected to decline by 4.2% in 2020.
9. Industry, Innovation and	Growth in decline due to tariffs	Shut downs continue to affect

Infrastructure	and trade wars	industries.
10. Reduced Inequalities	Little progress, some countries experiencing reduced inequalities	Vulnerable groups like migrants and refugees affected.
11. Sustainable Cities and Communities	Poor progress	Position remains the same, Covid-19 has not affected.
12. Responsible Consumption and Production	Unsustainable use of natural resources continues	Covid-19 provides an opportunity to rethink.
13. Climate Action	Poor performance on climate related issues	Pandemic may result in a 6% drop in greenhouse gas emissions for the year 2020.
14. Life below Water	Threat to marine life prevalent	Reduction in human activity due to Covid-19 has been positive.
15. Life on Land	Failure to halt biodiversity losses	Pandemic has not affected this goal.
16. Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	Dismal progress as civilians continue to be killed	Covid-19 has increased vulnerabilities.
17. Partnership for the Goals	Mild Progress	FDI falls by 40% due to pandemic.

However, on the flip side, the increase in food security, deteriorating environment and the presence of general inequality world over, requires a lot of attention. The report reveals and is categorical that the change, as envisaged is not taking place, specifically at the pace required to achieve the desired results. Despite the fact that Covid-19 affects every person and every community, but it does

not do so equally. The poorer nations, which already lag behind in achieving the SDGs have been the ones hit the most.

However, the present inequalities have further been exposed, especially among the most vulnerable groups like migrants and refugees, the poor segments of the society and among many others, those employed in the informal economy. The effects of this pandemic are very disproportionate across societies and the need for strengthening health systems on an urgent basis along with help and support for the more weak countries should be urgently undertaken. For this to materialize, multilateral approaches are the answer. The report also points out serious gaps in the availability of data for SDG monitoring. The pandemic is further jeopardizing the production of data, which is central to the achievement of the SDGs.

The SDG Report 2020 gives an insight into the pre-Covid situation and also gives an assessment on how the pandemic will affect the progress on each one of the global goals.² Starting with the first goal, 'No Poverty', the report states that the world was already off the track when it came to ending poverty by 2030 and Covid has pushed plus 71 million people into poverty in 2020. Progress on second goal, 'Zero Hunger' also reveals that food insecurity was on the rise and with the pandemic, the likelihood of 40 to 85% small farmers being hit by the pandemic has come up, including the locust threat as well as the threat of heightened conflict. The third global goal, 'Good Health and Wellbeing', reveals that there was some progress in health related areas in the pre pandemic days, however, the pandemic has revealed the weakness of the health systems, and specifically the disruptions in vaccinations as well as the lack of health systems for many citizens of the world. Progress on the fourth goal, 'Quality Education' was already poor and the pandemic has exacerbated the problem manifold and reversed years of progress as children remained out of school due to the pandemic.

The progress on fifth goal, which is 'Gender Equality' also, remains poor and the pandemic has increased the risk of violence against women. Goal number six of the SDGs, which is 'Clean Water and Sanitation' shows little progress as millions remain without water and sanitation services, and the pandemic has revealed that three billion people worldwide, lack hand washing facilities, the major and most effective method against Covid-19. The progress on goal seven, which is 'Affordable and Clean Energy' also, remains poor, pre-pandemic and presently 789 million people lack electricity. The gains on Goal number eight, 'Decent Work and Economic Growth' reveal that global economic growth was slowing down and GDP per capita decreased to 1.5% from 2.0% in 2018. Therefore, the world faces the worst economic recession and GDP per capita is expected to decline

² Ibid.

by 4.2% in 2020, further affected by the pandemic. Goal number nine, 'Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure' has also suffered due to the pandemic, although growth in this domain was already on the decline due to tariffs and trade tensions. The pandemic has caused the steepest decline to the aviation industry in this context. Goal number ten, 'Reduced Inequalities' also shows little progress although income inequality was falling in some countries but the pandemic has caused more hardship to the very vulnerable groups like migrants, refugees, children, women and persons with disabilities. Goal number eleven, 'Sustainable Cities and Communities' has also shown unsatisfactory results. Goal number twelve, 'Responsible Consumption and Production' shows that the world continues to use natural resources unsustainably and the pandemic offers an opportunity to develop recovery plans. The progress on goal number thirteen, 'Climate Action' has been unsatisfactory but the pandemic may result in a 6% drop in greenhouse gas emissions for the year 2020.

The progress on goal number fourteen, 'Life below Water' shows that the threat to marine life continues but the reduction in human activity due to the pandemic may give a chance to marine life. Moreover, progress on Goal number fifteen, 'Life on Land' shows that the world is lagging behind on targets to halt biodiversity losses. Goal number sixteen, 'Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions' shows poor progress as civilians continue to be killed and Covid-19 further threatens global peace and security. The last of the SDGs, goal number seventeen, 'Partnership for the Goals' also shows mild progress as the pandemic makes the decline in global foreign direct investment up by 40% in 2020.

Every crisis that the world has confronted has disturbed the agendas for development and prosperity and Covid-19 is no different, but is in fact, more lethal than the global financial crisis of 2007-08. The effects of every crisis are different, but the present crisis has a triple impact on the world, specifically as it hits health, economy and employment, all at once. SDGs can also be called the roadmap for development and while it is yet to be ascertained what the effects of Covid-19 will be on this development agenda, the future does not look very promising. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), global development in terms of health, education and living standards could drastically fall for the first time since the year 1990, when measurements actually began to be noted.³ However, this year the setback to the progress on the SDGs is very far reaching and its effects are yet to be determined.

Among all the negative facts, Pakistan has seen progress on one of the goals and the most important is the achievement of goal thirteen, which pertains to urgent actions to combat climate change and

³ COVID 19 and the SDGs, UNDP <https://feature.undp.org/covid-19-and-the-sdgs/>

its impacts. Pakistan has achieved this goal ten years ahead of its deadline. The initiatives undertaken by the country are the 10 Billion Tree Tsunami Program, Clean Green Pakistan Initiative, Clean Green Pakistan Index, Protected Areas Initiative (15 new national parks), Ecosystem Restoration Fund for facilitating green growth and policies, among others.⁴

The realization that the world is confronted with multipronged challenges which cannot be overcome without global cooperation is a must to understand the connection between achieving the SDGs and the pandemic, as the SDGs are a blueprint for dealing with global problems. The effects of this pandemic are far reaching and require multilateral efforts by big and small powers alike. The world is engaged in fighting the common goal, which is defeating the coronavirus. Although the grim crisis is still unfolding and as mentioned earlier, the true, realistic and accurate impact of this ongoing pandemic is yet to be ascertained, the solution lies in the multilateral approach. Therefore, the progress already made on the SDGs must be maintained and along with this, the global community must undertake measures to reverse the degradation of nature and undertake measures to avert climate change. As the report points out, focus on data collection is key, in order to determine true progress on each of the global goals. With only ten years left to achieve the SDGs, the world must consider that global unity is the only way to achieving sustainable development in a troubled world.

⁴ Sana Jamal, Pakistan achieves UN climate action goal 10 years ahead of deadline, July 13, 2020, Gulf News, <https://gulfnews.com/world/asia/pakistan/pakistan-achieves-un-climate-action-goal-10-years-ahead-of-deadline>