



PROGRESSING THE SDGS:

Policy brief on COVID-19

CONTEXT

COVID-19 was at the center of the 2020 United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF). The pandemic not only forced to move the meeting to virtual but was part of almost every debate. Besides the information provided by the 2020 voluntary national review (VNR) reports on the pandemic and its first impacts on the sustainable development goals (SDGs), the UN system, the private sector, civil society, and academia produced studies of the actual situations and figured out future scenarios. Global, regional and national reports on COVID-19, following general and thematic approaches, are available. Among them, a forgotten one is worth to be recalled.

In 2019, before the pandemic started, the WHO convened a conference to present the *Annual Report on Global Preparedness for Health Emergencies*. The event received little attention and almost no media coverage worldwide, even when some of its conclusions were alarming.

One of such conclusions was that “The world is not prepared for a fast-moving, virulent respiratory pathogen pandemic. The 1918 global influenza pandemic (...) killed as many as 50 million people - 2.8% of the total population. If a similar contagion occurred today with a population four times larger and travel times anywhere in the world less than 36 hours, 50 – 80 million people could perish (...) such a pandemic could cause panic, destabilize national security, and seriously impact the global economy and trade” (paragraph 15.)

As it is seen, COVID-19 was not unpredictable. Despite warnings, world leaders did not take the necessary measures to confront it. Now we have an opportunity to minimize its Sustainable Development impacts and chances to rebuild our societies more sustainably. Equitable access to vaccines is the world’s first challenge.

What are the 2020 VNRs telling us in that regard?

COVID-19 IN THE 2020 VNR REPORTS

Thirty-nine out of 47 countries (83%) make significant reference to COVID-19 in their VNRs; 21 reports (45%) mention the COVID-19 pandemic as a systemic issue hindering the national capacity to accelerate or even maintain the path towards the SDGs. At the same time, 17 identify it among the significant challenge to face.

The pandemic impacts from a leave no one behind (LNOB) perspective are part of 32 reports (68%). The cases of countries identifying specific vulnerable groups from a COVID-19 point of view is remarkable: Armenia mentions pregnant women; Bangladesh, transport workers, widowed women, and the transgender community; Moldova noted people susceptible to domestic violence, Peru points out to people with pre-existing diseases, and Samoa brought up people with mental health issues.

Notwithstanding the LNOB broad inclusion, only 25 VNRs (53%) provide information on how COVID-19 affected stakeholders in VNRs engagement process. In some cases, the reports highlight positive stakeholder reactions to COVID-19 societal disruption. That is the case of Bangladesh, noting the chance for the private sector and civil society to actively work on inclusion as a path to ensure that everyone gets fair opportunities for the post-pandemic context.

Available data at the VNRs building time did not allow States to have a complete picture of the COVID-19 possible consequences on the SDGs gains or future 2030 Agenda implementation. However, most reports recognize that impacts will be significant on 2030 Agenda implementation tools: 35 countries (75%) reported on the effects of COVID-19 on the means of implementation.

Nevertheless, the 2020 VNR reports do not frequently note how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted national priorities. Argentina, one of the few countries that have no national development plan or strategy document, underlines the state’s crucial role in providing essential services such as public health and subsidies to people in social and

economic vulnerability, which became the country's new priorities because of the pandemic. Armenia and Malawi refer to the COVID-19 pandemic concerning budgeting for the 2030 Agenda.

The uncertainty on future resource availability may be the reason why VNRs focus on domestic responses to the pandemic, with no countries explicitly referring to global commitments in this area and only a small number of them informing on international measures to support global efforts to contain the COVID-19 contagion. Russia, for example, reports bilateral aid provision to countries in various regions such as Italy, China, the United States, and the Commonwealth of Independent States members. Private-Public partnerships, such as the ones established

in Costa Rica, raised more than a million US dollars to pay off local loans for food and cleaning products. Cooperation between countries and international institutions, like the Kenya-World Bank-WHO-UNICEF alliance, to mobilize a national healthcare response was critical for the country's first reaction to COVID-19.

In a similar perspective, focused on assuming a Sustainable Development integrated approach in the post-COVID-19 recovery plans, Seychelles' VNR report describes both impact and actions taken in different aspects of each Sustainable Development dimension.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEW OPPORTUNITIES AHEAD OF US

The 2021 VNR reports submissions would rely on a [new set of Secretary-General guidelines \(2021\)](#), including suggestions on how countries should report against COVID-19 and build back better. Even if the guidelines are voluntary, the updates will help find common global problems, past experiences, and good practices in confronting them, supporting the call to Build Back Better.

Simultaneously, the inclusion of references to international and global commitments on COVID-19 linked with the 2030 Agenda, presented with a detailed level that allows for their follow-up, open an opportunity to learn new lessons together, improving accountability and transparency.

Identifying new vulnerable groups arising from the context set by COVID-19, or unknown vulnerabilities in the traditionally vulnerable groups, could lead to an improved

application of the LNOB principle in policy design. Also, it is essential that the UN disability strategy is implemented in order to address the inequality facing people with disabilities, in everyday life and particularly relating to the current global COVID-19 pandemic. Opening new spaces for civil society engagement in the design, implementation, and monitoring of COVID-19 recovery plans will include their human, technical and knowledge-related resources into the national rebuilding efforts. Hearing multiple voices will contribute to the sustainability of the process. It is vital that all development actors ensure that the groups they partner with are diverse and do not replicate existing forms of discrimination.

The pandemic shows that world leaders should be attentive to the scientific community's warnings, reflecting them in their plans and policies and reporting how they were taken into account to avoid future global crises.

This policy brief was prepared in February/March 2021, in the context of the 2020 Progressing National SDGs Implementation report (5th edition), an independent assessment of the Voluntary National Review reports submitted to the United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development each year.



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