

Effects of Covid-19 On Sustainable Development Goals and How to Salvage Our Global SDG Attempts

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The onslaught of the latest pandemic is yet to be relieved as the world struggles to pick up bits and pieces of its fallen economy and infrastructure while most of its population functions behind closed doors. What makes the corona virus a severe threat to global security is the prolonged and protracted impact it has on development and global targets of sustainability and ingenuity for a better future. The pandemic has not only slowed down the process of development and sustainability but has shifted the gear and back-paddled to decades of hard work and connectivity that were creating pathways to on-set goals in the coming decades. The concern of this paper is to discuss how Covid-19 has impacted development, essentially, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). By the end, we will also discuss shortly how we can hope to strive through and salvage the situation and ensure the effects of the pandemic is minimum, so we can work to achieve the SDGs full throttle.

Let's take a recap and discuss the SDGs for a bit. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), also known as the Global Goals, were adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015 as a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030¹. There are 17 SDGs, all are integrated, meaning that action in one concern will affect outcomes in others, reminding us that development must balance social, economic and environmental sustainability. These goals are based on the pledge, "Leave No One Behind", making the countries that are least developed and under-developed to get the priorities first, ensuring several life-changing "zero", such as zero poverty, hunger, discrimination, etc.

These goals are what the entire world is aiming for, and these 17 goals have become a sort of litmus test for global standard of living and development. And to some extent, the world is striving its way to reach these set goals by the UNDP, bringing concerns of gender discrimination, poverty, sustainable development in economy, etc. on the forefront of global concerns. That is, until the Corona virus became a pandemic earlier in the year 2020.

Suddenly, the economy began to collapse, giving way to a global recession, rise in unemployment, loss of jobs, shutting down of industries, stopping global supply chains, and halting trade and commerce. Gender discrimination is on the rise as headlines of gender violence and degradation began to plague the news and social media. Educational institutions all over the world closed down temporarily, poverty became an alarming siren for doom for several social

¹Sustainable Development Goals | UNDP. (2020). Retrieved 8 July 2020, from <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals.html>

classes, and public health has become a luxury most people can barely afford. And these are just some of the major impacts of Covid-19 on a global scale.

SDGs Under Threat

When we talked briefly about the SDGs before, I pointed out that all the 17 goals are integrated, meaning that action in one concern will affect outcomes in others. Automatically, a negative impact on one area will reverberate to a few other areas, if not all. Covid-19 however impacts almost all the 17 goals directly, leaving us a lot of fires to put out. When we observe the impacts, we find two kinds of effects of the pandemic on SDGs; implicit and explicit. The areas that will explicitly be impacted are, 1. No Poverty; 2. Zero Hunger; 3. Good Health and Well-being; 4. Quality Education; 5. Gender Equality, 8. Decent Work and Economic Growth and 10. Reduced Inequality. The forecast mentioned in the previous paragraph are vivid indications to that. The goals which might suffer implicitly due to impact of the explicit impacts are; 6. Clean Water and Sanitation; 7. Affordable and Clean Energy; 9. Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure; 11. Sustainable Cities and Communities; 13. Climate Action; 14. Life Below Water; 15. Life on Land; 16. Peace and Justice Strong Institutions.

While millions lose jobs and food insecurity becomes a global crisis on an exacerbated period of time, basic human rights are becoming the explicit areas of impact. With a rise in global insecurities, racist, xenophobia, and gender discrimination is on the rise, and class differences have become rabid in societies. The implicit impacts such as clean energy, clean water, sanitation, innovation and climate actions are concerns of luxury at this point.

Interestingly enough, restrictions on worldwide economic activities and disruption of industries, as well as major cut-back in burning of fossil fuel in transportation and locomotion coupled with disruption in using natural resources may lead to some relief for the nature, therefore making some improvement relating to SDG no 13, 14 and 15. These, however, may not be enough to compensate substantially for the overall impact, which again, is a much bigger portion of the threat.

It is very hard to predict how long it will take to resettle everything, eventually to restore normalcy. Experts say the health issues will remain the focus until there's a scientific remedy in the form of a vaccine. Nevertheless, as the health crisis is increasingly transforming into an economic crisis, there is a simultaneous debate about how to 'cure' the global economy that Covid-19 has already 'infected' due to unprecedented limits on people's travel as well as commercial activities in the form of worldwide lockdowns. While countries are reopening gradually with caution, there are expected to be restrictions of varying degrees that will further affect the economies for some time to come. Covid-19's potential impacts on the SDGs could be three fold: first, it will erase some of the praiseworthy achievements that have been made so far with regard to some goals that have been severely impacted; second, it will slowly progress on some other goals in the following months due to priorities being reset; and third, resources could be reallocated to the immediate priority sectors. Each of these may cause delay in achieving SDGs; some experts also expect a re-evaluation of the timeframe to achieve SDGs.

This leaves companies in a Catch-22 situation. Because of the pandemic, many of the companies and institutes are fighting for survival and are currently unable to invest in sustainable development. But at the same time, doing exactly that will help them become more resilient for future shocks. And we all know the next shock that is to come, the climate change emergency. Climate experts are demanding the ongoing focus on climate change to continue. They expressed the expectation that as the daily life resumes, societies, governments and businesses will not revert to bad habits but will help transform the world into a greener and fairer future.

Here are a few take-aways from what we have learnt from the delays and discourses created by the pandemic. We can still salvage the crisis if we take the time we have right now and start to take actions immediately.

The "pandemic pause" could be a blessing in disguise, meaning that if done right, it gives all the stakeholders a chance to re-evaluate and review thoroughly of where we stand as well as what needs to be changed. It is important to understand which SDGs needed to be our first priority, and so firstly, we need to know how we can reprioritize and revamp the SDGs. We need to go back to the drawing board.

Secondly, "Shared responsibility", "global solidarity" and "acting together" should be the primary principles for responding to the socio-economic challenges created by Covid-19, as identified by the UN in its recent report on Covid-19 impact. Global Partnership for Sustainable Development, the 17th SDG goal, can become a guideline here.

Finally, the international institutes need to act fast and precisely. There is no room for second-guessing here, not when millions of lives are dependent on decisions that could make or break their lives in the coming decades. The SDGs are falling behind because the pandemic has created a larger gap between the developed/developing states and the under-developed and least developed states. Prioritizing the countries that lag behind should be unparalleled at this point. This can be more effective if the international institutes take on the state level to grass-root level non-profits and small-scale humanitarian and philanthropic approaches at micro-level to help eradicate the crises. As it has become evident in the past few months, these small-scale humanitarian and micro-level non-profit organizations are the once that are running up to the forefront to redistribute resources. Connecting these institutes on a global platform will ensure the help and support is dispersed deeper and wider. This will truly help us achieve the pledge, "Leave No One Behind" in its truest sense.

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