



# HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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## How do we get on track for building more peaceful, equal and inclusive societies? (SDGs 3, 10, 16, 17 and interlinkages among those goals and with other SDGs)

*Thursday 8 July 2021, 9 am – 12:15 pm*

### Secretariat Background Note

#### Introduction

The continuing COVID-19 pandemic risks increasing inequality both within and among countries along many dimensions. Income inequalities within countries have widened, with lower income households bearing a disproportionate burden of the pandemic in terms of lost jobs or greater exposure to the virus. Across countries, differences in recovery trajectories – due to unequal access to COVID-19 vaccines, as well as constrained fiscal space – threaten to further widen gaps in per capita incomes between developed and most developing economies.

Forms of inequality that pre-date COVID-19, including unequal care burdens at home and the digital divide, now stand to set women, ethnic minorities, school-age children and rural communities back decades. Even past progress in many areas of health and well-being including in maternal mortality and childhood vaccinations stand to be reversed. Many of these heighten social tensions and polarization and weaken social cohesion. At the same time, in many cases, institutions intended to promote more peaceful, just and inclusive societies have fallen short, including during COVID-19 related lockdowns, increasing risks of unrest, conflict and violence.

In many cases, the intersecting impact of the crisis risks that societies will become more divided, unsafe, and poorer. Emergency measures have condemned many to abuse in their own homes with limited access to services. Fear amongst people due to misinformation has triggered spikes in xenophobia and racial profiling. School closures, court closures, and the strained health systems have impacted access to and the quality of public services. Above all, COVID-19 is reversing the gains made in poverty eradication and is pushing back the possibility of peaceful, justice and inclusive societies by at least a decade - if not more.

There is however some hope that the stresses being experienced could motivate new partnerships and initiatives to reduce inequalities, advance well-being, prevent all forms of



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violence, and promote justice for all. This session will explore the interlinkages among SDGs 3, 10, 16 and 17 and identify ways toward more peaceful, equal and inclusive societies.

## Successes and challenges<sup>1</sup>

Before the COVID-19 crisis, progress was being made in improving maternal health with increases in skilled childbirth care and adolescent birth rates were falling. Reductions were seen in child and infant mortality rates and communicable diseases, and there was increasing immunization coverage, albeit not always fast enough to meet SDG 3 targets by 2030. The pandemic threatens to halt and, in some cases, reverse past progress with interruptions to care and vaccination distribution. A survey one year into the pandemic indicates that 90 per cent of countries are still reporting one or more disruptions to essential health services. Among the most extensively affected health services are those for mental, neurological and substance use disorders; neglected tropical diseases; tuberculosis; HIV and hepatitis B and C; cancer screening, services for other noncommunicable diseases including hypertension and diabetes; family planning and contraception; urgent dental care; malnutrition; immunization and malaria. Improvements in the provision of essential health services as measured by the universal health service coverage index increased from 45 (of 100) in 2000 to 66 in 2017, but with slower progress after 2010. Low income countries had experienced the greatest progress, mainly driven by interventions for infectious diseases. COVID-19 could interrupt access, however.

Inequality, including in access to healthcare and exposure to disease, has been a headline issue during the COVID-19 crisis. The inequalities that are so visible today reflect persistent divides that pre-date the pandemic. Modest gains had been made in reducing inequality in some areas covered by SDG 10, for instance, income inequality was reduced in some countries, preferential trade status to lower-income countries continued, and transaction costs of remittances fell from 9.3 per cent in 2011 to 6.5 per cent in 2020. The pandemic is hitting the most vulnerable people and the poorest countries hardest and is projected to push back the poorest countries a full 10 years on their SDG progress. Gaps that had been closing between countries could begin to widen again.

In 73 of the 90 countries with comparable data during the period 2012 to 2017, the bottom 40 per cent of the population saw their incomes grow. Moreover, in slightly more than half of those countries, the bottom 40 per cent experienced a growth rate of income that was higher than the overall national average. Still, in all countries with data, the bottom 40 per cent of the population

<sup>1</sup> Data are from the Report of the Secretary-General on SDG Progress 2021 (advance, unedited copy) [https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/27610SG\\_SDG\\_Progress\\_report\\_2021.pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/27610SG_SDG_Progress_report_2021.pdf)





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received less than 25 per cent of the overall income or consumption, while the top 10 per cent of the population received at least 20 per cent of the income. The World Economic Outlook October 2020 estimates that COVID-19 increases the average Gini index for emerging market and developing economies by more than 6 per cent, with an even larger impact for low-income countries.

COVID-19 is deepening divides in education and access to other services, as access to digital technologies become a prerequisite for economic and social inclusion with the potential to set back an entire generation of children. Women face deepening inequalities as the care work burden and gender-based violence both increased, and many social protections and labour market responses have been gender-blind. Data from 44 countries and territories from 2014-2020 show that almost one in five people reported having personally experienced discrimination on at least one of the grounds prohibited under international human rights law. Moreover, women are more likely to be victims of discrimination than men. These divides are being reflected in individuals socio-economic and health conditions under COVID-19. Globally, the highest absolute number of refugees was recorded in 2020. Even amidst strict COVID-19 mobility restrictions across the globe, thousands of migrants died along the migratory journey.

Achieving the goal of peaceful, just and inclusive societies (SDG 16) faces many challenges. Millions of people are still living in fragile and conflict affected states – also places with poorer access to health care. At the end of 2019, 79.5 million people had been forcibly displaced worldwide, translating to 1 per cent of the global population. In 2020, five civilians per 100,000 population were killed in armed conflicts; one in seven of those deaths was a woman or child. In countries with available data from 2012 to 2020, 8 in 10 children aged 1 to 14 years of age were subjected to some form of psychological aggression and/or physical punishment at home in the previous month and violence against children stands to grow due to COVID-19. Increases in unemployment rates with COVID-19 are likely to increase trafficking in persons half of whom are trafficked for sexual exploitation or forced labour. In 2020, the UN tracked an 18 per cent increase in killings of human rights defenders over 2019 in 32 countries. 62 journalists were killed in 2020, compared to 57 in 2019. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed inequalities and discrimination, testing and even weakening rights and protection systems in countries.

It should also be noted that corruption presents a significant risk to recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic. The current situation exposes the various ways in which corruption can exacerbate inequalities in access to health services. The speedy allocation of resources for the provision of emergency equipment and health services present corruption risks which may, in turn, lead to a lack of access to these services for those who are most vulnerable. The production and distribution of vaccines is also vulnerable to corruption undermining not just vaccination programmes, but further exacerbating the lack of trust in public institutions more broadly. The



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pandemic has only increased the global justice gap, particularly for women, children and other groups who have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic yet find it hardest to access justice.

### Interlinkages, synergies and trade-offs

Ensuring good health and wellbeing, reducing inequality, and promoting peaceful, just and inclusive societies are interconnected processes where strong synergies can be leveraged and trade-offs mitigated across the 2030 Agenda. Acting on evidence about such interlinkages, especially as countries weigh different spending and policy options for COVID-19 recovery, can help to generate multiple positive outcomes for a recovery that is both inclusive and sustainable. For example, efforts to prevent violence and psychological abuse against children can translate into better health and wellbeing throughout the lifecycle; and considering how inequalities can generate unrest, violence and conflict there are strong synergies to be leveraged between reducing inequality and furthering progress toward peaceful communities.

The COVID-19 pandemic puts into stark relief how closely linked the advancement of SDGs 3, 10 and 16 are. The health challenges imposed by the pandemic can directly affect inequality, crime and trust in institutions. Existing inequalities, social and economic exclusion, and fragile health systems, including a lack of universal health coverage and adequate social protection floors in many parts of the world worsened the impacts of the global pandemic. Various forms of crime and illicit activity also threaten the recovery.

### Recommendations for action: Mechanisms and partnerships to accelerate progress

During the decade of action and delivery on the SDGs, the international community must collaborate to address challenges bringing together governments, the private-sector, civil society and the science community, and leveraging individual and collective action for sustainability. Solutions that work need to be shared, scaled up and adjusted to address context specific conditions. Where the way forward is less clear, sharing information and identifying ways to fill knowledge and data gaps to support evidence-based decision-making will be key.

Specific solutions will vary across countries, but there is a consensus building around clusters of actions that can help to build more equal and peaceful societies with good health and well-being for everyone. First, it is essential that health service disruption during COVID-19 is reduced with emergency efforts to ensure that progress on vaccination provision, NCD reduction, maternal care, family planning, HIV and AIDS prevention and other health related areas, while at the same



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time accelerating progress toward the universal provision of quality healthcare, including through the removal of any barriers financial or otherwise for vulnerable groups.

Second, inequality must be addressed with full commitment including regarding access to vaccines in all countries and in areas exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic linked to the digital divide and the growing pressures on women. Addressing the chronic underfunding of public health systems, and social sectors more generally is needed to shift toward more equitable paths and build resilience at the individual and community levels. Austerity measures that cut back on social protections during recovery from the crisis will deepen poverty and inequality, and could risk intensifying public discontent, further weakening trust in institutions, and leaving people vulnerable to risks of future shocks.

Finally, efforts must focus on bolstering institutions that are in place to prevent violence and corruption; reducing inequalities that threaten to undermine stability, social solidarity and civil peace; and ensuring that disinformation does not fuel conflict and division. The ambition for violence reduction must be commensurate with the scale of interventions needed to rebuild social cohesion and trust as well as circumvent a resurgence in social unrest, political conflict, and violence. Justice systems need to be transformed, by putting people at the centre, to be more effective and transparent in addressing injustices and grievances, tackling inequalities and building resilient societies.

## Proposed guiding questions

- What is the situation regarding SDGs 3, 10, 16 and their relation with SDG 17?
- What has the pandemic revealed about how deep-seated inequalities and injustices determine lifetime opportunities and outcomes including in good health and well-being?
- Has the pandemic introduced new forms of inequality and vulnerabilities within and across countries that now also need to be addressed?
- What solutions and remedies have been developed during the pandemic to prevent violence, reduce inequalities and provide justice for all?
- How can interlinkages, synergies and trade-offs be leveraged across 3, 10, 16, 17 to meet the needs of people and communities most at risk of being left behind?
- How can countries make effective and enduring changes towards more equitable, inclusive and just societies?
- What are the opportunities to be realized (and pitfalls to be avoided) in the immediate and medium terms towards these ends? How can international cooperation support?



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