

This year was meant to be a turning point for climate and sustainable development, with 2020 marking the start of the decade of action. The pandemic, with its devastating consequences is upending plans, interrupting trends and testing assumptions.

The mounting loss of life and strain on communities and economies from Covid-19 crisis requires thoughtful and far-reaching strategies. A wider perspective is needed, to view energy, society, the economy and the environment as parts of a holistic system. Practitioners and experts across diverse sectors and fields, can play a critical role, working in collaboration to bring this perspective to their support for countries and localities to recover better and stronger from the Covid-19 pandemic.

In April 2019, UN DESA and UN Climate Change (UNFCCC secretariat), organised the first annual Global Conference on Strengthening Synergies between the Paris Agreement and 2030 Agenda. Hosted by the Government of Denmark, it took place in Copenhagen with several hundred participants from diverse communities.

The COVID-19 Pandemic forced a change of plans in 2020. Rather than an in-person conference, a virtual Global Synergies Consultation will take place over the course of May and June. The objective, however, has only become more urgent with the pandemic. We seek to advance the application of synergies in practice by illustrating the potential of synergistic approaches to recover better & faster from Covid-19, accelerate enhanced climate action and transitions to sustainable development. We invite all stakeholders and partners to join us.

Acting on synergies to recover better & stronger from Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic obviates our interdependence. Our economies, societies, and individual prospects depend on the health and well-being of people across the world, and within our countries.

The response to the pandemic's human crisis, is a vivid demonstration of our ability to make drastic changes quickly. At the same time, it reveals the importance of competent and swift government action, to proactively change the calculus of individual actors to avert the worst outcomes of crises, and alleviate the burden on the poorest, most vulnerable, and hardest hit populations.

As noted by the UN Secretary-General, the "recovery must not come on the backs of the poorest – and we cannot create a legion of new poor. Working in concert, countries can draw on synergies to steer recovery to a more sustainable and inclusive path. The Paris Agreement and 2030 Agenda give us a framework that can drive global recovery and enable us to keep our promises to people & planet."

With intersecting crises becoming a feature of our times, there can also be no illusion that one crisis will automatically solve another. The global disruption triggered by Covid-19 has lowered the demand for energy and reduced global greenhouse gas emissions. To change the trajectory of CO₂ levels in the atmosphere, long-term systemic shifts in emissions are needed. Moreover, any improvement that comes on the back of human distress is neither desirable nor sustainable not sustainable.

The IPCC has made our threshold clear: to avoid catastrophic and irreversible global impacts, the world must limit global warming to 1.5°C by the end of this century. To meet this threshold, CO₂ emissions must decline about 45 percent by 2030 and reach net zero in 2050. Countries' Nationally Determined

Contributions (NDCs) under the Paris Agreement remain inadequate. Additionally, 2015-2019 saw a continued rise of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere.

At the 2019 Climate Action Summit, the UN Secretary General called on *all* countries to come forward at the UNFCCC, COP26 Climate Conference with strategies to reach net zero GHG emissions strategies by 2050. 75 countries pledged to do so and more than 70 committed to delivering more ambitious NDCs. The Alliance of Small Islands States and the 47 Least Developed Countries agreed to reach net zero emissions by 2050, in the context of resources being available to do so.

Outcomes of the first Global Synergies Conference informed an in-depth review of climate action (SDG 13) at the 2019 UN High Level Political Forum (HLPF). At the HLPF, world leaders recognized the synergies between the SDGs and Paris Agreement and pledged to accelerate progress, including by “equipping our domestic institutions to better address interlinkages, synergies, and trade-offs through whole-of-government approaches.”

Strategic entry points to accelerate synergies in action

Despite initial efforts, the world was not on track to achieve most of the SDGs, even before the Covid-19 pandemic. Nor has any country been yet been able to convincingly meet a set of basic human needs at a globally sustainable level of resource use. The universal transformation to sustainable development thus depends on the simultaneous achievement of context specific innovative pathways.

The *practice and science* of sustainable development point the way forward. Evidence suggests that the shortfalls in social, environmental, and economic progress stem from a lack of appreciation of the interlinkages that bind them, as well as decision-making that unduly prioritizes the short-term. When properly accounted for, however, interlinkages can be applied to generate synergies that lead to desired sustainable development transformations.

Numerous examples demonstrate that people-centered sustainable development transformations are possible. The independent group of scientists behind the UN’s 2019 [Global Sustainable Development Report](#) went further in concluding that “the most efficient, or sometimes the only, way to achieve progress on a given SDG target is to take advantage of positive synergies with other objectives.” A significant amount is known about these interactions. It is essential that decision-makers in all sectors, draw on this know-how to make intentional, context-specific decisions for their recovery to COVID-19 and transitions to sustainable development.

The Report identifies six concrete areas where rapid, transformational change is possible, and four essential cross-cutting levers of change. It points to, for example, the potential to reverse the negative feedback loop, whereby climate change contributes to biodiversity loss, which, in turn, further reduces the climate resilience and future options of poor and vulnerable populations. With intentionally synergistic strategies, stakeholders can drive interactions in a positive direction. Land restoration, for example, has proven to be a powerful intervention in places like Niger and Ethiopia - to address drought and water scarcity by raising groundwater levels, increasing crop yields, and inducing positive changes in fauna and biodiversity.

Covid-19 brings the link to human health into sharp focus. Widespread animal migration, due to habitat loss and a change climate, is forcing species to interact, that would not otherwise, leading to the spread of pathogens. In addition to driving a steep loss of biodiversity, babitat loss and climate change thus, will increasingly make infectious disease, like Covid-19, more likely. Following the SARS virus, [some limited data](#) in Italy suggests a correlation between air pollution in cities and the number

of admissions from Covid-19. Early indications thus suggest that improving environmental legislation will improve health and resilience to future spreads of disease.

A growing number and range of stakeholders are capitalizing on the climate and SDG synergies. Cities have increasingly taken the lead, embarking on transitions that illustrate the potential to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation and GHG emissions, and advance along inclusive, human rights based sustainable development pathways. In China, the city of Shenzhen more than tripled its number of electric buses since 2015; and is now the first city in the world to electrify 100% of its bus fleet. In the northern Indian city of Gorakhpur, city officials are encouraging a range of tactics to boost climate resilience, from reducing monoculture to protecting water bodies, to reduce flooding and boost resilience as monsoons get stronger and more unpredictable.

Enabling climate ambition and SDG progress

Where governments succeed in capturing synergies, it can boost the public benefits of policies and investments. Higher public returns on investment can serve to attract additional resources, including private financing [where private returns also increase]. Sustainable development transformations, however, require a more systematic change in both the volume and pattern of public and private investment. *Sustainable investing*, where impact on people and planet rank alongside financial returns, is an important start. Much of the potential, however, remains untapped due to lacking financial products, impact standards, and misconceptions of risk and return.

In the context of a global recovery to the Covid-19 Pandemic, public investment must necessarily play a leading role in stimulating economies, safeguarding financial systems, mobilising public resources through progressive means and re-building vulnerable and hard-hit communities. Synergies offer governments a way to maximize the public benefits of their investments. With intentional and coordinated policies, governments can simultaneously *stimulate and align* their economies and financial systems to SDG and climate objectives.

A mounting body of evidence demonstrates low-carbon and climate-resilient growth can unlock lasting economic and social benefits. According to the New Climate Economy bold climate action can deliver at least \$26 trillion in net global economic benefits between now and 2030 compared with business-as-usual. In the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, it is expected that governments and development banks will provide unprecedented levels of investment to reflate economies and generate jobs. As they do so, it may not just be visionary but prudent for investments to be targeted to low carbon and climate resilient projects. During the 2008 economic crisis, South Korea invested more in green stimulus s than any other OECD country and was one of the quickest to rebound.

The European Investment Bank (EIB) has announced plans to stop funding oil, gas and coal projects at the end of 2021 and more than 130 private banks — representing one-third of the global banking sector — have signed onto the Principles for Responsible Banking, a framework that seeks to align banking practices with the Paris Agreement.

The Covid-19 crisis has led much of the public to see the value of science and better understand our vulnerability to shocks from the natural world, despite our highly complex societies. This sentiment and the growing spirit of human solidarity can be tapped to drive a vision for post-Covid-19 sustainable development that leaves no one behind. We invite you to join us at this critical time, to learn and illustrate how synergies have and can work *in practice*, to enable Covid-19 recovery, accelerate the Paris Agreement and SDG objectives.

Key Resources

UN Climate and SDGs Synergies Knowledge Platform – Includes the synergies questionnaire and webinar background documentation,

<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/climate-sdgs-synergies2019#home>

UN Global Sustainable Development Report 2019, “The Future is Now: Science for Achieving Sustainable Development ”

https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/24797GSDR_report_2019.pdf

[UN report on Covid-19](#) –See chart on p. 12 summarizing the impact of the virus on different SDGs

Report of the Secretary General on the 2019 Climate Action Summit and the Way Forward in 2020:

https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/assets/pdf/cas_report_11_dec.pdf

2019 NDC Partnership Report, “Partnership in Action: Three years on”:

http://www.ndcpartnership.report/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/00_PIA-2019_FULL.pdf

Summary of the First Global Conference on Strengthening Synergies between the Paris Agreement and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, 1-3 April 2019, Copenhagen, Denmark :

https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/25256WEB_version.pdf