



#SDGs #GlobalGoals #2030Agenda

ECOSOC HIGH-LEVEL SEGMENT

Scenarios and possible medium and long-term trends related to the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and the achievement of SDGs

16 July 2021, 15:00 – 16:30 (hybrid format)

CONCEPT NOTE

The response to the COVID-19 pandemic should not be guided only by emergency concerns. It is important to reflect on how the policy measures being taken today can shape a better future. As decided by the General Assembly in its resolution 72/305, the High-level Segment of the Economic and Social Council will focus on “*future trends and scenarios related to the Council theme, the long-term impact of current trends, such as contribution of new technologies, in the economic, social and environmental areas on the realization of the SDGs based on the work of the UN and other regional and international organizations and bodies as well as other stakeholders.*” Accordingly, the present session will examine policies that can respond to COVID-19, overcome its negative impacts on the SDGs and kick off accelerated progress to realize the 2030 Agenda. It will also discuss scenarios for reaching sustainable development in the long term within the context of the current pandemic.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (General Assembly resolution 70/1) reflects a broad, aspirational vision for people, planet and prosperity. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set out therein provide a quantitative and qualitative snapshot of what the world would like to have achieved by 2030. However, it does not provide any guidance on how coordinated global actions could feasibly unfold over time to attain the SDGs. That is what scenarios are designed to explore. Scenarios are internally consistent and plausible future pathways based on the best available scientific evidence.

Alternative scenarios have been suggested for the world to achieve the SDGs and beyond. They describe coherent, internally consistent and quantitative timeline of actions, sometimes referred to as a pathway. In his report entitled “*Long-term future trends and scenarios - impacts in the economic, social and environmental areas on the realization of the SDGs*” (E/2021/61)¹, the Secretary-General details one particular best-case scenario that would allow the achievement of the SDGs by 2030 and further sustainable development by 2050. This scenario would also allow the world to reach the 1.5 C degree climate target.

In terms of SDG progress, this scenario outperforms many others in the literature. It explores what is technologically feasible in terms of addressing the broad range of SDG challenges. In particular, the scenario achieves very high living standards worldwide, reigns in resource use and increases end-use efficiencies. It offers an integrated vision for the SDG agenda, digitalization, climate and COVID-19 actions, and for broader development. Actions in one of these areas could drive progress in the other areas

¹ <https://undocs.org/E/2021/61>



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and vice versa. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated digitalization, but in the absence of universal access and inequalities, it has also greatly amplified persistent technology divides – essentially excluding billions of people from reaping the benefits of digital technologies and innovations. Yet, there is a large untapped potential for digital consumer innovations for increasing service efficiencies in mobility, food, buildings, and energy services, which will be key to progress on the SDG and climate change. The scenario essentially describes a world that becomes increasingly high-tech, interconnected and focused on education, science and technology, which is shared globally. It shows how we could “do more with less”, on a grand scale, leading to declining global energy and resource use despite rapid increases in living standards.

How could this be achieved? Selected strategies in both developed and developing countries could include electrifying energy end-use worldwide and achieving pervasive digitalization and rapid innovation in granular technologies; bringing homes, appliances and transport modes to the technological efficiency frontier; supporting multi-functionality and technology convergence; promoting a generational shift from ownership of material goods to accessing services; increasing utilization rates of goods, infrastructure, and vehicles and promoting user-oriented innovation; as well as allowing end-users to go beyond mere consumers, becoming producers, innovators and traders.

The needed technologies for such a global transition are already available in principle. However, reinforced global cooperation is needed most immediately on the response to COVID-19 and on science and technology, as are a major push for digitalization and urgent action on the technological divides. The report of the Secretary General proposes a number of “no regret” actions that could be taken right away by governments, stakeholders, corporations, civil society and all of us.

The scenario also shows a pathway towards the 1.5°C climate target without relying on unproven negative emission technologies, but by achieving a global final energy demand that would be 40 per cent lower by mid-century than today, achieved through radical improvements in end-use efficiencies. Current rates of renewable energy deployment would suffice to meet future energy needs. With immediate actions taken, it would in principle be possible to limit conversion of forests and other natural ecosystems to negligible levels. In the longer run, 1.5 billion hectares of land could be shifted away from agriculture compared to business-as-usual. Agricultural productivity could be increased by more than one per cent per year and food loss and waste reduced by a quarter.

What kind of investments will be needed? Achieving universal energy access (SDG7) is comparatively cheap and would require a doubling of current investments to an estimated US\$45 billion per year until 2030 which amounts to less than 2 per cent of the total energy sector investment. Overall energy supply investment requirements for fuel systems, power plants and networks increase only slightly in the scenario until 2030 and decrease thereafter. In contrast, investments in energy end-use and services, and related business opportunities will rapidly expand from US\$0.4 to \$1.6 trillion for energy end-use – much of which however would ultimately benefit consumers through lower electricity and fuel costs. The stakes are high, and overall benefits could be great also in other sectors. For example, an increase in investment of 0.3 per cent of global GDP, or about US\$350 billion per year, in human capital, technologies and the food and land use systems, could provide annual health, environmental and economic gains of US\$5.7



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trillion by 2030, and as much as US\$10.5 trillion by 2050. Compared with current trends, it would double the growth of rural incomes and create an additional 120 million decent jobs.

To-date, the vast majority of financial stimulus packages in response to the pandemic have not focused on such longer-term goals and investments in sustainability. A complementary report of the Secretary General on this year's ECOSOC theme (E/2021/62)² provides additional background information on related recent trends and on the impacts of COVID-19 on SDG progress. It proposes economic, social and environmental strategies, which could drive a sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic that would put the world on an inclusive and effective path for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda in the context of the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development.

The session will explore cooperative, near-term actions for a sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and the achievement of the SDGs by 2030. It will bring together expert panelists, eminent personalities, and keynote speakers from Governments, the UN system, think tanks, regional organizations and other stakeholders.

Guiding questions

The session will be guided by the following questions. In particular, it will also consider the recommendations put forward by the Secretary General in his reports E/2021/61 and E/2021/62.

- Which feasible scenario pathways towards the SDGs are preferable, and how could they be achieved? What kind of broader lessons can be learnt from such scenarios? How can they be made readily available to decision-makers?
- To which extent do strategies, actions, programs, and partnerships support such pathways in your country? What more is needed?
- Which near-term actions should be considered in developed and developing countries – in response to the pandemic and with a view to ensure a sustainability transition in education, food, energy, water and transport?
- What is the experience with recent COVID-19 recovery plans and related financial stimulus packages? How could they better support sustainable and resilient solutions, reduce inequalities, and bridge the technology divides in the long-term? What kind of national legal, policy and institutional measures are needed to improve social protection and healthcare systems? How can women be empowered to contribute to recovery strategies?

² <https://undocs.org/E/2021/62>