

With COVID-19, the SDGs are even more important



(Credit: United Nations)

by Dane Moores

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This year, the first of the new decade, was meant to be the start of something big. As 2020 started, we tipped into the 'decade of delivery' to eliminate extreme poverty and achieve the [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#) by 2030. It also marked an unexpected era as COVID-19 hit – Australia and the world have been grappling with the pandemic and its devastating aftershocks ever since. But instead of sidelining the Goals, COVID-19 has made the SDGs even more relevant.

The SDGs offer us an integrated perspective to combat this crisis. In the 2030 Agenda we have a holistic framework that brings the global economic, environmental and development agendas together for the first time. Because they are so broad and complex – the very thing they are often criticised for – the SDGs can help us understand and respond to the wide-ranging impacts of COVID-19.

So COVID-19 should not be an excuse to delay action, but rather reason to accelerate action on the SDGs.

SDGs as a framework for understanding COVID-19 impacts

COVID-19 started as a health crisis, but quickly snowballed into an economic crisis and is now a burgeoning humanitarian crisis as well. We are only just starting to truly understand the scale and scope of its impacts.

By early June, a [Reuters tally](#) showed more than 400,000 people had died worldwide from COVID-19, with the spread far from contained in many parts of the world. Other regions are already experiencing a [second wave](#) of infections. The [International Labour Organization](#) estimates nearly half of the world's workforce – 1.6 billion people – risk losing their livelihoods due to the 'great lockdown'. According to the IMF's latest [World Economic Outlook](#), the cumulative loss to global GDP over 2020 and 2021 could be about US\$9 trillion, greater than the combined economies of Japan and Germany. In the Asia-Pacific alone, the drop in global demand is estimated to slash [US\\$172 billion](#) from trade. The economic impacts of the virus are projected to force an additional [40 million](#) to [500 million](#) people into poverty. [World Vision](#) estimates that the lives of 30 million children are at risk from COVID-19 health aftershocks, as malaria and malnutrition go untreated due to

overstretched health systems. In April, [school closures](#) in more than 190 countries forced at least 1.57 billion students from classrooms. There are fears many of these students may be lost to the education system entirely, becoming more vulnerable to child labour, trafficking and child marriage.

The flow-on effects are so extensive that they are difficult to comprehend.

One framework that brings these diverse aspects together – from poverty rates, to economic growth, to education, to health – is the Sustainable Development Goals. The 17 Goals, and their 169 targets and 232 indicators, are a unique tool to help governments, businesses and NGOs understand the full scope of complex policy challenges like COVID-19. The [United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs](#) has conceptually mapped how COVID-19 affects each of the SDGs, from disruption to food supplies (SDG 2) to increased levels of violence against women (SDG 5). This conceptual mapping, while simple, shows the value of the SDGs as a framework for understanding the intersecting flow-on effects of COVID-19.

Figure 1: COVID-19 impacts and the SDGs



SDGs as a roadmap to recovery from COVID-19

The SDGs are not only useful for understanding COVID-19, they are also a valuable tool to guide the national and international recovery effort. In the SDGs we have a blueprint to not only address health security, but to address food, economic and climate security as well. This is important because we don't want to step from one

crisis straight into another.

The pandemic has exposed weaknesses in the international system that need to be addressed as part of the ‘build back better’ agenda. The past couple of months have shown how poverty (SDG 1), weak health systems (SDG 3), inadequate water and sanitation (SDG 6), and substandard international cooperation (SDG 17) have exacerbated the COVID-19 crisis. In the SDGs we have a comprehensive framework to address these risk factors holistically to build resilience to current and future shocks, whether they be health, economic or environmental shocks. That is why, for example, [World Vision’s global response](#) to COVID-19 is not only limiting the spread of the virus, but supporting food security, education, and livelihoods as well.

Importantly, we now have an opportunity to fast-track sustainable development by ensuring recovery plans are aligned with the SDGs. The massive fiscal stimulus that is being deployed around the world can be used to both address COVID-19 impacts and accelerate the SDGs. The development trajectory that will be forged in the coming months will have significant implications for generations to come.

The underlying principle of the SDGs is to leave no one behind. This should be a hallmark of the national and global recovery effort. According to the [UN](#), the cost of protecting the most vulnerable 10% of people from the worst impacts of COVID-19 is about US\$90 billion – or 1% of the combined stimulus packages of OECD and G20 countries (estimated at about [\\$9 trillion](#)).

SDGs as a vision for a post-COVID world

The SDGs paint the picture of a world free from poverty by 2030, where there is universal access to healthcare, education, water and sanitation. It is a resilient world which would be in a much stronger position to withstand shocks like COVID-19. Had the international community invested more in the SDGs earlier, we may have been in a better position to manage the current crisis.

The vision for 2030 outlined in the SDGs may seem unreachable, but the political will and amount of stimulus being mobilised to combat COVID-19 demonstrate that, when push comes to shove, humanity can step up to deal with complex global challenges. The SDGs must be pursued with the same decisiveness, solidarity, urgency and commitment that we are seeing in the fight against COVID-19. Only then can the vision for a world free from poverty be realised.

This post is part of the [#COVID-19 and international development](#) series.

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