**COVID-19 and Climate Change**

**Introduction**

*This issues book paper will provide an overview into the COVID-19 pandemic and its effect on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) put forth by the United Nations, as well as a case study on COVID-19 and climate change. It will serve as a background document for the GA Special Session and efforts to develop a Ministerial Declaration on Covid-19 and Climate Change.*

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that the SDGs are even more relevant today than ever before. COVID-19 is the infectious disease caused by the most recently discovered coronavirus. This new virus and disease were unknown before the outbreak began in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. COVID-19 is now a pandemic affecting many countries globally[[1]](#footnote-1).

The most common symptoms of COVID-19 are fever, dry cough, and tiredness.[[2]](#footnote-2) Other symptoms that are less common and may affect some patients include aches and pains, nasal congestion, headache, conjunctivitis, sore throat, diarrhea, loss of taste or smell or a rash on skin or discoloration of fingers or toes.[[3]](#footnote-3) These symptoms are usually mild and begin gradually. Some people become infected but only have very mild symptoms. In addition to those who experience symptoms, some individuals test positive for COVID-19 but remain asymptomatic the whole time they are ill. This can make COVID-19 particularly difficult to detect. Most people (about 80%) recover from the disease without needing hospital treatment. Around 1 out of every 5 people who gets COVID-19 becomes seriously ill and develops difficulty breathing.[[4]](#footnote-4) Older people, and those with underlying medical problems like high blood pressure, heart and lung problems, diabetes, or cancer, are at higher risk of developing serious illness.  However, anyone can catch COVID-19 and become seriously ill.[[5]](#footnote-5) People can catch COVID-19 from others who have the virus. The disease spreads primarily from person to person through small droplets from the nose or mouth, which are expelled when a person with COVID-19 coughs, sneezes, or speaks. These droplets are relatively heavy, do not travel far and quickly sink to the ground. People can catch COVID-19 if they breathe in these droplets from a person infected with the virus.[[6]](#footnote-6)

**How COVID-19 has impacted the SDGs thus far**

The COVID-19 pandemic has unleashed an unprecedented crisis, causing further disruption to achieving the SDGs, with the world’s poorest and most vulnerable affected the most, leaving them even further behind, according to a new report released by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs.[[7]](#footnote-7) “As Member States recognized at the SDG Summit held last September, global efforts to date have been insufficient to deliver the change we need, jeopardizing the Agenda’s promise to current and future generations,” said UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres. “Now, due to COVID-19, an unprecedented health, economic and social crisis is threatening the lives and livelihoods, making the achievement of the Goals even more challenging.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Below are some key findings from the Department of Economic and Social Affairs Reports on COVID-19 and the SDGs:

* An estimated 71 million people are expected to be pushed back into extreme poverty in 2020, the first rise in global poverty since 1998. Lost incomes limited social protection and rising prices mean even those who were previously secure could find themselves at risk of poverty and hunger.
* Underemployment and unemployment due to the crisis mean some 1.6 billion already vulnerable workers in the informal economy – half the global workforce – may be significantly affected, with their incomes estimated to have fallen by 60 per cent in the first month of the crisis.
* The more than one billion slum dwellers worldwide are acutely at risk from the effects of COVID-19, suffering from a lack of adequate housing, no running water at home, shared toilets, little or no waste management systems, overcrowded public transport and limited access to formal health care facilities.
* Women and children are also among those bearing the heaviest brunt of the pandemic’s effects. Disruption to health and vaccination services and limited access to diet and nutrition services have the potential to cause hundreds of thousands of additional under-5 deaths and tens of thousands of additional maternal deaths in 2020. Many countries have seen a surge in reports of domestic violence against women and children.
* School closures have kept 90 per cent of students worldwide (1.57 billion) out of school and caused over 370 million children to miss out on school meals they depend on. Lack of access to computers and the internet at home means remote learning is out of reach of many. About 70 countries reported moderate to severe disruptions or a total suspension of childhood vaccination services during March and April of 2020.
* As more families fall into extreme poverty, children in poor and disadvantaged communities are at much greater risk of child labor, child marriage and child trafficking. In fact, the global gains in reducing child labor are likely to be reversed for the first time in 20 years.

**The Future of the SDGs in the Wake of COVID-19**

Below are suggestions for how States, in conjunction with the UN, can utilize the SDGs to help those who have been impacted by COVID-19 and to create a better future moving forward.

Digital finance is the access and usage of formal financial services by excluded populations.[[9]](#footnote-9) A new report, “*People’s Money: Harnessing Digitalization to Finance a Sustainable Future,*” by the UN Secretary-General’s Task Force on Digital Finance sets out an Action Agenda. Centrally, it spells out how digital finance can be harnessed in ways that empower citizens as taxpayers and investors in envisaging a digital transformation at scale that better aligns people’s money with their needs, collectively expressed by the SDGs.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The report highlights how billions of people around the world are responding to the COVID-19 pandemic using digital tools to work, spend and socialize and argues there is an historic opportunity to harness digitalization in placing citizens, the ultimate owners of the world’s financial resources, in control of finance to ensure that it meets their needs, today and in the future.[[11]](#footnote-11) The Task Force identifies five opportunities for harnessing digitalization in aligning financing with the SDGs. Amongst these opportunities are initiatives such as: aligning global capital markets with the SDGs, increasing the effectiveness and accountability of public finance that makes up the majority of the global economy, channeling digitally aggregated domestic savings into long-term development finance, informing citizens how to link their consumer spending with the SDGs, and accelerating lifeblood financing for small and medium-sized businesses.[[12]](#footnote-12) Maria Ramos, Co-Chair of the UN Secretary-General’s Task Force on Digital Financesaid, “We have an historic opportunity to accelerate and expand the transformative impact of digitalization. In particular, digital finance, which in this crisis became the lifeline for millions across the world, extends the boundaries of financial inclusion by empowering citizens as savers, investors, borrowers, lenders and tax-payers in a way that gives them choice and power over their money.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

Creating and then making the vaccine for COVID-19 available to all peoplealso aligns with the SDGs. More than 140 world leaders and figures signed an open letter requesting Governments unite behind a “people’s vaccine” against COVID-19, marking the most ambitious position yet set out by world leaders on what has become the most urgent quest in modern science.[[14]](#footnote-14) They are demanding that all vaccines, treatments and tests be patent-free, mass produced and distributed fairly. South African President Cyril Ramaphosa has been quoted as saying, “Nobody should be pushed to the back of the vaccine queue because of where they live or what they earn.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

The final recommendation is to enhance political will and recommit to the SDGs.

Our world has the knowledge, capacity and innovation to defeat COVID-19 and make the world a more equitable place, and if we are ambitious enough, we can muster the full complement of resources needed to implement the Goals successfully. As the world responds to the effects of this brutal pandemic, and seeks to restore global prosperity, we must focus on addressing underlying factors in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals.[[16]](#footnote-16)

A major threat to global sustainability is climate change. The next sections will address climate change, SDG 13, and how to build back better together.

**Climate Change**

The world, both humanity and the natural environment, are facing tremendous turmoil and change. Climate change is a major threat that the international community must address. In a United Nations Environment Programme report on emerging issues of concern, Deputy Executive Director Joyce Msuya discussed how humankind has caused global temperatures to rise 170 times faster than the natural rate, deliberately modified more than 75% of the planet’s land surface, and permanently altered the flow of more than 93% of the world’s rivers.[[17]](#footnote-17) The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) releases a synthesis report related to climate change based on the reports of three Working Groups of the IPCC. The most recent synthesis report, AR5 Fifth Assessment Report (hereafter AR5 Report), was published in 2014 and the next report is scheduled to be published in 2021. The AR5 Report states that anthropogenic (human impact on the environment) greenhouse gas emissions are now higher than ever and causing atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide.[[18]](#footnote-18) It is these emissions and other human activities that “are extremely likely to have been the dominant cause of the observed warming since the mid-20th century,” which will “amplify existing risks and create new risks for natural and human systems.”[[19]](#footnote-19) Unfortunately, it should be no surprise that these risks are unevenly distributed and will most affect disadvantaged communities across the globe. Climate change also has the potential to increase the number of vulnerable people. A 2018 World Bank report predicts that without necessary actions, climate change could displace 143 million people by 2050 (in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America).[[20]](#footnote-20)

As part of its effort to address climate change, the United Nations has included a Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) dedicated to the topic. SDG 13 aims to take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.[[21]](#footnote-21) Climate change is closely linked to development since a variable climate will impact resources such as freshwater and food supplies, the basic necessities for a functioning society. In particular, “poor and developing countries...will be among those most adversely affected and least able to cope with the anticipated shocks to their social, economic, and natural systems.”[[22]](#footnote-22) SDG 13 indicators include targets to increase disaster risk resilience, integrate measures into national policy, improve education on climate change, and promote capacity for planning and management.[[23]](#footnote-23) However, all of these indicators are ones that will be further hampered by the effects of COVID-19.

**Covid-19 and Climate Change: Why talk about them together?**

Response to climate change could be further challenged by COVID-19 as national governments are focusing on the emergency of the pandemic. Although climate change may seem further away or something to worry about later, it is something that must be addressed now in conjunction with other emergencies.

On September 10, 2020, the General Assembly of the UN passed a 14-page omnibus resolution with 169 in favor to 2 against (Israel, United States) and 2 abstentions (Hungary, Ukraine).[[24]](#footnote-24) The resolution is titled “Comprehensive and coordinated response to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic” (document A/74/L.92).[[25]](#footnote-25) The resolution first and foremost acknowledges the devastating nature of the current pandemic and notes that this has reversed “hard-won development gains and [is] hampering progress towards achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and all its Goals and targets.”[[26]](#footnote-26) The resolution also acknowledges the leadership of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the increasing need for international cooperation to overcome this pandemic through a people-centered approach.[[27]](#footnote-27) The approach must also be cooperative, comprehensive, and science-based. Member States are encouraged to adopt a climate-sensitive approach at the national level in accordance with the SDGs and the Paris Agreement. The operative paragraphs from the omnibus resolution state:

OP46 - *Stresses* that the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need to reduce the risk of the economic, social and environmental impacts of disasters, many of which are exacerbated by climate change, desertification and biodiversity loss, and emphasizes the need to support and invest in adaptation and action at all levels to enhance efforts to build resilience through, inter alia, disaster risk reduction, community empowerment and participation and the sustainable management of ecosystems and the protection and sustainable use of biodiversity, including wildlife, to reduce the likelihood of zoonotic infections and the impacts and costs of disasters;

OP47 - *Urges* Member States to adopt a climate- and environment-sensitive approach to COVID-19 recovery efforts, including by aligning investments and domestic policies with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement and the ultimate objective of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, reversing biodiversity loss, and strengthening approaches that reduce emissions and enhance both resilience and efficiency, such as increasing the global share of renewable energy, promoting pathways towards climate-resilient development, developing more ambitious national plans and, for parties to the Paris Agreement, communicating or updating their nationally determined contributions in 2020, immediately curbing greenhouse gas emissions and achieving sustainable consumption and production patterns, taking climate change and biodiversity into account in fiscal planning, budgeting, public investment management and procurement practices, and emphasizes in this regard that mitigation of and adaptation to climate change represent an immediate and urgent global priority, and stresses the importance of mobilizing means of implementation from all sources, including adequate financial support, inter alia, for mitigation and adaptation, taking into account the specific needs and special circumstances of developing countries, especially those that are particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change;

**Moving Forward**

Moving forward, the international community must ensure any and all pandemic responses are climate-sensitive. A climate-sensitive response would be one that takes into account mitigation strategies and strengthens investments and domestic policy needed to promote climate-resilient development. Member States must build back better together through multilateral efforts that are people-centered. It will certainly be an issue if some countries with major influence continue to take steps back from multilateral efforts. Response should also be gender-sensitive and respect human rights. Investment will need to made to ensure resilience through disaster risk reduction, community empowerment and participation, and the sustainable management of ecosystems.[[28]](#footnote-28) Domestic policies should be in line with the goals outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals as well as the Paris Agreement. Member States must work together to address the serious risks posed by both a global pandemic as well as a global climate crisis.

**Questions**:

1. What steps has your country taken to address the Covid-19 pandemic?

2. Have these steps taken into account their impact on climate change and long-term development?

3. What stakeholders have been involved in any of these decisions?

4. What role should the World Health Organization play in addressing Covid-19?

5. What other steps can the international community or the United Nations system take to address these issues?

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