

How will the pandemic influence development goals?

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Can the Sustainable Development Goals still be achieved on time by the 2030 deadline?

The apparent answer is no, not only because priorities have shifted and resources will be diverted toward addressing other urgent matters, but also because achieving the SDGs successfully now requires new rules and methods.

The impact of the pandemic will not only affect the timing of implementation, but will also extend to the mechanism of action. Meetings scheduled for 2020 will not take place according to plan, especially the annual political summit organized by the United Nations in July, to discuss progress made toward achieving the SDGs.

This may not be a great loss, because the summit has become a sort of social folklore. The decline in the work of governmental bodies and international organizations will lead to a delay in decision-making, with many heads of international organizations staying away from their headquarters for months. The direct negative outcome will affect all goals, beginning with the third goal, which calls for ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all. Health has been the first victim of the pandemic, as the world has lost almost all progress made in recent years, after having to direct available resources to address the current emergency, at the expense of universal health care.

The fourth goal, which calls for inclusive and equitable quality education, suffered a severe blow with more than 1 billion students under lockdown, a situation aggravated by a weak digital infrastructure in many poor countries that failed to secure online education.

The eighth goal, which is about promoting sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all, was also hit hard by an unprecedented economic collapse and the loss of tens of millions of jobs. The first and second goals, to end poverty and hunger, have also lost major ground, with tens of millions expected to join the growing club of the poor and hungry.

Whereas the seventh goal calls for ensuring access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all, a shortage in maintenance workers led to breakdowns in the existing electricity networks, and the decline in investments halted the construction of new production plants, whether they adopted traditional or renewable sources. According to the figures of the International Energy Agency, investments in energy in recent months have witnessed the largest decrease in history, and are expected to decline by 20 percent by the end of this year, compared to last year, at the equivalent of \$400 billion. The agency warned that this will affect energy supplies as well as hinder the shift to clean energy sources.

Whatever the hopes may be, the reality is that the current situation will negatively affect the commitments to curb climate change, as according to the Paris Agreement, developing countries were set this year to start receiving \$100 billion annually for climate action. In the absence of stable financing for practical and long-term measures, the expected funding delay will not be compensated by the temporary decrease in emissions from industry and transportation.

On the other hand, some positive indicators have emerged, the most prominent of which is that achieving the SDGs, including environmental protection, is still on the national and international agendas, despite health and economic setbacks. The challenge has prompted all to acknowledge once again the imperativeness of international cooperation in addressing cross-border disasters, whether related to health or the environment.

Despite the isolationist tendencies of some governments, and populist movements that disregard environmental measures, including climate action, the European Union announced, when it recently allocated additional 750 billion euros for the EU Recovery Fund, that aid would be conditional on adopting green policies that would be reflected in both public and private sector spending, including efficient buildings, renewable energy and clean transport.

According to announced policies, the recovery funds allocated by developed countries will address environmental challenges alongside health, social and economic matters, which will boost achieving the SDGs within national borders.

But what about developing countries that need assistance to implement the required transformation? What are the implications of the global economic meltdown on donations, loans and investments in developing countries, whether they come from governments, development funds or the private sector? Here lies the big challenge.

The need of donor countries to pump massive funds to save their own economies will put pressure on funds earmarked for foreign aid. Country contributions to the budgets of international organizations and development funds will decrease. This compels a new approach, because attracting money and investments will become more difficult and subject to strict conditions, the most important of which are good governance, efficiency and the fight against corruption. Private investors will demand more guarantees, and aid agencies will ask for sterner assurances that soft loans and donations are well used and are not wasted to corruption.

Developing countries need to get their affairs in order, redefine their priorities, and invest their human and natural resources in a highly efficient manner, to show that they are worthy of external support. On the other hand, international organizations and development funds must adhere to strict efficiency standards, focusing on results and actual productivity, not on the number of projects or the size of loans and aid agreements.

There is no doubt that the global catastrophe we are going through will change the timetable for achieving the SDGs, including climate change and environmental protection, especially in developing countries. But we must admit that the failure to meet the conditions for achieving these goals is not solely the result of the new pandemic, as it preceded it. It should not be allowed to use the pandemic as an excuse for delay.

Changing the course was required long ago. Hopefully the shock caused by the pandemic will constitute an impetus for long-awaited new development policies, at the national, regional and international levels. Instead of the pandemic hindering sustainable development efforts, a successfully managed exit from the crisis may put them on the right track.

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