



Impact of COVID-19: perspective from Voluntary National Reviews

When countries expressed their readiness to present their voluntary national reviews (VNRs) at the 2020 High-level political forum on sustainable development (HLPF) in September 2019, trends towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were uneven. There were some favorable tendencies globally.

In particular progress was being made towards eradicating extreme poverty, lowering child mortality rates, advancing gender equality in some areas or improving access to electricity in the poorest countries. These advances resulted in no small part from the impact of policies conducted by many Governments and their partners since 2015.

At the same time, many challenges remained, and even deepened, including the rise in hunger, the increase in greenhouse gas emissions, persistent inequality, the loss of biodiversity, inadequate means of implementation and weaknesses in institutions. The SDG Summit in September 2019 and its political declaration were very clear that we were not yet on track for realizing the SDGs by 2030¹ and that a major acceleration effort was needed in the coming ten years—the Decade of Action and Delivery for Sustainable Development.

The VNRs provide the international community with insights on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the country level. They show that there has been a near universal response to the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. They also show that country ownership of the 2030 Agenda is strong and that efforts to implement the Agenda are unwavering despite the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Many Governments have prioritized the integration of the SDGs into their national plans and policies. They have been creating the institutional arrangements that help drive and monitor progress towards the transformation needed in economies and societies in order to reach the SDGs.

Today, with the COVID-19 pandemic, many of the hard-earned gains towards the SDGs are in jeopardy and years of development progress might be reversed. Exist-

Summary

- » COVID-19 is having a profound effect on the socioeconomic development of countries and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development undermining SDG progress and exacerbating already existing inequalities and exclusion.
- » A variety of mitigation measures are being put in place, through great efforts and at great cost, to address the impact of COVID-19 and reduce the risk of future crises, especially for the poorest and most vulnerable people and countries. It is important to work in an emergency mode to respond to the health impact, but also to keep the focus on the longer term, building resilience and using the 2030 Agenda as a roadmap.
- » Multilateralism and global solidarity are essential to build back better by responding to COVID-19 in a way that supports the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and SDGs, bolsters results and addresses gaps in sustainable development.

ing gaps and challenges might become more pronounced and difficult to overcome.

HOW COVID-19 WAS REFLECTED IN 2020 VNRs

Forty-seven countries presented VNRs² at the 2020 HLPF, out of which 26 were first time presenters, 20 were second time presenters and one country presented for the third time. Out of the 46 reports submitted, 39 countries explicitly mention the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and many devote a separate section to the pandemic in their reports.

The findings below are based on these reports. They confirm that COVID-19 can undermine or reverse progress in the implementation of the SDGs and disrupt development efforts. The reports show that small, vulnerable, highly indebted, and tourism-dependent states are among the hardest hit. Many countries, especially developing countries and least developed countries, called for

1 Political declaration, A/RES/74/4.

2 <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/>.

Figure 1

Daily reported cases of COVID-19, United States and European Union



Source: UN DESA graphic using data from the World Health Organization (<https://covid19.who.int>, accessed 25 June 2020, 2.25 p.m. CEST)

global solidarity, expressing their need for international assistance. A strong message was the necessity for a coordinate international response to the pandemic and for cooperation by all stakeholders.

The VNRs reports describe the health measures undertaken to combat COVID-19, the socio-economic impact of the pandemic and related measures as well as the roles of various stakeholders in combatting COVID-19. Countries also mentioned the impact of the crisis on the conduct of their VNRs, notably the consultations with stakeholders required for preparing the VNRs.

Some reports underlined a point also made by the Secretary-General, namely that, if we had been more advanced in SDG implementation, the impact of COVID-19 might have been less severe.

HEALTH IMPACT AND MEASURES

The VNRs highlight a variety of measures in the area of health. Some countries have been making their national health systems more accessible and more resilient to adequately combat COVID-19. Some elaborated that measures include addressing the primary and secondary impacts of the pandemic. Regarding primary impacts, sick people are identified and provided with patient and hospital care and containment measures are implemented including promoting hygiene and social distancing. Regarding the secondary impact of COVID-19, countries such as Costa Rica report identifying its negative impacts

and implementing response measures. These response measures include raising salaries for healthcare workers and providing them with adequate training and personal protective equipment; modernizing and ensuring timely delivery of medical equipment (e.g. artificial lung ventilators); increasing epidemiological and laboratory effectiveness; establishing modular hospitals, isolation centers and sanitary cordons as well as digitizing patient data for use by multiple health workers and providing data intelligence platforms to minimize fatalities. Measures also include providing health coverage and access to medicine for all (Argentina, Austria, Benin, Costa Rica, Panama, Trinidad and Tobago, Ukraine).

Other countries report implementing measures to trace and isolate persons who have been in contact with COVID-19-positive patients, accommodating these people in hotels and providing them with quality and safe food, creating health corridors and disinfecting public transport (Armenia, Bangladesh, Mozambique).

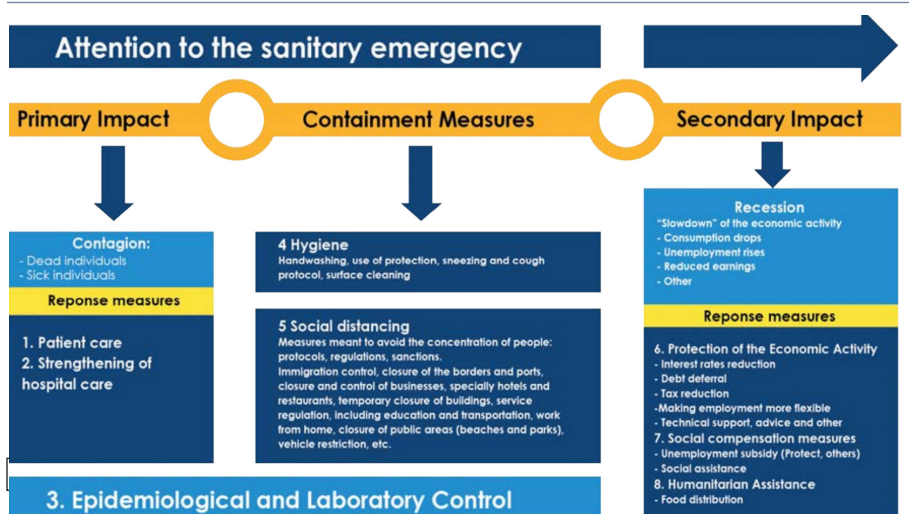
Data intelligence platform

The Government of Bangladesh facilitated data-driven decision-making by creating a **data intelligence platform** to minimize fatalities. The analytics help to identify hotspots and high-risk cases, analyze and predict requirements for patient management and guide resource allocation (health workers, testing facilities, hospitals, isolation units, ICT, etc.). They thus guide the Government in developing timely policy responses. The platform integrates data of national helplines and hotlines, epidemiological data, COVID-19 test data, data of patients suspected of having COVID-19, citizen's self-reporting data, community health worker reports, mobility data, and other relevant data to generate insights for decision making and planning. Advanced-level technology is deployed (artificial intelligence, machine learning, big data analytics, cloud technology, etc.). Various data models are being used to monitor the situation, identify the concentration and risk zones, and take the necessary measures. The platform includes dashboards to assist healthcare providers and other stakeholders to make decisions, to exchange information and to raise awareness.

Source: Bangladesh VNR report, 2020

Figure 2

COVID-19 impact and care actions



Source: Costa Rica Second VNR report, 2020

SOCIOECONOMIC IMPACT AND MEASURES

Economic measures

The VNR reports underline the severe impact of COVID-19 on the economy and society, indicating that the pandemic exacerbated inequalities and widened divides, with the most detrimental impact on those who are already at risk of being left behind (Argentina, Austria, Bangladesh, Comoros, DR Congo, Georgia, India, Niger, Nigeria).

The pandemic affected macroeconomic stability and, in many countries, made the debt situation more acute. A number of countries described the impact of the pandemic on particular sectors of the economy. Agriculture, food security and nutrition, education, tourism, trade, transport are some of the sectors that have been the hardest hit, especially in the least developed countries and small island developing States. Therefore some countries provided economic stimulus packages targeting specific sectors (Gambia, Micronesia, Samoa, Seychelles, Ukraine).

Assistance to unemployed in the tourism sector

Part of the national response to COVID-19 in Micronesia was the recently passed economic stimulus package, which allowed businesses within the hard-hit tourism industry to apply for wage subsidies and receive gross tax revenue rebates, via the Tourism Sector Mitigation Fund.

Source: FS of Micronesia VNR report, 2020

Many countries created emergency assistance programmes and emergency response funds for employers and employees so as to support sustainable and continuing economic development and provide macroeconomic stability – some with support from the World Bank, IMF, WHO or UNICEF. This involved supporting individual economic entities in countries' priority sectors to address the liquidity-related risks expected due to the spread of COVID-19. Measures also included providing assistance in re-financing personal and business loans, including student loans, lowering taxes for some sectors, providing interest rate subsidies, supporting small and medium

enterprises (SMEs) and providing lump-sum grants to preserve jobs (Argentina, Armenia, Brunei Darussalam, Costa Rica, India, Micronesia, Moldova, Morocco, Nigeria, Panama, Russian Federation).

Some countries described the establishment of mechanisms, such as national committees or operational headquarters, to combat the pandemic and coordinate measures undertaken by different entities (Bangladesh, Bulgaria, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Morocco, North Macedonia, Papua New Guinea, Russian Federation). Many countries stressed the need for a coordinated approach and cooperation by all stakeholders. Some described how parliaments (Armenia, Bulgaria, Moldova) have passed some

Economic measures

The Bulgarian government has introduced a variety of economic measures to mitigate the negative impact of COVID-19, with a special focus on small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and the sectors that have been hit the hardest. Grants are provided to SMEs under the Operational Programme "Innovations and Competitiveness", funded by the European Union (EU). Whereas preferential credit measures are mainly aimed at providing liquidity for SMEs, large enterprises are also eligible for financing under the programme. The "Financing for Urban Development" programme can direct funding to public-private partnerships and companies that have been struck by the crisis. Self-employed persons and agricultural producers are also eligible for financial support. The Bulgarian National Bank approved a moratorium on private payments of credits related to COVID-19 on April 10, 2020.

Source: Bulgaria VNR report, 2020

temporary laws, including on investment and taxation, to ease the burden of COVID-19 on the economy. Others stressed the role of volunteers, especially youth, who distributed food rations to households in need during the height of the pandemic (Brunei Darussalam). Some others described certain sectors coming together to improve the situation of their beneficiaries, such as educators providing classes to those families who do not have access to internet, especially in rural areas (Ecuador, Georgia) or delivering on other important activities in society (Liberia), including preventing violence against women and children (Moldova).

The project “Teleschool”

The project “Teleschool” was created during the pandemic and offers TV lessons to those school children who do not have access to the internet or do not own a computer (mostly living in the rural areas). The program started on March 30, 2020. Television lessons are designed for each class by subjects and are conducted in both Georgian and ethnic minority languages – Armenian and Azerbaijani. The TV lessons are also simultaneously translated by sign language interpreters. In addition, sporting activities are offered to the students in between TV lessons. The proposed TV program also includes educational cognitive programs and film screenings.

Source: Georgia VNR report, 2020

Social measures

Many countries described social measures to provide support to vulnerable people, including students, families with children, pregnant women, persons with disabilities, older persons, migrants, workers in informal

Leaving no one behind

Specific measures have been taken by the Government of Morocco, directly or with support from civil society, in favour of vulnerable categories including homeless children, persons with disabilities, the elderly and women in vulnerable situations. These measures focused on the provision of urgent and local services, protection from violence, psychological support, and the provision of advice and guidance. In this context, the prison population has been given special attention. A number of prisoners received a royal pardon whereas preventive measures were taken to protect prisoners from the spread of the virus.

Source: Morocco VNR report, 2020

economy, etc. Examples of measures taken are: increasing the scope of social safety nets, including rental housing for migrant populations and the urban poor, building homes for homeless, assistance to unemployed families with children or through compensation or forfeiting tuitions fees for students, or distribution of free food items to low-income families (Bangladesh, Bulgaria, Gambia, India, Micronesia, Moldova, Morocco, Panama, Trinidad and Tobago, Uzbekistan).

MEDIUM- AND LONG-TERM PLANS TO STRENGTHEN ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL RESILIENCE TO COVID-19 AND FUTURE PANDEMICS

Many countries reported that they have started to look at medium- and long-term plans to strengthen economic, social and environmental resilience to COVID-19 and future pandemics. This includes creating economic stabilization and recovery plans, multisectoral preparedness and risk response plans, as well as developing national plans based on the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (notably on preparedness), national early warning and emergency operational centers, with the ultimate purpose to combat both the current COVID-19 pandemic and any future pandemics (Bangladesh, Ecuador, Liberia, Mozambique, Zambia). Many VNR reports underlined the importance of the use of technology, not only for virtual communication, but also for service delivery and doing business in general as well as in research and innovation (Armenia, Finland, Moldova, Nigeria, Zambia).

Improving preparedness

The COVID-19 pandemic exerted strong pressures on the health system, including on surveillance, diagnostics, personal protective equipment, awareness campaigns, containment and treatment. This experience is being used to improve preparedness for future disease outbreaks by focusing on: (i) diseases surveillance, (ii) testing and other diagnostics, (iii) building community awareness, (iv) personal protective equipment and (v) case management and treatment.

Source: Zambia VNR report, 2020

IMPACT ON VNR PREPARATIONS

The majority of countries reported that COVID-19 had disrupted the last phase of VNR preparations, especially in relation to stakeholder engagement which is an important dimension in carrying out a VNR. A number of

countries therefore posted reports on the government's official websites to reach a wider audience. This enabled stakeholders and NGOs to submit proposals and descriptions of their efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda for inclusion in the VNR report. Some countries reported challenges related to ICT and tried to reach those in more remote areas either through interviews conducted over the phone or through community radio stations (Gambia, Liberia). Some, however, underlined that they had a good experience with virtual preparations, saying that they could reach a wider range of stakeholders, especially youth who are savvier with technology. They also indicated that these virtual meetings came at a lower cost than in-person meetings, thus freeing resources for other important matters.

Peer learning

Virtual learning from peers was organized by UNDP, UN DESA and the Republic of Korea's International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) online upon the request of DR Congo, a country that presented its first VNR at 2020 HLPF. The Central African Republic and Côte d'Ivoire, countries that presented their VNRs at the 2019 HLPF, and Burundi, which was also presenting at 2020 HLPF, joined the webinar and shared best practices and lessons learned on SDG implementation, especially in fragile and post-conflict situations, in order to inform the preparations of DR Congo's VNR.

Source: DR Congo VNR Report, 2020

Engagement and coordination of stakeholders

As the VNR process was conducted in a very challenging environment due to COVID-19, the Government of Malawi, through its National Planning Commission (NPC), used an assortment of consultation platforms to engage all stakeholders in the VNR, including those in the hardest to reach areas. As in-person workshops were not possible, virtual means were used to collect ideas from the general public. These included phone-in radio programmes and interviews with key informants among others.

Source: Malawi VNR report, 2020

BUILDING BACK BETTER

Almost all countries stressed that the current efforts to kick-start economic recovery and overcome the health crisis must be aligned with, and guided by, the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. Many underlined that the pandemic can be an opportunity to find new solutions for building more sustainable economies, for sharing gains more widely, for creating more inclusive and equal societies with access to basic services and education opportunities for all, for better preserving the environment, and for strengthening measures to combat climate change (Austria, Comoros, DR Congo, Ecuador, Finland, Georgia, Liberia, Malawi). Most countries underlined importance of multilateralism and global solidarity to get the world back on track to recover from COVID-19 and achieve the SDGs.