

**Virtual Inter-agency Expert Group Meeting on Implementation of the Third United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty (2018-2027)**  
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**Dr. Kalterina Shulla**

Associated Researcher  
ZEF, Centre for Development Research  
University of Bonn  
Chair of RCE middle Albania

## **The COVID-19 pandemic and the achievement of the SDGs**

### **Overview of COVID-19 impact for the SDGs**

In 2015, the world committed to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Global crises caused by the pandemic of COVID-19, since early 2020, can risk the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and as a consequence, the SDGs implementation process can be slowed or even reversed. According to the High level political forum (HLPF) in 2020, the SDGs even before pandemic were not on track to be reached by 2030<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, it is crucial not to lose what is done so far. The UN, Sustainable Development Goals Progress Chart 2020, reveals several SDGs Targets as regressing or with no/limited progress, where among others are: “access to adequate, safe and affordable housing” (SDG11), “reduce global greenhouse gas emissions,” (SDG13), “full and productive employment for all” (SDG 8) and “reduce inequality within countries” (SDG 10).

The COVID-19 pandemic is impacting many sectors of society<sup>2</sup>, such as health, education, economy, which are related to thematic issues covered by the SDG3 (Health & Well-Being), SDG4 (Quality Education), SDG8 (Decent Work & Economic Growth), SDG12 (Consumption & Production), SDG13 (Climate Action), etc.

Global Human development, (containing education, health and living standards) experienced a decline in 2020, especially related to an increase in woman’s violence and food insecurity<sup>3</sup>. UN report of the Secretary-General, “Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals” (2021), states that, as a result of the pandemic an additional 83-132 million people can suffer hunger and different forms of malnutrition in 2020 (SDG2). Furthermore, about 90% of countries, suffered disruption of health services (SDG3). Regarding climate (SDG13), despite a temporary reduction of emissions in 2020 due to the lock-down measures, overall in 2020, the Greenhouse Gases (GHG) increased around the world<sup>4</sup>.

Although difficulties were foreseen even before pandemic for SDG1, (*baseline projections suggested that 6 per cent of the global population would still be living in extreme poverty in*

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<sup>1</sup> UN (2020) Sustainable Development Goals Progress Chart 2020, [progress-chart-2020.pdf \(un.org\)](#)

<sup>2</sup> Berchin II, de Andrade JBSO. GAIA 3.0: effects of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak on sustainable development and future perspectives. Res Glob. 2020;2:100014.

<sup>3</sup> [Building forward from COVID-19 towards the ambition of the 2030 Agenda | SDG Integration \(undp.org\)](#)

<sup>4</sup> UN (2021) Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals Report of the Secretary-General. [Microsoft Word - SG SDG Progress report 2021 unedited](#)

2030)<sup>5</sup>, due to the pandemic it is expected an increased by 110 million of people living in poverty<sup>6</sup>. The pandemic impact is bigger among the vulnerable groups (women, youth, low-wage workers, small and medium enterprises, informal sector)<sup>7</sup>. It is expected that economic crisis will have a stronger impact for the developing countries<sup>8</sup>, which can deepen the inequalities between countries, thus, compromising the achievement of SDG 10 (reduced inequalities).

In the education sector, according to UNESCO, more than 1.5 billion learners are affected<sup>9</sup>, thus challenging the Goal 4 implementation. This can influence the long-term implementation of the entire 2030 Agenda, as Goal 4, and especially Target 4.7, on Education for Sustainable Development (which evolves along with sustainability issues), are strongly interconnected with the other goals<sup>10</sup>.

On the other, hand, unprecedented global crisis enhanced the pressure for multilateral system cooperation (“*which needs functioning institutions, and a level of political leadership to drive those institutions towards an outcome*”<sup>11</sup>). Thus, highlighting the importance of the SDG17 “Partnerships for the Goals” for global cooperation processes. Another negative effect of COVID-19 pandemic for the SDGs, is that data production, which is crucial to the achievement of SDGs is being disrupted<sup>12</sup>.

In addition, the unusual circumstances created by the COVID-19 pandemic have intensified the interdependencies between the SDGs. Intersection between health and sustainability challenges was made clearer by the pandemic<sup>13</sup>. The regress on the implementation of the immediately most affected SDGs, can influence the achievement of other SDGs, in short or long-term, creating a new pattern of interconnectedness between them, which can be related to consequences pf the COVID-19 pandemic.

For post-pandemic recovery and resilience towards future challenges, it is important to understand the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for the SDGs, not only because the SDGs framework can serve as a useful tool if properly incorporated in the post-pandemic actions and recovery plans, but also because it can be a good opportunity to synergise the world different agendas for a sustainable future. Furthermore, the encompassing nature of the SDGs which enables addressing multiple global challenges (e.g., climate change, poverty, water, peace) emphasises their importance for the efficiency of the recovery processes.

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<sup>5</sup> [Goal 1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere – United Nations Sustainable Development](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Microsoft Word - Zero draft MD ECOSOC-HLPF - 17 April FINAL \(un.org\)](#)

<sup>7</sup> Berchin II, de Andrade JBSO. GAIA 3.0: effects of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak on sustainable development and future perspectives. *Res Glob.* 2020;2:100014.

<sup>8</sup> Barbier E, Bugess J. Sustainability and development after COVID-19. *World Dev.* 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2020.105082>.

<sup>9</sup> [Global Education Coalition \(unesco.org\)](#)

<sup>10</sup> Shulla K, Leal Filho W, Lardjane S, Sommer J, Borgemeister C. Sustainable development education in the context of the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development. *Int J Sustain Dev World Ecol.* 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504509.2020.1721378>.

<sup>11</sup> UNICEF. [Reimagining multilateralism in the time of COVID-19 | UNICEF Office of Global Insight & Policy](#)

<sup>12</sup> UN (2020) Sustainable Development Goals Report. [The need for data innovations in the time of COVID-19 — SDG Indicators \(un.org\)](#)

<sup>13</sup> The Lancet Public Health (2020). Will the COVID-19 pandemic threaten the SDGs?. *The Lancet. Public health*, 5(9), e460. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667\(20\)30189-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(20)30189-4)

There are negative consequences associated with non-achieving the SDGs, which can be related to degradation of environmental problems, poverty and hunger, economic growth and well-being<sup>14</sup>. But due to the unexpected crisis, there is a shift of countries' priorities, which is diminishing their efforts to reach the SDGs. Countries as main responsible for SDGs implementation, can use the crisis as an opportunity to strengthen their commitment for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, by placing sustainability at the core of recovery plans<sup>15</sup>.

## Interconnections between the SDGs

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is indivisible, where Goals have positive or negative synergies between them<sup>16</sup>. The global pandemic has highlighted the indivisible character of the 2030 Agenda and intensified the interconnection between the SDGs. Understanding these interactions can play a role for consistent policy actions<sup>17</sup>. The SDGs interconnections can take place in different ways such as through: (1) goal–goal interactions; (2) target-target interactions; (3) indicator-indicator interactions; (4) policy-policy interactions; (5) goal/target/indicator and/or policy interactions; (6) external entities and (7) geographic location<sup>18</sup>. Also these interactions can be more visible through real case observations<sup>19</sup>.

Findings (based on literature and observations) related to the consequences of COVID-19 pandemic for several SDGs, as presented in the publication “Effects of COVID-19 for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)” by Shulla et al (2021)<sup>20</sup>, emphasise that due to the global pandemic, the linkages between the most effected SDGs are intensified and their impact on other Goals is increased. Current emerging challenges for the implementation of SDG3 (Health & Well-Being), SDG4 (Quality Education), SDG8 (Decent Work & Economic Growth), SDG12 (Consumption & Production) and SDG13 (Climate Action), can aggravate further implementation of the SDG5 (Gender Equality), SDG9 (Infrastructure & Innovation) and SDG10 (Reducing Inequalities), SDG17 (partnerships for the goals) and SDG11 (sustainable cities).

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<sup>14</sup> Leal Filho W, Wolf F, Lange Salvia A. *et al.* (2020). Heading towards an unsustainable world: some of the implications of not achieving the SDGs. *Discov Sustain* 1, 2. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43621-020-00002-x>.

<sup>15</sup> Leal Filho W, Brandli L, Lange Salvia A, Rayman-Bacchus L, Platje J. COVID-19 and the UN sustainable development goals: threat to solidarity or an opportunity? *Sustainability*. 2020;12:5343. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12135343>

<sup>16</sup> Nilsson M. Important interactions among the sustainable development goals under review at the high-level political forum 2017. SEI Working Paper 2017–06. Stockholm: Stockholm Environment Institute; 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Ament JM, Freeman R, Carbone C, Vassall A, Watts C. An empirical analysis of synergies and tradeoffs between sustainable development goals. *Sustainability*. 2020;12(20):8424. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12208424>.

<sup>18</sup> Bennich T, Weitz N, Carlsen H. Deciphering the scientific literature on SDG interactions: a review and reading guide. *Sci Total Environ*. 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2020.138405>.

<sup>19</sup> Andreoni V, Vargas RV. Tracking the interlinkages across SDGs: the case of hill centered education network in Bogota, Colombia. *Sustainability*. 2020;12:7924. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12197924>.

<sup>20</sup> Shulla, K., Voigt, BF., Cibian, S. et al. Effects of COVID-19 on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). *Discov Sustain* 2, 15 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43621-021-00026-x>.

Table 1. Key implications of SDG4; SDG12; SDG13; SDG8 and SDG3 for other SDGs, driven by the COVID-19 pandemic (adopted from source: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43621-021-00026-x>)

SDGs	Key implications to other SDGs	Explanation
SDG 4 “Quality Education”	SDG 10 “Reduced inequalities” SDG 5 “Gender equality” SDG13 “Climate Action” SDG 9 “Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure”	Online learning: Unequal access to knowledge and educational resources; Deepened differences between genders, because of the limited access to online education especially for girls; Demand for access to technological infrastructure and technological resources; Demand for technological innovation; Reduced mobility, due to travelling restrictions related to educational activities and physical exchanges
SDG 8 Decent Work and economic growth	SDG 3 “Health and Well-being” SDG 5 “Gender Equality” SDG 10 “Reduced inequalities” SDG 4 “Quality Education”	Remote working: Revealed related health problems (posture defects/overweight/diabetes /short sightedness/sleep disturbance/addiction/risk behaviour); Demand for capacity strengthening, due to insufficient self-management/poor digital competences; Forced homework can increase social-cultural injustice; Job loss, reduced working hours etc., can increase inequalities
SDG 12 Responsible consumption and production	SDG 1 “No poverty” SDG 9 “Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure”; SDG 15 “Life on Land” SDG 4 “Quality Education”	Job loss/reduced working hours Decreased demand for goods and services; Opinion change and awareness raising for responsible use of resources; Pressure to innovate for businesses; Education for sustainable development
SDG 13 Climate action	SDG 11 “Sustainable cities” SDG 3 “Health and Well-being” SDG 8 Decent Work and economic growth; SDG 15 “Life on Land”	Temporary decline of CO2 emissions; (cycling; reduce business travelling/air quality); Home working/reduce of physical contacts; Awareness raising for importance of ecosystems and responsible use of resources
SDG 3 Health and Well-Being	SDG 1: No poverty SDG 8 Decent Work and economic growth SDG 10 “Reduced inequalities” SDG 17 “Partnership for the Goals”	Health problems contribute to the increased poverty; Inability to work due to health effect economic conditions; Health problems can increase inequalities; Global pandemic highlighted the need for global cooperation

**To conclude**, the post-pandemic recovery process can be directed towards sustainability. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development can be a useful tool for the post-pandemic recovery processes and future resilience. Although several SDGs are affected more than others by the pandemic, their interconnectedness influence the progress on others, thus compromising the overall progress of the 2030 Agenda.

Scientific work for identifying new SDGs synergies and dependencies fostered by the pandemic in specific contexts, is important in order to address in clusters multiple challenges. By addressing or financing for the SDGs in cluster, based on their most positive synergies in the given contexts, it can be achieved more with less resources. The “UN Research Roadmap for the COVID-19 Recovery” identifies key research priorities for the socio-economic recovery related to SDGs progress, and stresses the role of research for finding new ways to resolving problems created by the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>21</sup>.

It is also important to seize the opportunity of a positive trend on behaviour change, as a result of the pandemic, towards more sustainable life styles. Citizen’s awareness is raising regarding the importance of sustainability and of balanced ecosystems for health and wellbeing. In many countries it was experienced an increase in the use of alternative mobility ways, especially biking. Many cities around the world have as well intensified measures for non-motorized transport alternatives to solve air pollution issues<sup>22</sup>. (For example, Paris pedestrian plan for 325\$ million bicycle network, Montreal 320 km of new pedestrian and bike paths, Brussels 40 km of car lines to bike paths, etc.). Therefore, recovery polices based on sustainable frameworks can have more support from communities. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which encompasses sustainability in all forms, can be a useful framework and guideline toward a sustainable future.

*“The pandemic is acting as a driving force for changes in main sectors and highlights the interdependence of sustainability issues embraced in the SDGs. Lock-down related effects such online education, forced home-office work, unemployment or decreased working hours, reduced mobility, etc., have enhanced social-structural injustice and inequality (SDG5) and (SDG10). Observations and analyses also indicate stronger dependencies between SDG4, SDG8, SDG3 and SDG13. Nevertheless, the pandemic has presented a unique opportunity for change, as more people are aware of the urgency in which sustainability issues must be addressed and of the importance that balanced ecosystems have for health and wellbeing. There is also growing pressure for innovation (SDG9) and global collaboration (SDG17)”<sup>23</sup>.*

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<sup>21</sup> UN. (2021). Research Roadmap for the COVID-19 Recovery.

<https://www.un.org/en/coronavirus/communication-resources/un-research-roadmap-covid-19-recovery>.

<sup>22</sup> Aloï A, et al. Effects of the COVID-19 lockdown on urban mobility: empirical evidence from the City of Santander. Sustainability. 2020. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12093870>.

<sup>23</sup> Shulla, K., Voigt, BF., Cibian, S. et al. Effects of COVID-19 on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Discov Sustain 2, 15 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43621-021-00026-x>.