

REPORT OF THE HLPF VIRTUAL SIDE EVENT  
“Building Back After the Pandemic: Work, Health and Well-being”  
15 July 2021

The Virtual Side Event to the HLPF was organised by DISD and focused on social development policy issues related to Goal 3 on *good health and well-being* and Goal 8 on *decent work and economic growth*. The panel was chaired by Dr. Jomo Kwame Sundaram, and the speakers included: Dr. Michel Sidibé, Prof. Dzodzi Tsikata, Prof. Duncan Green and Ms. Ayesha Constable.

**Alcinda Honwana**, Inter-Regional Adviser at DISD, and the main organiser of the event, opened the session and introduced the panel, inviting them to reflect on how to optimize the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, in light of the fact that the pandemic seems far from over, as new variants and new waves of infections continue to affect several countries in the global South and North. She concluded by stating the importance of examining the present to build stronger and more sustainable foundations for the future.

**Dr. Michel Sidibé**, started by pointing out that we were falling short of the SDG’s well before the Covid-19 pandemic. He posited that the current unprecedented global crisis created by the pandemic revealed faultlines in our societies. In terms of health, the deployment of Covid-19 vaccines has not been inclusive nor adequate; it has been biased in favor of the developed countries, “it’s sad to say, but we are facing a vaccine apartheid” affirmed Dr. Sidibé. This underscores the importance of establishing the [African Medicines Agency \(AMA\)](#): to strengthen the regulatory systems for drugs and vaccines; to fight against the scourge of counterfeit drugs and medical products; and, to take advantage of rich flora that can enhance African pharmacopoeia. He asserted the need to move from a disease-centered approach, to one that is human-centered; one that understands health as a common good, rather than a profit-making endeavour. Dr. Sidibé called for a debate about global health democracy, and for the reinvention of new models of solidarity that reinforce multilateralism and build greater equity among nations.

**Prof. Dzodzi Tsikata**, opened her remarks with the [UN Secretary-General’s statement](#): “Covid-19 has been likened to an Xray, revealing fractures in the fragile skeleton of the societies we have built....” She went on to stress the structural inequalities that permeate the experiences of populations prior to as well as during the pandemic, including food availability, unemployment and lacking social protections. African nations, Prof. Tsikata explained, have been in crisis for many years, making Covid-19 a ‘crisis within a crisis.’ Short-term containment and mitigation measures along with poor vaccine rollout have led to wholly deficient responses to the pandemic in the global South. This is exacerbated as wealthier nations hoard stocks and practice “[vaccine nationalism](#).” Current dominant economic and social policies, she asserted, are not fit for purpose. Rather what is required is a new social contract between citizens and the State, and a rededication to long-term planning and structural transformation. As she emphasized, “the SDGs should become means for demanding accountability rather than ends in themselves”.

**Prof. Duncan Green** illustrated how social inequalities have been exacerbated during the pandemic by highlighting the huge discrepancies in profit distribution between shareholders and workers in the supermarket sector during the pandemic in the UK. Workers received only 1 percent of profits made by the sector, [according to a 2021 Oxfam study](#). He pointed out the policy implications of these inequities and agreed with Prof. Tsikata on the need for a new social contract, not just between States and citizens, but between businesses and workers. Covid-19, Prof. Green explained, should be understood as a [critical juncture](#), an event that opens possibilities for structural transformations. The disparate experiences of this pandemic underscore the need to (i) revitalize the role of the State; (ii) strengthen social protection regimes; (iii) change the imbalances of power between nations; and (iv) create what Dr. Sidibé called a “global health democracy”. Prof. Green concluded by urging us to seize on this momentum to strengthen the SDGs and institutionalize the changes that will make sure no “one is left behind.”

**Ms. Ayesha Constable** began by stating that the pandemic had been wrongly labelled as “the great equalizer.” The effects of the pandemic are being and will be disproportionately felt in the global South. Flawed dominant socio-economic models have exposed the economic volatility, gender inequality and climate vulnerability within the region. Ms. Constable highlighted how education as a key to development and access to decent work, has been hindered by the [digital divide that precludes schooling](#) in poor countries. Apart from the loss of knowledge provision, unemployed young people are even more uncertain about their futures. She went on to discuss women’s loss of work, the undervaluation of the care economy, the [‘feminization of poverty’](#), and called for gender sensitive socio-economic policies. Finally, she asserted that “Covid-19 is a dress rehearsal for climate.” It showcases what will happen if we continue with “business as usual.” The pandemic is happening concurrently with climate change and populations have been juggling the two crises. Ms. Constable closed by saying “we cannot wait to build back better; we need to build better now!”

**Dr Jomo Sundaram** summed up the speakers’ presentations by making three main points: Firstly, we are far from the end of the pandemic, it has, in fact, become endemic. The global South is severely handicapped as pharmaceutical transnational corporations have not made tests, treatments, PPE and vaccines affordable available to poor nations. Secondly, global South countries have been hesitant to undertake stronger fiscal measures due to various constraints. On the other hand, global North countries have spent more on treatments and vaccines, and for relief and recovery. This leads to a “two-track recovery”, which will further set back progress on achievement of the SDGs. Thirdly, he stated that what is required is an “all of government approach” and an “whole of society approach” beyond public health and police enforcement measures. The longer we delay acting, the more difficult it will be to solve the problem.

The questions and comments from the audience allowed the speakers to expand their analysis of the issues mentioned above, more specifically on the revitalization of the state; the establishment of a new social contract between States and citizens, and businesses and workers; the changes in the power dynamics between rich poor and countries; as well as on the role of the United Nations in promoting stronger solidarity among nations, and the establishment of more inclusive and equitable social policies.

**Dr. Jomo** ended by thanking the panel for a fruitful discussion that he hopes will enhance DISD’s contribution to improve social development policies in these challenging times. And **Alcinda Honwana**, thanked the panel and the audience for the successful HLPF Side Event, on behalf of DISD.