



COVID-19 RESPONSE

ECOSOC's response to COVID-19

Overview

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic with alarming levels of spread and severity. The pandemic has caused severe disruptions to societies and the economy around the world with deep impacts on health, education, economic, financial and social systems.

ECOSOC and its subsidiary bodies immediately shifted focus to address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and to find policy solutions to respond to its devastating effects and recover and rebuild better.

Promoting a robust multilateral response guided by global solidarity has been at the core of the Council's approach to respond to the pandemic, with the longer term view to ensure that the response puts us back on track to realize the SDGs and to reduce vulnerabilities to future shocks and disasters. The 2030 Agenda and the SDGs have remained as the most viable roadmap for recovery and building resilience.

ECOSOC [Financing for Development Forum](#) called for global action to scale up resource mobilization from all sources, to invest into a sustained recovery from COVID-19. The [ECOSOC high-level virtual briefing on COVID-19](#) allowed ECOSOC to dialogue

with the executive heads of critical UN system agencies solutions for an effective and coordinated multilateral response supporting national responses. The Council's [Integration, Humanitarian, High-Level and Operational Activities for Development Segments](#) also addressed the impact of the pandemic. Calls were made for ECOSOC to continue to provide an inclusive platform to explore integrated policies to respond to COVID-19 and more generally to the current and longer-term crises, harnessing the work and expertise of the ECOSOC subsidiary bodies and the UN system.

The various ECOSOC meetings highlighted that the response to COVID-19 needs to be guided by international solidarity and cooperation and aim to put the world back on track to realize the 2030 Agenda.

Although COVID-19 had an impact on the programme of work of the Council, leading to some forums to be scaled down and/or deferred to 2021 ([Financing for Development Forum](#), [Youth Forum](#), [Partnerships Forum](#) and the [Science, Technology and Innovation Forum](#)), the Council found innovative ways to discuss the relevant issues of the forums' thematic focus as well as received valuable inputs from different stakeholders.

ECOSOC's segments and special briefings

In response to the pandemic, ECOSOC held various dialogues, peer-to-peer learnings, sharing of lessons learned and coordination of future actions:

- The [2020 annual meeting of the high-level political forum](#) (HLPF) (7-16 July 2020), convened under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council, examined closely the impacts of COVID-19 on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs under the theme, *Accelerated action and transformative pathways: realizing the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development*. It provided an opportunity to mobilize global cooperation, solidarity and actions for a sustainable recovery from the pandemic. The discussions emphasized the need to respond to the socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19 within the framework of the 2030 Agenda, so that the world preserves the gains made on the SDGs, builds back better and gets back on track for the decade of action and delivery for realizing the SDGs. 47 countries carried out voluntary national reviews (VNRs) of their implementation of the 2030 Agenda. COVID-19 response and recovery were high in the agenda of these countries, in particular in strengthening government policies and institutions as well as mobilizing multi-stakeholder support and partnerships. VNR Labs were also held virtually in 2020 on the margins of the HLPF which addressed challenges and good practices in reporting and responding to the COVID-19 pandemic in ways that support a sustainable recovery and SDG achievement as well as the Decade of Action.
- The High-Level Segment of ECOSOC held a stimulating high-level discussion on “[Multilateralism after COVID 19: What kind of UN do we need at the 75th anniversary?](#)” on 17 July 2020, as the Council’s contribution to the 75th anniversary commemoration of the United Nations. Participants agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and exacerbated vulnerabilities and inequalities within and among countries. This included the fragility of food, trade, health, and climate systems. The pandemic threatened to severely roll back decades of development successes and impeded SDG achievement. This called for a strengthened and renewed multilateralism that was more resilient and better prepared to respond to crises and longer-term challenges to sustainable development, such as climate change and biodiversity loss. For multilateralism to become more responsive and effective, it must become more inclusive and open to a broader variety of voices and viewpoints. Trust among countries and trust in international institutions, which had eroded over time, must be restored. Many speakers stressed that being at the heart of the multilateral system, the UN must be people-centred, promote human rights, be gender-responsive, serve the most vulnerable and furthest behind, and support a whole-of-society and whole-of-government approach to ensure no one is left behind. Some speakers emphasized that the UN must promote equity, inclusivity and transparency and be more agile and responsive to the changing global context. Leaving no one behind was the central to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and protecting the poorest and most vulnerable needed to guide the global response.

- The [2020 ECOSOC Integration Segment](#), convened virtually on 6 July 2020, discussed analysis and policy proposals emanating from ECOSOC subsidiary bodies and the UN system on the 2020 theme of ECOSOC and HLPF “*accelerated action and transformative pathways: realizing the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development*”. In view of the COVID-19 pandemic, the theme was explored through the lens of overcoming the human crisis and recovering better. The Segment brought together the heads of UN entities and chairs of subsidiary bodies, as well as the Chairs of the Groups of LDCs, LLDCs, MICs and AOSIS. The discussions highlighted that silo thinking and approaches continue to hinder progress not only in the implementation of the SDGs, but also in COVID-19 responses. The pandemic impacted all the SDGs and revealed and exacerbated existing vulnerabilities and inequalities. Many viewed the COVID-19 pandemic as a historic opportunity to launch transformative pathways to realize the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. Participants emphasized the need to build on the many interlinkages among the SDGs to rebuild inclusive and resilient societies. Recovering better requires a coherent whole-of-government approach and meaningful engagement of all relevant stakeholders. Financing in all its forms remains critical for the transformations needed to get back on track for the SDGs. Harnessing the work and expertise of the ECOSOC subsidiary bodies and the UN system, the Economic and Social Council should continue to provide an inclusive platform to explore integrated policies to respond to the world’s most urgent challenges.
- ECOSOC convened a high-level virtual Briefing on “[Joining Forces: Effective Policy Solutions for COVID-19 Response](#)” on 11 May 2020. The briefing brought together the Deputy Secretary-General and the executive heads of WHO, FAO, ILO, UNCTAD, ESCAP, and the High-Commissioner for Human Rights, as well as DESA’s USG and Plan International to discuss policy solutions for an inclusive, and human-centric COVID-19 response. The President of ECOSOC issued a [Presidential Statement](#) to share the key messages from the meeting. The President underscored the need to work together to deepen efforts during the Decade of Action for delivery of sustainable development to recover better, and build a healthier, greener, fairer and a more resilient world. The briefing demonstrated how the United Nations system has come together for an inclusive and truly human-centric COVID-19 response. The briefing emphasized that an effective and coordinated multilateral response required strong political will and leadership and global solidarity with the poorest and most vulnerable countries and people. Calls were made to fund the COVID-19 response plans, including the Solidarity Response Fund, the UN-coordinated Global Humanitarian Response Plan for COVID-19 and the UN COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund, as well as the Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator.

ECOSOC's subsidiary bodies – some illustrations

- **The Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (PFII) urges the international community to respond to specific needs and priorities of indigenous peoples in addressing COVID 19**

Though its annual session that typically attracts thousands of representatives of indigenous peoples, had to be postponed, the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (PFII) issued numerous statements, declarations and recommendations on COVID-19 with particular focus on the impact of the pandemic on indigenous peoples. The Chair of the Forum, in April 2020, urged countries to take immediate steps to ensure that indigenous peoples were informed, protected and prioritized during the COVID-19 global health pandemic. The Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, in May 2020, warned that COVID-19 was devastating indigenous communities worldwide and implored governments to ensure that indigenous peoples had access to information about COVID-19 in their languages and to appropriate medical services. COVID-related information and recommendations by and for indigenous peoples was also shared through the UN's website which served as a clearing house for public announcements. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/covid-19.html> Many UN system organizations also used the site to share analysis, policy briefs and practical information to raise awareness and provide guidance. The 2020 International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples (9 August) was dedicated to the theme of "COVID-19 and indigenous peoples' resilience". The theme focused on the innovative ways indigenous peoples continue to demonstrate resilience and strength in the face of the pandemic while confronting grave threats to their survival. It highlighted how the preservation and promotion of indigenous peoples' traditional knowledge and practices could be leveraged during this pandemic and to build back better.

- **Committee for Development Policy on COVID-19**

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Committee for Development Policy (CDP) prepared, in April 2020, a [consolidated response](#) to the crisis urging countries to put SDGs first and foremost, building equal and inclusive societies that are resilient in the face of future pandemics, climate-related disasters and other acute and chronic challenges the world will face within our lifetimes and that of the next generations.

[The Committee for Development Policy \(CDP\)](#) expressed its deep concern about the possible negative impacts of the Covid-19 crisis on Least Developed Countries (LDCs), including those that are graduating or are to be considered for graduation at the triennial review in 2021. The Committee issued a [statement](#) on how it intends to address these impacts in its work on LDCs. Together with its Secretariat, it also started monitoring the nature and extent of that impact.

In its resolution [2020/10](#) on the report of the Committee for Development Policy on its twenty-second session, the Economic and Social Council recognized that COVID-19 severely affects the LDCs, including those graduating from this category, and is likely to impact their sustainable development trajectories. The Council requested the Committee to

undertake a comprehensive study, within existing resources, on the impact of COVID 19 on the least developed country category; and also requested the Committee to closely monitor and incorporate fully into its triennial reviews the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on least developed countries and countries graduating from the category of least developed countries.

- **Commission on Science and Technology for Development**

During its [virtual session \(10-12 June\)](#), the [Commission on Science and Technology for Development \(CSTD\)](#) reaffirmed the importance of supporting research and development and innovation activities as well as skills development, while also recognizing the need to enhance international cooperation and multilateralism in addressing COVID-19 and accelerating SDG progress. CSTD underscored the need to redirect science, technology and innovation (STI) policies beyond merely boosting industrial development, and to ensure that frontier technologies enable marginalized people to transform their lives for the better. CSTD also highlighted the persistent existence of the digital divide and the importance of the Internet and digital technologies in tackling societal challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021, one of the priority themes of CSTD will focus on health through the theme of “*Using STI to close the gap on SDG 3, good health and well-being*”. Ahead of its virtual session, over fifteen CSTD members and several other stakeholders shared country-level STI responses to COVID19, as well as policy solutions and other fixes that ensure that STI are deployed for the good of all. A [synthesis report](#) based on these contributions was prepared by the CSTD Secretariat, which is available along with individual contributions at the [CSTD web site](#).

- **UN Forum on Forests (UNFF)**

While the [United Nations Forum on Forests \(UNFF\)](#) did not hold a meeting of its fifteenth session, the Forum considered proposals through virtual consultations and silence procedure. It adopted an omnibus resolution that included the quadrennial programme of work of the Forum on Forests for the period 2021-2024, which was later also adopted by the Economic and Social Council ([E/RES/2020/14](#)). Reacting to the challenges imposed by COVID-19 on forests, the omnibus resolution requested the Forum secretariat, in consultation with other members of the Collaborative Partnership on Forests, and with input from members of the Forum, to compile an initial assessment of the impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic on sustainable forest management, the forest sector, forest-dependent people, indigenous peoples and local communities, forest financing and international cooperation, and to present the assessment to the Forum at its sixteenth session.

- **Commission on Narcotic Drugs**

The [Commission](#) has, at its regular sessions, a standing agenda item under which it discusses its contributions to the follow-up to and the review and implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Special attention has been given to the implementation of Goal 5 on achieving gender equality and women empowerment. The CND and the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal held a joint virtual high-level event in commemoration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Plan of Action, with a view to also discussing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women and girls. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) has continued to provide support to competent national authorities in the functioning of the system of international trade in controlled substances. INCB Learning, an initiative the Board has been pursuing in response to General Assembly and Commission on Narcotic Drugs resolutions, saw a massive uptake in enrolment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- **Regional Economic Commissions**

The crucial role of the regional and sub-regional follow-up and implementation was recognized by Member States when adopting the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development¹. In response to the above-mentioned mandate, the regional commissions initiated consultative processes leading to the establishment of regional forums on sustainable development. At the General Assembly SDG Summit in September 2019², the valuable contribution of the regional commissions was reaffirmed in particular as the world initiated the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development in 2020.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there was significant disruption to the efforts to organize the regional sustainable development forums this year. Two of the Forums needed to be scaled down and held virtually ([ECE](#) and [ESCAP](#)); two others were held through regional consultations ([ECLAC](#) and [ESCWA](#)) and one was held as scheduled in the early part of the year ([ECA](#)). Results from analysis across all five regions were showing insufficient progress to achieve all SDGs by 2030. COVID-19 has added serious challenges and great complexity to the situation at the regional level. The Regional Economic Commissions then adjusted their support to their members through regional COVID-19 observatories, policy monitoring and tracking tools as well as dedicated knowledge management hubs which have become regional public goods. Regional collaboration and actions that foster peer-learning, best practices, policy solutions and resilience are being leveraged in helping countries to respond, recover and rebuild back better after a cross-border challenge such as a pandemic.

¹ See General Assembly resolution [70/1](#).

² See General Assembly Resolution [74/4](#).

ECLAC prepared COVID-19 special reports on [scenarios and projections in the current crisis](#), [measuring the impact of COVID-19](#) with a view to reactivation, [social challenge in times of COVID-19](#) as well as the [social and economic effects of the pandemic](#) in the Latin America and Caribbean region. The [COVID-19 Observatory in Latin America and the Caribbean](#) as well as the [COVID-19 geoportal](#) on disseminating and monitoring measures to address the pandemic were also created.

UNECE has numerous instruments and initiatives that can support Member States in their efforts to tackle the COVID-19 crisis and promote a sustainable recovery. The aim is to engage its different functions and assets – convening power, normative production and technical cooperation – to help countries to respond to the evolving needs of the region’s member States. UNECE has launched [online platforms](#) and observatories to gather updates and policy resources to help member States respond more effectively to the COVID-19 crisis. A publication – [Responding to the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in the UNECE region](#) – has been prepared to assist in identifying the necessary evidence-based analysis across UNECE areas of expertise to help create the dynamic synergies between relief, reconstruction and long-term development efforts.

ESCAP has created [dedicated online resources](#) to assist its member states in accessing expert advice and policy experience that the region has accumulated throughout the years and which provides a solid foundation to tackle the impact of the pandemic and move forward. While there are concerns that the COVID-19 pandemic and its unprecedented effects might reverse hard-won sustainable development gains, many inspiring examples of action around the region can be observed. These examples include a focus on holistic approaches, implementation of whole-of-society and whole-of-government approaches, and the organization of stakeholder meetings, including by creating spaces for innovation, linking climate action with conservation, developing community-based businesses, strengthening social protection systems, localizing the Sustainable Development Goals and using public-private partnerships. As the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated, in an interconnected world, infectious diseases are no longer the domain of a single country’s Government but require inter-country collaboration. ESCAP has developed a [framework to support the socio-economic response of Asia and the Pacific to the COVID-19 pandemic](#). The framework’s overarching principle supports building back better through integrated policies aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals. Regional action to improve preparedness for the next epidemic will be supported by regional mobilization of resources, joint action plans, shared expertise and the establishment of early warning systems.

ECA has also created a [dedicated online repertoire of resources](#) to support its member states in their response, transition and recovery efforts from the COVID-19 pandemic. ECA [publications and policy briefs](#) address issues related to [lockdown exit strategies](#), [protecting lives and economies](#), [rapid mortality surveillance and epidemic response](#), [statistical perspective on how COVID-19 is changing the world](#) and the [impact of the pandemic on Africa’s energy sector](#) just to name a few. ECA comprehensive collection of [presentations](#), [videos](#), [dialogues](#) and [events](#) have offered valuable advice, lessons learned and peer-to-peer learning to its member states. ECA’ support has also addressed the singularities of sub-regions in the continent with their [sub-regional COVID-19 impact assessments](#).

ESCWA has devoted valuable resources to prepare [policy briefs and publications](#) as well as create opportunities for [experts' interviews and dialogues](#), to guide and encourage urgent action to save lives and repair livelihoods in the Arab Region. The pandemic is spreading fast throughout the region at a time when economies were already battered by conflict and mounting fiscal pressures. The crisis is a stark reminder of the need of an efficient and effective public and health sector as the first line of defense in addressing systemic risks. Resources are available to member states of the Region on the [economic impact of the pandemic](#), [tracking policy responses](#), [COVID-19 economic cost to the Arab Region](#), the pandemic's impact on [poverty](#), [food security](#), [gender equality](#), [water scarcity](#), [trade and foreign direct investment](#), [fiscal systems](#) as well as [young people](#) and the [elderly](#). A dedicated dialogue and publication were prepared on the crucial role of solidarity to assist [Lebanon's multiple overlapping shocks](#). A [Regional Solidarity Fund](#) for the Arab Region has been suggested by ESCWA's Executive Secretary to support the [emergency response to mitigate the impact of the pandemic](#).

Additional online sources on the work of the ECOSOC and its subsidiary bodies as well as the UN system on COVID-19 can be found at:

- [ECOSOC website](#)
- [UN platform on COVID-19](#)
- [The UN response to COVID-19](#)