



ECOSOC

United Nations Economic and Social Council

TAKING ACTION TO IMPROVE LIVES

ECOSOC Briefing on *Joining Forces: Effective Policy Solutions for COVID-19 Response* 11 May 2020

INFORMAL SUMMARY

“This pandemic has put a spotlight on the need to strengthen multilateral cooperation, governance, and above, all global solidarity. At the individual level we show our solidarity by staying at home – if we can – and helping our communities. At the international level we show solidarity through multilateralism and working together. Drawing on each of our strengths to find a solution for a more resilient future. As the centre of the UN development system, ECOSOC brings people and issues together to promote collective action for a sustainable world. We must work together to deepen our efforts during this Decade of Action – to recover better, and build a healthier, greener, fairer and a more resilient world.”

ECOSOC President, H.E. Mona Juul

The President of the Economic and Social Council, H.E. Mona Juul (Norway), convened a high-level briefing of the Council on *Joining Forces: Effective Policy Solutions for COVID-19 Response* on 11 May 2020. During the briefing, Member States had an opportunity to hear from the UN Deputy Secretary-General, the executive heads of WHO, FAO, ILO, UNCTAD, ESCAP and the High Commissioner on Human Rights, as well as the Under Secretary-General of DESA and Plan International.

As of 11 May 2020, over 4 million cases of COVID-19 had been reported to WHO, and almost 275,000 lives were lost. The world is facing an unprecedented threat from COVID-19. The need to put people at the centre of crisis response and recovery to achieve better, more equitable and resilient outcomes for all was emphasized. The ECOSOC briefing brought together the leadership and expertise of the wider UN system 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 briefing.

UN System and COVID-19

The UN has mobilized the full capacity of the UN system in countries to immediately support national authorities in developing public health preparedness and response plans. The UN Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG) launched a United Nations global framework for the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19, complementing the UN health response, led by WHO, as well as the humanitarian response detailed in the COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan.

The UN response, under the leadership of the strengthened Resident Coordinator system, is bringing the policy expertise from across the UN system to support Governments with the difficult trade-offs needed to help sustain progress against the pandemic over time without deepening economic and social instability and environmental degradation. Established and new modalities are being utilized for rapid funding of COVID-19 related programmes in countries.

The response also reflects stronger partnerships with International Financial Institutions, civil society organizations, the private sector, academia and the scientific community. Speakers highlighted examples of how the UN was leveraging the recent reform efforts to provide countries, such as Cameroon, Ghana and

Nepal, with the integrated, efficient and transparent support. Some donors' flexibility in the use of resources has allowed the UN system to reprioritize and provide the support where most needed.

The COVID-19 pandemic compounds a global humanitarian situation in which over 100 million of the world's most vulnerable people were already in need of humanitarian assistance due to conflict, natural disasters and climate change. Failure to help will place millions at high risk and further increase global humanitarian suffering and needs. It is critically important to support the global humanitarian response plan and to sustain funding to existing humanitarian appeals. The CERF (Central Emergency Response Fund) the United Nations fund for all, by all, has already released \$90 million to support humanitarian action in response to COVID-19.

Speakers recognized the efforts of the UN and health and humanitarian organizations and personnel, working on the front lines against the pandemic in humanitarian crises to prevent the spread of COVID-19, and respond to its devastating humanitarian impacts. The United Nations system remains fully committed to support Governments and ensure that lives are saved, livelihoods are restored, financial resources are mobilized, and that the global economy and the people can emerge stronger from this crisis.

Policy solutions for COVID-19 Response

Health

The diverging trends among countries with regard to the COVID-19 pandemic called for a tailored response, inspired by the [WHO Global Strategy to Respond to COVID-19](#). This response must mobilize all sectors and communities; control sporadic cases and clusters rapidly; suppress community transmission through context-appropriate infection prevention and control measures; reduce mortality by providing appropriate care; and develop safe and effective vaccines and therapeutics. Further mobilization of funding is critical for the recently launched Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator to speed up the search for a vaccine and medicines, and ensure that the vaccine reaches all those who need it, particularly the most vulnerable.

Strong and resilient health systems were considered to be the best defense against outbreaks and pandemics. To this end, health should be seen as an investment, not a cost to the economy. Countries must never have to choose between prioritizing health and safety or livelihoods and economy. Furthermore, protecting the environment, ensuring biodiversity, was considered key to protecting human health and wellbeing, including from pandemics.

Inequalities and human rights

Pre-existing inequalities along various dimensions are differentiating the impacts of COVID-19. The COVID-19 response must focus on the most vulnerable people, who are more likely to suffer devastating losses from this pandemic. Poverty could rise by millions for the first time in three decades. Violence against women and girls, and particularly domestic violence, has intensified. The quarantine exacerbated the incidence of domestic violence in particular while resources have been diverted from services related to domestic violence response and some services have been suspended.

All human rights must be respected, and measures to respond to COVID-19 must be lawful, necessary, proportionate, time-bound and justified by public health objectives. Freedom of expression and participation are human rights that should not be infringed. The COVID-19 response and building back better efforts must leave no one behind, including women, youth, older persons, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, refugees, migrants, minorities and LGBTI people. A conscious effort was needed to address, consider and include vulnerable groups in the decision-making and policy processes.

Livelihoods and jobs

Measures are needed to expand systems for the universal provision of quality social services such as health care, education, sanitation and social protection; identify and empower vulnerable groups; and invest in jobs and livelihoods. It is critical to act through the multilateral system to respond to disparities across countries. The ILO estimates the loss of jobs for the second quarter of 2020 to be equivalent to 305 million full-time jobs around the world. Urgent measures are needed to keep small enterprises alive and retain jobs, and support informal workers, that are largely concentrated in developing countries.

The pandemic has put a spotlight on the care economy and care workers, who are mostly undervalued in the world of work. Women, who constitute 70 percent of care workers, must be at the centre of reorganizing the care economy. Measures to protect and stimulate the economy, from cash transfers to credits and loans, must be targeted at women who make up the majority of those in the hardest-hit informal economy, and who are at the forefront of the community response.

There could be no justification for any infringements on human rights as they are practiced at work. Governments, employers and workers needed to cooperate now more than ever to shape the new ‘working normal’ when getting back to the workplace. Furthermore, the ecological, technological and demographic changes, which have been impacting the world of work, have not gone away during the pandemic, and would need to be tackled in an integrated manner.

Food security

Prior to COVID-19 pandemic, countries in the Horn of Africa were battling with a desert locust crisis, and around 135 million people in 55 countries and territories were experiencing acute food insecurity. The impact of COVID-19 on hunger must be controlled. Food systems need to remain functional as countries tackle the impacts of COVID-19. FAO has warned policy makers to ensure that their emergency policies do not spur a global food crisis. To this end, it would be important to avoid export restrictions in order not to repeat the mistakes of the 2007-2008 food crisis. Innovation must be scaled up in agriculture, including digitalization and e-commerce; to produce more food, in a more sustainable way; safeguarding biodiversity. This would require changing current business models.

Economic dimensions of COVID-19

A sustainable recovery must deal with pre-existing vulnerabilities and financial challenges, while addressing direct consequences of COVID-19. A comprehensive approach to alleviate the debt burden of countries would include a debt moratorium, and address the issue of debt sustainability as well as structural issues in the international debt architecture. The needs of conflict- and disaster-affected countries, Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States must be met. The pandemic has also revealed the huge digital divide among and within countries, as well as the gender digital divide. While some countries quickly moved to e-learning, cashless economies, e-governments, others have been left behind. Addressing the digital divide requires investment in physical infrastructure and skills-building along with strengthening privacy laws.

The briefing also addressed the issue of unilateral coercive measures’ impact on the COVID-19 response in the affected developing countries. There was support for the UN Secretary-General’s call for a global ceasefire and waiving of sanctions to ensure access to food, essential supplies and access to COVID-19 tests and medical support. The High Commissioner for Human Rights had also called for an easing or suspension of sectoral sanctions for global public health reasons, and to support the rights and lives of millions of people in affected countries. Concern was expressed about the refusal of some enterprises in the financial and logistical sectors to cooperate in providing aid, equipment and other medical assistance to affected countries.

Regional dimensions

Building resilience at all levels, including household, community, national, sub-regional and regional level, must be a priority. This requires not only social protection measures, but also early warning systems at country and sub-regional levels. At the regional level, issue-based coalitions have been particularly helpful in addressing inter-connected challenges, for example climate change and mitigation, inclusion and empowerment. It would be important to strengthen and leverage the work of the UN organizations, including the regional commissions.

The Way Forward

The COVID-19 response must be guided by the 2030 Agenda, the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on Financing for Development. Hard won progress made on the SDGs must be protected and gaps and obstacles must be addressed, so as to kick off the decade of action and acceleration. Addressing climate change and reversing the loss of biodiversity should be a priority.

Effective coordination does not require new structures. Controlling the pandemic and its impacts requires a coordinated multilateral response, supported by strong political will and leadership and global solidarity with the poorest and most vulnerable countries and people. The global response must help countries get back on track towards multilateral approaches.

The important work of health and humanitarian workers who are on the front lines of response should be given the recognition that they deserve. It is important to avoid disruptions to the movement of key personnel and medical and humanitarian supplies that are critical to urgently mitigating and responding to the impacts of COVID-19.

The international community was called upon to mobilize and fully 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 recently launched Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator.

Governments need to engage all parts of society, including the poorest and the most vulnerable, for effective and legitimate policies and to build back better. Policies must adapt to the people. Partnerships with civil society and the private sector will be critical.

The Economic and Social Council, as an inclusive intergovernmental platform, will continue to engage and mobilize governments, the UN system, civil society and young people around the world to facilitate sharing of experiences and learning to help put countries back on track to achieving the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals.