



## TRANSCRIPT

### Responding to COVID-19: What will it take to recover better?

With H.E. Ambassador Munir Akram, President of the UN Economic and Social Council

**Martina Donlan** [00:06:15] Hello and welcome to Face to Face, a special United Nations press briefing with the President of the UN Economic and Social Council, his Excellency, Ambassador Munir Akram. I am Martina Donlan from the UN Department of Global Communications at UN headquarters in New York. In a moment, we'll hear from the President on the work of the Economic and Social Council in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and in accelerating action on the Sustainable Development Goals. Ambassador Akram is the 76<sup>th</sup> President of ECOSOC and the current permanent representative of Pakistan to the United Nations. As a career ambassador, he was already President of ECOSOC in 2005 and President of the Security Council twice in May 2003 and May 2004. He was also chair of the Group of 77 and China in 2007 and facilitator of the UN Administrative Reform in 2006. Today, Ambassador Akram will present his views and vision on how the ECOSOC, as one of the main organs of the United Nations, is responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

He will also announce the launch of an initiative towards a sustainable, resilient recovery, and he'll be happy to answer your questions, of course. So, thank you all for joining us. Ambassador Akram will make brief remarks and then take your questions. Ambassador, you have the floor.

**Munir Akram** [00:07:53] Thank you. Thank you, Martina.

And good morning, ladies and gentlemen, today, as we all know, we are suffering a grim crisis and facing another grim day in the fight against the coronavirus. The World Health Organization is recalling a total death toll of 1.6 million people. Millions have been infected and are suffering.

As the toll rises, we continue to deal also with severe disruptions in societies and economies around the world with deep impacts on health, education, economic growth, financial displacement and stress and breakdowns of social systems. And as usual, it is painfully obvious that the poorest countries and the poorest people in those countries have been hit hardest with the loss of jobs and livelihoods. Businesses, especially small businesses, are struggling to keep afloat. There are reports that over 20 countries are facing food insecurity and there is a danger of famine in some of them. Public health systems in developing countries are under stress. So, we need to fight the virus and the consequences of the virus.



We have initial approval for some of the vaccines that have been developed in record time. And we must ensure that this vaccine becomes available to everyone, everywhere, rich or poor, man or woman. On a quarterly basis, a vaccine must be seen as a global public good and as the WHO Director General Dr. Tedros said "No one is safe until everyone is safe". It is also in every country's national and economic self-interest to work together to ensure that the tests are done, treatments are recorded, and a vaccine is available to all who need it. So that we are able to deal with this virus on a global basis. Because unless we can put it down everywhere, it will spread again.

The ACT Accelerator and COVAX facility is a groundbreaking collaboration between WHO and international parties to accelerate global access to tools that can rapidly reduce the risk of severe disease and help in the acute phase of the pandemic. We face problems in the equitable distribution of the vaccines that become available. The first issue are the advanced purchase agreements that have been made by some. And if economic nationalism prevails once again it could become an impediment in the distribution of the vaccine equitably. The second issue is the intellectual property constraints, which could hinder a fair distribution of the widest possible distribution of the vaccine. And the third problem are the supply arrangements, which obviously are detrimental or disadvantage the developing countries where the vaccine is not being. So that is the first challenge. And I believe that support for the COVAX facility and similar facilities that are being contemplated will be important, and we hope that these will act with transparency and equity in the distribution of the vaccine.

But the consequences of the COVID-19 virus impacts are economic and social. And to deal with those consequences we need to have an emergency response and a structural response. The emergency response basically is to generate and mobilize the financing that is required to enable the poorer countries to have the fiscal space to recover from the impacts of the COVID crisis. These emergency financing requirements are obvious and have been discussed in the Secretary General's process launched together with Jamaica and Canada.

These responses: Firstly, the elimination of the crushing debt of developing countries. Five developing countries have defaulted on debt. Many more may follow. There could be collapse of businesses and the entire economy as a result. Certainly, we need to generate additional liquidity for the developing countries. And the easiest way to inject additional liquidity would be the creation of new SDRs by the IMF and the redistribution of existing unutilized quotas of SDRs to those developing countries which need the liquidity. The private sector creditors must join the official creditors who have declared a suspension of debt. Until the end of June, the G20 has taken a decision and that's a welcome decision.

We need support for the COVAX facility. We are short of 5 billion dollars. We need support for the Secretary General's emergency humanitarian program. Out of an ask for a billion dollars, close to a billion dollars in funding has been disappointing. It is only about 140



million so far, and we need to make up that emergency finance. We need developed countries to live up to their commitments to 0.7% target. These are some of the emergency measures that we need to take to enable developing countries to recover from the crisis. Developed countries have injected 13 trillion dollars to revive their economies; developing countries are struggling to find a fraction of the 2 to 3 trillion that they need for recovery.

Well, apart from the emergency financing there is a need for a structural change. The Secretary General has remarked that the hallmark of our times is inequality. He has said, and I quote him, "The response to the pandemic and to the widespread discontent that preceded it must be based on a new social contract and a new global deal that creates equal opportunities for all and respects the rights and freedoms of all".

We need structural change in the financial architecture. We need to align the international trade regime with the SDGs. We need a fair international taxation system where corporations are not able to shift profits to avoid tax. We need a halt in illicit financial flows, which takes away 300-400 billion dollars every year from developing countries to safe havens, mostly in developed countries. These are some of the structural issues that need to be addressed.

Another important aspect of structural change is the need for investment in sustainable infrastructure if we are to build back better, as the Secretary General has said, and to build a new green economy, which prevents and avoids the climate disaster that is facing us. We need to invest in sustainable infrastructure and to move away from the fossil fuel economy.

The requirements for infrastructure investment annually are estimated to be about 1.5 trillion dollars. So at the present moment before the COVID crisis, multilateral and bilateral sources were investing only about 70 billion dollars in infrastructure in the developing countries. There is therefore a need to accelerate this to identify and build projects in developing countries on sustainable energy, sustainable agriculture, sustainable transport and housing.

If we are to build back better so that we do not build back to the same patterns that have caused so much disaster in the world, I have therefore proposed the establishment of a facility to be a public private partnership to accelerate sustainable infrastructure investments in developing countries. I'd be happy to elaborate this in response to your questions with regard to the consultations that are underway on this facility.

Lastly, we need to utilize science and technology and innovation to build back better, to recover from the pandemic and to promote the Sustainable Development Goals. I have identified science and technology as the third leg of my ambition. Firstly finance. Secondly, investing in sustainable infrastructure. Thirdly, the utilization of scientific knowledge.



The experience of the vaccine has showed that when we have a clear target for innovation, we are able to mobilize the resources and the research efforts to achieve that target. The COVID vaccine has been developed within 10 months or so. Similarly, we need to identify what are the innovations, what are the scientific breakthroughs, what are the available technologies that need to be applied for the promotion of the Sustainable Development Goals? I believe that such an identification is possible. And that once we have such an identification, an effort could be made to direct research and development institutions, especially public research in developed institutions across the world, to endeavor to make those big breakthroughs.

We also need to see how to align the intellectual property regime with the SDGs. At the moment, there have been some exceptions. As we all know, intellectual property rights, intellectual property, regime patents, can act as a constraint on the ability of developing countries to apply those technologies that are available. It is therefore important to see which technologies are critical for the Sustainable Development Goals to eliminate hunger, to eliminate poverty, and to address some of the climate disasters. What are the technologies that would be useful for developing countries? We need to make a database of such technologies and to see how we can facilitate their application and ease the intellectual property constraints that act to impede such application.

And last but not least in the sphere of technology we need to digitalize the economies of the developing countries. Today, we are able to communicate with each other because we are connected over the Internet. Connectivity in the industrial countries is over 80 percent, connectivity in the developing countries is less than 20 percent. And therefore, 80 percent of the population of developing countries today under lockdown's are in the dark. They are left behind. They have no ability to communicate, to conduct commerce, to conduct business, to be able to lead normal life because they are isolated. Virtually and physically. Therefore, the gap continues between developed and developing countries, between vulnerable populations, i.e women, children, minorities and majorities, I think those gaps, the digital gaps, need to be addressed and overcome. And this requires a conscious effort.

The Secretary-General has spelt out a roadmap. We need to flesh that roadmap out. We need to identify precise actions that are required in financing intellectual property and other constraints that impede the bridging of the digital divide. So, these are processes which I have launched.

We have informal consultations underway on most of these processes. I have appointed co-facilitators for this science and technology event. I will be appointing facilitators for financing development and these will all come together in the various forums that ECOSOC will reveal in the next year. Firstly, the Financing for Development Forum in April; the Science and Technology STI Forum in May; the Development Cooperation Forum; and lastly, the High-Level Political Forum, which will be held in July. So, the



objectives and ambitions that I have outlined as main objectives for ECOSOC this year will all come together in these forums and finally in the High-Level Political Forum. And I hope that we will be able to agree on an ambitious program and on ambitious decisions that can enable the international community to respond to the crisis that has been sparked by COVID, but also to respond to the challenge of the SDGs and the challenge of climate change that we are all confronting. I will stop here, and I'll be happy to answer your questions. Thank you very much.

**Martina Donlan** [00:28:08] Thank you so much, Ambassador, for this really comprehensive overview and briefing. The floor is now open for questions. If you could please put your name in the chat and then I can call on you. We will start with Valeria Robecco, President of the UN Correspondents Association. Valeria, please.

**Valeria Robecco (UN Correspondents Association)** [00:28:35] Thank you. Thank you so much. Thank you, Ambassador, for this briefing. We just heard the report from the John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health that as much as a quarter of the world's population will likely not receive the COVID-19 vaccination until 2022. So, I would like to have a comment from you. And if you think that, like with the COVAX facility and you know, there is a chance to overcome this, these forecasts, which is, of course, is not an optimistic one. Thank you so much.

**Munir Akram** [00:29:22] Thank you. Thank you very much. But that's an important question and it's an important challenge we all face. And I believe that, like everything, it depends on political will to be able to rectify such a prognosis. The vaccine supply is going to be available.

We hope that through the COVAX facility, there will be complete transparency with regard to the production and location of the vaccine production. We hope that there will quickly be an identification of the most vulnerable populations, whether these are health workers in the host countries or where the vaccines are being produced, or these are health workers and vulnerable people in developing countries.

And this will be a test, an acid test, of international solidarity that the priority which is being accorded nationally to health workers and all the people in, say, the United States or in Europe, that priority is extended to similar vulnerable groups in developing countries and that they should take precedence over others in the availability of the vaccine. It's a question of political will. We can change this projection, which is a pessimistic projection, perhaps a realistic one. But it is up to governments to be able to decide that they will allocate a portion of the vaccine production for other countries, for developing countries, for the vulnerable in developing countries. So, this will be an acid test. And certainly, we as developing countries, as well as international actors here at the United Nations, we must press for this. And I hope that we do this.

**Martina Donlan** [00:31:55] Next, we have a question from the AP of Pakistan Iftikhar.



**Iftikhar (AP of Pakistan)** [00:32:27] Hello. Can you hear me? OK. Ambassador, thank you for this briefing. In your opening remarks, you spoke about the fact that you have proposed creation of a facility for infrastructure development. Could you please elaborate a bit what kind of mechanism it will be and under whose sponsorship it will operate? Thank you very much.

**Munir Akram** [00:33:03] Thank you. Thank you. The suggestion for the facility arises from two gaps that we are facing.

One is the fact that there is very little policy harmonization on infrastructure investment. Different countries have different regulations: the requirements for investment in various countries are regulated nationally, and there is no connection at the moment between the developing countries, which have the opportunities for investment and the investors and the investor community. As I said, the gap in investment infrastructure is so large and varied. We have tried to understand why this is so. There are already 12 mechanisms that have been set up by various institutions: the World Bank, the EIB and the G20 and so forth. But so far, this has not resulted in investment in developing countries to the level that is required. We are trying to create this facility to connect and to bridge the gap that is preventing investment. So the idea is firstly to have a policy board which can harmonize policies with regard to sustainable infrastructure investment. Various proposals are on the table from both the private sector and from public sector institutions. And we need to harmonize that and to bring all the actors together in one place. So that's the first objective.

The second objective is to utilize the vast country level system that the UN has. The United Nations has country representatives, resident representatives, UN resident representatives, resident coordinators in over 130 countries in the world. These representatives are in constant touch with developing country governments and are familiar with the plans and requirements of these countries. They are excellent instruments to be able to identify the possible infrastructure projects, to help the developing countries build the capacity to formulate good pre-feasibility and feasibility studies for those projects. And the facility would be designed to find the right partners for those projects in the investment world.

That's the simple explanation. It's a little obvious the discussions are ongoing. There are various points of view with regard to the nature of the private public partnership we have as to where this facility could be located. The basic point is that it should be a public private partnership, which brings together all the actors, developing countries, the donor countries, the United Nations system, as well as the investor community. We need to bring them all together on one platform so that they are able to communicate with each other and to make the connection that will enable the investors to have the confidence to invest in developing countries. That's the simple explanation, and I hope that as the



consultations go forward, we will have a more concrete proposal to be able to share with all of you and all of our colleagues.

**Martina Donlan** [00:37:44] Thank you. Next, we have a question from Sherwin Bryce-Pease of South African Broadcasting.

**Sherwin Bryce-Pease (South African Broadcasting Corporation)** [00:37:52] Hi, thanks. Good afternoon, Ambassador Akram. Russia and the United States. What do you make of their decision not to join the COVAX facility? And how do you view that exclusion affecting the equitable access and distribution of vaccines? And in addition to that, President Donald Trump signed an executive order a couple of weeks ago that seeks to address the vaccine needs of American citizens first before other nations will have access to vaccines that were developed in the United States. What do you make of that decision?

**Munir Akram** [00:38:32] This is obviously some of the things that I was referring to as impediments to equitable distribution. Obviously, it would be best if both Russia and the United States would join the COVAX facility. And certainly, we hope that the United States, which has produced the first two approved vaccines, that it will also participate as a contributor to the international effort that we hope will be launched for an equitable distribution of the vaccine. I can only say that we look forward to the policy positions of the incoming US administration, and we hope that these policies will be an expression of American solidarity, not only with its own people, but also with the global population.

**Martina Donlan** [00:39:53] Thank you. Next up, we have a question from Al Arabiya thank you so much.

**Al Arabiya** [00:40:03] Ambassador, thank you for this briefing. I have a similar question. I mean, how do you see the U.S. administration, the incoming administration returning back to the WHO? How could that help the global efforts for universal distribution of the vaccine? The second related question is that you see that WHO has some efforts in that field, the office of the Secretary General, ECOSOC. There are different facilities that are working on that. Why can't the UN system, in general, put one office in charge (of the COVID-19 pandemic) similar to what happened of AIDS pandemic, when they had UNAIDS, which was a central office to coordinate and work with that, to stop that.

**Munir Akram** [00:41:06] With regard to your first question about the incoming administration, I think if the incoming administration did indeed rejoin the WHO, we hope that it will also join the COVAX facility in the ACT. And if it does not, it will be a good indication of its willingness to participate in the efforts of the COVAX facility to ensure equitable distribution of the vaccine. This is, of course, presumption at the moment. But a reentry of the United States into the WHO would be a very welcome development and I think essential for equitable distribution.



As far as the UN establishing one office, I think the focus is on the COVAX facility there. There is another proposal that was made by Costa Rica, which is voluntary at the moment, but which was a more broader and more equitable distribution concept. But so far, the general consensus is that everybody is gathering around the COVAX facility as the principal coordinating mechanism for the distribution of the vaccine. So, this is what we have to work with. And we should try to see that the COVAX facility works with transparency, that it is not impeded by advance purchase agreements, and that it is not impeded by nationalistic positions which exclude export or vaccines from where they are being produced. These are some of the things that we hope that the COVAX facility will be able to address. Transparency, equity in distribution and exportability to other countries. These are important issues which it will have to address. And we look forward to that because this is going to be an acid test of global solidarity.

**Martina Donlan** [00:44:03] Next, we have Anwar Iqbal.

**Anwar Iqbal (Pakistan's Dawn Newspaper)** [00:44:23] Can you hear me? Yes, yes, sir, I am Anwar, I work for Pakistan's Dawn newspaper and my question to the ambassador is Pakistan-specific. Ambassador can you please also highlight the pandemic's impact on Pakistan, how Pakistan is going to deal with it, and what should the international community do to help Pakistan come out of this crisis?

**Munir Akram** [00:44:54] As you probably know, we in Pakistan, we were able to deal fairly, fairly well with the first wave of COVID. The government adopted a policy, what we call 'Smart Lockdowns', which would reduce the impact on the entire economy. So, the economic contraction was limited.

The government also injected an 8 billion dollar package to stimulate the economy, especially to distribute cash and in kind support to those who were jobless or those who lived on daily wages to poor and vulnerable people. And this was done utilizing digital technology, which ensured an efficient and equitable distribution, and it reduced the impact of the crisis, the economic impact, on the poorest among the population. The economy, of course, has contracted like other economies, but the contraction has been around 5%. And there seems to be signs of a robust recovery that is underway. Exports in Pakistan are up. The construction industry has been provided support and there is job creation in the construction industry. The agricultural industry is robust. Hopefully these are good signs. But we are now experiencing a second surge, and we have to deal with the second surge, and hopefully we will be able to deal with this as well as we did the first initial surge.

**Martina Donlan** [00:47:33] Thank you. Next, we have Elena Lentza from the LUNA News Agency.

**Elena Lentza (LUNA News Agency)** [00:47:41] Hello. Good morning, Ambassador. Thank you so much for the briefing. My question is again about equity and solidarity. I



know that ECOSOC is underlining the need for solidarity and equity in everything that you have been talking. But how do you ensure that the new initiatives that you announced are going to reach everywhere? And is there going to be a difference between countries that are members of ECOSOC and others that aren't. Looking, for example, into the community of the Portuguese speaking countries, because that's what I work on. We have Brazil and Angola that are members of ECOSOC, but we have other countries who are poor and are not members. So, are we going to ensure that every country can participate and also have benefits in any way they can?

**Munir Akram** [00:48:37] I think as far as solidarity and equality is concerned, that's a principle that we must follow. It is inherent in the SDGs. This is the purpose of the SDGs, to promote equitable development. And we cannot do it without international cooperation and solidarity.

Of course, it remains to be seen how much international solidarity will be available. As I said, the distribution of the vaccine will be an acid test of the solidarity. A lot of countries, a lot of governments have spoken eloquently about the need for solidarity and cooperation, multilateralism. But we will have to see how they live up to the statements and declarations. In ECOSOC, obviously, this will be our guiding principle in every effort and decision we try to make.

With regard to participation, as you know, in most of the forums that we will have, the FFD, the STI forum, the development cooperation forum, ECOSOC is open not only to member states, but it's also open to non-member states of the council. And moreover, we have several mechanisms through which to bring in civil society as well as the private sector. In the FFD, for example, there is an investment fair on the side and in that investment fair, the private sector and the developing countries are brought together to exchange information on specific projects for investment in developing countries. So that's just one example of the interaction between member states in the private sector.

The HLPF is a forum, which is convened by ECOSOC, but it is a forum in which all the members of the United Nations participate. All 193 countries participate in the HLPF. So every country, small, big, everyone, is represented in the process and in the consensus that we try to achieve in the HLPF process, which is the apex of everything that we will do through the year. We will try to bring it together in the HLPF Ministerial Declaration at the end, and that's the final act of the ECOSOC session in late July. So that's how we will hopefully bring together all member states as well as other stakeholders.

**Martina Donlan** [00:51:49] And the next and last question goes to IRNA, the Iranian News Agency. You have the floor.

**Iranian News Agency** [00:51:56] Thank you. Hello, Ambassador. My question is about the unilateral coercive measures of the United States against Iran and some other countries. As you know, these measures make difficult for them to access the vaccine and



treatment of the corona virus. What can the United Nations agencies do with this humanitarian problem?

**Munir Akram** [00:52:26] Thank you. That is an important question. As you know, this is a question which has been discussed in the consultations and meetings that have been held in recent months throughout this COVID crisis. The principle of international solidarity should extend to all peoples, regardless of political considerations, and my hope and aspiration is that we will find a way in which to express that solidarity through the deliberations of the Economic and Social Council.

I hope that the crisis and the magnitude of the crisis, the human suffering that that is now visible, that this will generate the solidarity that is required to ensure that all people are have access to the medical and other requirements if they need to save lives and livelihoods. So, I think this is an aspiration. I am well aware of the difficulties faced by some countries, but this is part of the effort to build solidarity. And we hope that with changing circumstances in the world that we could see a revival of international solidarity.

**Martina Donlan** [00:54:12] Thank you Ambassador and thank you everybody for joining. We will end here, but we hope to see you all soon again for another Face to Face with the President of ECOSOC next year. So, until then, thank you all and have a good day.