

Building Back Better: The SDGs as a roadmap for recovery from Covid-19



About us

The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on the UN Global Goals for Sustainable Development is a group of cross-party UK parliamentarians, co-chaired by Rt Hon Lord Jack McConnell and Theo Clarke MP, dedicated to championing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and monitoring their implementation.

In early 2020, we launched an inquiry to assess the UK's progress on delivering the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and to investigate and evaluate the impact of Covid-19 on the SDGs at this crucial point in their delivery, and to determine the steps the UK Government should take to ensure the SDGs are at the heart of efforts to build back better.

Introduction

In 2015, the UK and 192 other countries signed up to the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These ambitious goals include a global commitment to end poverty, reduce inequality and address climate change by 2030, and apply equally for every region in the world.

At the start of this year, the United Nations (UN) launched a 'decade of action' for delivering the SDGs by 2030, with UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres noting that, despite "tremendous enthusiasm" and "concrete progress" around the SDGs, "what we see is not enough" and the world remains "off track" for delivering the SDGs.

Since those remarks, the world has been hit by the full extent of the Covid-19 outbreak. The consequences of the pandemic will impact progress towards the SDGs in numerous ways. The impact of the pandemic only heightens the need for increased action by the global community towards achieving the SDGs, and delivering on the commitment to 'leave no one behind', by 2030.

The UK's role

The UK has a crucial role to play in the decade of action, in both delivering the SDGs domestically and supporting other countries to do so. There are many parallels between challenges in achieving the SDGs in the UK and in other countries, particularly around issues such as inequality and the leave no one behind agenda, which are apparent in the UK Government's stated aim to 'level up' areas of the country that are economically less developed. These issues apply as much to areas of the United Kingdom as they do to the UK Government's engagements overseas, highlighting the importance of the universality of the SDG agenda.

The UK Government now needs to back up positive statements made by ministers with action by using its domestic policies and influence abroad to ensure the SDGs are placed at the heart of the recovery from Covid-19. The Government must ensure the SDGs are prioritised domestically as well as internationally. As we heard from Chris Southworth, Secretary General of the International Chamber of Commerce UK (ICC UK): "It's really hard to influence the rest of the world unless you lead by example".

Although the impacts of Covid-19 undoubtedly present challenges to delivering the SDGs, it is also true that the recovery from the pandemic presents an opportunity to build back better by using implementation of the SDGs as a 'ready-made' roadmap to recovery.

What you can do



Use your position in Parliament to ensure that:

1. the SDGs are at the centre of global recovery efforts in 2020 and beyond;
 2. the UK government plays a prominent role in advancing the SDGs on the international stage, and engages in an effective and collaborative way with key stakeholders including civil society; and
 3. the new Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office puts the SDGs at its heart with a strategic approach that reflects and is supported by the new institutional arrangements.
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The impact of Covid-19 on progress towards the SDGs

Health

In addition to the direct health impacts of Covid-19, the crisis has exposed weaknesses in health systems across the world and had secondary impacts on other health areas, such as disrupting routine vaccinations and sexual and reproductive health services, which threaten progress towards achieving Good Health and Wellbeing. *The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that at least 80 million children under the age of one are at risk of missing out on routine vaccinations for diseases such as diphtheria, measles and polio.*



Poverty and hunger

There has been a significant impact on employment and income, particularly in the informal sector, and reductions in exports, foreign direct investment and remittances. These trends have already resulted in increased poverty and world hunger levels, which are predicted to continue to increase. *The effects of these catastrophic economic and employment trends will result in increased poverty rates, with the World Bank estimating that between 40-46 million people will fall back into extreme poverty, the first increase in extreme poverty since 1990.*



Education

Education has been disrupted across the world, with schools closed to control the spread of the virus. The most vulnerable children have been particularly affected, with remote learning often not possible, and it is feared that many will never return to education. *At the peak of the outbreak in April 2020, 194 nations had country-wide school closures, with 91 per cent of the world's children being out of school.*



Climate change

We heard that the Covid-19 crisis has helped to highlight the urgency of tackling climate change and protecting the environment, demonstrating that global coordination can help us take urgent steps to address shared problems. *However, it also threatens to distract global attention from taking the necessary measures.*



Gender equality

Women and girls are bearing the brunt of the secondary impacts of the pandemic and are particularly impacted by the socioeconomic effects of the virus and the reallocation of resources and priorities from other health services to responding to Covid-19. *There has been a rise in gender-based violence amid the pandemic and it is estimated that female genital mutilation and child marriages will increase due to the impact of the pandemic.*



Conflict

Evidence shows that distrust in institutions, community tensions and conflict situations are all increasing following the Covid-19 outbreak. Disruption to conflict-prevention work as a result of the virus has further threatened peace. *Recent research found that four out of five local peacebuilders have experienced a reduction in funding since the start of the pandemic and almost 80 per cent have had to suspend activities.*



Global cooperation

Partnership working to achieve the SDGs is also under threat, with levels of overseas development aid likely to be affected at a time when less-developed countries will need support more than ever. *There is a risk that the response to the virus will undermine global collaboration, with countries failing to work together around a potential vaccine and treatments for Covid-19.*



Marginalised groups

Already-marginalised groups have been particularly affected, with the evidence we received raising concern about the impact on people with disabilities, children, older people, refugees and displaced people, ethnic, linguistic & religious minorities and LGBTQAI+ individuals. *For example evidence highlighted deficiencies and overburden of healthcare and WASH facilities in displacement camps, which increase the risk of Covid-19 spreading.*



Recommendations: The SDGs as a roadmap to build back better

While progress towards achieving the SDGs has been threatened by the Covid-19 pandemic, the need to 're-set' from its effects offer an opportunity to ensure delivery of the SDGs are a global priority. Prioritising key areas of economic and sustainable development will support and enable the achievement of the SDGs, especially if the leave no one behind principle is integrated into these approaches. The following are the key priorities for the UK Government based on the evidence we received:

Economic development

1. Integrate the leave no one behind principle into all UK Government activities.
2. Enable and leverage finance available for delivering the SDGs.
3. Maintain and develop programmes that support cash transfers, social protection, social insurance and market intervention measures.
4. Invest in the creation of (and reskilling for) new, inclusive, decent jobs and livelihoods in sustainable and environmentally-friendly industries.

Sustainable development

1. Develop and implement more ambitious emissions-reduction policies in line with the UK's Paris Agreement commitments and support efforts to protect global biodiversity.
2. Produce an ambitious Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) prior to COP26 and use the Summit to spearhead and inspire global action on reducing emissions and mitigating climate change.
3. Target UK Government support on adaptation to those most vulnerable to climate change.
4. Ensure any post-Covid-19 economic recovery packages support a green and just transition to sustainable and resilient business models and development pathways.

Build back better

1. Re-adopt the SDGs as an explicit roadmap to recovery.
2. Ensure that a Covid-19 vaccine and any proven treatments are available to all as fast as possible and free of charge to those who need it most.
3. Maintain current ODA for non-Covid-19 health programmes and support low-income countries to develop resilient public health systems and universal health coverage.
4. Invest and encourage wider investment in WASH facilities in schools and communities that do not already have adequate provision in order to help prevent further Covid-19 outbreaks, ensuring the principle of leave no one behind guides this support.
5. Increase spend from the international aid budget on education to 10 per cent given the impact of the pandemic on children and their education.
6. Commit to supporting governance and accountability-building mechanisms across government activities including within ODA, recognising the impact of the pandemic on civic space, drivers of conflict, transparency and corruption.

How to deliver the SDGs

1. Develop a cross-government strategy for achieving the SDGs and allocate responsibility for oversight of implementation to the Cabinet Office, overseen by the Prime Minister.
 2. Establish a mechanism for ensuring and monitoring alignment, policy coherence and finding synergies across government with the SDG framework.
 3. Develop a clear mechanism for engaging with stakeholders in reviewing progress in the UK and internationally, such as through engaging civil society, businesses and trade unions, in a systematic and inclusive way.
 4. Use its influence to further lead and encourage businesses to adopt the SDGs and demonstrate their impact.
 5. Ensure the new Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office puts strategic delivery of the SDGs at the heart of its work and builds on the strengths of both of the merged departments, increasing the transparency of UK aid and demonstrating the impact of its work on the poorest countries and communities in line with the leave no one behind principle.
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