

Sustainable Development Agenda 2030 in the midst of Covid-19

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9 Sep 2020

The Covid-19 pandemic has come at a time when societies are already facing many challenges related to inequality, poverty, unemployment, and drought and/or lack of access to water, amongst others. The cost of the crisis will be felt in years to come, from the traumas and emotional pain of loss of lives to its impact on the economy. The impact of the pandemic on economic, social and political structure is immeasurable. The pandemic will also negatively affect global development objectives, specifically the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).



Lungile Manzini, corporate sustainability expert

The Covid-19 pandemic has already affected sustainable development in many constructs. The United Nations published a report on the impact of the pandemic in the achievement of the SDGs which demonstrated that the pandemic has indeed stalled progress in meeting the goals that are to be achieved by 2030. The report also highlighted that inequality, poverty, the climate crisis, unsustainable production and other challenges require more urgent action as a result of Covid-19.

The SDGs define a common global goal of ending poverty and hunger and ensuring equality with the least impact on the planet. Therefore reaching the SDGs will ensure that extreme socio-economic challenges are addressed collectively and effectively. This view was emphasised by the administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), who indicated that: "Without support from the international community, we risk a massive reversal of gains made over the last two decades, and an entire generation lost, if not in lives then in rights, opportunities and dignity."

The outline below, adapted from the United Nations, demonstrates how the Covid-19 pandemic has affected the SDGs.

SDG 1: Currently, 55% of the population in South Africa live below the poverty line of R1,227 per month and more than 20 million people live on social grants, according to Statistics South Africa. The pandemic has exposed and exacerbated these already existing vulnerabilities in society as communities have lost income as both formal and informal businesses where closed during the Covid-19 lockdown.

SDG 2: The Covid-19 lockdown has resulted in the disruption food production and distribution. According to the International Food Policy Research Institute, 14-22 million people could enter into extreme poverty in emerging markets and the exportation of agri-foods could decrease by 25%.

SDG 3: The health system in Africa is already under a lot of strain. People with underlying conditions and older persons are the most vulnerable to the Covid-19 pandemic. At some point during the peak of Covid-19, some provinces in South Africa were running out of beds and ventilators.

SDG 4: During the Covid-19 lockdowns many children and young people had to be out of school. This has implications for social and cognitive development of children. Kenya decided to cancel school attendance for the rest of the year. In some cases schooling was converted to online learning. However, there were limitations linked to access to data and smart devices.

SDG 5: The media has numerously reported on the severe increase in violence against women during lockdown. Women have also been the most affected by the pandemic, as they play a central role in communities as caretakers, healthcare workers, traders and producers.

SDG 6: Access to adequate clean water has been key in preventing the spread of Covid-19. However, in South Africa there are still many communities (more than 50%) that do not have access to running water in their households, according to Statistics South Africa.

SDG 7: In South Africa, load shedding was suspended during lockdown as a result of a decreased demand in electricity. However, as soon as the lockdown measures were eased, load shedding was again introduced which has implications for economic recovery.

SDG 8: Statistics South Africa has reported the unemployment rate at 30.1% with 40% of young people unemployed. As a result of Covid-19, economic activities were suspended - this has negatively impacted socio-economic structures resulting in unemployment, permanent shutdown of small businesses. Additionally, the minister of finance in South Africa has estimated a budget deficit of over 15% as a result of Covid-19.

SDG 9: The Covid-19 pandemic has led to extreme pressures in infrastructure and industry and has halted innovation. In a study done on 301 SMEs in Kenya, it was found that only 7.3% of the SMEs had insurance which includes a cover in climate disasters.

SDG 10: According to the World Bank, South Africa is one of the most unequal societies in the world. The Covid-19 effects will further weaken macro-economic structure and increase inequalities in communities.

SDG 11: People face higher risks related to inadequate access to safe drinking water and sanitation, poor housing and overcrowding particularly in informal settlements.

SDG 12: There has been a disruption observed in the production of essential equipment, particularly healthcare production and also consumption patterns. Post-pandemic, the structures of production and consumption will change completely.

SDG 13: There is a risk that there could be a decrease in climate action as financial resources will be diverted to other social areas as a short-term solution to the economic crisis as a result of the pandemic. However, it is important to note that there has been a reduction in environmental impacts as a result of halted economic and transport activities.

SDG 14: Increased poverty as a result of Covid-19 could lead to overfishing which could cause a loss of marine life and also the likelihood of pathogens which can be transmitted to humans.

SDG 15: Ecosystems that are highly polluted and damaged are less resilient to environmental shocks and crisis. The economic recovery if not done in a sustainable manner could lead to dangers of uncontrolled deforestation and pollutions. The increased intensive land use could also lead to a loss of biodiversity.

SDG 16: Conflicts during the Covid-19 pandemic have exacerbated the crisis. The reported terror attacks in Northern Mozambique could hamper the development of the gas industry which is key in the economic recovery.

SDG 17: The Covid-19 pandemic has proven how connected the world is and has highlighted the importance of multilateral international cooperation and collaboration.



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With the pressures of the impacts of Covid-19, a post economic recovery that will accelerate these goals becomes critical. Governments are already designing economic recovery packages to improve the livelihoods of communities and drive economic development. These economic recovery packages have to be sustainable, inclusive and equitable while creating an environment where both society and the planet can thrive not only today, but also for generations to come.

An economic recovery that is based on investments in fossil fuels, for example, could reverse past progress made on sustainable development as it will increase emissions which could have disastrous social, environmental and economic effects over time. An increased investment in clean technologies is crucial in fostering green jobs creation to restart the economy on route to recovery, mitigating against climate change and driving sustainable communities. The pandemic has proven how connected the world is, giving us the opportunity to further accelerate our efforts in ensuring that we achieve the SDGs.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lungile Manzini is a corporate sustainability expert and has more than 10 years' experience in the field of sustainability. She has an MBA from Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS) and an MSc from the University of Johannesburg (South Africa) and Wageningen University (Netherlands). Manzini is currently a PhD candidate in sustainability studying with the University of Johannesburg.

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