



BLOG POST May 12th 2020

Achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: A necessary horizon for the post-crisis recovery, but how to do it?

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 Reading time: 6 min



The current health crisis has shown, both in its emergence and in its impacts, multifaceted and interconnected risks and vulnerabilities, both in humanitarian and social, economic and environmental terms. Most of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals are concerned, individually and above all in their indivisibility, which constitutes the core and added value of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In the context of post-crisis reconstruction, more than ever, the implementation of this universal agenda is a necessity, particularly to reduce vulnerabilities to crises by optimising the interactions between the SDGs. This post proposes some avenues.

The health crisis highlights the relevance of the 2030 Agenda

The unprecedented crisis linked to the Covid-19 pandemic will have a strong impacts on the entire 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and on the achievement of its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in all countries: loss of income, leading vulnerable segments of society and families to fall below the poverty line (SDG1)¹; risks of disruption in food production and distribution (SDG2); on education, with the closure of schools (SDG4), also a source of increased inequality (SDG10); and increased violence against women (SDG5); disruptions in supply and insufficient access to drinking water that hamper access to clean handwashing facilities (SDG6); reduced income, shorter working hours, unemployment for certain professions (SDG8); deterioration of the situation and endangerment of people living in slums (SDG11); even risk of a reduction in commitment to climate action (SDG13). Moreover, the degradation of biodiversity (SDG15) might have contributed to the emergence of this virus, not to mention the obvious impact in terms of health (SDG3).

This crisis is thus a strong reminder of the integrated and interconnected nature of the common and global challenges we face and exacerbates the issue of vulnerabilities: ecological and health risks are linked; and our economic and social systems are vulnerable to these risks. The response to the pandemic cannot, in this context, be dissociated from the 2030 Agenda,² as the achievement of the SDGs should put us on the right track to address global health risks and emerging infectious diseases; but also, as they are the same tools, to combat climate change, biodiversity loss and poverty.³ The 2030 Agenda is more relevant than ever, and must help build more inclusive and greener development models to be more resilient in the face of future threats.

Keeping the promises of the 2030 Agenda

When the 2030 Agenda was adopted in 2015, countries had already agreed that the goal of "transforming our world"⁴ would only be possible if the SDGs were closely interlinked, in an integrated implementation. But the promises of the 2030 Agenda have so far not been fulfilled.⁵ It must, however, constitute a compass in exiting the crisis,⁶ implying making drastic choices and accepting the transformations of the development models it implies.

As the Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR)⁷ reminded us last year, co-benefits, trade-offs and tough choices are at the heart of sustainable development, but have not always been appreciated as such. Indeed, early interpretations that focused on the three dimensions of sustainability (economic, environmental and social) tended to reinforce decision-making in thematic silos, often prioritising immediate economic benefits over the social and environmental costs that would materialize in the longer term. At the same time, this approach has also consistently deferred consideration of the hard choices that needed to be made. Yet the 2030 Agenda is much more than a long wish list, it is also an integrated vision of how to achieve SDGs, while jointly advancing the well-being of humanity and the planet. Within this framework, objectives and targets are useful, but above all the interactions between them need to be optimised. However, it is this dimension that has so far been the least applied.

In an increasingly globalised and hyper-connected world, any intervention in the name of one objective can entail unforeseen and even negative consequences for the achievement of other objectives. However, interactions between SDGs can also give rise to co-benefits and significant potential for transformation towards sustainable development. This requires managing contradictions and synergies between sectors, such as health care, the economy, food and energy systems. Sectoral approaches that focus on a single objective or a subset of objectives need to be overcome, as the most effective - if not the only - way to make progress on a given objective is to take advantage of positive synergies with other objectives while resolving or improving negative trade-offs with others: for

example, what are the options for tackling poverty and food insecurity while preserving biodiversity and water and ensuring that gender inequalities are adequately addressed? GSDR's systemic entry points (e.g. in the agribusiness or energy sector) are a way to exploit important synergies, multiplier effects and trade-offs between several objectives, but also to identify levers and actors that can help achieve these objectives.

Strategising recovery plans in sustainable terms

And the post-crisis period is an opportunity to accelerate structural transformations for sustainable development, as the six systemic entry points of the GSDR can constitute the main chapters of a sustainable development strategy at the level of territories or actors. In this reconstruction logic, it seems necessary to make debt cancellations or company rescues conditional on the adoption of sustainable development pathways and strategies. This alignment of investments and recovery plans with sustainable development should be evaluated. Compared to 2008, we are much better equipped in this respect: adoption of the regulation on the taxonomy of green activities,⁸ development of environmental, social and governance (ESG) criteria, integration of SDGs in budgets⁹ and in the European Semester,¹⁰ criteria for evaluating recovery plans,¹¹ and the work in progress led by the OECD and the United Nations Development Programme on the alignment of private finance with the 2030 Agenda. Reconstruction must be based on financing strategies and Integrated National Financing Frameworks (INFFs)¹² to better link planning and financing processes; to do so, each country must take into account its own conditions and priorities, while breaking with the current practice of "grow first and clean up later".

The success of the 2030 Agenda further requires the cooperation of governments, institutions, development banks, the private sector and civil society across different sectors, locations, borders and levels. Its implementation poses a huge governance challenge for all countries, regardless of their level of development and income. It requires governments and all actors to work across political boundaries and set ambitious and interdependent economic, social and environmental goals that transcend short-term political cycles, as recalled by the OECD¹³ last year.

¹ <https://unsdg.un.org/resources/shared-responsibility-global-solidarity-responding-socio-economic-impacts-covid-19>

² <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/coronavirus-pandemic-effect-sdg-un-progress>

³ Cf. Julián Suárez Miglioni, vice-président de la Banque de développement de l'Amérique latine. https://elpais.com/economia/2020-05-01/el-desarrollo-sostenible-como-vacuna.html?ssm=LK_CC?event_log=oklogin

⁴ https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=F

⁵ <https://www.iddri.org/fr/publications-et-evenements/decryptage/bilan-et-conditions-de-succes-de-lagenda-2030-pour-le>

⁶ <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/launch-report-socio-economic-impacts-covid-19>

⁷ Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary General (2019). Global Sustainable Development Report 2019: The Future is Now – Science for Achieving Sustainable Development, United Nations, New York.

⁸ <https://www.iddri.org/fr/publications-et-evenements/billet-de-blog/pour-des-investissements-durables-dans-la-transition-la>

⁹ <https://www.iddri.org/en/publications-and-events/study/integrating-sdgs-national-budgetary-processes>

¹⁰ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_20_306

¹¹ <https://www.iddri.org/en/publications-and-events/op-ed/europes-recovery-plans-must-pass-five-sustainability-tests>

¹² <https://developmentfinance.un.org/fsdr2019>

¹³ OCDE (2019), Governance as an SDG Accelerator : Country Experiences and Tools, Éditions OCDE, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/0666b085-en>.

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