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COMPLEXITY AND FRAGILITY: REALISING THE SDGS IN THE FACE OF COVID-19

By Dr David Nabarro and Joe Colombano

If there is one lesson to be learned from the COVID-19 pandemic is that humanity and the planet are tightly linked in a sophisticated whole of interconnected systems, encompassing the biosphere and the constructs of our society, its politics and the economy. Life in every form is at the center of such “system of systems,” from the microscopic of a virus to the macroscopic of the animal kingdom, the global commons and the world economy. Because of its complexity, however, such a structure is vulnerable to sudden catastrophic collapse triggered by small events in any one of the constituent systems.

One such event occurred late last year, when an unknown virus jumped from a wild animal, probably a bat, to a human, possibly in a wet market in Wuhan, China, thus transmitting the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Corona Virus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) responsible for the COVID-19 disease. Since then, this zoonotic virus spread as an unprecedented pandemic, infecting over 4 million people, killing over 300,000, and causing a global recession of historical proportions. Until a vaccine or a therapy are found and made available to all, the virus will continue to wreak havoc on our world.

The pain inflicted by the pandemic has devastating effects on sustainable development, the concept that more than others reflects the complexity of our world by combining and juxtaposing the socio, economic and environmental aspects of human activity. These effects undermine our chances of meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the international agenda for sustainability agreed by all 193 Member States of the United Nations in 2015.

The direct effects of COVID-19 on sustainable development come from the adverse health outcomes of the virus, and the extent to which its rate of mortality and morbidity impacts on the size and health of the labour force and its productivity (SDG3). This in turn affects, for example, the fight against poverty (SDG1), the number of people at risk of famine (SDG2), education outcomes (SDG4), economic growth and employment (SDG8), and more. Indirect effects come from the lockdown measures, as the artificial stalling of the economy triggers one of the most severe recessions on record (SDG8), with levels of unemployment and deprivations (SDG1) of historical proportions.

Most interestingly, the pandemic exposes the flaws of our system. Far from being the great equalizer that it was initially purported to be, the virus impacts deeply into the fabric of our society and exposes its violence, for example against those considered responsible for the contagions (SDG16), and inequalities, as the poorest and most vulnerable, including women, are hit the hardest (SDG5, 10). In some less democratic countries, the crisis has also become the pretext for authoritarian leaders to strengthen their grip on power, in disregard of parliaments and the rule of law (SDG16).

The relationship between the pandemic and the SDGs is two-way. Not only has the virus an impact on the achievement of the SDGs, but also the extent to which progress has been made on the goals determines the severity of the crisis. Put in other terms, progress on SDG implementation contributes

to building resilient societies. Take, for example, the first line of defence against the virus, as recommended by the World Health Organization: frequent handwashing. While this is a daily routine for many, the latest SDGs Progress Report reminds us that 2 out of 5 people worldwide do not have access to soap and water at home. This means that, globally, an estimated 3 billion people are deprived of the most basic and effective measure against COVID-19.

On the upside, the sudden stop in economic activity and the movement of people has had a positive impact on measures of air and water pollution, and, to a lesser extent on emissions, as sectors other than transport and industry remain active, even during lockdowns. Such improvements are destined to be short-lived anyway, unless countries deliver on their Paris commitments once the global economy restarts. Rather, if a silver lining is to be found, this is certainly the fact that the strengthening of the public health systems is now at the heart of the political debate, and one hopes that the sector will not again suffer the political side-lining and cuts in resources seen in the past.

In the face of uncertainty, complexity means fragility. Because uncertainty cannot be controlled, the only option we have is to manage complexity. When it comes to sustainable development, the SDGs provide us with a formidable instrument to do so. Investing in them will allow us to build resilience against crises such as the one we are currently facing, and finally move towards a fairer and more sustainable future.