



SOCIAL WATCH



From 2020 HLPF to the first annual “SDG Moment”

By Elena Marmo

The first annual SDG Moment is set to take place on 18 September 2020, designed to reinvigorate efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. Marking the last decade in which to achieve these goals, the moment [will](#): “Set out a vision for a [Decade of Action](#) and recovering better from COVID-19; Provide a snapshot on SDG progress; Highlight plans and actions to tackle major implementation gaps; and Demonstrate the power and impact of action and innovation by SDG stakeholders.”

Highlighting this first SDG moment at the close of the HLPF in July, Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed [stated](#), “We hope to generate greater momentum, solutions and solidarity to address the massive implementation gaps that we are all so keenly aware of.” At the event on 18 September, Secretary-General Antonio Guterres will present his “Vision for Decade of Action”. He gave a preview perhaps at the HLPF, [saying](#): “The COVID-19 crisis is having devastating impacts because of our past and present failures. Because we have yet to take the SDGs seriously. Because we have put up with inequalities within and between countries that have left billions of people just one crisis away from poverty and financial ruin. Because we haven’t invested adequately in resilience – in universal health coverage; quality education; social protection; safe water and sanitation. Because we have yet to right the power imbalances that leave women and girls to constantly bear the brunt of any crisis. Because we haven’t heeded warnings about the damage that we are inflicting on our natural environment. Because of the shocking risks we are taking with climate disruption. And because we have undervalued effective international cooperation and solidarity.”

The first SDG Moment sets its sights high and needs to address a number of concerns about the future of the 2030 Agenda were raised at the HLPF.

Leave no one behind?

The term, “Leave no one behind” has become an official slogan of the 2030 Agenda. Multiple statements of efforts to be inclusive, while welcome, are selective and neglect many disadvantaged groups, and ignore the dynamics, policies and practices that *push* many behind. At a HLPF side event on national reporting on the 2030 Agenda, Committee for Development Policy (CDP) member Sakiko Fukuda-Parr said: “most voluntary national reports mention leave no one behind, (45 out of the 47) but it's the depth of that principle we are concerned about with only seven recognizing what policies might be pushing people behind.”

To push no one behind requires that Member States examine not only their efforts of inclusion, but also policies and practices that may be effectively excluding or pushing groups behind, both within their national borders and in terms of extraterritorial responsibilities. This links to a broader discussion on reducing inequalities between and within countries. The Secretary-General’s [2020 SDG Progress Report](#) noted that “progress had either stalled or been reversed: the number of people suffering from hunger was on the rise; climate change was occurring much faster than anticipated; and inequality continued to increase within and among countries”.

Belgium observed that the commitment to leaving no one behind without detail or an inequality framing would fail as “successfully fighting climate change will require us to ensure that the transition is just, or we risk leaving people behind”. To that point, the European Union also noted: “Building back better is the first task of the Decade of Action. We have to join our forces to accelerate the implementation of the SDGs to achieve a transformative shift by 2030 that leaves no one behind.” How will Member States use the SDG Moment and Decade of Action to promote policies that curtail action pushing populations and countries behind?

Worsening inequalities—change measurement?

COVID-19’s socio-economic effects have raised a myriad of issues related to inequalities. In particular, SDG 10 to reduce inequalities within and among countries permeated discussions from digital technologies to macroeconomic recovery.

At an HLPF session on mobilizing international solidarity, accelerating action and embarking on new pathways to realize the 2030 Agenda and the Samoa Pathway, Barbados called on all Member States to “pay more attention to this notion of vulnerability. It’s not about GDP per capita, [rather] what is our capacity to absorb new technology, composition of our population, levels of education and skills that allows us ... to really take advantage of the resources that we have?”

This was echoed by Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa, Vera Songwe, who noted: “the importance of changing our classification during this crisis...if we stay within our traditional sort of GDP per capita definitions of the crisis we will not be addressing the countries.” How will the SDG Moment and Decade of Action build on these calls and usher in an understanding of vulnerability to the 2030 Agenda?

Multilateralism or Multi-stakeholderism

As the effects of COVID-19 reverse progress made on the SDGs, conversations regarding financing and implementation of the 2030 Agenda have heightened urgency. However, rather than a robust multilateral effort to establish fiscal space for the public sector, Member States have turned once again to the private sector for support. Without clarification on related responsibilities, the unconditional or unqualified inclusion of the private sector and multinational companies shifts multilateralism to multi-stakeholderism, and risks bypassing people-centred and human rights-based multilateralism and related standards of accountability and universality.

Secretary-General Guterres [urged Member States](#):

“We must also reimagine the way nations cooperate. The pandemic has underscored the need for a strengthened and renewed multilateralism: A multilateralism based on the powerful ideals and objectives enshrined in the Charter and in the agreements defined across the decades since...We need a networked multilateralism...And we need an inclusive multilateralism, drawing on the critical contributions of civil society, business, foundations, the research community, local authorities, cities and regional governments.”

At an HLPF session on financing the 2030 Agenda amid COVID-19, Ibrahim Mayaki from NEPAD emphasized that “no man is an island, no country is on its own. Africa as a continent is affected by global imperatives, good or not...Resilience alone without a holistic approach to well-being and broader development needs is counter-productive.” This recognition of the interdependence of countries reflects a necessary distinction between “shared” responsibilities and the notion of solidarity. The “global imperatives” caused by climate change, cross-border trade, illicit finance and tax cooperation reflect the need for international co-operation and solidarity.

In the [2020 Spotlight Report on Sustainable Development](#), Barbara Adams notes: “Multilateral solidarity is gaining traction as the slogan for mobilizing support for international cooperation and for the UN. Is it replacing

or merely renaming cross-border obligations, many of which have been enshrined over decades in UN treaties, conventions and agreements, and the principle of common but differentiated responsibility in their implementation?”

Beyond Building Back Better

The phrase “Build Back Better”, applied by Secretary-General Guterres to the context of climate change, took hold at the HLPF, with many Member States, UN Staff, and civil society organizations calling for development action to make this possible, as well as asking if what is needed is rather to build back differently.

Isabelle Durant, Deputy Secretary-General of UNCTAD remarked: “I’m tired of hearing building back better. What is better? We need to build back differently, more diversified economies, greener, more inclusive. Who are we building back better for? Big economies, for profit, and big business, or for sustainable development?”

Guyana on behalf the of the G77 and Belize agreed. Belize states that building back better, “for SIDS is not going back to what they had. When we were encouraged to diversify our countries and markets we took what we were really good at and exchanged it for something else, not a true diversification.”

However, the United Kingdom was an early proponent of the idea, noting, “we must not be consumed by the challenge alone; we must use this as an opportunity to rebuild better. This is the moment to shape a recovery that delivers cleaner, healthier, more inclusive and more resilient economies and societies.” The European Union echoed this sentiment, stating: “Building back better is the first task of the Decade of Action.”

Germany highlighted concerns regarding the SDGs, noting: “Instead of falling behind in the implementation of the SDGs, we must think about how we restart our economies in a way that will accelerate implementation.” The United Kingdom posed the SDGs as a roadmap for recovery “that puts the 2030 agenda for sustainable development and the goals of the Paris Agreement back within reach as we collectively rise to the challenge of the decade of action”.

Pakistan noted the role COVID-19 can play in rebuilding not only better but differently, saying that COVID-19 “has exacerbated the systemic risks and fragilities in our economic and financial systems and development models. It has also highlighted the cascading impact of disasters crossing economic, social, environmental, dimensions of sustainable development, and affecting all countries, especially developing countries.”

The COVID-19 crisis has heightened, not diminished the urgency for action on the SDGs. As stated by the President of ECOSOC: “Our development gains are at risk of being reversed in the very year when we launched a Decade of Action and Delivery to accelerate the implementation the Sustainable Development Goals.” While COVID-19 has massively disrupted economies, health systems and social protection worldwide, Member States continue to invest trust and support in the 2030 Agenda. However ambitious and essential its SDGs may be, it lacks an accountability mechanism to get them back on track.

Secretary-General speaks out

Just two days after the HLPF came to a close, Secretary-General Guterres, delivering the [Nelson Mandela lecture](#), called for major reform to the UN Security Council, the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, saying:

“COVID-19 has been likened to an x-ray, revealing fractures in the fragile skeleton of the societies we have built. It is exposing fallacies and falsehoods everywhere: The lie that free markets can deliver healthcare for all; the fiction that unpaid care work is not work; the delusion that we live in a post-racist

world; the myth that we are all in the same boat. Because while we are all floating on the same sea, it's clear that some are in super-yachts while others are clinging to drifting debris.... Inequality defines our time."

He added: "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 create equal opportunities for all and respect the rights and freedoms of all. This is the only way that we will meet the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Paris Agreement and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda – agreements that address precisely the failures that are being exposed and exploited by the pandemic."

With eyes focused on the first annual SDG Moment to "set out a vision for a Decade of Action and recovering better from COVID-19", how will Member States respond to calls to go beyond implementation gaps to tackle systemic failures, the need to do things differently, and to reinvigorate the multilateral system?

Social Watch

Avda. 18 de Julio 2095/301
Montevideo 11200, Uruguay
socwatch@socialwatch.org
www.socialwatch.org

Global Policy Watch

205 E 42nd St | 20th Fl
New York, NY 10017, USA
globalpolicywatch.org

Global Policy Forum

Koenigstrasse 37a
53115 Bonn, Germany
gpf@globalpolicy.org
www.globalpolicy.org