

SUSTAINABLE AND RESILIENT RECOVERY FROM THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Building An Inclusive And Effective Path For The Achievement Of The 2030 Agenda In The Context Of The Decade Of Action And Delivery For Sustainable Development

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Abstract:

For the economic recovery from the COVID-19 crisis to be durable and resilient, a return to ‘business as usual’ and environmentally destructive investment patterns and activities must be avoided. Unchecked, global environmental emergencies such as climate change and biodiversity loss could cause social and economic damages far larger than those caused by COVID-19. To avoid this, economic recovery packages should be designed to “build back better”. This means doing more than getting economies and livelihoods quickly back on their feet. Recovery policies also need to trigger investment and behavioural changes that will reduce the likelihood of future shocks and increase society’s resilience to them when they do occur. Central to this approach is a focus on well-being and inclusiveness. Other key dimensions for assessing whether recovery packages can “build back better” include alignment with long-term emission reduction goals, factoring in resilience to climate impacts, slowing biodiversity loss and increasing circularity of supply chains. In practice, well-designed recovery policies can cover several of these dimensions at once, such as catalyzing the shift towards accessibility-based mobility systems, and investing in low-carbon and decentralized electricity systems.

Introduction

The year 2020 began with what seemed to be a brief stint of nature fighting back when humans crossed boundaries. For the past 40 years or more, many Environmental Economists have highlighted the risks associated with the current geological age of the “Anthropogenic” – one in which human activity has become the dominant influence on climate and the environment.

The scientific literature is now awash with publications on the impacts of climate change, biodiversity loss, environmental degradation and other forms of anthropogenic impacts on nature, as well as the self-destructive impacts of social inequalities, poverty and deprivation that characterize human societies everywhere. Beyond the science, these negative impacts have all too often been evident in human societies over time. Millions of life forms and treasured assets (economic, social and natural capital) worth billions of US dollars are lost annually. Incidences of increasing extreme climate events (cyclones, wild fires, melting of the glacier that holds the poles of the earth together, floods, droughts, increased temperatures and heat waves, and the growing sea level rise), other forms of pollution and environmental degradation (depletion in air quality, plastic litter in oceans – stifling the blue economy, etc.), and heightened social fragilities (hunger pandemics, social insecurity and growing terrorism) that social inequities and environmental degradation engender, have become regular news everywhere. However, the incidence of COVID-19 has been very different.

Like other supranational challenges such as climate change, COVID-19 is a global commons problem. However, unlike climate change, the impacts of COVID-19 have been more urgent, more globalized. Its immediate devastating impacts on global, regional and national health systems, economies, trade, cultures, societies, and systems of cooperation has been unprecedented.

Building Back Better In The Post-Covid-19 Era

The impacts of COVID-19 in terms of morbidities and mortalities remain a significant concern in many countries and second waves of infections are being experienced in countries that are rapidly reopening their economies. However, Scientists now have a better understanding of the epidemiology of the virus and its transmission mechanisms. There is also increasing hope for a vaccine and therapeutic is due to the youthful population and dispersed settlement patterns in countries of the world and rural communities. Whichever perspective one may hold, there appears to be a growing consensus that has started to turn the corner on COVID-19, attention is now turning to re-opening economies.

As the world begin to turn the corner on COVID-19 and Governments start to consider policies for building back better, there is need to address the social, economic and environment trade-offs in COVID-19 impacts. While the COVID-19 lockdown has led to gains in environmental sustainability indicators – reduced CO2 emissions, improved air quality, reduced plastics littering, etc., it has also decimated economies and livelihoods, and disproportionately impacted the poorer segments of society. The International Energy Agency estimates that global GHG emissions might fall by 8% or 2.6 GtCO₂ in 2020. By comparison; annual CO₂ emissions fell by an average of 4% during the Second World War (1939 – 45), 3% during the 1991– 92 recession, 1% during the 1980– 81 energy crisis, and 1% during the 2009 global financial crisis. UNEP estimates that global GHG emissions must fall by 7.6% every year from 2020 to 2030 to keep temperature increases to less than 1.5°C. So, one may argue that the COVID-19 lockdown has delivered some environmental sustain-ability gains.

But there is a trade-off. The halt in economic activities has caused significant harm to the global and national economies, livelihoods, and societies everywhere. Countries are experiencing deeper recession than in recorded history, the lockdowns have caused hunger pandemics and pushed millions into poverty. Unemployment rates in many countries is higher than in record history and many Central Banks and Finance Ministries in the world-over have limited fiscal and monetary space / headroom to intervene decisively with rapid burst of fiscal stimulus or quantitative easing

than ever seen before. The inflationary impacts of the massive easing of fiscal and monetary policy to provide social safety nets for households and economies are yet to fully unfold.

In Africa for example, the African Development Bank Group estimates that Africa could suffer GDP losses from 2020 between \$145.5 billion (baseline) and \$189.7 billion (worst case), from the pre-COVID-19 estimated GDP of \$2.59 trillion for 2020. Some countries have seen a sudden uptick in inflation of up to 5%, and expansionary fiscal spending have double since the end of 2020.

Making The 2030 Agenda The Centre Of Post-COVID-19 Recovery Efforts

Building back better would require a careful but balanced triangulation of the three pillars of sustainable development: the social, the economic and the environmental. Framed around the global sustainable development goals, building back better will lead to more inclusive, efficient, resilient, and sustainable economies, if and only if, we develop policies that balance the three objectives. Economies that leave no one behind. Leaving the poor in poverty while growing GDP and/or conserving nature is not sustainable development.

Events of the past 40 years of the age of the Anthropocene have shown that social, economic and environmental fragilities are mutually re-enforcing. Actions of one agent and/or within one sector without proper consideration of the multiplier effects on the other (including positive and negative externalities) cannot lead to a sustainable solution. Just like greenhouse gas emissions that circulate freely in the atmosphere and warms the global climate for all irrespective of the geographical boundary of the emitter(s), if there is COVID-19 anywhere, there is COVID-19 everywhere. Like COVID-19, when there is fragility anywhere, there is fragility everywhere. Questions of moral and distributive justice, as well as intersectoral cooperation and coordination become inevitable in finding a lasting solution.

Policy Considerations For Building Back Better In Post Covid-19 National Level Policies for Reopening Economic Activities

To build back better, Countries must first ensure that the guidelines they follow for re-opening their economy are informed by science, not politics. Countries need to carefully follow the guidelines provided by the Centers for Disease Control (CDCs) based the epidemiology of the disease within specific local contexts. Please see the table below (Table 1).

Sample Guidelines for Reopening Economic Activities.

Gating Criteria	Threshold to Enter Phase 1	Threshold to Enter Phase 2	Threshold to Enter Phase 3
Decreases in newly	Downward trajectory	Downward trajectory	Downward trajectory

identified COVID-19 cases	(or nearzero incidence) of documented cases over a 14-day period	(or nearzero incidence) of documented cases for at least 14 days after entering Phase 1	(or nearzero incidence) of documented cases for at least 14 days after entering Phase 2
Decreases in emergency department (ED) and/or outpatient visits for COVIDlike illness (CLI)	Downward trajectory (or nearzero incidence) of CLI syndromic cases reported over a 14-day period	Downward trajectory (or nearzero incidence) of CLI syndromic cases reported for at least 14 days after entering Phase 1	Downward trajectory (or nearzero incidence) of CLI syndromic cases reported for at least an additional 14 days after entering Phase 2
Decreases in percentage of SARSCoV-2 tests positive	Downward trajectory (or nearzero percent) of positive tests as a percentage of total tests over a 14-day period (flat or increasing volume of tests)	Downward trajectory (or nearzero percent) of positive tests as a percentage of total tests for 14 days after entering Phase 1 (flat or increasing volume of tests)	Downward trajectory (or nearzero percent) of positive tests as a percentage of total tests for at least 14 days after entering Phase 2 (flat or increasing volume of tests)
Treat all patients without crisis care	Jurisdiction inpatient & ICU beds 4 days	Jurisdiction inpatient & ICU beds 4 days	Jurisdiction inpatient & ICU beds 4 days
Robust testing program	Test availability such that percentage of positive tests is $\leq 20\%$ for 14 days Median time from test order to result is ≤ 4 days	Test availability such that percentage of positive tests is $\leq 15\%$ for 14 days Median time from test order to result is ≤ 3 days	Test availability such that the percentage of positive tests is $\leq 10\%$ for 14 days Median time from test order to result is ≤ 2 days

Adapted from the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (US CDC)

Governments should work with local experts (Epidemiologist) to produce guidelines that are adapted to their local contexts to inform the thresholds for a phased approach to reopening economies based on local contexts. Such guidelines should include, sustained decline in newly identified COVID-19 cases; decreases in emergency department (ED) and/or outpatient visits for COVID-like illness (CLI); decreases in percentage of SARS-CoV-2 tests positive cases; demonstrated ability to treat all patients without crisis care; and capacity to implement a robust testing program.

To successfully re-open and rebuild economies, the following interrelated immediate-term policies are required:

- (a) Follow the science Rely on epidemiological data on COVID-19 incidences in the population for decision-making regarding reopening sequences and rates. Ensure that the preconditions set by the Centre for Disease Control (CDCs) are met before re-opening the economy. In this regard, evidence from WHO does suggest that based on 7-day average analyses, most African countries appear to have turned the corner as the incidences of confirmed cases and deaths are now trending downwards. But this should be a reason for continued compliance with the guidelines based on science not complacency. Evidence from other countries demonstrate that there is high risk of resurgence when economies reopen.
- (b) Invest in testing, contact tracing and isolation To successfully reopen, countries need to scale up the capacity for testing, contact tracing and isolation of COVID patients. Testing regimes

should be informed by local realities, but two key areas for prioritized testing include: (i) testing at key ports of entry such as international and local airports, and (ii) community testing where there are high incidences of COVID-19. Testing at ports of entry is build trust in science and in the policies proposed to contain the virus.

- (c) Implement social distancing, wearing masks in public and personal hygiene Frequent hand washing, wearing face masks when in public and maintaining at least 6 feet (about 2 meter) distance from each other always are crucial. Personal hygiene, water and sanitation are not just good for COVID-19 but for a lot of communicable diseases that plague Africa. Implementing social distancing and personal hygiene saves lives. This is a moral and social responsibility that we owe each other to defeat the virus. To be effective, governments and decision makers should invest in the required infrastructure for water and sanitation and other facilities to incentivize adoption and implementation of the policy.
- (d) Communication and trust building Countries should develop effective information sharing and communication strategies based on science to enhance the trust between society, private sector, and governments. The politicization of COVID-19 response policies has led to waning confidence in the public policy responses being implemented by governments. There is need for mass communication strategies using community champions, community leaders and trusted institutions to build trust in science and in the policies proposed to contain the virus.
- (e) Incentivize proactive labor market policies to protect workers and their jobs Decision-makers should encourage flexible working arrangements, retrofitting of offices to ensure effective social distancing and ventilation. Teleworking and different variants of working from home could yield several co-benefits to social, economic and environmental sustainability in a post-COVID-19 world. Workers could benefit from better work-live balance and savings in costs of transportation. Companies could achieve significant savings in capital expenditure as large high-end city offices may no longer be required. The environment benefits in terms on reduced CO2 emissions and improved air quality achieved during the COVID-19 lockdown could be sustained, at least in part if a hybrid working system is adopted for longer. One major challenge in implementing this policy in Africa is the digital divide and lack of access to data and affordability of hardware. Governments and private companies should consider re-investing the cost savings from teleworking to provide mobile data to workers.
- (f) Digitization of economic activities COVID-19 has helped to fast track the transition to the fourth industrial revolution technologies. Digital access has become essential for participation in economic and social activities across sectors. Decisionmakers are encouraged to prioritize investments in digitization of economic activities in priority sectors, including foods systems and agricultural value chains, education systems (e-learning), public health care systems (such as telemedicine, heath data systems, and mobile health delivery) through Public Private Partnerships (PPPs). If there is one take home message from COVID-19, it is the fact that the digital economy is the new normal. Only those with hardware and reliable and affordable internet connections will benefit for the post- COVID-19 economy. Digitization also delivers key cost savings and benefits for environmental sustainability through reduced transportation and unnecessary air travel. It could also lead to decongestion in cities as workers will become more

willing to live in rural communities and work from home – driving greater social inclusion, equity and work-life balance. This calls for strategic investments in digitization of the key sectors of every nation's economy and building the physical infrastructure and human capacity for digital economies in all sectors, especially in the critical sectors: health, agriculture and education.

- (g) **Prioritize investments in inclusive one health infrastructure** This includes investments in food systems, water and sanitation facilities, and public health care for all, especially to the vulnerable households in communities where lockdown policies are needed. Also promote community-based health care to augment the traditional hospitals. Food production and distribution within communities should be classified as essential services. Governments should assist small holder farmers with personal protective equipment such as masks and hand sanitizers. Investing in health systems needs to be re-conceptualized as investing in improving the human experience from conception to the grave (all keys must play harmoniously for better health and wellbeing). This is a step-change from the consumptive health systems which focuses on building hospitals to manage disease conditions.
- (h) **Private sector participation** To succeed, countries need to implement policies that eases the business environment to allow the private sector to proactively participate in rebuilding the economies. The limited fiscal space in Africa means that countries have limited headroom to act decisively at the pace and scale required to rapidly rebuild economies. Policies that encourage social innovations and public-private sector participation would be a win-win for Africa. This could help create jobs and unleash the innovative talent of African youths. Macro-economic policies such as small business tax deferrals could be helpful. Polices that target bailouts to large business such as airline bailouts, assisted bankruptcy for large companies, and large business tax deferrals are known to have negative externalities on environmental sustainability.
- (i) **Clean Technology Investments** To drive the transition to low carbon economies, countries should prioritize clean technical investments in key sectors, such as (i) clean energy infrastructure; (ii) connectivity infrastructure such as mass transit systems, (iii) e-education; and (iv) smart quality health care infrastructure.
- (j) **Investments in Research and Development** Knowledge dependence have been at the roots of Africa's underdevelopment for decades. With very low investments in research for development, African countries register low patents and continue to rely on foreign knowledge for its policies and development programs. Most Think Tanks in Africa are faced with sustainability challenges as they largely depend on research grants from Donors often at the expense of undertaking relevant research that can inform context-relevant policymaking in Africa. Investments in R & D spending and capacity development will deliver significant benefits to building resilience in Africa.

(k) Intersectoral coordination and collaboration at the national and regional scales will be critical for sustainable policy design and implementation. While COVID-19 is primarily a health pandemic, the transmission channels through which it impacts economies and citizens are multi-sectoral, especially through food systems and food value chains, water and sanitation services, trade and industry. Effective collaboration among the relevant Ministries including health, agriculture, food and livestock, tourism, national planning, finance and more is therefore crucial in designing policies to build back better.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic is imposing economic and broader development challenges as never before. Job losses, reduced income and lack of access to social protection has pushed millions back into extreme poverty, with consequences for persistence in inequality. There is a significant risk that the pandemic will push many countries in the world further back from achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and leave it even more vulnerable to future shocks.

To avoid the devastating consequences of such shocks in the future, policymakers need fresh thinking and strategies to improve the resilience of economies, that is, their ability to absorb various shocks and adapt to change and prevent systemic breakdowns. Rather than looking back, they should start anew: i.e., instead of turning on the old 'doomsday machine' that churned out respectable GDP growth figures but performed poorly in eradicating poverty, inequalities and protecting the environment, they must "build forward" towards more resilient, inclusive, and sustainable economies.