The Sustainable Development Goals Report
2021

United Nations

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Foreword

The global community is at a critical moment in its pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). More than a year into the global pandemic, millions of lives have been lost, the human and economic toll has been unprecedented, and recovery efforts so far have been uneven, inequitable and insufficiently geared towards achieving sustainable development. The current crisis is threatening decades of development gains, further delaying the urgent transition to greener, more inclusive economies, and throwing progress on the SDGs even further off track.

Had the paradigm shift envisioned by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development been fully embraced over the past six years, the world would have been better prepared to face this crisis – with stronger health systems, expanded social protection coverage, the resilience that comes from more equal societies, and a healthier natural environment. Regrettably, the SDGs were already off track even before COVID-19 emerged. Progress had been made in poverty reduction, maternal and child health, access to electricity, and gender equality, but not enough to achieve the Goals by 2030. In other vital areas, including reducing inequality, lowering carbon emissions and tackling hunger, progress had either stalled or reversed.

As the pandemic continues to unfold, *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2021* outlines some significant impacts in many areas that are already apparent. The global extreme poverty rate rose for the first time in over 20 years, and 119 to 124 million people were pushed back into extreme poverty in 2020. There is a risk of a generational catastrophe regarding schooling, where an additional 101 million children have fallen below the minimum reading proficiency level, potentially wiping out two decades of education gains. Women have faced increased domestic violence, child marriage is projected to rise after a decline in recent years, and unpaid and underpaid care work is increasingly and disproportionately falling on the shoulders of women and girls, impacting educational and income opportunities and health. Notwithstanding the global economic slowdown, concentrations of major greenhouse gases continue to increase. With the global average temperature reaching about 1.2°C above pre-industrial levels, the climate crisis has well and truly arrived, and its impacts are being felt across the world. The pandemic has also brought immense financial challenges, especially for developing countries – with a significant rise in debt distress and dramatic decreases in foreign direct investment and trade.

Yet, with a surge in global solidarity and leadership from the highest political level, countries can still deliver on the 2030 Agenda and the 2015 Paris Agreement on Climate Change. A global vaccination plan, designed and implemented by the countries that can produce vaccines today or will be able to do so if properly supported, is an urgent first step in that direction.

A recommitment by Governments, cities, businesses, and industries to ensure that the recovery reduces carbon emissions, conserves natural resources, creates better jobs, advances gender equality and tackles growing poverty and inequalities is a further imperative. As this report shows, the availability of high-quality data is also critical, helping decision makers to understand where investments can have the greatest impact; but improved data collection will not happen without increased data financing, from both international and domestic resources.

The challenges are immense, but there are also reasons for hope. The COVID-19 crisis demonstrated inspiring community resilience, highlighted the Herculean work by essential workers in myriad fields and facilitated the rapid expansion of social protection, the acceleration of digital transformation and unprecedented worldwide collaboration on the development of vaccines. A brighter future is possible. We must use the crisis to transform our world, deliver on the 2030 Agenda and keep our promise to current and future generations.

António Guterres

Secretary-General of the United Nations

View from the pandemic: stark realities, critical choices

As we enter the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is abundantly clear that this is a crisis of monumental proportions, with catastrophic effects on people's lives and livelihoods and on efforts to realize the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Historically, pandemics have served as catalysts for political, economic and social change, and that still holds true today. The year 2021 will be decisive as to whether or not the world can make the transformations needed to deliver on the promise to achieve the SDGs by 2030 – with implications for us all.

The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2021 uses the latest available data and estimates to reveal the devastating impacts of the crisis on the SDGs and point out areas that require urgent and coordinated action. The report was prepared by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs in collaboration with more than 50 international agencies.

Years, or even decades, of progress have been halted or reversed. In 2020, the global extreme poverty rate rose for the first time in over 20 years. Hundreds of millions of people were pushed back into extreme poverty and chronic hunger. The COVID-19 pandemic has interrupted one or more essential health services and poses major health threats beyond the disease itself. It has wreaked havoc worldwide on children's learning and well-being, and women have suffered a disproportionate share of job losses and increased care work at home.

The pandemic has exposed and intensified inequalities within and among countries. The poorest and most vulnerable people have a greater risk of becoming infected by the virus, and bear the brunt of the economic fallout. The crisis has threatened the livelihoods of 1.6 billion workers in the informal economy. The collapse of international tourism disproportionally affects small island developing States. And vast inequities exist in vaccine distribution: as of 17 June 2021, around 68 vaccines were administered for every 100 people in Europe and Northern America compared with fewer than 2 in sub-Saharan Africa.

The climate crisis, the biodiversity crisis and the pollution crisis persist, despite the pandemic. Concentrations of major greenhouse gases continue to increase despite the temporary reduction in emissions in 2020 related to lockdowns and other COVID-19 response measures. The world remains woefully off track in meeting the Paris Agreement. Biodiversity is declining, and terrestrial ecosystems are being degraded at alarming rates. Around the world, 1 million plastic drinking bottles are purchased every minute, and 5 trillion single-use plastic bags are thrown away each year.

The COVID-19 pandemic serves as a mirror for the world. It reflects deeply rooted problems in our societies: insufficient social protection, weak public health systems and inadequate health coverage, structural inequalities, environmental degradation and climate change.

Resilience, adaptability and innovation bring us optimism. In the face of tremendous challenges, many Governments, the private sector, academia and communities have demonstrated quick responses, remarkable creativity and new forms of collaboration. Between 1 February and 31 December 2020, Governments around the world announced more than 1,600 new social protection measures in response to the crisis. Scientist across the globe have been working together to develop life-saving vaccines and treatments in record time. The pandemic has sped up the digital transformation of Governments and businesses, profoundly changing the ways in which we interact, learn and work.

Transformational changes are needed, and the SDGs provide the road map. The crisis demonstrates the interdependency and interlinkages among the various dimensions of sustainability – from health, well-being, and social and economic prosperity to climate and ecosystems. To address the vulnerabilities exposed by the pandemic, Governments and the international community should make structural transformations and develop common solutions guided by the SDGs. These include significantly strengthening social protection systems and public services (including health systems, education, water, sanitation and other basic services); increasing investments in science, technology and innovation; creating fiscal space in developing countries; taking a green-economy approach and investing in clean energy and industry; and transitioning to sustainable food systems.

Investing in data and information infrastructure is critical. The pandemic has taught us that weaknesses in data and information systems present an added and enormous challenge to decision makers. A year into the pandemic, only about 60 countries had data on COVID-19 infection and death rates that could be disaggregated by age and sex and that were publicly accessible. These data deficiencies have serious consequences for people's lives. Policies, programmes and resources aimed at protecting people during this challenging time will inevitably fall short without the evidence to focus and hone interventions. Investing in data and information systems is not money wasted. Statistical offices around the world have embraced innovative approaches and forged partnerships, improving the availability of data for evidence-based decisions. Increased investments in national data and statistical systems and the mobilization of additional international and domestic resources will be imperative if we are to build back better from the crisis and accelerate implementation of the SDGs.

Building back better requires effective multilateralism and the full participation of all societies. This global crisis demands a shared global response. In the face of the many challenges we face, a unified vision of coherent, coordinated and comprehensive responses from the multilateral system is more important than ever. Since the pandemic affects everyone, everywhere, the implementation of solutions requires action and participation from all sectors of society, including Governments at all levels, the private sector, academia, civil society and individuals – youth and women, in particular.

We are at a critical juncture in human history. The decisions we make and actions we take today will have momentous consequences for future generations. Lessons learned from the pandemic will help us rise to current and future challenges. Let us seize the moment to make this a decade of action, transformation and restoration to achieve the SDGs and make good on the Paris Climate Agreement.

Liu Zhenmin

Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs

Investing in data to save lives and build back better

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, policymakers and business leaders have routinely had to make time-sensitive decisions, many of which have life-or-death consequences. Yet even basic data to guide decision-making – on health, the society and the economy – are often lacking. The pandemic has brought to the forefront the critical importance of such data. It has also accelerated the transformation of data and statistical systems and how the public perceives and uses that information. As policy- and decision makers were pressuring data providers for more up-to-date and accurate information, national statistical offices (NSOs) and their partners stepped up to the challenge. They forged new collaborations and leveraged alternative data solutions while increasing efforts to protect data privacy and confidentiality.

As the pandemic continues to unfold, and the world moves further off track in meeting the 2030 SDG deadline, timely and high-quality data are more essential than ever. Indeed, data are being widely recognized as strategic assets in building back better and accelerating the implementation of the SDGs. What is needed now are new investments in data and information infrastructure, as well as human capacity to get ahead of the crisis and trigger earlier responses, anticipate future needs and design the urgent actions needed to realize the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Responding to an unprecedented demand for data

Despite major disruptions to statistical operations, many NSOs have adapted quickly. They have adopted new methods and tools to come up with data and have played a central role in Governments' COVID-19 responses. As of September 2020, 82 per cent of NSOs were involved in data collection on COVID-19 and its impacts, some through innovative methods such as online and telephone-based surveys, as well as the use of administrative, credit card and scanner data.

In the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the Office for National Statistics has responded to an urgent need for information on how COVID-19 is affecting the population through methods such as web-scraping Google mobility data and the introduction of new surveys. Together with partners, the office set up a COVID-19 Infections Survey in a matter of days, which has since become an indispensable source of data on the pandemic. As of June 2021, interviewers had covered 2.4 million households and performed 4.6 million swab tests. The survey detected an uptick of new infections and the prevalence of the so-called Delta variant. In mid-June, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson delayed by a month his plans to lift the last COVID-19 restrictions. The delay in reopening was intended to buy additional time for the health department to intensify its vaccination programme, which was also informed by data showing that new infections were largely driven by those who were not fully vaccinated.

In Ghana, the Statistical Service responded successfully to the sudden increase in data demand. When COVID-19 hit, "suddenly, the appetite for numbers grew," says Omar Seidu, the head of demographic statistics and SDG coordinator at the Ghana Statistical Service. In addition to the number of new COVID-19 cases, other important questions were raised, such as which regions were densely populated, how many people lived in crowded situations, and which parts of the country had no water for handwashing.

The Ghana Statistical Service was able to guide policymakers on crisis response and service delivery by bringing together a wide range of data and disseminating them through a central COVID-19 data hub, supported by a joint project on SDG monitoring with the United Nations and the Government of the United Kingdom (the UNSD-FCDO project). The Ghana Statistical Service also helped monitor lockdown compliance through mobility data gathered in partnership with a cell-phone carrier. The crisis expanded the role of statisticians in the country. "In the past, our role was more or less limited to data collection," says Mr. Seidu. "Ministers and other decision makers now want us to have a seat at the table, not only for COVID-19 task forces, but on development policy as a whole."

Advancing progress on data for SDG monitoring and improving people's lives

Considerable progress has been made on the availability of internationally comparable data on the SDGs. The number of indicators included in the global SDG database increased from 115 in 2016 to around 160 in 2019 and 211 in 2021.

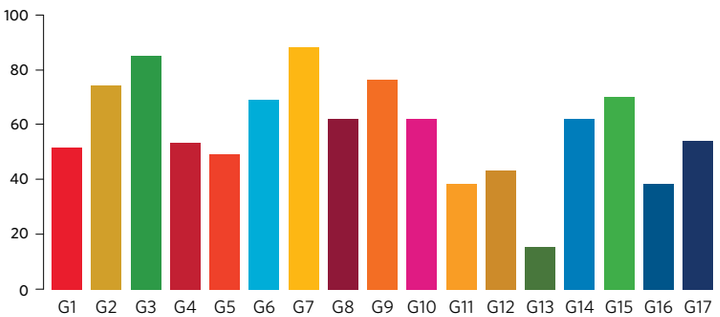
The advancements in data availability have had a direct impact on people's lives. Sugarmaa Batjargal was born on a cold February day in Mongolia's Alag-Erdene District. She was a healthy infant, thanks to the midwife who visited her mother during pregnancy and taught her about proper nutrition and ways to care for a baby in harsh weather conditions. These prenatal and neonatal services were put in place because of data that identified the region as high risk for child mortality. Between 1990 and 2019, the country's neonatal mortality rate dropped significantly, from 30 to 8 deaths per 1,000 live births. Only with the right data can Governments know which children are most at risk and how best to reach them.

Identifying data gaps to achieve the SDGs

For every success story like Sugarmaa's, there are many other stories of deprivation and inequity – the children who are not reached simply because there is no information about them. A lack of data severely limits a country's ability to reach children and their families – to ensure that they have the services, opportunities and choices they deserve to live life to the fullest. An average of 74 per cent of child-related SDG indicators either have insufficient data or show insufficient progress to meet the global targets by 2030.

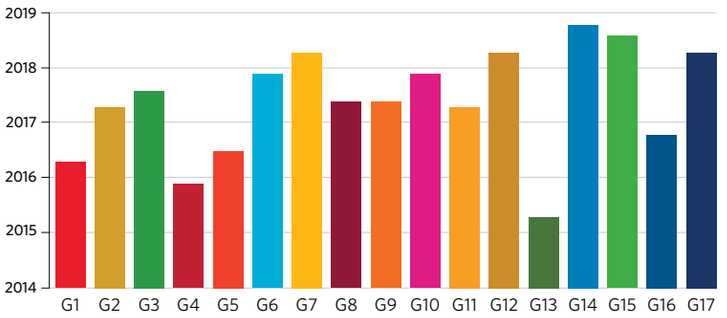
Despite improvements, big data gaps still exist in all areas of the SDGs in terms of geographic coverage, timeliness and the level of disaggregation required. Intensified efforts need to be made to fill those gaps. An analysis of the indicators in the Global SDG Indicators Database reveals that, for 5 of the 17 Goals, fewer than half of 193 countries or areas have internationally comparable data. This lack of country-level data is particularly worrisome for Goal 13 (climate action), where, on average, only about 1 in 6 countries have data available. Country-level data deficits are also significant in areas related to sustainable cities and communities (Goal 11), peace, justice and strong institutions (Goal 16), sustainable production and consumption (Goal 12), and gender equality (Goal 5). What's more, lockdown measures implemented to control the spread of COVID-19 have hindered data collection efforts for much of 2020, widening gaps in the capacity of countries to report on many of the indicators.

Proportion of countries or areas with available data, by Goal (percentage)



Note: The data in this chart are not comparable with those presented in *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020* due to changes in the SDG indicator framework and the calculation method. The SDG indicators framework was comprehensively reviewed and revised in 2020, resulting in 36 major changes to indicators in the form of replacements, revisions, additions and deletions.

The most recent year available (weighted average by indicator), by Goal



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Data timeliness has also been a challenge for SDG monitoring. For instance, the latest data point available for climate change indicators (Goal 13) is around 2015. The average of the latest available year for data on poverty (Goal 1) and education (Goal 4) is around 2016.

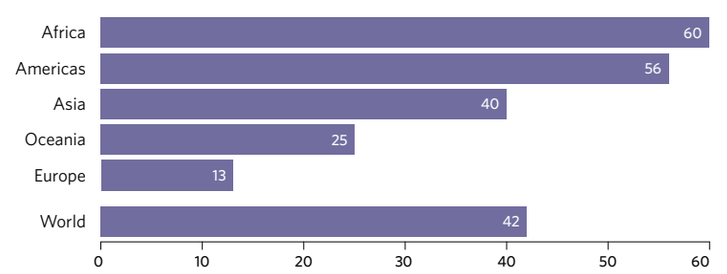
Addressing the vulnerability of data and information infrastructure

COVID-19 has further exposed the vulnerability of national data and information infrastructures. A seemingly straightforward question such as "How many people have died from COVID-19?" cannot be answered in many countries due to the absence of a complete and well-functioning civil registration system. Globally, only 62 per cent of countries had a death registration system that was at least 75 per cent complete in 2015–2019; the share in sub-Saharan African countries was less than 20 per cent.

During the pandemic, many countries also struggled with interruptions in data collection caused by lockdown measures. Face-to-face survey interviews were often stopped and statistical services reduced. In places where data and information infrastructure did not permit the use of alternative data collection tools (such as online or telephone-based surveys), data production was more severely affected. Countries with integrated and well-functioning household survey systems were more resilient. In a compilation of national COVID-19 impact surveys maintained by the Inter-Secretariat Working Group on Household Surveys, only 43 per cent of around 180 countries used a recent household survey as a sampling frame for telephone interviews; the remaining countries lacked a usable sample frame.

Important operations, such as population censuses, were seriously disrupted around the world. A survey of NSOs showed that about 42 per cent of countries have had to postpone censuses scheduled for 2020 or 2021 for at least one year. European countries, many of which typically use population registers rather than traditional censuses, were less affected. Only 13 per cent of the European country censuses were disrupted versus 60 per cent in Africa.

Proportion of countries that have postponed their censuses scheduled for 2020 or 2021



Overall, countries with the necessary information technology (IT) infrastructure and skill sets were more resilient, and their statistical operations were less affected. In mid-2020, 20 per cent of NSOs faced constraints in their ability to operate remotely due to inadequate IT equipment or infrastructure. Three out of four countries in the low- and middle-income group saw their production of monthly and quarterly statistics negatively affected by the pandemic. In contrast, production of short-term statistics was completely unaffected in two thirds of responding countries in the high-income group, attributable to their heavier reliance on administrative data sources and remote data collection modes. This disparity highlights the need for smart investments to build the necessary infrastructure and the right skill sets across national statistical systems to support remote work, training, and data collection and storage. Such investments are vital if NSOs are to operate during times of crisis and to spur the innovation and transformation needed to fulfil data demands during the recovery and to achieve the SDGs.

Driving innovation to advance SDG implementation

COVID-19 has introduced wide-ranging disruptions to national statistical systems. At the same time, it has pushed countries into trying new ways of doing things. The survey of NSOs, for example, showed that 58 per cent of countries carried out telephone instead of face-to-face interviews to monitor the impact of COVID-19. In May 2021, 58 per cent of NSOs surveyed indicated that their overall information and communication technology readiness has significantly improved over the past six months.

Innovative methods such as the integration of geospatial information and household survey data are also being used to produce more disaggregated and timely data. Colombia's National Administrative Department of Statistics is using satellite imagery and household surveys to produce municipality-level data on multidimensional poverty. This exercise, supported by the Data for Now initiative, has provided new insights into decision-making to combat poverty.

In addition, machine learning algorithms, when coupled with social science, can further understanding of public perceptions on issues such as discrimination. COVID-19 has prompted further innovative data collection methods such as measuring social distancing compliance with mobile phone data and uncovering disease transmission patterns using data from contact-tracing apps.

While encouraging, the emergence of innovation is not without risk. Proper data governance that guards the privacy of individual information needs to be put in place. Potential biases in data and

Leveraging the power of collaboration and partnerships

To meet data demands in the face of inadequate data infrastructure, partners at the national and international level have been working together closely. For the 2019 population census in Kenya, the National Bureau of Statistics partnered with the National Commission on Human Rights to work with communities who have historically been left behind. As a result, for the first time, intersex persons, persons with albinism, indigenous peoples and stateless populations were all counted in the census. This enabled the Government to tailor services, but it also demonstrated to members of these groups that they count. "I asked the enumerator to show me the 'I' mark [for intersex]. I saw it, and I got emotional," recalls one census respondent, the parent of an intersex child from Kajiado. "This is the beginning of a long journey, and it's going in the right direction."

In New Zealand, data gathered through citizen input is helping make life a little easier for the disabled.

Citizens help drive social change through data

The level of disability parking abuses in New Zealand has remained high over the past 10 years. To address this issue, an app was developed that can be used by citizens to report disability parking availability and misuse. The initiative was undertaken by CCS Disability Action, the country's largest support and advocacy organization for people with all kinds of disabilities, in partnership with Statistics New Zealand and SaferMe. Crowdsourcing information, generated by citizens through the app, is providing data on the availability and accessibility of disability parking in parks and open spaces, and will help reduce misuse.

At the international level, a technical advisory group of epidemiologists, biostatisticians, demographers and national statisticians worked tirelessly to help the World Health Organization and Member States obtain accurate estimates of deaths attributable to the pandemic. The group was convened by the World Health Organization and the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

Building statistical capacity in a more effective and sustainable way

The challenges of COVID-19 have prompted many statistical agencies, at both international and national levels, to rethink their training programmes. At least 75 per cent of all statistical capacity