

The COVID-19 Pandemic has Derailed the Progress of Sustainable Development Goals

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The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) conceived by the United Nations in 2015 along-with their associated targets and indicators provide a pathway for holistic sustainable development at the regional, national and local stratum (<https://sdgs.un.org/>). Furthermore, to track the global progress towards the 17 SDGs, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs in collaboration with several international agencies and organisations and backed by data provided by various countries signatory to the SDGs publishes ‘The Sustainable Development Goals Report’ on an annual basis (<https://sdgs.un.org/>). This year’s report, however, paints a grim picture in all (social, economic and ecological) dimensions of sustainability as countries irrespective of their geographic location, population density and national GDP have been adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, worsening climate crisis and violent conflicts (United Nations 2022a). Concerns and gaps also exist in the data acquisition process for the report as even-though the number of indicators assessed increased from 115 (in 2016) to 217 (in 2022), disaggregated data on the basis of sex, age, disability status as well as for monitoring the progress of vulnerable populations remains limited at the country scale. Additionally, the report also highlighted the role of ICT and digital infrastructure especially in the context of pandemic surveillance and remote data collection (ITU 2020).

In terms of individual SDGs, the report clearly states that the combined threat posed by the pandemic and the ongoing Ukraine war could potentially increase the pre-pandemic projections of people living in extreme poverty. Moreover, national lockdowns and reduction in working hours increased the proportion of the working population

living in extreme poverty with low income countries having the largest share of working poor as almost 40 percent of the employed population reside in poor households (<https://ilostat.ilo.org/>). Likewise, soaring rates of inflation combined with supply chain disruptions resulted in inadequate access to food thereby causing rise in food insecurity and limiting progress towards SDG 2 (HLPE 2020; IPES-Food 2020). SDG 3 (good health and well-being) targets also suffered major setbacks with the pandemic resulting in increased infections and mortality rates along-with disruption of essential health services and basic immunization coverage at the country scale (Rai et al. 2022; The Lancet 2022). Likewise, global school closures resulted in an estimated 147 million children missing out on more than half of in-person instruction in 2020–21 and negatively impacted progress of SDG 4. Gender Inequalities (SDG 5) in terms of political leadership, parliamentary representation, employment losses and domestic violence became more prominent during the pandemic.

The report also acknowledges that ongoing efforts towards access to safe drinking water and sanitation facilities (SDG 6) as well as to affordable electricity (SDG 7) have to be paced up to ensure global coverage of these basic amenities. With respect to SDG 8 dealing with ‘decent work and economic growth’ the report reiterates that the cascading effects of inflation, supply chain disruptions, emerging COVID variants and ineffective administrative policies have further impeded economic growth and recovery, similar to the findings of Elavarasan et al. 2022 (Fig. 1).

Meanwhile, between country inequality which was estimated to have fallen by 2.6 percent before the pandemic was projected to have increased by 1.2 percent between 2017 and 2021. While on one hand this is bound to restrict the steady trend of decline in income inequality apparent at the country scale, on the other hand, it will also adversely affect the most vulnerable groups within countries (Su et al. 2022; <https://blogs.worldbank.org/>).

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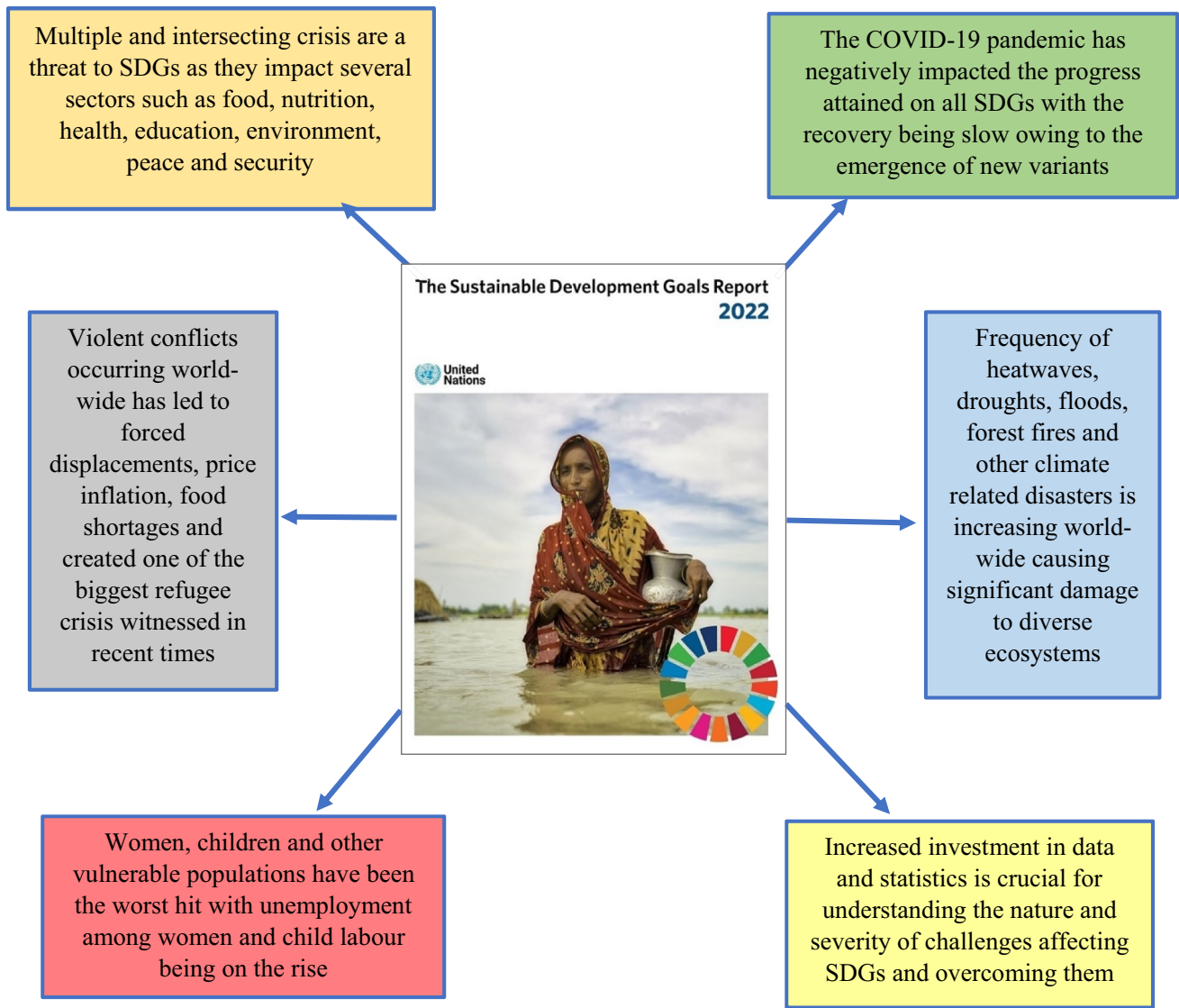


Fig. 1 Key messages of ‘The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2022’ by United Nations (United Nations 2022c)

The report unambiguously establishes that while the repercussions of the pandemic and the Ukraine crisis has halted, limited or reversed progress attained by most SDGs focused on the social dimension of sustainability, climate change and exploitative human activities have been the major drivers negatively impacting SDGs (13, 14 and 15) targeting environmental sustainability. Rising temperatures and anthropogenic mediated activities resulting in exploitative resource extraction and emissions have accelerated coral loss, sea level rise, frequency of natural disasters, global fish stocks depletion and species extinction rate (IPCC 2022). Despite rising threats and increasing scientific evidence asserting the benefits of climate finance in decreasing carbon emissions (Lee et al. 2022), climate finance mobilization did not meet the commitment made by developed countries for aiding climate action in developing countries (United

Nations 2022a). Simultaneously, data estimates for SDG 12 indicate that unsustainable consumption patterns are resulting in excessive food loss and wastage with an approximate 17 percent of total food available to consumers being wasted equating to 121 kg per person per year wastage. Reducing food loss and wastage would not only positively impact SDG 2 but also reduce green-house emissions resulting from dumping of food wastes in landfills (Adelodun and Choi 2020). Lastly, data aggregated for monitoring the progress of SDG 17 targets accentuates the significance of establishing statistical infrastructure and financing mechanisms at the country scale especially since funding for data acquisition in most major sectors (such as gender and climate) relevant to the SDGs declined in 2020.

The data and figures presented in the present report are weighted averages of the latest (June 2022) country scale

data for indicators defined in the global indicator framework for the SDGs (United Nations 2017). In addition to the main report, ‘The Sustainable Development Goals Progress Chart 2022’ has also been published which provides a visual representation of the progress attained at the global and regional levels for select indicators under the UN-SDGs (United Nations 2022b). Although, considerable variations exist in terms of progress against the SDGs at various geographical scales and across different population groups, the statistics clearly underline the distressing reality that progress towards Agenda 2030 at the global scale has been significantly impacted in the last 2 years and requires urgent remedial measures and coordinated efforts from governments and citizens alike (<https://news.un.org/>).

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Declarations

Conflict of Interest Authors do not have any conflict of interest.

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