

## Chapter 17

# Mapping the Relationship between SDG Commitment and Mitigating the Pandemic – A Comparative Study

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### ABSTRACT

*The UN's sustainable development mission, which seeks to achieve seventeen 'Goals' by 2030 in order to ensure a balance between social, economic, and environmental sustainability, is arguably the most popular and comprehensive approach to achieve sustainable development in recent times. Merely a decade away from the 2030 deadline to achieve these Goals, the world was engulfed in a pandemic of unprecedented proportions that has undoubtedly hit all social and economic development globally. The vulnerability of public health and education systems, inter alia, was exposed brutally by Coronavirus. In these circumstances, the present chapter seeks to analyse the relationship between the pandemic and the achievement of the SDGs and examine how the former has affected the latter. This chapter offers insight into how the situation before the onset of the pandemic was not as ideal as it should have been, either. Case studies have been undertaken to answer the question of whether countries that were more dedicated to achieving the SDGs have dealt with the pandemic in a better manner. The author seeks to infer whether greater commitment towards achieving SDGs is linked to a higher level of preparedness for dealing with the pandemic and narrow down certain SDGs that need to be paid special attention to for the future as well.*

**Keywords:** *Sustainable Development Goals, COVID-19, Social Development, Economic Development.*

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## I. Introduction

The unprecedented spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus strain to 215 countries and territories is arguably one of the most unparalleled health crises in history. As of June 2021, there have been more than 177 million cases and 3.8 million deaths globally.<sup>1</sup> In such a scenario, the UN Sustainable Development Goals (“SDGs”), comprised of seventeen Goals and one hundred and sixty-nine targets for the Member States to achieve before 2030 in order to effectively facilitate sustainable development in all aspects of life, have shifted downward on the list of priorities. This chapter would cover the impact of COVID-19 on the SDGs and seek to examine the relationship between commitment to the accomplishment of the SDGs and preparedness for the pandemic.

First, the socio-economic repercussions of the pandemic, as have been mapped by international organisations and researchers, would be explored. Then, the projected and the measured impact on SDGs specifically would be analysed in situations before and during COVID-19. The, directly and indirectly affected SDGs would be categorised, and this would be substantiated with different statistics. The next section maps the case studies for six countries in terms of how dedicated their efforts have been for the accomplishment of SDGs and how they have fared during the pandemic and now, at a stage when the world has shifted to the phase of vaccination. In the concluding section, inferences from all the available literature and the six cases studied would be drawn by the author to ascertain whether there does exist a strong correlation and causation between the efforts made for the achievement of the SDGs and the preparedness of nation-states for the pandemic.

Since the present situation is dynamic, the consequences drawn in this chapter are contained to a limited time period and may change with time and further study. The conclusions in this chapter have been

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<sup>1</sup> *COVID-19 Dashboard by the Centre for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE) at Johns Hopkins University*, (Dec.1, 2020) Johns Hopkins University and Medicine, <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>.

drawn while keeping in mind the upheaval caused by the pandemic halfway into 2021 as well, when most North American and European nations have begun to recover due to aggressive vaccination drives as compared to Asian countries like India.<sup>2</sup>

## II. Socio-Economic Repercussions of Covid-19

According to the UN World Economic Situation and Prospects (WESP) mid-2020 Report, the global economy was projected to contract by 3.20% in 2020, with no confident indications of any rebound strong enough to offset the damage in 2021. The report mentioned that nationwide lockdown, a sharp decrease in global demand, and a halt in the global supply-chain industry due to suspension of airline services might lead to a 15% drop in world trade.<sup>3</sup> The World Bank had estimated that about forty to sixty million people would be forced into extreme poverty depending upon the extent of the economic slowdown, with the most accurate estimate being forty-nine million. Global poverty in 2020 was predicted to rise so much that it would eliminate considerable progress which has been made in terms of fighting extreme poverty, and it could return to the same level as 2017.<sup>4</sup> This prediction has been more than realised, as new numbers suggest 97 million people were pushed into poverty in 2020 due to the Coronavirus.<sup>5</sup>

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2 Claire Felter, *A Guide to Global COVID-19 Vaccine Efforts*, Council on Foreign Relations (Apr. 27, 2021), <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/guide-global-covid-19-vaccine-efforts>.

3 *World Economic Situation and Prospects (WESP) mid-2020 Report*, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (Dec. 2, 2020) <https://www.un.org/development/desa/publications/world-economic-situation-and-prospects-wesp-mid-2020-report.html#>.

4 Daniel Gerszon Mahler, Christoph Lakner, et al., *Updated estimates of the impact of COVID-19 on global poverty: The effect of new data*, World Bank Group (Oct. 07, 2020), <https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/updated-estimates-impact-covid-19-global-poverty-effect-new-data#>.

5 Daniel G. Mahler, Nishant Yonzan, et al., *Updated estimates of the impact of COVID-19 on global poverty: Turning the corner on the pandemic in 2021?*, World Bank Group (June 24, 2021), <https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/updated-estimates-impact-covid-19-global-poverty-turning-corner-pandemic-2021>.

The IMF had also observed that its earlier predictions might have been too optimistic, stating that 170 countries have already been facing a fall in their GDPs per capita, and even if the pandemic was not extended over a prolonged period, it would lead to a 3% contraction in the GDP globally.<sup>6</sup> This prediction has turned out to be partially true and partially false. Midway through 2021, the IMF stated that the global growth is expected to accelerate by 5.6%, which is still 3.2% below pre-pandemic projections for 2021. This entails that while there has been some acceleration of the global economy, it is still lagging behind what it would have been in the absence of COVID. The growth is going to be uneven, too, considering many developing economies are still grappling with COVID.<sup>7</sup>

Besides these economic ramifications, COVID-19 has caused mayhem in other important facets of human life, causing social distress across the globe. Circumstances documented in New York<sup>8</sup> and Barcelona<sup>9</sup> have proven that low-income communities are disproportionately affected by COVID-19, possibly since poorer individuals live in crowded spaces wherein preventative measures like social distancing are near-impossible to implement, as well as the same demographic forming the majority of the people employed in low-skilled jobs which have been deemed essential during a pandemic. All in all, it can be concluded that those groups which

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6 Ben Winck, *The IMF says its forecast for the COVID-19 recession might now be too optimistic*, World Economic Forum (Apr. 18, 2020), <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/imf-economy-coronavirus-covid-19-recession/>.

7 *The Global Economy: on Track for Strong but Uneven Growth as COVID-19 Still Weighs*, The World Bank (June 8, 2021), <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2021/06/08/the-global-economy-on-track-for-strong-but-uneven-growth-as-covid-19-still-weighs>.

8 L. Buchanan, Jugal K. Patel, et al., *A Month of Coronavirus in New York City: See the Hardest-Hit Areas*, The New York Times (Apr. 1, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/04/01/nyregion/nyc-coronavirus-cases-map.html?action=click&module=Top%20Stories&pgtype=Homepage>.

9 Stephen Burgen & Sam Jones, *Poor and vulnerable hardest hit by pandemic in Spain*, The Guardian (Apr. 1, 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/01/poor-and-vulnerable-hardest-hit-by-pandemic-in-spain>.

form the poorer and marginalised parts of society have been affected the most and in the worst possible ways by the Coronavirus.

### **III. Impact of Covid-19 on Sustainable Development Goals**

#### **3.1 SDGs before COVID-19**

Even before the outbreak, the implementation of policies was not as effective as it should have been, especially in light of the fact that 2030 is the deadline for the achievement of these goals. A policy brief by the UNDESA comprehensively describes how the progress in achieving all the SDGs by 2030 had been uneven and needed to be accelerated, to begin with, even before the onset of the pandemic.

According to the brief, before the pandemic even took its toll, the effort which had to be made to actualise the goals set out in the Agenda was lacking. The pace at which extreme global poverty was declining had slowed down enough to suggest that 6% of the global population would still be in extreme poverty by 2030; the global maternal mortality ratio had declined 38% in seventeen years, but this was still less than half of the annual rate needed to achieve the global target of reducing maternal deaths to fewer than 70 per 100,000 live births by 2030; and while access to electricity increased and essential service was acquired by 1 billion people in eight years, 789 million people still lacked electricity in 2018.<sup>10</sup>

What is even more concerning is that progress had either been stalled or had been reversed when it came to some of the goals before the pandemic. Almost 690 million people were undernourished in 2019—up by nearly sixty million from 2014—indicating a massive increase in food insecurity; climate change was occurring faster than the world was prepared to handle it, with global temperatures projected to rise as much as 3.2°C above pre-industrial levels by

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10 Yongyi Min & Francesca Perucci, *UN/DESA Policy Brief #81: Impact of COVID-19 on SDG progress: a statistical perspective*, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (Aug. 27, 2020), <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/publication/un-desa-policy-brief-81-impact-of-covid-19-on-sdg-progress-a-statistical-perspective/>.

the end of the century; and inequality was increasing both within and among countries, as young workers were twice as likely to live in extreme poverty than adult workers and 85% of people without access to electricity lived in rural areas.<sup>11</sup>

### **3.2 SDGs during COVID-19**

From what has been established through the iteration of the general socio-economic repercussions of COVID-19, two assumptions can be made at this juncture:

- (i) That the pandemic has taken an extreme toll on both social and economic development; and
- (ii) Those who were in a marginalised or financially- and/or socially-disadvantaged position, to begin with, have had to suffer the effects of COVID-19 the most.

These assumptions will be examined and analysed in the subsequent sections to validate whether they hold true in terms of the impact of COVID-19 on SDGs. This is achieved by focusing on affected Goals, whether the impact is direct or indirect.

#### **3.2.1 Direct and Indirect Impact on SDGs**

In this regard, it can be said that since the SDGs were designed to holistically uplift the same groups which now have to deal with an exacerbated impact of the pandemic, there are bound to be certain effects on the implementation of SDGs which would take quite some time to reconcile with in the future. The effect may be explicit in terms of some of the Goals and implicit when it comes to others. The Goals which would be directly affected, *i.e.*, explicitly affected, are: SDG 1 (no poverty), SDG 2 (zero hunger), SDG 3 (good health and well-being), SDG 4 (quality education), SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth), SDG 10 (reduced inequality), and SDG 12 (responsible consumption and production). The Goals which would be indirectly affected, *i.e.*, implicitly affected, are: SDG 5 (gender equality), SDG 6 (clean water and sanitation), SDG 7 (affordable and clean energy), SDG 9 (industry, innovation and infrastructure), SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities), SDG 13 (climate action), SDG 14 (life below

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<sup>11</sup> *Id.*, at 2.

water), SDG 15 (life on land), and SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions).<sup>12</sup> The three ways in which these impacts might be felt are:

- (i) Diminishing some of the progress which has been made in the past few years when it comes to some of the directly affected Goals;
- (ii) Slowing down the progress which could be made for some other Goals due to prioritisation of more urgent actions; and
- (iii) Allocation of resources might be changed to favour the sectors which need the same immediately.<sup>13</sup>

### 3.2.2 Impacted SDGs

After the outbreak, the situation has become worse for most vulnerable and marginalised groups. The pandemic was expected to push 71 million more people into extreme poverty,<sup>14</sup> but newer estimates show that the pandemic led to 97 million people being added to the existing figures on global poverty (SDG 1).<sup>15</sup> School closures have led to around 370 million children not just being deprived of their regular studying environment and facilities (SDG 4), but missing out on school meals, which is something lower-income groups rely upon heavily for nourishment (SDG 2). Childhood vaccinations have also had an impact, with 70 countries reporting that March and April 2020 saw moderate-to-severe disruptions or total suspension of vaccination services (SDG 3).<sup>16</sup> Nationwide lockdowns, which led to the closure of schools and universities at some point in all affected countries, have affected over 1.5 billion students worldwide (SDG 4).<sup>17</sup> Inaccessibility to resources such as personal laptops and patchy

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12 Md. Manuar Mukarram, *Impact of COVID-19 on the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*, 44(3) *Strateg. Anal.* 253, 256 (2020).

13 *Id.*

14 Jeffrey D. Sachs, Christian Kroll, et al., *Sustainable Development Report 2020: The Sustainable Development Goals and Covid-19*, Cambridge University Press, [https://s3.amazonaws.com/sustainabledevelopment.report/2020/2020\\_sustainable\\_development\\_report.pdf](https://s3.amazonaws.com/sustainabledevelopment.report/2020/2020_sustainable_development_report.pdf).

15 Mahler, *supra* note 5.

16 Min & Perucci, *supra* note 10, at 4.

17 Aleksander Aristovnik, Lan Umek, et al., *Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Life of Higher Education Students: A Global Perspective*, 12(20) *Sustainability* 8438, (2020).

network connections has exposed how income disparities have an extremely negative effect on access to education when one cannot physically attend school, as has been documented in India, with 320 million students affected by the digital divide (SDG 4).<sup>18</sup> People, especially children, with developmental and intellectual disabilities have been impacted in several ways, with research indicating a higher-than-normal probability of contracting the infection and death studied in people with disabilities (SDG 3),<sup>19</sup> and dissonance between remote learning and assistive technologies creating challenges for students with disabilities (SDGs 3, 4, and 10).<sup>20</sup>

Domestic violence has been on the rise since March 2020, which is when most nations started imploring and mandating people to stay at home. One article highlights how India's National Commission for Women received 69 calls reporting domestic violence in the last week of March 2020,<sup>21</sup> which marked the first week of the nationwide lockdown imposed in India. The same has been the case across the world, be it the UK, the USA, France, or South Africa, where the first week of lockdown witnessed 90,000 reports of violence.<sup>22</sup> Domestic violence reports seem to have more than tripled in China and increased 40-50% in Brazil during COVID (SDGs 3 and 5).<sup>23</sup> Almost

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18 Sushma Modi & Ronika Postaria, *How COVID-19 deepens the digital education divide in India*, World Economic Forum (Oct. 5, 2020), <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/10/how-covid-19-deepens-the-digital-education-divide-in-india/>.

19 Joseph Shapiro, *COVID-19 Infections And Deaths Are Higher Among Those With Intellectual Disabilities*, NPR (Jun. 9, 2020), <https://www.npr.org/2020/06/09/872401607/covid-19-infections-and-deaths-are-higher-among-those-with-intellectual-disabili>.

20 Faith Hill, *The Pandemic Is a Crisis for Students With Special Needs*, The Atlantic (Apr. 18, 2020), <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2020/04/special-education-goes-remote-covid-19-pandemic/610231/>.

21 Tanika Godbole, *Domestic violence rises amid coronavirus lockdowns in Asia*, Deutsche Welle (Apr. 09, 2020), <https://www.dw.com/en/domestic-violence-rises-amid-coronavirus-lockdowns-in-asia/a-53077378>.

22 Girija Shivakumar, *While Battling COVID-19, We Can't Let the Pandemic of Domestic Violence Continue*, The Wire (Apr. 16, 2020), <https://thewire.in/women/covid-19-lockdown-domestic-violence>.

23 Anjali KK & Shubha Ranganathan, *Locked in: What the COVID:19 Pandemic*



1.6 billion people who work for the informal economy and form half the global workforce have been affected adversely (SDG 8). The income of informal workers is estimated to have reduced by 60% in the first month of the pandemic itself, with some regions seeing up to 81% reduction in income (SDG 8). Women, who account for nearly 70% of the health and social workers globally, have had to undertake additional unpaid work in the form of childcare due to the closure of schools and day-care centres (SDG 5). The crises of unemployment and movement faced by India's migrant labourers are also illustrative of the unprecedented impact that the disease has had on the lower stratum of the society (SDGs 8 and 10).<sup>24</sup> Conflict dynamics around the world have worsened as well, as armed groups now have the opportunity to capitalise on the chaos and distraction caused by the disease, which has made it difficult to seize the opportunities for peace (SDG 16).<sup>25</sup>

The UNDESA Brief, as well as the Sustainable Development Report 2020, which focused on SDGs and COVID-19, make no bones about the fact that those nations which were strongly committed or made better progress towards the achievement of the Goals before the pandemic was more prepared to handle the pandemic. It has been plainly stated that if the efforts to achieve the Goals had been more uniform and accelerated on a global scale, the world would be in a much better position to deal with the disease outbreak. These documents have made it clear that Asian countries, especially East Asian and South Asian countries, were more committed to the realisation of SDGs and have handled the spread of disease in a better manner in 2020, as compared to higher-income economies such as the United States of America. The report also predicts that this situation is instrumental to the gradual shift of the “geopolitical and economic global centre of gravity” from the North-Atlantic to the Asia-Pacific region and would accelerate the same.<sup>26</sup> However, it remains to be

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*Spells for Survivors of Domestic Abuse*, 55(32-33) Econ. Political Wkly., (2020).

24 Sergio Infante, *India's Coronavirus Migration Crisis*, JSTOR Daily (June 17, 2020, 2:07 PM), <https://daily.jstor.org/indias-migration-crisis/>.

25 Katarina Mustasilta, *FROM BAD TO WORSE?: THE IMPACT(S) OF COVID-19 ON CONFLICT DYNAMICS*, EUISS, (2020).

26 Sachs, *supra* note 14, at vi.

seen how far this shift in the geopolitical and economic global centre of gravity would take place, in light of Asian countries reeling with the virus even after several North American and European nations have almost fully vaccinated their populations or are at least in the process of doing the same aggressively.<sup>27</sup>

## **IV. Case Studies**

In order to establish a linkage between commitment to SDGs and preparedness for the pandemic, real-time scenarios need to be considered. The methodology employed for this is taking one country from each continent and adjudging its performance in accomplishing the most-impacted SDGs as of 2020 as per the aforementioned report.<sup>28</sup> These “most-impacted” Goals are Goals 1 (no poverty), 2 (zero hunger), 3 (good health and well-being), 4 (quality education), 5 (gender equality), and 8 (decent work and economic growth), as has been established in the previous section. The countries being studied are the USA (North America), Brazil (South America), South Africa (Africa), the United Kingdom (Europe), India (Asia), and New Zealand (Oceania). Simultaneously, the updates pertaining to these countries in terms of the number of cases and deaths, the financial assistance they may have provided to their citizens, and the quantifiable progress of administering vaccination doses would also be highlighted.

### **4.1 The United States of America**

The USA has an SDG global rank of 31 out of 166. As per the current assessment in its country profile, it faces significant challenges in Goal 1, where it is “moderately improving”; faces major challenges in Goal 2, where it is “stagnating”; faces significant challenges in Goal 3, where it is “moderately improving”; challenges remain for Goal 4, where it is “moderately improving”; faces major challenges for Goal 5, where it is “moderately improving”; and challenges remain for Goal 8, where it is “on track or maintaining SDG achievement”.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Felter, *supra* note 2.

<sup>28</sup> Sachs, *supra* note 14.

<sup>29</sup> Sachs, *supra* note 14, at 470.

The USA's total population in 2020, as per the World Bank, was 329,484,123.<sup>30</sup> Till July 15, 2021, the US has had 33,956,098 cases and 608,184 deaths.<sup>31</sup> This accounts for approximately 10% of the country's total population contracting the disease and 0.18% of the population dying as a consequence. In terms of direct financial assistance extended to citizens during the pandemic, the Internal Revenue Service issued three stimulus checks to those who were eligible: \$1,200 in April 2020; \$600 in December 2020/January 2021; and \$1,400 in March 2021.<sup>32</sup> By July 15, 2021, 334,282,915 vaccinations have been administered in the USA, as per the World Health Organization ("WHO").<sup>33</sup>

## 4.2 Brazil

Brazil has an SDG global rank of 53 out of 166. As per the current assessment in its country profile, it faces significant challenges in Goal 1, where it is "stagnating"; faces significant challenges in Goal 2, where it is "moderately improving"; faces major challenges in Goal 3, where it is "moderately improving"; faces significant challenges for Goal 4, where it is "on track or maintaining SDG achievement"; faces significant challenges for Goal 5, where it is "moderately improving"; and faces major challenges for Goal 8, where it is "stagnating".<sup>34</sup>

Brazil's total population in 2020, as per the World Bank, was 212,559,409.<sup>35</sup> Till July 15 2021, Brazil has had 19,209,729 cases and 537,394 deaths.<sup>36</sup> This accounts for approximately 9% of the country's total population contracting the disease and 0.25% of

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30 *Population, total - United States*, World Bank Group, (Jul. 13, 2020) <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=US>.

31 *Supra* note 1.

32 *Advance Child Tax Credit and Economic Impact Payments - Stimulus Checks*, USAGov (June 15, 2021), <https://www.usa.gov/covid-stimulus-checks>.

33 *United States of America*, World Health Organization, <https://covid19.who.int/region/amro/country/us>.

34 *Supra* note 14, at 148.

35 *Population, total - Brazil*, World Bank Group, (Jul. 13, 2020) <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=BR>.

36 *Supra* note 1.

the population dying as a consequence. In terms of direct financial assistance, the Brazilian federal, state, and municipal governments implemented several policies to assist citizens by providing emergency financial aid. This extended to refugees and migrants, vulnerable families, street vendors, single-parent families, families classified as “extremely poor” as per different financial criteria, families with pregnant or breastfeeding mothers, among others.<sup>37</sup> By July 15, 2021, 104,414,089 vaccinations have been administered in Brazil, as per the WHO.<sup>38</sup>

### 4.3 South Africa

South Africa has an SDG global rank of 110 out of 166. As per the current assessment in its country profile, it faces major challenges in Goal 1, where it is “stagnating”; faces major challenges in Goal 2, where it is “moderately improving”; faces major challenges in Goal 3, where it is “moderately improving”; faces significant challenges for Goal 4, where it is “on track or maintaining SDG achievement”; challenges remain for Goal 5, where it is “moderately improving”; and faces major challenges for Goal 8, where it is “stagnating”.<sup>39</sup>

South Africa’s total population in 2020, as per the World Bank, was 59,308,690.<sup>40</sup> Till July 15 2021, South Africa has had 2,236,805 cases and 65,595 deaths.<sup>41</sup> This accounts for approximately 3% of the country’s total population contracting the disease and 0.11% of the population dying as a consequence. In terms of direct financial assistance, South African President Ramaphosa announced a \$26 billion stimulus package in October 2020, formally called the Economic Reconstruction and Recovery Plan (ERRP).<sup>42</sup> 10% of this

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37 *Coronavirus: emergency financial assistance*, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, (Jul. 13, 2020) <https://help.unhcr.org/brazil/en/coronavirus-3/coronavirus-auxilio-financieiro-emergencial/>.

38 *Brazil*, World Health Organization, (Jul. 13, 2020) <https://covid19.who.int/region/amro/country/br>.

39 Sachs, *supra* note 14, at 416.

40 *Population, total - United States*, World Bank Group, (Jul. 13, 2020) <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=ZA>.

41 *Supra* note 1. at page – no page nor author, it is an interactive database.

42 *The South African Economic Reconstruction and Recovery Plan*, Government

package was allocated to social assistance of individuals above the age of 18, unemployed, and neither receiving any income nor any other social grant or support from the Unemployment Insurance Fund.<sup>43</sup> By July 15, 2021, 4,236,718 vaccinations have been administered in South Africa, as per the WHO.<sup>44</sup>

#### 4.4 The United Kingdom

The UK has an SDG global rank of 13 out of 166. As per the current assessment in its country profile, challenges remain in Goal 1, where it is “moderately improving”; it faces major challenges in Goal 2, where it is “stagnating”; challenges remain in Goal 3, where it is “moderately improving”; challenges remain for Goal 4, where it is “moderately improving”; faces significant challenges for Goal 5, where it is “moderately improving”; and faces significant challenges for Goal 8, where it is “on track or maintaining SDG achievement”.<sup>45</sup>

The UK’s total population in 2020, as per the World Bank, was 67,215,293.<sup>46</sup> Till July 15 2021, the UK has had 5,300,855 cases and 128,862 deaths.<sup>47</sup> This accounts for approximately 7% of the country’s total population contracting the disease and 0.19% of the population dying as a consequence. The UK government took measures to support businesses to the tune of £29,000,000,000, including property tax holidays, direct grants for small firms and firms in the most-affected sectors, and compensation for sick pay leave; and strengthened the

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of South Africa, (Jul. 14, 2020) [https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis\\_document/202010/south-african-economic-reconstruction-and-recovery-plan.pdf](https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/202010/south-african-economic-reconstruction-and-recovery-plan.pdf).

43 Haroon Borat & Tim Köhler, *Lockdown economics in South Africa: Social assistance and the Ramaphosa stimulus package*, Brookings (Nov. 20, 2020), <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2020/11/20/lockdown-economics-in-south-africa-social-assistance-and-the-ramaphosa-stimulus-package/>.

44 *South Africa*, World Health Organization, (Jul. 14, 2020) <https://covid19.who.int/region/afro/country/za>.

45 Sachs, *supra* note 14, at 468.

46 *Population, total - United Kingdom*, World Bank Group, (Jul. 14, 2020) <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=GB>.

47 *Supra* note 1.

social safety net to support vulnerable people (£8,000,000,000) by increasing payments under the Universal Credit scheme as well as expanding other benefits.<sup>48</sup> By July 15, 2021, 80,795,852 vaccinations have been administered in the UK, as per the WHO.<sup>49</sup>

## 4.5 India

India has an SDG global rank of 117 out of 166. As per the current assessment in its country profile, it faces significant challenges in Goal 1, where it is “on track or maintaining SDG achievement”; faces major challenges in Goal 2, where it is “moderately improving”; faces major challenges in Goal 3, where it is “moderately improving”; challenges remain for Goal 4, where it is “stagnating”; faces major challenges for Goal 5, where it is “stagnating”; and challenges remain for Goal 8, where it is “on track or maintaining SDG achievement”.<sup>50</sup>

India’s total population in 2020, as per the World Bank, was 1,380,000,000.<sup>51</sup> Till July 15 2021, India has had 30,987,880 cases and 411,989 deaths.<sup>52</sup> This accounts for approximately 2% of the country’s total population contracting the disease and 0.02% of the population dying as a consequence. In terms of direct financial assistance, the Indian government undertook in-kind (food; cooking gas) and cash transfers to lower-income households (1.2% of GDP); wage support and employment provision to low-wage workers (0.5% of GDP); insurance coverage for workers in the healthcare sector.<sup>53</sup> By July 15, 2021, 377,352,501 vaccinations have been administered in India, as per the WHO.<sup>54</sup>

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48 *Policy Responses to COVID-19*, International Monetary Fund (July 2, 2021, 11:52 AM), <https://www.imf.org/en/Topics/imf-and-covid19/Policy-Responses-to-COVID-19>.

49 *United Kingdom*, World Health Organization, (accessed Sep. 12, 2021), <https://covid19.who.int/region/euro/country/gb>.

50 Sachs, *supra* note 14, at 254.

51 *Population, total - India*, World Bank Group, (Jul. 14, 2020) <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=IN>.

52 *Supra* note 1.

53 *Supra* note 48.

54 *India*, World Health Organization, (Jul. 14, 2020) <https://covid19.who.int/region/searo/country/in>.

## 4.6 New Zealand

New Zealand has an SDG global rank of 16 out of 166. As per the current assessment in its country profile, challenges remain in Goal 1, where it is “on track or maintaining SDG achievement”; it faces significant challenges in Goal 2, where it is “moderately improving”; challenges remain in Goal 3, where it is “moderately improving”; challenges remain for Goal 4, where it is “moderately improving”; challenges remain for Goal 5, where it is “on track or maintaining SDG achievement”; and challenges remain for Goal 8, where it is “on track or maintaining SDG achievement”.<sup>55</sup>

New Zealand’s total population in 2020, as per the World Bank, was 5,084,300.<sup>56</sup> Till July 15 2021, New Zealand has had 2,795 cases and 26 deaths.<sup>57</sup> This accounts for approximately 0.05% of the country’s total population contracting the disease and 0.0005% of the population dying as a consequence. In terms of direct financial assistance, New Zealand has implemented a wage subsidy to support employers severely affected by the impact of COVID-19 (4.3% of GDP); income relief payments to support people who lost their jobs (0.2% of GDP); revenue measures including a temporary tax loss carry-back scheme and a permanent change in business taxes (2.7% of GDP).<sup>58</sup> By July 15, 2021, 1,340,678 vaccinations have been administered in New Zealand, as per the WHO.<sup>59</sup>

## V. Conclusion

As has been the argument throughout this chapter, it is reiterated that all the existing literature points towards the fact that marginalised and vulnerable individuals and communities are the most impacted group due to the spread of Coronavirus globally. All those who are a part of socially- and/or financially disadvantaged groups, such as women, the

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55 Sachs, *supra* note 14, at 352.

56 *Population, total - New Zealand*, World Bank Group, (Jul. 15, 2020) <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=NZ>.

57 *Supra* note 1.

58 *Supra* note 48.

59 *New Zealand*, World Health Organization, (Jul. 15, 2020) <https://covid19.who.int/region/wpro/country/nz>.

elderly, people working in the unorganised sector, people with intellectual or developmental disabilities, and economically weaker persons, all have been impacted adversely by the pandemic.

COVID-19 has wreaked havoc on global economic and social development, for the outbreak is so all-consuming that no efforts to revive the economy or further social development can be made until the pandemic is over. The ramifications of the outbreak on the UN's SDGs, which were adopted in 2015 in order to facilitate complete sustainable development by 2030, have only started to be studied, and they present a grave picture. The problem, it has been revealed, did not start with the onset of the pandemic but much earlier.

Most member states of the UN have not shown such commitment, which would be effective enough to actualise the SDGs by 2030, which has led to a less-than-desirable level of progress in some areas and an even more disconcerting regression or reversal of progress in others. In this regard, it can be said that what would have been a significantly muted impact of the disease on the world had SDGs been paid as much attention to as required has now been exacerbated due to a lack of strong commitment to the realisation of the Goals.

Ultimately, the effect on the SDGs is two-fold and can be felt in three main ways. The effect is explicit on some of the Goals, such as those relating to the eradication of poverty and hunger, the improvement of health and well-being, and the dissemination of quality education. The loss of jobs, the forceful push towards extreme poverty and undernourishment, the lack of sufficient health infrastructure, the digital divide in education, among other factors, exemplify the impact on the directly or explicitly affected Goals.

Certain Goals were impacted indirectly or implicitly, such as those relating to the eradication of gender inequality, undertaking effective climate action to reduce and reverse climate change, and the establishment of peace and just institutions around the globe. The shadow pandemic of domestic violence looming over women and children during lockdowns, the suspension of certain climate-friendly actions such as public transportation travel by the masses, and the increase in conflict dynamics and political violence while the pandemic acts as a global distraction all epitomise the less-prominent yet equally dangerous effects of Coronavirus.



Further, certain inferences may be drawn from the case studies presented across six countries, *i.e.*, the United States of America, Brazil, South Africa, the United Kingdom, India, and New Zealand. It can be noticed from just the statistics presented in the relevant section that New Zealand has undoubtedly fared the best in terms of handling the spread of disease, the peak of the pandemic, and is arguably the only country from this particular sample that has been able to abate the second wave.

However, an analysis of each country separately is required to draw a sound conclusion. Since all countries are facing some level of challenges (*i.e.*, “challenges remain”, “significant challenges”, and “major challenges”) in all the selected Goals, it is stated that an evaluation of “challenges remain” would serve as the most suitable reference point for what is conducive to the achievement of SDGs, and “significant” and “major” challenges would imply situations that are progressively more and more unfavourable to this achievement. Any Goal wherein, despite any level of challenges, the country is “on track or maintaining SDG achievement”, would be presumed to have the requisite minimum commitment.

Starting with the USA, which has topped the list of countries with the largest number of cases as well as the largest number of deaths, it can be noticed that effort has been lacking to accomplish a majority of the SDGs that have been the most impacted by the pandemic. Goals 1 and 3 are facing significant challenges, while Goals 2 and 5 are facing major challenges. Most prominently, efforts in Goal 2 are stagnating. The financial assistance extended to citizens has been jagged and seemingly arbitrary, with only stimulus checks being awarded over the course of an irregular timeline and with irregular amounts, as opposed to more widespread and radical assistance that other countries had undertaken.

Secondly, Brazil is in a worse position as compared to the USA in terms of commitment to SDGs. Goals 1, 2, 4, and 5 are all faced with significant challenges to their achievement, while Goals 3 and 8 are facing major challenges. Efforts for Goals 1 and 8 are stagnating. While Brazil’s percentage of the population contracting the disease is slightly lower than the US, the number of deaths as a consequence of contracting COVID-19 are higher. These further

cements the assumption that those countries that have not been showing a requisite minimum commitment to the accomplishment of SDGs have not been able to handle the pandemic as well as others. Information as to any kind of financial assistance extended to Brazil's citizens is sparse, owing to which reliance cannot be placed on the same completely.

Thirdly, South Africa is facing major challenges for Goals 1, 2, 3, and 5. As was the case with Brazil, even South Africa's are stagnating for Goal 1 and Goal 8. However, South Africa's number of cases and deaths related to COVID-19 are significantly lesser than its North and South American counterparts, and the financial assistance extended to citizens has been proven effective in reaching unique individuals and lauded for these efforts. In this regard, the validity of the correlation of commitment to achieving SDGs and handling the pandemic more efficiently or effectively is threatened.

Fourthly, the United Kingdom is facing major challenges for Goal 2 and significant challenges for Goal 5. Efforts for Goal 2 are stagnating. The UK had a larger percentage of the population infected as compared to South Africa, but lesser than the USA and Brazil. Conversely, it had a higher percentage of deaths as compared to the USA and South Africa, but lesser than Brazil's. This further dents the assumption as to the correlation between the commitment to SDGs and the handling of the pandemic. This is because the UK is reportedly more committed to accomplishing SDGs (even if its SDG global rank is not taken into account) than the three countries discussed thus far, but has not had as much success—falling short very marginally—in terms of curbing infection or preventing deaths when compared to the other three. The financial assistance extended to citizens was quite substantial, as compared to the USA and Brazil.

Fifthly, India is facing major challenges in Goals 2, 3, and 5. The demonstrable commitment to the accomplishment of SDGs is better than the USA's, Brazil's, and South Africa's. Efforts for Goals 4 and 5 are stagnating. If taken at the percentage value of the population infected and/or deceased, India has seen the lowest population out of all countries studied thus far. This would reduce some of the invalidity that has been attached by South Africa's and the UK's experiences to the assumption that countries more committed to SDG achievement

have performed better in the pandemic. However, the fact that India is the second most populated country in the world cannot be disregarded in terms of the number of infections and deaths, that bypass all other countries except the USA. Keeping this in mind, and comparing only the USA and India as the two are the closest in terms of infections and deaths, it still validates the hypothesis, since India has at least performed better than the USA. The financial assistance extended to citizens also seems to be more widespread than in the USA.

Lastly, New Zealand faces significant challenges only in Goal 4. Every other Goal witnesses neither significant nor major challenges, and it is also the only country from the sample that is “on track or maintaining SDG achievement” for three out of the six selected Goals. Furthermore, New Zealand’s infections and death statistics also put all other countries to shame, with 0.05% of the population infected and only 0.0005% dying as a consequence. This is the strongest possible evidence thus far that commitment to the achievement of SDGs, when it has been more than the most minimal requisite amount, can be connected to effectively handling COVID-19. Additionally, New Zealand had also implemented the most radical forms of financial assistance to its citizens during the peak of the pandemic.

From the above inferences, it can be concluded that proper, enthusiastic, and dedicated efforts made for the achievement of the SDGs have resulted in countries dealing with COVID-19 more efficiently and effectively. The best possible example of this is that of New Zealand’s. This is not to say that countries that have not been performing incredibly well in terms of achieving SDGs have performed terribly during COVID either (case in point: South Africa). However, from the majority of the analysis, it can be ascertained that those countries that were already performing adequately for the achievement of SDGs have had a better performance in terms of containing the effects of the pandemic.

A research question that can be posed at this stage is what the relationship is between the existing health infrastructure and COVID-19, especially since “developing” countries have performed in a better manner when it comes to curbing the spread of the pandemic. Halfway into 2021, however, even this is answered: first-world or developed countries have fared much better in terms

of vaccinating their populations as compared to third-world or developing countries.<sup>60</sup> While further research would shed more light, it can be surmised that having requisite health infrastructure (and the money and the will) to vaccinate a country's population is where developed countries (that have not been as committed to achieving SDGs) have an advantage over developing nations, even if the former did not fare as well in actually curbing the pandemic as the latter did.

At this stage, it is imperative that countries renew their efforts to accomplish SDGs in a much more rigorous manner than has been the case so far. Most notably, Goals 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 8 need to be paid special attention as the efforts for their achievement has been lacking thus far, and these are also the Goals most impacted by the pandemic. The way the pandemic has spread so rapidly and devastated so much economic and social development has exposed the structural defects that exist in the economic and social institutions to which we have become so acclimated. A revamping of these institutions needs to be initiated to better prepare for such unprecedented situations in the future, as well as recommit to the achievement of SDGs. Much more resilient economies and social institutions need to be envisaged before we can hope to reconcile the damages which have been rendered by COVID-19.

Research into the short-, medium-, and long-term effects of such unparalleled situations on the actualisation of SDGs needs to be looked into further, although this might only become clearer much after the pandemic has surpassed us. The strongest action that can be taken to be better prepared for the future and not just to deal with, but prevent extraordinary health crises such as these, is constant and consistent effort to achieve the standards which have been laid out so comprehensively in the 2030 Agenda. A lackadaisical approach towards sustainable development on the part of nation-states by focusing on isolated or self-centred development has proved to be catastrophic when the world is met with such a situation as the present one, and it is only if the lessons taught by these experiences are learnt on a global level that can we hope that they are not repeated.

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<sup>60</sup> Atthar Mirza & Emily Rauhala, *Here's just how unequal the global coronavirus vaccine rollout has been*, The Washington Post (May 6, 2021), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/interactive/2021/coronavirus-vaccine-inequality-global/>.