

Covid-19 Crisis: An Unprecedented Push for SDGs Action

By

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The current financial market turmoil, crude oil prices slump and temporary truce in all armed conflicts around the world in response to the COVID-19 pandemic chaos makes it clear that the intrinsic value of health sector goes beyond its contribution to human development. The catastrophic impact of COVID-19 crisis and the highest one-day death toll being reported in developed countries starkly spotlights the centre of gravity on the health related issues that receive a lot less attention than economic sector, but are equally or perhaps even more crucial from a long-term development perspective for developed as well as developing countries. The massive educational, business, industrial and other workplaces closures hinge strongly on the premise that no one is left behind in terms of health is crucial as a precondition and driving force for inclusive economic growth and development, poverty alleviation and universal access to education. Of course, COVID-19 is not the first global public health crisis. However, this time the social and economic disruption and uncertainty created by the outbreak has vast and far-reaching impact on every sector and every individual.

In view of inadequate responses to the Millennium Development Goals to overcome the challenges of a changing climate and weather extremes, conflict, inequality, hunger and malnutrition, water insecurity, rapid urbanization and disease outbreaks that left us all more vulnerable, several countries learned their lessons and responded far more rapidly to United Nations' universal call to action for SDGs. As actions which may contribute to one of the SDG targets may also have an impact on other targets, SDGs are quite clearly more interdependent and integrated. Such recognition is especially crucial as some overarching issues, such as pandemics, can affect multiple targets simultaneously and exponentially. For instance, the ranking of some of the countries with leading positions according to their GDP (PPP) per capita drops significantly in the Human Development Index when economic dimensions of health inequality is taken into account. Likewise, achieving equitable access to healthcare requires going well beyond the health sector to take action in related areas such as education, income and social protection, water and sanitation, governance, and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) industry. The relationship between the role of health equity and growth in ICTs adoption also works both ways around. Such interlinked nature of SDGs and its explicit health-related targets provide a new context as there is a health component affecting achievement of

many of the targets such as attaining gender equality, reducing poverty and improving education, not just those under SDG 3 (Good Health & Well-being - Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages).

Following the UN Sustainable Development Summit, held for the adoption of the post-2015 development agenda, and in response to the global emergence of more than thousand epidemic events in more than hundred countries in just 15 or so years, some hopeful signs were seen during 2016-2017, when UN Secretary-General's Global Health Crises Task Force (in 2016) and WHO-World Bank joint Global Preparedness Monitoring Board (in 2017) were established to mobilize and strengthen collective national, international and multilateral action for global health security and emergency preparedness. But despite considerable economic upheaval caused by viral outbreaks, and clearly identified mechanisms and policy solutions by the relevant health panels, an overwhelming majority of countries failed to make a fundamental shift in their health policies and were unprepared for the next devastating pandemic outbreak.

SDGs provided both an obligation and an opportunity to the leaders to rethink development systems and approaches to overcome problems to collective action in the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. Thus far, the United Nations had declared climate change as single biggest cross-border threat that gravely threatens the global progress and its sustainability. The United Nations and its relevant agencies and operational arms urge the countries to give renewed impetus to the mitigation, adaptation and building resilience to the climate change from a technological, business, legislative, and even political perspective. Unfortunately, the enormous threat that climate change already poses to human health could not duly mobilise the leaders of the developed and developing countries to take action. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and World Health Organization (WHO) of the United Nations has intimately linked 9 million deaths worldwide from hunger, 7 million deaths from air pollution, 3.4 million from water-related diseases, and 150,000 deaths from extreme weather every year to global climate change. An unmitigated climate change is expected to cause quarter million additional deaths a year between 2030 and 2050. We are witnessing the adverse impacts of climate change now faster than at any point in the world's history, however it failed to generate sufficient sense of urgency to take measures towards building resilience and reducing vulnerability, as envisioned in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and SDGs.

Imagine if a country reduced its carbon footprint by a quarter in just two weeks, dramatically improves its Air Quality Index from 303 to 92 in a month, and its electricity demand plummeted by 30% compared to the same period the previous year. These earlier unimaginable scenarios have turned into reality in China, India, and Pakistan as a result of the ongoing pandemic crisis of COVID-19. Many of us are seeing its effects on the climate as a silver lining but this is a wildly mistaken and short-sighted interpretation of pandemic's dark clouds. Governments were compelled to making unprecedented decisions of nationwide lockdowns that created these unintended environmental co-benefits, which are not conscious mitigation strategies based on multi-objective science-based approaches, but are unintentional externalities of pandemic fear. This reprieve will only last as long as the COVID-19 does and does not ensure the well-being on environment in the long-run.

Nevertheless, the positive environmental impact of this pandemic is stark indicator of interdependent relationship between health, environment and economy that constitute the core of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The lack of planning and preparation for the present and previous outbreaks of this decade are a strong impetus that the targets of risk reduction, mitigation, and resilience-building in the following Sustainable Development Goals: Goal 1 (poverty); Goal 2 (hunger); Goal 3 (Good Health & Well-being); Goal 11 (sustainable cities and communities); and Goal 13 (climate action) must be prioritized now in the policy design and delivery to make them preventive rather than reactive, to potentially catastrophic events in the future.

Whenever the world experienced a health crisis, it provided an opportunity for creating major changes. For instance, all spheres of political leadership in the global system interact, reinforce, and implement adaptive decisions at much faster pace in response to humanitarian emergencies. The current situation suggests a clear need to adopt a coordinated approach which may not focus solely on overcoming the crisis but ensure effective short and long-term initiatives with engagement of all political stakeholders, civil society actors, private sector and public institutions to better design the frameworks and responses to make the best use of the synergies between different goals as well as to manage aftermaths of pandemics. It is abundantly clear from the unprecedented suffering of the already unequal World exacerbated by COVID-19 that all countries must seek immediate support from their local government systems, private health services providers, local donors, and community volunteers to streamline effective and equitable emergency preparedness and response capacity. One

such capacity that is now more relevant than ever is of the digital and mobile technologies in healthcare delivery system.

This pandemic crisis has pushed societies at all levels to recognize that health is central to the core dimensions of sustainable development – economy, society and environment. The term Sustainable development came into the limelight in late 20th century as a result of the rising public concern over the unrestricted resource exploitation leading to global ecological, financial and health crisis. Calls for concerted action for strengthening the institutional foundations to support developing countries in their efforts to harness S&T for their sustainable socio-economic uplift came following the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in 1992. One of the earliest and thoughtful contributions made in this vein was by Pakistani Nobel Laureate, Prof. Dr. Abdus Salam, who gave the idea of establishing an Intergovernmental platform, the Commission on Science and Technology for Sustainable Development in the South (COMSATS), for providing visionary leadership to developing countries for utilizing and mobilizing STI as an integral component of strategies for promoting sustainable development.

At its inception as a high level forum of regional cooperation in S&T, represented by Heads of State/Government, COMSATS assumed an advocacy role for sensitizing the relevant government machinery in its 27 Member States for investing in STI for development and encouraging the decision-makers to strongly interact with the scientific community to incorporate relevant mechanisms and policies in their activities and development agenda. A platform for the latter was also made available in the form of a network of 22 renowned International Science and Technology Centres of Excellence. The Network compliments the organization's efforts for fostering active collaboration and resource-sharing among themselves and their counterparts in other regions. COMSATS is mandated to facilitate achievement of sustainable socio-economic development in the South long before the realization of 2030 Global Agenda. Several important initiatives have been taken by the Commission pertinent to education, environment, health and most importantly South-South and North-South partnerships that hold considerable relevance to the UN sustainable development targets. The major initiatives of COMSATS that laid solid foundations for STI development included, inter alia, establishment of high-quality educational institutions (COMSATS University) and Infrastructure (COMSATS Internet Service); International Thematic Research Groups (ITRGs) for promotion of cutting-edge research using multi-, Inter-, and transdisciplinary approach; COMSATS Telehealth program (CTH) pioneer in using ICTs

application for providing healthcare in community-based settings; COMSATS Centre for Climate & Sustainability (CCCS) a broad coalition of academic and research institutions and organizations working on environmental risks to achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); and various group training courses and workshops for technologists and practitioners from its Member Countries for building and strengthening education and research capacities.

To join and support COVID-19 response efforts and to carry on the momentum of progress towards achieving SDGs, COMSATS aims to give better insight into wide range of social, economic and environmental determinants of health, bring the regional- and national-level discussions with a multi-sectoral approach on mitigating the socio-economic impact of this crisis and alongside improving capacities and skills of personnel working across health and health-related disciplines. Utilizing South-South and North-South cooperation as mechanism to improve countries' capacities to better deal with the global health crises, the Commission encourages the Governments, development agencies, research institutions, private sector, and civil society to collaborate and to form necessary partnerships that are useful for SDGs implementation before, during and after crises.

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