

Sustainable Development Outlook 2021: From anguish to determination

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About the report:

The *Sustainable Development Outlook 2021* (SDO 2021) provides in-depth analysis of the progress and challenges faced in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and draws relevant policy lessons from that analysis. The distinctive feature of *SDO 2021* is its presentation of the future outlook in the form of alternative scenarios regarding the progress towards the SDGs, along with suggested policies that can help to translate the more desirable scenarios into reality. The *SDO 2021* focuses on SDG 1 (poverty), SDG 2 (hunger), SDG 3 (health and well-being), SDG 8 (growth and employment), SDG 10 (inequality) and their interlinkages. The SDO 2021 is prepared by the Development Research Branch in the Economic Analysis and Policy Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

Website: <https://www.bit.ly/DESADevelopmentOutlook>

It's been clear for some time that our actual progress toward the SDGs was falling short of our aspirations.

Many have pointed to the shortfall in mobilizing the necessary resources as the reason. We have indeed fallen short of requirements, particularly in mobilizing the private resources, but that is not the whole story.

There have also been shortcomings in policy. Few governments, if any, have adapted all of their policies to make them fully consistent with achieving the SDGs, or even with achieving the commitments under the Paris Agreement. In fact, one of the priorities for the recovery from COVID must be to get at least government budgets aligned with the 2030 Agenda.

Of course, that explains in part why private finance for sustainable development has not been as forthcoming – and more worrisome, it explains why so much of the available finance is still flowing into activities that are unsustainable. They still offer a nice return.

And then came COVID-19. The pandemic surprised us and highlighted many of the weaknesses that we were pretending away—the inadequacy of our public health systems, and our social

protection systems; the ongoing and widening inequalities, not just in income but in access to opportunity and to the digital technologies that are driving our world; the lack of fiscal space in most of the developing world, a situation compounded by the rising indebtedness over the past ten years, despite increasingly alarmed warnings.

The crisis has affected us all, but it has not affected us all equally. It has also slowed, and in some cases reversed, progress that has been made toward many of the SDGs over the past six years.

The setbacks are worrisome, and the prospects for recovering from these setbacks and finding a more ambitious pathway toward the Sustainable Development Goals are greatly complicated by the lack of fiscal space.

But as this year's Sustainable Development Outlook points out, every cloud has a silver lining. So too does the COVID crisis. Government around the world have demonstrated the capacity to take decisive and ambitious action, when the stakes are high enough, as they have been in this crisis. Some were able to do much more than others who lacked the resources to do more, but all did something. This means we should be able to do the same, to make courageous and ambitious decisions to achieve the SDGs. These are the highest stakes of all.

The crisis has also underscored two realities that have been somewhat obscured of late – the painful realities of inequalities, and the need for consistent and aligned policies to build up our resilience to shocks, and pursue sustainable and inclusive development. We can all hope that this realization can help drive the necessary decisions and the more consistent policies that will accelerate progress and motivate the engagement of the private sector.

The SDO does not focus on the obvious problems of financing shortfalls – instead we try to analyze the various reasons for the impact that the COVID crisis has had, and to recommend strategies and policies that can help us achieve our sustainable development objectives.

We will start today's webinar with an overview of the SDO by the leader of the authoring team.

We will then hear from our excellent panelists who will discuss the individual chapters which deal with the five SDGs that the Outlook has concentrated on.

This will be followed by responses from the chapter authors to the issues raised.

We will then pass on to Questions and Answers.

In that, one housekeeping note – we invite the audience to please put your questions and comments into the Q&A box, rather than the chat.

Also, one of our distinguished panelists, Professor Sachs, has graciously taken time for his other commitments to join us, and has to return to them, so I will invite him to be the first panelist to speak.