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At the start of this year, the United Nations (UN) launched a ‘decade of action’ for delivering the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, with UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres noting that, despite “tremendous enthusiasm” and “concrete progress” around the SDGs, “what we see is not enough” and the world remains “off track” for delivering the SDGs.¹

Since those remarks, the world has been hit by the full extent of the Covid-19 outbreak. The consequences of the pandemic will impact progress towards the SDGs in numerous ways, which we detail in this report. The impact of the virus only heightens the need for increased action by the global community towards achieving the SDGs, and delivering on the commitment to ‘leave no one behind’, by 2030.

The UK has a crucial role to play in the decade of action, in both delivering the SDGs domestically and supporting other countries to do so. As the government minister with primary responsibility for the SDGs, it was encouraging to hear Baroness Sugg state during a parliamentary debate earlier this year that the SDGs “have a key role in framing and shaping recovery” from the Covid-19 pandemic, and that the “decade of action will be more crucial than ever”.²

The Secretary of State for International Development, Anne-Marie Trevelyan, echoed these sentiments at the UN High-Level Political Forum on 15 July 2020, stating: “The Decade of Action is upon us, with only 10 years left to achieve the SDGs. The world needs the SDGs more than ever, but Covid-19 has posed yet further challenges to reaching them by 2030. Urgent action to accelerate progress is required.”³

The UK Government now needs to back up these positive statements with action by using its domestic policies and influence abroad to ensure the SDGs are placed at the heart of the recovery from Covid-19.

Although the impacts of Covid-19 undoubtedly present challenges to delivering the SDGs, it is also true that the recovery from the pandemic presents an opportunity to build back better by using implementation of the SDGs as a ‘ready-made’ roadmap.

We received evidence of the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic has had across a wide range of SDG areas.

In addition to the direct health impacts of Covid-19, the crisis has exposed weaknesses in health systems across the world and had secondary impacts on other health areas, such as disrupting routine vaccinations and sexual and reproductive health services, which threaten progress towards achieving Good Health and Wellbeing. For example, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that at least 80 million children under the age of one are at risk of missing out on routine vaccinations for diseases such as diphtheria, measles and polio.

Evidence regarding the economic effects of the measures taken to contain the virus shows a significant impact on employment and income, particularly in the informal sector, and reductions in exports, foreign direct investment and remittances. These trends have already resulted in increased poverty and world hunger levels, which are predicted to continue to increase. For example, global rise in unemployment of nearly 25 million and income losses for workers of up \$35 billion is expected. The effects of these catastrophic economic and employment trends will result in increased poverty rates, with the World Bank estimating that between 40-46 million people will fall back into extreme poverty, the first increase in extreme poverty since 1990.⁴

Education has been disrupted across the world, with schools closed to control the spread of the virus. The most vulnerable children have been particularly affected, with remote learning often not possible, and it is feared that many will never return to education. At the peak of the outbreak in April 2020, 194 nations had country-wide school closures, with 91 per cent of the world's children being out of school.

We heard that the Covid-19 crisis has helped to highlight the urgency of tackling climate change and protecting the environment, demonstrating that global coordination can help us take urgent steps to address shared problems. However, it also threatens to distract global attention from taking the necessary measures.

Progress towards gender equality has also been impacted, with women and girls bearing the brunt of the secondary impacts of the pandemic. Women have been particularly impacted by the socio-economic effects of the virus and the reallocation of resources and priorities from other health services towards responding to Covid-19. There has been a rise in gender-based violence and it is estimated that female genital mutilation and child marriages will increase due to the impact of the pandemic.

⁴ International Alert and Concern Worldwide, written evidence

The following section outlines specific impacts on different SDGs. However, there are some cross-cutting findings that emerge across all of the goal areas relevant to the UK Government:

- Covid-19 has largely exacerbated existing inequalities and exposed weaknesses in current health and other service delivery systems.
- Evidence shows already marginalised groups such as the urban poor, those working in the informal sector, people with disabilities, children and women and girls are those worst affected.
- Secondary impacts, such as the rise of other diseases where routine vaccinations have not been carried out or the lack of quality education provision leading to declines in school attendance, will be significant and are ongoing.
-

The direct health impact of the Covid-19 virus has been incomparable with anything the world has experienced in recent years, with over 27 million infections and 893,000 deaths worldwide at time of publication.¹¹ The most vulnerable communities in the UK and internationally have been particularly impacted, emphasising the need to put the leave no one behind principle at the heart of

per cent decrease in sexual and reproductive health provision over 12 months (a reduction the study authors actually considered a conservative estimate of the likely impact of Covid-19 on such services). They concluded that a 10 per cent decrease could lead to 49 million more women with unmet need for modern contraception, 15 million more unintended pregnancies, 168,000 more newborn deaths, 29,000 more maternal deaths and three million more unsafe abortions.²⁵

Adding to concern about the potential impact on pregnant women's access to antenatal care, VSO referred us to the findings of a study they conducted with the Liverpool School of Tropical Hygiene across Sierra Leone in 2015 following the Ebola crisis. The study found that there had been an 11 per cent decrease in women attending maternity services, and a corresponding 30 per cent increase in maternal mortality.²⁶ The implications of these findings for the likely impact on maternal mortality of Covid-19 are highly concerning.

²⁵ Action for Global Health, written evidence

²⁶ VSO, written evidence

involved in the informal economy and that “in many cases, these are breadwinners of already vulnerable households”.³⁰ Likewise, Mercy Corps stated that:

One effect of the Covid-19 pandemic according to Project Everyone is that it has demonstrated that “together, we can take steps to allow the planet to breath and prevent climate change from becoming a threat that’s irreversible”.⁵³

The Covid-19 crisis has also helped to demonstrate the urgency of action to halt climate change and protect the environment. The UN Global Compact Network UK told us that “COVID-19 has highlighted the risks our society faces because of biodiversity and habitat loss, and climate change” and that the crisis has served to demonstrate the importance of “[balancing] social and economic needs with the needs of our planet, protecting and managing nature, and reducing our greenhouse gas emissions.”⁵⁴

There is a risk that the impact of Covid-19 could distract from efforts to tackle climate change. In their written evidence, the Bond SDG Group warned that, in responding to Covid-19, “... the UK must not allow a reduced emphasis on other major crises, especially the climate and environmental crisis we all face”.⁵⁵

There is evidence that tropical forests are hot spots of pandemic impact. The Sussex Sustainability Research Programme provided evidence that deforestation is increasing in some areas of tropical forests because of the absence of law enforcement, migration, and other factors. This deforestation adds to greenhouse gas

The negative socio-economic impacts of the virus have particularly affected women. Women are vastly more likely to take on additional unpaid care roles, at a rate of 70 per cent even before the Covid-19 crisis.⁶⁰ These unpaid care roles have only become more necessary following the pandemic with care needed for those who are sick or isolating, or for children affected by school and nursery closures.⁶¹

Women are also more likely to work in the informal economy, which comprises 60 per cent of women's employment.⁶² Dinah Musindarwezo told us that

cent. Girls in the Democratic Republic of the Congo have reported sexual exploitation to meet basic needs since Covid-19 lockdown closed markets in which their parents work.⁶⁷

There has been an increase in gender-

Public trust in government and institutions has been damaged by the response to the Covid-19 pandemic in many countries. International Alert told us that the pandemic is eroding already weak trust in government, amplifying divisive narratives and providing cover to authoritarian inclined governments.⁷⁴

Mercy Corps highlighted Nigeria, Lebanon and Iraq as countries seeing particularly low trust in the government, with a Mercy Corps assessment of social cohesion in Iraq finding 85 per cent of respondents were unhappy with the government's handling of the pandemic.⁷⁵

The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) pointed to a recent study by the Varieties of Democracy Institute which found that 82 countries have a medium- or high-risk of democratic decline during the pandemic. With Covid-

that 65 per cent of people feel Covid-19 has changed social dynamics in their area and 80 per cent of people reporting that Covid-19 and the subsequent restrictions have hindered populations' return and reintegration.⁷⁹

The risk of further conflict has been heightened by disruption to peacebuilding programmes due to the Covid-19 outbreak. A consultation carried out by Peace Direct and Danish INGO Conducive Space for Peace found that important peacebuilding programmes and dialogues were cancelled in South Sudan, Somalia, Kenya, Cameroon and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, with the peace process in Colombia "stalling at a critical moment". Peace Direct also referred to research by Conducive Space for Peace, which found that four out of five local peacebuilders have experienced a reduction in funding since the start of the pandemic and almost 80 per cent have had to suspend activities.⁸⁰ Disruption to these crucial programmes threatens progress in achieving peace in conflict-affected areas.

We also heard that disruption related to Covid-19 has hindered the progress of landmine clearance. The Mines Advisory Group told us that most countries in which they operate suspended landmine clearance and that, while almost all have since allowed work to resume, "new social distancing requirements make the work of mine clearance teams less efficient and more time-consuming". Rules around social distancing also "make it more difficult to deliver life-saving risk education and collect information about possible mined area" with affected communities.⁸¹



The economic impact of the pandemic is likely to see ODA levels drop at a time when less-developed countries will need support more than ever. The Bond SDG Group wrote that “low-income and fragile countries are facing high and rising sovereign debt and decreasing tax revenues, essentially limiting their ability to respond to the crisis and achieve the SDGs”.⁸²

Global collaboration will also be particularly crucial in responding to the direct health impacts of Covid-19, with the Bond SDG Group warning of the risk of “limited production volumes, national hoarding and unjust distribution of health technologies that are currently in development. For example, the US Government has procured the world’s supply of COVID-19 treatment Remdesivir and several High-Income Countries, including the UK, are seeking preferential access to vaccine candidates”.⁸³ Failure by countries to work together to ensure a fair distribution of any treatments or future vaccine for Covid-19 will threaten progress towards Goal 17.

National collaboration and networking is also key to achieving the SDGs more broadly, as Takele Teshome of the Association for Sustainable Development Alternatives (ASDA), Ethiopia noted: “From my observation, without coordination and collaboration we cannot address the SDGs, but collaboration and networking is missing, everyone is running in their own compartments. There is a need to collaborate.”⁸⁴

⁸² Bond SDG Group, written evidence

⁸³ Ibid

⁸⁴ Takele Teshome, interview

vulnerability to violence, exploitation, and abuse.⁸⁹ This is exacerbated by the economic crisis caused by the pandemic, which increases the risk of children being forced into marriage and working.⁹⁰

SOS Children's Villages UK told us that there is a risk that, because children and young people have not been as physically affected by the virus, "the biggest risk is for the recovery efforts ... not to consider them as one of the most affected by the pandemic".⁹¹

Older people are the most vulnerable to the direct health impacts of the Covid-19 virus as they are most likely to live with chronic conditions that put them at risk of the virus' worst effects.⁹²

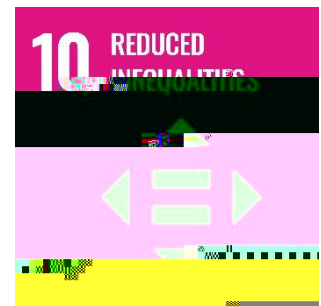
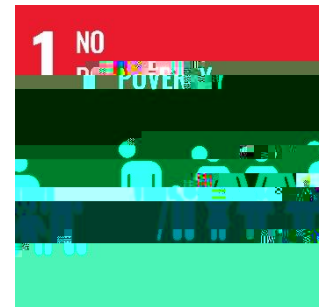
Age International argued that policies introduced by governments have also disproportionately impacted older people, who are already likely to face greater economic hardship. For example, in Serbia, a night curfew was imposed on anybody aged 70 and over, in Jamaica over 65s were not allowed to leave their homes and in Kerala in India a policy of 'reverse quarantine' designed to isolate older people from others in society was enacted. The effects of these policies, they told us, "risk entrapping an older person in chronic poverty and denying them voice and participation".⁹³

Chiara Mariotti from Oxfam GB noted that so far “the role of Global Britain has not been framed around the UK’s contribution to tackle inequality and achieve SDG 10. Inequality is a very clear example of the extent to which departments only focus on the SDGs they are interested in. More could be done by the UK to reduce inequality at national and global level, for example by playing more of a leading role in driving tax reforms in a more progressive way.”¹⁰⁷

The terms on which countries can access loans can present challenges to their ability to make progress on the SDGs. For example, High Commissioner Manoah Esipisu told us that the reclassification of Kenya to a lower middle income country in 2014 has made access to low-interest concessionary loans from multilateral institutions more difficult because the new status means Kenya is expected to access loans from the market.¹⁰⁸ The UK can therefore use its role as a member of multilateral institutions to make the case for low-interest loans to support countries to invest in achieving the SDGs.

Debt restructuring and cancellation was advocated as a way in which the UK could support other countries to make progress on the SDGs.¹⁰⁹ The Sussex Sustainability Research Programme told us that helping the 24 countries in the class of ‘debt distress’ or near debt distress to achieve long-term debt sustainability would give them a better chance of coping with the current financial crisis and get back on track to achieving the SDGs.¹¹⁰

With the UK currently engaged in efforts to agree new trade deals ahead of the end of the transition period for the UK’s exit from the European Union, the Trades Union Congress called for all new trade deals being negotiated, as well as those being rolled over, to be aligned with achieving the SDGs.¹¹¹ Chris Southworth said that “we need trade and development working hand in hand”.¹¹² Similarly, WWF-UK told us:



¹⁰⁷ Chiara Mariotti, interview

¹⁰⁸ His Excellency Manoah Esipisu, oral evidence session, 26 August 2020

¹⁰⁹ Bond SDG Group, Trades Union Congress, Project Everyone and UK Sustainability and Transition Working Group, written evidence

¹¹⁰ Sussex Sustainability Research Programme, written evidence

¹¹¹ Trades Union Congress, written evidence

¹¹² Chris Southworth, oral evidence session, 10 August 2020

The pressing need to take action on climate change was highlighted by Louise Scott from PwC: “It’s incredibly urgent. We’ve got ten years to halve emissions or we won’t keep warming below 1.5°C”, which she noted will see extreme weather and disruption at least as damaging as that seen due to Covid-19.¹²³

The Fairtrade Foundation told us of the impact climate change is already having on those with whom they work:

(NDC) and build sustainability considerations more systematically into how it spends ODA and how it delivers its foreign policy, as advocated by WWF-UK.¹³⁵

The need to reduce infections and deaths from Covid-19 and pursue research into a vaccine is evidently a hugely pressing priority for the global community. As advocated by the Bond SDG Group, the UK must ensure that a Covid-

where they live and nearly two billion not having a private toilet. The proportion of global ODA going towards WASH is around three to

Aspects of the UK's approach to supporting education in other countries was praised in the evidence we received. The UK's August 2019 announcement of £90 million in new contributions for the Education Cannot Wait (ECW) fund made it the largest donor to the global fund for education in emergencies.¹⁵⁰ Both the Send My Friend to School Policy and Parliamentary Working Group and Leonard Cheshire praised the UK Government's prioritisation of girls' education.¹⁵¹

Despite this, we were told that the proportion of the UK's aid budget spent on education is "still far too low", currently standing at 6.97 per cent, well below the International Development Select Committee's recommendation of 10 per cent.¹⁵² The Send My Friend to School Policy and Parliamentary Working Group called for the UK to provide a strong and early commitment to replenishing funding for multilateral education funds such as the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) as part of the recovery from Covid-19.¹⁵³

High Commissioner Manoah Esipisu told us of the need for the UK to assist Kenya and other countries with education provision, pointing out that investment in education is a safe investment in a world affected by climate change as it "provides knowledge and ability that can't be washed away. Innovation can survive in any environment, anywhere".¹⁵⁴

Other recommendations for ways the UK Government can support progress towards Goal 4 included: strengthening the leadership and meaningful participation of children, including the most marginalised, in all decision-making processes to ensure their perspectives are heard and needs are met; funding monitoring, evaluation and research into Covid-19 education responses, including collecting age-, gender-

Trust in state institutions has been damaged in many countries and regions during the Covid-19 pandemic. The UN Global Compact Network UK told us that the UK's leading in role in ensuring Goal 16 was adopted means it now "has an obligation to continue to press for a greater focus on promoting the rule of law, ensuring effective, accountable, and transparent institutions at all levels, and specifically strengthening national institutions."¹⁵⁶

The IFES wrote that

accountability”.¹⁸⁰ Louise Scott from PwC referred to the approach in Germany, where responsibility for the SDGs sits above any single department, which recognises the cross-cutting nature of the SDGs.¹⁸¹

As part of this process, the UK Government needs to outline how it will engage with other stakeholders around the SDGs, as it pledged to do in the VNR and which was felt to be lacking at present. Chris Southworth of ICC UK outlined the need for a much more “open and inclusive approach” to the SDGs, with too much “ad hoc” stakeholder consultation at present.¹⁸² Louise Scott from PwC felt that there is a danger that currently the Government and businesses are each waiting for the other to take the lead on engagement around the SDGs.¹⁸³

Action for Global Health
ADD International
Age International

Lord Collins of Highbury
Baroness Bennett of Manor Castle
Lord Stunell
Baroness Boycott