



A report by the APPG for the UN  
Global Goals for Sustainable  
Development

# Building Back Better: The SDGs as a roadmap for recovery

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# Executive summary

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Our inquiry sought to both establish the impact of Covid-19 on global progress towards achieving the SDGs and to determine the steps the UK Government should take to ensure the SDGs are at the heart of efforts to build back better as a roadmap for recovery.

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.<sup>1</sup>

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

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<sup>1</sup> International Alert and Concern Worldwide, written evidence

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.

Evidence shows that distrust in institutions, community tensions and conflict situations are all increasing following the Covid-19 outbreak. Disruption to conflict-prevention work as a result of the virus has further threatened peace.

Partnership working to achieve the SDGs is also under threat, with levels of international development aid likely to be affected. There is a risk that the response to the virus will undermine global collaboration, with countries failing to work together around a potential vaccine and treatments for Covid-19.

We also received evidence about specific groups that have been most impacted by the consequences of the virus. Already-marginalised groups have been particularly affected, with the evidence we received raising concern about the impact on people with disabilities, children, older people, refugees and displaced people, ethnic, linguistic & religious minorities and LGBTQAI+ individuals.

## The SDGs as a roadmap to build back better

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The SDGs now offer a 'ready-made' roadmap to recovery. They are also the closest thing to a global strategy that 193 governments have agreed.

While progress towards achieving the SDGs has been threatened by the Covid-19 pandemic, the need to 're-set' from its effects offer an opportunity to ensure delivery of the SDGs are a global priority. Prioritising key areas of economic and sustainable development will support and enable the achievement of the SDGs, especially if the leave no one behind principle is integrated into these approaches. The following are the key priorities for the UK Government based on the evidence we received:

### Economic development

1. Integrate the leave no one behind principle into all UK Government activities so that the impact of UK actions at home and abroad on achieving the SDGs for the most marginalised in every context is understood and evaluated.
2. Enable and leverage finance available for delivering the SDGs through aligning trade deals with the framework, supporting debt restructuring and exploring options for cancellation where needed, supporting international and domestic tax reform for this purpose, and encouraging other actors such as the private sector to do business differently and demonstrate their impact on delivering the SDGs.
3. Maintain and develop programmes that support cash transfers, social protection, social insurance and market intervention measures to help individual businesses and workers

cope with the economic fallout of Covid-19 containment measures. These measures must be developed and implemented in partnership with the people and communities benefiting from them in order to most effectively provide economic empowerment.

4. Invest in the creation of (and reskilling for) new, inclusive, decent jobs and livelihoods in sustainable and environmentally-friendly industries, including through grants and loans for small- and micro-enterprises and workers in the informal sector.

## Sustainable development

1. Develop and implement more ambitious emissions-reduction policies in line with the UK's Paris Agreement commitments and support efforts to protect global biodiversity, recognising that dangerous climate change and loss of biodiversity are major threats to achieving the SDGs in the next decade.
2. Produce an ambitious Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) prior to COP26 and use the Summit to spearhead and inspire global action on reducing emissions and mitigating climate change.
3. Target UK Government support on adaptation to those most vulnerable to climate change to leave no one behind and ensure it delivers integrated solutions to tackling poverty, promoting nature restoration, and building climate and economic resilience.
4. Ensure any post-Covid-19 economic recovery packages support a green and just transition to sustainable and resilient business models and development pathways.

## Build back better

1. Re-adopt the SDGs as an explicit roadmap to recovery.
2. Ensure that a Covid-19 vaccine and any proven treatments are available to all as fast as possible and free of charge to those who need it most.
3. Maintain current ODA for non-Covid-19 health programmes and support low-income countries to develop resilient public health systems and universal health coverage.
4. Invest and encourage wider investment in WASH facilities in schools and communities that do not already have adequate provision in order to help prevent further Covid-19 outbreaks, ensuring the principle of leave no one behind guides this support.
5. Increase spend from the international aid budget on education to 10 per cent given the impact of the pandemic on children and their education.
6. Commit to supporting governance and accountability-building mechanisms across government activities including within ODA, recognising the impact of the pandemic on civic space, drivers of conflict, transparency and corruption.

## How to deliver the SDGs

1. Develop a cross-government strategy for achieving the SDGs and allocate responsibility for oversight of implementation to the Cabinet Office, overseen by the Prime Minister.
2. Establish a mechanism for ensuring and monitoring alignment, policy coherence and finding synergies across government with the SDG framework.
3. Develop a clear mechanism for engaging with stakeholders in reviewing progress in the UK and internationally, such as through engaging civil society, businesses and trade unions, in a systematic and inclusive way.
4. Use its influence to further lead and encourage businesses to adopt the SDGs and demonstrate their impact.
5. Ensure the new Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office puts strategic delivery of the SDGs at the heart of its work and builds on the strengths of both of the merged departments, increasing the transparency of UK aid and demonstrating the impact of its work on the poorest countries and communities in line with the leave no one behind principle.

## SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

