

DISCUSSION PAPER

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# Development aid in the time of the coronavirus pandemic



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## Introduction: the time of mutual dependence

What does an illegal wet market in an unknown Chinese city have to do with us? We know the answer now: everything. The rapid spread of novel infectious diseases are just one of a series of collective problems we face in a hyper-globalised world, highlighting the inter-dependence of all humanity and the need for effective international collective action (e.g. pandemics, Anti-Microbial Resistance, climate change, loss of biological diversity, manipulation of digital information).

What probably started as a random encounter at the Chinese market between man and the environment, rapidly developed into an international public health crisis. Without vaccines or treatment options we have had to rely on a series of public health measures that help control the spread of the disease, but at the same time impede normal social functions. In just a few months, this has led to the largest global economic crisis since the 1930s. Estimates are still uncertain, but it is already clear that many countries will experience major reductions in productivity, travel, trade and increased poverty. Vulnerable groups will fare the worst.

The combined impact of an international health crisis and global economic slowdown has major implications for development progress in the poorest countries in the world. What exactly are the most significant impacts on the poorest? What can we do about it? These are questions that Norad has been working on daily throughout the spring of 2020. Norad manages approximately NOK 20 billion a year, which is the lion's share of Norwegian long-term development aid.

How can Norad ensure the aid investments we have made are rapidly re-purposed to respond to the new challenges the Covid-19 crisis presents – and that these new allocations are well spent? And how can Norad best advise the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Minister of International Development on effective policy approaches to respond to this volatile and complex situation?

The coronavirus pandemic raises fundamental questions about how international partners, including Norway, can best help developing countries get through the crisis. And whether the international system and institutions are best equipped to manage collective challenges.

This compendium contains a collection of analyses by Norad's experts, in different key areas. Based on experience and reviews of international literature – often in dialogue with local, international and Norwegian partners – descriptions are given of the main features and challenges that will impact ongoing and future efforts.

Those following the international state of affairs will see detailed analyses of topics that have been the subject of much discussion in recent months: the health situation, the financial ramifications and how education is being affected. Other topics include the capabilities of digitalisation and the important role of governments.

You will also find expert assessments, views and suggestions for political initiatives that are not currently Norwegian policy. Norad's expert role and special communication mandate require us to disseminate knowledge and foster debate about Norwegian development policy.

Two examples are as follows:

- (1) In some ways, the coronavirus crisis is hitting poor countries harder because of the widespread poverty in these countries and the absence of social protection. One of the articles specifically highlights safety nets, in the form of cash payments or support schemes, that can provide the poor with income security. We are familiar with these from the Norwegian context. Some poor countries have such safety nets, but they are often underdeveloped, and some have no safety net at all. Should Norway provide assistance here?
- (2) Following the partial shutdown of society as a blunt infection control measure, the subsequent reopening and rebuilding represents an opportunity to Build Back Better – to create greener, more productive and equitable societies and economies. One article discusses the fact that many countries spend extensive resources on subsidising fossil fuels. This is, of course, a poor climate policy but it also disadvantages the poorest in society. Subsidising oil prices absorbs funds that could have been used to foster better innovation, welfare and climate policy.

When progress of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are finally reckoned in 2030, the coronavirus pandemic will be viewed as a crucial turning point. How the international community assisted poorer countries in dealing with the pandemic will be the test of collective cooperation and our ability to respond to major set-backs as well as shifting to a greener economy. Supported by the Nordic international development ministers, the UN describes it as 'Building Back Better and Greener'.

We hope you enjoy reading this report.

Bård Vegar Solhjell  
Director General

## The coronavirus and developing countries

By Knut Thonstad, Policy Director, Unit for multilateral partners

The coronavirus pandemic has given rise to the biggest global economic crisis since the 1930s. Developing countries are the least equipped to deal with the pandemic and its ramifications. They will face increased starvation and poverty, and many lack a social safety net.<sup>1</sup> Even before the pandemic arrived, the economies in poor countries were suffering significantly as a result of falling commodity prices, reduced trade and tourism, fewer transfers from workers abroad and the flight of capital to rich countries.

### **Infection rate peaked later in developing countries**

Rich countries were the first to be hit by the pandemic on a large scale, partly due to the high levels of travel activity and close contact among the population, due to the extensive urbanisation. Various degrees of lockdown were imposed, and the new infection figures fell sharply most places. The countries have since reopened, and the infection rate has increased significantly in many places.

According to the estimate from the World Health Organization (WHO) 23 September there were 246 000 new confirmed cases in the preceding 24 hours, twice as many in one day as at the start of June, and four times more than at the end of March. On 23 September, a total of 31.4 million cases of infection were registered and 967 000 fatalities. Over 4500 of these deaths happened in the preceding 24 hours.

On the American continent, the number of new cases was 132 000 in the preceding 24 hours. In India, the corresponding figure was 83 000.

The registered infection rate in Africa is still relatively low, at just 3.7 per cent of the world's total confirmed cases of infection and 2.6 per cent of all coronavirus-related deaths. The low testing capacity means that the real figure is likely to be much higher. A majority of Africa's infections and deaths have been in South Africa, accounting for 15 000 of the total 25 000 reported deaths from coronavirus on the continent. The infection rate in South Africa peaked in July at about 13 000 new cases per day, and the number of new cases has since fallen by almost 90 per cent as a result of strict infection control measures.

### **Economic outlook**

On 8 June, the World Bank envisaged a 5.2 per cent contraction in global GDP in 2020. On 24 June the International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimated a contraction of 4.9 per cent. IMF estimated that the global economy would grow by more than 5 per cent in 2021. But the estimated global value added would then be 6.5 percentage points lower than the IMF envisaged last January.

The IMF estimated that despite major crisis packages, the effects of the pandemic and the shutdown of society would reduce GDP by 8 per cent in the United States and by 10 per cent in both the euro area and the UK in 2020.

The IMF estimated that GDP in emerging and developing countries as a whole would fall by 3 per cent in 2020 and that middle-income countries would see a major fall, including a decline of 9 per cent in South America and 4.5 per cent in India. Now it has been reported that GDP in India in the second quarter was 24 per cent lower than the corresponding period last year. One rating agency has estimated that the fall in GDP in the financial year from 1 April will be as much as 11.5 per cent. In Brazil and Mexico, GDP in the second quarter was 11 and 17 per cent lower, respectively, than in the

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<sup>1</sup> See the article by Lars Loe in the compendium: Strengthening social safety nets in response to COVID-19.

corresponding period last year. The IMF estimated that the GDP in China would increase by 1 per cent. After a decline in the first quarter, the GDP of China increased in the second quarter.

In sub-Saharan Africa, the IMF estimated a contraction in GDP in excess of 3 per cent, with a fall of 8 per cent in South Africa and 5 per cent in Nigeria. In the second quarter, GDP in South Africa was 17 per cent lower than in the corresponding period last year.

Low-income countries are the poorest countries in the world. These are countries where the national income per capita was less than USD 1035 in 2019. About 700 million people live in such countries, and 24 of the 29 countries are in sub-Saharan Africa. The IMF estimated a decline in GDP of 1 per cent in low-income countries in 2020. GDP was not projected to contract more because the vast majority of the population works in agriculture. Transfers from workers abroad to these countries are expected to decline by at least 1 per cent of GDP. Because the population growth rate is also high in these countries, income per capita will decline substantially.

In 2018, 10.1 per cent (759 million) of the world's population were living on less than USD 1.90 per day. Most cases of extreme poverty were in middle-income countries such as India and Nigeria. The World Bank has estimated that the number of people living in extreme poverty will increase by 70-100 million<sup>2</sup> as a result of the pandemic, but reported in August that this figure could be higher than 100 million if the pandemic persists.<sup>3</sup>

The World Bank estimated that world trade will fall by 13.4 per cent in 2020. Even before the pandemic, almost a fifth of the population in low-income countries lacked food security. This has now been exacerbated due to problems with food imports and supply chains. The locust invasion in the Horn of Africa is also having a negative effect.

Many sub-Saharan African countries were facing challenges with debt before the pandemic, 7 were in debt distress and 13 were at a high risk of debt distress. These countries have few resources to increase spending on the pandemic, and their debt challenges are hindering their work on health and safety nets. Many countries will have large deficits in their balance of payments. Financing these deficits is difficult in the current situation, and this may lead to fiscal tightening in the times ahead.

To remedy the situation, the IMF, the G20 (made up of the largest economies in the world) and the Paris Club (a group of officials from major creditor countries, including Norway) have temporarily suspended the payment of debt from countries facing major challenges. Development banks, such as the World Bank and the African Development Bank, will also frontload disbursements under new development assistance programmes.

### **The long lines**

The situation in sub-Saharan Africa is somewhat similar to that of earlier periods in the region. In the 1960s and 1970s, economic growth was good as a result of high demand for raw materials from Western countries. Commodity prices then fell sharply in the 1980s and 1990s, something which reduced GDP per capita and pushed up foreign debt, leading to extensive debt relief in the early 2000s.

After the year 2000, there was also a large upswing, this time largely driven by demand from China. However, commodity prices have fallen in recent years. Government debt in sub-Saharan Africa bottomed out at 25 per cent of GDP in 2008, but was 50 per cent in 2019. Foreign debt (private and public) and debt service has also increased. In recent years, growth in sub-Saharan Africa's economy

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<sup>2</sup> See Lars Loe's article.

<sup>3</sup> See Lars Loe's article.

has been weaker due to lower commodity prices and because many countries have pursued restrictive policies in an attempt to limit debt growth and avoid the large debts of the past. Debt growth slowed, but debt is once again increasing rapidly due to the pandemic. Unfortunately, debt is set to be a major issue in the years ahead.

Health and education levels have improved considerably over time in the region. The current challenges and those of decades ago both reflect the failure to replace the economy's strong dependence on raw materials with industry and modern services.

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## Strengthening social safety nets in response to COVID-19

By Lars Loe, Policy Director, Unit for multilateral partners

The COVID-19 crisis is hitting individuals, businesses and government agencies far harder in the poorest countries than richer countries. The needs are greater, but can they afford it? Are the social safety nets that we enjoy a luxury they cannot yet afford? Do they have to give top priority to growth and government finances?

These questions give rise to a difficult balancing act. Unless individuals, households and businesses are protected, the population's productive capacity will be damaged and capital invested in businesses will be lost. This insight characterises our own welfare state and other rich countries' response to COVID-19. It also characterises the recommendations of international organisations and prominent researchers who give a high priority to such factors when devising measures to address the crisis in the poorest countries.

### **Effect on the scope of poverty**

In sub-Saharan Africa, the number in extreme poverty has increased by over 130 million since 1990, to well over 400 million. Many are living just above the poverty line and are at a high risk of falling below the line. Eighty-nine per cent of employees work in the informal sector. Higher unemployment levels will have a major negative impact on the poor. Underemployment, low productivity levels and low incomes are the main problems in the region. Families that do not have a safety net, and who either work or starve, will face unpredictable effects on their finances, behaviour and social stability if society shuts down due to an epidemic.

We may still be in an early stage of a crisis with an unknown path, but the potential effects on poverty have been shown in recent research. Prominent poverty researchers at the UN University UNU-WIDER<sup>4</sup> have estimated that a 5 per cent drop in global income will push 85 million more into extreme poverty, living on less than USD 1.9 per day. Thirty million of these live in sub-Saharan Africa. With a 10 per cent fall, the increase will be 180 million globally and 56 million in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>5</sup> A 20 per cent drop in income will mean as many as 420 million more in extreme poverty

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<sup>4</sup> Sumner, Andy, Chris Hoy & Eduardo Ortiz-Juarez (2020): Estimates of the impact of COVID-19 on global poverty, Wider Working Paper 43

<sup>5</sup> World Bank researchers have calculated income declines of 5% and 8%, and arrived at a slightly lower increase in poverty: Mahler, Daniel Gerszin, C. Lakner, A. Castaneda, A. Wu (2020): Updated estimates of the impact of COVID-19 on global poverty. World Bank Blog

globally and 120 million in sub-Saharan Africa. In a recent report The World Bank estimates an increase in extreme poverty of up to 115 million in 2020, and a further increase of 35 millions in 2021. They also present scenarios for poverty for 2030, which shows that with same growth in GDP per capita as the period 2008-2018, the number of extreme poor may exceed half a billion people. This prospects underlines the need for direct redistribution in addition to increased growth in poor countries.<sup>6</sup>

The estimated increase in poverty is greatest in India, but populous African countries such as Nigeria, Ethiopia, Democratic Republic of the Congo and Tanzania will also suffer major negative effects.<sup>7</sup>

We will know more in the times ahead. A major research programme is underway where researchers are following a sample of households in a number of countries through telephone interviews. The first calculations from Ethiopia show that 55 per cent of the respondents had a lower income or, in the worst cases, had lost all of their income.<sup>8</sup> A similar study for Malawi also shows income declines as well as a drastic reduction in the proportion of children receiving education. In the poorest fifth of the population, the proportion of children receiving education is now only five per cent.<sup>9</sup> These are only indications, but they seem realistic when compared to the major effects seen elsewhere in the countries' economies and the assessments by prominent macroeconomic experts.<sup>10</sup> Social safety nets are now a core element of the discussions on crisis response in poor countries, and the desperate need for such nets is therefore one factor that needs to be considered. The second factor is that research and evaluations imply that social safety nets actually work. A well-known dilemma in rich countries is that social transfer schemes can disincentivise people to work. There is very little evidence of this among the poorest parts of the population, whose access to the labour market may, on the contrary, improve with financial subsidies, for example as a result of better health and nutrition.<sup>11</sup>

The number of countries with various forms of social safety nets in sub-Saharan Africa increased from 18 in 2000 to 45 in 2017, but the proportion of the population that was covered in the region was still just around 20 %. . Mobile technology facilitates a rapid response. A total of 400 million Africans use a mobile phone to do their banking, and more than half of the adults without mobile banking own a mobile phone.

For example, Ethiopia, where one in three of the 109 million inhabitants live in extreme poverty, has one of the region's largest social programmes, 'Work for social security', covering 8 million people. In Tanzania, Norway supports a programme aimed at the approximately 650 000 households below the national poverty line in relation to food consumption, as well as the approximately 350 000

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<sup>6</sup> World Bank (2020): Reversals of Fortune. Poverty and Sha

<sup>7</sup> Sumner, Andy, Eduardo Ortiz-Juarez & Chris Hoy (2020): Precarity and the pandemic. COVID-19 and poverty incidence, intensity, and severity in developing countries. Wider Working Paper No.77

<sup>8</sup> Wieser, Ambel, Bundervoet & Halle (2020) Monitoring COVID-19 Impacts on Households in Ethiopia. Results from a High-Frequency Phone Survey of Households. World Bank group, Report no. 1, June

<sup>9</sup> Moylan, Heather & Habtamu Fuje (2020): High-frequency monitoring of COVID-19 impacts: first results from Malawi. World Bank Blog. Corresponding studies are being conducted in Burkina Faso, Mali, Nigeria and Uganda.

<sup>10</sup> See Knut Thonstad's article in this compendium for a brief outline.

<sup>11</sup> Bastagli, Hagen-Zanker, Harman, Sturge, Barca, Schmidt, Pellerano (2016): Cash transfers: what does the evidence say? A rigorous review of impacts and the role of design and implementation features, Overseas Development Institute (ODI)



households at risk of falling below the line. The programme also has a ‘work for social security’ component, but cash transfers are now the priority during the COVID-19 crisis. Many countries are now introducing new program or expanding existing cash-transfer programs to meet the crisis. One challenge is that many such schemes are a patchwork of measures that are partly run and financed by development aid. In order to ensure sustainability and development effects, it is important that they are converted to state schemes.

### **The fiscal capacity to respond to the crisis is weak**

Government finance considerations require strict targeting of the poorest groups in the population. This argument is increasingly being challenged, especially in countries with a high poverty rate and weak institutions. Prominent experts point out that the need for a rapid response and the lack of administrative systems require fine-grained targeting according to precise criteria such as income, etc.<sup>12</sup> More coarse-grained schemes (e.g. child benefit) can reach more people and limit the leakage to high-income groups – in the very poorest countries with 50-70 per cent in extreme poverty and 80-90 per cent living on less than USD 3.2 a day.

The similarity between rich and poor countries is that a weak response to the social and economic problems of the crisis could mean greater financial ramifications in the future. Although the measures are costly, the future financial loss may be exacerbated if the population’s productive capacity is destroyed. The main difference is that many poor countries may not be able to avoid the huge loss without more support from rich countries. Poor countries already had debt challenges and few opportunities for self-financing before the pandemic, and could end up with weak or negative growth, declining tax revenues, the withdrawal of investors and increased balance of payment deficits. Interest on government bonds has risen sharply in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, and could have a major impact on deficit financing, and not least refinancing, which will be particularly needed from 2024.

This recognition now underpins the Norwegian and international efforts to adapt development aid to the crisis. How far it will go and how well the developing countries’ own policies are adapted remains to be seen. Increased income security can only be a limited part of the puzzle, but it is nevertheless crucial.

‘One dollar a week’ will be more realistic than a dollar a day in many countries, but can still represent an important contribution when the daily income is one dollar. Establishing such schemes is not just an important crisis response; like in modern welfare states, it is a key part of a long-term development strategy.

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<sup>12</sup> Ravallion, Martin (2020): Pandemic Policies in Poor Places. CGD note, April. Center for Global Development

## What happens to the SDG 3 for ‘Healthy Lives and Wellbeing for All’ during a pandemic?

By Lene Jeanette Lothe, Assistant Director, Department for Education and Global Health, Global Health Section

COVID-19 is a contagious disease, highly infective and frequently deadly – over 1 million people have died from Covid in just a few short months. But the ramifications of the pandemic for public health go far beyond the disease itself. The impact of the covid-19 crisis has severely impeded access and functioning of health systems – people are not getting vital care for other diseases. IN some countries this will have a bigger health impact than Covid itself – as children do not get vaccinated, Tuberculosis or diabetes patients fail to get the treatments they need – and women cannot go to hospital to give birth. But equally importantly, what we do in the health sector has an impact on the economy and other sectors like education – and how those sectors perform feeds back into health of the population.

How will COVID-19 affect our efforts to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of fighting poverty, hunger and climate change, and not least the SDG for universal good health?

The global pandemic is not really a surprise to those of us working in global health. Research, reports and emergency preparedness plans, as well as popular movies and books, refer to WHEN a pandemic will occur, not IF. We can also predict with high certainty, that there will be new pandemics in the decades ahead.

Nevertheless, we in Norway, along with the rest of the world, were unprepared for the speed, scope and not least the consequences of the virus and the infection control measures. Why was that? After all, we had a lot of knowledge and were well versed in what to do to defend ourselves.

### **Health security and global public goods**

From a global health perspective, we can safely say that there has been a lack of investment in health security both globally and locally. ‘A World in Disorder’, a report by the Global Preparedness Monitoring Board (GPMB) recommends additional funding for emergency preparedness to the tune of USD 5 per capita per year (or 35 billion dollars per year, every year, for the next 10 years).<sup>13</sup>

The problem is that preparedness investments do not lead to direct welfare gains – and so when resources are stretched – politicians tend to invest in daily services with meaning for people’s lives in the here and now. Investments in preparedness and prevention are frequently under-prioritized and delayed – in what is referred to as the “*tragedy of the commons*”.

Following the Ebola outbreak in 2014, Norway and other partners created the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness and Immunization (CEPI) – a platform ofr ramping up research on vaccine sin the face of rapidly emerging new diseases. CEPI has been a key player in the global response to Covid-19. But it is clear there are many capacities for an effective collective action that are missing.

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<sup>13</sup> [https://apps.who.int/gpmb/assets/annual\\_report/GPMB\\_AR\\_2020\\_EN.pdf](https://apps.who.int/gpmb/assets/annual_report/GPMB_AR_2020_EN.pdf)

The current experience of the devastation (health, economy, welfare, political) on a national and global scale must be translated into new efforts to define essential actions and capacities that are needed at national and international levels and to forge a common compact to collectively build these capacities. Such preparedness may not stop the next pandemic – but it will help us manage the consequences with far less devastation and cost.

Pandemics are not the only collective action challenge we have – we might also mention anti-microbial resistance, climate change, loss of biological diversity, pollution and others. In order to confront collective challenges we need to invest in what we call ‘global public goods’. The coronavirus pandemic has clearly shown how the whole world is interdependent. Global public goods require global solidarity, but what are the implications for funding, and for development aid funding in particular? Global public goods are of benefit to us all, not just the poorest. And global public goods require investment at a level many times that of current development assistance. We can no longer under-invest in global public goods using a proportion of development assistance.

In April 2020, the ‘Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) accelerator’ (ACT-A) was established to ensure fair access to COVID-19 diagnostics, medicines and vaccines. The current funding estimates needed to propel access to and delivery of effective tests, medicines and vaccines over the next 18 months is estimated at USD 38 billion,<sup>14</sup>. Immediate needs over the next six months amount to a total of USD 15.2 billion. The cost calculation covers research and development, production, procurement and distribution costs. Only USD 2.6 billion has currently been raised (10 September 2020)

Development aid funding on its own will be insufficient to cover the needs outlined. Research and development (R&D) costs will be useful for all countries - including high-income countries. The R&D costs for global public goods should not come only from development aid budgets. Development aid funding is relatively limited and directed towards assisting the poorest. Development aid should be used to support mechanisms to preferentially assist the poor - such as providing affordable vaccines to low-income countries as well as support for vaccine roll-out. Rolling out vaccination in ODA eligible countries, at the same time as beginning to vaccinate in richer countries will be vital in the effective management of the global pandemic and minimizing the global impact of the disease. But this requires that richer countries use their research, production and market power to forward a rational global effort rather than prioritize their own needs first. While richer country national interest is legitimate and must be considered – explicit compromises have to be made. If this is not done fairly – and by all nations the system of cooperation breaks down.

Modelling shows that twice as many lives can be saved through simultaneous roll-out of the vaccine, but that there will be some cost to richer countries – as they will bring down national mortality rates more slowly, if they share scarce vaccine resources with others<sup>15</sup><sup>[66]</sup>

But stabilising the pandemic is critical for all countries, not just to reduce covid-19 mortality rates, but to ensure political stability and economic resurgence. Trade-offs are required.

### **COVID-19 in Africa**

The coronavirus pandemic started in China but rapidly spread to Asia, the US and Europe through international travel. Those of us who work within development, and especially in global health, held our breath – what will happen when it reaches Africa? Our partner organisations quickly initiated

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<sup>14</sup> ACT Accelerator: Investment Case & Plan moving from start-up to scale-up ACT-A.  
[https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKewifmeie0P7rAhWsC2MBHVP8CVMQFjABegQIBRAB&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.who.int%2Fdocs%2Fdefault-source%2Fcoronaviruse%2Fact-accelerator%2Fact-a-fc-investment-case-and-plan-10-sep-final.pdf%3Fsfvrsn%3Dffac8796\\_1&usg=AOvVaw0pXg3D1a9bgxQ5gNx8O1in](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKewifmeie0P7rAhWsC2MBHVP8CVMQFjABegQIBRAB&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.who.int%2Fdocs%2Fdefault-source%2Fcoronaviruse%2Fact-accelerator%2Fact-a-fc-investment-case-and-plan-10-sep-final.pdf%3Fsfvrsn%3Dffac8796_1&usg=AOvVaw0pXg3D1a9bgxQ5gNx8O1in)

<sup>15</sup> [https://www.mobs-lab.org/uploads/6/7/8/7/6787877/global\\_vax.pdf](https://www.mobs-lab.org/uploads/6/7/8/7/6787877/global_vax.pdf)

measures to loosen rigid budget systems so that countries could immediately start implementing measures; monitoring, testing, access to personal protection equipment and training healthcare personnel. Fortunately, none of the worst-case scenarios for the spread of infection in Africa have come to fruition yet. African countries have acted quickly, building on experience from earlier epidemics and initiating effective infection control measures.

It is still unclear how the epidemic is actually evolving on the African continent. The total number of registered coronavirus-related deaths, as of 4<sup>th</sup> September, was 22 000, of which 14 000 were in South Africa alone. According to WHO, Africa accounted for 3.8 per cent of the world's confirmed cases of infection, and 2.5 per cent of all coronavirus deaths – despite having 17% of the world's population (as of 4<sup>th</sup> September).

Limited testing and underreporting create uncertainty about the real figures, and the number of cases may be much higher. In May, WHO estimated that without measures in the AFRO region, which includes 47 African countries, between 81 000 and 180 000 people in the region would die. These calculations take into account lower rate of spread and lower mortality than previously assumed (from Asia, Europe and elsewhere). However, parts of Latin America and India are experiencing significant spread of infection – calling into question if conditions really are so different in Africa). Meanwhile, the health sector is less able to care for the seriously ill than has been the case in many countries in Asia, as well as in Europe and the United States.

#### **Access to the necessary health services**

In the absence of a vaccine and treatment for COVID-19, the most important direct measures consist of information on infection control both nationally and in local communities, testing, infection tracing, social distancing, quarantine/self-isolation and lockdowns. In parallel with this, health services must make preparations to care for new COVID-19 patients and protect health workers and other patients. The measures have enormous social, economic and health ramifications, especially for women, children, young people and the poorest in society. Mortality related to COVID-19 can be relatively low compared to other existing health challenges in the region. Experiences from the Ebola epidemic in Africa show the importance of maintaining basic health services, especially in relation to pregnancy and childbirth, and in neonatal and paediatric care. WHO was therefore quick to declare that sexual and reproductive health services are essential services that must be available during the country's response to COVID-19. The continuity of health services is dependent on maintaining the capacity of health personnel and supply chains. This entails protecting personnel from infection or unnecessary quarantine/having to stay home to care for family (many health workers are women) , ensuring they are well equipped, re-designing patient flow and contact to maintain access to services and securing the supply of essential medicines.

The situation also affects the access to medical products – especially those imported. During the early stages of the COVID-10 pandemic, it was estimated that supply chain problems could put 47 million women in low- and middle-income countries at risk of losing access to effective contraception, leading to seven million unwanted pregnancies over a six-month period.<sup>16</sup> In areas particularly affected by HIV, tuberculosis and malaria, deaths related to these diseases over a period

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.UNFPA.org/>

of five years can increase by up to 10 per cent, 20 per cent and 36 per cent respectively. The vaccine alliance Gavi and UNICEF report that at least 80 million children are at risk of missing out on life-saving vaccines due to infection control measures.

Lack of accurate information about how COVID-19 spreads can lead to even more health problems. One such example is that mothers refrain from breastfeeding for fear of infecting their child with coronavirus. The implementation of infection control measures appears to have led to even greater challenges for the poorest parts of society: increased inequality, financial problems, food shortages, disruptions to schooling, human rights violations, more violence against women and children and an increase in child and forced marriages. This represents a major setback in the effort to achieve the SDGs.

As in the Ebola crisis, there is a major risk that the most significant health burden and mortality will not be caused by the virus itself, but will result from other diseases such as measles, malaria, tuberculosis and maternal and child mortality as a result of the reduced provision and use of services.

### **New ways of working**

Despite this gloomy picture, the extent of the coordinated cooperation between governments, research institutions, civil society and international agencies must be viewed as positive. The Malawian government funds Marie Stopes International's mobile health teams from the public health budget, giving more people in rural areas access to sexual and reproductive health services.<sup>17</sup> In Mozambique, the government has commissioned Pathfinder International to train health workers in infection control and the use of personal protective equipment. The government in Nigeria has mobilised retired health workers in order to increase the capacity of the health service. The use of digital tools is steadily increasing to improve the speed and availability of health information and in facilitating distance medicine, remote patient follow-up and dispensing medicines, contraceptives and medical aids. Registration and follow-up of women who are subject to violence are also integrated into the new initiatives. National and global collaboration is also in place to monitor and reduce the challenges in the supply chain for personal protective equipment, medicines and contraceptives. And the global cooperation to produce vaccines, tests and therapies for covid-19 has been unparalleled.

In the post-pandemic recovery, we have the opportunity to 'build back better', by reinforcing universal health coverage, public health, management of Non Communicable Diseases, health security and pandemic preparedness as vital inter-related elements in all health systems. And to work across sectors to reduce threats to health (pollution, AMR, diet etc.) and to green the economy, reduce drivers to climate change and biodiversity loss and enhance international capacity for management of collective action problems (including new means to finance global public goods).

We know that a robust and publicly funded primary health service saves lives, and that this helps to reduce health inequalities. But now we plainly see that it can save economies too. We must continue to build health systems that protect the population through appropriate prioritisation and good management of public funds. International aid must ensure incentives for countries to invest in the

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.mariestopes.org/>

domestic institutions and services they need to protect the public health – and not provide disincentives to this end.

This involves strengthening the work with domestic health financing including taxes, and financing partnerships with private sector, reducing waste and optimising the deployment of healthcare personnel.

### **COVID-19 and the SDG for universal good health**

In the short and medium term, African governments will see a further fall in revenues such as taxes, customs duties, etc. Households are also likely to see declining income through reduced remittances and income earning opportunities.

At the same time, various expenses will increase, both in the health sector and as a consequence of other socioeconomic measures due to the pandemic. Prioritisation and reallocation of funds within the health sector, and across social sectors, will represent one of the most important sources of funding and stabilisation. Countries must continue to make choices despite the difficult conditions. Rather than complicating the issue, development aid and International Financial Institutions such as the World Bank must support this work to the greatest degree possible. International cooperation and transparency on the distribution of funds will be crucial.

COVID-19 – just like the SDGs – affects everyone, rich and poor. We must make the most of the hard-learned lessons from this pandemic. We can use this opportunity to establish, once and for all, that our shared responsibility for global public goods and equitable access to them is not simply a good soundbite in a speech, but a necessity. The SDGs reflect a holistic approach to development, and I believe this will help us both in the effort to control the pandemic and in the post-pandemic recovery.

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## Education and COVID-19

By Gerd-Hanne Fosen, Policy Director, Randi Gramshaug and Silje Sjøvaag Skeie, Senior Advisers, Department for Education and Global Health, Education Section

2020 was the start of the Decade of Action – a decade in which we would mobilize increased efforts to accelerate progress towards the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. We were going to ensure that the children who were still out of school would get an education, and improve the quality of education so that all children and youth have the opportunity to learn and to succeed in life. Then the pandemic hit. Within just a few weeks, the world went from nine out of ten children being in school to nine out of ten children being out of school. How will the achievement of SDG 4 for quality education for all be impacted by COVID-19?

### **An educational crisis**

The COVID-19 pandemic is also an education crisis, with an unprecedented disruption of education for learners throughout the world. Schools closed overnight. Teachers were forced to find alternative ways of teaching, with minimal support. Students have either had no possibility to continue learning or had to take an unprecedented responsibility for their own learning. The United Nations

Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) estimates that, during the peak, more than 1.5<sup>18</sup> billion children and youth in 194 countries were affected by nationwide shutdowns of schools and learning institutions as a consequence of the pandemic. This corresponds to over 95 per cent of all learners in the world. According to UNICEF,<sup>19</sup> at least 463 million children and youth did not receive any alternative education during the shutdown.

### **A gradual reopening**

After the number of closed schools peaked in April 2020, several countries gradually started to reopen their education institutions. Six months later, in mid-September, about half of the world's schoolchildren were back in school. Figures from UNESCO<sup>20</sup> show that a national shutdown of schools remained in force in 53 countries, and more than 875 million children were still at home. According to the World Food Programme, 324 million children were at the same time losing out on school meals.<sup>21</sup> Some countries are preparing to reopen, while others have indicated that schools will remain closed until the start of the next scholastic year. Through the Global Education Coalition, a platform for collaboration and the exchange of experiences in education and COVID-19, organisations work to protect the right to education during and after the COVID-19 crisis. The coalition focuses specifically on ensuring connectivity for education and learning, strengthening teachers' capacities and address the gender dimensions of the COVID-19 education crisis.

### **Ramifications of COVID-19 for children's education**

The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to have major repercussions for children's and youth's learning outcomes and further education for many years to come. How long schools and universities will remain closed, what alternative measures are put in place and how education budgets will be affected by the crisis will determine how grave the pandemic's impact on children's learning will be. Based on three studies from 2020, UNESCO's Institute for Statistics estimates that around 100 million children of primary school age will not learn basic skills between 2020 and 2030 due to COVID-19. The figure for lower secondary school students is 86 million. Most of these children and youth are located in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia.<sup>22</sup> UNHCR points out that many of the world's refugees, who are already vulnerable, are also facing new challenges as a result of the pandemic. There is a significant risk that many refugees will never return to school.<sup>23</sup>

The importance of education in times of crisis has long been a key priority for Norway. We have learned that crises have significant consequences for children's and young people's learning and well-being, both in the short and long term. The COVID-19 pandemic is no exception. Closed schools lead to learning losses and increased dropout rates, as well as challenges in relation to protection

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<sup>18</sup> UNESCO: COVID-19 Impact on education. Nettside: <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>

<sup>19</sup> UNICEF: COVID-19: ARE CHILDREN ABLE TO CONTINUE LEARNING DURING SCHOOL CLOSURES? A global analysis of the potential reach of remote learning policies using data from 100 countries. August 2020: [file:///C:/Users/u15324/Downloads/COVID-19-Remote-Learning-Factsheet\\_English\\_2020%20\(2\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/u15324/Downloads/COVID-19-Remote-Learning-Factsheet_English_2020%20(2).pdf)

<sup>20</sup> UNESCO: <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>, data retrieved 15.09.2020

<sup>21</sup> WFP: Global Monitoring of School Meals During COVID-19 School Closures, Retrieved 15.09.2020: <https://cdn.wfp.org/2020/school-feeding-map/>

<sup>22</sup> UNESCO/UIS Estimates of the impact of COVID-19 on learning. Not yet publicly available.

<sup>23</sup> UNHCR: Coming together for refugee education: <https://www.unhcr.org/5f4f9a2b4>

and nutrition. The World Food Programme estimates that 369 million children missed out on school meals at the peak of the school shutdown in April 2020.<sup>24</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic is expected to reverse some of the progress made in recent decades in ensuring universal quality education, especially for the most vulnerable children. A prolonged closure of schools will increase the vulnerability of certain groups, particularly girls. Experiences from the Ebola crisis showed that girls were exposed to more sexual violence and abuse, early pregnancies, child marriages, prostitution and an increased burden of household chores, which had a negative impact on girls' rights, including their education.<sup>25 26 27</sup> There are signs of similar trends related to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is estimated that between 11 million and 20 million girls and young women will drop out of school as a result of the pandemic. Although the estimates are uncertain, it is evident that the pandemic will have a negative impact on girls' education.<sup>28 29</sup>

### **Alternative learning for all?**

The COVID-19 crisis resulted in a massive and unexpected disruption of learning. But some countries were quick to put alternative learning solutions in place when the schools were forced to close. However, the Global Education Monitoring Report 2020 points out that there are huge variations between countries. While online solutions were adopted in over 90 per cent of high-income countries, the corresponding figures for medium-income countries and low-income countries were 73 per cent and 55 per cent respectively.<sup>30</sup> Several of the poorest countries have not offered any form of alternative learning when schools were closed.

The countries offering alternative learning methods are also facing considerable challenges. Distance learning in many countries relies heavily on digital solutions. In countries that offer online solutions, 465 million children and youth have no internet access at home.<sup>31</sup> This corresponds to almost half of those being offered such solutions. In sub-Saharan Africa, 80 per cent of pupils have no internet access at home. Web based alternative learning solution is therefore not realistic for many and unless other alternatives are provided, there will be an extensive learning loss.

The variation between groups reinforces inequalities. Forty per cent of low-income countries have not been able to provide support to those pupils who are most at risk of exclusion, such as the

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<sup>24</sup> WFP: Global Monitoring of School Meals During COVID-19 School Closures, Retrieved 15.09.2020:

<https://cdn.wfp.org/2020/school-feeding-map/>

<sup>25</sup> Hallgarten: Evidence on efforts to mitigate the negative education impacts of past disease outbreaks (2020):

[https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/15202/793\\_mitigating\\_education\\_effects\\_of\\_disease\\_outbreaks.pdf?sequence=6&isAllowed=y](https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/15202/793_mitigating_education_effects_of_disease_outbreaks.pdf?sequence=6&isAllowed=y)

<sup>26</sup> UNESCO: Addressing the gender dimensions of school closures. Covid-19 Education Response. Education Sector Issue Notes. No. 3.1 May 2020: <file:///C:/Users/u15324/Downloads/373379eng.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> Malala Fund: Girls' Education and Covid-19. What past shocks can teach us about mitigating the impact of pandemics. September 2020:

[https://downloads.ctfassets.net/0oan5gk9rgbh/6TMYLYAcUpjhQpXLDgmdla/3e1c12d8d827985ef2b4e815a3a6da1f/COVID19\\_GirlsEducation\\_corrected\\_071420.pdf](https://downloads.ctfassets.net/0oan5gk9rgbh/6TMYLYAcUpjhQpXLDgmdla/3e1c12d8d827985ef2b4e815a3a6da1f/COVID19_GirlsEducation_corrected_071420.pdf)

<sup>28</sup> Malala Fund: Girls' Education and Covid-19.

<sup>29</sup> UNESCO: Building Back Equal. Girls Back to School guide. UNESCO, UNICEF, Plan International, UNGEI, Malala Fund. August 2020: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374094>

<sup>30</sup> UNESCO: Global Education Monitoring Report 2020. Inclusion and education. All means all:

<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373718>, s. 58

<sup>31</sup> UNESCO: Distance Learning denied: <https://gemreportunesco.wordpress.com/2020/05/15/distance-learning-denied/>



poorest, language minorities and children with disabilities. The fact that girls have less access to the internet and technology means that they are more excluded from digital learning than boys, thus widening the digital gender gap during the pandemic.<sup>32</sup> The challenges are not unique to the least developed countries.

Even in homes with internet access and computers, tablets or smartphones, childrens use of these tools is limited. Little is known about how much children actually get to take part in online teaching in homes where family members share computers and tablets. It is reasonable to assume that many pupils have not received adequate teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic and that radio and paper-based learning will be better solutions for many. Several education actors have therefore recommended that a diverse offer of education be provided, so that no one is left out. Learning loss can lead to knowledge gaps and underachievement. In the worst case, pupils may struggle so much that they drop out when schools reopen after the pandemic is brought under control.

### **Increase in poverty – a weakened education system?**

According to the World Bank, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused the biggest economic collapse since the 1930s. Poverty is on the rise. Economic stagnation or decline will affect family finances, and many poor people will no longer be able to bear the direct or indirect costs of education. According to UNICEF and the International Labour Organization (ILO), the school shutdown leads to increased child labour. These organisations fear that the progress made to eliminate child labour over the last 20 years will be lost due to the pandemic.<sup>33</sup>

Preliminary analyses show that the assumed economic decline as a result of the pandemic may lead to reduced education budgets for many years to come.<sup>34</sup> Stagnation or reductions are expected in national budgets. At the same time e budgets for certain sectors, such as health, are expected to increase in order to deal with the pandemic. Stimulus packages will also be offered to businesses with the aim of securing jobs. This could result in education receiving a smaller proportion of national budgets, or education budgets being reduced despite still constituting the same proportion of the national budget – or both.<sup>35</sup> A potential scenario for development aid budgets is that health and industry are prioritised, and that the share going to education may be reduced. However, the OECD also points to the possibility that development aid may increase. This probably presumes s that Western economies will recover quickly and that there is political support for an unprecedented need to contribute to the collective effort for the hardest hit and poorest countries.

Models that attempt to calculate the cost of ensuring universal education by 2030 estimate that, in addition to countries themselves having to increase their national education budgets, there was already before the pandemic an external funding gap of USD 148 billion. Now costs related to COVID-19 estimated to be between USD 30 and 45 billion come on top of that.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> UNESCO: Addressing the gender dimensions of school closures. Covid-19 Education Response. Education Sector Issue Notes. No. 3.1 May 2020

<sup>33</sup> UNICEF and ILO 2020: Covid-19 and child labour. A time of crisis, a time to act: <https://data.unicef.org/resources/covid-19-and-child-labour-a-time-of-crisis-a-time-to-act/>

<sup>34</sup> World Bank Global Economic Prospects June 2020

<sup>35</sup> Based on presentations by the World Bank, OECD and the UN's special envoy for global education in SDG4, steering committee meeting 5 June 2020.

<sup>36</sup> Global Education Monitoring Report Policy Paper 42 2020: Act Now: Reduce the Impact of COVID-19 on the Cost of Achieving SDG 4.

### **What now for SDG 4?**

If the gloomiest scenarios become reality, the progress of the last 20 years in the field of education could be severely set back. The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to make education only a distant dream for many of the most vulnerable children and young people.

However, possibilities can also arise out of crises. Perhaps the pandemic will create an opportunity to build better, more equal and inclusive education systems, where the importance of competent qualified teachers is emphasised because distance learning cannot replace the relationships in the classroom. The extensive use of technology during the pandemic has provided a unique basis from which to develop a sensible rationale for the use of digital learning.. Perhaps it will also stimulate the use of modern, research-based teaching methods in a number of countries where methods are outdated. There are also signs that the collaboration and coordination between global education actors is improving as a result of the pandemic..

We can hope that in the midst of a need for more money for health and crisis packages for businesses, education will be prioritised in national budgets and development aid budgets, and that the opportunity to ‘build back better’ can be realized. Moreover, a coordinated and collective approach will be needed to address the challenges that COVID-19 has posed for the education sector. We must come together to ensure that coming generations will have the opportunity to create a good future, and contribute to a more sustainable and equitable society.

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## How can you salvage the economy without an oil fund?

By Erik Feiring, senior adviser, Tax for Development programme

On Thursday 12 March 2020, the Norwegian government shut the country down to limit the spread of Covid-19. The very next day, the government presented the first financial measures to help companies and households who would lose income because of infection control measures. Fortunately, Norway has the world’s largest war chest in the form a sovereign wealth fund, commonly known as the ‘Oil Fund’, and the Norwegian parliament has approved crisis packages that will cost several hundred billion kroner (at least USD 20 billion) in 2020. But how can countries without a sovereign wealth fund salvage the economy during the crisis? I have been part of a working group of experts in economics, business, climate and anti-corruption who have looked into this. Here is what I have learned:

### **1. Think straight, but not in a straight line**

A simplified but useful way of thinking about the course of the crisis in each country is that it has three phases:

**Phase 1 – Immediate crisis response** where the health crisis is central, as well as the direct adverse effects on households, businesses and macroeconomics.

**Phase 2 – Economic recovery** when the health situation has been stabilised, but the economic situation remains unstable.

**Phase 3 – A new normal** where the economy has been stabilised, but the long-term social and economic ramifications are still being addressed.

We like to think in straight lines, but the world is rarely that simple. We still have incomplete knowledge of how the Covid-19 pandemic will develop, but we believe countries will enter and exit different phases as the virus is contained and flares up again, while some countries will skip phase 1 and go straight to phase 2. And some countries may never reach a new normal. Developing countries, and those of us who work with them, must make even tougher choices under even more uncertainty than those facing the Norwegian government.

## **2. Increase revenues**

Tax revenue is the main source of income for developing countries, and account for around six times more income than development assistance. However, even before the Covid-19 crisis, tax revenues were not sufficient to fund basic public services. And they are now falling dramatically. The IMF estimates that sub-Saharan Africa could lose a quarter of its revenue due to the coronavirus pandemic. Meanwhile, there is a growing need for money for health measures and to secure food supplies for vulnerable households.

The short-term solution for most developing countries is, unfortunately, more development assistance and more debt. The IMF, the World Bank and the regional development banks have committed more than USD 2 trillion in crisis measures, much of which will be injected into the national budgets of developing countries. The budget is salvaged today, but the debt may become unmanageable tomorrow.

Developing countries can cut unnecessary costs to release funds. For example, in 2019, Nigeria spent every eighth *naira* that it raised in taxes on subsidising low petrol prices. In April 2020, with historically low oil prices and a tight national budget due to the coronavirus crisis, Nigeria announced that subsidies would be phased out. If successful, Nigeria could save USD 2 billion a year! In spite of the triple benefits to the economy, the climate and public health through reduced air pollution, reducing subsidies has been a political quagmire. Studies have shown reduced inequality since those who drive the most pay the most, but poverty has also increased because small changes can lead to big problems for those living just above the poverty line. The solution is to spend some of the funds on supporting the poorest directly, whilst also dealing with the elite who profit from the current system. This is a high-risk strategy both politically and in terms of development, but worth the effort! In the longer term, the only solution for all countries is to devise a tax system that enables them to generate the revenue they need to finance the pandemic costs, service debts and make necessary investments in development.

## **3. Stop the leakage**

Corruption thrives in times of crisis. Norad colleagues who administer an international network of corruption hunters report on national systems that are not robust enough to control the large amounts spent on Covid-19. Brazil bought 3000 ventilators at double the market price without a public procurement process. Only a few of the ventilators were delivered, and the consequences were fatal for Covid-19 patients. The public prosecutor is now investigating. In Malawi, the anti-corruption agency is investigating fictitious recipients of social security assistance. We know from the

Ebola crisis that corruption kills when supplies of medical equipment are not delivered or are of poor quality. There are also other leaks due to tax evasion, organised crime and poor budget processes.

The solution is as effective as it is predictable and complicated – strong public institutions; tax authorities that collect revenues, a central bank that looks after the money and supervisory authorities that ensure compliance. More of the money spent on Covid-19 will be visible if public procurement systems are transparent and fair, and if there are critical voices in civil society that can hold politicians and bureaucrats to account.

#### **4. Protect the weakest**

Norway has a welfare state which includes child benefit, unemployment benefit, retirement pensions, and everything else that makes up our safety net. In sub-Saharan Africa, only 20 per cent of the population was covered by a social safety net in 2017. During the Covid-19 crisis, the number of countries with social protection systems has more than doubled, but they are still limited in scope. There is a pressing need to enrol more people and increase the coverage and amounts. The solutions must be designed cleverly to ensure that limited funds are targeted to those who need them most, without becoming too expensive to administer or vulnerable to abuse.

Another way to target the weakest is through micro-enterprises. In developing countries, almost no one works in a company as we know it; about a billion workers are employed in the informal sector on low wages. The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that this billion has lost more than half of its income due to the coronavirus crisis. Many companies are in danger of going bankrupt, creating ripple effects for the rest of the local economy.

#### **5. Build smart**

When you are in the midst of a crisis, it is not easy to think holistically. However, we must be able to deal with the pandemic alongside the climate crisis, the inequality crisis or any other type of crisis, depending on where you sit. We must ensure that our handling of the pandemic better equips us to deal with the post-covid world. There are few win-win situations and many difficult trade-offs.

I think most people would agree that immediate crisis response to keep people alive should not just be given to those with climate-friendly jobs. But on the other hand, if we start rebuilding everything as it was before, and *then* think about the climate, it will be too late. How do we ensure the right starting point for green growth? During the Covid-19 crisis, I have worked closely with the climate and environment experts at Norad, and I have been convinced that we must think about climate and environment concerns from the get-go. We must consider them, weigh them up against other needs and make a green footprint where it is most important – based on the knowledge we have and national needs and priorities. To salvage the economy without an oil fund, you need to think straight, but not necessarily in a straight line.

## In the shadow of the pandemic: human rights-based development aid promotes more effective and inclusive response measures

By Gørild D. Mathisen, Assistant Director; Margot I. Skarpeteig, Policy Director; and Matias Egeland, Senior Adviser – all in the Section for Human Rights

What began as a global health crisis has quickly developed into an economic and social crisis. No country has remained unaffected by the pandemic, and from experience we know that the most at-risk and vulnerable groups are being hit the hardest.

Human rights are to be integrated into all aspects of Norwegian development policy. A human rights-based approach is just as important now that we are in the midst of a global crisis. This concerns both the obligations of government and the rights of citizens, and it involves various thematic human rights and group rights, as well as the process of securing those rights.

A human rights based approach means that we base our aid efforts on some key principles, such as participation, non-discrimination, accountability and transparency. By actively applying these principles in the aid interventions against COVID-19, we promote inclusion, curb the spread of infection, and minimise the negative effects of infection response measures. Viewed through the lens of human rights, we are able to see more clearly those who are not getting access to hospitalisation when they become ill: those living in the most abject poverty, those residing in the most remote areas, those who speak a foreign language and those with disabilities – these are the people who are most difficult to reach.

### **Governments have a duty to ensure the right to health**

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recognises the right of everyone to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. The Covenant does not speak of the right to be in good health; no country's government can guarantee that. The human right addressed here is the *highest attainable standard* of health. Governments have a duty to respect, protect and ensure the right to health for their people. The right to health implies that health services must be available to everyone, without discrimination, at a cost that ensures access for the most vulnerable groups. As a consequence, governments have a duty to enact measures that can help to limit transmission of the virus and ensure treatment for those affected by COVID-19. The treatment must be safe and reasonable, as well as proportional to the state's resources.

### **Protection against human rights violations**

Many countries, including Norway's partner countries, have implemented extensive and socially far-reaching measures to curb the spread of COVID-19. A focus on human rights requires governments to use their authority to protect the life and health of their people. These same human rights should also protect against potential abuse of power by the state. International human rights conventions stipulate when and how human rights can be deviated from and which core obligations always apply. The population's support for, and compliance with, various measures will largely depend on the level of trust between the government and its people. Trust depends on the authorities' ability and willingness to avoid response measures lead to restrictions on, or violations of, human rights that cannot be justified by the fight against the pandemic.

### **At-risk and vulnerable groups in the pandemic response**

Experiences from both the current pandemic and previous pandemics show that response measures affect at-risk and vulnerable groups particularly hard. Quarantines, shutdowns and enabling statutes can prevent access to critical health and social services. They can also lead to unemployment, loss of

livelihood, food shortages, and decreased safety and security. All these factors heighten the vulnerability of groups that are already at high risk. An increase in child marriage, modern slavery, and violence against women are among the documented consequences of previous epidemics. We must learn from these experiences, and in particular assess the risks that various measures may entail for especially vulnerable groups. Mitigating measures must be enacted as far as possible in order to minimise the negative effects of infection control measures. Targeted measures may be needed to ensure that at-risk and vulnerable groups are also included in the efforts to fight the pandemic. At risk and vulnerable groups include:

- people with disabilities (greater risk of infection from COVID-19, greater risk of exclusion from economic measures, greater risk of cuts in essential health and education services)
- the youngest children (greater risk of parental neglect and malnutrition)
- women, children and young people who live in domestic violence situations (high risk of escalation, closure of services such as child protection measures and shelters)
- young girls in local communities where child marriage is accepted (greater risk of child marriage)
- women who work as health and care workers, both paid and unpaid work (greater risk of becoming ill/losing their livelihood)
- pregnant women (greater risk of cuts in health services with consequences for the life and health of mothers and their children)
- people, especially women and girls, who work in the informal sector and in positions with more insecurity (greater risk of poverty, food shortage, exclusion from economic measures, human trafficking, forced labour and modern slavery)
- people who are already vulnerable to forced labour and modern slavery, especially children and women (greater risk of escalation of violence, assault and exploitation)
- migrants (greater risk of losing their livelihood, access to services)
- sexual minorities (greater risk of harassment and exclusion from health services)

### **The COVID-19 response in Africa**

More than 700 million people live in 31 low-income countries; 25 of these countries are located in sub-Saharan Africa. Many live just above the poverty line and are extremely vulnerable in crises. Almost 90 per cent of Africa's population south of the Sahara works in the informal sector. Higher unemployment resulting from the pandemic response will affect the poorest people the most.

Many African countries responded quickly to the pandemic and introduced effective infection control measures, and relatively few COVID-19-related deaths in Africa have been registered so far.

According to the WHO, 32 581 people had died by mid-September 2020. A capacity shortage in many countries' health services also means that testing capacity is extremely limited, leading to great uncertainty about infection numbers and cause of death. However, the African countries vary widely with regard to capacity in the health services and the response measures they have enacted so far.

Some countries, such as Nigeria and Uganda, launched response measures early on. In addition, there are many examples of measures being carried out to ensure a human rights-based response to the pandemic. These include:

- targeted prevention measures for the most at-risk and vulnerable population groups, e.g. verbal information for those who cannot read
- measures to minimise the negative effects of response measures for the most at-risk and vulnerable groups, e.g. unemployment benefits or child benefits

- measures to ensure transparency, inclusion and participation for the entire population, including those who are most difficult to reach, e.g. public meetings in which the people who are most difficult to reach are invited to speak about their needs

Misinformation and rumours about the pandemic have proven to be a challenge in Africa because many people do not have access to quality assured information. A number of countries have established telephone hotlines where people can get accurate information about COVID-19. *Africa Check*, a fact-checking organisation, is collaborating with Facebook to increase access to reliable information about COVID-19. Half of the residents of Kibera, one of the poorest areas of Nairobi, have downloaded the WhatsApp messaging platform, where residents receive information about how to protect themselves against infection. Also installed in this same area are handwashing stations, toilets and water kiosks – staffed by a network of volunteers and health personnel.

Following reports of harassment and human rights violations committed by the police in their efforts to enforce curfews, Uganda set up a telephone hotline that the population could use to report harassment. Other countries (e.g. South Africa) have established special measures to monitor that the police’s efforts to enforce rules about quarantines, closures and curfews do not result in human rights violations.

Some countries have introduced curfews at certain times of the day rather than enacting a complete shutdown. This helps to ensure that people living in poverty can keep working in the informal economy, which they may rely on to provide for themselves and their families. Numerous countries have implemented food distribution and cash benefit schemes for the most vulnerable families, financed by the government, domestic and international donors, the private sector and, in some cases, the diaspora.

### **How can we promote effective and inclusive response measures?**

How can we as donors help to curb the spread of the virus and simultaneously ensure against the potentially negative effects of infection control measures, especially for the most vulnerable groups? How can we ensure that the COVID-19 measures are as effective as possible, at both individual and societal levels? From a human rights perspective, it is not only a matter of which measures we support, but also how the measures are carried out. By assessing measures in light of human rights principles such as non-discrimination, transparency and participation, we can promote inclusion and limit infection while minimising the potentially negative effects of infection response measures. Good risk assessments to avoid weakening human rights and equality are essential. When we work through partners, it is our responsibility to assess whether they are in fact taking steps to promote the human rights of vulnerable and marginalised groups. As a minimum, we must ensure that their activities do not result in human rights violations. Some key questions in the dialogue with partners may be:

- Have vulnerable and marginalised groups been **included in the planning** of response measures?
- Does the **budget include specific measures** to ensure that the people most difficult to reach are included?
- Are there **specific goals** in place for the inclusion of people who belong to vulnerable and marginalised groups (and can these be measured and followed up)?

In addition to the immediate response in the acute phase of the pandemic, it is also important that donors encourage the partners to assess the long-term effects of their response on at-risk and vulnerable groups. Although the crisis will have many negative effects in the short and medium term, it may also lead to the creation of new and innovative products, platforms, processes and partnerships. These can in turn generate new opportunities to strengthen both human rights and

equality in the long term when we eventually gain better control of the pandemic and its immediate consequences.

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## The importance of civil society for people's welfare

By Hildegunn Tobiassen, Policy Director, Department for Civil Society and the Private Sector

One of the most important days for my family this spring was when our local football club was able to organise the children's first football training session after the COVID-19 shutdown. My youngest girl whined a little bit because they could only train and not play a real game, but the football training sessions helped our entire family to feel less isolated. We fell into a routine that got us out of the house and gave us a chance to see people from our neighbourhood. Quite simply, our daily life became a little brighter.

Similarly, civil society plays a crucial role in the daily life of people around the world. Civil society includes aid workers who follow up people with mental health problems, parents who come together to build a new classroom, and journalists who are looking for a good news story. Civil society also entails formal and more spontaneous movements – such as those who have been out in the streets protesting against racism and police violence. In other words, this is a diverse group, ranging from local activists to large international organisations with professional development aid programmes. Many have an important role to play during the COVID-19 pandemic. Organisations involved in humanitarian relief efforts such as the Norwegian Refugee Council, the Norwegian Red Cross, Norwegian Church Aid, and Save the Children Norway make important contributions to international crisis management by, for example, ensuring that personal protective equipment, cleaning supplies, and food reach the people who need it.

Some organisations maintain contact with vulnerable groups by making critical deliveries to their doorsteps. Others counteract misinformation by sharing knowledge about COVID-19 on the radio and through their networks. They shed light on the violence and other violations committed by police and security forces during shutdowns, and they work to ensure that vulnerable groups are not excluded when governments prepare relief packages. They have managed to do this, even though the working conditions for civil society have become more difficult in recent years because governments are putting more and more restrictions on their work. The [COVID-19 Civil Freedom Tracker](#), [CIVICUS Monitor](#) and others have documented that the response of governments to COVID-19 in many countries has resulted in a further reduction of civil rights. This is occurring in the form of restricted access to decision-making processes, the introduction of various types of censorship, restrictions vis-à-vis civil society, expanded surveillance, and the establishment of unreasonably strict emergency or security laws.

In some countries, a reduction in civil rights has been an unintended consequence of the desire to gain control of the pandemic, but many governments have seized this opportunity to secure their own power and control. In countries such as Vietnam, Kenya and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, journalists and activists have been harassed and arrested for sharing information about the virus or for criticising the government's response to it. Whistleblowers in the health services have lost their jobs, and police in Kenya and South Africa have used violence to enforce curfews. In April,



more than 600 organisations wrote an [appeal](#), calling on world leaders not to use the pandemic as an excuse to place restrictions on civil society. An increasing number of organisations are adding their names. It is important to listen to these voices, as this development will make the follow-up efforts during and after COVID-19 even more difficult.

### **The vulnerable hit hard**

The COVID-19 pandemic is not only a health crisis. It will have enormous long-term economic and social ramifications as well. It is clear that this crisis, like most other crises, hits vulnerable groups especially hard. According to the UN, migrants, refugees and minorities are accused of being the source of virus transmission, and are therefore prevented from accessing medical treatment. We see that indigenous populations are being hit hard by the pandemic in countries such as Brazil and Peru. Domestic violence is more widespread and prolonged during a shutdown. There is a danger of food shortages in many countries due to interruptions in food production and supply lines.

Civil society is particularly suited to reaching out to vulnerable groups in the population and representing their voices. They have built up their credibility and trustworthiness so that they can meet the needs of the local population – needs that can vary enormously, depending on the demographics and geographic conditions. It concerns the local sports team that ensures the girls from the slums can get out of their cramped houses to play football. It is about organisations that negotiate with landlords to stop people from being evicted from their homes, or organisations that fight to access information regarding the government's COVID-19 follow-up efforts.

### **Major challenges**

But civil society is facing major challenges related to the crisis. When people have to practise social distancing and stay at home, the chance to meet with others and do political advocacy work is limited. Organisations are also finding it difficult to conduct their own fundraising, involve volunteers, and pay ongoing expenses when activities are postponed or cancelled. Many organisations may need to close.

The International Human Rights Network warned in a meeting with bilateral donors in June that they see a tendency for donors to redirect their funds from long-term initiatives and political advocacy to efforts they regard as directly relevant to COVID-19. They cautioned that this may place financial pressure on the organisations, especially those that do not work with service delivery in the social sector.

In poor countries, where civil society is often essential for service delivery in areas such as health and education, civil society organisations cannot expect to receive any relief packages. Organisations that represent vulnerable groups such as people with disabilities or minorities may be especially at risk, as their members can contribute very little to the organisations' finances in difficult times.

Many development aid organisations in the UK have either already closed or are at risk of closing. Norwegian organisations have also announced budget cuts and challenges related to ongoing expenditures. By the same token, we see that Profundo, a not-for-profit research and consultancy firm, reports that Norwegians have been more generous with their giving during the COVID-19 pandemic (*Bistandsaktuelt* 14 September 2020).

The organisations have taken new steps to secure their revenues. They managed to do this when the pressure was suddenly on. Online concerts, the shop check-out assistant who asks if you want to donate to a good cause while you are shopping, creativity in digital arenas – organisations are finding new ways of fundraising. This is good news for the Norwegian organisations, as well as for their partners in developing countries.

But for the local organisations that are struggling, it is important that the Norwegian organisations are conscious of the fact that with money comes power. The power imbalance between Norwegian and local organisations may increase.

### **The largest organisations get the most**

Due to travel restrictions, local organisations in particular have found themselves on the front line of the pandemic. They organise volunteers and raise money while trying to protect their own employees at the same time. They are important partners for Norwegian and international organisations, as well as for the UN system. Following the 2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa, in which the efforts of local organisations were essential for gaining control of the epidemic, many local organisations were critical of the situation. They believed that the large international actors had used the epidemic to raise money, while the donors largely ignored the local organisations that did the job on the ground. The Development Assistance Committee of the OECD estimates that about ten times as many of its members' development aid goes to organisations with headquarters in the donor country than to organisations based in developing countries. It is often the large actors that win, those that have money to do fundraising and that understand the donor's bureaucracy.

The specific goal in humanitarian relief is to channel more aid through local organisations, and perhaps something similar is needed for long-term efforts. It is therefore crucial that Norad continues to encourage Norwegian and international partners in civil society to transfer more authority and funding to the local level. Many organisations are working well to improve this; for others it may be time to revise their partner strategies.

What might this mean for Norad's partners? We should expect the flexibility that Norad affords its partners to be reflected in the partners' collaboration with organisations at country level. For instance, are there good reasons that agreements between Norwegian organisations and organisations at country level are significantly shorter than the 4-5-year agreements that Norad offers its partners? Organisations could be asked whether there are good reasons why a larger share of the aid funding is not managed by their partners at country level.

With travel restrictions presenting an obstacle, we can also envisage new ways of working. For example, Norwegian organisations could 'outsource' some of the work of monitoring partners to some dependable partners at country level. This could involve administrative steps like the one described here, but it could just as well entail organisations reflecting on the kind of partner they want to be and the kind of partnership they want to have.

For the COVID-19 pandemic must not be a lost opportunity to transfer genuine authority and resources to local partners.

Because this concerns more than good development aid; it also has to do with greater democratic participation and people's agency in their own daily lives.

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## Role of government in times of crises

By Toril-Iren Pedersen and Beate Bull, senior advisers, the Knowledge Bank

The societal crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of strong public institutions that can adapt and act quickly. Governments' resilience to external shocks and the ability to lead in crises are largely a result of investments made before the crisis. Competent leadership in times of crisis stems from long-term investments in building functioning institutions, and transparency and accountability. In Norway, during the Covid-19 crisis the names and faces government agency directors that have responsibilities to lead through the crisis have become well-known to the entire population, and confidence in their technical management abilities is high. This is not the case in most of the countries Norway supports through development aid and technical cooperation.

The role of Government in times of crisis is often constitutionally anchored with the task to minimise the negative impact of crises on the population and the economy. According to many countries' national laws, the government (executive) must ensure that the states' principle responsibilities is maintained through the crisis; including food supply, health, security and law and order. At the same time, in times of crisis, governments have the responsibility to protect critical social interests and rights such as democratic values and ensure peace and stability, according to Norwegian law.<sup>37</sup> Internally, within a country, the government's role in crises is often based on national security and emergency preparedness laws describing how and when the functions of government can be set aside or be replaced with a state of emergency.

The state's duty and responsibility to protect the population's human rights is inscribed in international law. Although this duty is not changed in a crisis the state's approach to fulfilling this duty is applied differently in times of crisis. Regardless of how demanding the crisis is, the government has a duty to uphold international laws and protect basic human rights. The International Convention on Civil and Political Rights describes how a state of emergency and crisis leadership should be conducted in a way that minimises violations of human rights.

### **Development aid can strengthen and weaken the role of government**

Governments in both rich welfare states and low-income countries are having to make difficult decisions with far-reaching consequences in an effort to control the spread of the virus. Its economic and social effects are being felt most directly by the most vulnerable populations, and can potentially have a considerable political cost.

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<sup>37</sup> Official Norwegian Report 2019:13, p. 31

Wealthy countries have a greater range of actions to consider than countries with limited resources. Development aid provides additional resources for crisis response at the disposal of poor and vulnerable countries. Development aid can support the government's responsibility to protect the population's human rights by delivering services and protecting basic rights. However, the incentive structure of aid can also mean that more emphasis is placed on short-term results than on long-term investments in institution-building and accountability, thereby undermining the government's role and responsibility.

Particularly in fragile states, other actors, including multilateral organisations, NGOs and religious groups, often take over the basic functions of government in service delivery. This might be necessary to ensure that immediate aid reaches people in crisis, but it is not always unproblematic for the government. External funding can cause fragmentation of national governmental institutions that end up competing for external funding instead of developing their own capacity and expertise, leading to an accountability relationship to external donors rather than to government and population. Development aid should not support parallel channels for service delivery that undermine the government's responsibility to develop public systems for service delivery and accountability. In those cases it can risk undermining the basis for and the legitimacy of taxcollection. NGOs are also a part of the political economy and cannot be regarded as a neutral alternative, and will not always support strengthening the role and capacity of government.

### **What impacts the government's ability to govern in crises?**

Several factors affect the ability to govern in a way that achieves the desired results while minimising the negative effects of a crisis. A study that cover the differences in official responses to the pandemic by democratic and authoritarian regimes shows that three factors are more important than the country's form of government: *experience with previous epidemics, the government's capacity to respond and communicate and the degree of trust and legitimacy*.<sup>38</sup>

### **Experience with previous epidemics**

Experience with previous crises can improve the readiness to handle new and emerging crisis. We see this, for example, in countries that went through the Ebola and SARS crises and which now appear to be better prepared to manage the COVID-19 crisis.<sup>39</sup> The experiences from the Ebola response in Liberia have taught us several lessons that can be applied in the COVID-19 response. These include the importance of engaging both national and local authorities in the crisis response, the importance of using media to communicate clear and facts based information, and the importance of having an independent media and civil society that can hold government to account. Liberia's experience with Ebola was costly, but it enabled the Liberian government to learn valuable lessons on how to lead the country during, through and after a crisis.

### **Capacity, and communication**

Effective crisis leadership and management involves capacity in a number of areas:

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<sup>38</sup> <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/03/31/do-authoritarian-or-democratic-countries-handle-pandemics-better-pub-81404>

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.thinkglobalhealth.org/article/coronavirus-and-ebola-hard-lessons-prudently-applied>

- Building systems of governance and institutions with the necessary capacity to **ensure continuation of service delivery**, also in times of crisis, is crucial. This includes the capacity to adapt to take on new tasks to ensure services are delivered – primarily in the areas of health, security, and law and order. In addition public institutions performing other social functions need the necessary capacity to manage their altered role in the crisis.
- Developing the capacity to **coordinate** the response between various levels of government is critical. Services are often delivered through coordinated efforts between national and local authorities. Since the roles and tasks are often changed in a crisis response, coordination and communication within the government apparatus are essential for effective crisis management.
- Strengthening the capacity to **collect accurate, reliable data** and knowledge to form the basis for decision-making in times of crisis has to be developed over time by building up government functions within areas such as statistics and relations with academia.
- **Capacity to communicate** is important for the crisis-response to be effectual. While there might be cases where it can be appropriate to exclude some information from the public in the early stages, transparency and accountability around the basis for the decision-making processes is crucial. This applies both to communication with the population, as well as between various parts of government. The media can also be an integral part and ally of the crisis leadership.

To summarize: Good crisis management requires effective, functional institutions that deliver on the government's responsibilities and the needs of the populations. Common for countries that have demonstrated effective leadership in dealing with COVID-19 are those with strong public institutions, including Singapore, Vietnam, New Zealand and Norway. Capacity must be strengthened before the crisis arises, and it is important that the capacity building includes institutional capacity, the enabling environment through laws and regulations, and capacity development of individuals within the public administration.

### **Trust and legitimacy**

According to a study from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, a third factor that impacts the ability to govern in a crisis is *legitimacy and trust*. The government's legitimacy is based largely on a social contract, whereby the population accepts the authority of the state in return for essential services. Weak public institutions that are not able to deliver essential services is further strained in a crisis and puts the government's legitimacy under additional pressure.

The presence of corruption, and the lack of transparency and accountability further erodes the population's trust in the government and thus its ability to govern. It is especially problematic in societies with high levels of inequality for the government to appeal to communal action and expect compliance to crisis measures from the population. Since, as mentioned above the measures often have a disproportionately negative consequences for those already marginalised/ the poorest segments of the population, compliance across the population is not likely. Government need to ensure that the measures are adapted to needs and capacities of various groups and that particularly vulnerable populations are included in the response plan.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> <https://www.cgdev.org/article/coronavirus-5-key-lessons-2014-ebola-outbreak-africa-report-podcast>

In some countries, the political leadership has failed to introduce the strictest measures deemed necessary by the WHO due to protests from groups within the population that may have lost their livelihoods due to the crisis measures and feel disenfranchised or desperate. This can be tied back to high levels of inequalities and low levels of trust in government institutions. This seems to especially be the case for countries with populist leaders, or where political priorities trump advice from their own public institutions. Low adherence to infection prevention measures has led to high infection rates and generally negative consequences of the populations health.

### **Focus on future crises**

Development aid must be future oriented and learn from the past. Governments will have to tackle future crisis and they will still have the main responsibility for protecting the population's basic human rights during crises. Experiences so far from the COVID-19 response, as well as from previous experiences with epidemics like Ebola and SARS in West Africa, show that trust in public institutions can be strengthened through enhancing the capacities in service delivery. This can further be enhanced through the capacity and political will to facilitate timely, fact-based communication .<sup>41</sup> Together this can improve leadership and thus compliance with crisis response measures and have a direct impact on the populations health and impact of the crisis. <sup>42</sup>

Although governments may have limited capacity, building parallel channels for basic government tasks must be avoided. Support provided to other actors should as far as possible be directed by the government and facilitate the strengthening of institutions. All of this in combination can improve the capacity and legitimacy of public institutions, including long term results for when the crisis is over.

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## Digitalisation in development aid and COVID-19

By Kari Moe Jacobsen, Programme Coordinator for the Digitalisation for Development programme in Norad, and Liv Marte Nordhaug, Co-lead of the Digital Public Goods Alliance Secretariat

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the importance of digitalisation as a tool for more effective solutions to major social challenges. Good digital solutions can help developing countries to manage both short-term crisis situations and long-term needs. Moreover, digital solutions can help to bring about measures that protect the most vulnerable, increase transparency, and thus advance democracy, inclusion, accountability and anti-corruption.

However, there is a risk of digital solutions being misused either intentionally or unintentionally, by governments or by other actors. This can result in human rights violations related to, for example, privacy protection, freedom of expression, political participation and economic rights. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed new challenges in the areas of human rights, privacy and data protection. Debates that have arisen around privacy and data protection in COVID-19 efforts provide scope for

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<sup>41</sup> <https://www.thinkglobalhealth.org/article/coronavirus-and-ebola-hard-lessons-prudently-applied>

<sup>43</sup> <https://digitalprinciples.org/>

important normative foundations on which digitalisation projects must be based, both in normal situations and in times of crisis.

### **Norms and principles in digitalisation efforts**

Innovation and digitalisation must be based on best practices and sound norms and principles if they are to benefit society and contribute to development for individuals, organisations, institutions and governments in low- and middle-income countries.

Digitalisation is occurring rapidly throughout the world, which makes the efforts to uphold human rights, privacy and data protection more important. Norway should be a vociferous advocate of following best practice, ensuring that human rights are the guiding principle and are applied in the digital world, and focusing on inclusion of marginalised groups, who also tend to be digitally marginalised. A growing group of development actors, including Norad, endorse the *Principles for Digital Development*,<sup>43</sup> which establishes norms and best practices for digitalisation in the development field. The Report to the Storting (white paper) titled 'Digital transformation and development policy'<sup>44</sup> and the 'Digital strategy for development policy'<sup>45</sup> highlight the importance of digitalisation for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Norway and Norad have a history of working strategically with innovation and digitalisation to achieve the SDGs in low- and middle-income countries. We now see that long-term, strategic efforts lay an important foundation for responding effectively to crises.

### **Open licensing**

There is a growing international consensus that digital solutions, content and data that are funded by development aid should be openly licensed. This is established in, for instance, the 'Principles for Digital Development'.<sup>46</sup> An open approach to digitalisation in development cooperation can facilitate better cooperation and coordination among various actors and avoid duplication of efforts. Additionally, open digital solutions can be reused and adapted to local needs, facilitate interoperability, and avoid a situation in which actors with limited resources are tied to expensive licenses over a long period of time.

Norway has a longstanding tradition of using public resources on public goods that have both national and international users. These public goods are intended for the entire world, such as the Svalbard Global Seed Vault and preservation of the rainforests to combat global warming. This also applies to solutions that are specially designed with the needs of developing countries in mind, such as the 'District Health Information Software 2' (DHIS2). This system, which originated at the University of Oslo, is an openly licensed health information system. The solution is in use in more than 100 countries, reaching a total of 2.3 billion people. In a short time, DHIS2 has developed a COVID-19 tracker that is now operational in 36 countries and is under development in an additional 15 countries.<sup>47</sup> Digital technologies, content and data are well positioned for becoming public goods,

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<sup>43</sup> <https://digitalprinciples.org/>

<sup>44</sup> <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/meld.-st.-11-20192020/id2682394/>

<sup>45</sup> [https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/digitalstrategi\\_2018/id2608197/](https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/digitalstrategi_2018/id2608197/)

<sup>46</sup> <https://digitalprinciples.org/>

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.dhis2.org/covid-19>

but in order for this to happen, it is not enough that they are available free of charge. They must also be openly licensed so that a user knows that the right to use the good applies indefinitely.

### **Digital public goods**

In autumn 2018 and spring 2019, Norway took part in the UN Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation. The panel highlighted the potential for greater international cooperation on digital public goods, emphasising how digital inclusion can lead to better service delivery for the world's poorest. Since then, Norway has played a leading role in the establishment of the Digital Public Goods Alliance,<sup>48</sup> as a direct follow-up to the recommendations in the panel's report. Through this alliance Norway cooperates closely with other champions of this work, such as the Government of Sierra Leone, the UNICEF Office of Innovation, and the Indian thinktank iSPIRT.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought the importance of this work to the fore. The efforts are inherently relevant for the COVID-19 response, as they prioritise literacy skills, digital proficiency, financial inclusion and climate change adaptation. In addition, more of the efforts are now being directed towards supporting the development and implementation of digital public goods in areas relevant to COVID-19 in selected low- and middle-income countries. Norad provides funding and directs the development of a number of digital public goods of relevance for COVID-19. The EduApp4Syria learning games, which are now available in 48 languages, and the Global Digital Library (GDL)<sup>49</sup> are two examples of this.

As a crucial part of the Global Book Alliance's contribution to UNESCO's COVID-19 Global Education Coalition,<sup>50</sup> Norad and GDL have also developed a cross-platform search engine targeting existing open platforms and open content. Launched on 2 June 2020, the platform provides access to quality-assured reading resources in 150 languages, with a total of 250 languages planned by the end of 2020.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, a project to translate existing books in GDL to other languages was expedited as part of the COVID-19 response. GDL also provides technical support to USAID, ADEA and others in an effort to quickly make content they have developed available for reading education over the radio.

Digital identity and digital payment solutions are essential for making countries more resilient to economic shock in the wake of COVID-19, including ensuring faster and more effective welfare disbursements. Digital ID systems and payment solutions are essential for ensuring long-term financial inclusion and for the ability to respond quickly to economic shocks in order to counteract marginalisation and an increase in poverty.<sup>52</sup> Many countries are now working to put such systems in place, and openly licensed solutions are highly relevant in this context for realising the significant opportunities and avoiding the pitfalls. Norad contributes to this through its funding for the Modular Open Source Identity Platform (MOSIP).<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> <https://digitalcooperation.org/> <https://digitalpublicgoods.net/>

<sup>49</sup> <https://digitallibrary.io/> <https://norad.no/tema/utdanning/innovasjon-og-utdanning/utdapp4syria/>

<sup>50</sup> <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/globalcoalition>

<sup>51</sup> <https://freelearning.io/>

<sup>52</sup> <https://blogs.worldbank.org/voices/responding-crisis-digital-payments-social-protection-short-term-measures-long-term-benefits>

<sup>53</sup> <https://www.mosip.io/>



### **Partnership in innovation projects**

Partnerships and risk sharing are necessary for success in innovation and digitalisation efforts, especially between private businesses, civil society actors and research institutions. Open licensing is not always relevant in partnerships where private businesses or other actors bring in considerable financing. Since 2015, Norad has worked with Innovation Norway and the Research Council of Norway on the funding mechanism Vision 2030, which provides funding and risk sharing for innovation projects that help to achieve the SDGs in low- and middle-income countries. The projects are carried out in a partnership between private businesses, civil society actors and/or research institutions.<sup>54</sup>

In March 2020, Norad and Innovation Norway received a number of enquiries from Norwegian industry actors that wanted to contribute to the COVID-19 response in low- and middle-income countries. In April, an extraordinary Vision 2030 call for proposals was announced for innovation projects that can implement measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and minimise its effects in low- and middle-income countries in sub-Saharan Africa. The call for proposals encompasses efforts in the health sector, both short-term crisis response and more long-term measures.<sup>55</sup>

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## Can COVID-19 save us from the climate, food and biodiversity crises?

By Bente Herstad, Policy Director, Department for Climate, Energy and Environment

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) warned us in 2016 already of the increasing risk of emerging zoonotic diseases from biodiversity and habitat loss, especially in tropical regions. COVID-19 emerged as a global pandemic through an interplay of multiple factors: of which habitat loss and environmental degradation, more contact between humans and wildlife, and increasing international travels are deemed to be the most important. A unified, cohesive response, recognizing the interconnections of people, animals, plants and our shared environment is necessary to reduce the risk of new zoonoses and climate change.

### **Decline and rise in greenhouse gas emissions**

Greenhouse gas emissions and environmental pollution have slowed down decreased dramatically during the pandemic, but the climate, biodiversity and environment emergencies stay on. The COVID-19 lock downs brought a sudden reduction in emissions and air pollution. This is good news for both people and the Planet. 8.8 million people die each year from air pollution. However, the emissions will most likely return to the same level, if not higher, when the societies reopen – as they did after the financial crisis in 2008. Historically low fossil fuel prices will most probably lead to increased consumption. Charcoal consumption is also expected to increase, resulting in degradation of forests and other natural areas.

The United States, Brazil and India have rolled back environmental regulations to stimulate economic recovery. We are already experiencing setbacks of long-term forest management, with more illegal activity due to weaker control and rising short-term needs. Safari tourism has come to a halt, and

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<sup>54</sup> <https://norad.no/tilskudd/sok-stotte/hoyere-utdanning-og-forskning/visjon-2030/>

<sup>55</sup> <https://www.innovasjon norge.no/no/tjenester/utlysninger/visjon-2030/>

the revenues on which national parks and local communities depend, especially in Africa, have vanished. In times of economic crisis, short-term needs wins over long-term sustainable management of natural resources.

Many clean energy projects have come to a halt as the supply chains have broken down due to the lock down. Some forward this as an argument against solar energy. Other argue just the opposite. Once set up, clean energy is less dependent on functioning supply chains than fossils. Clean energy transition is thus deemed imperative for reducing the vulnerability to such shocks and crises as COVID-19 has inflicted on societies around the world. That said, the economic recession following COVID is still expected to reduce investments in new clean energy projects.

### **COVID-19 and food production**

Global food production has remained stable so far, but this will change if farmers do not have access to primary commodities or markets after the end of the harvest season. Climate change in large parts of Africa has resulted in more unpredictable precipitation patterns, which have had major consequences for food production. Additionally, new pests such as the fall armyworm and the return of locust swarms have caused enormous damage. Thirty-four African countries are dependent on food imports (USD 35–50 billion annually) in a normal year. Reduced domestic production and high population growth will increase the need for imports. Efforts to minimise the impact of COVID-19 must therefore look at short-term measures to maintain food security and reduce the long-term effects on national food systems. In Sub-Saharan Africa, increasing agricultural productivity is important for reducing deforestation and the loss of natural resources. The most important measures are listed in the Norwegian action plan for sustainable food systems.<sup>56</sup>

### **From crisis to hope**

The immediate responses to stop COVID-19 have resulted in the worst economic recession since the 1930s, with enormous social ramifications. The UN has warned that the number of people living in extreme poverty could potentially double.<sup>57</sup> Progress in the fight to eradicate poverty may be set back by 30 years. Poor people are already the hardest hit by the climate and environmental crises. They live in high-density areas with extreme air pollution and insufficient access to clean water and sanitation. In sub-Saharan Africa, where the fatality rates have been much lower than in other parts of the world, forecasts have indicated that the response to the pandemic could do more damage than the disease itself<sup>58</sup>.

Others believe that the crisis management engenders hope. In June 2020, the Thomson Reuters Foundation reported that the pandemic has resulted in attitudinal changes that can bring about change in many countries. Trust in government and research has increased. People have become less self-centred and more engaged in their local communities. Governments in both rich and poor

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<sup>56</sup> <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/matsystemer/id2661208/>

<sup>57</sup> <https://www.wider.unu.edu/publication/estimates-impact-covid-19-global-poverty>

<sup>58</sup> [https://www.devex.com/news/as-africa-reopens-researchers-see-new-chance-for-data-driven-response-97830?access\\_key=&utm\\_source=newsletter&utm\\_medium=newswire&utm\\_campaign=top&utm\\_content=te xt&mkt\\_tok=eyJpIjoiT0RNeFl6Um1NekF3TURWaSlInQiOilwK3R6djJsQXhXdG50Y2ROeDluZVpHZHJ1S2ViMW5n cEJNZEtNT0NVQlInMTU1VUhr cDFobEFHVmxRaGR2QUWUyYXNET3d4S2NclON3QjZkZmZSOWwxYkU4ZFwvZ1pJY VBIZENzTTJJaWg1ZitmWCsxbVFSOGxTaHZUZVQralcxRDhhIn0%3D](https://www.devex.com/news/as-africa-reopens-researchers-see-new-chance-for-data-driven-response-97830?access_key=&utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=newswire&utm_campaign=top&utm_content=te xt&mkt_tok=eyJpIjoiT0RNeFl6Um1NekF3TURWaSlInQiOilwK3R6djJsQXhXdG50Y2ROeDluZVpHZHJ1S2ViMW5n cEJNZEtNT0NVQlInMTU1VUhr cDFobEFHVmxRaGR2QUWUyYXNET3d4S2NclON3QjZkZmZSOWwxYkU4ZFwvZ1pJY VBIZENzTTJJaWg1ZitmWCsxbVFSOGxTaHZUZVQralcxRDhhIn0%3D)

countries have acted vigorously and introduced drastic measures to stop and control the spread of the virus. Governments have mobilised USD 13 trillions in just 7 months. Globally, fiscal measures announced for recovery have already surpassed 10 trillion USD.<sup>59</sup> . Why not show the same determination in solving the global climate and poverty crises, question some African negotiators at the UNFCCC.

### **Emerging solutions**

There is no lack of concrete proposals to handle the climate and environment emergencies as part of the Covid 19 crisis and recovery responses. The IMF has included green recovery components in their crisis packages on loans and debt reliefs. The OECD encourages countries to include environmental impact assessments in both their crises and recovery responses. Even in a disaster relief situation, the environmental and social impacts should be addressed to ensure that the society is not made more vulnerable. Environmental standards have to be sustained to avoid a roll back of the achievements in handling the t the climate, biodiversity and environment emergencies. The UN has established a separate COVID-19 fund with an integrated framework for the crisis and recovery response.<sup>60</sup> In developing countries green responses should focus on creating unskilled jobs and should be quick and easy to implement. Food-for-work programmes in infrastructure and restoration of degraded natural resources are well-tested examples to this effect. We are already seeing both good and bad examples of safe handling of medical waste and recycling of plastics.. While Uganda has innovators, who make facemasks for hospitals from recycled plastic, other countries experience large amounts of used plastic gloves and bottles of disinfectant disposed at land and sea.

### **Green and just recovery**

Good access to clean water, sanitation and hygiene is needed to limit the spread of the Corona virus. According to WHO, handwashing is the most effective and the easiest way to limit the spread of COVID-19. Two of five people in the world do not have access to water and soap to wash their hands regularly. Three-quarters of the population in the least developed countries do not have access to handwashing facilities. The urban population is particularly vulnerable, especially in Africa where 63 per cent of the population lacks access to clean water.

Green economic recovery is important. Development aid can support countries in removing subsidies on fossil fuels. With historically low oil prices , drying public coffers and increasing demand for social programmes, the time is ripe for change. We know from experience that social programmes need to go hand in hand with the reduction or elimination of environmentally harmful subsidies.

Recovery after the COVID-19 crisis must reduce social inequalities, create jobs and address the climate crisis, according to Kristalina Georgieva, Managing Director of the IMF. She has recieved support from a number of other players. The UN has launched the motto 'Build Back Better'. The EU is basing both its own recovery and its COVID-19 aid on its 'Green New Deal'. The World Economic Forum has launched the 'Green Reset Initiative'. The question is when the green recovery will begin. If it does not begin before the pandemic is over, there is a risk that there is no more money.

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<sup>59</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/en/themes/green-recovery>

<sup>60</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/A%20UN%20framework%20for%20the%20immediate%20socio-economic%20response%20to%20COVID-19%2C%20April%202020.pdf>

According to the OECD, the plans presented are more environmentally damaging than green . The green components do not add up to more than USD 312 billion. So far it is primarily those countries that had green plans before the pandemic that have made green recovery plans.

Long-term recovery can involve a number of green initiatives: encouraging the private sector to adopt clean production methods and scaling up incentives to protect and strengthen sustainable local and international food systems are good examples. The COVID-19 crisis has, quite unintentionally, paved the way for more climate and environmentally friendly ways of working, with less job-related travels and extensive use of new web-based communication channels. Suggestions for a substantial expansion of IT infrastructure in developing countries have thus gained ground. (see the article on COVID-19 and digitalisation, p. xx).

### **Local based solutions**

Green recovery will not succeed without engaging national planning and financial authorities. Comprehensive information about the state of the environment and impacts of proposed actions , as well as good participation by all the impacted parties, are crucial for positive results. This is included in many countries' environmental regulations, but limited data, poor coordination and corruption may weaken implementation. There is good reason to believe that this will not be easier in the recovery following COVID-19. Development aid can make a positive contribution, e.g. by actively supporting the implementation of national biodiversity and climate plans. Experience indicates that changes must be linked with social support schemes to avoid increased poverty and marginalisation of vulnerable groups.

A ban on hunting and markets selling live wild animals (wet markets) has been proposed to reduce the risk for new zoonotic diseases. A full ban will deprive poor people living in villages throughout Africa and Asia of their most important protein source. It is thus important to limit such a ban to the illegal hunting and trade of wildlife. It is worth mentioning however, that most zoonoses originate in so called modern, large-scale factory farms with animals in tight confinement. Drastically reducing the global consumption of meat and dairy products may therefore be a better way to minimise the risk of new and emerging diseases. It would also help to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

The most important nature-based initiatives supported by Norad are related to the Climate Forest Initiative, food security, clean energy and oceans . Norad reviews how current support and practices can meet the COVID-19 crisis, increase resilience, and prevent new zoonotic diseases. Many recipient countries have substantial capacity development needs to be able to plan and implement a green recovery. Norad has the opportunity to use a wide range of instruments and programs in support of nature based solutions for COVID 19 recovery and the prevention new zoonotic.

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