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The impact of COVID-19 on SDG implementation in the UNECE region: What role for parliaments?

CONCEPT NOTE

Background

The UNECE region has been hit severely by the COVID-19 crisis. The pandemic has quickly evolved from a public health emergency into an economic and social crisis that has exposed and deepened existing fragilities. Inequalities between and within countries have come to the forefront in health systems, social protection, digital access for all, access to education, and many other areas. Countries are also affected to various degrees by the global recession that was caused by the drastic measures taken to halt the spread of the virus. The pandemic is an unprecedented wake-up call that is showing us how crucial it is for countries to have policy and legislation in place to ensure preparedness and prevention.

In order to contain the spread of the pandemic, and to alleviate its severe economic and social impacts, it is crucial that countries implement well-directed and well-resourced responses that are inclusive, forward-looking, and aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs are a unique framework that, thanks to their integrated and interlinked nature, provide a roadmap that can help countries improve their preparedness to respond to the pandemic and implement recovery plans that deliver social and environmental sustainability in a comprehensive manner. Parliaments have a central role to play in this effort. Their legislative, oversight and budget responsibilities make them key players in, for example, improving the health coverage of the people they represent, combating inequalities, and building peaceful, just and inclusive societies.

The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to have a severe negative impact on the achievement of the SDGs. Not only does it risk hampering or reversing the gains achieved in several areas – but it may also exacerbate already high levels of inequality within and between countries. What we saw in the period before the pandemic was that, despite the progress made, action to deliver on the SDGs was not advancing at the speed required.

More than half of the targets related to climate, nature and gender equality will not be met in the region unless progress accelerates. The trend needs to be reversed on three climate- and nature-related targets – water-related ecosystems, managing chemicals and waste, and loss of biodiversity.

While the region is on track with eradicating extreme poverty and providing access to basic services, faster progress is needed for 80 per cent of the measured targets on poverty and inequality.

The region is also on track with a third of the climate and nature targets measured, including the health impact of pollution, education on sustainable development, safe drinking water, and reducing fossil fuel subsidies.

Progress has been good with some targets relevant to gender equality, such as the reduction of maternal mortality and the improvement of sexual and reproductive health. Altogether, just 39 per cent of the measured targets relevant to gender equality would be achieved by 2030 with the current rate of progress, as measured before the COVID-19 pandemic.

For many targets, measuring progress at the regional level is challenging because data are not available. Investing in data therefore remains crucial for the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda, even in countries with well-developed statistical systems.

Considering that most financial resources will likely be absorbed by the emergency response, the achievement of the SDGs by 2030 may be in danger if national economic recovery plans are not aligned with the development and environmental goals.

As countries are now resetting their priorities and reallocating resources to deal with the pandemic, parliaments should be in a position to influence policies and budgets to ensure that the COVID-19 pandemic responses and recovery strategies embrace and incorporate the SDG framework in its entirety. Parliaments should also monitor policy implementation and ensure that the needs and concerns of the whole of society are given due consideration, with no one left behind. The economic downturn due to the crisis has been increasing inequalities and is disproportionately affecting women and the most vulnerable and marginalized segments of society. Now that the world is entering its final decade of action and delivery for sustainable development, parliaments must hold governments accountable for the goals to which they subscribed, and for the commitment they reaffirmed in 2019 to accelerate their efforts to reach their common vision by 2030.

Objectives of the webinar

The webinar will provide parliaments with up-to-date information on the status of SDG implementation, as well as recommendations on how to accelerate transformative change in the region and ensure that COVID-19 recovery strategies incorporate the SDG lens. Parliamentarians and parliamentary staff will have a unique space to exchange and discuss common challenges as well as strategies that they could implement to promote a green recovery and contribute to the achievement of the SDGs by 2030. The discussions will also focus on the importance for parliaments to be engaged in the Voluntary National Reviews process in order to monitor government actions, strengthen national ownership of and build more political support for the SDGs.

Jointly organized by the IPU and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), the webinar is part of a series of IPU regional webinars on SDG implementation in a time of pandemic, and is intended to contribute to the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development, an intergovernmental meeting organized by UNECE to review progress on the SDGs at the regional level, by providing parliaments' input. Key findings will be conveyed to the UNECE Regional Forum on Sustainable Development that will take place on 17-18 March 2021.

Dates: 9 March 2021

Participation: The webinar is open to parliaments of the following countries: Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Monaco, Montenegro, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Moldova, North Macedonia, Romania, Russian Federation, San Marino, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, United States of America, Uzbekistan.

Languages: The working languages will be English, French and Russian.