

## The Road to Making Equal Recovery from COVID-19 a Reality for All

Side Event for the High-level Political Forum, July 8, 2021

The side event was co-hosted by the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, the Permanent Mission of Bangladesh to the UN and the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Korea to the UN, and supported by the Center for Reproductive Rights.

**Moderator:** **Micah Grzywnowicz**, Programme Manager, Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation.

**Opening remarks:** **Henrik Hammargren**, Executive Director, Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, and **H.E. Ambassador Cho Hyun**, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Korea to the United Nations, (Co-Chair of the Group of Friends of SDG10).

**Speakers:** **Ulrika Modéer**, Assistant Secretary-General and Director of Bureau of External Relations and Advocacy, UNDP, **Dr. Elizabeth Kerekere**, Member of Parliament, Green Party of Aotearoa New Zealand, **Carmen Cecilia Martínez**, Regional Manager for Latin America and the Caribbean Program, Center for Reproductive Rights, **Asif Saleh**, Executive Director, BRAC Bangladesh.

**Closing remarks:** **H.E. Ambassador Rabab Fatima**, Permanent Representative of Bangladesh to the United Nations, Co-Chair of the Group of Friends of SDG10.

Watch the replay of the event here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hHjqH5B7FNA>

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In 2020, not only was the world hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, but it became very clear that it was not on track to meet the commitments of the 2030 Agenda. Although modest gains had been made in some areas before the pandemic, these have largely been reversed and pre-existent inequalities within and among countries have been reversed, hitting the most marginalised groups and countries the hardest.

UNDP has, since its adoption in 2015, repeatedly highlighted the use of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a roadmap to build forward better. For the World Economic Forum 2020, Ipsos released a survey<sup>1</sup>, which unveiled that 86% of the respondents would prefer to see the world change significantly – and become more sustainable and equitable – rather than revert to the pre-COVID-19 status. In other words, they called for a systemic change, which should start with the recovery.

In this context, the side event ‘the Road to Making Equal Recovery from COVID-19 a Reality for All’, held at the High-level political forum (HPLF) on July 8, 2021, offered a platform to discuss how traditionally marginalised populations have been affected by the pandemic and participated in the response efforts. Participants at the event also assessed how national COVID-19 response policies have served to overcome, maintain, or exacerbate inequalities, as well as what role the UN has had in supporting such efforts.

**Henrik Hammargren**, and **H.E. Ambassador Cho Hyun** welcomed participants to the event which aimed to foster policy dialogue and generate tailored responses to those most left behind. Hammargren and Hyun shared their hope that the event would be an opportunity for collective learning.

**Henrik Hammargren** expressed his enthusiasm for co-organising the event with the Republic of Korea and Bangladesh and for the large representation of civil society, the multilateral system, and the UN present at the event. The Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation has focused on inclusivity for a long time, seeing it as an issue that is often recognised but not realised.

**H.E. Ambassador Cho Hyun** highlighted that the pandemic has been merciless in magnifying pre-existent and deep-rooted inequalities. While the developed world has spent trillions of USD on stimulus packages, many from low- and middle-income countries (LICs and MICs) have experienced falling revenues

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ipsos.com/en/global-survey-unveils-profound-desire-change-rather-return-how-life-and-world-were-covid-19>

and rising external debt obligations and vaccine inequalities further hampering their SDG implementation. Inequality has increased in both developed and developing countries. Growing inequality creates a vicious circle of increased social unrest, which in turn damages economic stability and resilience.

Building on those introductory remarks, **Ulrika Modéer** shared the UNDP's as well as the broader UN's efforts to maximise financing and channel it towards recovery efforts aimed at reducing inequality.

To achieve integrated impact at scale, the UNDP has identified three shifts that need to take place: First, fiscal, political, and institutional constraints that slow progress at the country level must be unblocked. The most marginalised groups, carbon-zero economic models, social protection floors, and Universal Health Care must be at the centre of policies. Secondly, there is a need to create an SDG policy space in every country by expanding fiscal space, addressing debt standstills<sup>2</sup>, and preparing for debt restructuring. Thirdly, the UN must move the needle on some of the most challenging development issues, that is, poverty and basic services in Least Developed Countries (LDCs), food and energy transitions in Small Islands Developing States (SIDS), livelihoods, and jobs in fragile country settings. To make real change, these issues must be addressed in conjunction with governance, social cohesion, rule of law, human rights, and gender-based violence.

Moreover, there are several existing tools, mechanisms, and approaches to reduce inequalities. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the UN started conducting socio-economic impact assessments in five regions, often jointly with International Financial Institutions (IFIs), the European Union, and others, as well as UN Socio-economic Response Plans (SERPs) which are implemented in 139 countries. Other instruments are the SDGs and the Paris Agreement, to which the signatories must align their economies. The UN is working on creating the right incentives for the allocation of financing by public and private actors where it matters for the SDGs, looking at geographical and thematic areas, e.g., renewable energy and social protection. UNDP has developed [SDG Impact Standards for Private Equity Funds and Bond Issuers](#) and is currently developing Enterprise Standards.

Each effort needs to be tailor-made to fit different contexts, and the UNDP is currently supporting 72 governments in implementing holistic financing strategies, e.g., the Integrated National Financing Frameworks (INFF), aiming to advance Agenda 2030 at the national level. UNDP is also working with vulnerable countries to make SDG financing needs are integrated into financially sound and attractive business propositions by providing market intelligence through [SDG Investor Maps](#). Special attention is paid to the needs of countries at the greatest risk of being left behind in the wake of COVID-19. In particular, the UNDP works with LDCs' efforts in transitioning to the digital economy, and on the blue economy in SIDS.

In addition to being contextualised, all policies must be based on strong data to capture the multidimensional challenges. Capturing the intersectoral and gender aspects of the most marginalised individuals is necessary to build policies addressing inequalities and respond to their needs.

**Dr. Elizabeth Kerekere** presented New Zealand's approach to containing COVID-19, which aimed at a virus elimination strategy, and measures that have been or should have been taken to ensure that the Maori and LGBTI communities are included in and protected by recovery efforts.

When hit with the pandemic, New Zealand closed its borders and only its citizens could enter the country, upon which they were obliged to isolate and quarantine for two weeks. Each time new COVID-19 cases spread, there was a communal quarantine across the country. The Maori people were the most severely impacted. Cultural organisations and health providers advocated to keep the Maori people safe, and the government understood the need to connect local organisations with Maori people (most of whom even prior to the pandemic were marginalised due to their economic situation, lack of income, living below the poverty line). Although the pandemic had affected sectors where women (including transwomen, inter-sex women, and non-binary people) are typically overrepresented, e.g., care and hospitality, and work informally

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.undp.org/press-releases/un-calls-comprehensive-debt-standstill-all-developing-countries>

or part-time, the government responses targeted citizens who under normal circumstances are active fulltime in the formal sector. Consequently, the inequality gaps were exacerbated as the Maori people and other marginalised groups received less or no compensation. Moreover, despite LGBTI people having representation in parliament, a tailored response to address their needs was not integrated. Instead, LGBTI organisations sought through their efforts to reach all people, and in particular, those who could no longer work. In this process, mental health issues were observed and identified as being of great concern.

**Carmen Cecilia Martínez** presented the Center for Reproductive Rights' work on monitoring how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted access to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) for young people in the Latin American region, and what the Center did with the data and information gathered.

Given the alarming incidents of sexual violence against girls and denial of their sexual and reproductive rights during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Center made this a specific focus. During the period while populations faced confinement, the Center monitored sexual violence, and the development of sexual and reproductive health and rights, in particular, the denial of access to essential safer services, including in cases of rape. To that end, the Center requested a regional hearing before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, focusing on these matters in the context of COVID-19. The hearing was an opportunity to present in-depth and updated information, and also showed that sexual violence had exacerbated during the pandemic, including against individuals from historically discriminated populations, e.g., indigenous and migrant girls. The plaintiff group of the presented case demanded a regional, differentiated, and long-term approach that was child-centric and had a gender focus. Moreover, Martínez highlighted the issue of systematic problems being related to a lack of data.

**Asif Saleh** shared BRAC's lessons learned from the pandemic, particularly in ensuring that the systemic inequalities present before the pandemic were not forgotten in COVID-19 responses.

The first lesson learned was the importance of ensuring people-centred responses to crises as crises affect everyone in different ways. BRAC saw to it that tests and telemedicine reached those most left behind, for instance migrants. It also made an effort to reflect the marginalised communities' needs in the Bangladeshi government's COVID-19 stimulus packages for small and medium enterprises (SMEs). With COVID-19 cases spreading, BRAC decided to provide unconditional cash support through digital wallets to almost 350 000 of the most marginalised, focusing on women as they were the most disproportionately affected.

Secondly, one needs to identify new emerging vulnerabilities. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown how future pandemics and other crises, such as climate change, can reverse the lives and livelihoods of people. BRAC has conducted research showing that 14,8 percent of the Bangladeshi population fell below the poverty line as a result of the pandemic. Out of this group, 50 percent, which is not homogenous (being migrants, restaurant workers etc.), remained in poverty. Many of them are not covered by social safety nets.

Thirdly, crises responses must be flexible, and it must allow trying different mechanisms and for them to be adjusted accordingly.

**The event continued** with a discussion on the need to make responses based on reliable data to implement a sustainable recovery where the furthest behind are put first and to answer the needs of communities. All speakers emphasised the importance of having data that reflect intersections of different groups to respond to their diverse needs, as well as understanding further the groups that are left behind. Ulrika Modéer put forth the lack of finding accurate data, and the need for a proper gender analysis when developing responses. The UNDP has started working with satellite data and with digital strategies to expand its scope. Carmen Cecilia Martínez stated that accurate data is key to monitor and collect information about the obstacles to access sexual and reproductive health services.

**H.E. Ambassador Rabab Fatima** closed the session by reflecting on how the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated inequalities across the world and recalled the Secretary General's last report on the SDGs predicting 10 years push backward in achieving the 2030 Agenda. The average GINI index for developing economies has increased by more than 6 percent, with an even larger impact for LICs. Fatima emphasised

that no single country could tackle this situation alone. There is a need for global solidarity to chart out sustainable and resilient pathways to ensure equal recovery from COVID-19.

Fatima then summarised the key takeaways being: 1) The growing vaccine divides between the rich and the poor have compounded prevailing inequalities both within and across the society; 2) the COVID-19 pandemic is plunging millions into poverty and hunger; 3) there must be an enhanced global solidarity to support climate vulnerable countries; 4) migrants are one of the populations that have been hit particularly hard by the pandemic; 5) LDCs are bearing the heaviest brunt of the crisis and require stronger support from IFIs; 6) inequalities are multi-dimensional and complex, and the SDGs are indivisible. Focusing on SDG10 means that one must consider the other 16 goals as well; and 7) there is a great need for reliable and disaggregated data for sustainable recovery.