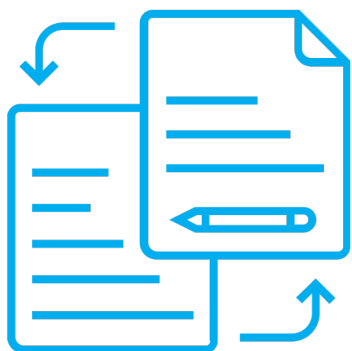# Human Well-Being and Capabilities

Sophie Plagerson
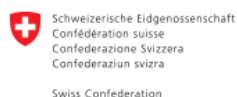

From Science to Practice:
Research and Knowledge to Achieve the SDGs

March 2021

Organizing Partners

This project is coordinated by the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), the Geneva Science-Policy Interface (GSPI), the Think Tank Hub, the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) Switzerland and the SDG Lab, and funded by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA).

Funding Partner

Human well-being and capabilities

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Box 1. Science to Practice: Research and Knowledge to Achieve the SDGs – About the Project

Scientific research can make a critical contribution to addressing global challenges and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, translating the knowledge that comes from research into action remains a complicated task. Research often fails to find its way into policy-making circles due to a number of technical, normative, cultural, political, institutional and financial barriers.

With this in mind, a consortium of Geneva-based institutions has established a new channel through which research and knowledge from International Geneva and its global networks can amplify its impact on national and global policy making and help to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Progress towards the goals is reviewed in July each year at the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) that takes place in New York. Our process began therefore with a call to organizations to submit research related to three themes, covering the SDGs that will be reviewed at the 2021 High-Level Political Forum (HLPF):

• Human well-being and capabilities
• Sustainable and just economies
• Food systems and nutrition patters

After receiving around 100 submissions from a broad range of organizations throughout Geneva and their international networks, three synthesis reports were drafted that brought together the research submitted and situated this new evidence against the state of the art.

This report is the first step in a larger process to institutionalize this research-to-practice channel over the long term and bring more and more knowledge-making bodies into the process, to ensure policy making is influenced by relevant, timely, interdisciplinary research.

This task is more important today than ever, as we begin the decade of action to achieve the SDGs in the face of economic, health and environmental crises, typified by the Covid-19 pandemic. Such challenges demand we make use of all the knowledge we have available to us. Carving out a clear path for science to play a central role in policy making is an essential first step.

Summary

Scientific research can make a critical contribution to addressing global challenges and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As part of an effort to improve processes of research uptake in policy making, this report synthesizes research submitted by Geneva-based institutions and their global networks to the project "From Science to Practice: Research and Knowledge to Achieve the SDGs" on the theme of **human well-being and capabilities**. The report presents qualitative and quantitative evidence contributions, including a variety of case studies, in the context of current policy-relevant knowledge on SDG progress. The findings underline both individual and collective dimensions of well-being, as well as the linkages between different social, health and environmental interventions. In spite of severe setbacks caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the scientific knowledge base provides many examples of immediate and longer-term responses which can expand and create sustainable freedoms, in the direction of greater human well-being for all. Policy recommendations highlighted in this report include the equitable and inclusive expansion of access to health, education and social protection; improvements in governance to ensure security against intra-state conflict, build state capacity, broaden inclusion and progressively realize human rights; wider and better access to technology and information; environmental action; and partnerships which expand the scope of inclusive decision making.

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Introduction – The Freedom Crisis of 2020-21

Human well-being and freedom go hand in hand (Box 2). Yet in recent months, through COVID-related measures intended to protect our physical well-being, such as lockdowns, curfews and travel bans, many of us have experienced the temporary curtailment of our freedoms to study, work, earn, socialize and experience life as we would like to. Tragically in many contexts, the restrictions have exposed and exacerbated a pre-existing freedom crisis that goes much deeper and precedes the pandemic outbreak, revealing that the lack of opportunity to attend school, to receive health care, to eat nutritious food, and to live a life free from violence are the daily, enduring and devastating reality for many millions of people. In the throes of the pandemic, political leaders have found themselves making agonizing decisions between lives and livelihoods, between health and education, universal and indivisible freedoms that had not previously been so distressingly pitted against one another. These dilemmas bring to the fore deep questions about the essence of freedom, whose freedom matters and who should decide.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a welcome compass to navigate these questions. They sharpen the focus on the objectives and targets to aim for, with human well-being as the plumbline (Box 3). They soberly remind us that expanding real freedoms for all is a complex journey, and that it requires partnerships between governments, businesses, and international and local civil society stakeholders. The SDGs promote carefully calibrated systems that expand interdependent economic, social and environmental freedoms in a sustainable manner (Hujo and Carter 2019). The SDGs attest that freedom is not attained if it is at the expense of others' present or future freedoms, especially women, children and many vulnerable groups who are systematically marginalized by contemporary social, political and economic systems. Similarly, they discredit any purported "freedom" if the price tag of opportunities for a few is greater inequality and environmental threats for the majority. The SDGs are rooted in the understanding that not only is expanding freedom the goal, but that it is also the route to attaining that goal, by supporting platforms for dialogue, giving voice to the marginalized, and investing in inclusive and transparent governance.

Box 2. Understanding human well-being and capabilities

Human well-being cannot be measured by individual incomes or GDP. It is about more than meeting basic needs (UNDP 2020b). The capability approach to well-being, conceived by the philosopher Amartya Sen, is interested in the expansion of freedom as a primary end and as the principal means of development. It is interested in what people are able to do, and in people's real opportunities to live a life they value (Robeyns 2017). Sustainable development is anchored in the expansion of people's capabilities to drive global social, economic and environmental change according to sets of knowledge, skills, competencies, and psychological and physical abilities. It seeks to increase people's opportunities to flourish individually and collectively—to be healthy, educated, safe, included and politically engaged. It also demands the removal of major sources of unfreedom such as poverty, violence and oppression (Sen 1999).

A human well-being approach is people-centred, gender-sensitive, rights-based and locally relevant (Crabtree and Gasper 2020; Ghosh 2016). Investing in capabilities means *"empowering people to identify and pursue their own paths for a meaningful life. It challenges us to think of people as agents rather than as patients"* (UNDP 2020b, 6). A focus on environmental well-being is now also absolutely vital. As the Human Development Report 2020 observed, *"the increasingly important questions for many countries are not about the overall size of the pie but the relative size of its slices. In this year's Report, [...] we also worry about the oven"* (UNDP 2020b).

Box 3. Human well-being and capabilities—Why are the SDGs clustered in this way?

"Human well-being and capabilities" is the first of six "entry points" for a systemic approach to realizing the SDGs (Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary General 2019). Accordingly, this report focuses on SDGs 1 (no poverty), 3 (good health and well-being), 4 (quality education), 5 (gender equality), 13 (climate action), 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions) and 17 (partnerships for the Goals). These SDGs are central to eradicating deprivations across multiple dimensions, expanding human capabilities, tackling inequalities and closing opportunity gaps, and creating the conditions for everyone across the life course to realize their potential. This cluster of SDGs is also concerned with upholding human rights and safeguarding the natural environment on which the well-being of current and future generations depends (UN DESA 2020a).
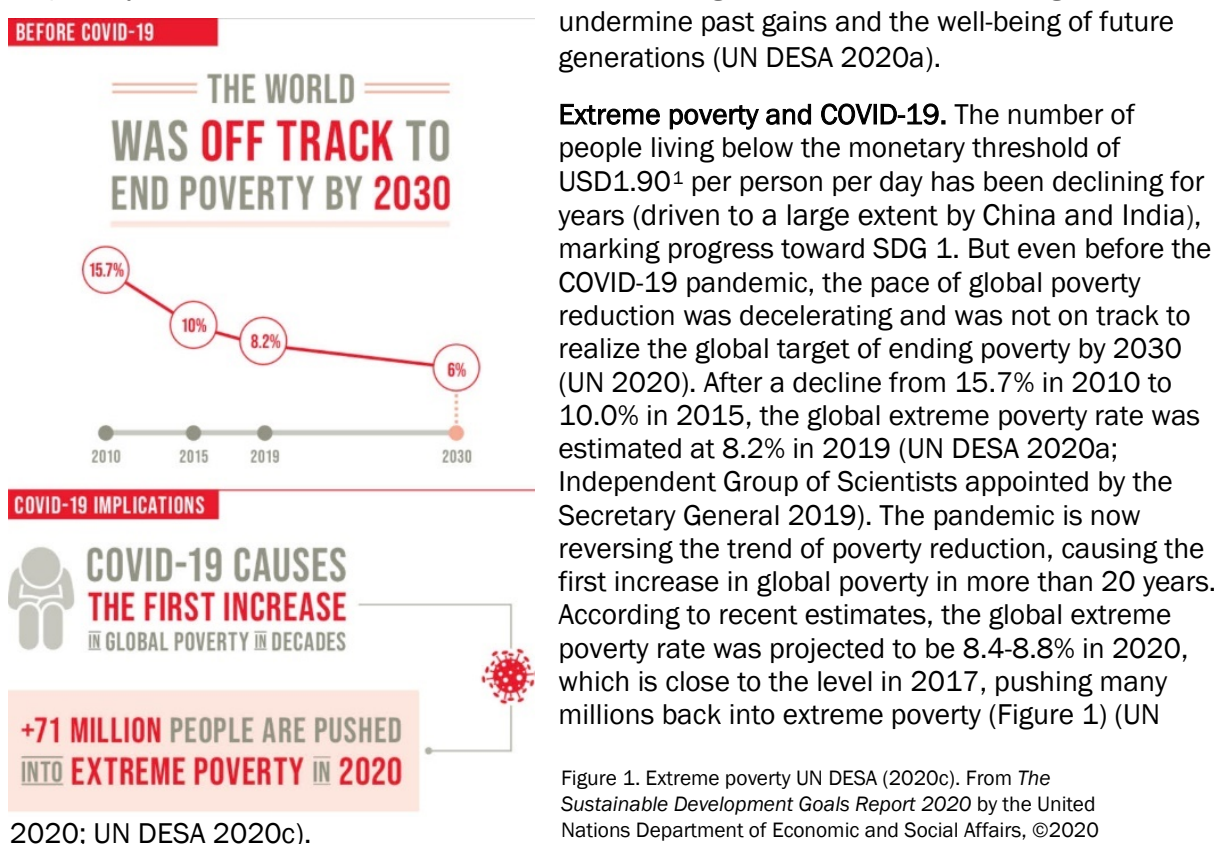
Clustering the SDGs assists decision makers to address multiple goals simultaneously based on current knowledge of the linkages between social and environmental systems (Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary General 2019). The most efficient way to make progress on a given target is to take advantage of positive synergies with other targets while resolving the negative trade-offs (Ehrensperger et al. 2019). This means applying cross-sectoral systems thinking that goes beyond mitigating symptoms and towards substantive structural changes in all policy areas (Hujo and Carter 2019). Evidence from around the world shows that it is possible to advance human well-being without intensive resource use, without leaving many behind and without creating conflict (Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary General 2019).

This report synthesizes research submitted by Geneva-based institutions and their global networks to the project *From Science to Practice: Research and Knowledge to Achieve the SDGs* (*Box 1*). Under the headings of *Freedom from poverty*, *Freedom from violent conflict* and *Freedom to flourish*, this report presents findings from these submissions as they relate to human well-being in the context of current policy-relevant knowledge on SDG progress. These headings and the submissions underline both the individual and collective dimensions of well-being, as well as the linkages between different dimensions of social, health and environmental systems. Despite the severe setbacks caused by COVID-19, the scientific knowledge base provides many examples of immediate and longer-term responses which can expand and create sustainable freedoms, in the direction of progress towards the SDGs and of greater human well-being for all.

Freedom from poverty – What progress has been made?

In recent decades, the world has made substantial advances toward eradicating extreme poverty, advancing human well-being and building capabilities, but extreme deprivations persist, and progress varies significantly between regions. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic abruptly disrupted implementation towards many of the SDGs and threatens to reverse years of progress on poverty, health care and education. Environmental degradation and climate change further undermine past gains and the well-being of future generations (UN DESA 2020a).

Extreme poverty and COVID-19. The number of people living below the monetary threshold of USD1.90[1] per person per day has been declining for years (driven to a large extent by China and India), marking progress toward SDG 1. But even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the pace of global poverty reduction was decelerating and was not on track to realize the global target of ending poverty by 2030 (UN 2020). After a decline from 15.7% in 2010 to 10.0% in 2015, the global extreme poverty rate was estimated at 8.2% in 2019 (UN DESA 2020a; Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary General 2019). The pandemic is now reversing the trend of poverty reduction, causing the first increase in global poverty in more than 20 years. According to recent estimates, the global extreme poverty rate was projected to be 8.4-8.8% in 2020, which is close to the level in 2017, pushing many millions back into extreme poverty (Figure 1) (UN 2020; UN DESA 2020c).

Figure 1. Extreme poverty UN DESA (2020c). From *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020* by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, ©2020 United Nations. Used with permission.

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[1] Although widely used, it is important to note its limitations as a single comparative measure (Box 2) and critiques (e.g. Reddy and Lakoti, 2016).
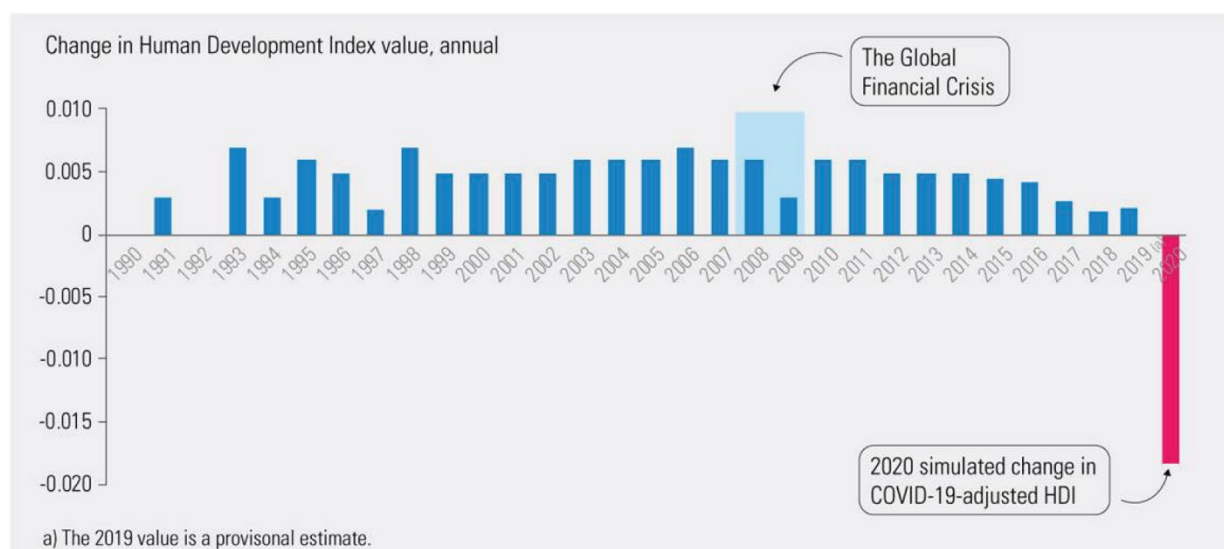
Figure 2. Global Human Development Index by year (UNDP 2020a)

Multidimensional poverty. Multiple dimensions of poverty such as poor health (child mortality, nutrition), insufficient education (years of schooling, enrolment), and inadequate living standards (access to water, sanitation, electricity, cooking fuel and other assets) reinforce each other and constrain people's freedoms and capabilities (Bohl et al. 2017). In 2018, 1.3 billion people in 105 countries lived in households with overlapping deprivations. About 84.3% of multidimensionally poor people live in sub-Saharan Africa (558 million) and South Asia (530 million) (Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary General 2019). As a result of the COVID-19 crisis, the Human Development Index, a combined measure of education, health and living standards, is on course to decline for the first time since the measurement began in 1990 (Figure 2) (See also UN DESA 2020b, 2020a).

Several contributions to this report provide country-level human development data to customize development strategies (Box 4) (Moyer and Hedden 2018). This was the case in Mexico, for example, the first country to institute a national multidimensional poverty measure, the Mexican Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) in 2009 (Hanna and Bohl 2018).

Box 4. Forecasting human development trajectories at the country level

Several studies cited in this report use the International Futures integrated assessment database of over 4,000 historical data series representing 186 countries. The platform is developed and maintained by the Frederick S. Pardee Center for International Futures at the University of Denver and comprises models of systems across the domains of agriculture, demographics, economics, education, energy, environment, finance, governance, health, infrastructure, international politics and technology. The open source simulation tools have been widely used for global forecasting by the UNDP, UNEP and the European Commission (Joshi et al. 2015; Moyer and Bohl 2019).

Country reports on human development and/or SDG progress in a broad range of countries (Brazil [2017b] ; Egypt [2018] ; Ethiopia [2017]; Mexico [2018]; Moldova [2017a] ; Mozambique [2018]) show distinctive paths of progress over the past 20 years. Mexico was successful in halving the population living on less than USD 1.25 a day by 2015. In Egypt, under-five mortality fell by over 74% between 1990 and 2013. In Brazil, life expectancy increased from 65 years to 75 between 1990 and 2015. In Mozambique, gross enrolment in primary education has increased by nearly 60% in the past 20 years. Albeit from a low starting point, Ethiopia has quadrupled primary school enrolment, halved child mortality rates and doubled the percentage of people with access to clean water. Moldova, one of the poorest countries in Europe, considerably expanded access to basic services including electricity, clean water and sanitation, and health care.

However, each of these countries face different gaps in their progress and different challenges in pursuing sustainable development. For example, despite reducing poverty by roughly 45 percentage points over the past 20 years, 25 million

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Ethiopians still live in extreme poverty. In Mozambique, while natural gas production is forecast to drive large gains in economic growth in the next decade, rapid population growth, rising inequality and lack of access to basic services and infrastructure mean that much of this growth may not benefit the poor. In Moldova, the development trajectory will be heavily shaped by a high emigration rate and an ageing demographic, as well as by trends in governance, amid deepening concerns over corruption, the influence of business on politics and socioeconomic divisions.

These studies simulate alternative development scenarios using International Futures models for achieving selected SDG targets by 2030. These analyses provide a range of context-specific policy options. In Brazil for example, the study compared four alternative scenarios with varying emphases on (i) human capabilities (interventions and spending to improve education, reduce non-communicable disease deaths, and expand access to basic infrastructure), (ii) improved governance (effectiveness, reduced corruption and greater inclusiveness), (iii) trade and investment (trade liberalization, foreign direct investment promotion, high levels of domestic private investment to boost competition and innovation); and (iv) "integrated push" (combines elements of each scenario). Overall, the country studies demonstrate that (i) there is no universal solution for broad-based national development; (ii) investments in health, education and infrastructure are costly but reap disproportionate benefits in human development outcomes over time (compared for example with purely economic strategies); and (iii) comprehensive development strategies which take advantage of synergies and minimize trade-offs yield the most significant gains over time.

Sources: Scott et al. (2017b), Hanna et al. (2018), Donnenfeld et al. (2017); Hanna and Bohl (2018); Scott et al. (2017a), Porter et al. (2018).

Vulnerable groups and poverty. Women, children, youth, older people, persons with disabilities and indigenous peoples, among other groups, often experience lower levels of well-being within a population (Alkire et al. 2020; Hughes et al. 2009; Hujo and Carter 2019). Extreme poverty is also concentrated among these marginalized groups, and the limitations to their opportunities and capabilities are often linked to deeply rooted structures of social and political inequality, and discriminatory laws and social norms (Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary General 2019). In many countries, children are more affected by poverty than the general population, including in high-income countries where around 1 in 7 children are deprived (Hujo and Carter 2019; UN DESA 2020a). An estimated 80% of persons with disabilities live in poverty. Refugees and migrants also face numerous barriers (Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary General 2019). Many vulnerable groups do not benefit from any form of social protection. Less than 20% of older persons receive a pension, 28% of persons with severe disabilities receive disability cash benefits, 35% of children worldwide have access to social protection (ranging from 16% in Africa to 28% in Asia, and 70% in Latin America) and only 41% of women giving birth are covered by maternity benefits (UN DESA 2020a; Hujo and Carter 2019). Box 5 provides an example of a rights-based social protection programme which addresses child poverty and combines this with access to comprehensive and free educational and health services. The importance of development-oriented legislation for securing rights for marginalized groups is discussed in a study based in India (Ghosh 2016). Despite bureaucratic and political weaknesses in their implementation, laws such as the Right to Food (2013), the Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (1998), the Right to Information Act (2005) and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA / 2005) have served in different ways to promote access to services and employment and to empower rural women especially, as well as scheduled castes and tribes (Ghosh 2016).

Box 5. Universalizing child benefits in Argentina

In 2009, as part of efforts to address coverage gaps in the social security benefit system, Argentina introduced a tax-financed child grant (Asignación Universal por Hijo – AUH) for unemployed, informal, domestic or self-employed workers and beneficiaries of public works programmes. This complemented the existing contributory child grant for formal sector workers and is applicable to nationals and residents with three years of residency. In 2019, it was equivalent to around USD 47 per month (USD 188 for disabled children), with amounts adjusted yearly to price and wage indexes. The grant is paid for up to five children until the age of 18 (and permanently for disabled children) and requires certification of school attendance and health check-ups for the payment of 20% of the grant (80% of the grant is unconditional and automatically transferred each month). Overall, the family benefit programme covers 85% of all children. The AUH covers slightly less than half of these children and costs approximately 0.8% of GDP per year (Hujo and Carter 2019).

Vulnerable groups and COVID-19. The pandemic has disproportionately affected vulnerable groups and further exacerbated existing disparities (UN DESA 2020c; UN 2020). The gap between men and women who live in poverty has widened. Projections commissioned by UN Women and UNDP suggest that by 2021, for every 100 men aged 25 to 34 living in extreme poverty (living on

USD 1.90 a day or less), there will be 118 women, a gap that is expected to increase to 121 women per 100 men by 2030 (Azcona et al. 2020). A survey on "Protecting and Supporting Vulnerable Groups Through the COVID-19 Crisis" conducted in April-July 2020 by the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) with academics and practitioners from 82 countries worldwide highlighted the need for policy responses that are sensitive to the specific characteristics, locations and needs of vulnerable groups, especially the working poor, as well as older persons. In low- and lower-middle-income countries, lockdowns and physical distancing were perceived as less effective if not accompanied by social and economic support policies such as food distribution. The importance of establishing employment programmes for vulnerable people such as migrant workers, daily wage labourers and youth was highlighted in Belgium, Costa Rica, India, Mexico, Palestine, South Africa, and the United States. Inclusive social protection programmes for people living with disabilities and older persons were emphasized in Indonesia, Myanmar, Nigeria and the United Kingdom. Beyond governments, non-state actors including faith-based groups, trade unions, the private sector and other non-governmental organizations have provided essential support and services in some countries, especially for vulnerable groups. This has included the provision of food and protective equipment, public information campaigns, transporting older persons to clinics, mental health services, and support for women and children (Ladd and Bortolotti 2020).

Gender, care work and care policies. On average, women spend about three times as many hours in unpaid work as men (Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary General 2019). During lockdowns, women and men have both taken on more household chores and care for children and family members, but the majority of work still falls on the shoulders of women and girls (Azcona et al. 2020). Care policies are increasingly being recognized as an important dimension of sustainable development which can increase gender equality, contribute to economic and social development and improve the well-being, rights and autonomy of both caregivers and care receivers (UNRISD 2016 cited in Hujo and Carter 2019). Although the uptake of care policies has been slow at national and regional levels, several examples are emerging particularly in Latin America (Box 6).

Box 6. Integrated care systems in Uruguay and Costa Rica
Care policies are a good example of a cross-sectoral and integrated policy approach that reflects the holistic vision of the SDG framework, by allocating resources in the form of money, services or time to caregivers or people who need care, spanning sectoral divides between health, education, the labour market and social protection policies. Uruguay and Costa Rica have introduced universal care systems that aim to institutionalize inter-sectoral coordination, although outcomes of the reforms have not yet been evaluated.

The Uruguayan National Care System (Sistema Nacional Integrado de Cuidado / SNIC) was created in November 2015 as the result of political mobilization and broad alliances forged between women's and social movements, women parliamentarians and academics. It includes both existing policies on health, education and social security, and new policies for vulnerable groups, including adults with specific care needs, persons with disabilities and young children. The SNIC is human rights–based, solidary in its financing and universal in terms of both coverage and minimum quality standards. Changing the sexual division of labour within households and supporting paid care workers are among the SNIC's stated objectives.

In Costa Rica, the Early Childhood Development and Care Network (Red de Cuido y Desarollo Infantil / RedCUDI) was enshrined in law and implemented in 2014 covering children below the age of seven. The objective is to universalize childhood education and development services comprising both public and private provision. The system establishes early childhood care services as a right of every child, and also has the stated objective of expanding opportunities for mothers and fathers to engage in paid work or education.

Source: UNRISD 2016 cited in Hujo and Carter (2019)

Health outcomes. Physical and mental health are crucial to human well-being. Significant advances in many areas of health were being made prior to 2019, though these still fell short of meeting many of the SDG 3 targets. Major progress has been made in maternal and child health (Figures 3 and 4). By 2018, 121 countries had already met the SDG target on under-5 mortality (UN DESA 2020c). However, the pandemic is reversing gains in this area and others which were already under stress. It is estimated that disruptions to routine health services and constrained

access to nutritious diets may have caused hundreds of thousands of additional under-5 deaths and tens of thousands of additional maternal deaths in 2020 (UN DESA 2020c).

Figure 3. Maternal mortality ratio, 2000–2017(deaths per 100,000 live births) (UN DESA 2020c)
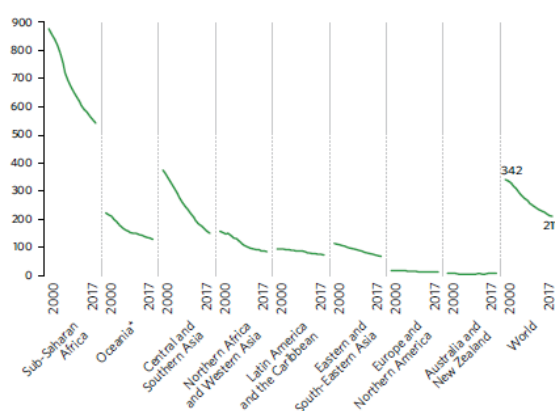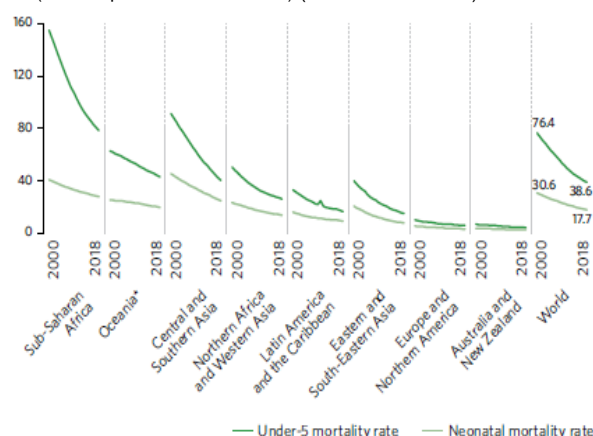
Figure 4. Under-5 and neonatal mortality rates, 2000–2018 (deaths per 1000 live births) (UN DESA 2020c)

Figures 3 and 4 from *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020* by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, ©2020 United Nations. Used with permission.

Health systems and COVID-19. Despite some progress towards universal health coverage (see examples in Box 7), the pandemic has exposed inadequate health and sanitation systems globally (UN DESA 2020a). Most countries, especially poor countries, have insufficient health facilities, medical supplies and health care workers for the surge in demand (UN DESA 2020a). The number of people covered by essential health services in 2017 was estimated to be between 2.5 billion and 3.7 billion—about one third to one half of the global population. Access to water and sanitation (SDG 6) remains a major health issue: 2.2 billion people remain without safe drinking water (The Lancet 2020). With regard to mental health care, in 2017 a study found that in high-income countries the proportion of people with depressive disorders being adequately treated was around 1 in 5, and in low- and middle-income countries it was only 1 in 27 (Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary General 2019).

Box 7. National health insurance in Ghana and Rwanda

National Health Insurance schemes were formally introduced in Ghana (2003) and in Rwanda (2008) with the goal of providing access to free basic health care services. Both countries have seen overall health improvements. Life expectancy in Ghana rose from 61 to 65 years between 1995 and 2014. Between 2005 and 2015 Rwanda halved child mortality rates. Key factors to success in scaling up these programmes have included the training and deployment of health workers, technological innovations and partnerships. In Ghana, a strategy was adopted to increase the number of midwives trained and deployed in health service. The decentralized Rwandan system relies strongly on voluntary, trained community health workers (CHW).

Technological innovations include the collaboration between Ghana's government and a private sector drone-delivery company to transport key medical supplies to remote areas to enhance equity and health impact. In Rwanda, a mobile phone SMS system, designed by UNICEF, assisted in the monitoring of pregnant women and newborn babies.

Partnerships between government departments, between private and public service providers have been crucial. In Rwanda, health reforms have been accompanied by complementary policy reforms in education, nutrition, transport, as well as water and sanitation. In 2015, the government transferred management of the community-based health insurance scheme to the Rwanda Social Security Board in order to scale up its reach, expand the benefit package to the level of social insurance for formal workers, and address financial instability of individual schemes due to an accumulation of debts to health providers.

Challenges include substantial inequities in access to health care that affect poor and rural populations, and the fiscal pressures associated with an increasing set of benefits and an expanding population under cover threatens the sustainability of the schemes.

Sources: Hujo and Carter (2019); Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary General (2019)

Access to education and school closures.

Access to quality education in early childhood, as well as primary, secondary and higher education, are essential to build capabilities for all. The proportion of children and youth out of primary and secondary school declined from 26% in 2000 to 19% in 2010 and 17% in 2018 (Figure 5). In the past year, school closures to stop the spread of COVID-19 have affected the vast majority of the world's student population (Cuevas-Parra and Stephano 2020). In 2020, more than 190 countries implemented nationwide school closures and about 90% of all children and youth (1.6 billion) were out of school for at least part of the year (UN DESA 2020a).

Figure 5. Proportion of children and youth out of primary, lower secondary and upper secondary school, 2000–2018 (percentage) (UN DESA 2020c)
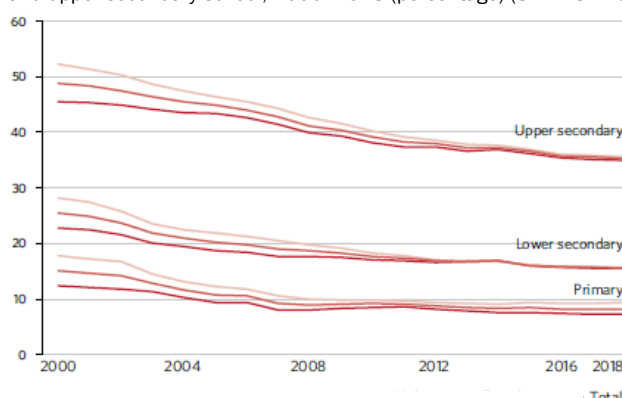
From *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020* by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, ©2020 United Nations. Used with permission.

Educational disparities. There are significant gaps in education quality and access between countries and along gender, class and regional lines. Fifty-three percent of children who do not attend primary school are girls. In many countries in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa, more than half of students who complete primary school fail to attain basic numeracy and literacy skills. In sub-Saharan Africa, only 55% of primary school teachers are trained. The increased privatization of education in some contexts contributes to a massive disparity in quality of education between the poor and the wealthy, increasing pressure on already struggling education systems (Hujo and Carter 2019). Several submissions for this report demonstrate the potential cross-sectoral impacts of investment in education (Box 8).

Box 8. Investment priorities in education—case studies

Inputs to this report provide case studies on education in Guatemala, Honduras and South-West Uganda, and on the Central American region that illustrate different educational outcomes and policy needs.

In Honduras, education quality (measured by primary and secondary test scores) was identified as a major issue to be addressed, despite high levels of spending relative to the Central American region (5.9% of GDP in 2013). In Guatemala, levels of educational attainment (average years of schooling for adults aged 15+), education quality *and* levels of spending (2.5% of GDP) were among the lowest in the region. In South-West Uganda, inability to afford school fees was identified as the primary cause of student dropout in the primary education system. These detailed analyses are used to provide policy makers with calibrated and sequenced policy options which combine more and/or more effective spending towards the gradual achievement of the SDGs.

Alternative policy scenarios using the International Futures forecasting models (see Box 4) highlight several cross-cutting conclusions: investment in education is costly and requires long-term commitment; investment in education can reap long-term gains for individual and collective well-being with large impacts on economic growth, reduction in violence and reduced emigration over the long term; gains are observed across all countries, but those starting from a low base and experience some of the greatest gains (the case of Haiti, Guatemala and Honduras, for example); investment in education requires synergistic spending across multiple sectors, such as functioning infrastructure and public transportation systems to provide safe access and basic services like water, sanitation and electricity.

Sources: Porter et al. (2020b), Rafa et al. (2018), Porter et al. (2020a), Dickerson et al. (2019).

Innovations in education. Case studies submitted for this report highlighted the importance of contextualizing education within local communities and of integrating environmental issues (see Box 9). Education responses to the COVID-19 pandemic by public and private institutions have also demonstrated significant capacity for innovation. However, the digital divide is widening education equality gaps (UN DESA 2020a). Before the pandemic crisis, almost one third of the world's young people were already digitally excluded. Although distance learning solutions have been provided in four out of five countries with school closures, at least 500 million children and

youth in vulnerable and disadvantaged communities remain excluded from these options (UN DESA 2020c, 2020a).

Box 9. Education, the community and the environment

Case studies from India and Brazil submitted for this report highlight examples of using environmental issues to catalyse and strengthen education-community interactions, civic engagement and green outcomes.

The Escola Verde com Afeto (Green School with Affection) project aims to improve the conditions around schools in the city of Salvador (Brazil) through the removal of garbage, the planting of trees and agroforestry initiatives. The project is an initiative of the Canteiros Coletivos movement, a social, autonomous and nonpartisan collective that provides environmental education and mobilizes residents for the recovery, conservation and good use of public space. By teaching and applying interdisciplinary environmental knowledge, educators act as mediators in the political, economic, social, and cultural relations within their local context. Building on the project's success, several schools have collaborated to propose a "popular initiative bill" (a mechanism which allows citizens to deliberate on political matters directly) to make green areas around schools mandatory at the municipal level (De Oliveira Hortmann 2020).

In West Bengal (India) the Ecology and Natural Resource Education (ENRE) programme enabled learners to interact with a broad cross-section of their community around themes of biodiversity conservation. Led by the non-governmental organization Swanirvar, the programme provides training to teachers and social workers on the pedagogical use of nature and natural resources. Alongside the benefits of embedding education within the local context and supporting knowledge-based activism, the case study also highlights that, particularly where unequal power relations are challenged, deeper engagement within the community can also lead to instances of conflict, which requires careful management for peaceful resolution (Ghosh 2014).

Climate change, environmental degradation and well-being. Environmental, social and economic challenges are interdependent and shape the well-being of current and future generations (UNDP 2020b). The temporary reductions in emissions and air pollution related to restrictions on travel during the COVID-19 pandemic and economic downturn are not sufficient to reverse worsening environmental trends in greenhouse gas emissions, land degradation, biodiversity loss, overfishing and the deterioration of coastal waters (UN DESA 2020a). Countries and individuals that have contributed least to climate change are most affected by its negative direct and indirect impacts. Countries with the highest risk of climate change are concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, the regions with the largest proportions of the world's poor. Women, persons with disabilities and indigenous peoples may lack land rights, access to financial resources, training and technology, and may have little influence on political decision making (Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary General 2019). Direct effects of climate change, such as sea level rise and drought, place added pressures on communities where clean water, sufficient food and adequate shelter are already difficult to obtain (Hujo and Carter 2019). Nevertheless, scientific knowledge increasingly demonstrates that well-being need not depend on intensive resource use, nor need it exacerbate or entrench inequalities and deprivations (see Box 10).

Box 10. Generating synergies between environmental conservation and poverty alleviation

Examples of eco-social policies, which combine social and environmental objectives or policies, include the Bolsa Verde in Brazil and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in India. The Bolsa Verde programme provides cash benefits and vocational training to low income households that make a living from collecting forest products or farming in protected or other designated areas, in return for commitments to adopt more sustainable use of natural resources to reduce deforestation.

The MGNREGA programme was established in 2005, guaranteeing up to 100 days of paid employment to impoverished people in rural areas. The work comprises activities related to environmental conservation, natural resource management, improved water security, soil conservation and higher land productivity. In 2017, 51 million households were employed in the programme, with women constituting 53% of total work amounts granted.

Source: UNRISD (2016) cited in Hujo and Carter (2019)

Participation and voice. Freedom from poverty is not only concerned with well-being outcomes, but also with the *process* of expanding capabilities (UNDP 2020b; Hujo and Carter 2019). Several submissions for this report illustrate the different ways in which a human well-being approach to

research and practice gives a voice to marginalized individuals and groups and promotes their agency (Box 11). A study by Medeiros on community-driven development underlines the need for programme designs to include parameters for collaboration and transparent financing mechanisms in order to prevent community fragmentation and elite capture of funds (Medeiros 2020). Her study on the effects of the Projeto Sao Jose programme, implemented in 69 communities across 126 municipalities in the state of Ceara (Brazil), showed that that the programme was used to leverage pro-government community organizations, undermining the legitimacy of civil society activism and advocacy and weakening its impacts (Medeiros 2020).

Box 11. The process of expanding freedoms: Voice, agency and participation of children, youth and older persons

A consultation conducted by World Vision in 13 countries documented children's experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Across all countries, the respondents highlighted three important factors that directly changed their lives on a massive scale: school disruption, emotional distress due to social distancing, and increasing poverty. Despite these challenges, the children and young people (aged 8-17) asserted that they could play a pivotal role in raising awareness on COVID-19 because, in many cases, they had a better education and more access to technology and information than their parents and other community members. As a quote in the study indicates, *"There are many people who are completely unaware and do not take any precautions. So, we can shoot short videos to promote more awareness. We can use an online platform to upload videos with hashtags and help by doing with something productive" (Jose, age 15, Peru)* (Cuevas-Parra and Stephano 2020).

As part of a 50-country inquiry by the World YMCA, a qualitative study in Albania in 2017 explored the aspirations, expectations and needs of young people (aged 17-20). In a context of rapid social and technological change, the findings pointed to a sense of disjointed development, due to gaps between educational curricula and employment opportunities, between individual aspirations and family values, and between the theory and practice of environmental awareness. These resulted in a combination of optimism and cynicism, despite a recurring belief in social justice and civic organization, as the following quotes illustrate: *"We protest with banners against waste disposal and when the protest finishes we throw the banners on the streets and everything ends there" (Xhesika, female, age 17); "This system does not create people able to work; it creates people with useless and general knowledge" (Amarildo, male, age 17); "I think that [...] hope comes from youth organizations mostly [...]. Here the protests can make changes, and even those small protests have given their contribution, they have yielded results" (Eris, male, age 20).* The findings highlight the need to support human development processes that integrate the systemic linkages between SDGs at the individual level, as well as at policy and sectoral levels.

Lastly, older persons were active collaborators in all stages of "PlaceAge", a research project conducted in Brazil Public policy proposals, based on the results of the study, were discussed with older people in the study neighbourhoods, to identify those most relevant (Portella and Woolrych 2019).

Freedom from violence

Freedom from fear and the freedom to live a secure life with dignity are basic human rights. SDG 16 and other Goals promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development. Yet, violence, conflict and weak governance remain a threat to the advancement and protection of human well-being. Sudden disruptions in social interactions as a result of COVID-19 have also had varied effects on violence and conflict (UN DESA 2020c).

Violence against women and children. Globally, 35% of women have experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence, or sexual violence by a non-partner (UN Women 2020). Every year, more than 1.7 billion children around the globe experience emotional, physical and sexual violence in homes, communities, schools, workplaces, detention centres, institutions and online. The root causes of violence include poverty and economic distress, cultural norms, conflict and displacement, weak safety net services, and gender inequality (Cooke 2019).

COVID-19 and violence against women and children. In many contexts, virus-related measures, aimed at keeping people protected, have increased women and children's vulnerability to violence in the home, with growing numbers of reports of intensified gender-based violence and sexual exploitation and abuse (UN DESA 2020a). Drawing on information indicating increased domestic violence and surges in calls to child helplines, as well insights from field offices and knowledge gained from previous crises, such as the Ebola outbreak—a World Vision briefing
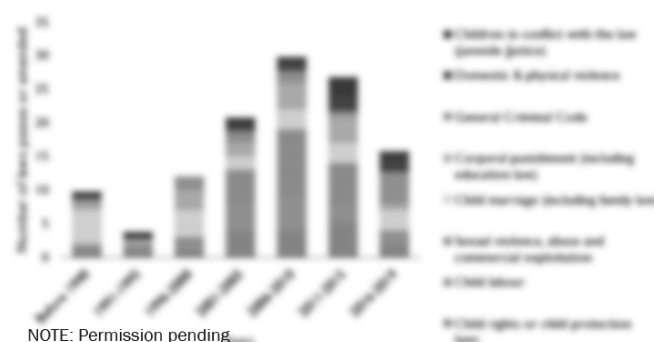
estimates an increase in violence against children of between 20% and 32% since the outbreak of the pandemic. A national assessment in Bangladesh revealed beatings by parents or guardians had increased by 42%, and that there was a 40% increase of calls to the child helpline. World Vision also estimates that 13 million more children are at increased risk of child marriage and child labour over the coming years as family livelihoods evaporate and economic crises ensue, pushing families to identify other forms of income which harm children. Furthermore, the systems and services that can help detect, respond to and prevent such threats and violence (Box 12) are operating with little or no capacity during the pandemic (World Vision International 2020).

Box 12. Actions to address violence against children

The commitment to end violence against children was reinforced in 2015 with the adoption of SDG target 16.2, "end the abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children". Despite this commitment, a World Vision review of the legal, policy and planning progress to end violence against children in 20 countries showed that significant gaps remain and violence against children persists in every country (Cooke 2019). Eight critical areas of policy action to end violence against children have been identified.

• **FORBID** all forms of violence against children. Figure 6 shows that progress in advancing legislation to forbid violence against children accelerated between 2006 and 2015.

• **PREVENT** violence through evidence-based programmes. Home visitations are instrumental in preventing mistreatment of children.

• **REPORT** cases through protocols for service providers and citizens.

• **RESPOND** to cases of violence through government services and referrals. Response services such as medical care, counselling, legal support and protection from offenders are critical for victims in the immediate aftermath of violence and are an effective method

Figure 6. Number and type of laws passed or amended (Cooke 2019). Permission pending. See original source, page 11.

• **FUND** action plans at national and sub-national levels. Many governments look to development partners such as UNICEF and bilateral donors for external funding.

• **MANAGE DATA** through centralized information systems. Mexico's INFOSIPINNA and South Africa's National Child Protection Register are examples of national data systems.

• Be **ACCOUNTABLE** for commitments and allow citizens and children to participate in decision making.

• **CHALLENGE** perceptions of violence through public awareness campaigns.


NOTE: Permission pending

Source: World Vision International 2020; Cooke 2019


Violent conflict trends and impacts. Violent conflict is increasingly recognized as a major obstacle to reaching the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. Its dramatic resurgence over the last few years, particularly as a result of (internationalized) civil wars, has caused immense human suffering (Figure 7) (United Nations and World Bank 2018; Palik et al. 2020). In 2018, the number of people displaced by war, persecution and conflict exceeded 70 million, the highest level recorded by UNHCR in almost 70 years (UN DESA 2020a; World Vision International 2019).

Figure 7: Number of countries with state-based armed conflicts, by conflict type (Palik et al. 2020)
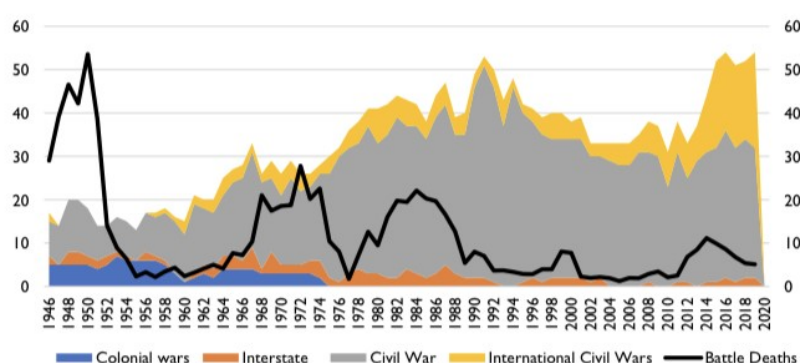
Violent conflicts have also become more complex and protracted, involving more non-state groups and regional and international actors (Degila 2020). Risks associated with climate change and natural disasters can combine with and exacerbate risks of violence through factors such as food insecurity, economic shocks and migration (United Nations and World Bank 2018).

Figure 8: Increased likelihood of war due to coronavirus, 2020-2022 (Moyer and Kaplan 2020; used with permission)
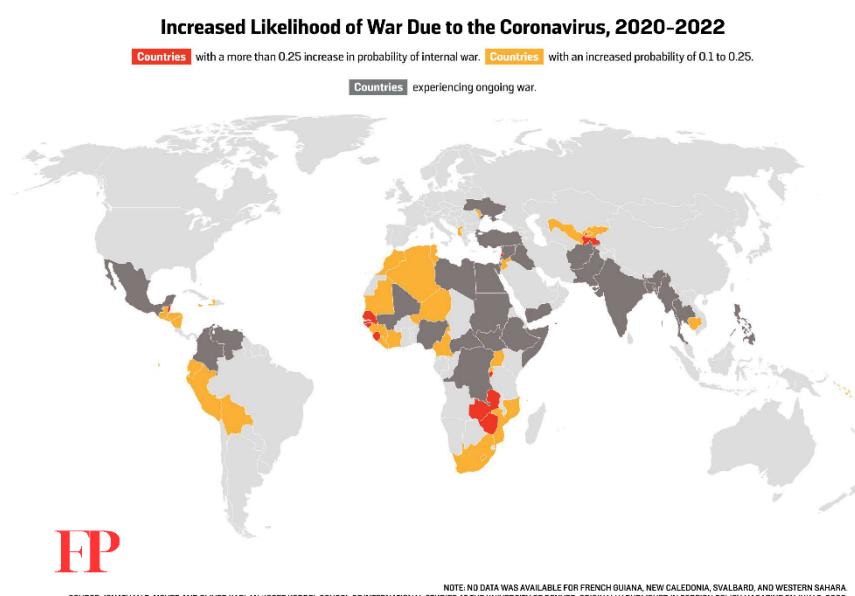
COVID-19 and violent conflict.

Despite short-term declines in armed conflict following lockdowns in some countries (Ide 2021), forecasts based on historical patterns predict an elevated likelihood of instability due to the coronavirus pandemic and government responses in 35 countries between 2020 and 2022, more than at any point over the past 30 years. These include countries experiencing ongoing conflict and post-conflict states, as well as new conflicts in 13 countries (Figure 8) (Moyer and Kaplan 2020).

Conflict and human well-being. There are strong linkages between conflict and human development outcomes (Box 13). By 2030, the share of those living in extreme poverty in fragile and conflict-affected contexts is projected to reach more than 60% (World Vision International 2019; United Nations and World Bank 2018; Milante et al. 2016).

**Box 13. Impacts of war on human development in Yemen**

The war in Yemen has set back development by more than two decades. Now in its fifth year, the conflict is characterized by huge suffering and indirect deaths due to the war's impacts on access to food, health services, and physical and social infrastructure. These findings shed light on the opportunity cost of the ongoing war in Yemen. The report's authors call on involved parties to the conflict and the international community to reach a political settlement as the best alternative for the country, before it slips to the point of no return (Moyer et al. 2019).

Vulnerable groups are at greater risk in situations of conflict. Women face a continuum of insecurity before, during and after conflict. Sexual and gender-based violence tends to be higher in conflict and post-conflict settings, as does recruitment of girls into trafficking, sexual slavery and forced marriage (United Nations and World Bank 2018). Children are also disproportionately affected by war, including facing increased risk of all forms of violence and exploitation (Hall 2019). Tens of thousands of children are used by both armed forces and armed groups in at least 20 countries around the world (Hall 2019). Research conducted by World Vision in the Central African Republic, Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq and South Sudan found that adolescent boys from 14–16 years of age make up the largest group of children associated with armed groups, with children as young as five years enlisted. While some children are abducted from their homes, schools and communities, the vast majority join because of various forms of desperation—they have no other options or feel that this is the best of their bad options (Hall 2019).

Actions for sustainable peace.
A growing volume of evidence documents strategies for avoiding the onset and recurrence of conflict, and for de-escalating conflict when it arises. Violence is highly path-dependent, therefore as risks intensify, the options for preventing violence become more complex. A study of policy responses in 50 representative cases of fragility (including 25 "onset" [wars, coups, genocides] and 25 "non-onset" cases), found that governments were overall quicker to introduce political reforms and provide economic support for their citizens rather than engage in political repression or economic punishment of political rivals (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Policy responses to fragility (Kaplan 2021; used with permission)
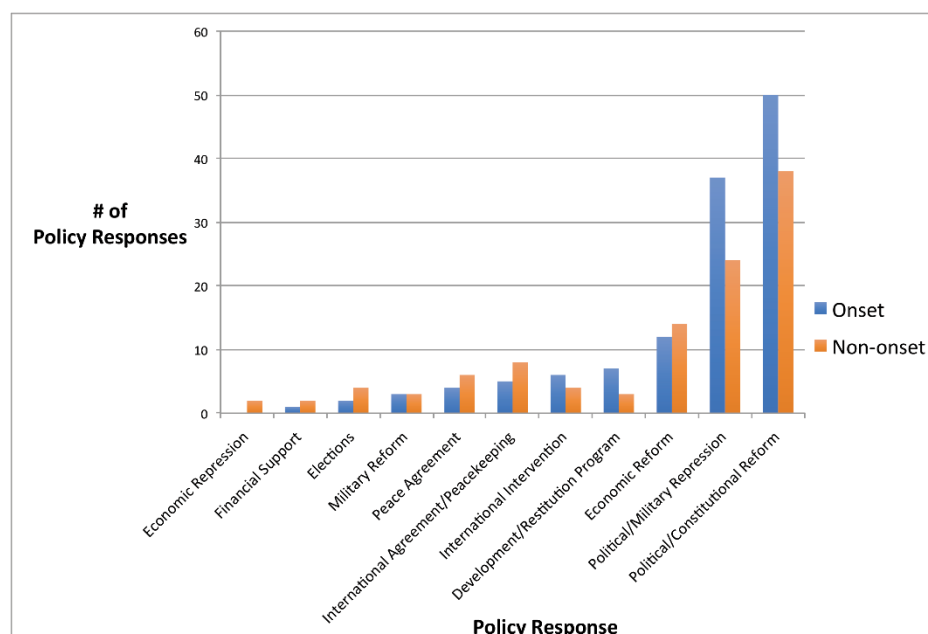
Prevention through sustainable development. The report *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict* jointly published in 2018 by the United Nations and the World Bank reviewed the experiences of countries that have avoided violent conflict, prevented its escalation or rebuilt peace afterward. Prevention through inclusive and sustainable development was unequivocally identified as the best and most cost-effective way to save lives and to prevent societies from descending into crisis (United Nations and World Bank 2018). Focused attention to sustainable development in "high-hanging fruit" states with high levels of risk or open conflict is necessary in order for the SDGs to be achieved, despite the inherent challenges (Milante et al. 2016). In relation to child soldier recruitment, a World Vision report specifies that prevention work must happen at both the macro level, through addressing inequality issues and strengthening national protection systems, and at the micro level, for example through access to education, intergenerational dialogue, psychosocial and livelihood support (Hall 2019).

Inclusive responses to conflict. The exclusion of particular groups from power, resources, services and security on the basis of identity or geography is a key factor in most violent conflicts (United Nations and World Bank 2018). Addressing grievances and inclusive decision making are fundamental to sustaining peace. However, in situations of open conflict, negotiated settlements that lead to political power sharing and bring enduring peace are difficult to design—and the stakes are high (Box 14). Similarly, programmes which seek to contribute to conflict resolution at the grassroots level may have both positive and negative impacts (Box 15).

Box 14. Should elections be held in post-conflict situations?
Up to 90% of civil conflicts since 2000 have been linked to the recurrence of earlier conflicts. Research submitted for this report examined data from 79 civil conflict settlements (from 1975 to 2005) in which rebel parties negotiated electoral participation provisions to compete alongside government parties in post-conflict elections. These included many seemingly intractable conflicts, such as in El Salvador, Mozambique, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The analysis found that although post-conflict elections as a whole did not produce peace, electoral participation provisions were associated with an 80% increase in the odds that peace endures (Matanock 2017).

Evidence from the 2016 popular plebiscite in Colombia suggests that in situations where there are deep divisions between leaders of factions, referendums and other tools of direct approval by voters may amplify these divisions instead of strengthening peace processes. Focusing instead on conventional "elite-led" negotiations that seek to satisfy each faction may have a better chance of producing signed settlements, even if they are time consuming (Matanock and Garbiras-Díaz 2018).

Box 15. Types and impacts of peace-building interventions

A review of (limited) experimental evidence on peace-building, reconciliation and dispute resolution programming found varied outcomes (Nolan et al. 2019).

1. Evaluations of the impacts of **community driven development (CDD) and community-driven reconstruction (CDR) interventions** on social capital and conflict outcomes have shown disappointing results—while they can contribute to reconstruction and improved service delivery in fragile contexts, they may not improve social cohesion or reduce violence.

2. **Transitional justice interventions** bring victims and perpetrators of conflict face-to-face in a community forum. Randomized evaluations in Sierra Leone found that the reconciliation programme did lead to greater forgiveness of war perpetrators and strengthened social ties, but in some instances this came at a significant cost to individuals' psychological well-being.

3. **Alternative dispute resolution interventions** teach communities informal dispute resolution skills where the rule of law and formal justice institutions are weak. One evaluation in Liberia found a greater likelihood of dispute resolution using such interventions, but they were also associated with an increase in extrajudicial punishment and low levels of cost-effectiveness.

4. **Media interventions** such as radio and television programming aim to shift social norms, build social capital, and contribute to peace. In Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, media interventions broadly had a positive impact on social norms and dispute resolution. However, media programming in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo had the unintended effect of leading to increased intolerance. Peer influence, through group discussion, and dramatization are important avenues through which information campaigns are translated into group behaviour.

Understanding motivations for conflict and peace. Stakeholders in conflict make strategic decisions between violent and non-violent actions. In high-risk settings, where material incentives for conflict may be present, interventions may be needed to mitigate the impact of economic shocks which can act as triggers for violence. Findings from Colombia, for example, suggest that price stabilization schemes which place a floor on the price of labour-intensive commodities may help mitigate violence in the wake of price shocks. In India, a study found that the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee programme lowered the opportunity cost of engaging in violence by dampening the effect of poor rainfall, resulting in a decrease in conflict and some forms of crime in districts affected by Maoist violence. However, since these programmes also introduce changes in economic conditions, their potential impacts on the operations and geographic locations of armed conflicts need to be evaluated (Nolan et al. 2019).

Unarmed civilians also play an important role in civil conflicts. In his book, *Resisting War: How Communities Protect Themselves*, Kaplan (2017) explores cases from Colombia to show how civilians promote peace, influence armed actors and limit violence. Based on fieldwork and statistical analysis, the book explains how local social organizations enable both covert and overt nonviolent strategies, including avoidance, cultures of peace, dispute resolution, deception, protest and negotiation. These "autonomy" strategies help civilians retain their agency and avoid becoming helpless victims by limiting the inroads of armed groups. Key constraints to civilian-oriented policies are typically capacity and knowledge rather than resources. A particular challenge for supporting civilian autonomy movements is that external aid projects can be perceived by non-state armed actors as part of a counterinsurgency strategy (Kaplan 2017).

The role of international and regional actors. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is a significant step towards more collaborative, coherent and complementary relationships between humanitarian and development actors, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected situations (World Vision International 2019). Multilateral and regional institutions such the United Nations, the African Union and the European Union play key roles in preventive diplomacy, mediating ceasefires and peace agreements, protecting civilians, and supporting post-conflict transition processes (Matanock 2020b; United Nations and World Bank 2018).

Freedom to flourish

The specific evidence and solutions presented under the themes of *Freedom from poverty* and *Freedom from violent conflict* support a common core of broad, long-term and structural approaches to ensuring individual and collective human well-being (UNRISD 2016). These include: expanding access to health, education and social protection; good governance;

promotion of human rights; increased access to technology and information; environmental action; and partnerships. Combined, these freedom-oriented collective social actions and public policies can resist widening social inequalities and the entrenchment of disadvantage, by expanding opportunities and participation and building inclusive institutions (Venkatapuram 2020).

Expanding access to health, education and social protection. The pandemic has shown that the cost of not having universal public goods that enhance well-being implies costs for all (UN DESA 2020a). While the crisis has exposed and exacerbated many inequalities, it has also led to some reflection on societal values, including the revalorization of essential workers, and the importance of universal health services and social protection (Ladd and Bortolotti 2020). Many desperately needed transformations to advance human well-being are demonstrably possible through a more equitable distribution of resources and a shift in focus toward the universal provision of public goods (UN DESA 2020a).

Equitable and holistic approaches to health. Public health systems are needed that deliver comprehensive, integrated, quality primary health services that are accessible across all population groups, in particular to those who are stigmatized and marginalized due to age, disability, location, ethnicity and other factors. Countries must sustain health services across the life course including sexual, reproductive, maternal, new-born, child and adolescent health services, and care for older persons, especially in low- and middle-income countries and in settings of fragility, conflict and violence (UN DESA 2020a). Health strategies need to be adapted for different contexts and groups (Ladd and Bortolotti 2020). Sustainable and holistic approaches to health require increases in the quantity and quality of fiscal resources for health policy spending beyond the current 6% of global annual spending, in order to address malnutrition and mitigate the detrimental health effects of environmental and climate change, for example by improving sanitation and hygiene infrastructure and ensuring access to clean water (Hujo and Carter 2019).

Inclusive and equitable quality education. Education should be free at all levels, ensuring access regardless of background (UN DESA 2020a). Building a functioning education system with trained staff, skilled professionals and empowered citizens requires a holistic approach with strong capacities and sufficient resources at all levels, including primary, secondary and tertiary. Addressing these issues to ensure a safe and accessible learning environment involves an integrated approach that engages actors across sectors, including government ministries, municipal service providers, labour unions, and child and gender advocates, as well as parents and students (Hujo and Carter 2019).

Social protection. Countries with effective health and social protection systems in place that provide universal coverage have been better prepared to respond to the COVID-19 crisis (UN 2020). Before the pandemic, 55% of the world's population—about four billion people—did not have any form of social protection. In 2020, 215 countries, areas and territories planned or implemented 1,414 social protection measures, however many of these remain temporary (Gentilini et al. 2020). Institutionalized, long-term, universal and human rights-based approaches to social protection that empower all segments of society to play a role in the development of their communities are key to reducing inequalities and building resilience in the face of future shocks and stressors (UN DESA 2020a). Scaled-up social protection systems need to be funded domestically through progressive fiscal systems; avoid entrenching gender or poverty stereotypes through conditionalities; and connect income transfer programmes with improved access to quality social services and decent work opportunities (UNRISD 2016 cited in Hujo and Carter 2019). Further expanding age, disability and gender-responsive social protection coverage, in particular to the most vulnerable, including informal workers, the rural poor, women, children, older persons, migrants, refugees and persons with disabilities, is among the most critical interventions that will need to be resourced and strengthened to generate synergies across the SDGs (UN DESA 2020a; Ladd and Bortolotti 2020).

Good governance. Governments' ability to maintain peace and ensure access to public services effectively and inclusively underpins sustainable development. Good domestic governance can support the creation of public goods that facilitate development, including infrastructure, and education and health care. Institutional reform can provide enduring means of resolving social conflict, contributing further to development opportunities and strengthening the foundation for even better governance (Hughes et al. 2014; Milante et al. 2016; Joshi et al. 2015).

Steps towards good governance. Progress from weak to strong governance entails three fundamental stages: (i) providing *security* against intra-state conflict through the legitimate use of force; (ii) building state *capacity* to govern effectively and efficiently through revenue collection and investment in public goods; and (iii) broadening and deepening *inclusion*, through the extension of democracy (Hughes et al. 2014; Bohl et al. 2017; Joshi et al. 2015; Milante et al. 2016). These dimensions of governance interact strongly with each other, and with human development and well-being, in either vicious or virtuous cycles (Hughes et al. 2014). Historically, these transitions have been largely sequential but increasingly proceed simultaneously, in mixed and varied patterns for many of the newly post-colonial states (Joshi et al. 2015). The transition towards good governance needs to avoid potential pitfalls: (i) some countries may get caught in a middle-income trap as the international comparative advantage of cheap labour disappears and there is a pressing need for difficult restructuring of their economies; (ii) the passage from very high youth bulges to more mature demographic structures, giving rise to unemployed and disaffected youth and social conflict; (iii) a rise in "partially democratic" regimes, which have historically been six times more likely than democracies, and two-and-a-half times more likely than autocracies, to experience societal conflict; (iv) the complicated transition in some countries away from heavy dependence on energy exports and other high-value raw materials (Joshi et al. 2015).

Promotion of human rights. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is grounded in international human rights law, yet compliance remains based on voluntary national reviews and peer-reviewed soft guidance. A briefing paper on "#ESCR AND #SDGS" recommends that UN human rights mechanisms provide guidance to states in the implementation of the SDGs, as well as to national, regional and global monitoring mechanisms (including the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development) to enhance participation, accountability, non-discrimination and transparency in the implementation of the SDGs (Golay 2020). This would give the SDGs a strong normative basis with binding legal obligations. States should also follow a human rights-based approach in the implementation of the SDGs. The case of Brazil, which made impressive progress in reducing hunger and extreme poverty between 2003 and 2015 by recognizing legal entitlements and reaching the most vulnerable in the implementation of social programmes, shows that this can be done (Golay 2020).

Increased access to technology and information. The success of the 2030 Agenda in achieving improved well-being requires deliberate engagement with the rapid advancement of technology (Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary General 2019). Artificial intelligence, blockchain, big data and other new technologies are central to a growing number of responses to sustainable development issues, ranging from tracking greenhouse gas emissions to monitoring global supply chains, to transnational efforts to combat human trafficking, as well as efforts to manage the COVID-19 pandemic (Bernards et al. 2020). For children and youth, technology affects many aspects of human well-being: the livelihood and employment opportunities of their parents or caretakers; public service provision (for example water, health, education, security and justice); and everyday life through communication, culture, political participation, social relations, and consumption behaviour (Hujo and Carter 2019). Access to many services, including education, health, emergency information and cash benefits, increasingly requires access to mobile phones and the internet as well as infrastructure such as electricity services to ensure connectivity (UN DESA 2020a).

However, technology also risks further entrenching existing inequalities (Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary General 2019). One major finding of a synthesis of discussions by scientists on "Technology-led Experiments in Sustainability Governance" submitted for this report is that private sector-led environmental and sustainability initiatives have a potential to reinforce power imbalances and exclusion. It is primarily private companies and the largest INGOs that have the resources to create and manipulate the technologies at the heart of novel solutions to global sustainability challenges. Smaller and more local actors, in particular from the global South, may be left out, entrenching existing disparities in access and participation. To ensure that local voices—particularly those of affected communities—remain at the forefront of technology-enhanced sustainability governance activities, ethical technology standards and frameworks must be developed and rolled-out in collaboration with local communities and stakeholders (Bernards et al. 2020).

Environmental sustainability. International cooperation, social movements, disasters and research all reinforce the consensus around and knowledge of the deep interdependencies between human well-being and environmental sustainability. The COVID-19 pandemic offers a chance for societies to re-evaluate norms and for policy makers to take concerted steps towards social and economic recoveries that invest in healthier, greener, more equitable futures—ones that expand human freedoms while easing planetary pressures (UNDP 2020b).

Partnerships and inclusive policy making. A broad alliance of actors and collaboration between civil society, business, governments and international organizations are necessary to implement the SDGs and to make sure that power asymmetries are not reproduced or reinforced in partnerships or policy-making processes. Responses to the pandemic demonstrate the importance of inclusive and responsive institutions, with strengthened decision-making power and agency for all individuals—especially youth, women, older persons, persons with disabilities and other marginalized groups. Inclusive processes of policy making can help generate broad support for policies and avoid neglecting key interests and issues (UN DESA 2020a; Ladd and Bortolotti 2020). This report builds on efforts to strengthen the linkages between science and practice, which require closer partnerships between research and policy communities (Box 16).

Box 16. Science to practice—Human well-being research and methodologies

This report builds on earlier initiatives to strengthen the transfer of science to practice to achieve the SDGs (Carter 2020) by synthesizing a broad range of evidence on multidimensional poverty and conflict. The compilation of this report also draws attention to several barriers which can hinder the translation of human well-being-related science into practice. First. the nature of the evidence is often context-specific and requires careful attention in its application beyond its research setting. Second, findings which relate to human well-being are often complex and sometimes contradictory (given their sensitivity to human behaviour and contextual variables). As a result, translating nuanced findings into a concise, decisive and coherent synopsis can be challenging. Third, not all social science research is focused on finding solutions. More critical traditions of research are relevant but limited in their direct applicability to policy formulation.

Several submissions to this report provide helpful insights on the opportunities and challenges of translating science to practice, particularly regarding issues of research supply and demand, and the methodological implications of well-being-related research which seeks to affect practice.

Improving research relevance. On the topic of land, a critical yet finite resource linked to many SDGs, a study by Ehrensperger et al. (2019) compared *knowledge supply* (quantified by a meta-study of research conducted by land system scientists since 2015) and *knowledge demand* (assessed by means of a survey among development organizations, policy makers, and other societal actors regarding their priorities for evidence). The study identified some areas of overlap, for example with regard to the interactions between climate change and food security. A major mismatch was identified in the near absence of explicit references to socioeconomic issues, namely poverty and gender, a key demand identified by societal partners. For land scientists, the study highlighted the need to deepen and foreground poverty and equity issues, and to engage with policy actors to identify which intersections critically require knowledge. For policy makers, the study emphasized gaps in understanding on the complexity of socio-ecological system dynamics and their interactions with development processes (Ehrensperger et al. 2019).

Embedding the science-to-practice cycle within a research project. The three-year PlaceAge research project conducted between 2016 and 2019 in three Brazilian cities aimed to understand which factors promote daily social involvement and a healthy urban life for the elderly. The third year was dedicated to an interactive process (with local government representatives as well as older persons involved in the research) of translating the findings from years 1 and 2 into local and national policies, practical guidelines and tools, to guide the development of cities and communities towards being age-friendly (Portella and Woolrych 2019).

Experimental evidence. Two studies included in this report reviewed experimental evidence in fragile contexts (Matanock 2020a; Nolan et al. 2019). This is a growing field of research which uses randomized controlled trials. Despite the opportunities for advancing the understanding of enduring peace, experimental evaluation in conflict-affected settings holds particular ethical challenges due to both the high stakes of peace and the sensitivity of the subjects. Further, the outcomes of peace-oriented interventions depend on both institutional change and behavioural responses, which means that the lessons may not travel even among post-conflict settings (Matanock 2020a).

Achieving synergies and minimizing trade-offs. As many examples included in this report have shown, advancing human well-being should be pursued in ways that generate synergies with other sets of goals. Using historically fast-developing countries as benchmark examples, a study by Moyer and Bohl modelled three alternative pathways (see Box 4) for achieving SDG targets: global technology, lifestyle change and decentralized governance. Though none of these interventions in isolation achieved all the SDG targets related to human well-being, combining the interventions in an "SDG Push" scenario would lead to higher levels of country-level SDG target achievement than any of the three scenarios individually. Combining interventions would lead to 63% of target values achieved by 2030 and 89% achieved by 2050, a notable improvement over the current path of development and a significant stride towards sustainable human development. This suggests that the three pathways can be pursued simultaneously to improve human development outcomes, with the most vulnerable countries as the focus of global efforts (Moyer and Bohl 2019). A similar more recent study also finds that a focused set of SDG investments over the next decade in social protection/welfare programmes, governance, digitalization and a green economy could not only prevent the rise of extreme poverty, but actually accelerate the development trajectory the world was on before the pandemic. This ambitious yet feasible "SDG Push" scenario would lift an additional 146 million people out of extreme poverty (including in fragile and conflict-affected countries), narrow the gender poverty gap, and reduce the female poverty headcount by 74 million (Hughes et al. 2020).

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic threatens to erase significant achievements in terms of individual and collective human well-being and capabilities, leaving in its wake greater levels of poverty, violence and conflict. However, cross-cutting solutions that support human development and prevent conflict, and which are strongly supported by a broad base of evidence, can advance progress towards the realization of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the coordinated expansion of freedoms for all.

Complementary policy recommendations highlighted in this report include the equitable and inclusive expansion of access to health, education and social protection; improvements in governance that ensures security against intra-state conflict, builds state capacity, broadens inclusion and progressively realizes human-rights; increased access to technology and information; environmental action; and partnerships which expand the scope of inclusive decision making.

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