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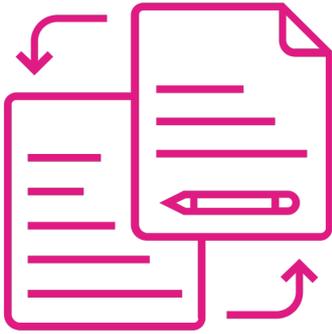
# Sustainable and Just Economies

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

March 2021



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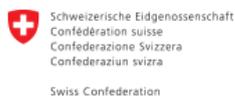
29 March-1 April 2021

## 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



# Sustainable and just economies

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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 patterns

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”. The report considers how to build **sustainable and just economies**—economies that promote growth along with an equitable distribution of benefits to the whole population, and which preserve rather than profit off of the natural environment. It includes recent findings on how the Covid-19 pandemic is impacting and, in many cases, exacerbating the challenge of building fairer economies. The report then presents some pathways towards achieving the SDGs that link to and reflect discussions within the research community. Four examples are proposed from International Geneva, of possible spaces for action maximize synergies in addressing the SDGs: the role of trade and technology; systems thinking; the circular economy; and strengthening the science-practice interface. The report concludes by highlighting the need for a holistic approach towards addressing the topic of sustainable and just economies under the SDGs, one that recognizes the complexity and interdependence of the global challenges to which the Goals are responding.

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## 1. Introduction

We are at a critical juncture when it comes to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Countries have made important progress on many SDGs over the past five years but we are, at the same time, facing numerous deep-seated and interconnected crises (UNSG 2020). While economic growth increased in the period before Covid-19, inequality within and between countries has deepened and planetary boundaries are being transgressed (Steffen et al. 2015).

The topic of “sustainable and just economies” stresses the “importance of economic growth that works against the growing concentration of wealth, preserves rather than profits off of the natural environment, and ensures an equitable distribution of benefits to the whole population” (UNRISD 2020a). The discussion around how to put social objectives and environmental sustainability at the heart of the economy is not new to the academic and policy space. See, for example, the literature on social and solidarity economies (SSE) (Utting 2018), circular economy (Stahel 2019), and doughnut economics (Raworth 2018). Yet, there has been a surge in interest in the topic as countries respond to the global Covid-19 pandemic. We have seen radical shifts in economic policy and development agendas worldwide, twinned with calls for “building back better” (e.g. UN DESA 2020). The pandemic acts not only as a trigger for rethinking these economic systems, but it also lays bare their deep flaws, as evidenced by the way in which the pandemic amplified existing inequalities and has the biggest impacts on the vulnerable and unprotected. While the 10 richest people in the world have seen their combined wealth increase by USD 500 billion since the pandemic began, hundreds of millions of people have been thrown into poverty and will need at least one decade to recover economically (Oxfam 2021).

This is a context that demands a reexamination of the attitudes and assumptions that currently underlie approaches to social and economic development, followed by the integration of alternative principles and practices in the policy responses. This is important because “economic policy and financial flows are powerful levers for the transformations necessary to achieving the SDGs by 2030” (Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary General 2019:32).

On this basis, the questions that guide this report are the following:

- What challenges are the world’s economic systems facing, and what are the root causes of those challenges?
- What are some policy recommendations for addressing the root causes?
- What opportunities does the Covid-19 pandemic offer for making economic systems more just, sustainable and resilient based on a strengthened science-practice interface?

### **Box 2. On this report and its objectives**

This report is focused on the theme of “sustainable and just economies.” The starting point for this report is that a fresh look at the way our economies function is needed to clear the way for a sustainable and just economic order. Economic systems should serve the common good rather than being a goal in and of themselves (Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary General 2019).

The report was written by compiling, synthesizing and comparing policy-relevant research and knowledge from International Geneva. It filters new evidence against the established body of research on this topic, aided by desk research, and highlights gaps or imbalances in the evidence submitted.

The objectives of this report are to:

- achieve a better understanding of the state of the art of research on sustainable and just economies;
- compile, synthesize and compare policy-relevant research and knowledge from International Geneva and producing a comprehensive report accessible to policy makers;
- channel findings from this process directly into policy-making processes at the HLPF and beyond; and
- support efforts to achieve the SDGs with policy-relevant research.

**Box 3. Sustainable and just economies – Why are the SDGs clustered in this way?**

“Sustainable and just economies” is the second of six “entry points” for a systemic approach to realizing the SDGs laid out by the UN’s 2019 Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR) (Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary General 2019). Accordingly, this report, focusing on sustainable and just economies, explores the linkages between and systemic approaches to realizing SDG 5 (gender equality), SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth), SDG 10 (reduced inequalities), SDG 12 (responsible consumption and production), SDG 13 (climate action) and SDG 17 (partnerships for the Goals and means of implementation).

These SDGs are central to eradicating economic hardship across multiple dimensions, reducing poverty, 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 safeguarding the natural environment.

Clustering the SDGs assists decision makers in addressing 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 more substantive structural changes in all policy areas (UNRISD 2016). 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).

## 2. Stocktake of Challenges and Their Root Causes

In working towards achieving the SDGs by 2030, we must ensure that the future is sustainable and just. This section explores key challenges the world is currently facing in realizing sustainable and just economic systems through the lens of the various SDGs critical to this objective, and is attentive to their interlinkages.

### 2.1 Rising inequality

In his 2020 Nelson Mandela Speech, UN Secretary-General António Guterres said that inequality, an issue which “defines our time,” risks destroying the world’s economies and societies (Guterres 2020). The world’s 2,153 billionaires have as much wealth as 60% of the world’s population, or 4.6 billion people (Oxfam 2020). Despite continued economic growth, high levels of inequality persist between and within countries. These inequalities are based on differences in wealth, gender, nationality, ethnic or racial background, and geography (HLPF 2020a).

It was noted at the 2020 High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) that when it comes to SDG 10 (reduced inequalities),

monitoring indicates that there has been some progress with over half of countries with comparable data during the period 2012 to 2017 seeing incomes of the bottom 40 percent of the population experience a growth rate of income higher than the national average. However, most of the benefits of economic growth are still being captured by the top 1 percent, rather than being shared more equitably. (HLPF 2020a:3)

When the rate of return on capital is greater than the rate of economic growth over the long term, the result is concentration of wealth, and this unequal distribution of wealth causes social and economic instability (Piketty and Goldhammer 2014).

Inequality is linked to shorter, unhealthier and unhappier lives; it increases the rate of violence, imprisonment, addiction and obesity<sup>1</sup> (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009). Of all crimes, those involving violence are most closely related to high levels of inequality—within a country, within regions and even within cities. Consumerism, isolation, alienation, social estrangement and anxiety all follow

<sup>1</sup> Global overeating has become a bigger problem than world hunger with more people now obese than underweight (NCD Risk Factor Collaboration 2016).

from inequality, and so cannot rightly be made a matter of individual management (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009) (see Box 4).

#### **Box 4. Inequality, poverty and economic growth**

Inequality is a social ill that causes suffering to many. At the same time, poverty remains a huge challenge in and of itself, and it has complex interactions with sustainable consumption and production, the environment, and work and growth. Inequality and poverty are economically counterproductive and affect economic growth for a number of reasons:

**Political economy:** inequality creates political instability which leads to lower investment and more resources being wasted bargaining over the distribution of rents. Instability also reduces government's ability to react to shocks, and—in its more extreme form—leads to direct and opportunity costs due to violence.

**Economic factors:** Due to limited access to credit, the poor often cannot afford the minimum initial investment in education or other investments, or cannot get insurance for their investments, even if they are profitable, since they lack collateral. Initial asset distribution has a negative effect on subsequent economic growth.

**Social factors:** Sources of disadvantage are often intersectional cutting across gender, nationality, race, ethnicity geography, and other factors. These disadvantages impact peoples' opportunities, well-being and access to essential services (e.g. social protection, schooling and learning opportunities, decent work, nutrition services, digital technologies). These will in turn affect the development and resilience of communities and their ability to build capabilities.

(Naschold 2002; Chaplin et al. 2019)

## **2.2 The lack of decent work and myopic views on economic growth**

In the context of the SDGs, sustainable development and eradicating poverty requires economic growth and job creation (SDG 8) (Milante et al. 2016; Zytek 2020). Access to decent work and the protection of labour rights are key factors that underpin the achievement of this SDG (OECD 2019).

As things stand, the availability of decent work and working conditions in the formal sector have declined (HLPF 2020a; HLPF 2020b). Austerity measures after the 2008/2009 global economic and financial crisis have further deepened socioeconomic divides. Downward trends in labour's global share of national income reflect an increase in pay inequality within countries, "with the lowest 50 percent of workers receiving only 6.4 percent of global pay" (HLPF 2020a).

There has also been a significant shift in the job market, in terms of how income is generated. Manufacturing jobs in the global North have disappeared (in the United States, 90% of manufacturing job losses were due to automation and 10% due to offshoring [Hicks and Devaraj 2015]). New jobs in the services industries are often less productive, less well paid and less secure than the jobs that they replaced (Reich 2016). These jobs are also predominantly held by populations facing other forms of discrimination and exclusion, including women, ethnic minorities and migrants. Migrant workers make an increasingly significant contribution to socioeconomic development. The McKinsey Global Institute, for example, found that "in 2015, migrants are estimated to have contributed over 9 percent, or USD 6.7 trillion, to global GDP" (HLPF 2020a). Yet, these workers are predominantly excluded from social protection systems and are not given adequate labour rights.

It is notable that in SDG 8, economic growth is expressed in terms of gross domestic product (GDP). While economic indicators such as GDP are taken as the main measure of success in almost all countries, they either completely overlook central questions of equity, sustainability, well-being, health and resilience, or deem them less important. GDP includes values for many goods and services that either do not contribute or have negative implications for human well-being (Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary General 2019). Production of armaments, industries that pollute, and the prison system, for example, all add to GDP. At the

same time, GDP excludes critical elements of human progress, including healthy ecosystems, unpaid care work and reduced inequalities.

### **2.3 Gender inequality**

Achieving gender equality by 2030 as per SDG 5 requires urgent action to eliminate the many root causes of discrimination that still curtail women's rights in the private and public spheres. Gender inequalities extend across economic, cultural and social spheres. Globally, women aged 25-34 are 25% more likely to live in extreme poverty than men of the same age (HLPF 2020a). In social protection systems, gender gaps and biases remain predominant (HLPF 2020a). Persistent inequality between men and women is also reflected in high levels of gender-based violence, sexual exploitation, harassment and abuse.

Within the work force, women continue to face a pay gap, occupational segregation and discrimination. In 2020, women earned 81 cents for every dollar earned by men (PayScale 2020), indicative of the fact that women are concentrated in lower-paying jobs, in particular in the informal sector. And women are also employed in the more precarious sectors of the informal economy—domestic work, home-based work and contributing family work—compared with men (ILO 2018). At the same time, a predominant part of women's work fails to be recorded due to the way in which care and domestic work are missed or undervalued in measures of GDP, where women spent 3 times as many hours as men on unpaid care work (UN Women 2020). Further, with less access to education, technology and financing, their economic empowerment and opportunities for advancement remain limited. Limits on women's property rights also constrain their capacity to generate wealth and assets, with significant implications for gender inequalities (HLPF 2020a). All in all, women are consistently cut out of the benefits of economic growth, while at the same time their contribution to it is deeply undervalued.

### **2.4 Unsustainable production and consumption**

In 2020, we needed the resources of 1.6 planet Earths to support humanity's demand on the Earth's ecosystems (WWF 2020). Patterns of production and consumption need to urgently be transformed to ensure the rights of all (including future beings) to access and make the most out of global commons such as land, soil, water (Ghosh 2010), air and the biosphere's capacity to process greenhouse gases, within the limits of what is sustainable. Achieving the SDGs depends on restoring the stock of natural capital (GGKP 2020).<sup>2</sup>

Consumption patterns are not the same the world over. The richest 1% of the world's population is responsible for more than twice as much carbon pollution as the 3.1 billion people who make up the poorest half of humanity (Oxfam 2020). Dominant patterns of production and consumption not only perpetuate but underpin unsustainable development and inequality.

### **2.5 Climate change and crossing of other planetary boundaries (SDGs 13, 14 and 15)**

Climate change is part of an even larger environmental crisis that includes species extinction, ocean acidification, deforestation, land degradation, and pollution by chemicals and plastics. These environmental challenges prompt the following question: how to live sustainably and justly on this Earth (QUNO 2016)?

Continuous growth is impossible on a planet with finite resources where we are already surpassing several planetary boundaries which affect both life below water (SDG 14) and life on land (SDG 15) (Jackson 2009). The world economy is almost five times the size it was half a century ago, and this expansion has already been accompanied by the degradation of an estimated 75% of the world's land areas (IPBES 2018). Humans account for about 36% of the biomass of all mammals. And while domesticated livestock, mostly cows and pigs, account for 60%, wild mammals account for only 4% (Bar-On et al. 2018). Such numbers put the imperative

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<sup>2</sup> Natural capital can be defined as the world's stocks of natural assets which include geology, soil, air, water and all living things. It is from this natural capital that humans derive a wide range of services, often called ecosystem services, which make human life possible.

of eternal economic growth into question. The association between economic growth and waste production, as demonstrated by the growing per capita carbon dioxide emissions at the global level, is illustrative.

In order to meet targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, the environmental sustainability of production and consumption patterns need to be radically altered. Such a transformation will need to go beyond concepts like “green growth” and “green new deals” which are still based on the idea that we can decouple economic growth from environmental impacts even though decoupling has been debunked repeatedly.<sup>3</sup>

## 2.6 Intersecting issues: human rights abuses and conflict

The emphasis on the place of social and environmental objectives in economies has wide-ranging implications for human rights, peace and security. For example, the human rights implications of exploitation of workers, including migrants, within the global economy, and the lack of remedy, cannot be missed (Joshi et al. 2020). Economic activities that disregard human interests can also fuel conflict, for example through the demand for resources. The arms industry remains one of the biggest sectors in the global economy, generating economic growth at the expense of enormous human suffering (QUNO 2020a). Acknowledging that predominant economic activities and practices sit among the complex drivers of injustice and conflict is crucial to strengthening coordination and integration across development, peace and human rights, and in holistically working towards the achievement of the SDGs.

## 3. Pathways Towards Achieving the SDGs

The previous section set out some key challenges related to sustainable and just economies. This section explores some responses to these challenges and more specific ways forward.

### 3.1 Seeing GDP growth as a means to an end

The topic of “sustainable and just economies” asks us to reimagine economic activities and practices, so that they are not simply an engine of growth but give primacy to social and environmental objectives (Milante et al. 2016; Utting 2018). GDP growth should be a means to ends and not an end in itself. The pursuit of economic prosperity often means more pollution and other strains on ecosystems. Yet, a growing GDP can also be helpful in achieving goals such as education, better health and environmental cleanups, especially in developing countries (Thore and Tarverdyan 2020).

The Environmental Performance Index (EPI), for example, shows that environmental quality is associated with wealth (GDP per capita), where economic prosperity makes it possible for nations to invest in policies and programmes that lead to environmentally desirable outcomes. For example, building the necessary infrastructure to provide clean drinking water and sanitation, reduce ambient air pollution, control hazardous waste, and respond to public health crises yields large returns for human well-being. The EPI suggests that countries need not sacrifice sustainability for economic stability, or vice versa (Wendling et al. 2020). This phenomenon may hold when there is a limited number of wealthy countries in the world, but the question is whether the resources are available for lifting the wealth of all countries to the levels where it starts to support environmental protection, especially as decoupling economic growth from environmental impacts has been debunked (also see section 2.5 above).

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, European Environmental Bureau (EEB) 2019 report “Decoupling debunked.” UNEP’s International Resource Panel calculated in 2017 that even with a global carbon price of USD 573 per metric ton, a resource extraction tax, and rapid technological innovation spurred by strong government support, we would still significantly increase our natural resource use by 2050.

Having a more diverse “dashboard” of indicators for human and environmental well-being might help us see GDP growth more as a means than as an end in itself.<sup>4</sup> While many alternatives or complements to GDP already exist (Happy Planet Index, Gross National Happiness, Human Development Index), a set of systems indicators would more precisely reflect how a country performs than one aggregate number (Stiglitz et al. 2009; Hoekstra 2020). “The United Nations and other multilateral organizations could further promote measures other than GDP that reflect a more comprehensive assessment of overall national well-being” (Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary General 2019:128). Ensuring that economic growth is inclusive, generating decent jobs to which all are given equal access, is also a crucial element in ensuring that this growth contributes to the achievement of the SDGs over the long term (HLPF 2020a).

### 3.2 Re-valuing resources

Global development that is both just and sustainable requires fair sharing and responsible use of the world’s natural resources. The question of who benefits from the extraction of natural resources is central to this agenda. Dominant forms of economic activity and practice currently depend on the exploitation of resources along global value chains that are rooted in colonial histories (Acemoglu and Robinson 2017). There is an enormous differential between countries in the global South that are resource rich, and those in the global North that extract and profit from them. It is important that fair prices are paid to producers and that they can benefit from the value added to their products along the supply chain, for example by local processing.

Prices should be fair not only in terms of accounting for social cost, but also in how they reflect environmental externalities. The world’s resources are being overconsumed because consumers are not paying the full value of products. To overcome this the full cost of resources should be included in products and processes. Key here is the “polluter pays” principle, which was formally adopted by the OECD in 1972 and was included in the Rio Declaration in 1992.<sup>5</sup> For example, carbon pricing that is ambitious, socially fair and environmentally effective has an important role to fulfill in addressing greenhouse gas emissions and fossil fuel use (Baranzini et al. 2016).

### 3.3 Redistribution to address inequalities

For a just world with reduced inequality (SDG 10), in which people’s human rights are respected and their basic needs are met, resources and profits must be distributed more equally. Reducing inequality demands a sharp focus on the multidimensional nature of poverty and inequality and the intersection between disadvantages (HLPF 2020a). Redistribution is especially relevant in the light of exacerbated inequalities due to the Covid-19 pandemic and as part of calls to “build forward better.”

A more equitable distribution of natural resources, which takes into account the structural factors that play a role in inequality, will be needed to raise the global standard of living. Achieving this with a world population that is expected to stabilize at between 9 and 10 billion people would imply a much less resource-intensive lifestyle for many people in wealthy countries.

The intersections between inequality and climate vulnerability both within and between countries must be taken into account in steps towards achieving the SDGs, because the most vulnerable experience the greatest impacts from climate change although they have been the least responsible for its causes. It is in this context that addressing climate change must avoid the “triple injustice” of implementing “green” policies that reproduce or further exacerbate inequalities and negative distributional consequences for already disadvantaged groups (Cook et al. 2012; UNRISD 2016). In the global North, for example, low-income households often do not

<sup>4</sup> Stiglitz and his co-authors (2009), for example, identify eight dimensions—material living standards (income, consumption and wealth); education; health; work and other personal activities; political voice and governance; social connections and relationships; the natural environment both now and in the future; and insecurity, both economic and physical—as key towards assessing people’s well-being in a more comprehensive manner.

<sup>5</sup> The “polluter pays” principle is the commonly accepted principle in environmental law that those who produce pollution should bear the costs of managing it to prevent damage to human health and the environment.

benefit from subsidies that promote renewable energy generation due to the need for expensive upfront investments, or because they do not own their homes but rent instead. At the same time, these low-income households face rising electricity prices. In the global South, some green economy projects have led to “land grabbing” and the displacement of people for “sustainable” infrastructure, payments for ecosystem services, and biofuel projects. Such projects can involve violations of customary land rights and the rights of indigenous populations. Green economy approaches have often paid limited attention to the unequal or problematic social consequences of these policies, the structural determinants of inequality and unsustainable behaviour, or the social and power relations that shape policies, processes and outcomes (UNRISD 2016).

Effective tax policies can not only generate resources for public expenditures and investments within the regions where economic activity takes place, but also support the reduction of inequalities through redistribution. “Predictable and transparent tax rules can also reduce illicit financial flows and increase investment in sustainable goods and services” (Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary General 2019:33).<sup>6</sup> Measures may include more progressive personal income taxes,<sup>7</sup> a net wealth tax or removing loopholes in tax evasion. International collaboration in this area is of particular importance in the context of increased distribution of economic activity across national jurisdictions (HLPF 2020a). The renewed focus on debt restructuring and concessional finance following Covid-19 hold significant implications for future distribution objectives (Humphrey and Prizzon 2020).

Attracting private capital and encouraging official development assistance (ODA) towards sectors and activities that enhance human well-being and reduce environmental externalities in developing countries is also critical. “It is estimated that developing countries face an annual investment gap of USD 2.5 trillion relating to Sustainable Development Goals implementation” (Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary General 2019: 32). While microcredits and access to financial services can play an important role in poverty reduction, financialization and fintech have significant limitations and do not offer comprehensive solutions (Bernards 2019).

For example, following the privatization of mining companies and increased financialization of the copper value chain in Zambia, a greater focus on profit led to the erosion of the rights and welfare of workers. This included the casualization of labour and greater use of informal contracts. The emphasis on profit maximization generally reduced the consideration of broader societal and environmental goals, although to some extent there was an erosion of gender stereotypes and the gendered division of labour (UNRISD 2020c).

Inequalities based on gender call for a re-distribution of opportunities between men and women in addition to equal distribution of economic resources. Discriminatory laws need to change; legislation must be implemented that proactively advances gender equality and facilitates participation from all parts of society (UN 2020).

### 3.4 Social protection and labour rights

All countries need a re-design of the welfare state and social policy delivery (Cottam 2020). Academic discussions around alternate forms of economic activity and practice, such as platform or social and solidarity economies, are particularly prescient. Ensuring policy coherence is important in this context to ensure that ambitious social policy objectives are not constrained by regressive taxation, austerity policies or subsidies to extractive industries (Utting 2018). Current welfare systems do not take the changing nature of the labour market and developments such as

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<sup>6</sup> In a World Economic Forum blogpost, the CEO of the Institute for Sustainable Investing, Audrey Choi, writes that “Sustainable investing – once regarded as a niche – is now fully mainstream, accounting for \$1 out of every \$3 under professional management, or \$30 trillion globally. More strikingly, in 2019 and 2020, sustainable investing has outperformed traditional investing, delivering both higher returns and lower downside volatility throughout the bull markets, bear markets, and extraordinarily volatile markets alike.” (Audrey Choi, WEF blogpost, 24 January 2021). Available at: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/01/what-changes-to-global-and-regional-cooperation-will-2021-bring-here-s-what-business-leaders-say/>

<sup>7</sup> In OECD countries, the top personal income tax rate fell from an average of 62% in 1981 to 35% in 2015 (Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary General 2019).

gig economy, platform economy, temporary workers, etc. into account (also see Box 5). It is crucial here that social protection is expanded to cover those in the most vulnerable situations (including informal economy workers, migrant workers, rural workers, racial, ethnic and religious minorities, and Indigenous peoples)(HLPF 2020a). Availability and access of social protection are the two key components in advancing coverage, under which schemes such as universal social protection and universal basic income may be taken into account (HLPF 2020b).

#### **Box 5 The platform economy**

The platform economy (also known as collaborative platform economy or sharing economy) enables interactions among distributed groups of people supported by digital platforms. Such digital platforms allow people to exchange (matching supply and demand), share and collaborate in the consumption and production of activities leveraging capital and goods. The platform economy is growing rapidly and exponentially, creating great interest while also becoming a top priority for governments around the globe.

The platform economy is also creating high expectations for its potential to contribute to a sustainable development of society, but there is confusion about platforms that present themselves as collaborative when, actually, they are not. The disruptive impact of the best-known platform economy models, such as Uber and Airbnb, is provoking huge controversy (Meagher forthcoming). The alternative to such “platform capitalism” is generated around cooperativism and the social and solidarity economy (SSE).

The social solidarity economy is conceptualized as an alternative to capitalism and aims to transform the social and economic system. SSE has the ability to take the best practices that exist in our present system (such as efficiency, use of technology and knowledge) and transform them to serve the welfare of the community based on different values and goals (Utting 2018; Yi 2017). . In this sense, “platform cooperativism” adopts the principles of cooperativism and the values of SSE to promote an alternative to platform capitalism.

Governance and data dimensions are less present in the SDGs than ICT for Development was in the Millennium Development Goals, although sustainably designed platform economies could contribute to the SDGs if economic transparency, labour rights and data commons are warranted. The digital perspective of SDGs in turn should be improved to intertwine better with sustainable platforms (Fuster Morell et al. 2020).

Sustainable and just economies will need to rebalance the skewed rewards flowing to labour and capital, redistributing greater profits to the former. In doing so, governments will need to take into account the gendered, ethnic and racial dimensions of inequality within the labour market (HLPF 2020a). It is important to explore ways to obtain redistribution in the course of transitioning to a more sustainable world economy (Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary General 2019). For example, for a “just transition”, governments, the private sector and civil society should explore equitable employment opportunities for workers displaced in the shift to the low-carbon economy<sup>8</sup> (see also Morena et al. 2019, Krause and Roth 2018). Those working in carbon- and resource-intensive industries should be offered social protection coverage, education and re-skilling, and support should be available to their communities (HLPF 2020a).

### **3.5 Inclusive policy making**

Including the perspectives and concerns of marginalized and vulnerable populations, including women, youth, minorities, persons with disabilities, and indigenous peoples, is vital to just and sustainable development (UNDP 2018). Children in particular are important agents and beneficiaries in the 2030 Agenda. Many children are among the most vulnerable groups affected by poverty, inequality, conflict and climate change. At the same time, many of them will reach adulthood during the realization of the 2030 Agenda. New transformative approaches to policy should target the underlying generative framework of social injustice as opposed to implementing affirmative remedies that simply seek to alleviate the symptoms (Hujo and Carter 2019).

<sup>8</sup> For example, QUNO (2020d) offers an example on the establishment of a Just Transition Commission in Scotland “to ensure the creation of new green jobs while committing the Scottish government to eliminating poverty and reducing emissions without leaving workers in pollutive industries behind.”

Enabling multi-stakeholder access to the design and implementation process of public policies is crucial to ensure that these policies are not only reflective but also inclusive of groups and geographical areas in vulnerable situations (HLPF 2020a). Active citizenship and participatory democracy comprise a significant component of processes looking to transform economic systems and place social and environmental objectives at their centre (Utting 2018).<sup>9</sup>

The collection and meaningful disaggregation of data forms a key component of inclusive and participatory approaches to policy making. Data is needed to identify patterns of discrimination and identify groups who are marginalized and underrepresented (HLPF 2020a; HLPF 2020b). Public consultation processes are a way to ensure affected and vulnerable groups are adequately represented in public dialogue (HLPF 2020b). It is only through inclusive dialogue that sustainable and just economic actions and practices can be developed and maintained over the long term (UN 2016).

### 3.6 Good governance

Good governance is an SDG in itself: Goal 16 calls for promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, providing access to justice for all, and building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. Governance is recognized as the means to a broader end as it is an essential lever of the systemic transformations needed to achieve all 17 SDGs (Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary General 2019).

Joshi and his co-authors (2015) propose a conceptualization of governance based on the idea of three fundamental transitions in which currently high-income countries have made long, halting and somewhat sequential historical shifts, but with which most post-colonial states today struggle simultaneously: (i) providing security against intra-state conflict; (ii) building state capacity to govern effectively and efficiently; and (iii) broadening and deepening inclusion.

Bohl and his co-authors (2017) note that governance is the linchpin for sustainable development in Southern Africa. Good governance—characterized by a government’s ability to maintain peace and ensure access to public services effectively and inclusively—could be a catalyst for Southern Africa’s development. On the other hand, poor governance—characterized instead by unpredictable levels of violent conflict, corruption, ineffectiveness and discriminatory practices—could severely restrict, and even reverse, the region’s development.

Bernards and his co-authors (2020) are cautious about the use of technology in multi-stakeholder governance initiatives as it tends to reduce rather than expand the set of actors, increasing instead of reducing challenges to participation and transparency, and reinforcing rather than transforming existing forms of power relations. Without recognizing and attempting to address these limits, technology-led multi-stakeholder initiatives will remain less effective in addressing the complexity and uncertainty surrounding global sustainability governance. Given the high complexity and uncertainty surrounding sustainable governance initiatives, Bernards and his co-authors argue that it is not technological considerations but ethical, social and political considerations that should be given foremost priority in such initiatives.

Re-valuing the role of the public sector in order to change the status quo begs the bigger question: “what makes up economic value?”. It is essential to recognize the investments and creativity provided by a vast array of economic actors beyond the private sector. Pharmaceuticals (including vaccines against Covid-19), the internet and renewable energy, for example, were all developed as a result of enormous amounts of government investment and risk-taking, and have relied on public institutions and infrastructure. Correctly appreciating this collective effort in creating value would help to ensure that the economic benefits of innovation are distributed more equitably (Mazzucato 2018). The public sector also has an important role to play in incentivizing and legislating for improved corporate behavior. The slow evolution of reporting

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<sup>9</sup> The principle of public participation also forms a key tenant of environmental treaties such as the Aarhus Agreement and the Escazu Agreement, as well as Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration. These instruments are key to promoting environmental democracy. QUNO (2015) focuses on the potential of environmental rights agreements in preventing violent conflict.

standards demonstrates that more government engagement is needed to incentivize corporations to implement such standards and to put regulations in place towards this end (UNRISD 2020b).

## 4. Examples: Transformative Actions That Maximize Synergies

The previous two sections set out some key challenges related to sustainable and just economies and explore responses to these challenges. This section suggests a set of transformative actions that can maximize synergies between actions undertaken for achieving the SDGs. These actions include global cooperation, especially through trade and technological cooperation; addressing complexity and raising systems awareness; and applying systems thinking, especially for sustainable infrastructure and the circular economy.

### 4.1 Global cooperation: The role of trade and technology

At the international level, narrow nationalism must give way to global cooperation because global challenges require global, multilateral responses. A rules-based system should ensure that actions align with the shared values of human rights, peace and sustainable development. The multilateral trading system in particular needs to be updated so that it can play an enabling role in preventing and addressing crises such as pandemics and climate change. The SDGs are a suitable framework for remedying such challenges both at the national and at the global level (QUNO 2020a).

Trade is referred to in the SDGs mostly as a means of implementation (MoI) in SDG 17 (for an overview of the role of trade in the SDGs see Bellmann and Tipping 2015). Historically, trade has played an important role in economic development and poverty reduction by providing access to new markets and facilitating the sharing of technologies and ingenuity. Trade in sustainable technologies can facilitate greater global adoption and technology dissemination, assist in scaling up such technologies, and accelerate broader progress towards sustainable development if done in a targeted manner.

Moyer and Bohl (2019), for example, model three different pathways towards achieving the SDGs: (i) Global Technology (GT) scenario: large-scale technologically optimal solutions and a high level of international coordination (e.g. through trade liberalization); (ii) Decentralized Solutions (DS) scenario (e.g. local energy production and equitable access to food); and (iii) Consumption Change (CC) scenario (e.g. limiting meat intake and a less energy-intensive lifestyle).<sup>10</sup> Moyer and Bohl (2019) find that the best results can be achieved by pursuing all three pathways simultaneously.

Trade policy can be used to forge new partnerships and create shared interests among countries as well as open up employment opportunities and lower the costs of environmental goods and services (WTO and UNEP 2018). One major achievement in trade in recent years has been the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA), which is set to contribute to creating jobs and fostering sustainable wealth as depicted in the African Union's (2015) *Agenda 2063*, a strategic framework for inclusive and sustainable development on the African continent.

Subsidies can be applied or eliminated to support the protection of scarce natural resources and reduce environmental degradation, for example, by limiting overfishing or unsustainable agricultural practices. "Policies that encourage trade in sustainably produced goods and services with fair prices, decent labour conditions and wages, and environmentally friendly production techniques can significantly boost progress toward the SDGs" (Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary General 2019:32).

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<sup>10</sup> Also see Wiedmann et al. (2020).

The Agreement establishing the World Trade Organization (WTO) already provides a robust mandate for work on trade and sustainable development. Its preamble says that trade and economic relations should be conducted with a view to raising standards of living, “while allowing for the optimal use of the world’s resources in accordance with the objective of sustainable development” (WTO 1994). It is important to make this purpose of trade and of the WTO effective and inclusive to ensure the prosperity of humankind on a healthy planet.

Some topics that could be entry points for WTO transformation are: eliminating harmful fisheries subsidies,<sup>11</sup> trade and climate change (e.g. eliminating fossil fuel subsidies)<sup>12</sup>, trade and the circular economy, fostering trade in environmental technologies, sustainable plastics economy and greening value chains (QUNO 2020b).

The Covid-19 pandemic provides an impetus for accelerating these reforms within the context of a wider rethink of our economic models and paradigms. It is critical that trade contributes to an economic recovery that addresses inequality and environmental sustainability (QUNO 2020b). The current crisis should be used to transition towards a different kind of multilateral trading system; a system which contributes to fairly shared prosperity, exemplifies policy coherence (see also OECD 2019), and has a positive impact on the environment.

New negotiations, such as those on the Agreement on Climate Change, Trade and Sustainability (ACCTS) show the potential for fresh thinking. Another opportunity for shifting the course of the WTO is the recent establishment of an Informal Working Group concerning Trade and Environmental Sustainability Structured Discussions (TESSD), in which civil society may also get more opportunities to participate than in previous WTO deliberations. To support these efforts, the Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO) in Geneva has initiated a consortium among a group of civil society organizations in support of the TESSD.

## 4.2 Addressing complexity and raising systems awareness

The challenges which the SDGs seek to address can only be managed through collective action that starts long before they become full-blown crises and must be acted upon not as singular threats but as a potential series of shocks.

However, currently dominant economic theories disregard complexity, including the environmental and human costs (Polasky et al. 2019). Systems thinking can assist in viewing complex economic systems from a broad perspective and can help to identify leverage and entry points for change and address the multiple root causes that drive economic injustice and ecological destruction (QUNO 2020a). Applying systems insights enables policy coherence for sustainable development (OECD 2019).

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<sup>11</sup> The negotiations on eliminating harmful fisheries are currently the only ongoing multilateral negotiations at the WTO and are so important for the future of the global trade body that some experts have suggested that “the fate of the WTO and global trade hangs on fish” (see also Bacchus and Manak 2020). Government leaders agreed in 2015 in SDG 14.6 that they would “by 2020, prohibit certain forms of fisheries subsidies which contribute to overcapacity and overfishing, and eliminate subsidies that contribute to IUU fishing, and refrain from introducing new such subsidies, recognizing that appropriate and effective special and differential treatment for developing and least developed countries should be an integral part of the WTO fisheries subsidies negotiation.”

<sup>12</sup> Some estimate that fossil fuel subsidies led to extra consumption that was responsible for a staggering 36% of global carbon emissions between 1980 and 2010 (Stefanski 2014). Removing fossil fuel subsidies and applying appropriate taxation could reduce emissions by 28% globally (Coady et al. 2019). SDG 12 provides a mandate for rationalizing “inefficient” fossil fuel subsidies as Target 12.C reads: “Rationalize inefficient fossil-fuel subsidies that encourage wasteful consumption by removing market distortions, in accordance with national circumstances, including by restructuring taxation and phasing out those harmful subsidies, where they exist, to reflect their environmental impacts, taking fully into account the specific needs and conditions of developing countries and minimizing the possible adverse impacts on their development in a manner that protects the poor and the affected communities.”

To foster systems awareness, we need consultative processes in which all participants strive to transcend their respective points of view to respond to systemic challenges and opportunities. Such consultative processes can draw from appreciative enquiry, systems and empathy mapping, design thinking, theory U, and quiet diplomacy (Boardman and Sauser 2013; Britain Yearly Meeting 2020; Scharmer 2016; Stavros and Cheri Torres 2018). Higher education has an essential role to play in fostering systems thinking and more holistic solutions (see Box 6).

#### **Box 6. The role of higher education in sustainable and just economies**

Education plays a key role in building the capacity for systems thinking and finding holistic solutions. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), including business schools and economics faculties, remain key stakeholders and at the core of innovation for sustainable development. HEIs play two roles in this regard. First, through their teaching mandate, they impart knowledge. Second, they are innovators themselves through their research mandates.

HEIs are part of the communities, governments, private and public corporation they expressly and implicitly seek to inform, educate, advise and/or assist. To foster the achievement of the SDGs, HEIs could go beyond the transfer of knowledge and focus more on the skills and competencies of students, and they could truly implement a trans-, inter- or multidisciplinary (TIM) approach to examining contemporary challenges as means of advancing plausible holistic solutions (Nhamo and Mjimba 2020).

In addition, universities have an important role to play a role in overcoming inequalities. Participation in tertiary education has increased significantly all around the world. Social aspirations and the expectation of better labour market opportunities that should come with a university degree are rising. However, these assumptions rely on certain economic and social conditions being fulfilled, some of which have worsened in the age of jobless growth and the Covid-19 pandemic. The question is how higher education can truly be a key to social mobility in countries across the Global South (UNRISD forthcoming).

Sustainability challenges, such as climate change, require systemic solutions. We need changes in patterns of demand and consumption, including through regulation and consumer education, to reduce environmental impact (Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary General 2019). But even though individual behaviour (in terms of travel and consumption) changed for a brief period due to the Covid-19 pandemic, emissions and air pollution went down by a relatively small percentage and are rebounding quickly. It is therefore essential that individual behaviour change and systemic change go hand in hand.<sup>13</sup> About half of each individual's emissions are beyond that individual's control because they arise from public infrastructure and services that fulfil societal needs. In sum, a new paradigm should take hold, one which recognizes the interconnected nature of our global challenges and our prosperity. Whether the issue is poverty, the proliferation of weapons, health, global trade, environmental sustainability, human rights, corruption or the rights of minority populations, it is clear that none of the problems facing global governance can be adequately addressed in isolation from one another (BIC 2005). To make the necessary changes to radically improve the lives of all we need to be effective systems changers and systems leaders (QUNO 2020a).

### **4.3 Systems thinking: Sustainable infrastructure and Circular economy models**

One area where systems thinking and holistic, integrated approaches are particularly needed is sustainable infrastructure development (QUNO 2020c; see Box 7). UNEP (2019) recommends three ways that the international community can promote the use of integrated approaches to sustainable infrastructure at a system scale.

First, there is a need to make visible infrastructure's centrality to the 2030 Agenda, place integrated approaches to sustainable infrastructure on the global policy agenda as a distinctive

<sup>13</sup> To illustrate the scale of the challenge: Although global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions were reduced by 17% during April 2020 as a result of the Covid-19 lockdown, early predictions suggest that they may only fall 4-8% for 2020 as a whole. We would need to continue this trend in reducing emissions for the next 10 years to have any chance of staying below 2 degrees Celsius of warming. See Le Quéré et al. (2020).

item, and mobilize the research community in demonstrating the benefits of upstream, macro-level, integrated infrastructure planning.

Second, there is a need to consolidate existing tools available for sustainable infrastructure development, analyse and address gaps where tools are lacking for integrated approaches, and provide guidance for their use in different contexts.

Third, there is a need to work together to strengthen the technical and institutional capacity of developing countries and countries with economies in transition to adopt and apply integrated approaches to sustainable infrastructure in support of the 2030 Agenda.

#### **Box 7 Characteristics and advantages of sustainable infrastructure**

Integrated approaches to sustainable infrastructure have the following characteristics.

1. They consider the interconnections among infrastructure systems, sectors, levels of governance, spatial scales, and the environmental, social, and economic aspects of sustainability across the entire life-cycle of infrastructure systems (i.e. early planning to decommissioning).
2. They do so as far upstream in decision-making processes as possible, when alternatives are still technically, politically and economically feasible.
3. They incorporate stakeholder consultation and public participation from the outset, so that as wide a range of potential opportunities and challenges as possible are captured in the analysis.

Integrated approaches have three main advantages over “siloed” infrastructure approaches that consider infrastructure projects, systems, and sectors in isolation from others. First, they allow for optimizing infrastructure development by considering the services that infrastructure systems deliver, and not just the assets created. Second, they result in longer-lasting infrastructure that is more resilient to climate change risks and human-made/technological disasters. Third, by identifying and addressing potential risks early in the planning process, they increase the bankability of infrastructure projects, making them more attractive to investors. (UNEP 2019)

Making the global economy more “circular” would result both in considerable savings of materials (as per SDG 12) and in reduction of greenhouse gas emissions (SDG 13) (Climate-KIC 2018).<sup>14</sup> The Royal Swedish Academy of Engineering Sciences (IVA) Report 2020 recommends the following steps to help realize a circular economy:

- “Seeing society from a systems perspective – it is not enough to examine and analyse one challenge at a time.
- Developing a circular strategy – all parts of society need to produce a plan to act in a resource-effective and circular way. Policymakers have a key role to play in creating a framework.
- Expanding the mission of the relevant [governmental] ministries – one actor needs to take overall responsibility for society’s collective resources with a mandate to promote a system perspective.
- Using public procurement as a tool for circularity by, for example, developing functions to drive resource-effective innovation.
- Creating common markets for resources – there is significant potential for cooperation and synergies between sectors and industries to create effective resource flows.
- Supporting small businesses in their transition – driving change and quickly transitioning on their own is a major challenge, particularly for small enterprises” (IVA 2020).

<sup>14</sup> Geissdoerfer and his co-authors (2017) define circular economy mainly in terms of the circulation of materials: “A regenerative system where resource supply, waste, emissions and energy leakage are minimised by slowing down, closing and reducing the circulation of energy and materials. This can be achieved through careful design, maintenance, repair, reuse, remanufacturing, renovation and recycling.”

### **Box 8. Strengthening the science-practice interface for sustainable and just economics**

Research in the area of economics has a great deal to offer when it comes to addressing pressing global challenges and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The reason is that the root causes of social and environmental problems are often embedded in our economic systems. Therefore, more engagement is needed between researchers in the area of sustainable and just economies and policy makers.

Dieleman and her co-authors (2019) list a number of major barriers that prevent social sciences such as economics from affecting policy and practice:

- There is limited funding of social scientific questions, preventing their initial investigation
- There is a lack of applied research in sustainability-related social sciences such as economics
- Research approaches are often individual focused, with a limited capacity for social science to drive policy surrounding diffuse environmental issues, including climate change

In addition, senior researchers often built their whole career and publication track record on traditional models and paradigms (e.g. neoclassical economics) and it is challenging for them to take distance from that and embrace disruptive models and paradigms. Also, there is a lack of international cooperation and even competition between jurisdictions in areas such as corporate taxes, trade, and social and environmental regulations.

Research could be focused more directly on projects that address the SDGs and economics-related challenges. University curricula could be more open towards innovative economic models and paradigms and could foster interactions between research communities and policy makers.

Bringing a more diverse set of academics or practitioners into the conversation from across sectors would be important to stimulate innovation and to widen perspectives. This could lead to more systemic and integrated approaches to sustainable and just economies.

Ehrensperger and his co-authors (2019) argue that it is often difficult for sustainability scientists to identify what important knowledge gaps might exist from the perspective of societal partners. For example, scientist often cannot identify by themselves which intersections critically require knowledge. Transdisciplinary dialogue in science-policy-society interfaces are key modalities through which scientists can better understand and formulate research questions of relevance to societal partners.

Additionally, Ehrensperger and his co-authors (2019) point to the need to further increase interdisciplinary collaboration, in particular with the social, behavioral and economic sciences, and to deepen understandings of social, cultural and governance factors in socio-ecological system interactions. Scientists can work to enhance the visibility of scientific outputs as well as to increase engagement with societal partners to leverage their capacity to address the challenges of the 2030 Agenda.

## **5. The Covid-19 pandemic as a challenge and an opportunity**

By putting unprecedented pressure on social, economic and governance systems, the Covid-19 has accelerated many trends and vulnerabilities that were visible when the year 2020 started. Due to structural and economic factors, low-income and minority communities are far more vulnerable to infection, hospitalization and deaths from the coronavirus (Platt and Warwick 2020). These communities are also more likely to include a disproportionate number of essential workers, face crowded housing conditions, and be uninsured or underinsured, reducing their access to affordable, quality health care (Platt and Warwick 2020). Low-income occupations, such as in the service sector or in large factories, tend to require a higher degree of personal exposure, and are not easily transitioned to homeworking, boosting infection risk. One important political legacy from Covid-19 is that the pandemic has made more visible pre-existing social and economic inequalities.

We have the opportunity to successfully rebound from the pandemic with more solid global security and cooperation than we had going into it. We have an opportunity to build new economic systems that are genuinely better, smarter, more equitable, and greener. These must be properly funded and cannot be based on further austerity measures.

The pandemic and its aftermath also underscore the importance of economic development that that preserves rather than profits off of the natural environment, and that works against the growing concentration of wealth. Such development ensures an equitable distribution of benefits

to the whole population, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, age, citizenship status or any other characteristic.

The pandemic may have made the need for implementing remedies such as the ones listed in the previous section more urgent, but it has long been clear to many that this work was necessary anyway. For example, loan forgiveness for developing countries has been discussed for many decades but because of the impact of Covid-19 on developing countries and their limited budgetary space for economic stimulus measures, the need for scaling up loan forgiveness (including by private lenders) has come to the forefront (UNCTAD 2020).

The pandemic calls for social protection mechanisms in all countries linked to the provision of food, water and shelter, and measures around minimum wages or the introduction of a basic income. Yet there is a lack of reliable information on vulnerable groups that could be used to design and effectively deliver appropriate responses. Increased collaboration, external support and funding for NGOs that already work with vulnerable groups could be important interventions (UNRISD 2020a).

## 6. Conclusions

We are at a critical juncture when it comes to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). At the same time, the Covid-19 pandemic calls for a fresh look at the way our economies function. A sustainable and just global economic order is vital in this context as it can address many of the root causes of the challenges that we face in achieving the 2030 Agenda.

In terms of challenges and their root causes, the paper found that:

- The pandemic acts not only as a trigger for rethinking our economic systems, but it also lays bare the deep flaws in these systems, thus bringing up the question of how to “build forward better” (e.g. UN DESA 2020).
- Inequality remains a major challenge as it is linked to shorter, unhealthier and unhappier lives (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009) and has complex interactions with sustainable consumption and production, the environment, and work and growth.
- Access to decent work and the protection of labour rights are key factors that underpin the achievement of the SDGs (OECD 2019).
- In SDG 8, economic growth is expressed in terms of gross domestic product (GDP). However, GDP completely overlooks central questions of equity, sustainability, well-being, health and resilience, while at the same time includes values for many goods and services that either do not contribute to or have negative implications for human well-being (Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary General 2019).
- Gender inequalities that hold back achievement of the SDGs extend across the public, private, economic, cultural and social spheres.
- Patterns of production and consumption need to urgently be transformed to allow all to access and make the most out of global commons such as land, soil, water, air and the biosphere’s capacity to process greenhouse gases.
- Climate change (SDG 13) is part of an even larger environmental crisis which prompts the questions “how to live sustainably and justly on this Earth?” (QUNO 2016) and “is continuous growth is possible on a planet with finite resources?” (Jackson 2009).

In terms of responses to these challenges, the paper found that:

- We need to reimagine economic activities and practices, so that they are not simply an engine of growth but give primacy to social and environmental objectives (Milante et al. 2016; Utting 2018).

- The purpose of the economy and of economic growth should then be the enhancement of all life, human and non-human: “What matters is not the quantity of growth but its quality” (Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary General 2019:15).
- To see the economy more as a means to an end and to create awareness and appreciation of public goods, we need to introduce a broader set of systems indicators as complements to GDP that monitor the wider environmental, social and economic domains of our society (Hoekstra 2020).
- To have global development that is both sustainable and just we need to share and use the world’s natural resources more fairly and responsibly (Acemoglu and Robinson 2017). An important way to include the full cost of resources in products and processes is the “polluter pays” principle.
- The redistribution of resources and profits is vital for reducing inequality (SDG 10) (HLPF 2020a). Redistribution is especially relevant in response to the unequal impacts from the Covid-19 pandemic and as part of calls to “build forward better” (e.g. UN DESA 2020). Effective tax policies have an important role to play in generating resources for public expenditures, while official development assistance (ODA) plays a critical role in achieving the SDGs in the global South (Piketty and Goldhammer 2014; Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary General 2019).
- Re-designs of the welfare state and social policy delivery (Cottam 2020) are necessary, especially as current welfare systems do not take the changing nature of the labour market and developments such as the gig economy, platform economy, temporary workers, etc. into account.
- Tackling the imminent impacts of climate change will take a profound transformation that is able not only to accelerate decarbonization but also to overcome entrenched inequalities that leave people who least contributed to climate change at the greatest risk from its impacts. This is what is meant by a “just transition” to a low-carbon economy (Morena et al. 2019; Krause and Roth 2018).
- Inclusive policy making embraces the perspectives and concerns of marginalized and vulnerable populations (UNDP 2018).
- Governance (SDG 16) is an essential lever of the systemic transformations needed to achieve all 17 SDGs (Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary General 2019). Good and effective governance requires re-valuing the role of the public sector.

The paper gave the following examples of transformative actions that can maximize synergies:

- Global cooperation is imperative because global challenges require global, multilateral responses and a rules-based system. In particular, the multilateral trading system (SDG 17) needs to be updated so that it can play a supportive role in sustainable development and a sustainable and just economic recovery after Covid-19 (QUNO 2020b).
- Systems thinking can improve understanding of complex economic systems from a wider perspective and can help address the root causes that drive economic injustice and ecological destruction (QUNO 2020a; OECD 2019). Pursuing sustainable and just economies requires long-term, integrated approaches for overcoming problems of uncertainty, complexity and interdependence (Moyer and Bohl 2019).
- Sustainable infrastructure and the circular economy are areas where there is a strong need for systems thinking. Making the global economy more “circular” would result both in considerable savings of materials (as per SDG 12) and in reduction of greenhouse gas emissions (SDG 13) (Climate-KIC 2018).
- The science-practice interface in sustainable and just economies needs to be strengthened because research in this area has a great deal to offer when it comes to addressing pressing global challenges and achieving the SDGs. The root causes of social and environmental problems are often embedded in our economic systems. To counter a host of barriers that prevent researchers from having an impact on policy and practice, more active engagement and collaboration is needed between researchers in the area of sustainable and just economies and policy makers.

While Covid-19 has accelerated many trends and vulnerabilities that were visible prior to the pandemic, it offers an opportunity to build new economic systems that are genuinely better, smarter, more equitable and greener.

Overall, the challenges of climate change, pandemics and social injustice are proving to be deeply interconnected. To truly solve any of these challenges, we cannot treat them in isolation. We must seize the moment for a new type of systems thinking that addresses these challenges holistically.

An important way of operationalizing the science-practice interface, then, would be to encourage researchers and practitioners to focus together on global issues such as climate change and social justice at a systems level. Not only does this help scale the solutions that drive positive, sustainable and systemic change, it is the next frontier in sustainable thinking.

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## Consultative tools, techniques, and approaches

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