Joint meeting of the Second Committee of the General Assembly at its 75th session and the Economic and Social Council
Wednesday, 14 October 2020, 3 pm

"Developing sustainable infrastructure and utilizing science and technology in response to COVID-19"

Introduction

The year 2020 will enter history as the year when, without forewarning, a global health pandemic hit the world for the first time in decades. So far, over 1 million people have died with over 30 million people infected with the virus worldwide. While it is uncertain how and when the world will re-emerge from the devastating effects of the pandemic, there is emerging consensus that, once the scourge of COVID-19 has been reduced, the world should build back fairer, more inclusive and more sustainable economies and societies, leaving no one behind.

Despite the setbacks caused by the spread of the disease, it will be essential to regain momentum and move ahead at an accelerated pace towards the achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The COVID-19 crisis has revealed some fundamental development flaws and the response can be converted into an opportunity to recover better, if much of resources aimed at recovering from the pandemic and its impacts are directed toward promoting the SDGs. [1] Investing in sustainable infrastructure and leveraging science and technology in response to the pandemic will be important in moving forward to build back better and get back on track towards reaching the Goals.[2]

Objective

The joint meeting of the Second Committee with the Economic and Social Council will address the challenges of building sustainable infrastructure and mobilizing science and technology to respond to the global COVID-19 crisis and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. It would aim notably to provide a deeper understanding on how building back better from the pandemic requires reconsideration of investing in infrastructure and investing in and mobilizing science and technology.

Structure and outline of the joint meeting

The joint meeting will be divided in two parts, each with a panel of speakers and a question and answer session..

Panel 1. Developing sustainable infrastructure (3 – 4 pm)

Sustainable infrastructure of various kinds is essential for development and for reaching many of the SDGs. The on-going COVID-19 pandemic has confirmed the need for sustainable, technologically advanced, resilient and adaptable infrastructure that can effectively operate during moments of crisis. However, according to the Global Infrastructure Outlook, total current investments in infrastructure are $79 trillion, while the investment needed is $94 trillion. This leaves the world facing a $15 trillion gap

[1] DESA Policy Brief #84. *Achieving SDGs in the wake of Covid-19: Scenarios for Policymakers*. 31 August 2020.
[2] DESA Policy Brief #62 *The COVID-19 pandemic: a wake-up call for better cooperation at the science-policy-society interface.* 17 April 2020.

between the infrastructure investments needed and the amount expected to be provided by 2040.[3] For energy infrastructure, this gap is $2.9 trillion US$ and for water infrastructure it is $713 billion.[4]

Public funds in developing countries are insufficient to meet this vast demand. Private sector resources are needed to close the global infrastructure investment gap and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals as well as the objectives of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. Incentives, fiscal measures, regulations, an enabling environment and partnerships are all required to help mobilize private investments in infrastructure related to the SDGs. But developing countries also need help in order to connect with potential investors and articulate their needs and specific projects, including notably countries emerging from conflict situations. Overall, the need to strengthen global partnerships to achieve the 2030 Agenda, as laid out in Goal 17, is stronger than ever.

It is also important to integrate new technologies during the design, construction and operational phase of an infrastructure asset in order to significantly lower the cost while improving the functionality of the infrastructure. Artificial intelligence, advanced data analytics, fintech, cloud computing, 5G, new materials, renewable energy technology and 3D printing are just a few of the innovations changing the global infrastructure landscape. When used, they can decrease project cost, compress construction time, reduce community disruption, minimize environmental harm and increase safety.

It is also important to focus on social infrastructure, like schools and hospitals. Those should use the latest innovations and techniques to withstand the evolving challenges of our times, from natural disasters to pandemics. It will also be necessary to re-assess global transportation needs, as the pandemic has halted international air travel and has curbed domestic transportation during domestic lockdowns. Building infrastructure will require solutions aimed at low cost and low-carbon modes of transportation. The upcoming Conference on Sustainable Transport will allow to discuss those issues.

Dividends for the environment are also apparent. In energy infrastructure, long a major source of global carbon emissions, renewable technologies have made enormous strides. Wind and solar power are now the most cost-effective modes of power generation across more the two-thirds of the world.

A number of international/inter-governmental institutions have been established to promote infrastructure investment. There are also several sectoral initiatives, especially in the renewable energy space, designed to facilitate public and private investment in sustainable infrastructure. However, these and other institutions and initiatives have not led to either the desired global harmonization of investment policies, standards and practices nor significantly accelerated the pace and volume of sustainable infrastructure investment in developing countries, especially the lower income countries which need and would benefit the most from such investment.

A critical shortcoming of all initiatives and institutions is their lack of universality and inclusivity absence of the trust and confidence required to both harmonise policies on sustainable investment and to actually accelerate such investment beyond certain parameters. The United Nations is well placed to overcome these shortcomings.

Overall, building back better after COVID-19, and relaunching economies, is an opportunity to build advanced, resilient and sustainable infrastructure that will serve the needs of people and the planet. Investing in sustainable infrastructure can be an important tangible outcome of global policy debates on the recovery process.

[3] Global Infrastructure Outlook
[4] Ibid.

The panel and ensuing discussions could address the following key questions:

1. What types of infrastructure are needed in both the short and long term to achieve the SDGs, combat climate change, and lead to a sustainable recovery from COVID-19 and why?
2. How can we engage Governments, the private sector and other relevant stakeholders to facilitate and finance the kind of sustainable infrastructure that is needed to resume and accelerate progress towards the SDGs? What is the role of the United Nations in this regard?

Panel 2. Role of science and technology in combating and recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic (4 – 5 pm)

International cooperation to respond to COVID-19, notably in science and technology, is essential in conquering this and future pandemics. So are efforts to ensure equitable access to vaccines and strengthen the capacity of developing countries.

The pandemic has stressed that countries need to work in partnership with all relevant stakeholders to increase research and development capacities as well as funding for vaccines and medicines. Cooperation is also needed with regard to various technologies, such as information technologies.

Five early lessons have been drawn from the response to the pandemic that can strengthen how science and technology are harnessed for meeting other global challenges. These include strengthening national capacities for science-based decision making, enhancing public trust in science, sharing knowledge for more collaborative research, ensuring universal access to solutions, and acting with greater urgency on global scientific assessments[5].

Efforts are on-going to bolster coordination among countries and with the private sector towards the rapid development, manufacturing and distribution of diagnostics, antiviral medicines, personal protective equipment, treatment and vaccines.

The Access to COVID-19 Acceleration Tools (ACT), in particular, works to mobilize global collaboration in those areas, bringing together governments, scientists, businesses, civil society, philanthropists and global health organizations. The COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) Facility aims to allow countries to benefit from a portfolio of vaccine candidates so that their populations can have early access to effective vaccines.

More generally, the pandemic has also shown that it is important for governments and societies to set clear priorities for scientific research and technological development. This was clearly a necessity to accelerate the response to COVID-19. A lesson is the need to better focus the research and development agenda on issues related to SDG progress in developing countries in the future.

Multi-stakeholder collaboration, within and across countries, is essential for the development and deployment of scientific and technological advances for the SDGs. The Technology Facilitation Mechanism (TFM), established by UN member states as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its associated instruments such as the UN system Inter-Agency Task Team, the annual global Forum on Science, Technology and Innovation for the SDGs (STI Forum) and the online platform for technology and innovation, 2030 Connect, contribute to this effort.

[5] UN DESA Policy Brief #62: *The COVID-19 pandemic: a wake-up call for better cooperation at the science–policy–society interface.* 22 April 2020..

The pandemic has also increased attention to the importance of various technologies such as information or technologies, which have played a key role in the response. Government must review their egovernment strategies in light of the experience gained during the pandemic. Important lessons have been learned. Improving digital inclusion policies and protecting data are key objectives, along with strengthening the policy and technical capabilities of public institutions. This would further support the implementation of the Secretary-General's Digital Roadmap for Digital Cooperation.

Key questions to be addressed in this panel will be the following.

1. What are lessons learned from the use of science and technology in the response to the pandemic and how can they be used to maximize the impact of the response to COVID-19 and accelerate SDG progress?
2. How can we ensure universal access to the vaccine and other tools to respond to the pandemic?
3. How can science and technology more effectively advance progress towards the SDGs?
4. How can scientists and policy makers better address the deficit "of trust towards solutions to the pandemic, notably vaccination?

Programme and speakers

Brief opening remarks will be made by the Chair of the Second Committee and the President of the Economic and Social Council. A moderator will facilitate the two panels. The Chair and the President will both make brief closing remarks.

Panelists will include decision makers from governments, practitioners from the field, including the private sector, science and technology experts, and representatives from UN entities.

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