

Webinar for parliaments in Africa - The impact of COVID-19 on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in Africa: What role for parliaments?

Concept note

Background

1. The current global health crisis is an unprecedented wake-up call that is showing us how crucial it is for countries to have policies and legislation ensuring preparedness and prevention, in particular in Africa, where over 60 per cent of socioeconomic activities are weather- and climate-sensitive and heavily depend on natural resources. Accordingly, the pandemic has created new economic pressures on countries already facing massive reductions in revenue owing to the increased intensity and frequency of extreme weather events triggered by climate change. Hence, the convergence of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and the climate change crisis has brought to the fore the intrinsic vulnerabilities and structural inequalities of African economies and communities.
2. According to estimates of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), overall gross domestic product (GDP) for Africa in 2020, predicted prior to the pandemic to grow by 3.2 per cent, could fall to 0.1 per cent or even contract by as much as 2.7 per cent. The socioeconomic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are uncovering stark asymmetries and structural imbalances in our societies, such as the prevalence of poverty, unequal access to health services, weak health-care systems, high unemployment rates, persistent inequality in areas such as education, and weak regional and global cooperation.
3. As it stands, Africa is not on track to meet most of the Sustainable Development Goals. Although the continent has recorded some progress on 15 of the 17 Goals, the current rate of progress is insufficient to fully achieve all the Goals. Africa must therefore accelerate efforts if the Goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development are to be met and the ambitions of Agenda 2063 of the African Union are to be realized. Progress across the 5 subregions of the continent has been uneven. Moreover, even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, poverty in Africa as a whole had declined much more slowly than in other regions in the world, and the continent was not on track to meet any of the targets under Goal 1. This trend has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis, with people who work in the informal sector being especially vulnerable to economic shocks and the impact of mitigating measures.
4. As part of the measures to curtail the spread of the virus, many educational institutions were shut down and activities were essentially conducted online. In areas where the adoption of technology is limited, access to and continuity of educational activities were disrupted. Invariably, access to inclusive and equitable education for all target groups was undermined by the impact of COVID-19. Increasing the spread of technology to accelerate the achievement of Goal 4 will be a critical element in building back better.

5. The COVID-19 pandemic has also revealed the weaknesses in many systems, including the limits of traditional statistical data collection. Governments are implementing various strategies to contain the pandemic that have in many cases affected the timely provision of the data and statistics that are required to inform decision-making. Data collection operations have been significantly affected. According to a survey conducted by ECA in March 2020, 25 per cent of surveys planned (i.e., 42 out of 168) were halted or suspended and a further 29 per cent postponed. In addition, even where operations are ongoing, higher non-responses rates and low sample coverage are being observed. Moreover, 22 per cent of planned population and housing census activities were halted or suspended. National statistical systems, in particular national statistics offices, require funding in order to acquire and utilize the new technologies that they need to modernize and achieve efficiency in all circumstances, with a view to providing data and statistics to support sustainable development and peaceful coexistence in Africa.¹

6. Furthermore, unceasing environmental degradation and biodiversity loss, driven by climate change, resource extraction, and urban and agricultural expansion into wildlife habitats, have created ripe conditions for the spread to humans of vector-borne zoonotic diseases, including Ebola, Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS), severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), and now COVID-19. It is therefore imperative that post-COVID-19 recovery policies and investment programmes pay due attention to the integrity of ecosystems, because healthy ecosystems translate into healthy economies and societies. In this regard, national parliaments have a critical role to play in the formulation of post COVID-19 national development policies, strategies and plans to ensure that economic growth is inclusive, generates jobs, and promotes resource efficiency, while safeguarding the sustainable use of ecosystem goods and services – the base of Africa economies.

7. In order to contain the spread of COVID-19, alleviate its effects and avoid major economic, social and environmental disruption, it is crucial that countries implement well-directed and well-resourced responses that are inclusive, forward-looking and aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals. As a unique, integrated and interlinked framework, the Goals provide a road map that can help countries to improve their preparedness to respond to the pandemic and implement recovery plans that deliver social and environmental sustainability in a comprehensive manner. Parliaments have a central role to play in this effort. Their legislative, representational, oversight and budgetary responsibilities make them key players in, for example, improving the health coverage of the people they represent, combating inequality, and building peaceful, just and inclusive societies.

8. The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to have a severe, negative impact on the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals. Not only does it risk hampering or reversing the gains achieved, albeit slowly, for example, in reducing child and neonatal mortality and improving access to electricity and safe drinking water, it will also exacerbate already high levels of inequality within and across countries. With 27 of the world's 28 poorest countries being African, the Goals matter most for the African continent. According to ECA estimates, COVID-19 risks pushing 5–29 million more Africans into extreme poverty. Even in the pre-pandemic period, notwithstanding the progress that had been made, action to deliver on the Goals was not advancing at the speed required. Considering that most financial resources will likely be absorbed by the emergency response to COVID-19, the realization of the Goals by 2030 may be in danger if national economic recovery plans are not aligned with the global Goals, especially Goal 13 on climate action.

¹ This will be the focus of the celebration of African Statistics Day 2020 under the theme “Modernizing national statistical systems to provide data and statistics to support sustainable peace and development in Africa” on 18 November 2020.

9. The COVID-19 pandemic epitomizes the enormous challenges to financing nationally determined contributions in Africa, where the bulk of funding for contributions was anticipated to come from conditional climate finance sources. With the potential reduction in available climate funds owing to the pandemic, African countries will be forced to look for innovative means of financing, including from the private sector and domestic resources, to ensure that their contributions remain on track.

10. Africa does not have the fiscal space for trillion-dollar stimulus packages as it attempts to build back better, but must instead look for innovative alternatives. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is one such solution. By addressing intra-African tariff and non-tariff barriers and harmonizing regulations and standards across the continent, AfCFTA will help to consolidate a \$2.5 trillion-dollar market and generate an estimated 5.6 million jobs. In doing so, AfCFTA will directly contribute to meeting Goal 8 on decent work and economic growth during the post-COVID-19 recovery. The only way to achieve Goal 1 and end poverty in all its forms in Africa is to diversify its economies from dependence on extractive commodities to sustainable, value-added activities, like agro-processing and manufacturing. These are precisely the sectors that are forecast to grow most rapidly as a result of AfCFTA implementation, with intra-African trade in manufacturing and trade in agriculture set to grow by 25–30 per cent and 20–25 per cent, respectively. Along with contributing to Goal 2 on achieving zero hunger and Goal 9 on industry, innovation and infrastructure, the diversification of Africa's economic structure will also directly help to achieve Goal 10 on reducing inequality.

11. The pandemic has also demonstrated that it is possible to reorganize economies and livelihoods in ways that can drastically reduce emissions and put countries on more sustainable development paths. As African countries build back their economies in the wake of COVID-19, they must recognize that existing socioeconomic development models have failed to foster the resilience required to face such global crises. Thus, post-COVID-19 recovery will provide an opportunity to leapfrog old, carbon intensive development models to a new, clean economic paradigm that is anchored in green and clean energy and that ensures delivery on the ambitions of the 2030 Agenda. Africa's investment in clean, green and renewable energy would significantly contribute to climate change mitigation and provide enough energy to drive its industrial development and transformation.

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

Objectives of the webinar

The webinar will provide parliaments with a platform to:

1. Exchange national experiences on Goal implementation in the light of COVID-19 pandemic;
2. Share up-to-date information on the status of Goal implementation in Africa by taking stock of the progress made and the challenges to be addressed;
3. Discuss prospects for building back better, leveraging AfCFTA, charting an inclusive and green recovery path, and accelerating transformative change in the region.

Programme structure

The webinar will include:

- (a) An opening session;
- (b) Two presentations on national experiences by parliamentarians;
- (c) Two presentations by subject-matter experts on: (i) the status of Goal implementation in Africa; and (ii) the prospects for the future and building back better;
- (d) A moderated and interactive discussion.

Date: 13 November 2020

Participation: The webinar is open to parliamentarians of the following countries: Algeria, Angola, Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cabo Verde, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Lesotho, Libya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mauritius, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Africa, South Sudan, Sudan, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe.

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

Webinar platform

The webinar will be hosted on the Kudo platform. Arabic, English and French interpretation will be provided.
