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GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19

Jana ARBEITER
University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Social Sciences, Kardeljeva ploščad 5, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia
e-mail: jana.arbeiter@fdv.uni-lj.si

Maja BUČAR
University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Social Sciences, Kardeljeva ploščad 5, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia
e-mail: maja.bucar@fdv.uni-lj.si

ABSTRACT

The paper analyses the response of the international development system aimed at offsetting the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in less developed countries through the prism of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). We apply a mixed-method approach, comparing the response of the international development system to the international cooperation targets under Goal 17 of the SDGs. The results of a comparative-historic analysis, the conceptualization and operationalization of key concepts, the case-study analysis, a secondary statistical analysis, and a secondary sources analysis indicate that the tools envisaged by SDG 17 for its implementation (increase of several financial resources for development, debt relief, COVAX, etc.) have not been adequately used by the international community to counter the impact of COVID-19 on development.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals, SDG 17, COVID-19, global partnership, development cooperation, COVAX

PARTENARIATO GLOBALE NELLA RISPOSTA AL COVID-19

SINTESI

Nel contributo si analizza la risposta del sistema di sviluppo internazionale volta a compensare gli effetti della pandemia di COVID-19 nei paesi in via di sviluppo attraverso gli Obiettivi di Sviluppo Sostenibile - OSS (Sustainable Development Goals - SDGs) che guidano l'Agenda 2030 per lo Sviluppo Sostenibile. A questo scopo viene utilizzato un approccio a metodo misto che confronta la risposta del sistema di sviluppo internazionale con i traguardi di cooperazione internazionale previsti dall'Obiettivo 17 dell'Agenda. I risultati di un'analisi storico-comparativa, la concettualizzazione e operazionalizzazione dei concetti chiave, l'analisi di casi di studio, un'analisi statistica secondaria e un'analisi di fonti secondarie indicano che i mezzi previsti dall'OSS 17 per la sua attuazione (aumento di risorse finanziare per lo sviluppo, riduzione del debito, COVAX ecc.) non sono stati adeguatamente utilizzati dalla comunità internazionale da poter combattere l'impatto del COVID-19 sullo sviluppo.

Parole chiave: obiettivi di sviluppo sostenibile, OSS 17, COVID-19, partenariato globale, cooperazione per lo sviluppo, COVAX

INTRODUCTION[1]

The widespread COVID-19 pandemic, declared in March 2020, has shaken and changed the very foundations of the international community, with serious implications not only for health systems, but also for economic and social systems in several countries. With its far-reaching (global) negative impact, the pandemic also exposed fundamental flaws in the international development system (Carver, 2020; Svetličič, 2021), where existing problems were only exacerbated (Prebilič & Kukovič, 2021; Caballero & Arbiol, 2022), seriously affecting sustainable development. As such, it affected the blueprint for international development, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2015).[2] This means that "the coronavirus pandemic puts societies to the test: it is a test of political leadership, of national health systems, of social care services, of solidarity, of the social contract" (The Lancet Public Health, 2020a). It tests our commitment to internationally agreed long-term strategies.

The key objective of this paper is to look at the current progress in implementing Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular SDG 17, which aim to improve the implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development. The goals and targets, which have been set, are in serious danger of remaining unfulfilled. This is not only or primarily the result of pandemic. While the pandemic may provide governments with a convenient excuse for inaction, we also claim that the international community has not sufficiently internalised the SDGs to provide the resources necessary for their implementation.

We aim to analyse the international development system's response to SDG 17. The paper seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What kind of development strategy is envisioned through the SDGs?
2. How is the international development system responding to the crisis and how is it helping the developing countries worst hit by COVID-19? Was their response in line with the spirit of the SDGs?
3. What are the implications of COVID-19 on the global partnership, as specified in Goal 17 of the SDGs, and what does this mean for the overall implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development?

Based on the literature review and comparative-historic analysis, the paper starts with a brief presentation of the origins of the SDGs and offers some facts on the effects COVID-19 has had on its implementation. This is followed by a theoretical framework seeking to understand the importance of implementing SDGs and global partnership, based on the descriptive method, as well as on the conceptualization and operationalization of the key concepts used. The more detailed analysis of the complexity of international partnership through the prism of SDG 17 is divided into two parts. First, we analyse secondary statistical data and perform an analysis of secondary sources to show the financial trends associated with tackling the post-pandemic crisis. This is based on the assessment of trends in the Official Development Assistance (ODA), remittances, foreign direct investment (FDI), debt and trade. Secondly, by using the case study method, we review the success of the COVAX Facility as a joint effort of global partnership in mitigating the spread of COVID-19 within and among societies. The paper concludes with a discussion of the main findings and answers the principal question of our research.

BACKGROUND

Back in 2015, the international community agreed on a set of goals to guide governments, international organisations, non-governmental organisations and many other (national and international) stakeholders in their (development) activities until 2030. The 17 SDGs and 169 targets, defined in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2015), encompass a wide range of ambitiously set targets for our common future that are expected to significantly improve the entire world in many areas, from eradicating poverty to reducing inequality, protecting the environment and biodiversity, global peace, and increasing international cooperation. While some experts may have doubts about the reality of such complex and ambitious goals and targets (e.g., Mathers & Deonandan, 2018; Kunčič, 2019), going so far as suggesting that SDGs could be understood as utopian global politics without adequate global means (Eskelinen, 2021), all governments have officially committed to their implementation, both at the national and international level.

This has made the SDGs a blueprint for a better and more sustainable future and the 2030 Agenda a (new) global development agenda with a focus on the needs of future generations and the declarative universality of goals. The SDGs provide a framework for understanding the interconnectedness of economic, social, and environmental systems where well-planned, coherent contributions through global partnerships are neces-

1 The article is the result of the "Slovenia and its actors in international relations and European integrations" (P5-0177) research programme.

2 Transforming Our World: Rhe 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly Resolution no. 70/1 on 25 September 2015.

sary for meaningful (and successful) global development (Jahan, 2016; Conceição et al., 2020; Elavarasan, 2022).[3] These are shared goals, based on a set of principles, values, and visions necessary for a successful global development agenda that centres on people and the planet.

However, the world needed a major "existential shock" to truly understand how interconnected the various systems in our societies are. COVID-19 revealed that direct effects on one system are difficult to contain, inevitably spilling over to other societal systems (Svetličič, 2020; Brglez et al., 2022). The pandemic triggered by COVID-19 has caused a global economic and social crisis for the first time (Conceição et al., 2020), forcing countries to face steep recessions and a decline in per capita income, increased poverty rates, and greater inequality (Leal Filho et al., 2020; Rahman et al., 2020; Sumner et al., 2020). Despite the clearly negative spill over effects that the pandemic had in various areas, this multifaceted crisis forced countries at the outset to shift their focus to their own socio-economic (and health) issues, rather than on the SDGs and global partnership and solidarity.

Since the pandemic began two years ago, there has been much research on how COVID-19 influenced the SDGs. We can divide it into three major categories:

a.) Research providing an extensive analysis of impact of COVID-19 on achieving SDGs and the short- and long-term effects on SDGs (Barbier & Burgess, 2020; The Lancet Public Health, 2020b; Naidoo & Fisher, 2020; Shulla et al., 2021, etc.)
b.) Research analysing challenges for SDGs in countries of the Global South (Narayan et al., 2020; Banerjee, 2021; Bottan et al., 2021; Fagbemi, 2021; Huq & Biswas, 2021; Zhang et al., 2021; Janssens et al., 2021; Kansiime et al., 2021; etc.)
c.) Research analysing how COVID-19 influenced specific SDGs (Fenner & Cernev, 2021; Jaiswal & Jayakumar, 2021; Qadeer et al., 2022, etc.)

However, what we think the literature is lacking is a specific study or review discussing the role of SDG 17 in post-pandemic recovery and keeping the world on track towards a more sustainable future through the implementation of SDG 17.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The SDGs represent a conceptual shift in the global development perspective, offering countries the opportunity to rise above the limitations of the international development system, which has often been defined by a clear division between the rich, developed Global North and the poor, developing Global South. This duality and classic framework of political and economic cooperation, which until recently dictated the behaviour of states, was often based on the pretext of solidarity and altruism toward the Global South. It was understood as a sine qua non of the modern international development agenda and rarely challenged (Reuveny & Thompson, 2007; Steffen et al., 2015). This is why, in theory, SDGs should be understood not just as a popular academic buzzword or a 21st century fad that generates academic citations, but as a step forward from the one-dimensional development agenda of the 20th century (Pradhan et al, 2017), which has failed to address increasing poverty and inequalities between and within countries (Milanovic, 2012; Sumner, 2012; Gore, 2015), and a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to development.

The foundations of the SDGs were laid as early as the late 1970s and 1980s. These years were marked by the spread of newer, alternative visions of development and the use of the definition of sustainable development in the Brundtland Report. When 20th century development strategies in less developed countries failed to deliver desired outcomes, such as the promised stability, economic growth and (economic) development, criticism of development that focuses solely on economic growth began to grow (Offer, 2000; McNeill, 2007). By the end of the 20th century, it became clear that people are not merely a means to promote production and prosperity (UNDP, 1990) and that human well-being should be placed centre stage when preparing development strategies (Sen, 1987).

This was the context in which the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were developed.[4] These can be understood as an implicit critique by individuals and organizations from the Global South, i.e. that benefits of globalization are extremely unevenly distributed and that the costs of policies that increase the economic benefits of developed countries are borne by all actors in the international community, especially less developed ones (Carant, 2017). However, despite ambitiously promoting a global partnership to reduce extreme poverty and establishing a global strategy with quantitatively measurable indicators for successfully meeting the eight MDGs, the international community has failed to do so (Sianes, 2017). Despite its efforts, the MDGs remained deeply embedded in the development framework of the North-South divide, in which global partnerships were more of a catchphrase than a reality. The MDGs were meant

3 The basic premise of the SDGs is that in order to achieve them by 2030, working in silos should be avoided.
4 The eight MDGs on which countries agreed in 2000 were focused on combating poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy, environmental degradation, and discrimination against women.

only for the Global South to follow (Marten, 2019), proving once again that countries of the Global South were still treated as unequal partners that needed to change and improve, leaving the Global North to be the one prescribing development strategies.

The failure to reach the MDGs, the increasing number of global challenges (e.g., economic and environmental crises), and vocal appeals from the Global South for an equal distribution of burdens, led to the modernization and rearrangement of the current development agenda. The SDGs should not only be understood as a mere successor of the MDGs, but also a step towards an "ideal" liberal international order, where every country is responsible for actions in areas, which are of "critical importance for the humanity" (UN, 2015, 5) and where the global partnership is understood as a two-way process, with each partner bearing specific responsibilities. With 17 SDGs, the international community has committed to a development strategy and mode of international (development) cooperation that should be inclusive and "leave no one behind" (Helgason, 2016). This was already indicated in the inclusive process of conceptualising and creating SDGs and is very deeply rooted in the 2030 Agenda, especially in SDG 17,[5] which is explored in this article.

SDG 17 is the most complex goal in the 2030 Agenda, focusing on strengthening the means of implementation and revitalizing the global partnership for sustainable development. It has 19 targets and 25 indicators (cf. UN SDG Tracker, 2020), calling on countries, the private sector, and civil society to build inclusive partnerships in order to align their actions, policies and means in five categories, as seen in the Figure 1.

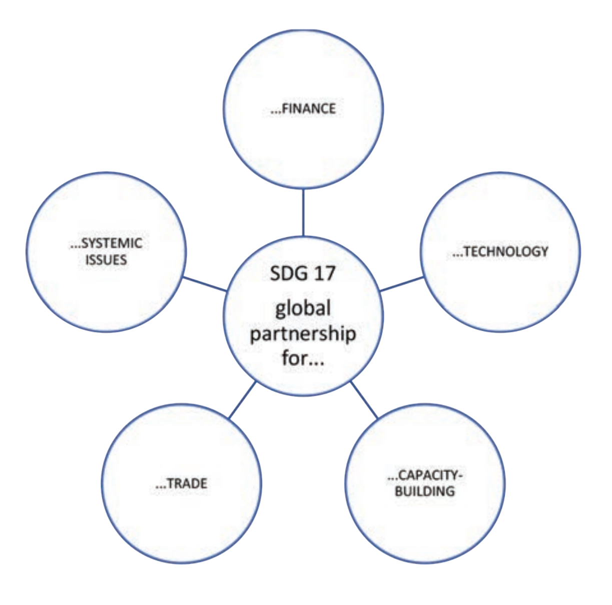

Figure 1: Means for the implementation of sustainable development per SDG 17 (Source: Own elaboration).

The strengthened global partnership envisioned in SDG 17 became the modus operandi for cross-sectoral, national, regional, and international cooperation in pursuit of all SDGs by 2030. It follows the conceptual logic of the systems approach to sustainable development,[6] which states that achieving and maximizing the goals only from one system (e.g., economic, social or environmental) does not lead to sustainability because it does not take into account the impacts on the other systems (Barbier, 1987). The trade-offs between the different goals in these three systems must therefore be balanced to achieve sustainable development (Barbier & Burgess, 2017). This can also be extended to the operational logic envisioned in SDG 17, where strengthened cooperation and shared responsibility among countries and other stakeholders are of key importance. Why? Such an approach creates synergies between the expertise and resources, needed for the achievement of SDGs at the national and international level (Detomasi, 2014; Besheim & Simon, 2017). SDG 17 could therefore be understood as the fulcrum for achieving all other SDGs, providing a number of tools for enhancing finance, technology, capacity building, trade, policy and institutional coherence, needed for the implementation of the SDGs as a whole (UN, 2015). Most importantly, it offers a one-way ticket towards a more sustainable future that cannot be imagined without an effective global partnership.

COMPLEXITY OF INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS: COVID-19 AND SDG 17

SDG 17 is the most comprehensive and complex goal, as it addresses the conditions necessary for the implementation of all previously set goals. However,

5 The shortened name for SDG 17 is "Partnerships for the Goals", whereas its full name, "Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development", very clearly reveals its main objective. For further details, see UN (2015).

6 The systems approach to sustainable development highlights the importance of interconnectedness of economic, environmental, and social systems. It was first employed by Barbier (1987) through the Venn diagram representation, where the intersection of the goals from three systems depicts sustainable development. Therefore, an economic system should consider its impacts on biodiversity and biological productivity, good governance, and social stability when trying to be efficient, equitable, and aimed at poverty reduction (Barbier & Burgess, 2017). Even though the systems approach to sustainable development has certain limitations (e. g. how the trade-offs among the goals should be made) (Barbier & Markandya, 2012), synergies between different economic, social, and environmental goals are important (Elliott, 2006; Constanza et al., 2016).

no global partnership or international cooperation can exist without the necessary resources that are also required to fully implement the 2030 Agenda. Yet, the issue is not only the financial costs,[7] but also, as revealed through specific SDG 17 targets, the issue of human resources, access to technology and knowledge, the ability to participate on an equal footing in the international markets, etc. The UN even envisaged "inclusive partnerships between governments, the private sector and civil society, built upon principles and values, a shared vision, and shared goals that place people and the planet at the centre, are needed at the global, regional, national and local level." (UN SDG Tracker, 2020). Under SDG 17, the blueprint for strengthening multilateralism, building partnerships among diverse stakeholders, and the implicit indication that combating global crises cannot be solved by limited, national(istic) attitudes is, however, equally important.

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only put tremendous pressure on health systems around the world, but also on the international economy, leading to an increase in poverty, hunger, and inequality and slowing progress toward a more sustainable future as envisioned in the 2030 Agenda (Lee at al., 2020; Leal Filho et al., 2020). Focusing on achieving the SDGs calls for urgent global cooperation and providing assistance to those countries most in need (Cheng et al., 2021), whose issues will be likely overlooked in the aftermath of the pandemic (Zhou & Moinnuddin, 2021). Which is why the following sub-chapters are focused on the analysis of financial aspects of tackling the post-pandemic crisis and a review of the COVAX Facility, as an example of the global partnership, created in a joint effort to mitigate the spread of COVID-19.

Sharing the financial burden after COVID-19

SDG 17 is a goal that was designed to accelerate progress in other goals through collaborative efforts, shared burdens, and global partnership (Elavarasan, 2022), where sharing the financial burden is of crucial importance. Given that goals to end poverty, protect the environment, and support the well-being were already off track before the pandemic, the need for global partnerships is of crucial importance. Coping with the pandemic has increased pressure to secure sufficient funding for various government interventions, not only in the health sector but also in the national economy. As a result of the economic crisis and budgetary freezes, tax and fiscal revenues in government budgets have declined, putting severe pressure on less developed countries. This has increased the challenge of target 17.1,[8] which calls for more national resources to implement the SDGs. Some authors even believe that "there will be not enough money or attention to banish poverty and inequality, expand health services and overturn biodiversity loss and climate change, all by 2030" (Cheng et al., 2021, 13). While spending at the national level has been increasing, several international sources have decreased the among of funds dispersed. What is certain is that COVID-19 is widening the pre-pandemic financing gaps to achieve the SDGs (UNCTAD, 2022a).

We firstly analyse ODA, which has traditionally been a source of funding to mitigate the immediate effects of various crises and is known to be an especially important part of the global response to any kind of humanitarian disaster. As a response to COVID-19, it was hoped that both national and international donors would increase their ODA contributions, helping to address the pandemic and implement SDG 17.[9] As a first response to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, several claims suggested that redirecting ODA funds towards helping developing countries to improve their capacity to respond to health crises was crucial. Yet, there were no open commitments to increasing ODA volume at the time (OECD, 2020a). At several fora, heads of international organisations appealed to protect and, if possible, increase the 2019 ODA level (DAC CSO Reference Group, 2020; European Commission, 2020; OECD, 2020b; IMF, 2020). A positive response to such initiatives came from various international organisations, which re-directed some of their funds towards COVID-19 crisis,[10] as well as organised special joint emergency funds to which individual countries could add their contribution. At the level of individual donors, only scarce information was available, mostly on re-directing already planned ODA to the health sector; however the long-pledged 0.7% of GNI has not been achieved, not before, during, or after the pandemic, as shown in Table 1.

7 The first four targets of SDG 17 address various funding sources, from the mobilization of domestic finance to meeting the "old" target for international development assistance of 0.7% GNI.

8 Target 17.1: Mobilize resources to improve domestic revenue collection. UN definition: Strengthen domestic resource mobilization, including through international support to developing countries, to improve domestic capacity for tax and other revenue collection (For more, see UN SDG Tracker, 2020).

9 To adequately respond to the aftermath of the pandemic, the international development system should fully implement all development assistance commitments under SDG Target 17.2 and share the risks and burdens within global partnership, assisting countries most in need.

10 The World Bank, for example, has prepared an "emergency package" of USD 12 billion; the IMF activated USD 50 billion through its rapid disbursing emergency financing facilities (Moreira da Silva & Moorehead, 2020).

Table 1: ODA 2019–2021 Trends (Source: OECD, 2022).

	2019	**2020**	**2021**
ODA (USD)	152.8 billion	162.2 billion	178.9 billion
% of donors' GNI	0.30	0.32	0.33
Increase compared to the previous year	/	3.5%	4.4%

ODA in 2021 remained at 0.33% of donors' combined GNI – unchanged from 2020, despite the 4.4% increase in real terms from 2020 (OECD, 2022). However, it is very important to note that despite an increase in overall ODA levels between 2020 and 2021, in 23 out of 29 DAC donors,[11] this increase was mostly due to donated vaccine doses, which were reported as ODA and amounted to 3.5% of the total ODA (Tew & Breed, 2022; OECD, 2022).[12] If we exempt COVID-19 vaccine donations from ODA, the increase from 2020 would only be 0.6% in real terms (OECD, 2022). What is interesting is that COVID-related ODA spending for 2020 and 2021 was mostly not allocated to specific countries; rather, it was used either for vaccine research or other funds, related to COVID (Tew & Breed, 2022).

In addition to ODA, remittances have become an increasingly important source of finance for development. The UN acknowledges that facilitating remittance flows at low cost will not only support the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, but also the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs (UN, 2015). In the past, remittances have contributed to the alleviation of poverty (Masron & Subramaniam, 2018), to improved access to water, food, medicine, housing, and clean energy (Gyimah-Brempong & Asiedu, 2014; Ndiaye et al., 2016; Ebadi et al., 2018; UN, 2019a), to promoting entrepreneurship (UNDP, 2016), and empowering women (Sambo, 2016; UN 2019b). In 2020, remittance flows to low- and middle-income countries were expected to decline by around 20%, marking the sharpest decline in recent history (World Bank, 2020).

However, remittance flows defied predictions and their decline in 2020 – compared to 2019 – was only 1.6% (World Bank, 2021). Even though it was estimated that compared to 2019, when remittances amounted to $554 billion, the 2020 number would be only $445 billion (ECDPM, 2020), remittance flows in 2020 reached $540 billion (World Bank, 2021). Despite very bleak estimates, this is consistent with the evidence that remittances are known to be excellent automatic stabilizers that often regulate production and consumption, especially among the poorest (Combes & Ebeke, 2011). After the initial fall, which can be attributed to several factors[13], migrant workers tried to support their families at home despite the economic effects on their lives, as shown by Kpodar et al. (2021).[14]

If the predictions for the remittance flows proved too pessimistic, the same cannot be said for the FDI and global value chains, which were very much affected by COVID-19 (UN, 2020a, 58–59). Global FDI flows were forecasted to decrease by up to 40% in 2020, from their 2019 value of $1.54 trillion, according to the World Investment Report 2020 (WIR) (UNCTAD, 2020). However, the world FDI inflows in 2020 declined by 35% to $1 trillion, from $1.5 trillion in 2019 (UNCTAD, 2021). Despite predictions that FDI inflows to developing countries would be hit especially hard in 2020, as export-oriented and commodity-linked investments were among the most seriously affected, the biggest decline in 2020 was reported in the inflows to developed economies (UNCTAD, 2021). FDI fell in developed economies by 58% (UNCTAD, 2021), with the biggest decline within the European Union (73%) (Moosa & Merza, 2022, 3).

The relatively quick return of the global FDI flows in 2021 (growth of 64%, compared to 2020, amounting to $1.58 trillion in 2021) (UNCTAD, 2022b) can be attributed to the high level of interconnectedness of the international economy and the extensive recovery measures, undertaken in developed countries. Their economies recovered much better than those of developing countries, opening the door to FDI flows as well: three quarters of the global increase (64%) of FDI inflows happened in developed countries. On the other hand, overall FDI to developing countries continued to decrease (-8% in 2020) (UNCTAD, 2021). Yet, big asymmetries of inflows remained: Asian countries were the most resilient and inflows in China

11 In 2020, ODA rose only in 16 DAC donors and fell in 13 (Ahmad & Carey, 2021).

12 Vaccine donations, which are counted as ODA, were offered to countries in need only when DAC members had an excess of their domestic supply (Schütte, 2022), which is especially worrying from the perspective of global partnership.

13 Such factors included lock-downs in developed countries, where migrant workers suffered disproportionally because of their temporary contracts or losing their jobs or even their right to stay in a host country, having to rely on their saving to sustain themselves.

14 The study, made by Kpodar et al. (2021, 16), shows that for a 10% rise in COVID-19 cases per million in a population, a 0.3 percentage point increase in remittances would occur after five months after the initial fall due to the COVID-19 shock.

actually increased by 6%. But FDI inflows to African countries fell by 16% and by 45% to Latin America and the Caribbean (UNCTAD, 2021). In 2021, FDI inflows to developing economies increased by 30%; however this was again mainly due to the increase in Asia,[15] whereas the increase in FDI flows in other developing countries was much smaller (UNCTAD, 2022a).

This suggests that another important stream of funding for development and consequently SDGs' implementation had decreased. COVID-19 caused a collapse in FDI flows to sectors that are relevant for the implementation of the SDGs in developing countries (UNCTAD, 2021). Many least developed countries (LDCs) are dependent on FDI in extractive industries, many small island developing states are dependent on investment in tourism, and landlocked developing countries are disproportionally affected by supply chain blockages. But as the WIR rightly acknowledges (UNCTAD, 2020; 2021; 2022), the COVID-19 crisis only compounded several SDG-relevant issues, including already insufficient private investment in SDG-relevant sectors in developing countries. Current (foreign) investment in SDG sectors, especially in developing countries, is too low and was not growing at the sufficient rate even before the pandemic (UNCTAD, 2022a). Sustainability financing[16] largely bypasses them and SDG-specific investment policies are not being rolled out fast enough. This situation is compounded by the impact of the COVID-19 crisis, which risks subordinating progress on the SDGs to the priority of economic recovery (UNCTAD, 2020, 39; Moosa & Merza, 2022).

Debt rescheduling/cancellation needs to be mentioned, not only because meeting the payment significantly affects the national budgets of highly indebted developing countries. One of the SDG 17 targets addresses debt management[17]. In 2022, 58% of low-income and least developed countries (LDCs) are currently assessed as being at high risk of external debt distress or already in debt distress (Estevão & Essl, 2022). In 2020, we likewise witnessed the largest debt surge since World War II, with global debt rising to $226 trillion (Jain, 2022). Rising debt-service costs diminish fiscal space for countercyclical measures and for investments in long-term structural transformation and the SDGs (UNCTAD, 2020, 127).

What is of particular concern is growing private sector debt: traditionally, public and private debt were similarly proportioned. However, following the 2007–2008 global financial crisis, private debt escalated to 139 per cent of GDP of developing countries (UN, 2020c, 139). The WB Development Committee and the G20 Finance Ministers therefore endorsed the Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI) in April 2020 in the response to a call by the WB and the IMF to grant debt-service suspension for 2021 to the poorest countries to help them manage the severe impact of the COVID-19 pandemic[18]. However, the initiative was somehow disappointing, since it only suspended debt service payments for 48 out of 73 eligible countries to participating bilateral creditors, amounting to $10.3 billion between May 2020 and June 2021 (IMF, 2021)[19]. At the same time, private creditors did not participate in the debt service suspension on equal terms (Jain, 2022). We can thus agree with the Shadow Report of EURODAD (Fresnillo, 2020) that DSSI is merely postponing repayment pressures instead of cancelling debts. The Report warns "DSSI-eligible countries are already scheduled to repay USD 115 billion of debt in 2022–2024, just when their suspended 2020 payments come due". So, while at first sight the Initiative looks positive, there are many caveats attached which seriously diminish its effectiveness.

At the start of 2020, it was expected that trade issues would be one of the key areas of focus for advancing the 2030 Agenda, since one of the important targets within SDG 17 has a 2020 deadline.[20] The importance of trade-related issues for developing countries in generating the resources necessary for implementing the SDGs lies in the fact that trade issues have two explicit targets[21] to be met. Yet, even pre-COVID trends suggest that the world is far from implementing these targets. In reality, the international trade and its multilateral regime are suffering from a complex set of issues, only exacerbated by the pandemic (UN, 2020c).

An earlier, more pessimistic WTO scenario even projected that world trade would fall by 13% to 32% in

15 It is important to note that six economies account for more than 80% of FDI in Asia and that Asia's FDI inflows account for 40% of global FDI (UNCTAD, 2022a).

16 Under this category, UNCTAD includes investments in the energy sector, where most of the investment in new, sustainable energy sources is occurring in developed countries (UNCTAD, 2020).

17 17.4 Assist developing countries in attaining long-term debt sustainability through coordinated policies aimed at fostering debt financing, debt relief and debt restructuring, as appropriate, and address the external debt of highly indebted poor countries to reduce debt distress.

18 The main goal of the DSSI is to allow poor countries to concentrate their resources on fighting the pandemic and safeguarding the lives and livelihoods of millions of the most vulnerable people. Borrowers commit to use freed-up resources to increase social, health, or economic spending in response to the crisis (World Bank, 2022).

19 This was just a quarter of the amount the G20 announced the DSSI would deliver.

20 Target 17.11. Significantly increase the exports of developing countries, in particular with a view to doubling the least developed countries' (LDCs) share of global exports by 2020.

21 Target 17.10 Promote a universal, rules-based, open, non-discriminatory and equitable multilateral trading system under the World Trade Organization, including through the conclusion of negotiations under its Doha Development Agenda.

2020. In June 2020, the WTO Trade outlook predicted a fall of trade volume by 12.9% (WTO, 2020a), which proved a too pessimistic estimate (Arriola et al., 2022). In fact, global trade fell by 9.6% only in 2020 and was already rebounding in 2021. It increased by about 13% compared to the pre-pandemic figures, proving the global trading system was more resilient than expected (WTO, 2021; UNCTAD, 2022c). The WTO was particularly concerned with the impact of COVID-19 on least developed countries (LDCs), since their participation in global trade had already been declining in 2019, in clear contradiction to Target 17.11. Their decline was sharper than the world average, resulting in a 35% drop in LDC service exports and 12% decline in their exports of goods in 2020 (WTO, 2022a; UNCTAD, 2022c).[22] Considering that LDCs depend on a limited number of export items[23] and are often highly dependent on a small number of markets, they therefore have a higher risk of being exposed to external shocks. For several LDCs, top destination markets include those that were among the worst affected by the outbreak of COVID-19 (i.e., China, France, Germany, India, Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States) (WTO, 2020b). This meant a sharp decline of export earnings[24]. On the import side, many LDCs depend on the import of food and medical equipment and were thus worried about different trade restrictions/export bans undertaken by some countries.

The WTO's Institute for Training and Technical Cooperation called upon LDCs to enhance their requests for trade-related technical assistance activities, resulting in 80 capacity-building activities, which were accrued out in 2021 (WTO, 2022b). However, the question remains whether these kinds of activities, where 30% take the form of e-learning courses, accelerate trade in LDCs. We only analysed the targets related to the financial flows, yet others show no more encouraging data. When looking at the policies, undertaken by the developed countries, the obvious self-interest stands out. Some rhetoric took place on global fora, but at most, only minor shifts in the re-allocation of development assistance to the health sector were implemented. Debt relief was insignificant, with FDI and trade mostly bypassing the LDCs. This suggests that not only is SDG 17 out of reach, but due to its importance for the overall implementation, the overall SDG agenda is increasingly becoming an illusion. Still, there are certain positive examples of international cooperation, which were prompted by COVID-19, raising hopes that the ideals of solidarity within the global community have not been lost at times of crisis. We consequently analyse the case of COVAX in more detail to see if such initiatives really provide us with possible models of future global public-private cooperation.

The case-study of tackling COVID-19 through global partnerships: the example of the COVAX Facility

With the global pandemic, many health challenges, which the global community has been trying to overcome for years, have been put on hold. Although some slow progress has been made in increasing life expectancy, lowering child mortality, eradicating a wide range of diseases, sanitation and hygiene, COVID-19 has diverted the attention from these problems and shifted focus to responding to health emergencies.[25]

The COVAX Facility was a very promising enterprise. Launched in June 2020, it offered a ray of hope for combating COVID-19 and trying to contain the worsening spill-over effect in other systems. The COVAX Facility was developed as a key vaccine pillar of the Access to COVID -19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator, leading a global risk-sharing mechanism for the pooled procurement and equitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccines, co-led by the World Health Organisation (WHO), GAVI, and the Coalition of Epidemic Preparedness Innovation (CEPI) (GAVI, 2020; CEPI, 2020; Peacock, 2022).[26] Its goal in early 2020 was to accelerate the development and production of new COVID-19 health technologies (WHO, 2020) and enable access to vaccines for countries that were unable to secure direct agreements with vaccine manufacturers (Sharma et al., 2021). Unsurprisingly, these were (and still are) mostly countries that the World Bank classifies as low and lower middle-income countries.[27]

Even though on paper, the COVAX facility could be regarded as a prime example of public-private partnership, envisioned and promoted within the SDG 17, the reality of it is far from perfect. The pandemic not only

22 Even South-South trade was affected similarly to global averages (UNCTAD, 2022c).

23 Preliminary data, gathered by WTO (2020c), suggested that trade value has plunged for LDC exporters of petroleum and minerals, manufacturing items (e.g., clothing), agricultural products (e.g., horticulture exports) and services exports (tourism revenues).

24 Bangladesh suffered an 83 per cent decline in its textile exports in April 2020 in comparison to 2019, Ethiopia lost 80 per cent of its flower exports to European markets (WTO, 2020b).

25 As reported in the Sustainable Development Report, only Sweden, Norway, Australia, Israel and Luxembourg have already achieved SDG 3, whereas 101 countries still face major challenges regarding this Goal and 51 countries face significant challenges (Sachs et al., 2020).

26 Policy issues are overseen by WHO; CEPI is responsible for coordinating the development and manufacturing of the vaccine, whereas AVI is responsible for procurement and delivery (Rutschman, 2021a).

27 Countries of the global South are in the international development system commonly classified into categories according to the level of income, measured by gross national income per capita, which were developed by the World Bank in the 1980s and are gradually updated.

revealed the global shortage of health workers and the need for better public health preparedness (UN, 2020a, 31), but it also exposed the unilateral action of some countries, both in securing individual short-term needs (preventive equipment)[28], as well as using their wealth to claim primary rights to vaccination or/and medicines solely for their own citizens.[29] The global partnership and shared responsibility of COVAX can therefore be challenged on grounds of stakeholder participation, policy formulation and its implementation.

At the level of stakeholder participation, the main concern is an existing large power imbalance between high-income and upper middle-income countries that are able to self-fund their participation in COVAX and lower middle-income countries and low-income countries, which have to rely on the "good will" of wealthy nations and pharmaceutical companies to donate funds or vaccines (Emanuel et al., 2021; Rutschman, 2021b). Self-funded participating countries were able to freely distribute doses of the vaccine domestically according to their own rules, whereas funded (low and lower middle-income countries) had to use the global framework, designed by the WHO (Rutschman, 2021b). This was especially challenging for two reasons. Firstly, the national policies of self-funding participating countries, where, for example, Israel made it very difficult for Palestinians in the Occupied Territories to access the vaccines. Similarly, the Taiwanese found it very challenging to secure COVID-19 vaccines due to the so-called "One China" policy (Dyer, 2021; Zhong & Schuetze, 2021). Secondly, the countries with poor(er) economic development were not able to purchase vaccines and depended on vaccine donations from wealthy nations and vaccine delivery by the pharmaceutical companies. This led to very low vaccination rates (Eccleston-Turner & Upton, 2021; Emanuel et al., 2021; Rutschman, 2021b; OHCHR, 2022). By 2022, less than 14% of people in low-income countries had received a single dose of COVID-19 vaccine, compared to almost 70% vaccinations in high-income countries (OHCHR, 2022). Even though COVAX set its goal to deliver 1.8 billion doses of COVID-19 vaccine to 92 low-income countries in 2021 (WHO, 2021a), recent data shows that COVAX has shipped only around 1.3 billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines to 87 low and lower-middle income countries to date (WHO, 2022). What is even more worrying is that 82% of all doses of the vaccine delivered to low-income countries were shipped by COVAX (ibid.) and not by self-funding countries donating vaccines, as recommended by COVAX. This suggests that the measure was only a provision on paper, not living to its potential.

At the level of policy formulation and implementation, vaccine nationalism was front and centre. The main contributors to COVAX were too short-sighted to see the potential global risks. Their actions were often led by protectionist, populistic, and sometimes even xenophobic political decisions (Wong, 2021; James & Valluvan, 2020). Even though vaccines were donated to COVAX, a lot of countries and vaccine manufacturers poorly adhered to the principles, decided under COVAX (GAVI, 2022). Firstly, 30% of donated doses in the low and middle-lower income countries were delivered through bilateral arrangements, rather than through COVAX, as envisioned (de Bengy Puyvallée & Storeng, 2022). Secondly, as the analysis by de Bengy Puyvallée & Storeng (2022) shows, not only were shared doses actually delivered only when donor countries had already vaccinated their adult population with two doses in the second half of 2021, there was also a gap between pledged and delivered donations.[30] Moreover, donations "have [far too often] been ad hoc, provided with little notice and short shelf lives", which made it difficult for the recipient countries to implement the vaccination (WHO, 2021b). Despite COVAX's principle of allocating vaccine donations according to pre-defined rational criteria, geopolitical factors and national self-interest often prevailed (de Bengy Puyvallée & Storeng, 2022). COVAX proved to be another developmental mechanism embedding the "old" donor-recipient relationship of modern international development system, where national interests, influence, and soft power are at the forefront (Arbeiter et al., 2019; Almeida, 2020). With vaccine diplomacy,[31] pursuing commercial interests[32]

28 As reported by the World Trade Organization, the restrictions on personal protective equipment (e.g. masks, gloves and protective clothing) and on the means of production of medicines and medical equipment (respirators) have been firstly imposed in Asian, Arab and European countries, the United States and many Latin American, Eastern European Countries (WTO, 2020a).

29 President Donald Trump, for example, wanted the primary rights for the COVID-19 vaccine for the United States of America. It was reported that Trump administration offered a German medical company "a large sums of money" for exclusive access to a COVID-19 vaccine (Oltermann, 2020).

30 They point to the United States, which announced massive donations, delivering only 43% of its pledge by the end of 2021, despite claiming global leadership in pandemic response (de Bengy Puyvallée & Storeng, 2022, 6).

31 China, for example, donated all of its doses bilaterally to like-minded countries, with which it already cooperates at the political and economic level, in order to strategically build its reputation and position itself towards the global North (Huang, 2021; Lee, 2021).

32 On the one hand, vaccine manufacturers were selling vaccine doses at full prices to wealthy nations, who then decided whether to donate them to COVAX, which not only benefited the manufactures but also countries in which those manufacturers are based (Vanity Fair, 2021). On the other hand, wealthy nations (the European Union, the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada and Norway) in 2020 rejected the proposal of India and South Africa, made to the World Trade Organisation, to temporarily suspend intellectual property rights for COVID-19 vaccines and technologies, so as to make them accessible to low and lower-middle income countries (Usher, 2020).

and vaccine nationalism, the limitations of the Bretton Woods development system[33] were simply translated to COVAX and its policy formulation and implementation. Instead of a win-win solution, COVAX became an instrument for zero-sum geopolitical power play, deepening inequality, poverty and the gap between the global North and South (Choi, 2021; Wong, 2021).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The SDGs bring together different aspects of human development – from poverty, economic growth, education and health – and are more important now than ever. If we fail to implement the set goals and targets, income losses will cause vulnerable segments of society and families to fall below the poverty line and deepen inequalities around the world (UN, 2020b). However, the international community already faced an annual SDG investment gap of USD 2.5 trillion in 2019 (UN, 2020b), leaving the SDGs far from implementation. The SDGs remain based on a voluntary effort, although UNDP monitors the progress. This means that the coronavirus pandemic was also a test of our commitment to internationally agreed long-term strategies, which essentially aim to prepare the world to deal more effectively with crises of this kind.

The analysis shows that, in many instances, the implementation rate of SDGs was too slow even before the COVID-19 outbreak. Despite clear dedication to sharing the financial burden, we so far primarily see the already dedicated funds being redirected towards covering increased health expenditures, not really upping the game as initially promised by the international (development) community. As we have shown, even the small increase in ODA flows is mainly due to the donations of COVID-19 vaccines. There is still a lack of will-power to truly commit to the global partnership principles and come up with necessary funding. The pandemic has shown where the fundamental weaknesses of our international (development) community lie. The reaction of the international community demonstrates how quickly global commitments (like SDGs) are forgotten. The focus is on protecting and solving an individual (national) situation, especially, if the strategy, instrument, or goal are not mandatory with clear consequences and penalties for the countries. Such behaviour is frustrating, since we are faced with a global crisis, which is currently also compounded by the war in Ukraine. Still, we tend to seek a national response, ignoring that "historic crisis requires a fast, massive and coordinated global response to protect all people, save lives and tackle the economic fallout. Now is the time for international solidarity and leadership, not isolation; to reach out more internationally, not less" (EU, 2020b).

SDGs are still on the international agenda, yet the commitment demonstrated so far by the individual countries is in line with the pessimistic view that regardless of the impact of the COVID-19, the SDGs had and have a poor chance of being implemented as envisaged. Despite several international appeals, plans for recoveries and actions, we still witness a lack of willingness to jointly address global issues. As the analysis shows, there is insufficient readiness to truly commit to the internationally agreed norms and rules. Consequently, this not only undermines the implementation of SDGs, but results in the inability of the countries to deal with today's and future systemic challenges. COVID-19 did not trigger more intensive international development cooperation that would provide additional stimuli for SDG implementation. Rather, it seems to have revealed several negative attributes of the international community, which reflect a high level of individualistic behaviour of some of the key global powers.

Even though the international (development) system would like to understand SDG 17 as a foundation for achieving all the other SDGs, the tools which it provides were not adequately used in combating COVID-19 effects. A lot of the solutions put on the table by the international community (debt relief, COVAX, etc.) once again reflect the division between the global North and South, which is only widening due to COVID-19. National interests, influence and soft power were once more at the forefront, showing that SDGs will not be able to stand the test of time until development actors are ready to admit that changes are needed in both halves of the world.

33 We define the Bretton Woods Development System as a system created after World War II by the countries of the Global North, which used ODA as a pretext to strengthen their economies and ensure the unimpeded flow of commodities and capital from the Global South. ODA served, of course, to promote economic development in the poorer regions and countries of the world but was also mainly used to broaden and strengthen political alliances, position themselves geopolitically, and strengthen the position of Global North countries in the international community.

GLOBALNO PARTNERSTVO KOT ODGOVOR NA COVID-19

Jana ARBEITER
Univerza v Ljubljani, Fakulteta za družbene vede, Kardeljeva ploščad 5, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenija
e-mail: jana.arbeiter@fdv.uni-lj.si

Maja BUČAR
Univerza v Ljubljani, Fakulteta za družbene vede, Kardeljeva ploščad 5, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenija
e-mail: maja.bucar@fdv.uni-lj.si

POVZETEK

Cilji trajnostnega razvoja (CTR) predstavljajo ključno strategijo za globalni razvoj do leta 2030. Njihovo uresničevanje ni odvisno le od pripravljenosti vseh držav, da se jim zavežejo, ampak tudi od globalne solidarnosti, ki pomaga financirati potrebne aktivnosti na različnih področjih, zlasti v primeru manj razvitih držav. Članek analizira odziv mednarodnega razvojnega sistema na učinke pandemije covid-19 v manj razvitih državah, skozi prizmo CTR. Z uporabo mešanih metod, članek primerja odziv mednarodnega razvojnega sistema z zastavljenimi cilji mednarodnega razvojnega sodelovanja skozi prizmo CTR 17. Na podlagi zgodovinsko-primerjalne analize, konceptualizacije in operacionalizacije ključnih konceptov, analize študije primera, sekundarne statistične analize in analize sekundarnih virov, rezultati kažejo, da mednarodna skupnost za zmanjšanje vpliva covid-19 na razvoj, ni ustrezno uporabila predvidenih orodij, ki so predvideni za implementacijo CTR 17 (npr. povečanje finančnih sredstev za razvoj, odpis dolga, COVAX itd.). CTR so še vedno pomembni, vendar je pomanjkanje zavezanosti, ki so jo doslej pokazale posamezne države, skladno s pesimističnimi mnenji, da imajo CTR omejene možnosti za uresničitev, ne glede na vpliv covid-19 na mednarodni razvoj.

Ključne besede: cilji trajnostnega razvoja, CTR 17, covid-19, globalno partnerstvo, razvojno sodelovanje, COVAX

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