

Looking Forward: The 2030 Agenda in a Post-COVID World

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This paper outlines how the COVID-19 pandemic might negatively (or positively, in limited cases) influence the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2030 Agenda. Importantly, it is a point-in-time perspective piece, offering a snippet of early thoughts on the pandemic. Written during the first six weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada, it reflects a very early outlook on how the world might be impacted, assessed through the lens of the 2030 Agenda. It opens with a focus on public health; it considers the short- and long-term effects COVID-19 will have on the climate crisis; it analyzes shifting power dynamics, including dynamics between governments and those they govern, leaders and those they lead; and, it considers how shifting priorities will impact a variety of other global goals, primary the SDGs. In this way, it is a profoundly predictive and thought-based analysis which combines the commentaries of experts, academics, and leaders in various fields with those of my own.

In a world preoccupied with climate collapse, a rise in populist nationalism, and disinformation, it is understandable that the “lesser” existential threats such as artificial intelligence, nuclear conflict, and pandemics get put on the back burner. Of course, these threats to our lives as we know them do not exist in silos—they are deeply intertwined and interconnected. No global effort to acknowledge and decipher the interconnectedness of the issues we face has succeeded more in support and popularity than the UN 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with their accompanying targets and indicators. With respect to its timeline and goals, the generation-defining crisis posed by the COVID-19 pandemic could not have come at more pivotal a moment: five years into its fifteen-year lifespan, the 2030 Agenda’s honeymoon phase has passed.

At this five-year mark, where is the world in terms of the UN 2030 Agenda? Through the Voluntary National Reviews now available from a majority of member states, we can hear from countries about the progress they have made. From global civil so-

ciety and scientists, we can hear whether this progress is real. From the targets and indicators outlined during the 2030 Agenda’s creation in 2015, we can measure objective progress. Through the High-level Political Forum (HLPF), held every year in New York, we can assess all of these variables at once. The takeaway is clear: we are not on track. This outlook was echoed again and again at the most recent HLPF at the UN Headquarters—an event that I was fortunate enough to attend in person in July 2019. A handful of mostly so-called “developing” countries who are “leap-frogging” the stage of fossil fuel reliance are among those on track to reaching an impressive number of their goals. However, put into the context of their small sizes, both in landmass and population, it is clear that overall global progress is nowhere near where it is supposed to be one-third of the way through the time frame outlined by the 2030 Agenda.

With this dire outlook, we must now ask the big question: how will the COVID-19 global pandemic impact our world, as measurable through the lens of the 2030 Agenda? In addition to this, how will the 2030 Agenda itself be impacted? To properly assess these questions, I have decided to break down this analysis into five principal thematic areas: health and safety, climate, politics, economy and economic prioritization, and education and living. Through these categories, all seventeen SDGs will be assessed to varying degrees. As such, this paper functions as a bullet point list of arguments that intertwine scientific analysis with lived experiences. Due to the vast and all-encompassing nature of the 2030 Agenda itself, this approach seems most fitting. I will conclude by considering how this pandemic may affect the 2030 Agenda specifically and the institutions of the UN more generally. Should the 2030 Agenda and its 2015-era indicators be thrown out the window entirely or are they flexible and all-encompassing enough to weather this storm?

FEWER CAR CRASHES, MORE KITCHEN FIRES (SDGS 3 AND 5)

War is a sign of defeat, a failure of politics. The overriding goal must be human security: providing food, water and a clean environment and caring for people’s health.

—Mikhail Gorbachev on COVID-19¹

The COVID-19 Pandemic marks the first time in the 2030 Agenda’s lifespan that the world has pivoted so hard and fast to a single sustainable development goal: health. The world’s economy, people, and ways of life have frozen in time in the interest of upholding

this goal. While it is a genuinely incredible and historical development which, although unfathomable only months ago, will undoubtedly save many lives, self-isolation is not without its negative consequences.

Self-isolation will likely lead to upticks in a range of physical and mental health problems. Physical inactivity means that as long as the current form of lockdown persists, we will collectively live a much more sedentary lifestyle. This inactivity is bound to result in a variety of physical health problems. In 2002, the World Health Organization published that sedentary lifestyles “increase all causes of mortality, double the risk of cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, and obesity, and increase the risks of colon cancer, high blood pressure, osteoporosis [and] lipid disorders.”² The burden this will put on our health care systems in the long run cannot be ignored.

Our collective mental health will also suffer. Sociologists and psychologists have deemed this event as a “collective trauma,” the effects of which may be felt by an entire generation.³ In contrast, however, fourth-year Psychology student at Mount Allison, Clare Maguire, points out that the effects vary enormously from situation to situation: “My roommates and I have been as productive as ever, able to keep our heads down and push through the end of the semester with great focus!”⁴

Our new living realities have indeed uniquely impacted everyone. While some have found solace in the newer, slower pace of life and have been able to catch up on tasks and relax, others could not be experiencing a more different situation. One of the main targets of SDG 5, Gender Equality, is Target 2: “Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres.”⁵ Unfortunately, self-isolation and the subsequent time spent at home is what many highlight as being responsible for the recent surge in domestic violence.⁶ Tracey MacKenzie, who was killed by her boyfriend in Hammonds Plains on April 6, 2020, can be viewed as the first real victim of the pandemic in Nova Scotia as her death pre-dated Nova Scotia’s first COVID-19 victim who died on April 7, 2020.

“Loneliness is worse than smoking”: this phrase, now commonly shared across social media, popularized the results of an Indian study that found that loneliness could have long-term adverse effects.⁷ The negative mental health effects are just as worrying to experts. Ali Beydoun, a second-year McMaster Medical School student, highlights that a principal worry in the medical community are the psychiatric issues to come: “Long periods of isolation and the consequent trauma may have a negative effect on the

wider population—especially the longer this goes on.”⁸

Despite these negatives, there are potential health-related upsides. The shutdown or limitation of restaurants—both fast food and dine-in, local and international chains—has adverse effects across all levels of the economy. However, it means that more people are learning to cook and bake for themselves at home, consequently taking better control of their diets. While the harmful effects of a sedentary lifestyle may result in illnesses in the medium term (i.e., the time frame following lockdowns, where we see a return to “normal”), it may mean a reduced dependency on fast-food and unhealthy eating habits in the long-term. It is one way we can build a “new normal,” as discussed below.

CLIMATE (IN)ACTION (SDGS 12, 13, 14, AND 15)

An unchecked pandemic is as much bad luck as ill-preparedness. But climate risk grinds on, slowly and surely.

—Tom Rand⁹

We are now in the Anthropocene, a new epoch defined by humanity’s dominant influence on the environment.¹⁰ So what happens then, when a pandemic all but freezes humanity in place? What happens when our globalized, ever-moving world suddenly stops moving—in what some claim could be the true “end of globalization?”

There are several immediate environmental effects—there is less air pollution, there is less rumbling on the earth’s surface, fewer earthquakes, noise and water pollution have decreased, and wildlife are roaming our now quieter cities.¹¹ Remarkably, nearly all of this is positive. This drastic reduction of movement is a dream come true for climate activists worldwide—at least as long as it lasts. However, in conjunction with these beneficial effects, there are certainly some negative externalities. For example, while Venetians enjoy seeing dolphins and jellyfish in their crystal-clear canals, Thai villagers do not enjoy angry, hungry monkeys coming in from the countryside, confused about the lack of tourists usually there to feed them. Despite these relatively small consequences, it is fair to say that positive environmental effects are one of the biggest silver linings to come from this pandemic.

Experts question, however, how much of an impact this is truly having toward reaching specific sub-goals of SDG 13, like keeping the global tem-

perature increase below two degrees Celsius.¹² There are two primary reasons for this skepticism: the expectations that these gains will be short-lived (a reasonable claim given the provincial “re-opening” plans we already see coming forward), and more precisely due to the difference between the emissions and the atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide.¹³ Simply put, the continued warming we witness now is the result of increased carbon dioxide over years and decades, and not the last several months.¹⁴ In other words, unless this decrease in emissions continues for an extended period of time, the difference will be barely noticeable.

However, the manner in which our suddenly reduced consumption and production play a positive role in achieving climate action cannot be overlooked, particularly since this may influence our long-term consumer behaviours. Most businesses have been deemed non-essential and have subsequently been closed. While online shopping continues to be an option, the surge in demand has resulted in outstanding backorders for non-essential items.¹⁵ (I have been waiting several weeks for a DIY Hair Clipper from Ontario). Between closed stores and sites struggling to keep up with orders, both the capacity and motivation for individuals to shop for non-essential items have been reduced.

This lack of essential items will only be further exacerbated by the imminent nation-wide strike by American Amazon, Whole Foods, Instacard, and Target workers set to take place on May 1, 2020.¹⁶ The striking group is putting forth the radical demand of basic on-the-job personal protective equipment, hazard pay, health care benefits, and paid leave, at a time when all the aforementioned employers are making record high profits. However, quite problematically, the ability to donate and recycle items has been impacted by the closures of these services. At the time of finishing this paper, the government of New Brunswick, currently one of the first provinces set to re-open in Canada, has not specified at which stage these services will recommence.

WARTIME LEADERS, WARTIME POWERS (SDGS 10 AND 16)

I still vividly remember the first time I watched Fox News. My family had gone on a shopping trip to Maine, and at our hotel we huddled around a TV in the lobby that was playing the news. I was only twelve and yet I remember exactly how different it felt from a Canadian broadcast. The hosts were as lively and eccentric as the graphics changing rapidly across the

screen. They spoke in theatrical tones, almost as if acting, saying something negative about Barack Obama. Fox News has since become the poster child of biased news in America.

It has long been known that the approval ratings of leaders tend to surge during “wartime,” sometimes due to a change in attitude. Prime Minister Trudeau’s ratings have surged—the Liberal party’s rating reached a whopping 38.5% on April 19, by far the highest political support of a Canadian party reached so far in 2020.¹⁷ Even President Trump, who has come under a surge of criticism for drastically mishandling the situation, has seen increased approval ratings, albeit smaller than most.¹⁸ This surge in popularity may be, in part, a by-product of national unity.

What leaders choose to do with this newfound support determines how this crisis impacts SDGs 10 and especially 16. Some heads of government, such as President Trump, have used the opportunity to forward nationalist (verging on racist) monologues such as the now infamous labeling of COVID-19 as the “China Flu” in a transparent attempt to cater to his neo-nationalist voter base. Others have focused on a much more Palpatinesque approach to seize indefinite “emergency” powers.¹⁹ Most notably, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán obtained the indefinite power to rule by decree, a power he has already used to reverse laws protecting LGBT rights in Hungary during the pandemic thus far.²⁰

Other leaders have risen to prominence during this crisis for their unprecedented and adaptive leadership styles. The perfect example of this is New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern. Ardern gained international praise for her Facebook Live video streams, where she engagingly fielded questions directly from New Zealanders while at home in her pajamas after having put her daughter to sleep.²¹ Her informative, reassuring, and frank tone is being cited as one of the reasons New Zealand has already eliminated COVID-19 within their borders (for the time being) and has earned Ardern praise as “the most effective leader on the planet.”²²

Regardless, while we can see the short-term political responses play out, the longer-term consequences are harder to predict and will depend in no small part on the severity of the ensuing economic repercussions. Ken Boessenkool and Dan Robertson of *Maclean’s Magazine* worry that the financial crisis could lead to a “populist storm.”²³ They claim that the pandemic “has created the perfect storm of fear, anger and anxiety which will propel populism at an even greater pace.”²⁴ Claims that China has taken advantage of the crisis by weaponizing its supply chains further

demonstrate how competitive political opportunism continues despite calls for unity and may ultimately lead to a new global order defined by a hegemon other than the United States.²⁵

WHEN THE MONEY STOPS FLOWING (SDGS 1, 2, 6, 7, 8, AND 9)

A great depression seems all but inevitable.
—Van Jackson²⁶

Reduced consumption has already been touched on in this paper. While it is generally nothing but positive from an environmental standpoint for the time being, our society's capitalist foundation means that any economic repercussions as drastic as this will have a direct effect on our livelihoods. Yet these impacts are distributed unevenly. One of the 2030 Agenda's driving slogans, "leave no one behind," is truly being put to the test.

The initiative of civil society and other organizations working to directly affect the 2030 Agenda relies heavily on funding—and in the wake of this crisis, funders are not all reacting in the same way. Executive Director of Community Forests International, Daimen Hardie, portrays this split as "[funders] pausing their programs or retreating into one camp (often due to circumstances outside their control) and those pushing forward and meeting [the crisis] head on."²⁷

Then, a risk arises in how much funders (including governments) re-allocate their funding and where they allocate it. First, how much will the increased "crisis" funding offset what is being held back by funders due to uncertainty surrounding the economic future? Regardless, it is likely that funding to civil society undertaking "non-essential" initiatives will decrease overall. This poses a risk to some SDGs more than others. I worry in particular about SDG 1, No Poverty; SDG 2, Zero Hunger; SDG 4, Quality Education; SDG 5, Gender Equality; and SDG 6, Clean Water and Sanitation. It can be argued that states will be focusing on these SDGs more than ever domestically, particularly the first two listed SDGs. For example, homelessness in Canada has received great attention thus far. However, the work undertaken by civil society abroad may be negatively impacted.²⁸

This leads directly to a second point: where will this funding be directed geographically? At time where the global community needs to coordinate more than ever before, funders (particularly governments) will be tempted to spend at home first. It is hard to blame them. Governments need to take care of the citizens they protect first and initiatives abroad

second. So, international initiatives are naturally the first to be scraped when fiscal uncertainty is on the rise. The Charities Aid Foundation's 2019 "World Giving Index" ranks states in the Global North as making up most of the world's largest funders.²⁹ Frankly, the Global North will fare better at the expense of the "developing" world.

One heavily discussed subtopic has been the hit to global oil prices, mainly due to maintained production in the short term coupled with virtually no demand. Last week, crude oil prices dipped to nearly negative forty US dollars per barrel.³⁰ Oil distributors, left with nowhere to store their oil, were paying for people to take it off their hands. The dependency of certain economies on oil (in Canada, Alberta specifically) has never been clearer. This resource wakeup call may incite oil-dependent economies to diversify their energy sectors towards renewable energy sources. In other words, the oil market crash may indirectly support the long-term goals of SDG 7: Clean Energy.

BUILDING A NEW NORMAL (SDGS 4 AND 11)

We will see ordinary people become saints; we will see ordinary people become criminals. We're not prepared for it. And so the end of that, first, will be disbelief; bewilderment. And the return to normality will be slow.

—Larry Brilliant, leading epidemiologist³¹

As the lifestyle of self-isolation begrudges forward, alongside the pandemic, a discussion has emerged across social media about the degree to which people want things to return to "normal." While some of the difficulties surrounding online-only learning have become more apparent, the necessity to adapt rapidly has demonstrated how technology could have been taken advantage of much earlier to assist students with physical disabilities. One German student studying in Switzerland pointed out to me how infuriating it was for Swiss students' rights activists to see that much of what they had been advocating for over the course of twenty years, that bureaucrats claimed could not be done, was achieved within forty-eight hours. In light of the potential forthcoming "populist storm," the importance of accessible education should be emphasized now more than ever.

Unfortunately, this pandemic may see the un-inventing and disassembly of growing trends in both education and professional workspaces, such as the temporary end of "open concept" shared work areas. This is a decision that once again comes with its

own associated adverse health consequences. However, we may see a decline in the pace of urbanization and the mass movement of people to cities. New Brunswick, alongside other rural areas in Canada, are shining examples of how much slower diseases and viruses spread in rural areas compared to urban settings—and how, assuming a stable internet connection and accessible outdoor areas, these settings can provide for far more enjoyable and affordable work-from-home scenarios. In short, rural areas are healthier, safer, cheaper, and more enjoyable, at least within the pandemic context—and people are starting to notice.

GOING META: HOW THE UN ITSELF MAY BE IMPACTED (SDG 17)

The Great Depression precipitated the collapse of the League of Nations. While it was by no means the only contributing factor to the demise of multilateral institutions at the time, it was undeniably a principal one. When the UN turned fifty there were massive celebrations, but last year Secretary-General Antonio Guterres announced that there would be no celebrations in 2020 for the UN's seventy-fifth anniversary due to worries that the UN is at risk of collapse. The UN@75 committee had said:

just when we need bold collective action more than ever, multilateralism is being called into question. Unilateralism is on the rise as the world becomes more multipolar but also more polarized. In many parts of the world there is a growing disconnect between people and institutions. Renewed support for global cooperation could not be more urgent.³²

Therefore, this pandemic could very well “make or break” the UN and its institutions, defining them from this point forward. In the short-term, the health of the 2030 Agenda is likely not at risk due to its flexibility and all-encompassing nature. However, any progress made toward SDGs will be indirect and likely made in an individualistic fashion by countries focused on improving conditions within their borders. The HLPF itself will therefore undoubtedly see fewer Voluntary National Reviews and may devolve into an echo chamber in which “developed” states are primarily self-interested and the requests for support made by “developing” states go largely ignored.

CONCLUSION

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It has been one year since the COVID-19 pandemic began. While the continuous approval and production of vaccines are now well underway, the pandemic rages on. Having just escaped the “second” wave, a series of more contagious variants are taking the world by storm and delivering the “third” wave of the year. How the pandemic will impact the long-term implementation of the 2030 Agenda remains to be seen as the pandemic is far from over. Early steps toward vaccine-distribution agreements, primarily with COVAX, suggest that vaccine-nationalism is trumping international cooperation. Still, the 2030 Agenda serves as a beacon for post-COVID-19 recovery and is as relevant today as it was before the pandemic.

This piece has provided insight and early thoughts on a pandemic, the likes of which no one alive in 2020 had experienced, with the hope that there might one day be value in this point-in-time perspective. Future readers conducting post-pandemic analyses might compare these early thoughts and perspectives to how the pandemic impacted the 2030 Agenda. On a final note, I hope that readers recognize that no country in the world was on track to fulfilling the 2030 Agenda prior to the pandemic. It would not be surprising if many states cite the pandemic as a major reason for being off-track in their forthcoming Voluntary National Reviews. This response would be misrepresenting the truth. Pandemic or not, the 2030 Agenda was never going to be implemented anywhere except perhaps a handful of “developed” states. Nevertheless, the 2030 Agenda is a guide that all states would do well to strive to implement, even though its goals may be implausible.

FIGURE 1: UN Sustainable Development Goals

<i>Number</i>	<i>Goal</i>	<i>Description</i>
1	No Poverty	End poverty in all its forms everywhere
2	Zero Hunger	End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture
3	Good Health and Well-Being	Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages
4	Quality Education	Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all
5	Gender Equality	Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
6	Clean Water and Sanitation	Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
7	Affordable and Clean Energy	Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all
8	Decent Work and Economic Growth	Promote sustained inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all
9	Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation
10	Reduce Inequalities	Reduce inequality within and among countries
11	Sustainable Cities and Communities	Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
12	Responsible Consumption and Production	Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
13	Climate Action	Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts
14	Life Below Water	Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development
15	Life on Land	Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss
16	Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels
17	Partnerships for the Goals	Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development

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