



City Law Forum

COVID-19 reminds us of SDG pledges

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Sekander Zulker Nayeem

In 2015, the United Nations (UN) adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, commonly known as Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It provides a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet recognizing that ending poverty and other deprivations must go hand-in-hand with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality and spur economic growth, and thereby, all while tackling climate change and working to preserve our oceans and forests. At the heart of this Agenda, there are 17 Goals and 169 targets. The normative structures of SDGs basically derived from the juxtaposition of two interdisciplinary spirits: Environment and Development.

Following a discursive genealogy of development, it is now established that development means establishing social justice, not simply attaining the economic growth. Amartya Sen and some other commentators contributed to find out the ingredients of such justice as- building human capability, ensuring distributional justice, equality and non-discrimination, recognition and public participation. It would not be an exaggeration to say that justice ingredients have achieved some dominant presence in the UN SDGs. For example, it pledges determination for ending poverty and hunger, in all their forms and dimensions, and to ensure that all human beings can fulfill their potential in dignity and equality and in a healthy environment. The goals of SDGs are framed with visions of creating a world free of poverty, hunger, disease and want, where all life can thrive; a world with equitable and universal access to quality education, health care and social protection, where physical, mental and social well-being are assured; a world where human habitats are safe, resilient and sustainable. It also envisages a world of universal respect for human rights and human dignity, the rule of law, justice, equality and non-discrimination; of respect for race, ethnicity and cultural diversity; and of equal opportunity permitting the full realization of human potential and contributing to shared prosperity.

These determinations and visions are the echoes of global ambitions for establishing equality and letting the people thrive, realizing their full potentials which, in other words, can be addressed as building human 'capability'. Equality and non-discrimination are pledged to be ensured in letting the people attain 'capability' which denote the global promise to 'recognition' of all irrespective of race, sex, ethnicity, cultural diversity etc. Observing the targets of SDGs, we find that some goals, e.g., ending poverty, hunger, and inequalities, are designed to improve human capability; whilst other goals, e.g., ensuring sustainable environment and ecological balance, are designed to afford the present population and future generation to keep improving capability to sustain. However, building the capability of all requires 'distributional justice' as the means of implementation. Each country has the primary responsibility to mobilize financial resources to effectuate distributional justice. Additionally, private sectors and civil societies do have some responsibilities to mobilize resources to implement the SDG pledges. The shared principles and commitments of national governments and those of international community to achieve the targets of SDGs are the examples of distributional justice. In SDGs, it has been reiterated that

'participation' needs to be ensured with a view to achieving the goals. Goal 16.7 pledges ensuring responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels. In addition, goal 16.8 pledges broadening and strengthening the participation of developing countries in the institutions of global governance. In short, building capability of present and future generation is the vision of SDGs; distribution is the means of achieving that vision whereas recognition and participation are the procedure of effective distribution.

COVID-19 reinforces the global pledges of establishing justice at national and global level. Amid the pandemic, the target of human capability-building is facing two major obstacles: livelihood crisis and vaccination crisis. The former originates in different countries due to nationwide lockdowns helping prevent the proliferation of coronavirus. Countries like the UK are responding to provide their citizens who are refraining from attending the jobs the necessary sustenance to live. For example, the furlough schemes are the paradigm of distributional justice. Unfortunately, most of the least developed and developing countries are experiencing double-edged crises because, on the one hand, they are putting lockdowns into effect to help prevent the spread of corona-virus yet, on the other hand, they do not have sufficient means and mechanisms to effect distributional justice. Consequently, people in those countries are opting to succumb to death for managing necessary food and stuffs rather than staying at home.

Another major and probably the most significant obstacle to the achievement of human capability in the present situation is the unequal access to vaccination. In fact, building immunity through vaccination is an apparent form of human capability-building. It is to be mentioned that goal 3.8 and 3.b of SDGs adopted provisions for ensuring equal access to any vaccines for all and providing the developing countries the right to enjoy flexibilities regarding the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights. However, after the innovation of COVID-19 vaccines, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimated to distribute 11 billion doses of vaccines for 5.5 billion targeted populations to build immunity. Nevertheless, the world is facing severe inequalities in vaccine distribution. For example, North America and Europe availed more vaccines than their proportionate number of population. Conversely, Africa, where 17 per cent of world people live, could only

manage less than 2 percent vaccines. In some low and middle-income countries, less than one per cent of the population is vaccinated. Vaccine equity is not only critical to saving lives but also to driving a faster and fairer recovery from the pandemic with benefits all. None would be able to escape the pandemic getting vaccinated in isolation. Rather, every country needs to contribute in disseminating the vaccines immediately to each corner of the globe because COVID-19 is a mutation-prone virus. To date, many thousands of mutations of COVID-19 have been found, and it is possible that further mutations could result in lowering the efficacy of current vaccines. This likely danger necessitates immediate immunity-building of world populace through fair distribution of vaccines. Leaving the people of any class, race, ethnicity, or country etc. unvaccinated anywhere in the world may allow the virus any further unexpected mutations. Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of WHO, rightly commented, ‘Vaccine inequity is the world’s biggest obstacle to ending this pandemic and recovering from COVID-19. Economically, epidemiologically and morally, it is in all countries’ best interest to use the latest available data to make lifesaving vaccines available to all’.[1]

Thus, all people need to have the access to vaccine irrespective of race, sex, colour, language, and countries. In short, ending this pandemic requires building human immunity (capability to fight against COVID); distribution of resources and vaccines is the means of achieving this immunity whereas recognition, non-discrimination and participation are the procedure of effective distribution. COVID-19 demonstrates vividly the necessity of complying with justice ingredients, and reminds us of the pledges we vowed in SDGs for holistic global development.

[1] World Health Organization, ‘Vaccine inequity undermining global economic recovery’ <https://www.who.int/news/item/22-07-2021-vaccine-inequity-undermining-global-economic-recovery> accessed on 30 July 2021

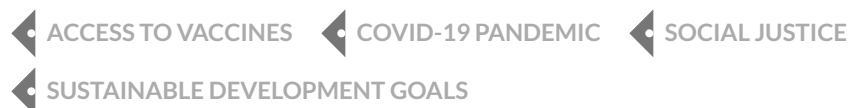
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2. World Health Organization, 'Vaccine inequity undermining global economic recovery' <https://www.who.int/news/item/22-07-2021-vaccine-inequity-undermining-global-economic-recovery> accessed on 30 July 2021
3. United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal3> accessed on 30 July 2021
4. Emdadul Haque, 'Access to Covid-19 vaccine and Bangladesh' <https://en.prothomalo.com/opinion/access-to-covid-19-vaccine-and-bangladesh> accessed on 30 July 2021
5. Will COVID-19 Vaccines Work against these New Variants? https://www.gavi.org/vaccineswork/what-do-new-covid-19-variants-mean-vaccine-development?gclid=CjwKCAjwxo6IBhBKEiwAXSYBsxQzOWW3K3GU-5enTUJmsCMIAhvsYBtyCydyWEnHqHVJzLVcMniMORoCmO4QAvD_BwE accessed on 30 July 2021

Sekander Zulker Nayeem



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3 Comments



Hussain Bari

AUGUST 3, 2021 AT 3:50 PM

Excellent piece. Congrats

REPLY



Emdadul Haque

AUGUST 4, 2021 AT 6:22 AM

The write-up on 'COVID-19 reminds us of SDG pledges' is well researched and written in lucid language. To me, Sustainable Developments Goals (SDGs) from 2015 to 2030 are very lofty for most of the developing and all least developed countries (LDCs) as the unjust struggle for attaining Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) from 2000 to 2015 was in shambles. We live in a world of relentless inequality and the camel hump shape of global economy is expediting, showing perpetuating discrimination among the rich and the poor. The world has more cell phones than truth brushes but the distributive justice as a socialist concept sounds well to the players of geopolitics. However, as optimist, let's see the SDGs, as glimpse of hope amid escalating despair, paving the way for a better world where there will be no hunger, inequality and injustice rather there will be equitable freedom, equality and justice for all irrespective of gender, colour, creed, or ethnicity. #

REPLY



Sekander Zulker Nayeem

AUGUST 12, 2021 AT 4:52 PM

Dear Mr. Emdad

Thanks for such precious comments. What a nice example of toothbrush

and cell phones! I am impressed with and inspired by your comments to think more on the topic. Thanks.

REPLY

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