

## APPG on the UN Goals for Sustainable Development inquiry on

### The Sustainable Development Goals: Covid-19 and the Decade of Action and Delivery

#### Written evidence submission from the Sussex Sustainability Research Programme (SSRP)

## 1. Introduction and reason for giving evidence

- 1.1 The Sussex Sustainability Research Programme (SSRP) is a partnership between the University of Sussex and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and builds upon a distinguished record in sustainability science and worldwide leadership in development studies across both organisations (the University of Sussex is consistently ranked number one in the world for development studies, under the [QS world university ranking](#)).
- 1.2 The Director of SSRP, Professor Joseph Alcamo, previously served as the Chief Scientist of the United Nations Environmental Programme and Special Science Advisor to the head of the international climate negotiations, and has led environmental science research since the 1980s.
- 1.3 The Programme launched in 2016 to address complex socio-economic, technical and environmental challenges. Through working with academics in the natural and social sciences and strategic international partners, the SRRP acts as a source of cutting-edge scientific and policy advice for governments, industry, non-governmental organisations and other bodies.
- 1.4 The Programme focuses on “Science for the SDGs”, providing knowledge to support the implementation of the SDGs. It gives particular attention to the issues of trade-offs and synergies among the goals (<http://www.sussex.ac.uk/ssrp/>).
- 1.5 SSRP is submitting evidence to the APPG on the UN Global Goals for Sustainable Development inquiry because our research has provided evidence of a worrisome gap in many countries between national policies for implementing the SDGs and how the SDGs are being realised locally, on the ground.
- 1.6 SSRP academics would be happy to give oral evidence to the Committee, or host a visit to the University of Sussex, to support the Inquiry.

## 2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 Although responsibility for implementing SDGs is vested in national governments, research is uncovering examples of disconnects between national plans to achieve the SDGs and local implementation of these plans.
- 2.2 We recommend that the UK government help close the gap between national planning and local implementation by encouraging beneficiaries of ODA to involve local stakeholders in national planning. The government can also help close the gap by encouraging beneficiaries to set up national advisory councils that are representative of a wide range of social groups, and by supporting UN programmes that focus on local implementation of the SDGs.
- 2.3 Evidence is accumulating that indigenous peoples in Latin America may be particularly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Mortality rates of indigenous people in the Amazon regions of Brazil and Peru are much higher than national averages, and this is likely to be related to their restricted access to health care. The fact that Covid-19 particularly endangers older people means that the indigenous knowledge held by these people is also threatened.
- 2.4 Tropical forest areas in Latin America and Africa may be hot spots of pandemic impacts. There is evidence of intensifying deforestation in parts of Brazil, Peru and Guinea-Bissau connected to pandemic-related relaxation of forest protections leading to a boost in logging and mineral extraction. New migrants fleeing the impacts of the pandemic are also clearing forests.
- 2.5 Research on financial crises over the past decades suggests that the pandemic-related global economic downturn may have knock-on effects on low and medium income countries including large increases in extreme poverty, a substantial drop in investments in education, and a decline in consumer access to electricity. We recommend that the UK assist low-income

countries to get back on their feet by helping them achieve long-term debt sustainability, in the spirit of Target 17.4 of the SDGs.

- 2.6 The pandemic-related downturn of the global economy means that the UK and other countries will have fewer resources to dedicate to the SDGs. Based on our research we recommend that countries use their resources more efficiently by investing in *synergy drivers* – actions that help achieve two or more SDGs at the same time by capitalising on the positive interconnections among the goals. Research has identified many examples of synergy drivers from around the world including sustainable supply chain management, integrated public health - forest conservation programmes, and people-centred early warning systems for extreme weather events. Each of these actions advance at least two, and usually more, SDGs. We recommend that the UK support national governments and local communities in the Global South so that they can identify the synergy drivers that work best in their particular context.

### 3. **How could the UK better support the achievement of the SDGs in other countries, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) and fragile and conflict affected states (FCAS), whether through aid or other foreign policy measures? To which countries, communities or sectors should the UK be directing greater attention and in what way?**

- 3.1 **It is very important that the UK direct its attention to the worrisome gap between national planning and local implementation of SDGs.** Responsibility for implementing the SDGs lies with national governments, but the implementation itself happens in local communities, businesses, and schools throughout each country. Research has provided evidence (see below) of a gap at many locations between the national planning for SDGs and local implementation of the goals. Actions taken at the national level often do not achieve the aims of the SDGs locally. Research shows that local conditions must be factored in more decisively when implementing national plans for the SDGs.

Some examples:

- In Tanzania, there is evidence that national policies to boost food production (SDG 2) through commercialisation of agriculture are opening up arable land for commercial operators but leaving out most local smallholder farmers.<sup>1</sup> Although smallholders produce a third of the world's food supply and disproportionately more in sub-Saharan Africa<sup>2</sup> they are still being left behind by these policies.
- In a number of African countries there is evidence that local groups most affected by national plans for introducing "climate-smart agriculture" (smallholder farmers, fisher communities, pastoralists) (SDGs 2 and 13) are frequently overlooked or completely bypassed in national decision-making processes about how to locally implement this type of agriculture.<sup>3</sup>
- In Ecuador, research has shown that national policies to advance economic growth (SDG 8) via increased oil extraction have caused environmental degradation and health impacts near extraction sites that harm poor and indigenous people. Furthermore, oil extraction has not markedly improved their economic condition.<sup>4,5</sup>

### 3.2 **Recommendation:**

**The UK should help close the gap between national planning and local implementation of the SDGs**

- Beneficiary countries of ODA can be encouraged to engage with local stakeholders in national decision making on the SDGs.
- Beneficiary countries can be encouraged to set up a national advisory council that provides input to national decisions about implementing the SDGs. This council should include a wide range of social groups that should benefit from the SDGs, but are in danger of being left behind by SDG policies.

- The UK can support programmes of the UN that are particularly oriented to local implementation of the SDGs.
- The UK can support projects that specifically aim to harmonise national planning and local implementation of the SDGs.

#### 4. **What are the most significant impacts that the Covid-19 pandemic is having on the achievement of the SDGs? What are the principle risks and where is it most essential to protect existing progress?**

##### 4.1 **There is early evidence that indigenous peoples in Latin America are disproportionately affected by Covid-19.**

- Early reports and preliminary data are presenting a discernible pattern of pandemic impacts on indigenous peoples in Latin America. A more definitive picture must await further data collection and analysis.
- Due to the high mortality rates among the elderly part of the population, indigenous communities are particularly vulnerable to long-term impacts of Covid-19. “Every time an elder dies, a library is burnt”: leaders are lost and with them language, cultural histories, and traditional knowledge.<sup>6,7,8</sup>
- In Brazil, the mortality rate for indigenous peoples in the Amazon region is 150% higher than the mortality rate for Brazil as a whole<sup>9</sup>. Brazil’s Indigenous Health Care agency does not include indigenous peoples living in urban areas or on lands without official indigenous demarcation in their Covid-19 statistics<sup>10</sup>.
- The number of Covid-19 deaths of indigenous peoples in Brazil could be as much as four times the official statistics.<sup>11</sup>
- In Peru, mortality rates for indigenous peoples in the Amazon has been three times that of the general population (90 deaths per 100,000 vs 29 deaths per 100,000)<sup>12,13</sup> Lack of access to oxygen in hospitals has led to deaths of indigenous peoples and other poor people who cannot afford to purchase oxygen.<sup>14,15</sup>

##### 4.2 **From the preceding point it is clear that, despite the assurances from the UK and other countries that the SDGs will “leave no one behind”, **vulnerable indigenous communities are in danger of being left behind.****

##### 4.3 **Recent data is showing that tropical forests in Latin America and Africa may be hot spots of pandemic impact.**

- There is early evidence that the pandemic, in addition to its tragic health impacts, may be leading to deforestation and environmental degradation at many locations, and making it more difficult to achieve the targets for the land goal (SDG 15) and social justice (SDG 16). At this point, we only have early reports and preliminary data.
- There is evidence that land use conflict and environmental degradation linked to logging, illegal goldmining and extractive industries are intensifying in Brazil.<sup>16</sup> Government presence and related law enforcement has been weakened by Covid-19 related lockdowns. At the same time, the national government has been pushing for legal changes that would give amnesty to land-grabbers and open up indigenous territories to mining.<sup>17</sup>
- Research in Peru is showing an uptick in deforestation caused by migrants who have fled Lima due to pandemic-induced unemployment and homelessness.<sup>18,19</sup> Having fled the capital city, the migrants have cleared forests along rivers and highways for farming.<sup>20</sup>
- A study of Covid-19 impacts in Guinea-Bissau has shown an upturn in illegal logging and other wildlife trafficking activities during the lockdown. As is the case in Brazil, the lack of government presence and law enforcement is creating a vacuum that is being exploited by illegal actors.<sup>21</sup>

#### 4.4 **Studies of recent financial crises hint at the impacts that low and medium income countries might expect from a downturn of the global economy caused by the pandemic.**

Research on world financial crises that have hit since the 1980s<sup>22</sup> provides some important lessons for the present crisis. Unsurprisingly, these crises have caused large increases in extreme poverty (SDG 1), especially in sub-Saharan Africa. Less obviously, these crises have also had important spin-off effects such as a substantial drop in government-spending on education (SDG 4) and a decline in access to electricity (SDG 7), and other negative impacts on well-being.<sup>23</sup> The current downturn in the global economy will make it much more difficult for low and medium income countries to achieve many/most SDGs including goals for poverty alleviation, education, and access to energy.

#### 4.5 **Recommendation:**

##### **The UK should help low-income countries reach long-term debt sustainability**

Some low-income countries are particularly vulnerable to the global economic downturn, especially the 24 in the class of “debt distress” or near debt distress.<sup>24</sup> If they could attain “long-term debt sustainability” they would have a better chance of coping with the current financial crisis and get back on track to achieving the SDGs.<sup>25</sup> At this juncture, the UK government can show exceptional international leadership by championing Target 17.4 of the SDGs which calls for richer countries to “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.”

#### 5. **Which SDGs are the UK government prioritising in its national and global response to Covid-19? What role could the SDGs play in sustainable recovery and efforts to ‘build back better’?**

##### 5.1 **Recommendation:**

##### **The UK and other countries should use their resources for implementing the SDGs more efficiently by giving priority to *synergy drivers*.**

The SDGs represent a unique global consensus on social, economic and environmental goals. For that reason, **they provide an ideal international road-map for “building back better”.**

But progress has been slow in achieving most of the global goals, even before the pandemic hit. In September 2019, the UN Secretary General reported that efforts were lagging in eradicating poverty, ending hunger and protecting the global climate and biodiversity.<sup>26</sup> Now, with the severe economic impacts of the pandemic, even fewer resources can be marshalled together for catching up with the SDGs. In short, the UK and other governments have to do **more with less.**

Based on our research, we recommend that the UK and other countries do more with less by investing in *synergy drivers* – policies, measures, and other actions carried out locally, nationally, or internationally that help achieve two or more SDGs at the same time by capitalising on the positive interconnections among the goals. By advancing multiple goals at the same time, synergy drivers have the potential to save resources in achieving the SDGs.

##### 5.3 **There are many examples of synergy drivers from around the world.** Over the last three years, the Sussex Sustainability Research Programme has compiled evidence of synergy drivers from four different continents:

- In forest margin areas of Brazil, Ecuador and elsewhere there is evidence that **sustainable supply chain management** can further SDGs for decent work (SDG 8), social justice (SDG 16), and land biodiversity (SDG 15) at the same time.<sup>27</sup>
- In peri-urban areas in India and the UK there is evidence that **sustainable agricultural practices** can promote not only the goal for ending hunger (SDG 2), but also goals for health (SDG 3), land biodiversity (SDG 15) and sustainable cities (SDG 11).<sup>28,29</sup>

- In Papua-New Guinea, researchers have evaluated projects that successfully **integrate public health programmes with sustainable forestry practices** in low-income villages in deforestation zones. These projects have the potential to support both the health (SDG 3) and land biodiversity (SDG 15) goals.<sup>30</sup>
- In the UK and elsewhere, researchers have found that **embedding Sustainability Assessments into existing and new trade agreements** can be an effective measure to achieve multiple SDGs.<sup>31</sup>
- In farming communities in Kenya and fisher communities in South India, research has found that **“people-centred” early warning systems** for extreme weather events (national early warning systems tuned to the needs of specific communities and locales) can help these communities adapt to extreme weather conditions related to climate variability (SDG 13), and protect their livelihoods (SDG 8). Consequently, these early warning systems also increase the food security of farmers and fishers and the communities they provide food for (SDG 2).<sup>32,33</sup>
- In agricultural areas around the world, **sustainable nutrient management** can help achieve the water quality target under the water goal (SDG 6) while advancing the end hunger (SDG 2) and climate goals (SDG 13).<sup>34</sup>

#### 5.4 Recommendation:

**The UK should provide support to national governments and local communities so that they can identify synergy drivers.**

It is important to note that particular synergy drivers are likely to work better in some places than in others. Or, put another way, their effectiveness in advancing multiple SDGs will depend on national and local circumstances. Some synergy drivers, such as sustainable supply chain management and people-centred early warning systems, might be applicable in many places; others might work only at a few locations. With this in mind, it would be helpful for the UK government to provide support to national governments and local communities (particularly in the Global South) so that they themselves can identify which synergy drivers work best in their own context.

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July 3, 2020

#### End Notes

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<sup>10</sup> Menton, Souza, op. cit.

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- <sup>24</sup> Antoniades, op. cit.
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