

ADVANCING
THOUGHT
LEADERSHIP
FOR
SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT

World Economic
Situation
and Prospects

2020

Over the course of the year, UN DESA continued to advance the global discourse on sustainable development, reacting swiftly to the unprecedented situation the world faces due to the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

UN DESA...

- Drove a multi-year process to prepare the first quadrennial Global Sustainable Development Report, launched in September 2019.
- Provided a comprehensive assessment of the macroeconomic consequences of emerging trends, including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Produced high-quality publications with hard hitting findings and recommendations for advancing social and economic development.
- Launched a dedicated series of policy briefs and webinars and published a Sustainable Development Outlook on the impacts of COVID-19 and policy options for recovering better.
- Supported leading development experts of the UN High-level Advisory Board on Economic and Social Affairs and the UN Committee for Development Policy in providing innovative policy advice to the UN system.

Press Briefing to launch WESP 2020
- Photo Credit: UN Photo/Manuel Elias

Advancing thought leadership for sustainable development

In a period marred by a global pandemic and its broad social and economic impacts, UN DESA continued to guide the narrative, using timely, principled and authoritative information to highlight solutions and solidarity, and offer sound avenues for response and recovery. UN DESA continued to set the tone of the global conversation on social and economic issues through its cutting-edge analytical products, policy advice and capacity development.



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WESP Mid-Year Update

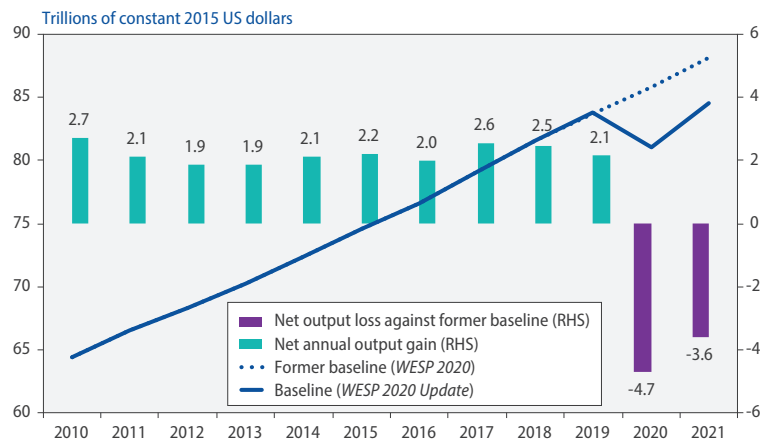
The mid-year update of the WESP report saw major media coverage:

- 2,000 articles
- 1,100 social media posts with a cumulative potential reach of over 123 million
- Close to 6,000 engagements on social media.

Bringing the future into focus

UN DESA's work on tracking and forecasting development trends received heightened attention in 2020. The **World Economic Situation and Prospects (WESP)** played a critical role in informing the global dialogue on economic development, including in the context of the World Economic Forum. The WESP mid-year update presented a comprehensive assessment of the macroeconomic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for the world economy as well as its implications for sustainable development in general. It found that the pandemic has unleashed a health and economic crisis unprecedented in scope and magnitude, with global growth projected to contract by -3.2% in 2020.

WORLD GROSS PRODUCT, LEVEL AND ANNUAL CHANGES, 2010–2021



The world economy is expected to lose nearly \$8.5 trillion in output in 2020 and 2021, wiping out much of the output gains of the previous five years. The report also underscores the imperative for countries to recover better, aligning their pandemic response with the objectives and priorities of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals. As of early June, the WESP 2020 and its mid-year update had together registered 26,058 downloads from UN DESA sites. The report and its mid-year update were mentioned around 3,000 times by the global media, including the Associated Press, Reuters, EFE, The New York Times, The Washington Post, France24, RT, Xinhua and NDTV.

The first in a new series, the **World Social Report 2020: Inequality in a Rapidly Changing World** also helped inform global dialogue on persistent challenges posed by inequality and other social divides. The report, released in January 2020 was taken up by over 40 prestigious media outlets around the world, as it revealed the deep divides that persist within and across countries despite an era of extraordinary economic growth and widespread improvements in living standards.

The report found that powerful economic, social and environmental forces, including climate change, technological innovation, urbanization and international migration, are affecting inequality trends, and recommended that countries redouble their efforts to achieve SDG 10 on reducing inequality. It sends a clear message that the future course of these complex challenges is not set. They can be harnessed for a more equitable and sustainable world, or they can be left to further divide us. The report received global media attention and sparked an intense debate on inequality in diverse circles – from an in-depth economy column in the Washington Post to the opening of a movie critique in Forbes.

Helping Member States recover better: Addressing COVID-19 response and sustainable recovery

In its immediate response to the COVID-19 crisis, UN DESA undertook research and analysis of the socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19. Published as a series of policy briefs, UN DESA drew on its analysis to provide policy recommendations to address the crisis and steer towards a sustainable recovery. Since the launch of the series on 1 April 2020, the Department published 23 concise and focused briefs, covering a wide range of both sectoral and cross-cutting sustainable development issues,



“It gave me the interrelatedness of the social and the economic, how a social problem of COVID-19 has gotten itself interwoven with the other facts of human society. The economic effects of this pandemic are worldwide and therefore one needs to look at it with a wider perspective, broadened view.”

(University student from Zimbabwe commenting on UN DESA webinar)



“My role as Senior Programs [Officer] involves designing and providing technical and managerial support to a portfolio of projects in country and within the region. So, the learning was very helpful designing the country-level COVID-19 contingency plan.” (Civil society organization member from Uganda commenting on UN DESA webinar)

often with a focus on the most vulnerable countries and populations. Jointly, they provided timely analyses of the challenges posed by the unprecedented crisis as well as policy guidance to ensure that sustainable development goals remains in reach during the post-crisis decade. UN DESA's new COVID-19 portal quickly became one of the Department's most visited web pages, with 17,896 visits in the second quarter. The featured policy briefs were downloaded a combined 237,729 times from 1 April through 30 June 2020.

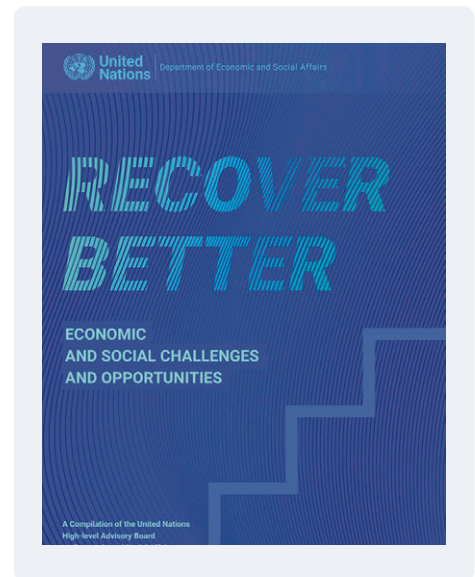
To strengthen its outreach to a wider audience and further inform the policy briefs' key findings and recommendations in responding to the pandemic, UN DESA launched on 9 April 2020 its first webinar on the economic, social and financial impact of COVID-19, as part of the **UN DESA Webinar Series**. The session was attended by close to 9,000 viewers from over 160 countries, with an estimated social media reach of over 34,000 people. The Department continued to inform and engage with the participants through its virtual platform on other urgent issues, including strengthening science and technology, addressing inequalities, harnessing climate and SDG synergies, and integrating the 2030 Agenda into response and recovery plans. A total of 16 webinars so far have been viewed almost 65,000 times.

As part of its efforts to help Member States respond to the COVID-19 pandemic UN DESA also brought together the analytical insights provided by the esteemed members of the UN High-level Advisory Board on Economic and Social Affairs (HLAB) and published the HLAB's edited volume in July 2020. Convened by the Under-Secretary-General of UN DESA, the Advisory Board is a group of former Heads of State, senior Government officials, a Nobel Laureate and other eminent experts on economic and social policies. The publication, "Recover Better: Economic and Social Challenges and Opportunities," is the outcome of the two-year term of the HLAB and provides important inputs to inform and advise the UN on critical social and economic issues. It discusses a wide set of development issues that are central to the work of UN DESA and the broader UN system, covering global economic development, inclusive growth, economic structure evolution, climate change, frontier technologies, financing for sustainable development, and multilateralism, among others. Nearly 800 people registered for the 22 July WebEx event, representing at least 75 countries from Africa, Asia, Australia, the Caribbean, Europe, North America and South America. In its first week, the video of the event was seen by about 2,000 users on UN WebTV, and an additional 1,400 on YouTube, 2,300 on Facebook and more than 10,000 on Twitter. Separately, the video reached almost 22,000 of UN DESA's Facebook followers, earning good engagement with 326 reactions.

UN DESA's work also supported the plenary session of the Committee for Development Policy (CDP) in February 2020. In its contribution to the HLPF Ministerial Declaration and in a dedicated document, the CDP focused on implications of the COVID-19 crisis, highlighting the need to put the SDGs first and foremost to build equal, green and resilient societies and economies. It made concrete proposals for how multilateral responses could address the health crisis, stem the economic impacts and accelerate achievement of the SDGs, and called for an inclusive process to reform multilateral rules and institutions.

Strengthening the science-policy interface

UN DESA drove a multi-year process to prepare the first quadrennial **Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR)**, one of the two reports mandated to inform the follow-up and review process of the 2030



Agenda. A Secretary-General-appointed group of 15 independent scientists authored the Report, supported by a task team of UN-system entities led by UN DESA and including UNCTAD, UNDP, UNEP, UNESCO and the World Bank. UN DESA provided research and drafting support, including managing the external peer review. An online call for inputs garnered more than 300 contributions from across the world. The report launched in September 2019.

The report identifies six entry points where specific actions aimed to mitigate trade-offs and catalyse synergies can bring about the transformative change needed to reach the SDGs. The report quickly gained strong online presence, with #GSDR generating more than 12.5 million impressions on Twitter on its launch day. The six 'entry points' presented in the report informed the politically

negotiated outcome document from the SDG Summit and its call for a 'decade of action and delivery'. Since the launch, UN DESA has continued, with the support of partners, to amplify the messages of the Report both on and offline. These messages continue to inform SDG implementation and review processes, including through dedicated sessions in the HLPF programme for 2020.

UN DESA has continued to support the important work of the ECOSOC High-level Segment, in its focus on future trends and scenarios. To support the discussions in the 2020 Segment UN DESA prepared a report on Accelerated action and transformative pathways: realizing the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development. UN DESA's report on Long-term future trends and scenarios-impacts in the economic, social and environmental

A panel of independent scientists authored the GSDR, with support from a UN DESA-led UN-System Task Team. – Photo Credit: UN Photo/ Eskinder Debebe



areas on the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals further served to inform the Segment's deliberations on the future of the SDGs following the COVID-19 crisis. UN DESA's **Sustainable Development Outlook** (SDO) further helped to inform Member States deliberations. In July 2020 the SDO addressed the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the sustainable development agenda and on the prospects for achieving the 17 SDGs. The 2020 edition of the report offered a forward-looking, scenario-based analysis of policy options for responding to the crisis, and presented their likely outcomes, supporting Member State efforts to recover better.

Support to the UN development system reform

In 2020, UN DESA continued to support Member States to forge ahead with efforts to reposition the UN development system (UNDS) and provide strategic direction on operational activities for development, an even more pressing topic in light of COVID-19. The Department surveyed Programme Country Governments, Resident Coordinators, Operation Management Teams and UN Agency Headquarters. An analysis of the robust evidence collected was presented to Member States in the annual Secretary-General's report on the quadrennial comprehensive policy review (QCPR). The report provides a comprehensive update on progress in implementing Member States' policy guidance on the QCPR, currently set out in the 2016 GA resolution on the QCPR and 2018 GA resolution on repositioning the UNDS. A detailed funding analysis and a monitoring framework with over 165 indicators accompany the report.

The Department supported the Vice-President of ECOSOC in organizing the ECOSOC's Operational Activities Segment, where the Secretary-General presented his report on the QCPR to the membership. This year's Segment was particularly critical as it paved the way for finalising the remaining mandates of the repositioning efforts, on the review of regional assets and multi-country offices, and the upcoming 2020 GA resolution on the QCPR. In addition, UN DESA is helping delegates to prepare for the 2020 GA resolution on the QCPR through a training series hosted in collaboration with the Government of Switzerland and UNITAR.

Exploring options for inclusive economies

Throughout the year, UN DESA has convened regular meetings of the United Nations Economists Network (UNEN), with participation from the



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Survey on operational activities for development

- Over 30,000 datapoints
- 117 Programme Country Governments
- 116 Resident Coordinators
- 116 Operational Management Teams
- 30 Agency Headquarters.
- 81% of LDCs (38 out of 47), 88% of LLDCs (28 out of 32) and 71% of SIDS (27 out of 38) responded to the survey of Programme Country Governments.



"This survey is helpful, it strengthens the partnership between government and UN agencies, and it allows them to evaluate their activities and improve on their mistakes."

~ Programme Country Government
Survey respondent

five UN Regional Economic Commissions, UNDP, UNCTAD, UNEP, UN-Habitat, ILO, FAO, UNU and others. The Network has two objectives: to facilitate the collaboration and joint work among agencies on issues of shared interest and relevance to the sustainable development agenda; and to provide a network of support on economic, financial and social policy issues to the UN Country Teams and the Resident Coordinator Offices. To advance on these objectives, the UNEN prepared a joint report for the 75th anniversary of the UN. The report examines how efforts must be reinforced and redirected to ensure that we achieve the full measure of the Sustainable Development Agenda and set the stage for an inclusive, sustainable and equitable future during the next 75 years. It does so through a focus on five megatrends that are shaping our reality: climate change; demographic developments,

particularly the “ageing” of populations; the emergence of digital technologies as the major feature of the Fourth Industrial Revolution; urbanization; and inequalities. The report includes a brief analysis of the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the megatrends. The executive summary identifies a range of policies and interventions that could be effective in shifting the evolution of the megatrends and establishing the principles that should guide the choice of policies in countries. The UNEN is also discussing how best to leverage existing and new networks of experts to assist the UN Country Teams and to directly support in-country activities.

Providing support to the new resident coordinator system and the new generation of United Nations Country Teams (UNCTs)

UN DESA identified the Common Country Assessments

Capture of QCPR UNITAR Training Session in 2020 – Photo Credit: UN DESA



(CCAs) as a key entry point to contribute to the UNCTs' support to national governments in the implementation of their sustainable development plans. The engagement in the preparation of the CCAs will ensure that UN DESA's support is aligned with the priorities of governments and work programmes of the resident coordinators. Accordingly, the support to the new generation of CCAs has become a priority for the whole department. The Department started providing analysis on regional economic situation, national macroeconomic and structural transformation, debt management and fiscal issues, in six pilot countries, with

a view to expanding it to more countries in the coming years. UN DESA also led an inter-agency team to prepare a thought piece on economic transformation. The objective is to equip the resident coordinators and UN country teams with sufficient capacities to elaborate their own analysis and advise governments on relevant economic issues. The Department has built on the analytical tools and products already at its disposal, including its economic forecasting model and the CDP framework for expanding productive capacities in LDCs, to develop country specific policy guidance.