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India–Africa Partnership for Sustainability in a Post-Pandemic World

Ayan Sharma

India and Africa face difficult hurdles to achieving the SDGs, including climate change. Photo: Getty Images / Guido Dingemans, De Eindreactie

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused severe impacts on societies and economies across the world. The public health response to the pandemic has set in motion a global economic recession, with no clear way in sight back to growth. Indeed, the pandemic has overwhelmed both healthcare systems and government policies. While the impact of the pandemic will vary across countries and regions, it is likely to increase poverty and inequalities at a global scale. The policy response will determine the human toll of the virus; the length and severity of the economic downturn; and the economic, social and environmental progress towards attaining the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This places a tremendous responsibility on policymakers.

While the first wave of the pandemic is now receding in parts of Western Europe, East Asia and North America, it has rapidly taken off in Latin America, Africa and South Asia. Countries in lower- and middle-income regions are witnessing spiralling infections, hospitalisations and deaths. India, which had initially surprised the world with its low numbers, now reports 4.7 lakh cases of COVID-19 infections, with a mortality rate of three percent.¹ Africa, too, had seen slow rates of transmission in the early stages, with lower numbers of infections compared to Western Europe and other regions in the world. However, it has now recorded 336,019 cases and 8,856 deaths.² To stem the spread of the virus, India and several African nations imposed lockdowns that have taken a heavy economic toll in these regions, forcing a revision of these countries' projected growth rates. The economic fallout has adversely affected sectors such as tourism, agriculture, manufacturing and trade, leading to massive losses in jobs and incomes. The Indian economy is predicted to contract by five percent in FY21³ and is set to face its worst recession in 40 years. Rating agencies have painted a similarly dire picture for Africa, with its growth rate dropping to 0.4 percent, notwithstanding fiscal stimulus packages or currency devaluations.⁴

The outbreak of COVID-19 comes at a time when the climate crisis is steadily escalating, exacerbated by unsustainable models of development based on the ceaseless exploitation of natural resources. Rapid urbanisation; increased density of human settlements; unsustainable changes in land use; growing demand for animal-sourced products; the destruction of animal habitats, both terrestrial and aquatic, have all contributed to zoonosis, which led to the COVID-19 pandemic.^a The imperative is to build better systems by

a The jumping of infectious diseases across the species barrier, from non-human animals to humans.

attending to social and environmental aspects that are key to attaining the SDGs.

For India and African nations, creating an inclusive, sustainable and equitable socio-economic architecture is critical in achieving the SDG targets. The pandemic has forced these countries to announce fiscal stimulus packages and institute relief measures to mitigate the damage to their economies. These measures, however, have caused the de-prioritisation of the SDGs in state policy and are likely to have adverse environmental impacts. Both Africa and India are extremely vulnerable to climate change, which is now compounded by their energy needs for getting their growth trajectories back on track. Therefore, while responding to the pandemic, these nations must focus on a strategy to “build back better.”

It is within this context that the Observer Research Foundation’s (ORF) Centre for New Economic Diplomacy (CNED) convened a virtual roundtable on an “India–Africa Partnership for Sustainability.” The digital discussion saw participation from more than 40 stakeholders, half of whom were women. The webinar reflected the CNED’s vision of helping Africa write its own development story and saw representation from 12 African countries in addition to India, the United Kingdom and Bangladesh. The discussion delved into five key themes:

- The Impact of COVID-19 on SDG Targets
- Transformative Partnerships
- Global Economic Imperatives and the Role of Financial Institutions
- Environmental Diplomacy in a Post-COVID-19 World
- Gender and COVID-19

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON SDG TARGETS

The COVID-19 outbreak is an unprecedented global health crisis and has also led to a colossal collapse in economic activity across the world. While it is difficult to determine the full extent of the socio-economic impact, a recession of record dimensions is almost certain. With many countries already lagging in their efforts to achieve the SDG targets, the pandemic could not have come at a worse time.

A pandemic thrives on human inequities: during an infectious outbreak, it is the poorer and weaker populations who are disproportionately affected and

ultimately bear the additional burden of early death. This has been demonstrated in India through the plight of its migrant labour populations who were deprived of any source of income and social-security nets following the imposition of the nationwide lockdown. This also brought to fore the question of whether India is on track with regard to eradicating poverty and offering inclusive development to the vulnerable sections of its population. While the country's commitment towards achieving the SDG targets is firm, and tremendous progress has been made in certain areas, the pandemic has exposed that the Indian government's policymaking does not adequately take into account the poor and most vulnerable sections of society. The pandemic has exacerbated the levels of poverty and inequality in India and has significantly damaged its progress towards the SDG targets.

For Africa, this new decade began with countries on track to realising the goals and priorities of SDG 2030 and Agenda 2063.⁵ Most African governments imposed restrictions by implementing lockdowns and curfews, banning public gatherings, and closing their borders. These measures have had a significant effect on the economy, since 90 percent of the African labour force is employed in the informal sector, which accounts for 25–65 percent of the GDP.⁶ The stay-at-home measures have affected the daily livelihoods of people, especially the poor and vulnerable in rural and urban areas. Given the nature of the pandemic, Africa's already stressed healthcare systems are likely to become over-burdened. This dual burden has already begun to impact Africa's progress towards SDG 3 (good health and well-being) and 8 (decent living and economic growth).

For both Africa and India, one of the key areas of impact in terms of the SDG targets has been that of Climate Action (SDG 13). According to Patricia Appiagyei (Deputy Minister, Ministry of Environment, Science, Technology and Innovation, Ghana), "67 percent of the population in Ghana that has access to electricity live in urban areas, and lack of clean energy access in rural areas has led again to a reliance by people on traditional fossil fuels to meet their energy needs." The lockdowns and curfews have amplified these issues of access, despite countries such as Ghana encouraging the establishment of solar farms and promoting the role of the private sector in transitioning towards a green economy. Minister Appiagyei stressed on the need to decentralise energy resources and focus on developing industries around renewable energy use. She reiterated the role of developed countries in providing financial aid under Article 6 of the Paris Agreement: the nationally determined contributions to climate action (NDCs) of most African countries depend substantially on the availability of climate finance, since their limited fiscal capacity is being spent on providing economic stimulus due to the pandemic.

In India, the rapid decline in travel and related economic activities during the lockdown has resulted in a slow dip in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, better air quality, and uninterrupted flowing of river water. The average air quality index (AQI) for the major Indian cities, which was between 300–500 before the lockdown, plunged to 50–100.⁷ Like in other countries, India has relaxed environmental norms in its stimulus package, in a bid to revive its economy. This may further weaken international efforts to combat climate change and air pollution. Therefore, measures taken to revive the economy in the aftermath of COVID-19 must aim to provide opportunities for countries to reduce emissions. Countries can be encouraged to invest in low-carbon infrastructure and capacity-building initiatives. Jayant Sinha (Member of Parliament, Government of India) stated, “Despite the on-going crisis, this is an opportune moment to see how a green stimulus-based package can reshape development in India ... Due to the economic downturn caused by the pandemic the inputs that are essential for creating a green stimulus are at very low prices and hence creating a more resilient India relative to Climate Change is a distinct possibility now.” He stressed that promoting a green transition in most sectors of industry can, in turn, create an employment incentive stimulus package, which will help mitigate the economic impact of the pandemic.

India and African nations must design their national strategies holistically to tackle equity, pandemic and climate change together, which will not only be cost-effective but will also save time and money. To be prepared for high-impact climate shocks,⁸ these countries must re-assess risk and vulnerability, rethink their application of equity, and enhance adaptive capacities.

TRANSFORMATIVE PARTNERSHIPS

It is too early to assess the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 in any country. However, countries have to come up with mitigation and response measures before the pandemic is over. Further, such measures must not be formulated in silos and should look towards inter-regional cooperation and international partnerships. According to Amb. Dr. Anil Sooklal (Deputy Director-General: Asia and the Middle East, South Africa), “There should be a multi-polar world and that India and Africa should look to create zone partnerships.” Developing countries and regions such as India and Africa should strive to not get caught in the crosshairs of the emerging cold war between the United States and China. Youba Sakona (Vice President, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) said, “India and Africa should collectively work towards creating social and technological transformations in a climate-compatible manner.” They are

capable of forging a “defining partnership” in the next decades by jointly combating the pandemic and coalescing their strengths to address challenges of the post-COVID-19 world as well as those of climate change, extremism, terrorism and transnational crimes. India has already provided substantial assistance to African countries in their fight against the pandemic, in the form of critical pharmaceuticals. Akhilesh Mishra (Additional Secretary Development Partnership Administration, Government of India) noted, “India through these initiatives has emerged as a responsible and reliable international power at a time when established international actors have remained unresponsive.”

According to Hassanatu Mansaray (Senior Policy Specialist, Strategy Operational Policies Department, African Development Bank, Cote D’Ivoire), India can be a tremendous provider of sector-specific knowledge and best practices, which can kickstart the economic revival measures in several African countries. Mohua Mukherjee (Former Ambassador of the International Solar Alliance), observed that since Indian and African economies are still heavily reliant on agriculture, they can partner in the field of climate-smart/resilient agriculture. “Through their unique experiences, India and Africa can help fill in the global knowledge gaps in the sector and also address the data paucity in the field.”

Shirish Sinha (Director, Climate, Children’s Investment Fund Foundation, India) remarked that India and African nations have the potential to partner in areas of urban-planning and management of mega-cities. Since the countries have a commonality of problems, they could also have a commonality of solutions. He stressed on the role that the Coalition for Disaster Resilience Infrastructure can play in fostering partnerships between India and African nations and promoting mutually beneficial collaborations between them. While the pandemic remains a colossal challenge, it has provided opportunities and avenues to bring India and Africa closer.

GLOBAL ECONOMIC IMPERATIVES AND THE ROLE OF FINANCIAL INSTITUTIONS

Due to the economic impact of COVID-19, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has predicted that the global economy will contract by three percent in 2020.⁹ This downturn is worse than the one witnessed during the 2008–09 global financial crisis. Restarting economies and life will be the defining governance challenge of this era. With no modern precedent to inform them, governments must create the maps that will guide their actions over the crucial

next few months. In times of such a global economic crisis, multilateral institutions such as the G-20 play a critical role in the path to economic recovery. Suresh Prabhu (G-20 Sherpa for India), stated, “The G20 can help promote international economic cooperation and the role of non-traditional actors such as NGO’s in catalysing development partnerships between emerging economies such as India and Africa.” The recovery is likely to be volatile and uneven. Governments will have to identify critical sectors for resuscitation and develop a resilient and adaptive strategy for reopening their economies.

According to Annapurna Mitra (Fellow, Observer Research Foundation, India), “innovation should be incentivised” and that governments and corporations should work towards making “every component of their supply chains sustainable.” She stated that raising fuel taxes, as India has done in the past few years, would not only promote a transition towards a green economy but also make it possible for countries to create financial corpuses that can help finance their economic recovery in a post-pandemic world. Fahmida Khatun (Director, Centre for Policy Dialogue, Bangladesh) agreed with this and stressed on the need for the inclusion of a green component in all economic stimulus packages.

A successful sustainable development agenda requires partnerships between governments, the private sector and civil society. However, in these unprecedented times, it is not prudent to rely on the private sector to fill in the financial gaps in sustainable development. Thus, the role of traditional development financial institutions, such as the African Development Bank and Export-Import Banks, becomes even more important. David Rasquinha (Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer, Export-Import Bank of India) stated that the key issue is to ascertain the kind of financing required. “Given the fiscal reality of most African countries, what is required are long term loans at low rates of interest [which the Indian Lines of Credit provide].” He added that social and environmental investors in the market must support the sustainable development agenda and highlighted the importance of leveraging social impact bonds to further augment the process.

ENVIRONMENTAL DIPLOMACY IN A POST-COVID-19 WORLD

Whilst COVID-19 has seemingly put environmental diplomacy on hold, with the postponement of COP26 and the 15th Biodiversity COP to 2021, the climate-change crisis continues to unfold across the world. The pandemic has dented nations’ collective ability to address the threat of climate change, in a

year that global political and business leaders were supposed to put climate first. With the momentum being lost, the role of global processes such as the COP 26 has become even more critical. Paul Arkwright (UK's Regional Ambassador for Africa in the FCO-Cabinet Office COP26 Unit Joint Team) stated, "The UK shall seek to leverage its presidency of the G7 to ensure that there are moments and milestones across the year where climate action is brought to the fore and international governments can come together and use those opportunities." He added that the UK will continue to focus on its key campaigns and commitments, such as promoting nature-based solutions in Africa as well as forest conservation and sustainable land use. He stressed that the "COP26 is postponed but not forgotten" and that it shall continue its work in critical areas, e.g. ensuring that the G-7 countries meet their commitments of providing climate finance to developing countries, to help facilitate their progress towards adaptation and resilience. The role of the COP will be critical in helping steer countries towards a sustainable recovery of their economies, including through fiscal stimuli and legislation, to advance a transformation in industry, transport, agriculture and other sectors.

GENDER AND COVID-19

Disease outbreaks affect women and men differently, and pandemics exacerbate existing inequalities for women and other marginalised groups, such as persons with disabilities and those in extreme poverty. This must be factored in while formulating healthcare measures. For instance, many women likely have less power than men with regard to decision-making around the outbreak, leading to the neglect of their general health, and their sexual and reproductive health in particular.

Despite women constituting nearly 70 percent of the global health workforce, they are not fully engaged in decision-making and intervention-planning, security surveillance, detection and prevention mechanisms. "Government must ensure that during the pandemic female voices are brought to the fore in decision-making processes and that their rights be they social, educational or reproductive are not violated due to the measures imposed in order to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus," said Gwendoline Abunaw (CEO, EcoBank, Cameroon). Furthermore, accurate and complete age and sex-disaggregated data must be gathered, to understand how COVID-19 impacts individuals differently, in terms of prevalence and trends. According to Danielle Kayembe (Founder, GreyFire Impact, US), "74 percent of Africa's population has mobile phones and we can leverage this to gather more data on

the gender-specific impact of COVID-19 ... COVID-19 is a warning that the challenges of the future are going to be global and that we will have to work together to address them successfully.”

CONCLUSION

As the world works through response and recovery measures to address the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic, the SDGs must be designed into the DNA of global recovery. They provide a blueprint for a more equitable and sustainable future. Aparna Roy (Associate Fellow, ORF) aptly summarised the roundtable by stating that the imperative for India and Africa “is to prioritise transition towards low-carbon sustainable energy infrastructure and access while designing their post-pandemic responses.”

In this post-pandemic world, CNED hopes to continue to engage with African stakeholders on the subjects of climate change and sustainable development, to create adaptive and resilient development frameworks and inclusive pathways. [ORF](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ayan Sharma is Associate Fellow at ORF and Programme Coordinator for the Center for New Economic Diplomacy.

ENDNOTES

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20, Rouse Avenue Institutional Area, New Delhi - 110 002, INDIA

Ph. : +91-11-35332000 Fax : +91-11-35332005

E-mail: contactus@orfonline.org

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