

2020 SPECA Economic Forum
“Regional Cooperation to Support Socioeconomic Recovery in the Wake of COVID-19”
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Session VI “Moving Forward: Building Back Better with View to Implement the SDGs”
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Remarks by Ms. Louise Chamberlain, UNDP Resident Representative in Kyrgyzstan

Excellencies, distinguished partners and colleagues,

Thank you for inviting me to participate in the session on the interlinkages between the effective recovery from COVID-19 and meeting the promise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Less than a month ago we marked the 75th anniversary of the United Nations.

With age come the benefits of experience. And for the UN, the most important lesson we have learnt from 75 years of existence is that international cooperation and effective and inclusive multilateralism are the only proven way to overcome global challenges and crises.

Much has been said during the last two days about the devastating impact of the pandemic in Central Asia. With the second and third waves of the crisis emerging in the region and globally, the health and development prospects are likely to become even grimmer.

Over the last 6 months we have seen the troubling trends and the various statistics that define these health or socio-economic trends. But we also see the effects every day in the countries we support. For those of us working in development, the numbers also represent a profound setback in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and an unwinding of years of hard-won gains. Our responses to these setbacks need to focus on the short and medium-term outcomes that can help us to bounce back from the worst of the pandemic, thereby helping to lay a foundation for countries to address long-term challenges for sustainable development. The transformational aspects of the 2030 Agenda provide a blueprint what recovery and ‘building back better’ should entail.

In order to ensure that the pandemic does not completely sidetrack SDG implementation and erode the hard-won development gains of the past decades, we must support our partners to rethink their medium and long-term development strategies, taking into account the pressing interconnected and increasingly complex issues: namely, inequality and unsustainable growth but also governance, climate change, and the digital revolution being ushered in by the fifth industrial revolution.

If we allow the focus to be just about recovering our economies, we will miss an unprecedented opportunity to build forward better and to deliver on the promise of the 2030 Agenda – a chance to invest in a more equal, inclusive, green and sustainable future.

Strategies to accelerate progress towards the 2030 Agenda recognize the need to have better approaches to meet the risk of future shocks. The contours of the pandemic require responses that must be based on unity, solidarity and renewed regional cooperation. Based on our analysis of the SEIAs conducted by UNDP jointly with other agencies, the following priorities are emerging:

1. Above all, we must **ensure investment in social protection**. Despite the well-developed social protection systems and relatively high public expenditure on social protection in Central Asian countries, UNDP's analysis highlighted significant gaps that have emerged due to COVID-19. This concerns in particular the new vulnerable, working-age populations and those in the informal sector. The current crisis creates an opportunity to rethink and redesign social protection systems to become more flexible, shock-responsive and countercyclical.
2. We need to **overhaul labour market policies and institutions and improve women's access to decent employment to reduce chronic informality**. This imperative comes from demographic patterns and peculiarities of labour market, characterized in most Central Asian countries by low-productivity agricultural employment and high level of precarious and unprotected informal activity.
3. To overcome the limits of the current development practices, we must invest in **innovations and digitalization**. This resonates strongly with policy priorities of all Central Asian states who are looking to modernize service delivery, trade of goods and services, create new jobs and improve access to education. UNDP is proud to support the governments of the region on digital transformation through several ongoing projects.
4. We must redouble our efforts on **SDG financing and public financial management**. This work is well underway in several Central Asian countries, where UNDP and other agencies are supporting the governments to establish the Integrated National Financing Frameworks. Linked to this, additional efforts are needed to improve transparency and conditions for private investment.
5. We need **environmental innovation and climate solutions** to uphold the climate promise. A 'green route' out of the crisis is not only possible but can be economically effective. UNDP is already supporting all countries of Central Asia to address the ongoing impacts of climate change and is bringing in expertise and best practices for green recovery.

Only by tackling these issues together can we ensure resilient recovery from COVID-19 and accelerate the Decade of Action to deliver the Global Goals.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the governments of Central Asian countries, UNESCAP, UNECE and other UN agencies for our excellent cooperation. UNDP remains committed to continue working side-by-side with the countries of the region to accelerate progress on the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.

Thank you.