



Wilton Park



Image: Development Initiatives

Report

Wilton Park and Development Initiatives virtual  
roundtable

**Responding to COVID-19: what are the main  
challenges for the Leave No One Behind agenda  
and how can the policy response be shaped to  
address these?**

Tuesday 30 June 2020 | WP1797V

In partnership with:



# Report

## Wilton Park and Development Initiatives virtual roundtable

### **Responding to COVID-19: what are the main challenges for the Leave No One Behind agenda and how can the policy response be shaped to address these?**

Tuesday 30 June 2020 | WP1797V

#### **Introduction**

The pledge to Leave No One Behind (LNOB) is central to Agenda 2030, a promise made by the 193 countries that adopted the General Assembly resolution in September 2015 that as they embarked on their journey towards the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), they would ensure that everyone is included in progress. Covid-19 poses a huge risk to progress on the SDGs, with recent projections from a variety of experts all pointing to a significant increase in numbers falling back into extreme poverty. As with other crises, the people who are most vulnerable and have the least resilience are likely to be hit hardest, whether from the immediate health pandemic, from resulting lockdowns measures or from its longer term socio-economic consequences.

The purpose of this event was to bring together key stakeholders to discuss the challenges the Covid-19 crisis poses to the people and places at risk of being left behind, to share different approaches to this challenge and to focus on steps that decision-makers at international, national and local levels can take to minimise the impact of the crisis on these communities and individuals.

50+ senior representatives of government, international organisations and civil society organisations participated in this virtual session. An initial poll confirmed that the majority of participants expected recovery from the impact of the pandemic to take 5-10 years and believe that it is both exacerbating existing inequalities within countries and creating new ones.

#### **Summary**

Covid-19 is a 'disease of poverty; a disease of inequality'. The pandemic is causing the most vulnerable people to be the most affected. Progress on the SDGs and reducing poverty levels is being reversed. Collaborative action at the local level is crucial to reduce the harm of the pandemic, with increased support and cooperation with and from the international community needed.

Priority actions to support the poorest populations and countries include:

- Focus on the countries that are already in danger of being left behind with high levels of extreme poverty and low levels of domestic and international resources to support them through the recovery.
- Embed the principle of Leave No One Behind into programming and policy responses to Covid-19 as countries seek to build back better.
- Invest in inclusive national health systems, targeting actions and policies to protect vulnerable populations from Covid-19 and its indirect impacts.

- Prioritise investment in social safety nets, including cash transfers for vulnerable households, to compensate for loss of income and to stimulate the economy.
- Empower community-led responses through local actors, supported by the global community.
- Invest in sustainable foundational data systems that are nationally owned, locally led and enable the production of timely, disaggregated data.

## **The Covid pandemic and its impact on the poorest**

1. The disease is spreading rapidly in all regions, especially the Americas, the Indian subcontinent and Africa. While it has slowed down in Europe there will be a resurgence as lockdowns are lifted.
2. Lockdowns slow transmission but to stop it requires constant readiness to interrupt transmission and all societies adopting patterns of behaviour to reduce transmission: face masks, social distancing, good hygiene, shielding the most vulnerable. Without such measures there will be further outbreaks which will only stop when a vaccine is available to everyone. This will take a minimum of 2.5 years, with no certainty of success. Until then people need to learn to live with it as there is no clear evidence on immunity.
3. COVID-19 is becoming a disease of poverty, it reveals inequity and highlights failure in food systems. Unless public services recognise how poor people live and work, and provide protection, COVID-19 will remain a threat and continue to affect the poorest and those with least power.
4. The reversals on progress towards the SDGs as a result of Covid-19 raises a question of how resilient and robust the achievements to date have been. Covid was described as a stress test of the collective commitment to LNOB. This agenda is not simply about reaching the furthest behind, it requires a shift in the accountability paradigm – ‘duty bearers need to be accountable to rights holders’. There is a real danger of going back on commitments and progress made.
5. Presenting false policy choices between protecting health and protecting the economy should be avoided as both are vital, especially for the poorest who are least able to protect themselves from the virus and most in need of work to provide an income. Equally, easing lockdown measures too early is bad for the economy as well as being bad for health.
6. This was recognised as a challenge for national governments, who are trying to put in place effective health measures at the same time as putting in place economic support and in some cases struggling to catch up.

## **Data and the impacts of Covid**

7. Updated analysis on a core group of countries being left behind shows that despite not being the hardest hit in terms of increases in absolute numbers of people living in extreme poverty as a result of Covid-19, the depth of poverty in these countries means that the list of countries at risk remains broadly the same. Similarly, at a global level, the daily income gap between the poorest 20% - the P20 - and the rest has been growing; based on both pre and post Covid-19 projections, it will continue to do so, with the very poorest seeing little progress in the last 15 years.
8. Global poverty data is not sufficiently timely or disaggregated to inform policy choices that tackle inequality in response to Covid-19. Where national data is available it shows that:
  - in Nigeria, the poorest 20% are more likely to have stopped work as a result of

the pandemic;

- in Bangladesh, women-headed households are more economically vulnerable;
- in Kenya, women have experienced a greater decline in labour market participation than men.

9. The impact of Covid-19 on the people most at risk of being left behind will largely depend on the response by national and local governments. The requirement for data to inform these challenging decisions has never been greater, but foundational data systems, which enable the production of timely and disaggregated data are often weak or non-existent. The commitment to Leave No One Behind needs to be embedded as the countries seek to build back better.

### **The links between health and anti-poverty policies**

10. Social distancing slows the virus but poorer people across the world face higher marginal costs in observing this. They confront a tougher trade-off between their economic welfare and their health, including exposure to the new Coronavirus, and also a trade-off between two aspects of health: nutrition and infection.
11. While social distancing has slowed the spread of the disease in Europe and US, it was recognised that such measures are impossible to observe for many of the poorest communities.
12. 90% of households in the developing world cannot comply fully with the WHO recommendations for protection from the virus. A majority can only achieve quite partial compliance. Globally, only 6% of the poorest 40% have adequate household environment protection (HEP) for self-protection while in sub-Saharan Africa the percentage is virtually zero.
13. The risk of the pandemic increasing hunger and food insecurity was highlighted. The timing could not be worse as it coincides with locust swarms in East Africa and a new outbreak of Ebola in DRC.

### **Exacerbating inequalities:**

14. The discriminatory impact of national lockdowns on the poorest and most vulnerable people was acknowledged.
15. Covid-19 has highlighted inequalities and the importance of ensuring everyone is counted to “make the invisible visible”. The crisis is exacerbating gender inequality and reversing recent gains, especially for women and girls who have additional care-giving responsibilities and face increased risks.
16. People with disabilities are further disadvantaged by Covid. They may be unable to access WASH facilities or read signs giving advice on protection and they are more likely to work in the informal sector with an increased risk of losing their jobs. This is the worst time to cut support; more is needed, including support for advocacy.
17. The pandemic has also hit older people hard as they are at higher risk. They are in the shielding category but many older people across the world and especially in poorer countries are working, providing vital resources to households and in many cases need to work in order to eat. Lockdown measures are making older people isolated, restricting access to resources and vital medication and they are not as digitally connected which adds to isolation and means they might miss key information.

### **Key policy options and responses include:**

#### **1. Responses to the pandemic**

- The current infrastructure for information (particularly cell-phone

- coverage) holds promise for getting the messages out on public health and access to consumption support.
- Subsidising soap and water access could be feasible in the near term and justified by both the external benefits and the equity impacts.
- Airborne transmission: leadership must push face masks and social distancing.
- Cash and food transfers that allow workers to stay at home without huge economic repercussions can play an important role.

## **2. Investing in health**

- Lack of resources and weak health infrastructure with many gaps are key challenges for many countries in particular fragile and conflict-affected states – health systems cannot be stand-alone, they are dependent on other systems.
- The need to invest in vaccines and ensure mass access was highlighted with the need for both safety and equity noted. In the absence of a single pooled-fund for all countries based on need, there is likely to be some variegation in terms of access, depending on support for an accelerator and the number of countries willing to fund this.
- Social safety nets, including cash transfers, are one of the most effective ways of providing support, saving lives and also helping to stimulate the economy.
- While the challenges of the pandemic are significant, they are leading to greater collaboration, for example between the public and private sector with regard to health.

## **3. Local and creative responses are key**

- Home-grown innovative adaptations to the realities of life in the developing world will be crucial.
- Digital inclusion needs to be considered – who are the groups missing out and what can be done to support them? Extending mobile connectivity is also a vital step.

## **4. Data is key**

- The lack of data to inform decision-making was recognised as a key problem in poorer countries. At least half of all deaths in the world are not registered and it is the poorest, most vulnerable and excluded who are left out of the data.
- The importance of local data and autonomy to deal with local clusters of outbreaks of the virus was emphasised, with community based systems in place to support these.
- The need for more timely and disaggregated data will be critical for identifying the individuals and population groups most at risk of being left behind.
- One reason to be hopeful is that the crisis has brought to the foreground the importance of data. Greater interest in data will help to make the case for investment in the longer term.

## **5. International and donor responses**

- The crisis poses many challenges for donors. One dilemma is sequencing

and prioritising short versus long term programming responses. This is both acute and long term development crisis; how to deal with this?

- There is a need for increased funding for key international agencies at a time when aid budgets are likely to shrink as donor economies contract and governments are focussed on the crisis at home.
- There is a danger of international organisations moving into the humanitarian space in large numbers, but in a way that is not sustainable. The emphasis should be on smaller, locally led programmes.

## **Conclusion**

Rather than being a great leveller, as some commentators suggested at the outset of the pandemic, Covid-19 has become a disease of the poor and there are fears of a grand reversal, with the crisis rolling back recent gains in poverty reduction and exacerbating inequality. This is a global crisis and the need for greater collaboration between governments, and between the public and private sectors was noted.

While the outlook is bleak, there are some glimmers of hope such as greater investment in social safety nets, including cash transfers, and an emphasis on local, community solutions, supported by global investment. This was reflected in the closing poll where participants identified social protection as the most important policy priority. Other issues highlighted included investment in inclusive health systems and in local data systems.

### **Carolyn Culey and Robin Hart**

Wilton Park | July 2020

Wilton Park reports are intended to be brief summaries of the main points and conclusions of an event. Reports reflect rapporteurs' accounts of the proceedings and do not necessarily reflect the views of the rapporteur. Wilton Park reports and any recommendations contained therein are for participants and are not a statement of policy for Wilton Park, the FCO or the UK government.

Should you wish to read other Wilton Park reports, or participate in upcoming Wilton Park events, please consult our website [www.wiltonpark.org.uk](http://www.wiltonpark.org.uk). To receive our monthly bulletin and latest updates, please subscribe to <https://www.wiltonpark.org.uk/newsletter/>.