

Parliamentary inquiry call for evidence: The Sustainable Development Goals: COVID-19 and the Decade of Action and Delivery

The Carnegie UK Trust welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence in response to the APPG on the UN Goals for Sustainable Development's inquiry: Covid-19 and the Decade of Action and Delivery.

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?

SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth

Sustainable Development Goal 8 aims to promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all. It is too early to quantify the impact of COVID-19 on the labour market, but it is likely to be significant. There are [currently](#) over 9 million jobs furloughed across the UK, with this government support likely to be suppressing unemployment while it is in place.

[Analysis](#) of monthly ONS labour force statistics show the economic impact of COVID-19 has disproportionately affected the following groups across the UK: low-paid workers, workers on zero-hours contracts, temporary workers, self-employed workers, young workers, women and BAME workers. A BMG poll for [The Independent](#) found that almost a third of all households had seen their finances cut as a result of lockdown measures, and showed that people from BAME households were almost twice as likely as White households to report having lost income and jobs. Even prior to COVID-19, young people, women, BME individuals, people with disabilities, and low-paid workers [often had least access](#) to work that could be considered 'fair work' across multiple measures. The concern is that COVID-19 could further entrench these inequalities, or reverse progress made towards decent work for all.

We recognise the economic, societal and individual wellbeing costs of unemployment, particularly at the potential scale caused by COVID-19. While being unemployed is highly damaging to wellbeing, being employed in poor quality work also has significant negative impacts. It is essential for the UK Government to frame 'decent work' as a key pillar of the economic recovery, to protect existing progress towards this Sustainable Development Goal and prevent a focus on quantity of jobs at the detriment to quality of jobs.

SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities

Sustainable Development Goal 10 aims to reduce inequality within and among countries. COVID-19 has exposed the [importance, complexity and fragility](#) of digital inclusion within the UK. The lockdown has put technology even more firmly at the heart of the country's essential infrastructure as millions rely on it every day to work, participate in education, shop for food and access essential services, including health services.

This overnight escalation in the role and importance of technology has exposed a wide range of challenges on digital access, which may affect progress towards achieving SDG 8 in the UK. Prior to the pandemic, some households used schools, libraries or public wifi to access digital technology and the internet. The closure of these settings due to lockdown caused an obvious short-term inequality and disadvantage, but may also have a longer-term effect depending on the length of time these services remain unavailable. Some households are no longer able to afford an internet connection due to financial pressures, and there has been an increased pressure on connectivity when most of the population are at home. An ongoing challenge is the greater need for devices and connectivity for large households where there are multiple people working or studying and requiring digital access. Whilst this has been particularly highlighted in the context of COVID-19, it is also a

longer term problem especially for households with multiple children who need access to devices for learning and homework tasks.

Inequality of access is of particular concern for children and young people due to many elements of education being delivered online during lockdown, as well as for those who relied on public access to digital technology or the internet for actions such as applying for benefits. We know that those who are not digitally engaged, or who have the most narrow digital engagement, [are also most likely](#) to be identified as disadvantaged or excluded according to a range of other socioeconomic indicators, deepening existing inequalities in society. It is essential to learn from the immediate efforts to tackle digital exclusion during the crisis, and use this as a platform for a committed medium-term ambition to solve the digital exclusion issues that the crisis has exposed.

SDG Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities

Sustainable Development Goal 11 aims to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. During the crisis, there have been signs that people have been let into decision-making about public services operating within their local area, with mutual aid groups working alongside clinical commissioners and the council. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that the voice of local membership organisations has been recognised in discussions about opening town centres. The Trust understands that individual and community wellbeing begin at the local level. Engagement in local decision-making; access to community and public spaces; and the availability of good quality green and blue space are fundamental to community wellbeing. We [know](#) about the social and economic value of green and blue space for our mental health; physical health; local recreation; and carbon sequestration; spaces that have been of profound importance during the crisis.

Our wider engagement to understand how communities have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted that there is a different way of [working together](#). Early [evidence](#) supports anecdotal claims that community spirit and mutual aid have been reignited during this time. Statutory Authorities have worked with community organisations and charities to help with the crisis response. New partnerships have emerged and long-standing barriers to agility and flexibility have apparently been overcome.

Furthermore, many have commented on the salience of [kindness](#) to the national effort to cope with COVID-19, both from [public services](#) and between citizens. Our [work](#) in this area has shown how kindness can combat [loneliness](#) as well as the importance of [spaces](#) and places that are safe and agenda free, for people to come together. Kindness can help to build social capital in communities, but it requires an infrastructure to allow it to flourish.

Which SDGs is 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’?

The Sustainable Development Goals are the highest profile and only truly global [wellbeing framework](#), showing how with concerted effort we can help societies progress socially, economically, environmentally and democratically. There are many examples of local and national wellbeing frameworks, some, like those in statute in Scotland and Wales, specifically link to the SDGs. These translate the global goals into action at a more local level and encourage decision-makers to think ‘in the round’ rather than give priority to one domain.

In the response to the pandemic, the UK government has prioritised economic wellbeing and while there are discussions of a green recovery, we are not convinced that this yet adds up to strategic shift away from pursuing GDP at all costs to a more nuanced strategy that considers the trade-offs between social, economic, environmental and democratic outcomes.

In building back better, the UK government should more seriously and proactively consider the role of societal wellbeing and the SDGs as a framework for recovery. Putting wellbeing at the heart would require a new, cross-departmental strategy for action that acknowledges fully the effect of actions on one domain of wellbeing on the others and supports joined-up policy development to tackle entrenched issues such as social and regional inequalities.

The following comments take 3 of the SDGs and consider what we currently know, and what this suggests a wellbeing framework for the UK could drive forward.

SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth

Our research and advocacy on [Fulfilling Work](#) (SDG 8) has shown that we should not only measure employment, but also the quality of that employment, because both are significant determinants of wellbeing. The Carnegie UK Trust-RSA convened Measuring Job Quality Working Group presents [a framework](#) for measuring job quality in national statistics. The Trust believes that employment and job quality should be measured as part of a wellbeing framework so government performance metrics are aligned more with what really matters to citizens.

The Trust’s [Can Good Work Solve the Productivity Puzzle](#) research shows that as well as contributing to wellbeing, improving aspects of ‘decent work’ can also make workers more productive, aiding business and economic recovery. In particular, the greatest productivity gains are found from improving conditions for workers in the lowest quality employment. Therefore, there is an economic as well as a social justice case for a sustained policy focus on encouraging work that goes beyond minimum standards.

SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities

Digital technology plays a fundamental role in supporting personal, community and societal wellbeing. COVID-19 has exposed the [importance, complexity and fragility](#) of digital inclusion. The lockdown has put technology even more firmly at the heart of the country’s essential infrastructure as millions rely on it every day to work, participate in education, shop for food and access essential services, including health services. This overnight escalation in the role and importance of technology has exposed a wide range of challenges on digital access; the affordability and stability of internet connection; the pressure on connectivity in larger households; the provision of devices; the IT infrastructure of organisations and skills of their staff to deliver services online; the

importance of family and friends in supporting digital engagement; and the protection of privacy and spread of fake news.

SDG Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities

In the UK, two out of five people live in a town, and yet there continues to be an evidence gap in the importance of towns and communities to our wellbeing, with a national focus on cities. The Trust's [Flourishing Towns](#) programme seeks to highlight the potential of creating safe, sustainable and resilient communities (SDG Goal 11) to play a leading role in supporting the development of towns' policy and practice. We have published research on [Supporting Local Places and Local People](#) and our [Turnaround Towns](#) UK report provided place-based examples of the ways in which towns have tackled the challenges they face, head on. In addition, our practice projects [Understanding Welsh Places](#) and [Talk of the Town](#) aim to both encourage people to learn about their town, share ideas and build relationships, and to promote more positive town stories to decision-makers.

As we noted above, community kindness requires an 'infrastructure of kindness' – including permission to act at a community level and places to meet and engage proactively as local citizens. This infrastructure is key to sustainable communities but over the past decade we have seen a restricting of 'civic space' in the UK as a result of austerity policies. Reopening these spaces, and allowing them to be used for community activity rather than pre-determined public service activity and should be prioritised when planning for recovery. The pandemic has created a '[mass re-neighbouring](#)' enabling us to connect with our local area and with our neighbours in new ways. We know that kindness can provide the conditions for community empowerment through positive relationships and values.

We would also go further and propose a radical kindness approach whereby governments and public services see their role as, in part, building a society that treats everyone with kindness. This would require updating of procurement, commissioning, customer service and HR practices across the public sector, many of these issues are in play now in the COVID recovery phase as public services reconsider what is important in light of what we have learnt from the pandemic.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In summary, our research has identified a number of potential benefits to a wellbeing approach and greater consideration of the Sustainable Development Goals to build back better:

1. National wellbeing can be the goal: Governments should no longer put economic growth above all else. We need political will to turn decision making around and embrace a balanced approach that recognises that ultimately social, economic, environmental and democratic progress are interconnected.
2. The relationship between citizens and the state can be reset: Rebuilding public services after the pandemic is going to be a long journey, but we shouldn't lose sight of what we have learned about people's ability to bring their capabilities to the table. The role of the state should be more clearly to enable people to flourish.

3. The future can be local (as well as global): We can build on the rediscovery of what is on our doorsteps to create a future which strengthens and maximises the potential of the places where we live and work; one that makes use of all the assets of a place to help recover together. A radical approach to kindness is needed to ensure all members of the community can enjoy the benefits. Governments can create the conditions by giving people permission to act locally and provide support for their collective actions.
4. Our relationship with work can be remodelled: In the recovery, governments must not only consider the need to protect and create jobs - as vital as this is - but also imagine the types of jobs and labour market that we want to create for the future. Work is important to wellbeing, but fair work - which values purpose, agency, relationships, mental health, diversity, inclusion and voice - is even better.
5. We can build a new level of financial resilience: Many of those most severely impacted by COVID-19 and the subsequent economic shock had very limited financial resilience. While we may never face a shock quite like this one again, we will face different challenges. So we urge governments to think seriously about how to learn from the response to the crisis and create a baseline of financial security in the face of an increasingly turbulent global economy and the need for a just transition to a more environmentally friendly future.
6. Technology can be for all: The crisis has exposed the vital role of digital technology in almost every aspect of life. Governments need to tackle the significant inequalities that currently exist in digital access. This work must go beyond providing devices to ensuring that technology is affordable; that people have the skills and confidence they need to use it effectively; and ensuring that the design and deployment of technology for private enterprise or public service enhances rather than diminishes wellbeing.

We hope that you find these comments helpful. If you would like to discuss any of our wellbeing work further, please contact Hannah@CarnegieUK.org – we would be pleased to hear from you.

Yours faithfully,



Hannah Ormston



Rachel Heydecker

Carnegie UK Trust