

## COVID-19 and sustainable health-care decisions

Kristin Heggen,<sup>a</sup> Tony J Sandset<sup>a</sup> & Eivind Engebretsen<sup>b</sup>

The World Health Organization (WHO) officially declared the outbreak of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) a pandemic on 11 March 2020.<sup>1</sup> A few months later, the world is dealing with a crisis of immense proportions. The pandemic has shown that this crisis is fuelled by poverty, hunger, weak health systems and lack of clean water and sanitation, education and global cooperation.<sup>2,3</sup> The global recession caused by COVID-19 is alarming and has made researchers question whether the sustainable development goals (SDGs) are fit for the post-pandemic age.<sup>4</sup> Some have even claimed that certain SDG targets might be counter-productive because they enhance growth rather than development.<sup>4</sup> While the SDGs do not have a dedicated pandemic response plan, we believe it is essential not to de-link the response to the pandemic from the SDGs. We argue that the COVID-19 crisis demonstrates the need to integrate the SDGs at the top national level as well as in individual health-care decisions. We also call for a focus on sustainable health-care decisions, meaning decisions that are made in the present but that do not compromise future needs, whether local or global. Making such decisions requires adapting to current context, anticipating (to a certain degree) their future impact, and being anchored in a rights-based framework. The current crisis requires us to make more sustainable health decisions at the microlevel and to consider the wider implications of our choices and actions. Such microdecisions are, for instance, using facemasks on public transport, observing social distancing advice and self-quarantining when necessary. Such decisions help curbing transmission and its detrimental effect on morbidity, mortality and the economy.

*Transforming our world: the 2030 agenda for sustainable development*<sup>5</sup> emphasizes that achieving the SDGs requires balancing three dimensions of sustainable development: economic

growth, social inclusion and environmental protection. Moreover, sustainable development requires us to balance our needs with the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Although the SDGs have strong localized underpinnings and were the outcome of dialogues held at all levels, the discourse on sustainable development, including the SDGs, has been criticized for being based on the assumption that governments can and should be the primary custodians of any sustainable development agenda.<sup>6</sup> While this assumption reflects a geopolitical world order, it also risks consolidating a macro-oriented understanding of sustainable development – that is, that sustainable development concerns only nations, not individuals.

The COVID-19 pandemic shows that sustainable development goes beyond national strategies. Every individual needs to make health decisions that meet personal needs as well as the needs of the broader community. Similarly, this global crisis reveals that community needs can be immediate (unlike, for instance, the 2030 horizon of the SDGs). Lack of health insurance, reduced access to water during lockdown situations or chronic long-term health conditions have suddenly become factors that determine chances of survival during the pandemic. To manage the COVID-19 pandemic, governments have had to assess the most sustainable ways of responding to the virus, and balance the need for mitigation, control and eradication. Should such responses entail enforcing states of emergency (with their associated lockdowns and social distancing), or should they involve a mitigation strategy built on the premise of reaching herd immunity, while being sustainable over time?<sup>7–9</sup> How could emergency strategies be consistent with targets that might reduce the risk for future pandemics, such as universal health coverage?

Such issues must be addressed in national strategies and in the individual choices that we, as health professionals and as citizens, make when we comply with health authorities' recommendations and help protect the most vulnerable. We all have a duty to act with a collective consciousness, as the consequences of our actions have an impact on the wider community.

The Faculty of Medicine at the University of Oslo, Norway, has recently been awarded a Centre of Excellence in Sustainable Healthcare Education, committed to including sustainability as an integrated part of medical decision-making and to teaching sustainable decision-making to future health professionals. The Centre's mission is to educate globally anchored health professionals who make sustainable health-care decisions without compromising future needs. The COVID-19 crisis underscores the pertinence of this mission. ■

### References

Available at: <http://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/98/10/20-263533>

<sup>a</sup> Centre for Sustainable Healthcare Education, University of Oslo, Klaus Torgaards vei 3, 0372, Oslo, Norway.

<sup>b</sup> Faculty of Medicine, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway.

Correspondence to Kristin Heggen (email: [k.m.heggen@medisin.uio.no](mailto:k.m.heggen@medisin.uio.no)).

## References

1. WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 - 11 March 2020. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2020. Available from: <https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020> [cited 2020 Jul 14].
2. Horton R. Offline: COVID-19 and the NHS "a national scandal". *Lancet*. 2020 03 28;395(10229):1022. doi: [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)30727-3](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30727-3) PMID: 32222186
3. Bedford J, Enria D, Giesecke J, Heymann DL, Ihekweazu C, Kobinger G, et al.; WHO Strategic and Technical Advisory Group for Infectious Hazards. COVID-19: towards controlling of a pandemic. *Lancet*. 2020 03 28;395(10229):1015–8. doi: [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)30673-5](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30673-5) PMID: 32197103
4. Time to revise the sustainable development goals. *Nature*. 2020 07;583(7816):331–2. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1038/d41586-020-02002-3> PMID: 32665631
5. Resolution A/RES/70/1. Transforming our world: the 2030 agenda for sustainable development. In: Seventieth United Nations General Assembly, New York, 25 September 2015. New York: United Nations; 2015. Available from: [http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E) [cited 2020 Jul 14].
6. El-Zein A, DeJong J, Fargues P, Salti N, Hanieh A, Lackner H. Who's been left behind? Why sustainable development goals fail the Arab world. *Lancet*. 2016 Jul 9;388(10040):207–10. doi: [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(15\)01312-4](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(15)01312-4) PMID: 26782981
7. Sandset TJ, Heggen K, Engebretsen E. What we need is a sustainable politics of life. *Lancet*. 2020 06 27;395(10242):1967. doi: [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)31378-7](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)31378-7) PMID: 32539936
8. Anderson RM, Heesterbeek H, Klinkenberg D, Hollingsworth TD. How will country-based mitigation measures influence the course of the COVID-19 epidemic? *Lancet*. 2020 03 21;395(10228):931–4. doi: [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)30567-5](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30567-5) PMID: 32164834
9. Ferguson N, Laydon D, Nedjati Gilani G, Imai N, Ainslie K, Baguelin M, et al. Report 9: Impact of non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) to reduce COVID19 mortality and healthcare demand. London: Imperial College Covid-19 response team; 2020. Available from: <https://spiral.imperial.ac.uk:8443/bitstream/10044/1/77482/14/2020-03-16-COVID19-Report-9.pdf> [cited 2020 Jul 14].