



Photo by Prabha Jayesh Pael

Entrenched Challenges to Development Progress

When the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic in 2020, it did so in an already stressed development and humanitarian assistance system.

After decades of work and success to decrease global poverty and improve health, over the past few years, development and humanitarian progress have stalled or regressed, leaving advancement for millions of communities and families out of reach and the prospect of reaching **global goals to end poverty** by 2030 less likely.

Global hunger has been **on the rise** since 2014, driven by increased displacement from conflict, economic downturns, and climate shocks. Conflict continues to drive the threat of **famine** and **emergency needs**. Making matters worse, humanitarian needs have consistently outpaced increases in donor investment. **From 2000 to 2019**, global malaria mortality fell 60%, case incidence declined by 27%, and 21 countries got rid of malaria. Yet, progress has plateaued since 2015, and COVID-19 has caused service disruptions, threatening a resurgence in cases globally. The WHO announced in **March 2021** that the number of people receiving tuberculosis treatment dropped by more than 1 million, and estimates estimated that hundreds of thousands more people around the world died of the disease in 2020 as a result. Across nearly every key measure of childhood, including poverty, child marriage rates, and nutrition, **progress has reversed**. Treatment and vaccination campaigns, particularly those **targeted at children**, for other diseases like measles, diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis, have been delayed or canceled, which could mean the reversal of years of progress toward reducing disease prevalence and mortality.

While the full impact of COVID-19 is still unknown, particularly as many countries continue to battle it, the pandemic and resulting economic crisis have deepened existing backsliding of progress and driven an unprecedented increase in poverty. In 2020, **global poverty increased** for the first time in over 20 years. The World Bank estimates up to **124 million** fell into poverty. In 2021, preliminary predictions expect that

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number to increase to between 143 and 163 million people. The increase in poverty is a key driver of further food insecurity. The World Food Program (WFP) estimates **272 million** people are already or will soon face acute hunger around the world.

The impact of COVID-19 on marginalized populations globally has been pronounced. Women have been particularly hard-hit, as they generally have a **greater unpaid work and domestic care burden**, earn less money, and comprise **70%** of the health workers and first responders around the world. Due to the pandemic, gender-based violence **increased**, and women had **reduced access** to economic opportunities and reproductive and maternal health care. Women and girls have also been impacted greatly by school closures—UNICEF estimates at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools closed their doors across 192 countries, sending **1.6 billion students** home. Unfortunately, at least 24 million children are projected never to return to school. These impacts of COVID-19 will be felt for years to come and have a generational effect on children and youth around the world. Analysis from Save the Children estimates that **153 children could die each day** from pandemic-related malnutrition over the next two years if urgent action is not taken to mitigate this crisis.

To address the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and reignite development progress, U.S. policymakers need to work with partners to address the root causes of global poverty. The current focus on the manufacturing, delivery, and equity of vaccines for COVID-19 is critical but also entirely insufficient to meet the moment, given the broad impacts of the pandemic and the likelihood of other pandemics and systemic shocks. The U.S. must also look across development, humanitarian, and peacebuilding programming to better coordinate and layer responses to global challenges. Amplifying global cooperation efforts and partnerships with governments and communities through the elevation of locally-led solutions is critical to building sustainable efforts that are flexible to ever-changing realities and landscapes, as is the ability to track progress, determine what is and is not working, and adapt accordingly.

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