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Setting the scene: A set of abilities amidst inequalities

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SDG acceleration in a multiple crises context

2023 marks the midpoint in implementing the 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These objectives became the roadmap for UN member states to achieve a sustainable future. Despite their relevance, progress in achieving the goals has not occurred at the required pace and scale. Over 30% of the SDGs have stalled or gone into reverse, and just 15% of the targets are on track (Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary-General, 2023).

SDG progress has also been uneven between countries and goals. Only five countries from the Global South—Brazil, Chile, Uruguay, Cuba, and Thailand—are in the 50 top performing countries on SDG progress (Sachs et al., 2023). Out of the 36 targets reviewed in 2023, only two present substantial progress (5%), 12 have had limited or no progress (33%) and eight have deteriorated (22%) (Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary-General, 2023). Targets relating to basic human rights such as achieving food security, ending malaria and malnutrition, and ensuring safe and affordable housing, as well as to the implementation of all development assistance commitments, were ranked “very far from the target” (Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary-General, 2023).

The slow progress in the advancement of the Agenda has also prompted a global push for acceleration. Only 38% of the targets reviewed by the Independent Group of Scientists in 2023 were assessed as showing fair progress, but in need of acceleration,² if they are to be met by 2030 (Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary-General, 2023). We understand acceleration as all actions taken to speed up the achievement of the SDGs. This involves scaling up existing initiatives and creating new ones, while at the same time responding to the needs of different populations to ensure equal opportunities for all.

Stagnation in the achievement of the Agenda reveals an urgent need for profound and systemic transformations to achieve the goals. Such transformations are crucial to redirect countries' structures and practices towards sustainable development pathways. Failure to embrace these transformations will not only worsen poverty and inequalities and accelerate environmental degradation, but also widen disparities in global development between the North and South (Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary-General, 2023).

Understanding what actions can accelerate SDG progress and drive the required transformations is imperative in today's complex world. We are facing multiple, intersecting crises, whose combined adverse effects further delay, stagnate or reverse development progress (Shulla & Leal, 2023; International Labour Organization [ILO], 2023). For example, evidence from this edition of the Southern Voice State of the SDGs (SVSS) shows how prior to the pandemic Latin America was already struggling with the displacement of seven million

1 The Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR) measures 'distance from the target' (2023) based on the calculation methodology from the Sustainable Development Goals 2022 Progress Chart Technical Note. Distance from achieving the targets is ranked on a scale of 5, where 1 is “very far from the target”, 2 “far from the target”, 3 “moderate distance to the target”, 4 “close to the target”, and 5 “target met or almost met”.

2 The GSDR measures “trend of SDG progress” (2023) based on the calculation mentioned in footnote 1, and categorises each target by one of four trends: deterioration, limited or no progress, fair progress but acceleration needed, and substantial progress/on track.

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Venezuelans, primarily to Colombia, Peru, and Chile (Rocha-Jimenez et al., 2023). COVID-19 then triggered additional displacement due to economic downturns and widespread job losses, intensifying the existing migratory crisis (Vásquez et al., 2023).

Moreover, established coping methods were disrupted. For instance, informal employment is considered to be a safety net for formal workers who have lost their jobs in times of economic recession (Saloner et al., 2020). However, during the pandemic, both formal and informal sector employment contracted, further limiting the income sources available to the population, and leading to a sudden increase in economic vulnerability among host and migrant populations (Vásquez et al., 2023).

The cumulative effects of these crises were also found to reinforce pre-existing inequalities. Take for example the inflation of food prices caused by the war in Ukraine. Rising food prices increase consumption inequalities, mainly affecting the poor who are already in a position of vulnerability (Kiptoo, 2022; ILO, 2023; Amaglobeli et al., 2022). The challenges faced by small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) during the pandemic also exemplify the ripple effect of crises on inequalities. A shrinking demand for goods, together with heightened uncertainty, and limited accessibility to formal financial mechanisms created acute liquidity shortages for SMEs (Belitski, 2023). In turn, many employees were made redundant, which reduced consumer spending, thus reproducing the cycle (Adil et al., 2023). The effects were most acutely felt by female, migrant, temporary, and informal workers, often employed by SMEs, which led to the exacerbation of pre-existing inequalities (Adil et al., 2023).

These multiple crises is shaping current debates on the ongoing race against time to achieve the SDGs by 2030. As countries implement actions to accelerate and achieve the transformations required to meet the Goals, it is essential to clearly identify which context-specific transformations are required, and to better understand what kind of policies are needed to achieve them.

Charting a fairer road ahead by tackling inequalities

Achieving sustainable transformations involves difficult trade-offs between competing priorities, as countries grapple with complex decisions in uncertain environments. Identifying areas where SDG initiatives can contribute significantly and simultaneously to multiple Goals can increase the efficiency of the transformative actions taken. A growing body of research suggests that reducing inequalities is a keystone to achieving other global goals (Lakner et al., 2022; UNU-Wider, 2023). In fact, recent declines in development progress and increases in household vulnerability have been attributed in part to the rise in income inequality caused by the pandemic, estimated to be the largest rise in three decades (UN, 2023). Addressing income and other kinds of inequalities thus constitutes a key entry point for driving transformations.

While it is important to recognise the impact of crises on SDGs, progress was already off track due to a lack of political will and

concerted government action (Malekpour et al., 2023). Governments hold significant responsibility not just for crisis management, but to act decisively and responsibly in shaping equitable, sustainable futures. As we navigate an era of increasing uncertainty, and governments choose between competing priorities as they rapidly design and implement policies, a key question arises: how can the increasing sense of urgency to meet the SDGs be navigated in a way that does not compromise the needs of the most vulnerable?

Crises may either exacerbate existing systemic problems, or indeed be catalysts for systemic change. We argue that placing the most vulnerable groups at the forefront of SDG achievement can ensure an inclusive acceleration. We use the term 'inclusive' here to denote actions which ensure that the most vulnerable are not negatively affected by rapid policy shifts, and that inequalities are not exacerbated. By exploring the risks associated with rapid policy implementation, this report harnesses lessons on how to ensure that the need for acceleration and transformations does not leave the most vulnerable behind.

A cross-regional, multi-level approach

SVSS 2 is the result of a two-year research and collaboration process over a number of stages, involving research teams across Asia, Africa and Latin America. Nine think tanks from the Southern Voice network conducted comprehensive research exploring the main factors behind deepening inequalities in their countries and regions, the most prominent gaps created or exacerbated during the pandemic, and the policy drivers of such impacts.

The initiative used a multi-level approach, based on the premise that the national and regional levels are interconnected. Each research team first produced three national-level case studies, which included Benin, Nigeria and Tanzania in sub-Saharan Africa; India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka in South Asia; and Chile, Paraguay and Peru in Latin America. This country-level disaggregated analysis of the impacts of the pandemic on inequality provided the basis to conduct regional- and global-level analysis contained in this report (Chapters 2, 3 and 4).

The thematic focus of the research is the result of a multi-stage exercise with Southern Voice's member organisations, which currently amount to 66. From 2020 to 2022, Southern Voice members carried out a considerable amount of research and analysis on the impacts of the pandemic in the Global South, resulting in a compendium of over 1,000 resources.³ A synthesis of these resources and a series of dialogues and consultations with Global South researchers helped identify growing inequalities in employment and education as critical cross-regional concerns in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Specifically, in sub-Saharan Africa, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated already chronic learning disparities, and disrupted learning for nearly 250 million students. Pandemic-related school closures meant that millions of students in the region will never

³ See [COVID-19 Digital Knowledge Hub](#)

return to school (Association for the Development of Education in Africa et al., 2021). In 2021, sub-Saharan Africa accounted for nearly 100 million of the global 244 million out-of-school children (Global Education Monitoring Report Team & UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2022). Notably, the region not only has the highest number of out-of-school children, but it is also the only region showing an upward rather than downward trend in this key indicator (Global Education Monitoring Report Team & UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2022).

Similarly, key concerns emerging in Latin America relate to the economic impacts of COVID-19, particularly in relation to employment and migration. This region experienced the sharpest decline in GDP during the COVID-19 pandemic (7.5%), and a lagging socio-economic recovery (Cottani, 2020). The region is also one of the ten largest global migration corridors, with its international migrant population more than doubling between 2000 and 2020 (UN, 2022).

In South Asia, micro-, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) serve as the backbone of the economy. They make up an overwhelming 99.6% of all enterprises and employ 76.6% of the workforce, contributing 33.9% to the region's GDP (Asian Development Bank, 2021). The role of MSMEs is crucial for economic inclusion, often serving as the primary employers for vulnerable populations (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2019). Yet, a significant proportion of South Asia's workforce lack formal social protection or safety nets. Overall, analysing the impacts of the pandemic provides insights into existing inequalities, and into new forms of social and economic exclusion (Reserve Bank of India, 2022).

In this context, the central concern of the SVSS 2 are the risks of sidelining inequalities in rapid policy design and implementation. Focusing specifically on vulnerable groups, we explore the increased inequalities brought about by rapid policy responses implemented during the COVID-19 crisis, while also identifying the abilities that helped vulnerable populations navigate the associated challenges. Building on this analysis, we aspire to redefine what it means for governments to implement transformative, forward-looking actions while ensuring that no one is left behind.

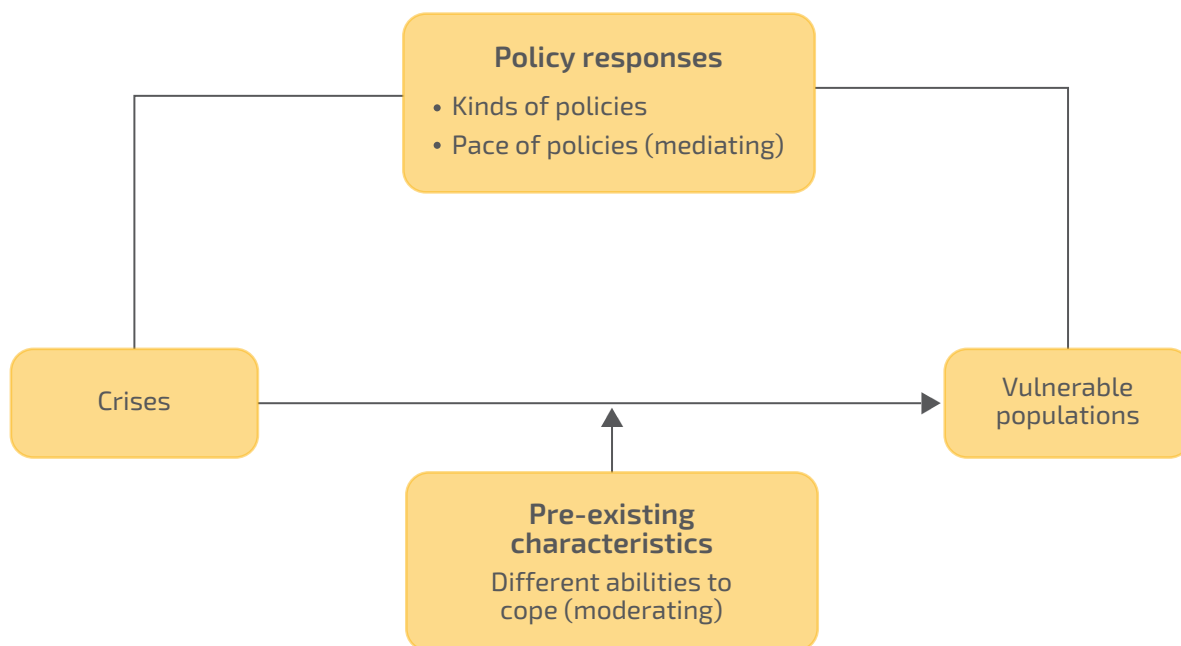
Understanding the relationship between policy, abilities and inequalities

Our analysis centres around the relationship between rapid government policy implementation, certain enabling resources held by vulnerable groups—hereby conceptualised as “abilities”—and inequality. Inequalities can be understood as the inadequate distribution of opportunities and outcomes among the population (Dabla-Norris et al., 2015). Characteristics such as race, religion, gender, ethnicity, caste, citizenship, or place of residence, among many others, influence how these opportunities and outcomes are distributed (UN DESA, 2020). Inequalities manifest in the differential impacts of policies and are closely linked to the formation of new vulnerable groups (Genevey et al., 2013).

The policy responses, strategies and measures adopted by authorities to address the pandemic and the ensuing economic crisis constitute the mediating factors in this research. The specificities of COVID-19 mitigation and recovery policies differed across countries and regions, but there were common actions and traits. Countries studied in the report resorted to, among other measures: lockdowns, border closures, and the closure of public spaces; the adoption or intensification of the use of technology-enabled services; monetary support and fiscal measures to mitigate the socio-economic shock; and capacity-building initiatives that took various forms (Adeniran et al., 2023; Adil et al., 2023; Vásquez et al., 2023). As will be discussed later in this section, the types of policies adopted and their accelerated pace created differential impacts.

In this context, the studies revealed that at least four individual- and community-level abilities moderated the extent to which the differentiated impacts of the COVID-19 shock and ensuing policy measures affected vulnerable populations. These were: digital skills, agency, the capacity to leverage or develop social networks (social capital), and the ability to access governmental support (accessibility). These abilities can be understood as a specific set of pre-existing skills or competencies that were instrumental in helping individuals cope with the challenges brought by the pandemic. Those with one or more of these abilities were better positioned to cope with the pandemic's challenges and benefit from the support mechanisms that were made available, while those without them found themselves at a disadvantage (Adeniran et al., 2023; Adil et al., 2023; Vásquez et al., 2023).

Figure 1.1. Key relationships analysed



Note. Adapted from *Conceptual Analysis of Moderator and Mediator Variables in Business Research* by Namazi & Namazi (2016).

Figure 1.1 illustrates the framework for the research, setting out the key relationships between vulnerable populations, crises, and policy responses. Central to this dynamic is the idea that individuals possess abilities that moderate how they cope with crises. For instance, despite living in poverty, an individual equipped with robust digital skills or social capital may face fewer adversities during a crisis like the pandemic than someone equally impoverished but lacking such skills. If policies are hastily designed and implemented, without adequately accounting for diverse abilities, they can inadvertently magnify the challenges for already vulnerable groups. This was evident during the pandemic, where swift policy rollouts often left significant portions of the population struggling to adapt, further entrenching existing inequalities.

Key abilities to mitigate the impacts of crises

The research teams observed that pre-existing abilities among different groups moderated the impacts of COVID-19 and associated policy measures. In other words, the presence or absence of these abilities was found to be a determining factor in their resilience or increased vulnerability. We argue that four key abilities played a crucial role in determining how people are affected by crises. Developing or strengthening these abilities among vulnerable populations ahead of 2030 is recommended to ensure inclusive and sustainable SDG acceleration actions.

Digital skills

Research across the three regions covered in this report found that digital skills were a primary ability for coping with the challenges of the pandemic and adapting to the policies enacted in response to the global health crisis (Adeniran et al., 2023; Adil et al., 2023; Vásquez et al., 2023). Digital skills encompass a range of proficiencies, including effectively utilising online communication platforms, navigating digital information sources, and employing digital tools (International Telecommunication Union, 2021).

Many countries adopted or intensified the use of technology-enabled services, through internet platforms, and encouraged the use of digital tools to resume daily activities during the pandemic. In this context, digital skills facilitated certain types of work, thus allowing some individuals to maintain their income, enabled the continuation of education for students and teachers, and empowered MSME owners and workers to identify alternative avenues to generate income and ensure the sustainability of the enterprises (Adeniran et al., 2023; Adil et al., 2023; Vásquez et al., 2023; Winarsih et al., 2021).

Conversely, individuals without digital skills were less equipped to face the challenges brought by the pandemic. For example, in sub-Saharan Africa, the swift transition to distance education prevented a complete halt in learning, but not all learner groups and households had equal access to the digital skills required to access remote learning (Adeniran et al., 2023). Efforts were made to develop alternative approaches to learning and to seek partnerships with

the private sector and civil society organisations (CSOs) to provide or promote investment in online platforms, tools, and applications to sustain learning (Adeniran et al., 2023). Nevertheless, digital skills gaps not only perpetuated existing inequalities but also exacerbated them in the context of the COVID-19 response (Adeniran et al., 2023).

The sub-Saharan Africa chapter also reports that students from higher-income households, urban settings, and private schools were better equipped with digital skills, enabling them to transition smoothly to online learning and continue their education remotely (Adeniran et al., 2023). In contrast, economically disadvantaged students, particularly those in public schools and rural areas, struggled due to a lack of digital literacy and skills. Moreover, access to essential facilities for remote learning—such as reliable internet connectivity and electricity—also varied significantly across different demographic groups. Overall, students and households lacking digital skills were at a heightened risk of educational exclusion, learning loss, and falling behind in their studies.

Similarly, digital skills were found to be crucial for MSME owners to keep their businesses afloat in Pakistan, India, and Sri Lanka (Adil, 2023; Southern Voice, 2023; Lokuge et al., 2023). Even though many of the enterprises surveyed had no previous experience with online sales or delivery services before the pandemic, there was a 42% increase in the adoption of digital strategies for business continuity across various sectors. Educated female entrepreneurs also utilised digital platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp to create alternative income streams, showcasing the resilience and adaptability that digital skills can offer in challenging circumstances. The transition to digital or remote work was therefore easier for individuals with a higher degree of digital skills, who were often concentrated in urban areas.

Disparities were also evident between sectors. Traditional businesses in rural areas faced greater difficulties than sectors such as IT and design consulting, which could effectively shift to a fully remote work model, using digital technologies to reach and tap into new markets (Adil et al., 2023). This was also seen in the case of migrant workers in Latin America. Only those who could effectively transition to remote work environments, such as managers, directors, and individuals in government roles, could leverage digital skills to cope with the challenges of the pandemic (Vásquez et al., 2023). In this scenario, migrant workers found themselves at a disadvantage, since they are largely concentrated in essential occupations that could not be carried out from home (United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean [CEPAL], 2022; IOM, 2022).

On one hand, digital skills proved to be a vital ability across multiple sectors and regions for individuals to cope with the effects of the pandemic. They served as a lifeline, enabling educational continuity, business adaptability, and remote work, thereby offering immediate relief to students, workers, and entrepreneurs (Adeniran et al., 2023; Adil et al., 2023; Vásquez et al., 2023). On the other hand, the studies showed that swiftly adopting or intensifying the use of technology-enabled services as an emergency policy response to crises widens inequalities, as it fails to address the needs of those without



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digital proficiencies. While some ad-hoc solutions emerged, such as makeshift online classes or temporary digital marketplaces for struggling MSMEs, the effects on vulnerabilities highlight the urgent need for more comprehensive, long-term policies that ensure digital inclusivity and sustainability for all demographic groups (Adeniran et al., 2023; Adil et al., 2023; Vásquez et al., 2023).

Agency

Human agency refers to the proactive efforts, initiatives, or influence one has on one's own life circumstances, and their interplay with socially produced structures (Sotarauta & Grillitsch, 2023; Eteläpelto et al., 2013). Within policy discussions, agency has been associated with an individual's ability to face structural conditions over their own life course; for instance, facing the transitions involved in life-long learning, the changing nature of work and, more generally, living an active citizenship (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Gerlak et al., 2020). Agency has also gained increasing significance when discussing the drivers of local and regional development (Sotarauta & Grillitsch, 2023).

During crises, it can be said that individuals or communities exert agency in the face of changing structural circumstances by employing the resources available to them to make choices that allow them to face shocks and recover sustainably. The studies showed that a greater degree of agency—or the lack thereof—greatly determined how individuals and communities' navigated uncertainties caused by the pandemic.

Lockdowns, border closures, and the closure of public spaces by definition interrupted the functioning of socioeconomic systems (Adeniran et al., 2023; Adil et al., 2023; Vásquez, 2023). This greatly restricted the options available for vulnerable groups to ensure their livelihoods. Mobility restrictions in Latin America, for instance, truncated migrants' possibilities to change locations or re-migrate to cope with the shock. This forced many migrants to either accept harder working conditions or, when possible, return to their places of origin (Vásquez et al., 2023). Internal migrants in particular who lost jobs in both the formal and informal sectors, and who lacked social protection and economic means, coped with the pandemic's socio-economic effects by returning to their home communities (Vásquez et al., 2023). Others sought to re-migrate despite the mobility restrictions, which was evidenced in the increase in irregular entry points in many South American countries (Vásquez et al., 2023).

In South Asia (Adil et al., 2023), lockdowns limited SME initiatives and possibilities to scale and invest, at the same time the closing of international borders caused supply chain disruptions, shortages of raw materials, workforce reduction, and a sharp decline in capacity utilisation. While savings became the primary resource for coping with financial uncertainties, business owners resorted to adjusting their production processes in the face of raw material shortages, reducing production and negotiating with vendors to maintain their businesses afloat. These were examples of agency strategies to address cash flow shortages. Resorting to lay-offs was also a way to curtail expenses. This is a way for business owners to react to economic shocks that also reflects how vulnerable SME workers are to sudden layoffs.

The large-scale exodus of migrant workers returning to their hometowns on foot highlighted the vulnerability of migrant workers who had no safety nets to rely on during crises.

The studies conducted in Sub-Saharan Africa also shed light on the intricate dynamics of human agency during times of crisis (Adeniran et al., 2023). The severe limitations on choices available to vulnerable groups for sustaining their livelihoods during lockdowns and border closures compelled some children to enter the workforce to contribute to their family's income. However, this particular strategy came at the cost of hindering children's educational development. This coincided with increased rates of early child marriage, teenage pregnancy, and a rise in school dropouts. On the other hand, individuals with a broader range of livelihood options sought alternative ways to ensure their children's education. For example, some parents could afford to hire private tutors for personalised homeschooling, while others assumed the role of teachers to support their children's learning at home. Older siblings also assisted younger siblings with their education.

Human agency takes on profound significance in times of crises, as it represents the proactive efforts and choices individuals and communities make in the face of shifting structural circumstances. The experiences detailed in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia underscore the pivotal role of agency in shaping responses to crises, where individuals and communities draw upon resources available to them to manage uncertainties and recover sustainably.

The ability to leverage or develop social networks (social capital)

Social capital represents the accumulated value derived from having strong networks, social support systems, and trust relationships. It embodies a wealth of resources and relationships that are forged and nurtured over time (Toyon, 2022). This form of capital is manifested through both individual and collective actions within a network, which operates based on mutually agreed-upon rules, obligations, and norms. The ability to leverage or develop such networks acted as an invaluable asset for individuals and communities during COVID-19 to fill in gaps in policy response and governmental support (Adeniran et al., 2023; Adil et al., 2023; Vásquez, 2023).

The different forms of monetary support and fiscal measures applied to mitigate socio-economic shock across the three regions during COVID-19⁴, fell short in preventing the exacerbation of inequalities. The studies showed that emergency cash transfers did not always reach the intended beneficiaries or those in the most vulnerable conditions (Adeniran et al., 2023; Adil et al., 2023; Vásquez et al., 2023). Some of these subsidies ignored the needs of the beneficiaries, were poorly regulated, or largely reliant on private parties' willingness to provide relief (Adeniran et al., 2023; Adil et al., 2023; Vásquez et al., 2023). In countries with limited or constrained state capacity, the policies had insufficient reach, were extremely limited, or the capacity was overtaken by other beneficiaries (Adil et al., 2023).

4 Payroll subsidies, exemptions in utility, rent and electricity bills, ration cards for food support, scholarships, subsidised school fees, and partnerships to provide free or low-cost internet were all documented in the reports (Adeniran et al., 2023; Adil et al., 2023; Vásquez et al., 2023). Non-monetary forms of support were also evidenced, such as the distribution of digital devices, learning materials and study guides for the most affected students in sub-Saharan Africa (Adeniran et al., 2023); or the provision of raw materials for MSMEs in Sri Lanka (Adil et al., 2023).

In this context, the studies revealed that those who could effectively leverage their networks were better equipped to navigate socio-economic challenges associated with the crisis (Adeniran et al., 2023; Adil et al., 2023; Vásquez et al., 2023). Friends and family often served as a financial safety net for MSME owners, filling the void left by inadequate or slow-moving government support (Adil et al., 2023). Women in particular turned to their connections to cope with the lack of stable financial support (Adil et al., 2023). In regions like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab in Pakistan, the familial support system was particularly strong, negating the need for external loans to maintain MSMEs operations (Adil et al., 2023).

In Latin America, social networks were more strongly leveraged by internal migrants for a quick re-entry into the labour market (Vásquez et al., 2023). International migrants more often relied on delocalised forms of social capital, anchored in their countries of origin or among relatives living abroad (Vásquez et al., 2023). Background studies on Peru, Chile, and Paraguay indicated that Venezuelan migrants frequently depended on remittances from family members who were still in Venezuela to meet their basic living needs (Vásquez, Morel & Mendoza., 2023; Ropert et al., 2023; Aquino et al., 2023). Conversely, those who had jobs in their host countries would send remittances back home or to relatives residing in other countries, often exhausting their savings in the process (Vásquez et al., 2023).

In coping with the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, those with strong networks found more immediate financial and social support, circumventing the shortcomings of governmental policies. Conversely, the lack of such networks left certain groups at a marked disadvantage, forcing them to resort to unsustainable coping mechanisms like selling valuables or relying on remittances. Disparities in social capital not only magnified existing social inequalities, but also underscored the limitations of current policies in providing equitable, effective support. This dynamic further emphasises the urgent need for targeted governmental policies that can address the unique vulnerabilities of different population segments, including migrants.

The ability to access to governmental support (accessibility)

The ability of individuals to access programmes and services delivered by governments, foundations, or civil society organisations was crucial in determining the extent to which COVID-19 impacted individuals. The studies revealed that inequalities were further exacerbated when policy initiatives implied cumbersome processes or excessive bureaucracy and prerequisites, thus hampering vulnerable people's ability to access governmental support. When prerequisites were too complex or implied biased evaluation criteria, they inherently favoured those individuals, communities or enterprises already better positioned, with more visibility and resources (Adil et al., 2023; Vásquez et al., 2023).

In addition, governments across the three regions strongly relied on formal registration systems to manage and distribute relief measures. However, the extremely vulnerable populations are often

not registered, and there is very little data available about them (Privacy International, 2022). Incomplete data is a significant challenge in the provision of support, for instance, in the case of unregistered migrants, and informally self-employed workers and MSMEs. For some individuals and businesses, a lack of official registration meant systematic exclusion from government-led mitigation and support initiatives (Vásquez et al., 2023; 2023).

In Latin America, recent migrants were disproportionately affected during the pandemic due to their limited familiarity with administrative procedures (Vásquez et al., 2023). Findings from the regional report found that some countries have highly complex regularisation processes, and that a migrant worker's length of stay in their host country correlates with their access to government systems and services (Vásquez et al., 2023).

The studies in South Asia (Adil et al., 2023) underscored how the size and sector of enterprises influenced their ability to access government relief. Larger companies typically had the financial documentation and historical records needed to access loans, while smaller enterprises struggled to qualify for, and benefit from, the support. These also faced fewer hurdles due to well-established relationships with governmental bodies and a greater understanding of bureaucratic processes. Medium- and large-scale enterprises in South Asia also tended to borrow right up to the maximum limit, reducing the amount of credit available for smaller enterprises. Smaller businesses, on the other hand, especially those in traditional sectors like manufacturing or retail, found it far more challenging to navigate administrative procedures and access aid.

The same was observed in capacity-building initiatives undertaken by the government to equip individuals and enterprises with skills to navigate the crisis. Programs aimed to enhance e-commerce awareness and digital proficiency were structured in a way that favoured larger businesses. These enterprises were more capable than smaller businesses of meeting the stringent requirements related to documentation, financial commitments, and registration, thereby limiting smaller businesses' ability to participate and benefit fully from these initiatives (Adil et al., 2023). This disparity extended to employees, as those working in larger, more stable companies were more likely to benefit from government relief measures compared to those employed in more precarious enterprises. Additionally, regional disparities further compound these issues, as urban centres are commonly prioritised for resources and support, leaving rural or more peripheral areas at a disadvantage (Adil et al., 2023).

The studies in Sub-Saharan Africa also revealed how unintegrated and inefficient responses limited the ability of vulnerable children from low-income rural families to access governmental support (Adeniran et al., 2023). An already limited access to essential services, such as education, became even more pronounced during the pandemic. Traditional barriers like long distances to schools, financial constraints, unsafe commuting, societal expectations, and limited transportation options compound the problem. Despite efforts from NGOs and government initiatives, these systemic challenges persist. Access to government support in Sub-Saharan Africa isn't just an



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educational issue but a broader development crisis that requires a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach for sustainable solutions (Adeniran et al., 2023).

One could argue that the ability to access government support affects individual and community resilience and adaptability during unprecedented challenges. A robust ability to access government programs, social services, and essential resources is crucial in helping people maintain stability and recover from shocks. Conversely, a lack of ability to access government support magnifies existing social and economic disparities, rendering certain groups extremely vulnerable. Hastily implemented policies with an excessive reliance on formal registration to provide relief, limited reach due to constrained state capacity, cumbersome processes or excessive bureaucracy to access support mechanisms, and unintegrated, inefficient or poorly regulated measures, all risk excluding groups who lack the ability to access support. The pandemic has underscored the vital role of the ability to access support as a primary ability, not just for immediate crisis management, but also for the design of more equitable, long-term policy solutions.

What to expect from the second edition

By exploring some of the pandemic-induced impacts on inequality experienced by primary and secondary students in Sub-Saharan Africa, MSME business owners and workers in South Asia, and migrant populations in Latin America, the report provides a unique perspective on how rapidly implemented policies could put long-lasting, inclusive, and equitable development outcomes at risk. It complements other development reports that highlight the inherent complexities of driving sustainable transformations, by bringing to light Global South perspectives on the abilities that individuals need to be equipped with to better cope with crises.

The report is organised as follows:

- Chapter II employs a mixed-method approach to understand educational inequalities in sub-Saharan Africa during the pandemic, and the effectiveness of government mitigation strategies across the region. It includes a quantitative analysis of education indicators using data from three country case studies in Nigeria, Benin, and Tanzania. The case studies relied on regression analysis, based on data from nationally representative surveys (National Living Standard Surveys) and administrative data to examine educational inequalities before and after COVID-19. The quantitative analysis is complemented with an extensive literature review analysis.
- Chapter III applies a comparative approach, looking at Pakistan, India, and Sri Lanka to explore interconnections between businesses, workers, and the SDGs. It uses data from surveys, interviews, and discussions in the three countries to understand the pandemic's effects on SMEs in relation to SDG

10 (reducing inequalities), and SDG 8 (economic growth and working conditions).

- Chapter IV uses statistical analysis to examine how COVID-19 affected work and employment in three Latin American countries. Using data from household surveys conducted in 2019, 2020, and 2021, it seeks to better understand how the pandemic impacted work-related inequalities for migrants in the region compared to the general population. By examining the employment conditions of migrants, the chapter broadens our understanding of the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on inequalities related to work and employment.
- Chapter V examines the slow progress on the SDGs as the 2030 deadline nears. Using data from the regional studies, it presents the setbacks caused by global crises including the COVID-19 pandemic and geopolitical tensions. The conclusion chapter examines in detail links between primary abilities—such as digital skills, social capital, agency, and the ability to access support—to national capacities. Through this lens, it argues that these abilities and capacities influence a country's resilience and ability to achieve the SDGs. The narrative stresses the importance of a balanced approach to SDG acceleration that prioritises both urgency and inclusion.

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