

Opening Statement by United Nations Resident Coordinator in South Africa  
Ms. Nardos Bekele-Thomas

Launch of the “THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC ASSESSMENT  
OF COVID-19 IN SOUTH AFRICA” STUDY  
19 August, 2020

Excellencies

My Big Sister, Hon. Minister Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, whose vision has guided the work of the study we are launching today, our Co-Host today

My Big Brother, Hon. Mkhize, who is an inspiration to all of us,

My Dear Sister, Hon. Minister Patricia De Lilli, Minister of Public Works, who I pester for the long-awaited UN House. We do appreciate your efforts.

My Dear Sister The Chair of the Solidarity Fund, Ms. Gloria Sorebe, who is a friend of the UN. Thanks for your solid partnership and for according the UN a seat in the SF advisory group

Members of the Diplomatic Corps

Members of the Sounding Board Group

Multilateral and Bilateral Partners

Senior Government Officials

Civil Society and the Media

UN Agencies

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good afternoon.

On behalf of the entire Un System in South Africa, it gives me great pleasure to welcome you to the launch of the **“The Socio-Economic Impact Assessment of COVID-19 in South Africa” study** that has been developed by the UN System in South Africa in close consultation with key partners over the past several months.

I want to sincerely thank the Sounding Board Group members, comprising representatives from the Government, private sector, academia and development partners, that have offered their valuable insights and perspectives into this report.

COVID-19 has drastically altered our daily lives since the first case in South Africa was recorded in March 2020. The cases of infection quickly soared, making South Africa the country with the 5<sup>th</sup> highest number of cases in the world, and the highest number of cases on the African continent. The strong leadership and the bold actions of the Government, serving as pacesetters to other countries, have been well-recognised globally. While the Government has acted swiftly with commitment to curb the spread of the virus, great challenges remain ahead to recover from the pandemic and to build back better and stronger.

The UN has implemented a comprehensive response to COVID-19, as the pandemic is more than just a health crisis; it is an economic crisis, a humanitarian crisis, a security crisis, and a human rights crisis. Globally, the UN has mobilized the full capacity of its system through 131 country teams, serving 162 countries and territories to support national authorities in developing public health preparedness and response plans to the COVID-19 crisis.

This study is one of the UN's initiatives to support the Government of South Africa to confront the challenges of Covid-19, with WHO at the helm of consultations with the Government on the health crises. Under the leadership of UNDP, other knowledge products under development include the *Emergency Needs Assessment of Covid-19*, the *Digitalized Dashboard* that could be used as Accountability Framework for tracking progress, and the *study on the Governance and Social Impact of Covid-19*. Other UN agencies are working on areas such as providing support on Personal Protective Equipment to medical practitioners and supporting recovery and social cohesion in marginalised communities and groups including women. The Un is also intensifying its work, in the provision of essential services, so that the hard won gains do not get reversed.

Last December, I provided opening remarks for the launch of UNDP's Human Development Report, which focused on inequalities in human development. Today more than ever, inequalities within and among nations are being exposed and exacerbated by COVID-19, as the poor and vulnerable are unable to protect themselves – and their livelihoods are disrupted from lockdown measures and closure of businesses. In this regard, assessing the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on societies, economies and vulnerable groups is fundamental to inform and

tailor the responses of governments and partners to recover from the crisis and ensure that no one is left behind in this effort.

This study on the Socio-Economic Assessment of COVID-19 on South Africa looks into the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on South Africa's society, economy, and especially its vulnerable groups, including women and the unemployed. One of the key findings for the study, which is useful to Government and partners, is the awareness that, with Covid-19, individuals are susceptible to transition from one level of poverty to an even lower one. While Government social protection grants tend to target the poorest, this study posits that care and support needs to be provided to those at the borderline of the poverty line, such as the vulnerable middle class, to reduce their likelihood of slipping into poverty.

Uncovering details of the most vulnerable groups from COVID-19 is essential for the UN, as we move towards implementing the UNSDCF 2020-25, which is the framework used for guiding our activities in South Africa. The study therefore will help us contribute to the Government's development efforts and to channel our resources to ensure No One is Left Behind – one of the key tenets of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Our Flash Appeal, Lunched in April, is geared towards ensuring the marginalized and the vulnerable groups and communities are prioritized. The resources in the Appeal Fund are aimed at complementing resources for the Government, our CSO partners and the UN System to support humanitarian and early recovery processes so as to lay the foundation for building back better. I therefore want to use this opportunity to call on our bilateral and multilateral partners to support the Flash Appeal in order to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 in the country.

Without pre-empting the report, I want to appreciate UNDP South Africa, under the leadership of Dr Ayodele Odusola, for conducting this study with diligence and providing a broad-based view of the implications of COVID-19, particularly on the impact on South Africa's three inherent challenges of poverty, inequality, and unemployment.

As the country moves towards revitalizing its economy – recently lowering to level 2 of the lockdown this week, today I invite you to think with us: how do we

re-imagine South Africa's future growth and development trajectory? How do we move forward and build back better to empower women, youth, the elderly, and those across the country, from the townships to the rural provinces? How do we the expand the number of stakeholders in the economy and how do we integrate the informal sector into the mainstream economy to promote inclusive growth? How do we harness the potentials of women and youth and benefit from the demographic dividend? What should our social protection support system look like? What should the inclusive future Education be like? While dealing with the Pandemic how can we focus on the National Health Insurance Scheme? What should the future governance system look like? We count on the ingenuity of South Africans to take advantage of this seemingly insurmountable challenge to forging an inclusive and happy society. Your UN Family is committed to travel the transformative journey with you, with honesty and neutrality our support will always accompany South Africa!

As the old adage goes "never waste a crisis" – it is an opportunity for change.

I wish you all a robust and heart-to-heart discussion towards ensuring no one is left behind in South Africa's path to recovery from COVID-19.

Siyabonga Kakulu.