



## 2. The devastating reality of the COVID-19 pandemic

COVID-19 has shown how an infectious disease can sweep the globe in weeks and, in the space of a few months, set back sustainable development by years.

By all measures, the impact of the pandemic is massive:

- 148 million people were confirmed infected and more than 3 million have died in 223 countries, territories and areas (as at 28 April 2021)<sup>(1)</sup>;
- at least 17 000 health workers died from COVID-19 during the pandemic's first year<sup>(2)</sup>;
- US\$ 10 trillion of output is expected to be lost by the end of 2021, and US\$ 22 trillion in the period 2020–2025 — the deepest shock to the global economy since the Second World War and the largest simultaneous contraction of national economies since the Great Depression of 1930–32<sup>(3)</sup>;
- At its highest point in 2020, 90% of schoolchildren were unable to attend school<sup>(4)</sup>;
- 10 million more girls are at risk of early marriage because of the pandemic<sup>(5)</sup>;
- gender-based violence support services have seen fivefold increases in demand<sup>(6)</sup>;
- 115–125 million people have been pushed into extreme poverty<sup>(7)</sup>.

The language of health statistics and economics cannot convey the depth of disruption as COVID-19 has overturned people's lives. People are grieving the loss of their loved ones, and those with long-term health impacts from the disease continue to suffer. There are instances where people with cancer have been unable to attend chemotherapy sessions, and people with suspected tuberculosis have not been diagnosed or treated. Market sellers have been unable to work and put food on the table. Women have found their double workload tripled or quadrupled, as they try to maintain the family income, care for the elderly and sick, become teachers for their home-schooled children, and maintain the well-being of their families.

Most dispiriting is that those who had least before the pandemic have even less now. The experience of previous epidemics shows that income inequality increased in affected countries over the five years following each event. Those working in the informal sector have had little or no support. Migrants, refugees, and displaced people have often been