COVID-19 in the Global South

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The COVID-19 pandemic is much more than a health crisis, as the diverse contributions to this timely book make abundantly clear. Dr Michael J Ryan, Director General of the World Health Organization (WHO) Emergency Programme, has observed that “Nobody on this planet is safe until everyone is safe”. An unprecedented spirit of global solidarity is required to overcome the multiple threats COVID-19 poses to our health, economies and societies, particularly in resource-poor settings.

In Ireland, we have a strong sense of community – *meitheal* – coming together to work collectively for a better future. This clear sense of global citizenship underpins Ireland’s development cooperation, as outlined in our international development policy, *A Better World*. Ireland is playing its part in building and contributing to a coherent, effective and integrated global response to COVID-19. Our overarching priority is to reduce the incidence and mitigate the impact of the pandemic among vulnerable populations, in line with our commitment to reaching the furthest behind first.

As the contributors to this book outline from a range of different perspectives, these efforts are unfolding in a highly dynamic, interconnected and changing world. Pre-COVID-19, we were already facing unprecedented levels of humanitarian crises, with over 134 million people in need of assistance and protection. Protracted crises are becoming the new normal. New threats are emerging to peace, and geopolitics is becoming increasingly complex and volatile. To overcome these challenges and achieve the UN (United
Nations) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), poverty needs to be addressed from a multidimensional perspective. This includes the way the international community approaches and applies research, evidence, knowledge and learning.

‘Research and Learning’ is identified as one of the five key criteria for action in *A Better World*, acknowledging the need to prioritize learning and to situate research and evidence centrally within Ireland’s development cooperation programme. We recognize the intrinsic value of research as a global public good, but also its role in better understanding approaches that work most effectively to reduce poverty. Together with learning from experience, reviews and evaluations, research is the basis on which we build knowledge and evidence for our work in international development – and nowhere is this more important than when working in conflict and fragility, where the context can and does change rapidly.

Our work with research partners is an essential part of our efforts to achieve the ambition of *A Better World*. We have supported the work of the Development Studies Association of Ireland since 2012, with good reason. The DSAI occupies a unique position in Ireland: it provides a national platform to harness knowledge from higher education and civil society, and bridges the gap between development research, policy and practice. Its members are key contributors to Ireland’s development knowledge base.

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, the DSAI has provided a dedicated online space for pooling experience and expertise about the impact of the pandemic on the developing world. It has enabled knowledge sharing through an easily accessible blog format, hosting opinion pieces from independent authors covering a wide range of thematic and geographic perspectives. I am delighted to see these expanded into book chapters and, along with other contributions, brought together in this new publication. It makes an important contribution in helping us to better understand COVID-19 and offset its impacts, drawing on work across disciplines and silos. It also underscores a core principle of Ireland’s foreign policy and development cooperation – that it is only through collective action with others that the great challenges of our time can be addressed.
The development and rollout of a safe and effective vaccine to reach 7 billion people worldwide is one such challenge. As we work towards this goal, Ireland’s priority is to mitigate the widespread effects of COVID-19 in line with our key policy priorities. We will protect peacebuilding efforts. We will work to ensure the ongoing delivery of critical humanitarian, livelihood and nutrition assistance. We will advocate for scaling up social protection to protect the most vulnerable. We will support the protection and promotion of the rights of women and girls and prioritize gender-based violence risk mitigation in our response. We will encourage ongoing engagement with civil society in line with international human rights norms and standards. We will learn from experience and link recovery from COVID-19 to building greater resilience to future hazards.

As the contributions to this book articulate so clearly, building back better post-COVID-19 does not just mean returning to the status quo. We must work together to accelerate transformative action to achieve the SDGs, putting the furthest behind first and utilizing robust evidence to address and mitigate the deeper, underlying causes of vulnerability and marginalization.

In the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (OECD’s) Development Cooperation Peer Review published in May of this year, Ireland is praised as a trusted partner to civil society, and a strong voice for sustainable development, leading and supporting policy dialogue at both local and international levels. By working in that spirit of meitheal, we must continue to share evidence, expertise and experiences to strengthen our collective efforts in tackling the impacts of COVID-19. I thank the DSAI for their contribution to this endeavour, and for creating a space where voices from across the globe can learn with and from each other.