PART I

Chapter 2

Why leaving no one behind matters

by

Elizabeth Stuart, Overseas Development Institute

This chapter examines the origins and imperatives of the leave no one behind commitment, explores how it resonates with wider social and political considerations currently rising up the global agenda, and asks why it is so central to development co-operation today and in the future. In doing so, it reviews understandings of the commitment as an instrumental part of the Sustainable Development Goals, as an anti-discrimination agenda, and as a call to account for the limited reach of past development progress. It introduces some of the notable critiques of leave no one behind and the challenges it faces, but also presents evidence that it can be achieved.

This chapter also includes an opinion piece by Gabriela Ramos, OECD Chief of Staff and Sherpa to the G20, on “Why it is imperative today to make growth more inclusive”.

Why leave no one behind matters

KEY MESSAGES

Leave no one behind can be defined as a three-part imperative: to end absolute poverty in all its forms, to stop group-based discrimination that results in unequal outcomes for disadvantaged populations and to take action to help the furthest behind first.

Leaving no one behind is challenging. Success requires political will to undo institutionalised discrimination, to manage trade-offs and to allocate resources to the worst off in areas that are hardest to reach — and it needs public support and demand, especially when middle classes may have just emerged from poverty and remain vulnerable.

Leave no one behind is central to achieving the 2030 Agenda. Put simply, if the lives of the poorest and most marginalised people are not improved dramatically, the entire set of sustainable development goals will not be achieved.

Reaching the furthest behind first is a question of prioritising and fast-tracking progress for the poorest and most disadvantaged people across all SDGs and policies.
In Long Walk to Freedom (1994[1]), Nelson Mandela wrote: “A nation should not be judged by how it treats its highest citizens, but its lowest ones.” Leaving no one behind is the moral challenge of our age. And as the unequal nature of society around the world has led directly to social fracturing, what might have remained an axiom has become an urgent political imperative.

The years since Mandela published his autobiography have been a time of enormous progress in reducing extreme deprivations. Nevertheless, that progress has been unequally distributed, with significant numbers of people – often identity-based groups, such as young people, older people and women – making fewer gains. Average consumption has risen markedly since 1980, but the minimum consumption floor\(^1\) experienced by the poorest stratum of society – approximately USD 1.00 in 2011 purchasing power parity – has changed only modestly (Ravaillon, 2018[2]). And in an analysis of health status in 64 countries between 1990 and 2011, World Bank researchers found that in about a quarter of these countries, the poorest 40% of people had regressed in absolute terms (Wagstaff, Bredenkamp and Buisman, 2014[3]). Just as life for so many people has gotten better, for millions of others it has gotten worse.

Focusing on these people at the bottom of society, and on closing gaps between the “highest citizens” and the “lowest ones”, is the unfinished business of the MDGs. Adopted in 2000 to be achieved by 2015, the MDGs shared a blind spot with wider policy making of their time and now: that of inequality (other than in the MDG target on gender equity in access to primary and secondary education) and its relationship to poverty reduction. Amiel and Cowell (1998[4]) in their seminal work Thinking About Inequality make the point that academic economists did think about inequality, but they failed to consider what the reference group was, i.e. to answer the question: equal with whom? Nonetheless, it was clear that inequality was not then a fashionable concept among policy makers. The MDGs were a product of their times in that they focused on absolute measures of improvement, but were agnostic as to whose lives were improving – a consideration that to be fair, policy makers did not have sufficient data to track, and were not even attempting to measure. The goals were only ever supposed to be global measures of progress – therefore gross aggregations.

Yet a situation where millions of people are structurally locked out of progress is morally untenable – it is not acceptable for development to focus on the relatively easier wins, to the detriment of the people who are suffering the worst levels of deprivations.

Already in 2012, Jan Vandemoortele, who was one of the architects of the MDGs but soon became one of their most vocal critics, wrote:

**Achieving the MDGs requires fundamental transformations in any society that transcends techno-fixes so that the most disadvantaged and vulnerable people receive higher priority – e.g. illiterate women, low-caste children, single mothers, slum dwellers, subsistence farmers, the unemployed, disabled persons, households at the bottom of the ladder, ethnic minorities. Such transformations will never result from the application of standard recipes that often engender those discriminations in the first place. (Vandemoortele, 2012[5])**

This perspective was reflected in views from civil society, including Save the Children, who explicitly discussed left-behind groups (Espey et al., 2012[6]) and helped popularise the expression. Growing out of a serious omission in the MDGs, the concept of leave no one behind came to occupy the transformational heart of their successor, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
Defining leave no one behind in the 2030 Agenda

While most people have an instinctual understanding of what it means to leave no one behind (and that this is a good thing), it is worth unpacking in detail exactly what the concept means, and carefully examining the inferences contained therein.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’s (UN, 2015) level of ambition is no less than creating a vision for the best future of humanity; when the bar is (rightly) set so high, it is all the more imperative to prioritise efforts where they are needed most. Hence, the intrinsic importance of leaving no one behind in achieving the SDGs is crystal clear.

Leave no one behind is also a lightning rod issue for the 2030 Agenda, because if it is not achieved, the entire set of global goals themselves, and their vision for a shared future, will not be achieved either. Several of the goals are “zero” ones: they aim to end extreme poverty, eliminate hunger and ensure healthy lives “for all at all ages”. Even if specific targets are less absolutist (for instance, the child mortality target is to reduce deaths under five years of age to “at least as low as 25 per 1 000 live births”, rather than achieve literally no deaths), the definition of many of the goals ensures that leaving no one behind is a core part of the agenda. If it is not attained, many of the goals cannot possibly be reached, and certainly the spirit of the goals will not have been realised.

In this sense, then, leaving no one behind also has a key instrumental importance: it underpins the success of the entire 2030 Agenda. As such, progress on the leave no one behind agenda will also serve as a useful proxy for progress towards the SDGs, in developing and emerging countries as well as in OECD member countries, overall. Put simply, if the worst off have not seen their lives improved dramatically, then the job will not have been done.

A close reading of the 2030 Agenda suggests that the call to leave no one behind has three interrelated, but still distinct, implications.

The first implication is to end absolute poverty – in all its forms – and ensure that those who have been left behind (in relative or absolute terms) can catch up with those who have experienced greater progress. While being left behind is typically associated with marginalisation, this is far from being a marginal issue: in several sub-Saharan African countries, the majority of people live in extreme poverty (Stuart et al., 2015).

The second implication is to stop the group-based discrimination that has resulted in unequal outcomes for so many disadvantaged and marginalised populations. The 2030 Agenda sets out an illustrative list of such groups: “… all children, youth, persons with disabilities (of whom more than 80% live in poverty), people living with HIV/AIDS, older persons, indigenous peoples, refugees and internally displaced persons and migrants” (UN, 2015). This perspective of group-based – also known as horizontal – inequality also brings a focus on intersectionality, whereby people face double or triple disadvantage and discrimination based on their identity. In Ethiopia, for instance, Somali girls living in rural areas have only a 15% chance of finishing school, compared to 77% for girls from other ethnicities living in urban areas (Lenhardt and Samman, 2015).

Third, and it is here perhaps that the radical heart of leave no one behind lies, the 2030 Agenda states that “… we will endeavour to reach the furthest behind first” (UN, 2015). Thus, it defines leave no one behind as a question of prioritising and fast-tracking every form of action for the poorest and most disadvantaged. This has profound implications for all governments, from resource allocation to planning, and from costing to measuring and evaluating (Stuart and Samman, 2017).

Therefore, leave no one behind is an anti-poverty as well as anti-discrimination agenda – and it is, furthermore, one that recognises the naivety of expecting progress to trickle down the socio-economic scale. Instead, it necessitates explicit and proactive attempts to ensure that the populations whom progress has left out are now not only included, but placed at the front. It does this at several levels, as Klasens and Fleurbaey (2018) have set out: the 2030 Agenda impels us to consider which countries
are left behind; which groups are left behind within a country; and who is left furthest behind within that group, that is, down to the level of the individual.

**Why is leave no one behind significant now?**

In many ways leave no one behind finds a natural home in the SDGs, which are intended to be universally applicable and – in contrast to the MDGs, which were solely focused on social progress – are relevant across the economic, social and environmental agendas. Leave no one behind, too, is inherently integrated. The poorest and most marginalised need better access to services such as health, education and social protection (social); they need higher quality and better-paid employment to increase their productivity and incomes (economic); and they also need to live free from the burdens of environmental degradation, climate change and climate-related disasters (environmental).

It is quite possible, however, that the phrase was given such prominence in the 2030 Agenda, and without much member state debate, because its truly radical nature – the absolute priority explicit in endeavouring “to reach the furthest behind first”, and the implications this has for policy implementation and resource allocation – was not fully appreciated.

But the phrase may also have gained traction in the context of the 2030 Agenda because it resonates with other social and political concerns. In this context, it is imperative to make growth more inclusive, according Gabriela Ramos (see the “In My View” piece). It is no coincidence that it has taken root in a time of backlash against globalisation and austerity policies; in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial and economic crisis; and amid a rising awareness of the pernicious effects of inequality, both in literature (such as Wilkinson and Pickett’s *The Spirit Level*, (2009[12]), and Piketty’s *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2014[13])) and wider discourse (from the Pope and the managing director of the International Monetary Fund to taxi drivers around the world). This is the decade that has produced the #MeToo movement; has spawned bestsellers such as Reni Eddo-Lodge’s book *Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People About Race* (2017[14]); and has led commentators in the United States and Europe to conclude that political discontent and populist movements are being propelled by people’s sense that social mobility is no longer available to the majority of them.

**Critiques**

Naturally, like all important concepts, leave no one behind has also attracted serious critiques. The first is that it has nothing to say about the people at the top of the wealth distribution. This may be because tackling the pernicious effects of extreme wealth is a politically toxic challenge, although it is arguably one that the 2030 Agenda should have tackled.

Another, closely related, critique is that the broader context of the SDGs does not challenge in any fundamental way the aforementioned idea of trickle-down growth. This means that the basic realignments that would be necessary to achieve leave no one behind in a lasting way – such as fully committing to decouple growth in gross domestic product from increases in resource use – are also omitted from being explicitly mentioned in the SDGs, although they are hinted at (Chapter 3).

Some gender activists, meanwhile, worry that they have spent years convincing the world that women are not vulnerable, only to have them cited here among the vulnerable and marginalised groups (Chapter 3).

Finally, a key concern in the 2030 Agenda negotiations was that leave no one behind should not eclipse the concept of leaving no country behind, which is a wider question of development co-operation. This would require a fundamental redistribution of official development assistance, as well as tackling illicit financial flows, inequitable trade rules and other forms of regressive distribution. These are all vital to improve global outcomes.
In my view:
It is imperative to make growth more inclusive – an OECD perspective

by Gabriela Ramos,
OECD Chief of Staff and Sherpa to the G20

We live in turbulent times.

For decades, globalisation has helped drive development by spreading ideas and technologies around the world, facilitating economic growth and productivity gains and lifting millions out of poverty. But development in rich and poor countries alike has not always resulted in improvements in general well-being as, in many countries, the benefits of globalisation have become concentrated on an increasingly narrow elite.

Top incomes continue to rise: the richest 10% now command around ten times the income of the poorest 10% on average across the OECD, up from seven times 25 years ago. In my own country, Mexico, it is around 20 times. Corporate profits are at historic highs in many countries with profits rising from 7.6% of global GDP in 1980 to 9.8% in 2013. And shareholder payouts hit a new record this year as global dividend payments neared the $500bn mark. The concentration at the top is not only about income, but also of opportunities and outcomes.

Meanwhile, median wages and living standards stagnate in too many countries and large shares of our populations are unable to fully contribute or benefit from economic prosperity. Our economic system continues to wreak environmental destruction, the costs of which fall mainly on the poor and vulnerable, in addition to the other flora and fauna with which we share this planet. The systemic effects of these forces cannot be underestimated, to which the ongoing migration crisis attests.

This has eroded trust – the glue that holds our societies together. Trust between different groups of people, trust between countries, trust in certain business sectors, and trust in institutions has plunged to record lows, with public trust in governments in the OECD standing at just 42% in 2016. This fall in trust has manifested itself in the rise of populism and return of protectionism in many countries, and a general malcontent with the process of globalisation itself.

This is clearly unsustainable, in all senses of the word.

If we are determined to improve these outcomes and to deliver on the SDG’s, we must rethink the way we measure economic success, and broaden the definition from GDP to include a set of dimensions that matter for people. Well-being, inclusion and sustainability become key words in this effort. It will take countries to both pursue inclusive growth policies domestically but also co-operate internationally to ensure “no one is left behind”. The OECD’s recently launched Policy Framework for Action on Inclusive Growth provides countries with a blueprint for how to do this. The Framework helps governments sustain and better share the benefits of growth by promoting dynamics in three key areas including:

- establishing equal opportunities for all by investing in early childhood education and care and lifelong learning, promoting regional catching up and investing in communities’ well-being and social capital;
- enabling strong, inclusive markets that prepare people and firms for the future of work by promoting inclusive labour markets, updating social protection systems and boosting productivity growth and business dynamism;
- and re-building trust in government by embedding inclusiveness in policy-making and using data and digital technologies to design citizen-centred policies.

Gender is an important part of the Framework and should be central to governments’ domestic and development co-operation policies. Despite recent progress, women are still less likely to be in the workforce than men: on average across OECD countries, 67% of women were in the labour force compared to nearly 80% of men in 2015. What’s more, the gender pay gap has remained stubbornly static over recent years at 15% on average across OECD countries. Governments should implement the OECD Gender Recommendations, implementing family friendly policies, offering equal and shareable parental leave, and various policies aimed at gender pay equality, such as pay transparency legislation. The OECD is further shaping global dialogue in this area by supporting the G20’s “25 by 25” target to reduce the gender labour force participation gap by 25% by 2025. Ultimately, promoting female economic empowerment is the greatest lever we have for achieving more inclusive and sustainable development.

The inclusive growth agenda is too broad and ambitious to be achieved by governments alone and will require close cooperation with the private sector and civil society to be realised. Through new and innovative initiatives such as the OECD’s Private Finance for Sustainable Development Platform Engagement we can help forge those partnerships. By working together – across countries and sectors – we can reinvigorate people’s trust and build a new era of inclusive growth that puts the well-being of people and the planet at its heart.
**Challenges**

Even accepting the legitimacy of the concept, there remains the scale of the challenge. The key political-economic challenge is what to do about governments that institutionalise discrimination and marginalisation to suit their own ends, such as, for example, when they wish to supress particular racial groups that would likely support opposition parties. Many governments have legal or constitutional provisions that actively discriminate against particular groups, while in other cases they tacitly endorse traditional norms that marginalise women or sexual minorities.

It may also be the wider electorate that does not want its government to put the worst-off first, particularly if it means that resources will be directed away from the middle classes, who may themselves have only recently emerged from a situation of vulnerability. This may mean that demand to fulfil the leave no one behind commitment remains weak.

Other formidable obstacles come with questions of measurement and data. In an already data-challenged context, marginalised communities are the very people on whom there is the least – official, anyway – data. For instance, household surveys omit by design the homeless, people in institutions, and mobile nomadic or pastoral populations, and tend to under-represent in practice people who live in urban slums, dangerous places, and fragile or transient households (Carr-Hill cited in Stuart et al. (2015[^8])). For a variety of reasons, data gaps also exist around older people, women, people with disabilities and ethnic minorities. Data initiatives are flourishing in the SDG era, and some of these gaps are starting to be filled. Nonetheless, for the time being it is often very difficult or impossible to count those who are left behind, let alone measure whether they are making progress (Chapter 5).

In addition, donors have voiced concerns that it is too difficult programmatically or, particularly, financially to reach that last person (Chapter 8).

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[^8]: Chapter 5

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**Box 2.1. Who is left behind in climate change?**

The climate aspect of leave no one behind has been largely neglected by commentators to date, perhaps because development and climate communities still speak different languages. This is a serious omission for the obvious reason that climate change may have the greatest impact on the poorest relative to other kinds of shocks, because these groups tend to be more dependent on ecosystem services than relatively better-off (in all senses of the term) populations (IPCC, 2015[^13]); (World Bank, 2012[^16]); (Chapter 3). In turn, disasters frequently exacerbate social inequalities and existing power dynamics, constraining people’s ability to escape poverty, and leaving those who are poor and the most marginalised at even greater risk of being left behind (Diwakar et al., forthcoming[^17]) (Lovell and Le Masson, 2014[^14]). Leave no one behind must also be thought of in terms of not leaving future generations behind – it is, in other words, a dynamic concept.

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**Leaving no one behind is feasible**

While these critiques and challenges highlight the complexity of the task, they should not be reasons why it is not taken up by governments or the donor community.

The political-economic questions are undeniably thorny. It will take a considerable normative shift to reverse entrenched attitudes and positions. But it is here that the global nature of the SDGs may be particularly helpful. The international scrutiny and pressure that they bring will, it is to be hoped, make it harder for governments to overlook the needs of significant percentages of their populations. Donors can support this by building the capacity of civil society and supporting decentralised levels of government (Chapter 6).

As for the questions of feasibility: the answer is yes, it can be done. Some countries are already striving to leave no one behind and are achieving results fast. For example, Ethiopia launched a Productive...
Safety Net Programme in 2005. By 2009 it was already the largest programme of its kind in sub-Saharan Africa, reaching 7.5 million extremely poor people (Stuart et al., 2015[8]). The programme, which is supported by a range of development partners – is well targeted, with 80% of transfers going to the poor, and is credited with lifting 1.4 million people out of extreme poverty and enabling Ethiopia to avoid famine during the severe 2010/11 drought. Plans are in place for it to double in size to reach 10 million beneficiaries by 2020 and to lift nearly half of these out of extreme poverty (Manuel et al., 2018[19]).

In 2007, the Eritrean government, in conjunction with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), launched a programme to ensure the children of nomadic herders – often excluded from formal education because of seasonal migration patterns – attend primary school. Within two years, more than 5,000 children from the ages of 9-14 were enrolled in 57 specialised learning centres (Stuart et al., 2015[8]).

Aiming efforts at the desperately poor, at rural minorities or at nomadic populations is likely to cost more than serving people who are already better geographically and socially connected. Yet there is some evidence that prioritising outcomes for those left behind may be more efficient as well as more equitable. A recent UNICEF report has shown that every USD 1 million invested in the health of the worst-off children prevented nearly twice as many deaths, on average, as the equivalent spent on the same interventions for non-poor children (UNICEF, 2017[20]). For example, following a successful pilot in 14 districts, in 2005 the Government of Nepal mainstreamed the Welcome to School Initiative, which included an enrolment drive focusing on girls and disadvantaged groups and a push to improve teaching/learning environments so that children would complete primary school. Mechanisms involved community-level mobilisation, economic incentives (school supplies and scholarships) and expansion of capacity to meet demand (Shanker, Marian and Swimmer, 2015[21]). It led to a net increase in enrolment of 500,000 children in its first year alone, against an anticipated 160,000 and the campaign – supported by UNICEF - became a national annual event (UNICEF, 2007[22]).

Finally, it is worth pointing out that leaving no one behind is an issue everywhere. Inequality is just as central a political issue in rich countries as it is in poor ones. One way that donor countries can promote change is by demonstrating that they take the 2030 Agenda and its commitment to leave no one behind seriously at home.

And it should be done precisely because it is hard: breaking through to the next level of improvements in global well-being for humanity will be challenging. Leaving no one behind is integral to it.

Notes

1. The minimum consumption floor is the “typical level of living of the poorest stratum” of society (Ravaillon, 2015[23]).

2. Although it should also be noted that even with the planned scaling-up, this programme will reach only a third of those living in extreme poverty and the average transfer will be only half the amount needed to lift the typical poor household above the poverty line (Manuel et al., 2018[19]).

References


Diwakar, V. et al. (forthcoming), Child Poverty, Disasters, and Climate Change: Examining Relationships and Assessing Implications Over a Child’s Life Course, Overseas Development Institute, London. [17]


