



# Defining 'leave no one behind'

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## Key messages

- 'Leaving no one behind' means ending extreme poverty in all its forms, and reducing inequalities among both individuals (vertical) and groups (horizontal).
- Key to 'leave no one behind' is the prioritisation and fast-tracking of actions for the poorest and most marginalised people – known as progressive universalism. If instead, policy is implemented among better-off groups first and worst-off groups later, the existing gap between them is likely to increase.
- 'Leave no one behind' goes well beyond being just an anti-discrimination agenda; it is a recognition that expectations of trickle-down progress are naïve, and that explicit and pro-active attempts are needed to ensure populations at risk of being left behind are included from the start.
- For countries where high levels of absolute deprivations persist, an appropriate emphasis is likely to be ensuring that people living below the poverty line – in income terms or other dimensions of wellbeing – can attain minimum living standards.
- For countries where most people have attained minimum living standards, relative considerations will become more important, and a focus on closing gaps.

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## 1. Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are designed to be sufficiently ambitious to be genuinely transformational, while at the same time allowing each country scope to implement them as most relevant to their domestic context.

In this spirit, this briefing note does not seek to pin down a prescriptive definition of ‘leave no one behind’, a commitment central to the SDGs. Instead, it sets out broad parameters to offer governments and other implementers some concrete suggestions for approaches to take, and aims to help build greater understanding among donors as to what the ‘leave no one behind’ agenda entails.<sup>1</sup>

The concept appears in the SDG outcome document in the following form:

*‘As we embark on this great collective journey, we pledge that no one will be left behind. Recognizing that the dignity of the human person is fundamental, we wish to see the Goals and targets met for all nations and peoples and for all segments of society. And we will endeavor to reach the furthest behind first’ (UNGA Resolution, 2015).*

‘Leave no one behind’ aims to address two related concerns: ending absolute poverty – in all its forms, and ensuring that those who have been ‘left behind’ (in relative terms or absolute terms) can ‘catch up’ with those who have experienced greater progress. It also means stopping the group-based discrimination that has resulted in unequal outcomes for some disadvantaged or marginalised populations. And, as the UNGA resolution sets out, it is about prioritising and fast-tracking action for the furthest behind.

In part, ‘leave no one behind’ is an anti-discrimination agenda. But it also goes well beyond this. Indeed, it is a recognition that expecting progress to trickle-down the socioeconomic scale is naïve, and that explicit and pro-active attempts are needed to ensure populations at risk of being left behind are included from the start. For instance, people in northern Ghana are left behind in terms of access to health and education, not because of active discrimination but because they lack schools and health centres close to where they live – the result of the central government’s failure to allocate resources in line with need (Abdulai et al., forthcoming).

Despite its prominent positioning in the SDG declaration, ‘leave no one behind’ enters the political – and technical – discourse amidst a wide range of other important terms and concepts, such as the reduction of inequality and poverty (including multidimensional poverty). As such, there is a danger of it being perceived either as a concept too far to implement, or simply a synonym for these other terms, so that what is distinct and transformative about it is lost. This note seeks to help guard against just that.

## 2. What does ‘leave no one behind’ mean?

As described, the ‘leave no one behind’ approach captures three concepts that are critical to improving the welfare of societies: ending extreme poverty (in all its forms), reducing inequalities, and addressing discriminatory barriers, which could arise from geography or aspects of social identity. Tackling all three concepts will require the prioritisation and fast-tracking of action for those who are worst-off.

The aim to leave no one behind corrects a serious omission in the precursor to the SDGs, the Millennium Development Goals: an understanding that a focus on averages when setting development goals can mask serious problems. While significant advances have been made in reducing extreme deprivations in the past 20 years, the progress that has occurred has been unequally distributed, with significant numbers of people – and identity-based groups – making relatively few gains (Bhatkal et al., 2015). For example, average consumption has risen markedly since 1980, but the minimum consumption floor experienced by ‘the poorest stratum of society’ – approximately \$1.00 in 2011 purchasing power parity (PPP) – has changed only modestly (Ravallion, 2016).

This example refers to income poverty, but the same principle applies across the global goals. In analysing health status across 64 countries between 1990 and 2011, for example, Wagstaff et al. (2014) found that in nearly half, relative inequality rose, while in about a quarter, the poorest 40% regressed in absolute terms.

The approach of putting the ‘worst-off first’ is also known as progressive universalism.<sup>2</sup> If this approach is not followed – that is, if policy is implemented first among better-off groups and only later in the poorest or most marginalised ones, it is likely that the existing gap between the worst-off and best-off will increase. Should a drive for universal coverage then fall short of fully realising its goal, this gap solidifies, thereby entrenching further inequalities (Gwatkin and Ergo, 2011). Progressive universalism is a concept borrowed from the health sector, but it is relevant to most aspects of policy implementation.

The SDG outcomes document provides an illustrative list of the groups who are left behind.<sup>3</sup> These include: ‘...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’ (UNGA, 2015). Elsewhere, the text also refers to women and the income poor as marginalised.

Framing the agenda in this way implies the need to prioritise outcomes for a defined subsection of society, such as a particular caste or ethnic group like Scheduled Castes and Tribes in India. However, in many instances, the majority of a country’s population may be excluded. Take income poverty: in Madagascar, at least 82% of the population lives below the \$1.90-a-day extreme poverty line, while in Nigeria that figure is 52%.<sup>4</sup> This will be an undeniably heavy lift, but there are precedents for governments targeting extremely large groups of people for

action – including, for example, gender-based affirmative action policies such as stipends for getting girls into secondary school in Bangladesh,<sup>5</sup> or Ethiopia’s Productive Safety Net Programme, which covered some 10% of the country’s population and reduced poverty by 7% (Lenhardt et al., 2015).

### 3. Identifying and monitoring those ‘left behind’

Because ‘leave no-one behind’ is both an absolute and a relational concept, policy-makers will want to consider both absolute and relative deprivations in identifying which populations should be the focus of policy interventions, and how to measure progress. Of course, for policy-makers at the national level, the population they should target will depend on the specific context.

A first step, for all countries, should therefore be to undertake a detailed inventory – to ‘go beyond averages’ and identify:

- **Levels of deprivation**, emphasising the poorest among the poor – for example, by using both moderate and extreme poverty thresholds, poverty measures that assign an extra ‘weight’ to the depth or intensity of poverty,<sup>6</sup> and/or multidimensional measures that show the extent to which people or households are experiencing overlapping deprivations.<sup>7</sup> Many measures of poverty are focused on income, but it is also important to identify poverty lines in other dimensions such as education (UNESCO, 2010), health and nutrition (e.g., see Sumner, 2012).
- **The characteristics of deprived populations**, given that deprivation is often linked to aspects of social identity and/or geography.<sup>8</sup> Special attention should be paid to so-called ‘intersecting inequalities’ (Kabeer, 2010), whereby group characteristics combine to amplify the experience of deprivation – as in Bolivia, where ethnicity and place of residence were each found to explain around 25% of total inequality in women’s educational outcomes, but explained close to 40% when taken together (Lenhardt and Samman, 2015).

‘Leave no one behind’ is not just about ensuring the minimum standards of societies are met (though this is vital). It is an explicitly relational concept that requires enabling people and groups who are left behind to progress at a higher rate than those who are better off. The risk is that relative gains are unlikely to be sufficient to reduce absolute inequalities (Hoy, 2015)<sup>9</sup> but it is important to draw the trade-offs and the difficult policy choices they illuminate into relief so that governments can make the most appropriate choices.

Take the example of income poverty among Afro-Brazilian and White populations in Brazil (Rodriguez Takeuchi and Mariotti, 2016). Between 2004 and 2012, while the probability of being poor fell for both groups, Afro-Brazilians were still 1.6 times more as likely to be poor as the White population. In other words, although the

poverty of the Afro-Brazilian population was reduced, they remained left behind in relative terms.

This focus on both absolute and relative deprivations has different implications depending on country contexts and starting points.

For countries where **high levels of absolute deprivations persist**, an appropriate emphasis is likely to be ensuring people living below the poverty line – in income or in other dimensions of wellbeing – can attain minimum living standards, with an emphasis on the poorest of the poor.

For countries where **most people have attained minimum living standards**, relative considerations will become more important. And, in addition to measuring absolute deprivations, it will also be possible to identify the share of people who are poor, if not in absolute terms, then *relative to societal expectations* (Ravallion and Chen, 2011), and to focus on shrinking this gap. This emphasis on inequalities is important both intrinsically and for instrumental reasons: income inequality is linked with poorer health and education outcomes, a greater likelihood of crime and conflict, and social unrest (see Melamed and Samman, 2013).

### 4. Putting the left-behind first in practice

The need for disaggregated data to help identify who the left behind are and where they live has already received considerable attention, so we do not dwell upon it in this brief.<sup>10</sup> Instead, our focus is on additional key elements that are needed if countries are to put left-behind populations, or those at risk of being left behind, first:

- Understanding what marginalised groups themselves want, need and prioritise, and ensuring these preferences are reflected in policy.
- Focusing policies on places in which left-behind groups live, and on issues that are most likely to improve outcomes for them. ODI research suggests these include: service delivery (with a focus on health, education, social protection and connectivity); anti-discrimination policies; and institutional and legal reform (Stuart et al., 2016).
- Promoting inclusive economic growth – which, though not a prerequisite for a ‘leave no one behind’ agenda nor sufficient in itself, can make it easier for governments to direct resources and give excluded people the chance to participate in and benefit from economic activity.
- Reducing inequality in all its forms, including inequalities of income or wealth, which are often the most pronounced but should not overshadow the need for equity in other dimensions like health, education and political participation, which may be more politically palatable. Importantly, reductions in income inequality can lead to higher and more durable economic growth (Ostry et al., 2014).
- Conducting an *ex ante* distributional analysis of all policy to assess impacts on the poorest and most marginalised (see OECD, 2007).

- Targeting additional supports, such as transport subsidies, to allow people access to services even when they are universally supplied.
- ‘Overweighting’ outcomes for the left-behind when assessing results, impacts and value for money, rendering equity as being at least as important as efficiency in this process.
- Ensuring that domestic and international public finance is channeled to the areas where those left behind live. For instance, in Kenya, a redistributive formula for allocation to counties means that more public finance is spent in poorer areas (Blampied et al., 2016). On the donor side, however, aid is poorly correlated with poverty in some countries – such as in Afghanistan and Bangladesh, where aid appears to be spent in the regions with the least need (Desai and Greenhill, 2017).

## 5. Conclusion

This briefing note focuses primarily on definitional aspects of ‘leave no one behind’ – what it means and how it can be achieved – but the decision to focus on the poorest and worst-off is inherently political. It will require a government and its donors to take a conscious and ambitious decision to do so.

Some governments may be less willing to tackle identity-based disadvantage, as in those countries where ethnic, religious, and sexual-minority groups are consciously marginalised. In such cases, the global nature of the SDGs will be particularly important: the international scrutiny and pressure that they bring will make it harder for governments to relegate the needs of significant percentages of their populations (Bhatkal et al., 2015). As evidenced by the current political turmoil in countries around the world, ignoring the concerns of the left-behind would appear to be unwise in the extreme.

Whatever the political levels of change, it will be important not to lose in implementation that which is unique about the ‘leave no one behind’ concept. A singular focus on eliminating poverty, even in a multidimensional way, may not be adequate to allow everyone a life of dignity.

### Box 1: Universal health coverage – what putting the last first looks like

When Julio Frenk took office as Minister for Health in Mexico in 2000, more than half the population, including 2.5 million of the poorest families, had to pay for any health care beyond basic community and preventative health. This meant that four million households – most of them poor and uninsured – were hit by catastrophic annual health costs.

Over the course of the next three years, Frenk introduced Seguro Popular, a public insurance system that was one of the largest health reforms of any country over the previous two decades. He identifies three key stages to the reform.

First, he built a system of national health accounts, which identified the inequities in health spending. Second, in 2003, a law was passed that enshrined the principle of progressive universalism in the new system: ‘The law was very specific that it would help the rural, indigenous and poor first, before anyone else. It also set out that this was an ethical obligation as well as a political one,’ he says.

The third element was monitoring: ‘There was an obligation to present reports every six months to the legislature at the national level, and to the public. An annual citizen’s health forum was set up. The outside pressure on the government to deliver was very high. This meant there was always an additional incentive to keep adding those who had been excluded.’ Subsequent analysis linked the programme to a 23% reduction in catastrophic health spending, and concluded that Seguro Popular was reaching the poor and marginalised.

*Sources: Stuart et al. (2016).*

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## Notes

- 1 Importantly, the concept is also applied at the international level – ‘leaving no country behind’ – particularly with reference to fragile and conflict-affected states (see Chandy, 2017). This note, however, focuses on the agenda in specific national contexts.
- 2 In a similar vein, the term ‘progressive realization’ is also used in the context of prioritising the access of poor, marginalised and disadvantaged populations to basic economic, social and cultural rights under national and international agreements (see OHCHR, 2008).
- 3 This illustration of left-behind groups does not come in the paragraph that explicitly refers to leave no one behind (paragraph 4), but rather that which deals with vulnerability. As we state above, there are also other marginalised groups referred to throughout the text.
- 4 World Bank PovcalNet data, available online at <http://iresearch.worldbank.org/PovcalNet>.
- 5 See the Female Secondary School Assistance Project in Bangladesh ([http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTEMPowerment/Resources/14828\\_Bangladesh-web.pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTEMPowerment/Resources/14828_Bangladesh-web.pdf)).
- 6 For example, the FGT-1 (depth) and FGT-2 (severity) measures (see Foster et al., 2010) and the ‘intensity’ component of the Multidimensional Poverty Index (Alkire and Santos, 2014).
- 7 Multidimensional indices include the Multidimensional Poverty Index (Alkire and Santos, 2014) and the Individual Deprivation Measure (Bessell, 2015).
- 8 For example, recent studies have shown that rural areas house 80% of the world’s poor (World Bank, 2016: 5) and that one third of poor people in the developing world are children under the age of 13 (Olinto et al., 2013).
- 9 Per Hoy (2015), reducing absolute inequalities within a society would require that the incomes of bottom 40% grow around twice the country average.
- 10 For instance, on data, see Stuart et al., 2015.

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