14 July 2017

Briefing note

# Four actions to drive and deliver SDG progress: lessons from ODI research

## Low-income/lower middle-income countries

Susan Nicolai and Moizza B. Sarwar

Key findings

- **Urgently accelerate early action on nine goals where progress is slow:** To achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), low-income and lower middle-income countries (LICs and LMICs) need to urgently accelerate their trajectory by multiples of current rates.
- **Focus on domestic policies that contribute to leaving no one behind:** LICs/LMICs can achieve quick SDG wins by undertaking specific social policy interventions, increasing information availability, and through institutional and legal reforms.
- **Strengthen public revenue and target financial resources to those most in need:** Increased public revenue generation in LICs/LMICs, alongside better directing of donor aid to marginalised groups and regions, will accelerate SDG progress.
- **Invest in data infrastructure and reach:** To ensure availability of disaggregated data on marginalised populations, LICs/LMICs should invest in their national statistics offices and in expanding respondents for surveys.

## Summary

With their universal agenda, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) require reform in low-income and lower middle-income countries (LICs and LMICs) as well as middle- and high-income countries (MICs and HICs). The SDGs will not be met in any of these contexts if progress continues to elude the poorest and most marginalised people. The longer governments take to act, the greater the difficulty of meeting the targets for everyone by 2030.

This policy brief provides an overview of some of the most relevant Overseas Development Institute (ODI) research on actions needed in LICs/LMICs to accelerate progress on SDGs, with an emphasis on the leave no one behind agenda (LNOB). We highlight SDG targets that need progress at multiples of current rates for these countries and then set out recommendations in the areas of policy, finance and data that LICs/LMICs can undertake to meet the SDGs by 2030.

## 1. To achieve the SDGs, LICs and LMICs need to urgently accelerate their trajectory by multiples of current rates

ODI research (Nicolai et al., 2016a, b and c) shows that a few LIC/LMICs are on track to achieve certain targets under the SDGs at their current rates of progress. For example, Ethiopia's economy has grown at an average of 11% a year over the past ten years and, while there are doubts that growth will continue at this rate, if it does, the country will achieve SDG 8's target of sustaining at least 7% per annum GDP growth by 2030 (Nicolai et al., 2016a). In El Salvador, SDG 10 on income inequality looks to be on track, with growth for the bottom 40% of the population at least two-and a-half percentage points faster than the average. Meanwhile, Laos has recorded commendable progress on SDG 6's target of increasing sanitation access and is set to achieve universal access by 2030 at current rates (Nicolai et al., 2016b).

However, most LICs/LMICs will need to speed up their progress by two to four times their current rate to achieve the SDGs targets in many areas. Nine targets reviewed fall into this group: ending extreme poverty (SDG 1), eliminating hunger (SDG 2), reducing maternal mortality (SDG 3), secondary-school completion (SDG 4), ending child marriage (SDG 5), universal access to sanitation (SDG 6), universal access to energy (SDG 7), halting deforestation (SDG 15) and mobilising domestic resources (SDG 17).

For example, Kenya, Nigeria and Honduras must accelerate their current rate of progress by two to three times to achieve SDG 1.1 on ending extreme poverty. On achieving universal secondary education, India, Benin and Bangladesh should quicken their pace by three to four times the current rate to realise SDG 4.1. Similarly, Ethiopia, Indonesia and Guatemala need to progress on average around three to four times faster than current trends to meet SDG 15.2, the target on halting deforestation.

The SDG outcome document specifies that none of the goals will be considered met if they are not met for all segments of society, implying that a focus on the poorest and most marginalised people is essential for further progress.

## 2. LICs/LMICs can achieve quick SDG wins by undertaking specific social policy interventions, increasing information availability, and through institutional and legal reforms

Early action on the SDGs is crucial to leaving no one behind, and delay puts it further out of reach. For example, to eliminate ultra-poverty (people living on less than $1 a day) in sub-Saharan Africa by 2030, a reduction of nearly 10.4% (compounded yearly) would be needed, which is almost twice the 5.4% average rate of reduction observed over 2000-2012 (Stuart et al., 2016).

ODI research sets out a critical path to leave no one behind built on the evidence of what people say they want and what works to allow people to lift themselves out of extreme vulnerability (Stuart et al., 2016). Interventions in social policy arenas are particularly important for addressing the needs of the poorest and most marginalised people, as is increasing information for the poorest and institutional and legal reform (Stuart et al., 2016). Many of the countries in this income category will have relatively underdeveloped policies and implementation on the above three areas, although not all – that is, some countries will already be further along and we highlight policy actions from these countries as evidence of actions LICs/LMICs can take up rapidly.

In terms of social policy, LICs/LMICs can quickly make health services free at the point of delivery and improve the inclusion and quality of universal health coverage. For instance, in April 2010, Sierra Leone introduced free health care for children under five and pregnant and lactating mothers (Stuart et al., 2016). Planning for this started just six months earlier, with the launch of a strategy to guide the policy. In the education sector, countries can create ways to enable previously excluded children to attend school. For example, in the Gambia, a special allowance was announced in 2006 to draw teachers to schools more than three kilometres from a main road and, by just 2007, 24% of teachers in numerous regions had bid for a transfer to hardship posts, with negligible numbers requesting transfers in the opposite direction (Stuart et al., 2016). LICs/LMICs can also pilot social protection programmes for scaling up to national systems such as Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Programme, which combines public works and a direct transfer for those unable to work.

It was launched in 2005, and by 2009 the programme was already reaching 7.5 million people (Stuart et al., 2016). Further, LICs/LMICs can adopt policies focused on connectivity, aiming to ratchet these up over time to ensure historically poor areas are connected to the rest of the country. In Senegal the Rural Electrification Senegal project – which targeted 191 target villages in rural areas – increased the number of people in these villages with access to electricity more than five-fold over a three-year period (Stuart et al., 2016).

Policy measures to raise public awareness on significant issues are also key. Governments in LICs/LMICs can conduct public information campaigns to change opinions or reduce discrimination and exclusion. Here too there can be quick wins. For example, the national centre for parasite control and the School Health Department in Cambodia launched a widely successful countrywide health campaign as part of its strategy to eliminate Neglected Tropical Diseases such as soil-transmitted helminth (parasitic worms). The campaign not only distributed necessary drugs at the school level (where the infection was most common) but also trained teachers to impart preventative health education on the importance of sanitation and hygiene. According to key informants interviewed, the strategy worked as children communicated information back to their families and wider communities (Pose, 2014).

In the area of institutional reform, LICs/LMICs can rapidly ensure balanced representation in key institutions such as the army, civil service, parliament and judiciary, and support legal reforms strengthening equity. For instance, in 2007, Nepal's interim constitution provided new quotas for members of lower castes and women in the civil service, the police and the army, women held one-third of seats in the Constituent Assembly formed a year later, including traditionally marginalised Tarai Dalit women. As of November 2015, 29% of Constituent Assembly members were women (176 out of 598) (Stuart et al., 2016).

While the examples above show evidence of fast implementation, some LICs/LMICs have the right policies in place, but implementation is not happening. ODI analysis of Kenya and Nepal's pro-poor policies in the health sector have shown that both countries possess a framework of rules and policies that align them with the commitment to leave no one behind (Blampied et al., 2017), but in practice, financing shortfalls, data gaps and political games often work against the interests of marginalised people and threaten the achievement of LNOB.

## 3. Increased public revenue generation in LICs/LMICs, alongside better directing of donor aid to marginalised groups and regions, will accelerate SDG progress

Both public finance and aid will play an important role in reaching those left farthest behind. An analysis by ODI comparing resource requirements (Greenhill et al., 2015) for funding universal health coverage, education and social assistance – three key policy areas for achieving the leave no one behind commitment as stated above – with potential government revenues found that many LICs/LMICs face a large financing gap in very low-income countries, with a total gap of $84bn across all countries.

Here too there are possible quick wins: ODI research finds that even in the poorest countries in sub-Saharan Africa, it is possible to increase tax revenues by 0.5 to 2% in one to three years (and by 2 to 3.5% over periods of five to 10 years) (Stuart et al., 2016).

There are also examples of LICs/LMICs that have allocated public expenditure in line with the LNOB agenda. For example, in Kenya, the Equitable Share grant seeks to improve resource allocation to counties, including a guarantee that at least 15% of revenues will be allocated to counties according to principles including: developmental and other needs; economic disparities within and among counties; and the need for affirmative action in respect of disadvantaged areas and groups (Blampied et al., 2017).

However, ODI research looking at sub-national aid allocation found that, among four countries examined, only two (Nigeria and Honduras) had a positive, statistically significant relationship between either general aid and poverty or health aid and health access – in Afghanistan and Bangladesh, data show that aid has not been reaching the poorest and neediest areas (Desai and Greenhill, forthcoming). Improvements in the delivery of international aid will be crucial for addressing the mismatch between need and allocation both in sectors and geographic areas. Partnerships by donors should include not just the central government but move beyond to encompass both sub-national levels of government and civil society organisations working with marginalised groups and areas (Greenhill, 2016).

## 4. To ensure availability of disaggregated data on marginalised populations, LICs/LMICs should invest in their national statistics offices (NSOs) and in expanding respondents for surveys

There are significant disparities across the globe in progress both between and within countries; LICs/LMICs are no exception. Ethnicity, for example, is a crucial factor in determining whether someone is likely to benefit from development gains. However disaggregated data is worryingly lacking (Stuart et al., 2015), and the very populations who are likely to be marginalised and very poor are those most likely to be left out of household surveys, such as slum dwellers, and those living in insecure areas (ibid). An ODI study (Stuart et al., 2016) found that of the national development plans in 39 LICs/LMICs, only 67% recognised people living with HIV and AIDS, 56% recognised ethnic minorities and/or indigenous people and 15% listed lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people as marginalised.

Governments need to invest initially in data to identify the groups furthest behind on their priority targets. Household surveys should be expanded by including non-traditional households and others overlooked by current surveys and embracing big data analytics (Stuart et al., 2016). Further ODI research in Nepal and Kenya has shown that policy and monitoring would benefit enormously by including questions that capture the needs of marginalised people specifically (e.g. patterns of land use by women) and the use of sampling frames that allow disaggregated analysis (Blampied et al., 2017).

For NSOs to succeed in collecting and using data for the poorest, national governments and donors need to invest in their capacity and autonomy. For years, NSOs in LICs/LMICs have been under-resourced, and this has had clear implications for their ability to collect quality data (Stuart et al., 2015). For instance, in Malawi and Mali, fewer than 20% of staff members had had any training in statistics, and there was no training plan in place (ibid). Often donor behaviour can undermine coordinated country-led data collection exacerbating gaps in data on the poorest (ibid). Stymied by the absence of domestically generated data, donors (and NGOs) commission surveys that answer their monitoring and evaluation questions at a time convenient for their own budget cycle. This can occur at the expense of domestic statistical capacity, as staff from NSOs are commonly hired to conduct the surveys as consultants, undermining the already-stretched capacity of the NSOs (Stuart et al., 2015). NSOs need to focus on improving the country's civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) to not only avail the government of a comprehensive overview of its population but also to ensure that poorest are in possession of state documents that allow them access to state services. They should also experiment with new forms of data.

In addition, LIC/LMIC governments and donors can therefore further the data revolution by:

- requesting major internationally comparable surveys, such as the DHS, MICS, and LSMS, be implemented and include questions that are relevant to marginalised populations,
- improving the collection of civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS), and
- experimenting with linking survey and administrative data, and with big data.

# References


Blampied, C. et al. (2017) Leaving no one behind in the health sector: an SDG stocktake in Kenya and Nepal. London: Overseas Development Institute.

Desai, H. and Greenhill, R. (forthcoming) Aid allocation within countries: does it go to areas left behind? Draft as of 15th June 2017. London: Overseas Development Institute.

Greenhill, R. (2016) Where next for development effectiveness? Leaving no one behind. London: Overseas Development Institute.

Greenhill, R., Carter, P., Hoy, C. & Manuel, M. (2015) Financing the future: how international public finance should fund a global social compact to eradicate poverty. London: Overseas Development Institute.

Nicolai, S., Bhatkal, T., Hoy, C. & Aedy, T. (2016a) Projecting progress: the SDGs in Latin America and the Caribbean. London: Overseas Development Institute.

Nicolai, S., Bhatkal, T., Hoy, C. & Aedy, T. (2016b) Projecting progress: the SDGs in Asia and the Pacific. London: Overseas Development Institute.

Nicolai, S., Bhatkal, T., Hoy, C. & Aedy, T. (2016c) Projecting progress: the SDGs in sub-Saharan Africa. London: Overseas Development Institute.

Pose, R.R. (2014) Neglected Tropical Diseases: the Case of Cambodia. London: Overseas Development Institute.

Stuart, E., Bird, K., Bhatkal, T., Greenhill, R., Lally, S., Rabinowitz, G., ... & Lynch, A. (2016) Leaving No One Behind: A critical path for the first 1,000 days of the Sustainable Development Goals. Overseas Development Institute, London. Accessed at www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/10692.pdf

Stuart, E., Samman, E., Avis, W. & Berliner, T. (2015) The data revolution: Finding the missing millions. Overseas Development Institute.

Overseas Development Institute
203 Blackfriars Road
London SE1 8NJ
Tel +44 (0)20 7922 0300
Fax +44 (0)20 7922 0399
www.odi.org
info@odi.org

ODI is the UK's leading independent think tank on international development and humanitarian issues. Readers are encouraged to reproduce material for their own publications, as long as they are not being sold commercially. As copyright holder, ODI requests due acknowledgement and a copy of the publication. For online use, we ask readers to link to the original resource on the ODI website. The views presented in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of ODI or our partners.

© Overseas Development Institute 2017. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial Licence (CC BY-NC 4.0).