Leaving no one behind
How the SDGs can bring real change

The commitment to 'leave no one behind' has been a key feature of all the discussions on the post-2015 agenda and the SDGs. The idea that 'no goal should be met unless it is met for everyone' is well established in the rhetoric around the new goals. In theory of course, this means ensuring that every individual achieves the full package of rights and opportunities the SDGs express. However, what this means in practice is still not clear.

Experience with the current MDGs, and the target on primary education which was framed in universal terms, demonstrates that simply stating that the target must be met by all is not enough. Despite a target which aimed for access to education for all children, progress in education has not been equally shared since 2000, and some groups have been left behind. There have been concerns that the target created incentives for governments to focus on 'low hanging fruit' rather than those most in need. More detail is needed on what 'leave no one behind' means for implementation and review, to define the actions needed and provide the right framework to monitor success.

New work from ODI shows who is being left behind, with a number of implications for the SDGs:

- Economic growth is the main driver of sustainable development. But economic growth that leaves no one behind can deliver sustainable development more quickly. If all groups had benefitted equally from growth since 2000, extreme poverty would be eliminated by 2030.
- Disadvantages add up to create groups that are doubly discriminated against: for example, women from ethnic minorities have seen the least progress on key MDGs. The economic potential of millions of people is being wasted.
- Inequality happens behind the front door: children in the same household can have different outcomes, depending on gender.

Image: Pupils at Matunduzi School, Malawi. © Erik Törner.

Despite a target which aimed for access to education for all children, progress in education has not been equally shared since 2000, and some groups have been left behind.

'Leave no one behind' could be hard-wired into the agreement in different ways

In the outcome document for September 2015:

- A commitment by governments to identify the groups being left furthest behind by progress on different goals in their countries within the first three years after the SDGs are agreed.
- A commitment to hold a high level global summit on 'leave no one behind' at the end of that period to identify common challenges and how they will be tackled.
- A requirement for the major data providers (including governments, the major household survey programmes, international institutions and the private sector) to commit to providing data that enables effective policy making and the tracking of the relevant inequalities.

Review requirements for national governments:

- At the global summit on 'leave no one behind', identify 'stepping stone' targets at national level to reduce inequalities during the lifetime of the SDGs.
- As part of regular reporting on progress on the SDGs, governments should identify the rate of progress on each target for the groups that are the furthest behind (for example, women in rural areas, or households in informal settlements, depending on the individual target).

What this could look like: progress on education

The target: By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes.

Means of implementation for first years of the SDGs:

- In the first three years, governments to identify the groups furthest behind on the education target. ODI research suggests that in many cases this will be poor women from ethnic minorities, and that children within the same household might be treated differently in terms of access to education.
- Governments and other data providers to publish data on completion rates for girls and boys, and for different ethnicities and regions.
- Governments to make commitments at the Leave No One Behind Summit to increase completion rates among the most excluded groups by more than the average to reduce inequalities.
- In order to achieve this, governments and others would be likely to need specific programmes to boost school attendance among those groups and households with the lowest completion rates, such as through targeted conditional cash transfers or through mentoring or additional grants, and to ensure that budget allocations for state-funded education are greatest where there is most need.

Review and follow up to ensure that the challenges identified are being addressed:

- Governments to report regularly on national figures for school completion.
- Governments to report on progress for the most excluded groups and achievement of the 'stepping stone' targets.
- Governments and others to regularly provide disaggregated data for girls and boys, for each ethnic group, for different regions, and for girls and boys from each ethnic group in each region, to assess progress on the multiple inequalities which are the key barrier to progress.