



Summary

# **‘Leave no one behind’ – five years into Agenda 2030**

## **Guidelines for turning the concept into action**

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Cover photo: A young girl walks to school in Ghana. © Arne Hoel / The World Bank

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# Executive summary

The Covid-19 pandemic has stalled global progress on many of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including ending extreme poverty by 2030. Inequality is rising and hard-won gains in poverty reduction are being reversed, in rich and poor countries alike. The pandemic has also shone new light on long-standing barriers to progress in reducing inequalities – notably the concentration of persisting deprivations in groups who share certain identities (e.g. age, race or ethnicity, having a disability), places of residence (e.g. remote areas) and/or experiences (e.g. forced migration).

The ‘leave no one behind’ (LNOB) agenda rose to prominence as the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) era closed. It was increasingly recognised that concentrating policy on outcomes defined by national averages concealed disparities affecting the poorest groups. The LNOB focus seeks to redress this failure by making progress for these poorest groups central to the realisation of the SDGs. Countries pledged through Agenda 2030 ‘that no one will be left behind ... 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’. This report discusses the interpretation of the principle to date, and how to advance the agenda.

Take-up of LNOB has been highest among international actors, notably within the UN system, and among bilateral donors and civil society organisations (CSOs). Among national governments, commitment varies. With some notable exceptions, our examination of the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) countries submit to the UN High Level Political Forum (HLPF) each July suggests weak overall engagement with LNOB and little prioritisation of domestic policy concerns to reflect it.

The LNOB agenda – policy, data and finance – differs between middle-income countries (MICs) and ‘left-behind countries’, where a majority of

people experience absolute deprivations. Three distinctive features of the agenda in MICs are its insistent focus on the poorest, its call to narrow the gaps between disadvantaged groups and the rest of society, and its prioritisation of those furthest behind in policy-makers’ attention. In this report, we propose an evidence-based approach by constructing illustrative LNOB profiles using publicly available household surveys for three MICs: Brazil (2002–2015), Nepal (2006–2016) and Nigeria (2008–2018). We illustrate key concepts and methods selectively for several SDG indicators: monetary and multidimensional poverty; stunting and child mortality; educational attainment and learning; interventions to support maternal and child health; and income inequality.

The evidence from these countries shows how LNOB can be interpreted in very different national contexts: reasonably inclusive development progress in Brazil; rapid progress coupled with some evidence of narrowing disparities in Nepal; and stagnation amid growing disparities in life chances in Nigeria. Our analysis seeks to distinguish three interpretations of LNOB that become increasingly stronger: 1) all groups make absolute progress (and may meet the SDG target); 2) in addition, disadvantaged groups progress at least as quickly as the national average; 3) in addition, absolute inequalities in life chances between the most and least disadvantaged groups close. When considering so-called ‘basic capabilities’ – including being nourished and surviving early childhood – we argue that eliminating absolute gaps is essential to equalise life chances, while reducing prevailing inequalities is integral for other capabilities.

LNOB profiles can be generated from currently available data by computing simple descriptive statistics that show average levels of attainment and rates of change among different groups, and how these evolve over time. We



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introduce summary measures of group inequality and a decomposition analysis that helps explain how group differences contribute to inequality levels and changes. In so doing, we consider the overlap in group-based differences, illustrating how belonging to more than one disadvantaged group can amplify poverty-related outcomes, and exploring more rigorously the impact of interactions among different aspects of identity.

Past policies on group-based inequality call attention to the need for inclusive human development, as well as policies that emphasise the needs of the most disadvantaged groups. We highlight three elements of such an approach:

- **Progressive universalism**, which reprioritises the poorest groups in both the allocation of policy resources and in the timeline for expansion of programmes to the whole population.
- **Anti-discrimination measures**, including positive discrimination in education, the labour market and political institutions.
- **Recognition of intersectionality** to ensure that government welfare policies cover all population groups; we contrast the possibilities offered by ‘universal plus’ strategies, such as universal basic income (UBI) alongside additional supports for disadvantaged groups, and those targeting the ultra-poor through a bundle of linked supports.

Data is often cited as a constraint to LNOB, but we demonstrate that there often exists considerable data that can be re-purposed for LNOB profiling, and that the data MICs routinely collect offers a reasonable foundation for an LNOB agenda that can be refined as statistical systems improve. Above all, the need for better data should not inhibit action. We highlight existing initiatives that collect and compile available data on left-behind groups, and potential ‘quick wins’ in terms of generating additional evidence.

Our financing discussion contrasts MICs’ capacity to afford universal policy support with actual spending. Fiscal affordability is apparent through a review of several high-performing countries’ investments in health and education,

which exceed both international commitments and assessments of the costs of basic universal service provision. We outline guidelines for domestic resource mobilisation their experiences suggest. But we also discuss evident disparities: left-behind groups and areas often receive less than better-off communities, despite evidence of greater need and potentially higher returns from such investment.

## Recommendations

Our recommendations span concepts, evidence, policy and future research.

### Concepts

- Interrogate further the relevance and use of the LNOB approach as a means of bridging debates about vertical and horizontal inequalities and links between inequality and poverty.
- Clarify the insights that an LNOB focus adds to well-established debates around social exclusion, poverty dynamics and chronic poverty.

### Evidence

- Bring together existing evidence and invest further in constructing:
  - A centralised repository that contains an inventory of datasets, indicators, methodological work and practitioners’ knowledge and advisory notes, to advance the identification and measurement of LNOB.
  - An evaluation database and meta-evaluations on ‘what works, for whom, where?’.
  - A compilation of ‘political resources’, such as the human rights basis and foundations for LNOB for use by governments and CSOs; case studies on political economy; and evaluations of VNRs (inclusions and omissions, quality considerations, etc.).
- Invest in ‘quick wins’ to increase the evidence base on left-behind groups, particularly through making administrative data accessible and citizen-generated initiatives

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that collect community-level data and use it to hold policy-makers to account.

- Raise awareness of what we already know about which groups are most at risk of being left behind in each region or country, or within each SDG goal area. This would ideally take the form of a recurrent UN-sponsored report that explores different approaches to applying the LNOB concept across the world, what effects it has had and what would be an ‘acceptable’ level of progress by 2030.

### Policy

- Embed LNOB concerns in national and international policy processes:
  - Review tools and rankings intended to facilitate an assessment of the impact of fiscal systems on vertical and horizontal inequalities and poverty, to identify those best suited to evaluate the distributional impact of reform on the most disadvantaged groups or areas and to benchmark countries’ policies relative to one another.
  - The HLPF process could support a track allowing countries to report on LNOB implementation through a dedicated VNR section and a corresponding HLPF session

that requires countries to identify left-behind groups, outline policy responses and acknowledge populations missing from data and programming.

- The HLPF could encourage countries to share assessments of left-behind groups among their own populations and CSOs, thereby sparking public deliberation that can drive change at national level.

### Further research needs

- Additional analysis to identify groups most at risk of being left behind and where progress has been achieved; and dissemination to stimulate public deliberation and inform policy-making.
- Generate a richer understanding of the challenges and trade-offs inherent in the LNOB agenda.
- Interrogate how countries can make LNOB fundamental in ‘building back better’ from Covid-19.
- LNOB in left-behind countries low-income countries (LICs), least developed countries (LDCs), fragile and conflict-affected states) should be a new focus and priority for future work.



**Evidence.  
Ideas.  
Change.**

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