



Leave No One Behind

Taking Action to Combat Global Poverty and Inequality

By Molly Elgin-Cossart September 18, 2015

We should ensure that no person – regardless of ethnicity, gender, geography, disability, race or other status – is denied universal human rights and basic economic opportunities ... We can be the first generation in human history to end hunger and ensure that every person achieves a basic standard of wellbeing. There can be no excuses.

— High-level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda

The past several decades have witnessed unprecedented levels of global growth and a mass exodus of people out of chronic poverty: poverty rates have been cut by more than half since 1990; child mortality rates have fallen by more than 30 percent since 2000; and new HIV infections declined by 38 percent between 2001 and 2013.¹

As the world has become more globalized, people, goods, knowledge, and capital flow across borders as never before, bringing with them increased innovation, productivity gains, and improved standards of living. Yet, still too many people have been left behind, trapped in cycles of poverty, disease, and injustice. And while there has been much progress, it has been uneven due to the ongoing and universal challenge of inequality and injustice, which hamper development efforts. Even the United States has witnessed rising levels of inequality and declining levels of socioeconomic mobility, which underscores the fact that no country is immune.

There are, however, signs of change. Pope Francis recently decreed, “just as the commandment ‘Thou shalt not kill’ sets a clear limit in order to safeguard the value of human life, today we also have to say ‘Thou shalt not’ to an economy of exclusion and inequality.”²

Encouragingly, the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals, or SDGs—a set of voluntary global goals to end extreme poverty and bring about sustainable development—seek to tackle exclusion. This marks a significant departure from the predecessor to the SDGs, the Millennium Development Goals, or MDGs, Development experts criticized the MDGs for focusing too much on averages and aggregates, rather than on those at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder.³

Enshrined in the SDGs is the principle that every person, including the poorest and most marginalized, should reap the benefits of global prosperity and freedom. From Des Moines to Dakar and from Milwaukee to Manila, everyone deserves the chance to survive and thrive.

While this lofty rhetoric is inspirational and sounds promising, it will not necessarily lead to change. The challenge is to maintain and build political momentum to support these aims. To this end, global leaders should commit to “leave no one behind” and back that commitment with action.

When global leaders convene at the end of September at the United Nations summit for the adoption of the post-2015 development agenda⁴—which will possibly be the largest gathering of heads of state and governments ever—they should commit to put the simple yet powerful principle to leave no one behind at the heart of the agenda.

Everyone deserves a fair shot at life

Ensuring that no one—no child, no woman, no man—is left behind in the race toward a prosperous, globalized world is the defining challenge of the 21st century. Through the SDGs, the concept of ensuring that everyone has a fair chance is gaining new relevance. It is a concept steeped in a wealth of previous thought, including achieving equality of opportunity and providing basic needs.⁵ Moreover, the leave no one behind concept embraces the capabilities approach to development, which treats the achievement of well-being as of the highest moral importance and specifies a broad conception of well-being beyond basic needs, as people’s real opportunities to do and be what they want.⁶

Leave no one behind is a challenge that every nation must address, from the world’s wealthiest countries to its most impoverished. Inequality persists at individual and group levels in every country.⁷ Today, where a child is born and into what circumstances too often determines her or his life chances.

Consider these examples:

- In Vietnam, a child born into the majority Kinh, or Viet, ethnic group is three and a half times less likely to die in his or her first five years than a child from other Vietnamese ethnic groups.⁸
- Urban Nigerians are one and half times more likely to have access to clean drinking water compared to Nigerians living in the country’s rural regions.⁹
- In the United States, a black woman is four times more likely to die in childbirth than a white woman.¹⁰

The concept of leave no one behind—giving everyone a fair chance in life—is at the core of broader goals on sustainable development. It starts with establishing a global minimum standard of well-being that allows the world’s most marginalized people a fair chance at a productive and rewarding life. And it can be built upon with more and broader actions to establish a foundation for broader sustainable development.

Giving everyone a fair opportunity to thrive and prosper is both a moral imperative and an economic necessity. According to the Growth Commission—a group of leaders from government, business, and academia chaired by Nobel Prize winning economist Michael Spence—sustained economic growth is tied to fundamental fairness, which is the ability of more and more people in an economy to benefit from growth. In its study of 13 economies that had grown at an average rate of 7 percent per year or more for 25 years or longer since 1950, the Growth Commission found that, “growth strategies cannot succeed without a commitment to equality of opportunity, giving everyone a fair chance to enjoy the fruits of growth.”¹¹

This September, the U.N. summit to adopt the global goals provides an opportunity for leaders around the world to commit to putting the concept of leave no one behind at the core of the global sustainable development agenda. Importantly, they should set out to define exactly what is meant by leave no one behind so that the world will know when it succeeds in this mission. As part of that effort, leaders should commit, through a joint statement or charter, to the following actions to achieve the goal of leaving no one behind:

- Adopt a people-centered approach, one in which no one—regardless of ethnicity, gender, geography, disability, race, or other status—is denied universal human rights and basic economic opportunities
- Focus first on those furthest behind, including:
 - Taking immediate action to empower excluded groups and individuals
 - Establishing a global minimum standard of well-being for the world’s poorest and most vulnerable
 - Tracking progress for all relevant economic and social groups and at person levels through disaggregated data¹²
 - Providing appropriate social protections to help people build resilience; that is to say, the means and resources to adapt to life’s uncertainties
- Measure success in terms of outcomes for people, rather than in inputs—such as the amount of money spent on a project—as well as in terms of national or global outcomes
- Ensure universal action to hold every country accountable at home and abroad to make sure that no one is left behind. Countries can define specific actions based on the needs and circumstances of their people.

Business as usual is not good enough

Given the economic progress witnessed in the past few decades, it is tempting to think that continued growth will bring with it prosperity for all. But that is not the case. As the Inclusive Prosperity Commission, convened by the Center for American Progress, has argued, “nations need to ensure both that economic growth takes place and that it is broadly shared.”¹³

For developing countries, growth alone will not help their most vulnerable citizens escape poverty.¹⁴ If trends continue, by 2030, almost 400 million people—or potentially many more—will still live on less than \$1.25 a day;¹⁵ around 650 million people will be undernourished;¹⁶ and nearly 1 billion people will be without energy access.¹⁷

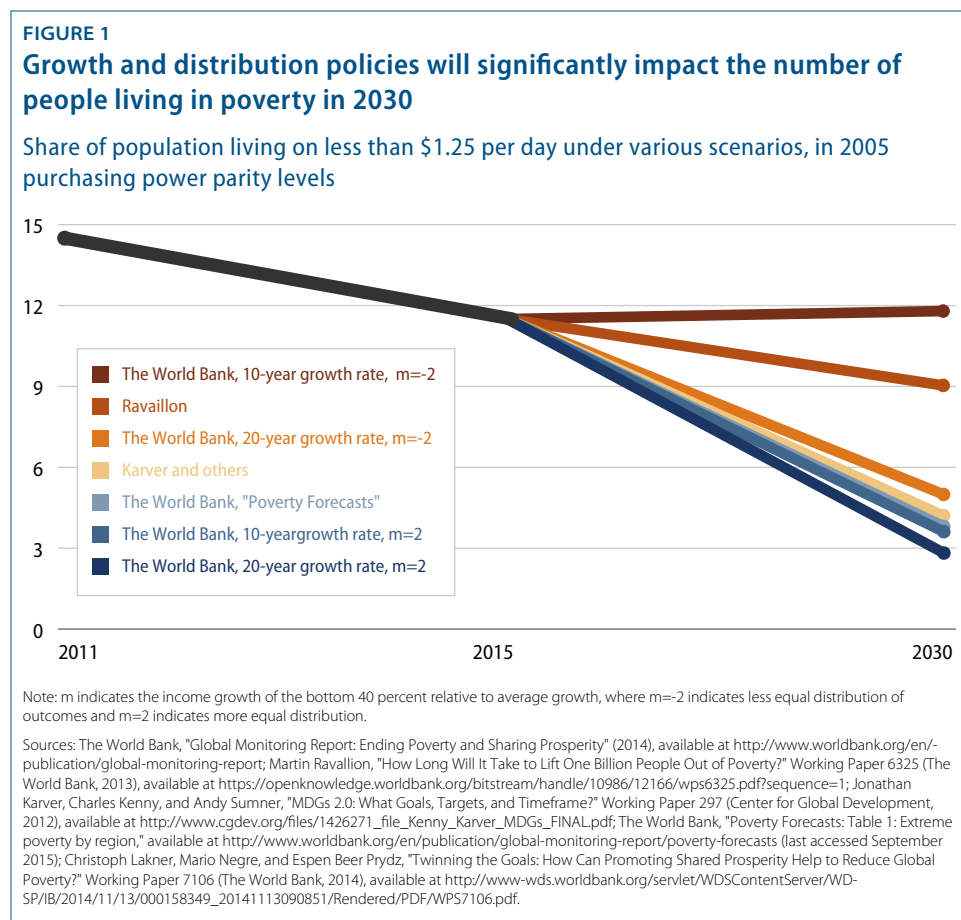
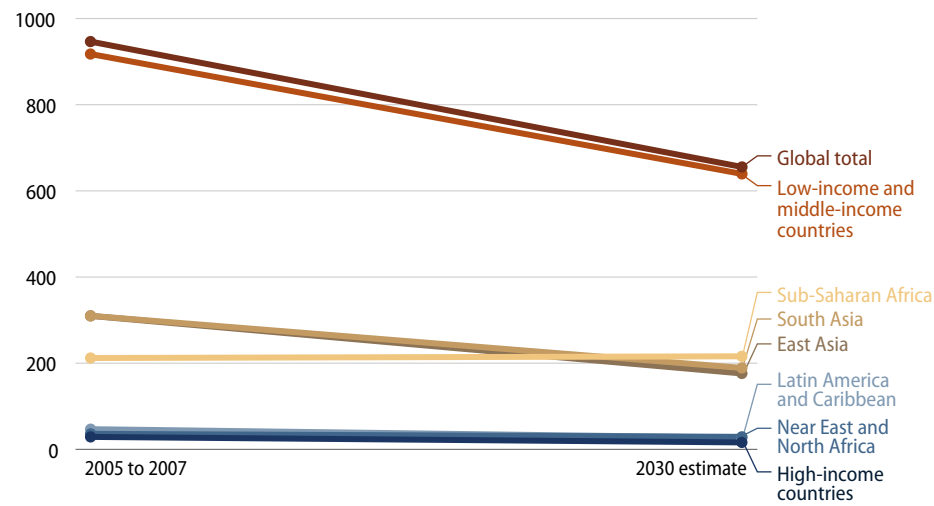


FIGURE 2

Millions of people will still be going hungry in 2030 under a business-as-usual scenario

Undernourished population in 2030, in millions of people

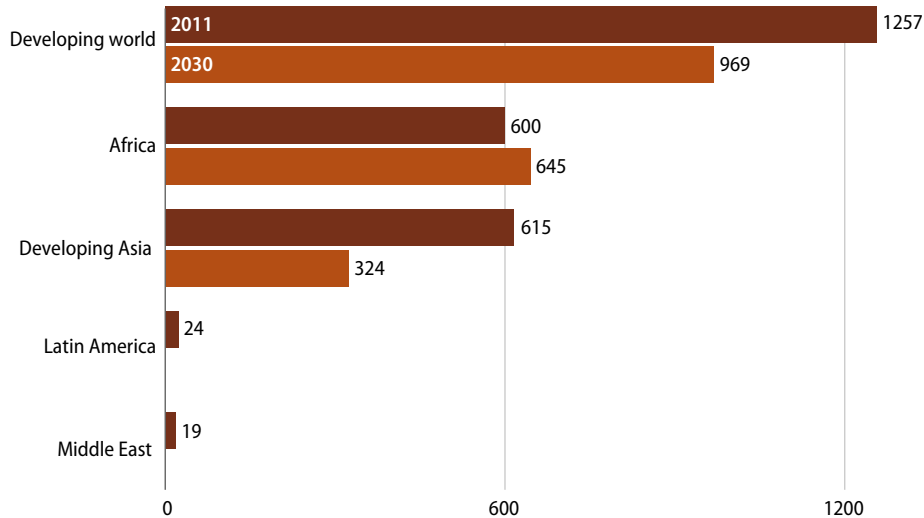


Source: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, International Fund for Agricultural Development, and World Food Programme, "Achieving Zero Hunger: The critical role of investments in social protection and agriculture" (2015), available at <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i4777e.pdf>.

FIGURE 3

Almost 1 billion people left in the dark

Population of people, in millions, without access to modern energy services by region, 2011 and 2030



Source: New Policies Scenario in International Energy Agency, "World Energy Outlook: Modern Energy for All" (2014), available at <http://www.worldenergyoutlook.org/publications/weo-2014/>.

Bending the curve to transform lives

Although current trajectories may not lead the global community to the objective of leaving no one behind, we can get there. The world is not starting from scratch: We can build upon the lessons, innovations, and tools developed over the past decade or so to accelerate and deepen progress.

Evidence is increasingly available on the best strategies, tools, and approaches to help people escape the vicious cycles of poverty and indignity. Approaches that incorporate income, enhance food security, encourage civic voice through community and political participation, and address other important dimensions of poverty eradication have a more effective and longer-lasting impact.¹⁸

Moreover, it has been clearly demonstrated that fairer progress is often faster progress. A recent study showed that countries that made progress in closing social and economic gaps achieved a 6 percent faster decline in child mortality over 10 years than those countries where gaps persisted or widened between the most vulnerable citizens and their peers.¹⁹

There will be a span of 15 years—slightly more than 5,000 days—from the time the post-2015 development agenda’s global goals are agreed upon later this month to the end of 2030. That is not a lot of time to change business as usual. Leaving no one behind will require immediate action. Fortunately, we live in a time of solutions. People across the globe understand more and more about the strategies, tools, and approaches that can make a lasting difference in ending poverty and exclusion.

To get serious about delivering on the promise to leave no one behind, commitment to principles needs to be accompanied by action, measurable objectives, and rigorous analysis.

From a moral and a pragmatic standpoint, the sustainable development agenda should focus first on the furthest behind. Leaders should commit to minimum standards for every person on the planet and commit to immediate action in these areas.

A core set of fast-track promises to the world’s poorest and most vulnerable people can act as a ramp to accelerate progress on the broader sustainable development agenda after 2020. Unless we get these most immediate needs right, we will not succeed in achieving the ambition of the rest of the SDGs.

The criteria for selecting the fast-track promises should be:

- Focus on the most vulnerable
- Aim at a person level—compared to objectives more directly relevant at the government or society level

- Full achievement of the promise is feasible, with a push, by 2030—either zero or 100 percent, depending on whether the target is framed positively or negatively
- Measurable with existing indicators, even if the current data are insufficient
- Have ripple effects across other sustainable development objectives

Although not comprehensive, these fast-track promises are derived based upon issues that the world's poorest often experience simultaneously and that cover a range of the human experience beyond income, including basic human needs and social, economic, and political rights.²⁰ This initial list draws upon work on multidimensional poverty by the U.N. Development Programme, or UNDP, and the U.N. Children's Fund, or UNICEF; the International Fund For Agricultural Development, or IFAD, and the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative's Multidimensional Poverty Index; the Sustainable Development Solutions Network; and the global minimum standard proposed by the High-level Panel of Eminent Persons on the post-2015 development agenda.

Importantly, no fast-track goal, target, or indicators should be considered met unless it is met for every person around the globe. This has implications for data, which are often not disaggregated in a way that allows for identifying gaps in progress among economic or social groups.

But the fast-track actions are not the end point. It is important that world leaders seize the opportunity of the SDGs summit to set out concrete plans for medium- to long-term actions. These plans could include incorporating leave no one behind into the entire agenda, specifying ways to monitor success, including with citizen participation, specifying national and local actions over the course of the medium- to long-term, and pledging to realize the promise of leaving no one behind for future generations. This leave no one behind pledge includes action on climate change, one trend that threatens progress on the entire sustainable development agenda.

Longer-term plans will need to remain flexible to accommodate for the inevitable changes and new opportunities that will arise in intervening years, but establishing a basis for longer-term action now is crucial to ensuring continued momentum and ultimate success of the overall agenda.

10 example set of fast-track commitments to be fulfilled by 2030

1. No one should live in extreme poverty
2. Everyone should have sufficient nutrition to grow and flourish
3. No mother should die bringing life into the world
4. No child should die of a preventable disease
5. Every child should be able to read, write, and do simple sums
6. Everyone should have access to safe drinking water
7. Everyone should have access to sanitation and hygiene
8. Everyone should have access to modern energy services
9. Everyone should have access to adequate shelter²¹
10. Everyone should have a legal identity, such as birth registration

There are a host of other potential candidates for fast-track options, but the 10 above are meant to capture a cross-section, including proxies that can include other progress on other measures.²²

Changing the way we do business

Ensuring that everyone gets a fair chance means changing the way we do business, harnessing rigorous analysis to deploy and, where necessary, developing successful tools and strategies, and ensuring accountability for success.

For each commitment, a shared understanding of where the world is, where the world will be in 2020 and 2030 if there is no change in approach, and what it will take to bend the curve toward meeting ambitious objectives is needed. It is also important to establish where there are unknowns and where more work is needed to understand progress, trends, or what it will take to implement positive change. Starting with the fast-track promises, policymakers at the global level and in each country should task a support team of researchers with undertaking an analysis of each commitment.

In areas such as preventable child deaths, for example, strategies and solutions are relatively better known, and therefore, the task at hand is to implement those commitments. In other areas such as education, there is less certainty over the best approaches, and as a result, more work will be needed to fill the knowledge gaps.

Importantly, these analyses will need to include broader issues, including political, economic, environmental, and security contexts. Although the focus on leaving no one behind is at the individual level, empowering people to overcome poverty requires tackling systemic issues. As one example, among people living on less than \$1.25 per day, more than 40 percent are currently living in fragile and conflict-affected countries, but that proportion could rise to 62 percent by 2030.²³ Without addressing underlying issues of rule of law, access to justice, accountable institutions, and inclusive growth, it will be impossible to meet the needs of these men, women, and children.²⁴ And the development policy community has limited tools to help people living in countries that are coping with conflict and fragility. That will need to change.

It will be crucial to establish a substantial and credible evidence base for how to tackle these problems by creating a bank of knowledge and solutions for policymakers to adapt to their specific circumstances. There is also a great need for adequate resources to bend the curve. One promising sign of progress on this front is the new global social compact that world leaders signed as part of the Addis Ababa Action Agenda in July 2015.²⁵ This compact includes four components:

1. Implementing nationally appropriate social-protection systems and measures—including policies and programs designed to reduce poverty and vulnerability by diminishing people’s exposure to risks and enhancing their capacity to cope with risks such as unemployment, illness, disability and old age, and environmental disasters
2. Focusing on the most vulnerable, including those furthest below the poverty line, persons with disabilities, indigenous persons, children, youth, and older persons

3. Considering appropriate spending targets for quality investments in essential public services, such as health, education, energy, water, and sanitation
4. Securing international commitment to support these efforts, especially for countries that require assistance

Following up on the global social compact—including more specific spending allocations and focused social protection systems—is a vital component of realizing success not only on the fast-track promises, but on the broader concept of leave no one behind. To achieve transformational outcomes for people, appropriate inputs—policy reform, financial resources, and smart strategies, to name a few—will be needed.

Finally, to ensure that giving everyone a fair chance in life is more than just a slogan; accountability is crucial. This should include a commitment from world leaders to report on progress on leaving no one behind in the SDG follow up and review framework established for the post-2015 agenda. But it shouldn't stop there.

Leaders should commit to generating higher-quality, timelier, usable, disaggregated, and open data. In tracking progress on poverty and basic needs and understanding the circumstances of the world's poorest people, we too often face a vacuum. Leaders should commit to work with the U.N. Statistical Agency, the Global Partnership on Sustainable Development Data, and the Global Data Forum in 2016 to work on compiling better data for people. Leaders should especially aim to ensure data are disaggregated—meaning broken down by sex, age, geography, and other characteristics—to shine a spotlight on where there are gaps in progress and where people are being left behind. Accountability efforts should also include the genuine involvement of citizens; the people at the heart of the promise to leave no one behind are too often left out of formal process, and so special efforts must be made to include them, perhaps with follow-up actions at local and national levels. Moreover, national and local efforts to leave no one behind must include a participatory component that builds on recent innovations in social audits, participatory budgeting, online feedback forums, and other means to include citizen voice. Individuals should also be able to comment openly on reporting submitted as part of the official follow up and review process.

Another possibility to ensure follow through and accountability is a specific summit or series of summits—perhaps convened every five years—to reflect on progress to leave no one behind at the highest political level. Such summits would complement the official follow-up processes, but also present an opportunity for more genuine engagement from citizens and stakeholders outside of government and informal interaction between governments and other partners. A summit is also a way to ensure in-depth focus on the cross-cutting nature of leave no one behind, which may otherwise be lost in the comprehensive official reviews.

Conclusion

The promise to give everyone a fair chance in life is transformational. A focus on empowering the most vulnerable and excluded individuals, wherever they are in the world, has the potential to help people achieve dignity and greater equality while promoting more stable and sustainable economic growth and political development in the process.

But to achieve this goal will require a change in the way business is done—that is to say, challenging and changing social norms. The SDGs contain a large number of targets that affect the world's poorest and most vulnerable. But to ensure that the call to leave no one behind becomes more than mere rhetoric requires that real meaning is given to the phrase. This is not just a matter of outlining the moral and economic case, but also of grounding the concept of leave no one behind in a core set of concrete actions.

The September 25 U.N. summit for the adoption of the post-2015 development agenda is an ideal opportunity to build and sustain political momentum around the concept of leave no one behind. World leaders should place the principle at the core of the sustainable development agenda and cement this commitment in a joint statement or a charter. Such a document, no matter its form, must commit to establishing a set of fast-track promises to the world's poorest as an immediate focus while setting out pledges to meaningful and longer-term action. It should also include an agreement on follow-up and accountability mechanisms to ensure success.

The Sustainable Development Goals will not solve all of the world's problems, but concrete action to ensure that no one is left behind in the race toward global progress would be an enormous step to a better, safer, and more just, equal, and prosperous world. It will not be easy, but genuine commitment and partnership—between citizens and their leaders, the public and private sectors, innovators and academics, North and South, East and West, and everyone with a vested interest in this shared agenda—can help bend the curve toward a world in which everyone receives a fair chance to survive and thrive.

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Endnotes

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