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'Leaving No One Behind'

How to Make the High-level Political Forum Transformative

Micah Grzywnowicz

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*'Governments must ensure that, through policies designed to support the most vulnerable groups, they recognize and respond to multiple and intersecting deprivations and sources of discrimination that are compounded by one another and make it harder to escape poverty, live with dignity and enjoy human rights.'*¹

When *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*² was adopted in 2015, it signified a commitment by States to create a better future for all. The implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its 17 Goals was to be guided by an almost utopian principle that promised to *leave no one behind*.

It was also succinctly accompanied by a catchy phrase of *'no more business as usual'*, which was used by diplomats and civil society alike in various statements and meetings. Both of them combined could be read as a vow to create a new approach to development, power and redistribution of resources. It also expressed a sense of urgency that things needed to change. It was, after all, supposed to incorporate all the lessons learnt from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which lacked efficient monitoring or evaluation mechanisms, and consequently left pockets of populations behind, making them continuously invisible in programs and policies.

Since *leaving no one behind* is not a goal or a target, it has not been reviewed systematically during the High-level Political Forums (HLPFs). It has been discussed as a theme, however, the discussions have never focused enough on the substantial operationalisation of the principle, which shows an obvious gap in the meaningful application of it.

The UN Secretary-General in his annual report on the progress towards achieving the SDGs stated that the pledge *'is seldom disputed in principle, but the complexity of its practical implementation and the political nature of the issues it involves are often insufficiently acknowledged'*.³ This has certainly been the case within the HLPF process, which should be more cognisant and purposefully focused on the implementation of the principle of *leaving no one behind* in order for it to fulfil its prescribed role.

Indeed, during the Expert Group Meeting on 'Lessons learned from the first cycle of the HLPF' in May 2019, it was expressed numerous times by various actors, including States, that we were missing

concrete examples of what States are doing to *leave no one behind*. There was a need expressed for more detail and specificity as to what is being done. However, this is complicated by the fact that there are no standard tools that can effectively monitor the complexity of the implementation of the SDGs for all, everywhere.

Who is counted is who counts

One of the most important elements of the monitoring, follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda is data. Learning from the shortcomings of the MDGs and looking into the future and the SDGs, *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2015* stressed the need of creating better high-quality data in order to meet challenges unaddressed by the MDG framework. It emphasised that *'only by counting the uncounted can we reach the unreached'*.⁴ It further emphasised that the new data should be disaggregated by *'key dimensions beyond the basics of age and sex, including migrant status, indigenous status, ethnicity and disability among others'*⁵ as only then would the policy and programme decisions be delivering sustainable development for all.

Similarly, former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, speaking in 2015, stressed that *'[t]o ensure no one is left behind, we must know where the most vulnerable people are. This is essential for making informed decisions that will provide them the education, housing, and health services they need'*.⁶ Consequently, the 2030 Agenda deemed it critical to produce quality, accessible, timely and reliable disaggregated data in order to measure progress and to ensure that no one is left behind.⁷

Unfortunately, overviews of the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) presented by States in 2017 and 2018 show that the reports *'provide little information on the status of data to leave no one behind'*.⁸ Accordingly, it is close to impossible to estimate what kind of policies and programs are successful in reaching those left behind.

Multi-dimensional and intersecting inequalities

It is safe to say that *leaving no one behind* has become a slogan that is oftentimes used to take away the focus from the lack of meaningful implementation of the SDGs. In order to make the principle operational and to deliver the promise of a transformative agenda, a level of specificity is required in the analysis that does not yet exist in the present discussions or data collection. There needs to be a space to examine specific problems that are faced by specific people in specific places, and there must be a real commitment to tackle them.

Putting the principle in action is a complex task as it was created to tend to a world full of complexities. *Leaving no one behind* requires understanding of multi-dimensional inequalities, which are horizontal (across social groups), vertical (within each group), intergenerational (across generations) and spatial (across locations). As noted by Naila Kabeer, *‘[w]here they overlap with each other, they give rise to an intersecting, rather than an additive, model of inequality, where each fuses with, and exacerbates, the effects of the other. This helps explain why certain groups in society are systematically left behind, or left out of any progress experienced by the wider society.’*⁹

To make the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, and consequently reporting on it, transformative, attention must be paid to all those whose disadvantages are compounded by identity, location and socio-economic status or any other circumstance. They cannot be ignored, invisibilised, or deemed trivial. It needs to be understood that challenges at hand are highly complex because people do not live single issue lives and so the solutions addressing them must look at various aspects, such as political, economic, spatial and cultural.¹⁰

If the aim is to create conditions for sustainable development to flourish, efforts need to center around providing opportunities, as well as creating an environment for people, individually and collectively, to develop their full potential and to make choices about their lives. In other words, people are supposed to live long, healthy and creative lives, be educated as well as have access to the resources needed for decent standards of living. As stated in the UNDP’s *Human Development Report 2019*, it is about the inequalities in capabilities, where capabilities are:

*(...) broadly defined as people’s freedom to choose what to be and do – cannot be reduced to income and wealth alone, because these are instrumental. Nor can they be defined as utility and measured by people’s actual choices, for that would obscure real differences in how individuals use income for achievements that they value. Instead, capabilities are people’s freedoms to choose what they want to be and do – regardless of whether they actually make those choices. Thus, capabilities are closely related to the concept of opportunities: It is not enough to know that someone has not travelled to a foreign country; we need to know whether that was a free choice or whether the person wanted to travel but either could not afford it or was denied entry.*¹¹

The message of the *Human Development Report 2019*, to look beyond generalised averages and a sole focus on material wealth, reinforces the broad scope of the

SDGs, where the *for all* applies to aspects from education and health to access to decision-making and justice. This holistic and intersectional analysis of what it means to be left behind, must be better reflected in the HLPF process. While reporting on their national progress during VNRs, States should actively inform on strategies and actions they undertook in terms of eg a better analysis of *leaving no one behind*, identifying the specific populations, based on the existing, disaggregated data, and also acknowledging those who are being missed in policy and programmes due to insufficiently aggregated data.

Broad stakeholder engagement

Even though the 2030 Agenda has been designed as a primary State-driven process, the role of the non-State actors cannot be underestimated or dismissed. The process leading to the adoption of the 2030 Agenda has many times been said to be the most inclusive and participatory negotiation process in UN history. The unprecedented global consultations involving more than one million people across the globe, which can be seen in the *leaving no one behind* guiding principle, was a deliberate endeavour to reach the poor, the marginalised and those whose voices and stories are traditionally not heard.¹²

Moreover, there was also a space created for civil society to contribute directly to the work of the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals (OWG)¹³, whose mandate was to prepare a proposal on the SDGs. *‘The co-chairs believed if this [the 2030 Agenda] was going to be a comprehensive agenda, ideas and suggestions from civil society had to be considered, even if there were some powerful countries that didn’t want to see some issues (LGBT rights, for example) on the agenda.’*¹⁴ Consequently, each morning before the formal negotiations session would start, the co-facilitators would hold meetings with civil society so that they could provide their input, addressing the same questions and documents as the diplomats.¹⁵

The approach was ground-breaking if compared to other processes within sustainable development negotiations and not only enriched the process significantly but also helped create ownership and engagement. It was also obvious that in order to produce a universal framework to create a better, safer, fairer and sustainable world for all, civil society had to be involved. They provided lived experiences and challenges and potential solutions for communities they were working with and for. The 2030 Agenda could not have been formulated without the voices of the people it was supposed to serve.

Emerging at that time, the *leaving no one behind* principle paid tribute not only to the needs expressed in the consultations, it also was seen as an invitation for engagement at the UN level in the negotiation processes. Thanks to that, the UN conference rooms not only saw the usual suspects participating in sustainable development, ie Major Groups¹⁶, but they also saw communities that had not taken part in such processes on a regular basis. These were, for instance, older persons, human rights organisations, persons with disabilities, migrants, LGBT groups, volunteer organisations, and humanitarian aid groups.¹⁷

This broad participation in turn paved the way to a more inclusive and open mechanism for civil society for a collective engagement in the follow-up and review process – the Major Groups and Other Stakeholders (MGoS). The MGoS mechanism is now composed of 18 constituencies representing specific social groups of rights-holders, as well as regional CSO engagement mechanisms and thematic coordination platforms related to other global frameworks that are connected to the 2030 Agenda.¹⁸

One concrete example of how the MGoS mechanism keeps expanding was a recognition of the LGBTI Stakeholder Group in 2019. This historic decision meant that LGBTI populations could formally engage in all processes related to sustainable development, including HLPF, in their own right. In practical terms, it meant that representatives of LGBTI organisations could participate in HLPF in the exact same way as their colleagues from other groups, bringing experiences, expertise, challenges, solutions, and realities specific to their constituencies. At HLPF 2019, the LGBTI Stakeholder Group attended the official meetings of the forum, and was able to raise its particular concerns when speaking on the review of SDG 4 (Education) and SDG 10 (Inequalities).

As an officially recognised stakeholder, the LGBTI Stakeholder Group is now also allowed to submit documents and present written and oral contributions, as well as to make recommendations. This is done in the form of a Position Paper, which is a part of the formal documentation of the forum and translated in all official UN languages. Lastly, the LGBTI Stakeholder Group is allowed to organise side events and round tables, in cooperation with Member States and the Secretariat, which provide an important room for less formal discussions and inputs.¹⁹ This has meant that LGBTI populations that are so often excluded from or invisibilised in national, regional and global activities received direct access to the Forum that was supposed to address all the challenges they faced daily.

Despite the encouraging expansion of stakeholder engagement described above, the way HLPF has been executed during its first cycle does not reflect the inclusive and participatory nature of the negotiations leading to the 2030 Agenda adoption. Expectations of the same or at least similar level of openness and excitement about the involvement of civil society and MGoS in the follow-up and review processes have not been met. Not enough space is given to MGoS constituencies to contribute to the discussions, debates or negotiations of Ministerial Declarations. So called Spotlight Reports prepared by civil society organisations do not have any official status within HLPF and so they do not constitute input that would be considered during the formal session of the Forum. The time given to representatives of MGoS participating in the VNRs is limited to 60-90 seconds in which they are to address concerns brought in by numerous constituencies. It is close to impossible to present a constructive and meaningful intervention. Regrettably, very rarely are these concerns then taken up by the State in question, in many cases due to lack of time.

It is still the case that civil society organisations are those who know what specific issues specific people face in specific places, esp. those who are marginalised, purposefully forgotten or invisibilised. Without their meaningful participation and going back to the roots of the collective process designed by the co-facilitators of the Open Working Group, the 2030 Agenda will not be achieved.

A transformative process

The 2030 Agenda promised to be transformative and innovative in order to change the world. But what does this mean in practical terms, and what is needed to ensure that the HLPF process contributes to real transformation?

Leaving no one behind does not have to be an impossible goal to achieve. It requires a true commitment from States to identify groups that are marginalised and purposefully invisibilised. The commitment must be translated into specific data collection initiatives that are done in a safe and ethical way not to expose those already at risk to harm.²⁰ This in turn should be followed up by effective policy and program changes to address the gaps discovered by the collected data. Doing this would require engagement from various stakeholders and various authorities, from statistical offices to civil society. In contexts when such multi-stakeholder cooperation is not possible, there should be alternative pathways and partnerships created in order to move the implementation forward.

Speaking specifically about the HLPF review, creating a designated space at HLPF where stakeholders could explore and dig deeper into the multidimensional and intersecting challenges and collectively come up with solutions that could then be translated into differentiated policy responses would be a good step. For instance, it could take the form of technical workshops focused on capacity building for civil society on collecting data provided by statistical offices; in-depth discussions could be organised in a form of so-called ‘world café’ or roundtables where different stakeholders share best practices, pose questions and receive advice from others on specific issues of interest; more use should also be made of the Regional Development Forums so that they could provide region-specific capacity building opportunities, and their outcomes should feed into the VNRs process at HLPF. Such spaces would also facilitate and encourage peer learning at the Forum for all involved.

A norm-critical approach

Apart from commitment, which should be taken for granted at this stage, transformation would ultimately require challenging traditional power dynamics, which used to be understood as power of the state over citizens or those privileged over those disenfranchised. Simultaneously, a norm critical approach to *leaving no one behind* has to be applied. Without power shift or change in how power is (not) shared there will be no transformation taking place. One way of doing it could be seeing three different types of power instead, which could in turn assist in a clearer conceptualisation of stakeholders engagement within HLPF:

‘[p]ower within,’ which can grow in a person as they gain self-belief and an understanding of their rights; ‘power with’ – when collectives come together to exercise joint action and solidarity; and ‘power to’ – the ability to decide actions and carry them out.’²¹

This broader and more nuanced understanding should enable sharing of power and identifying specific responsibilities carried by different stakeholders within a country, and consequently in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Seeing power as something that can be shared and balanced could also facilitate the norm critical approach to *leaving no one behind*. Instead of letting all the focus be on those marginalised and trying to ‘fix’ them, attention should also be put on those who are in power and investigate how their behaviour and patterns of behaviour could be modified in order to break the harmful cycle. In other words *‘the fulfilment of the SDGs depends on a massive power transfer, both economically (hence Goal 10, the inequality goal) and politically (hence Goal 16, the governance*

*goal), to the people who will ensure their realization’.*²² This in turn would increase *‘the power (understood as ability) of both citizens (to exercise agency) and states (to govern effectively)’.*²³

Expanding time and space

With the adoption of the 2030 Agenda came a sense of urgency that things needed to change in transformative ways in order to provide a better future for all. Unfortunately, that urgency of 2015 was lost both in national level implementation and in the engagement on the global level through HLPF. The VNRs are treated as a space to showcase only the positive outcomes with flashy videos. It is very rarely being used for sharing challenges, receiving feedback, meaningful dialogue or learning, which all were originally agreed on in the text of the 2030 Agenda. It can potentially be argued that this is due to the fact that there is not enough time to address everything in one presentation with a strict time limit. This is indeed true and the VNR presentation time slot should therefore be extended so that there is space for a meaningful dialogue between all different stakeholders present, including MGoS.

Space should also be provided specifically to those stakeholders that traditionally do not have access to UN spaces. It would only do some justice to the 2030 Agenda negotiations and stakeholders participation, but it is particularly important for such a space to exist on a global level because many civil society actors and those traditionally *left behind* face increasing restrictions, intimidations, and general shrinking space for engagement. Moreover, VNRs seem to be seen as a one-off event in New York disconnected from the lives of individual people facing specific issues in specific places. There must be a national level process that is consistent and encourages meaningful participation from diverse stakeholders in preparing for the VNRs but also in implementing the recommendations during a follow-up.

The review process must also be composed of a comprehensive preparation phase on national and regional levels which would include all stakeholders, as well as a national follow-up after the HLPF to implement all the recommendations. Following up on the above mentioned discussion on addressing power redistribution, it needs to be said that if the final analysis lacks a norm critical approach to power imbalances within countries, all the recommendations on whom to target, on what issues, and in which places will not be useful and it will prevent effective implementation.²⁴ Similarly, *over time, the SDGs will benefit greatly from deeper intersectional approaches, not only to better understand groups that sit at the nexus of vulnerabilities because*

they face multiple forms of power marginalisation but also to recognise which groups sit at the nexus of power over, with all the accountability that position demands.²⁵

Transformative agendas sound, and often times indeed are, complex as they inherently require us to question the existing structures, rules and methods of work. They demand that we get out from our comfort zone and existing relations of power and try something new. It is additionally challenging and daunting when it needs to be embraced and done by everyone, everywhere, without any exception. This is what the 2030 Agenda demands of us, to engage in big, unprecedented team work to change the world. It demands from us to be transformative.

Next steps

Not only does 2020 mark the year of the HLPF review process, it also marks the beginning of the last 10 years for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Despite being labelled the *Decade of Action*, which implies concrete plans and commitments are in place and ready to be implemented, it is hard to believe that at this pace of (in)action the promise to reach the furthest behind will be kept. The sense of urgency with which the framework was adopted must be revived and translate into action. As highlighted through this piece and summarised below, to spur this urgency a few concrete steps could be taken while reviewing HLPF:

1. The *leaving no one behind* principle must be operationalised through specific actions, addressing specific challenges faced by specific populations;
2. Traditional power dynamics must be challenged and transformed both in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and within the HLPF processes so that all stakeholders can participate actively and meaningfully;

3. A norm critical approach to *leaving no one behind* has to be applied;
4. VNR reports must include disaggregated data exposing multidimensional and intersecting challenges facing specific marginalised populations;
5. VNR reports must provide examples of policy and program solutions to the multidimensional and intersecting challenges revealed by data collection. It would contribute to strengthening of the peer learning element of HLPF;
6. A designated space at HLPF should be created where stakeholders, including States could explore various issues and collectively design solutions that could then be translated into differentiated policy responses and structural changes.

If these steps are taken, HLPF would not only be more practical and create a more inclusive space for all stakeholders, but it would also be closer to fulfilling its goal of providing political leadership and *'having a focused, dynamic and action-oriented agenda, ensuring the appropriate consideration of new and emerging sustainable development challenges'*.²⁶ It would then be worthy of the *Decade of Action* and be what was promised to the international community in the very resolution for the review.



Endnotes

- ¹ Report of the Secretary-General, Special Edition: progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals, (E/2019/68), para. 79.
- ² Resolution A/RES/70/1.
- ³ Report of the Secretary-General, Special Edition: progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (E/2019/68), para. 78.
- ⁴ *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2015*, p. 11. [https://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/2015_MDG_Report/pdf/MDG%202015%20rev%20\(July%201\).pdf](https://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/2015_MDG_Report/pdf/MDG%202015%20rev%20(July%201).pdf)
- ⁵ *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2015*, p. 11. [https://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/2015_MDG_Report/pdf/MDG%202015%20rev%20\(July%201\).pdf](https://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/2015_MDG_Report/pdf/MDG%202015%20rev%20(July%201).pdf)
- ⁶ <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2015-10-10/secretary-general%E2%80%99s-remarks-development-committee-ministerial-lunch->
- ⁷ Resolution A/RES/70/1, para. 48.
- ⁸ Shannon Kindornay, *Progressing national SDGs implementation: An independent assessment of the voluntary national review reports submitted to the United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in 2018*. Ottawa: Canadian Council for International Cooperation, 2019, p. vi, <https://ccic.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Full%20Report%20Eng.pdf>
- ⁹ Naila Kabeer, “‘Leaving No One Behind’: the Challenge of Intersecting Inequalities” in International Social Science Council, University of Sussex Institute of Development Studies, UNESCO, *World social science report, 2016: Challenging inequalities; pathways to a just world*, 2016, p. 56. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000245825>
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 56.
- ¹¹ United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2019*, p. 31.
- ¹² United Nations Development Group, *A Million Voices: the World We Want. A Sustainable Future with Dignity*, 2013, file:///Users/micah/Downloads/UNDG_A-Million-Voices.pdf
- ¹³ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/owg>
- ¹⁴ Macharia Kamau, Pamela Chasek, David O’Connor, *Transforming Multilateral Diplomacy: The Inside Story of the Sustainable Development Goals*, Routledge, 2018, pp. 125-126.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 125.
- ¹⁶ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/aboutmajorgroups.html>
- ¹⁷ Macharia Kamau, Pamela Chasek, David O’Connor, *Transforming Multilateral Diplomacy: The Inside Story of the Sustainable Development Goals*, Routledge, 2018, p. 124.
- ¹⁸ There are 18 Major Groups and Other Stakeholder Coordination Mechanism (as of January 2020). They consist of Major Groups (as identified in the Agenda 21): Women, Children and Youth, Indigenous Peoples, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), Local Authorities, Workers and Trade Unions, Business and Industry, Scientific and Technological Community, Farmers; and Other Stakeholders: Private philanthropic organizations/ Foundations, Educational and academic entities, Persons with disabilities, Volunteer groups, Older persons, Migrants, Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, APRCEM (Asia Pacific Regional CSO engagement Mechanism), LGBTI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Intersex).
- ¹⁹ Resolution A/RES/67/290, para. 15.
- ²⁰ According to the UN Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, ‘all activities must take into consideration the principles of self-determination, privacy and confidentiality, lawful use, participation, right to information, transparency, accountability and impartiality in the terms expressed in the present report and other relevant human rights sources.’ Report of the Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, Data collection and management as a means to create heightened awareness of violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, A/HRC/41/45, para. 80.
- ²¹ Paul O’Brien, “Left Behind or Pushed Behind?” in *Leave No One Behind: Time for Specifics on the Sustainable Development Goals*, p. 299.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 307.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 302.
- ²⁴ Ed. Homi Kharas, John W. McArthur, and Izumi Ohno, *Leave No One Behind: Time for Specifics on the Sustainable Development Goals*, p. 16.
- ²⁵ Paul O’Brien, “Left Behind or Pushed Behind?” in *Leave No One Behind: Time for Specifics on the Sustainable Development Goals*, p. 316.
- ²⁶ Resolution A/RES/67/290, para. 2.

Making the HLPF More Inclusive – a Paper Series

Stakeholder engagement and inclusion of those left furthest behind are key principles of the 2030 Agenda. The follow-up and review of its implementation is supposed to be *'open, inclusive, participatory and transparent'*, *'support the reporting by all relevant stakeholders'* and *'be people-centred, gender-sensitive, respect human rights and have a particular focus on the poorest, most vulnerable and those furthest behind'*, (paragraph 74, A/RES/70/1).

The annual High-level Political Forum (HLPF) is the United Nation's main platform for follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In 2019, we saw the completion of the first four-year cycle of HLPFs, leading to the first review of the modalities of the forum itself in 2020. These modalities include two resolutions codifying the structure and operational rules that govern HLPF, as well as the thematic focus for each year of a cycle. The review also provides an opportunity to discuss improvements of guidelines and practices that are not regulated by resolutions but still have an impact on the HLPF's form and function.

This paper series aims to contribute with reflections on how the HLPF process can become more inclusive of a broad range of stakeholders and more purposefully focused on the implementation of the principle of *leaving no one behind*.

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