Policy Imperatives for Leaving No One Behind

Social Development Brief #2

With its central pledge to leave no one behind, the historic and ambitious 2030 Agenda recognises that development will only be sustainable if it is inclusive. Promoting inclusion is fundamental to achieving a socially, economically and environmentally sustainable future.

No single set of policies or strategies is applicable across all countries and in all contexts to tackle exclusion and promote inclusion. Instead, Governments should bring a stronger equity lens to policy-making. Successful examples point to several imperatives to address the structural causes of exclusion and social injustice.

A universal approach to social policy, complemented by special or targeted measures

The first imperative is to establish a universal approach to social policy, complemented by special or targeted measures to address the distinct obstacles faced by disadvantaged, marginalized or otherwise excluded social groups. Special efforts are needed, even if temporarily, to overcome the barriers some groups face and make the universal provision of goods and services more effective in promoting social inclusion. Governments should design these measures in ways that minimize stigma and capture by local elites, and must integrate them fully into broader social protection systems. Policies aimed at tackling discrimination, as well as those that provide preferential access to some services, enable the participation of excluded persons and communities in decision-making processes.

Data to leave no on behind

Identifying groups that are left behind and in need of special measures may require better household and individual level data and increased data disaggregation. Strengthened statistical offices, as well as more openness to innovative social research directions can help improve data needs. To date, few of the current SDG indicators can be disaggregated by migrant, disability and indigenous status, for instance. In addition, as discussed throughout the report, social groups that are omitted from household surveys and censuses are often those at the highest risk of being left behind. In addition, a global effort to improve data availability for all population groups, including through improvements in the integration of data sources, has already begun. Further work is needed to enhance the coverage, quality and frequency of data to ensure that the most vulnerable and marginalized people are the first to be reached.

Policy coherence

This approach also requires aligning macroeconomic policy frameworks with social policy goals. Several economic and social policies can work together to promote decent work and ensure universal access to social protection. In order for growth to be sustained and inclusive, economic policies must be concerned with the ability of growth to create full employment and decent work for all.

Inclusive economic and social policies are mutually reinforcing. While macroeconomic policies can, and should, pursue social welfare and justice, well-designed social policies can enhance macroeconomic growth and post-crisis recovery through investments in human resource development, redistributive measures that increase productivity and aggregate demand. They can also build political stability, a robust determinant of long-term economic growth.

Promoting inclusive institutions

The second imperative is to promote inclusive institutions. The report highlights the role that institutions play in either perpetuating exclusion or, instead, in promoting inclusion. Empowering workers, entrepreneurs and small producers, for instance, or pursuing inclusive land ownership schemes, new forms of collective action, or greater State capacity to engage in participatory budgeting can make economic institutions more inclusive and equitable. Promoting civil registration and legal identity, engaging more with civil society, supporting local associations and enabling the creation of social movements can help political institutions become more transparent and inclusive. Promoting equal recognition through anti-discrimination laws and their effective enforcement, encouraging tolerance and challenging exclusionary attitudes and behaviours are all avenues for more inclusive cultural and social institutions.

Reversing entrenched prejudice and reforming institutions that perpetuate exclusion are often slow processes. Institutions are shaped by national and local circumstances, norms and behaviours that have deep historical and cultural roots. They therefore require considerable shifts in how people relate to each other and what is considered acceptable. However, concerted effort and long-term political commitment at the highest level make such change possible.

Conclusion

In order to leave no one behind, Governments must promote social inclusion as well as tackle the barriers that create and sustain exclusion. A universal approach to social policy, complemented with special or targeted measures, is key to address the underlying causes of exclusion and social injustice.

Leaving no one behind calls for institutional change as well. Ensuring that institutions are inclusive can contribute to levelling the playing field and provide all citizens with opportunities to participate in public life on equal terms. Changing the social, cultural and political norms that underpin or perpetuate unequal power relations and the disadvantage experienced by some social groups is often a long-term process, dependent on national and local circumstances but, with political will, Governments can influence and help transform them.