

Empowerment, Inclusion, Equality:

Accelerating sustainable development with human rights

With the most pivotal decade of SDG implementation ahead of us, the 2019 HLPF theme of Empowerment, Inclusion and Equality is a reminder that the transformational promise of the 2030 Agenda can only be achieved with the respect, protection and fulfilment of human rights.

When people can exercise their human rights, they can stand up for themselves and for each other, they are empowered to shape the decisions that impact their lives. Human rights stand for equality, for participatory and inclusive societies that dismantle the structures of discrimination which drive poverty and inequality. When everyone can claim their human rights, no one can be left behind. Human rights are not only the right way, but the smart way to accelerate progress for more equitable and sustainable development.

In the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#), governments around the world committed to a blueprint for a more just and sustainable path for people, planet and prosperity, with 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that “seek to realize the human rights of all”.¹

As we enter the most pivotal decade for SDG implementation, the theme ‘*Empowering People and Ensuring Inclusiveness and Equality*’ of the 2019 High-level Political Forum for sustainable development (HLPF) couldn’t be more timely.

Amongst the calls for more resources, more political will, more tools, technology and faster implementation, it is a reminder that equitable and sustainable development must be achieved *with* and *not for* people. Achieving the transformational promise of the SDGs depends on ensuring the empowerment, inclusion and equality of all people, which is so closely interconnected with human rights.

The promotion and protection of human rights is about empowering people to stand up for themselves and for each other, for equality, and for inclusive societies. This is how the power of human rights can foster and accelerate a transformative development agenda.

When we think of struggles for empowerment, inclusion and equality we think of heroes who have fought for their rights: luminary individuals like Mahatma Gandhi, Rosa Parks, Malala Yousufzai or Marielle Franco. They stood up for the rights of marginalized peoples, for the rights of the excluded voices who suffered in silence and whose dignity was not respected. Out of these movements the message for justice and human rights continues to spread across the world: *‘Yes, every human being matters, everyone is born equal in dignity and rights.*

Human rights matter because they embody the power of people standing up to change the world. Above all this is what the 2030 Agenda needs to accelerate its course.

¹<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld>

The SDGs already mirror much of the human rights framework. Each sustainable development goal, whether aimed at eradicating hunger, preventing disease, providing clean water or climate action, or focused on securing peace or decent work – all are simultaneously a claim about human rights.

Development is not just about changing the material conditions that prevent a person from reaching these goals. It is also about empowering people with voice and agency to be active participants in designing their own solutions and shaping development policy. It is about transforming laws, policy, practice, social norms and power relations such that everyone can flourish in equal dignity and freedom.

This is recognized in the 2030 Agenda commitment to create “a world of universal respect for equality and non-discrimination”, by ensuring “targets [are] met for all nationals and peoples and for all segments of society” and that the “SDGs realize human rights for all”. At its heart, the Agenda 2030 promise of ‘leaving no one behind’ is a reaffirmation that human rights and sustainable development are mutually reinforcing.

Development is a powerful tool, but it can also be a tool of the powerful unless human rights for all, without discrimination, is part of its design.

‘With limited time and resources, it is crucial to focus on securing rights for all, as not only the right way, but the smart way to achieve more sustainable development.’

Human rights can help to guide and navigate tough choices, resolve social conflict, prevent backsliding, provide for progressive realization and build resilience in a world that otherwise risks remaining unequal, unstable and unsustainable.

At the 2019 High-Level Political Forum, governments will review progress in achieving empowerment, inclusion and equality for all. They will assess progress in achieving the SDGs that are dedicated to these objectives; goals on ending discrimination and combating inequality (SDG 10), strengthening democratic governance, inclusive participation, global partnerships, rule of law, access to justice and personal security (SDG 16) and creating an enabling international environment (SDG 17). The review will also focus on ways in which the theme relates to goals for more inclusive quality education (SDG 4), decent work for all (SDG 8) and equitable climate action (SDG 13).

While significant progress has been made, there remain many gaps. As we approach the next crucial decade of SDG implementation, governments are under pressure to accelerate their efforts significantly.

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With limited time and resources, it is crucial to focus on securing rights for all, as not only the *right* way, but the *smart* way to achieve more sustainable development. A people-centered, inclusive and equitable approach requires its own investment of time, political will and resources. The returns however will be far reaching for unlocking the transformative potential of all other social, economic and environmental commitments in the 2030 Agenda.

As governments make pledges toward acceleration, they can consider how human rights can guide SDG implementation to achieve deeper, more transformative results. This pamphlet describes how the principles of human rights set the standards for what it means to truly empower people and address the discrimination at the root of inequality and exclusion.

People are empowered when they can claim their human rights

Empowering people means moving beyond purely technocratic solutions and treating people as passive objects of aid or charity. People are empowered when they are able to claim their rights and to shape the decisions, policies, rules and conditions that affect their lives.

An approach to development that is grounded in human rights treats everyone as agents of their own development. This is why the right to development requires “free, active and meaningful participation in development”.

This principle of working *with* and not just for the people is reflected across all the SDGs in different ways. It is reflected in the SDG targets to empower people, especially women and girls, as a means to SDG achievement. It is reflected in targets that support people’s ability to claim and exercise their rights and to allow for checks on power: such as the fundamental freedoms to dissent, express opinions without fear; access information; have a legal identity; organize; participate in economic, social and political decisions and access justice. It is also reflected in the targets on universal access to education, health, water, food and equal opportunities.

Empowerment requires securing civil and political rights as well as economic, social and cultural rights. People living in poverty, who face obstacles ranging from hunger and illiteracy, to lack of transportation to communication barriers, may face barriers in fully exercising their power. Women living in poverty are often the furthest removed from public life, access to information and participation by their burden of domestic responsibilities, restrictions on mobility and access to economic resources, as well as by discriminatory norms. Empowerment means recognizing and addressing these obstacles, investing in all people to build the knowledge and skills that enables them to act as agents of their own development.

From a global perspective, people living in developing countries can also be “left behind”, due to geography, conflict or climate crises, so it is also critical to create fair terms and conditions for all countries and equal participation in global governance. Specific challenges faced by African countries, least developed countries, landlocked developing countries, small island developing states and countries in conflict/post-conflict need to be recognized in pursuing sustainable development. Agreements on international trade, aid, investment and finance should avoid creating rules or conditions that favor the development of some over others.

Empowering human rights defenders in Kenya’s informal settlements. “Once people have power and rights, they can deal with all the other pressing issues...When you are not assured of the right to life, nothing else matters.” These are the words of a young Kenyan activist and member of the Mathare Social Justice Centre. With more than 30 volunteers the Centre works to support human rights defenders in informal settlements on a range of issues from political accountability to reproductive rights and forced evictions. In addition to defending the rights of community residents, the MSJC is a safe space for people to openly discuss social justice issues, solve problems and seek formal redress. With a revised Constitution that guarantees human rights for all in Kenya, MSJC is an important voice for marginalized communities. “Activists like the MSJC amplify voices that are rarely, if ever, heard.” said Marcella Favretto, UN Human Rights’ former Senior Human Rights Adviser for Kenya. “These young people put their lives on the line and they too need to be defended. Without these organizations, only one version of the truth will emerge.”

Empowerment requires opening safe spaces that enable all people, including those who have been traditionally marginalized, to have a place at the table, and participate in the shaping of the decisions, policies, rules and conditions that affect their lives. Without the protection of human rights, this can be impossible.

Today, the shrinking of civic space is one of the biggest risks to exercising human rights and empowerment. Though new technologies have increased interconnectedness across borders, the same technologies have sometimes been used for increasing surveillance and control of civil society movements and speech, often under security pretexts.

[Human rights defenders](#)² around the world are facing increasing threats of killings, torture and arbitrary arrests as well as intimidation through legal, political and administrative means. The evidence suggests that more societies are today at risk of an erosion in freedom of expression and the right to participation, well as basic protections such as security of person against violence and reprisals. Yet without a guarantee of these fundamental rights and freedoms social cohesion breaks down, threatening development, peace and security. Governments must promote and protect human rights, including protecting human rights defenders³, and regulating powerful non-state actors such as multinational companies,⁴ to create the space where all people can claim and exercise their rights.

Empowerment rests on the promotion and protection of people's ability to claim their human rights.

Inclusion means dismantling discrimination

Inclusion is also bound up with human rights. Inclusive societies recognize and build development policies around the diversity of their members and enable everyone's full inclusion and participation, regardless of their status. Inclusive, people-centered development means addressing the structural or legal barriers that discriminate against particular peoples and groups.

In other words, inclusion is not only about including those who are traditionally excluded but must also be about dismantling the many forms of discrimination that contribute to the persistent marginalization of groups on the basis of arbitrary distinctions, such as their age, their gender or the color of their skin.

This is reflected in the SDG target 10.2, which calls for "the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status". It is also reflected in the targets in SDGs 5, 10 and 16 to eliminate discrimination in laws, policies and social practices.

The development agenda can therefore draw on the wealth of experience of the human rights system in working to eliminate discrimination. Human rights law prohibits discrimination on any grounds including race, color, national, ethnic or social origin, language, sex, religion, political or other opinion, descent, birth, caste, age, disability, health status, migration status, sexual orientation or gender identity. Human rights also recognize that identities intersect to create multiple exclusions among and within groups.

²<https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2018-09-12/un-decries-shameful-reprisals-on-rights-activists-in-38-countries>

³ As set out in international human rights law and in the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/issues/srhrdefenders/pages/declaration.aspx>

⁴ As set out in the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/un-guiding-principles>

'From a human rights perspective, inclusion requires addressing discriminatory structures that have led to exclusion, deprivation of resources and lack of opportunity.'

It is also sensitive to the historical experiences and injustices that have shaped the experience of particular groups or peoples and can also produce diverse concepts of development. Inclusive societies can accommodate diversity by supporting the right to development, participation and self-determination. This includes for example, the right of indigenous peoples to free, prior and informed consent in decisions affecting their development, which addresses their unique experiences and preferences.

Through the human rights mechanisms, recommendations and guidance tools, the human rights system has generated a wealth of resources on building inclusive societies that respect the right to development of all peoples and social groups. Human rights resources have also been developed on the disaggregation of data, to ensure that groups who are traditionally excluded, are made visible in the data, so that they are not left behind.

The fact that people are excluded and not reflected or visible in disaggregated data can be closely related to patterns of historical discrimination. For example, historical racism and the legacy of slavery have created a diaspora of people of African descent around the world who have long been invisible in national data, and traditionally excluded from development, contributing to intergenerational forms of exclusion.

Addressing this kind of exclusion therefore requires dismantling structures of discrimination.

Today, this is an increasingly urgent and difficult challenge as societies are struggling with intolerance as a reaction to contemporary challenges such as migration, economic crisis and conflict. Witness for example, the recent global rise of nativist nationalisms which is becoming a threat to norms against discrimination, racism and other forms of intolerance.

Building on the interrelationship between the 2030 Agenda and human rights will be critical. The imperative of inclusion must be strongly grounded in the human rights principle of non-discrimination, if no one is to be left behind.

'If you aren't counted you don't count': Data disaggregation and protection for greater inclusion. To fulfill the goal of reaching the furthest groups first, SDG implementation requires data disaggregation to monitor the situation of all peoples and groups. However, studies on [inequality across groups](#), show that data itself can be inherently political and unreliable. A human rights approach emphasizes the empowerment of individuals in the collection, ownership and use of their data. It addresses the challenges in defining, collecting and securing this data so that it is not used to further discriminate or violate the privacy of individuals as prohibited under international law. UN Human Rights has also worked to facilitate cooperation between national human rights institutions and national statistical offices to build awareness of the relationship between disaggregation and discrimination, including in the context of ensuring that no one is left behind. For example, Dr. Ola Awad, President, Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics has said such a partnership will help to "realize the commitment to leaving no one behind in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda...and address the data challenges of revealing the situation of the most vulnerable and marginalized groups in Palestine."

Equality means achieving more equitable development outcomes for all

Equality is another powerful concept closely linked to the principle of non-discrimination and grounded in the principle that all people are created equal and must be treated equally. More equal societies create more social stability and cohesion, as they work well for everyone. Ensuring equality for all will be critical for ensuring more equitable and sustainable development, that leaves no one behind.

By focusing strongly on inequalities, the 2030 Agenda makes a clear case that this is a policy choice and not an inevitable outcome of development. SDG 10 targets focuses on promoting equality through reducing inequalities within and among countries. As well as promoting economic policies to “progressively achieve greater equality”, target 10.3 calls on governments to “ensure equal opportunity and reduce inequalities of outcome”.

Promoting equal opportunities is not enough, particularly for groups that have been historically discriminated against and left behind.

Reducing inequalities, such as excessive inequalities in income and wealth or vast disparities in the levels of education, health or access to resources of different groups must be achieved through policies that will reduce inequalities; from social protection, to universal access to education, health and other public services, fiscal reforms and labor rights – all of which can level the playing field for diverse groups and communities.

In the human rights context, equality is closely related to the principle of non-discrimination. But it also pays attention to opportunities as well as outcomes. For example, human rights encompass the notions of *formal* equality as well as *substantive* equality of results.

A prime example is the situation of women who may have attained equal rights before the law but have yet to achieve equal representation in political and economic life, nor equal pay for equal work in many societies. In addition, women continue to be excluded from the right to hold or inherit property, which limits their access to economic opportunities or public services. Even when they have equal opportunities, they may not achieve equal

Equality, development and peacebuilding in rural Colombian communities. For over 50 years, the people of El Bagre, Colombia felt neglected by their government. Though rich in natural resources, the region was once dominated by illegal armed groups. The legacy of inequality against these forgotten communities is as visible in the lack of infrastructure as it is in the stories of local communities. Scarce economic and educational opportunities drew generations of families into precarious, dangerous livelihoods based on informal and illicit mining. UN Human Rights has been working over many years with local people through human rights education and capacity-building to become better advocates for their own solutions. For example, a youth programme on human rights education not only supported local children but inspired their mothers to advocate for training and resources to pursue livelihoods outside of mining. UN Human Rights is working with all stakeholders including local authorities, women, youth, afro-descendant and indigenous communities, ex-FARC combatants, a mining company and mining communities to help solve local problems through a rights-based approach which is also supporting peacebuilding by helping nascent democratic processes take hold from the ruin of conflict. “Human rights are not just a goal in itself but a vehicle to facilitate societal transformation that allows development, peace and human rights to coexist,” explained Todd Howland, former UN Human Rights Representative in Colombia.

results, due to factors that are beyond their own control.

To reach substantive equality of outcomes between groups may require provision of additional resources, access to services, affirmative action or temporary special measures that take account of current differences and historical discrimination.

As the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) has established, gender equality:

“...requires that women be given an equal start and that they be empowered by an enabling environment to achieve equality of results. It is not enough to guarantee women treatment that is identical to men. Rather, biological as well as socially and culturally constructed differences between women and men must be taken into account.”

Today, the trend of rising inequalities in income and wealth in many countries around the world is a key challenge, potentially undermining the recognition that all people are created ‘equal in dignity and rights.’ The wealthiest one percent of the world population now owns almost half of the world’s wealth. The rise of economic inequality represents an extreme concentration of power and resources in the hands of the few which potentially undermines the commitment to equality included in the 2030 Agenda.

The imperative to leave no one behind depends on the promotion and protection of the human rights principle of equality in both opportunities and outcomes. A rights-based approach recognizes where different groups need additional targeted support to overcome structural barriers and reach equitable outcomes.

Conclusion

From the extraordinary vision agreed in 2015, governments gathered at the 2019 High Level Political Forum will have a chance to reflect on how their achievements have honored the commitment to ‘*Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality*’, and the imperative of ‘leaving no one behind.’

The 2019 theme is a reminder that the transformational promise of the 2030 Agenda can only be achieved with the respect, protection and fulfilment of human rights. Empowerment is not meaningful unless it is grounded in enabling people to claim their rights. Inclusion must focus not only on including everyone, but on targeting structural patterns of discrimination. Furthermore, achieving equality for all will require taking account not only differences and historical discrimination but addressing the emerging inequalities that would otherwise undermine the path towards more sustainable development.

With the most pivotal decade of SDG implementation ahead of us, building greater integration and coherence between the development and human rights agendas will be key.

Human rights are not only a guide on the right way to achieve SDG implementation, but the smart way to accelerate more sustainable and equitable development.

This year and every year, the promotion and protection of human rights, empowers people to stand up for themselves and for each other, for equality, and for inclusive societies. This is how the power of human rights can foster and accelerate a transformative development agenda.

Empowerment, Inclusion and Equality in the SDGs under review in 2019

At the 2019 High-Level Political Forum, governments will assess progress in achieving empowerment, inclusion and equality, as part of the SDG implementation review. The HLPF will also review progress in achieving five SDGs: education (SDG4), decent work (SDG 8), equality (SDG 10), good governance, peace and justice (SDG 16) and global partnership (SDG 17). All of these SDGs are closely linked to human rights, including both economic, social and cultural rights and civil and political rights. A wealth of human rights resources built up within the human rights system at national, regional and global levels are available to guide states in empowering people and ensuring inclusion and equality through their implementation.

SDG 4: Education is critical to empowerment, inclusion and equality, unlocking human potential and achieving social transformation. The right to education means that every person is equally entitled to free, quality, inclusive education without any kind of discrimination. Minimum standards of adequacy, accessibility, availability, and appropriateness of education for all, need to be guaranteed by the state as part of a commitment to equality.

SDG 8: Decent work is closely related to the human right to work and the right to just and favourable conditions, which aims to secure equal opportunities for all without discrimination and to empower workers to organize and participate in the decisions that affect them. One of the most persistent forms of discrimination at work is gender inequality. To achieve equal pay for equal work for women and men means addressing discrimination in pay gaps, career advancement gaps and providing social protection that support working families, especially for women who bear the burden of unpaid care work.

SDG 10: Empowerment, inclusion and equality are at risk in a context of the persistence of discrimination in laws, policies and social practices, as well as by the rise in wealth inequality within and between countries, which it makes it more difficult to build inclusive economies for all groups as envisioned in the SDGs. It is critical to implement the SDG targets under SDG 10 to dismantle discrimination, as well as the structural barriers that limit opportunities and benefits for marginalized groups while also challenging the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the few. It also requires realizing economic, social and cultural rights for all, including the right to social protection in times of economic crisis and the rights to participation for all including the excluded.

SDG 13: Addressing the climate crisis is will also need the participation of the people most affected, with a particular focus that puts the most affected and vulnerable groups first – especially since those who have contributed the least to creating the climate crisis are often the most vulnerable to its affects and the least able to protect themselves.

SDG 16: To achieve empowerment, inclusion and equality, participation and the enhanced engagement of civil society organizations, human rights defenders, and ordinary citizens will be critical. SDG 16 targets are closely linked to human rights through commitments for the elimination of discrimination, securing participation so that everyone's voice is heard, through inclusive institutions, accountability and access to justice that can also help to secure inclusive and equal opportunities for all people.

SDG 17: The right to development requires a more equitable and participatory international system, with implications for fairer regimes on aid, trade, debt and investment. The human rights commitments to international cooperation also aim to secure the mobilization of resources for the less developed states, which should help to deliver on Agenda 2030 for a more sustainable world. Ensuring that the maximum available resources to realize human rights will also require addressing the issues of illicit financial flows and tax avoidance.