



# What can be done to address intersecting inequalities?

## Social justice post-2015

Andrew Norton; Chiara Mariotti; Andrew Shepherd; Naila Kabeer



### Key messages

- The success of the post-2015 framework should be measured and judged by the effectiveness of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in motivating action to help the most marginalised and disadvantaged people: those who face intersecting inequalities.
- Effective action to address intersecting inequalities requires social and political mobilisation for social justice as much as technocratic shifts in aid and policy formulation. However, this briefing paper shows that there are interventions and policies that can make an impact and trigger transformative change. It also shows that efforts to address intersecting inequalities need not wait for the complete transformation of entire societies.
- The measurement of progress towards all of the SDGs and their targets should focus on the most marginalised people who face multiple disadvantages. This could be done by tracking the progress of those living at the bottom 5%, 10% and 20% of the income distribution and introducing indicators that focus specifically on their needs across all goals and targets.

Written by Andrew Norton, Head of Research at ODI ([a.norton@odi.org.uk](mailto:a.norton@odi.org.uk)), Chiara Mariotti, Research Officer ([c.mariotti@odi.org.uk](mailto:c.mariotti@odi.org.uk)), Andrew Shepherd, Director of Chronic Poverty Advisory Network at ODI ([a.shepherd@odi.org.uk](mailto:a.shepherd@odi.org.uk)) and Naila Kabeer, Professor of Gender and Development (London School of Economics and Political Science).

Debates around the content of the post-2015 agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have generated a growing global interest in inequality. This briefing paper sets out what can be done to ensure that both

policy action and politics at the national level address the multiple inequalities faced by marginalised people, and proposes the global monitoring of progress towards social justice through an internationally recognised framework.

ODI Briefings present information, analysis and key policy recommendations on important development and humanitarian topics.

All ODI Briefings are available from [odi.org](http://odi.org)

## Introduction

Inequality is taking a prominent place in debates about the post-2015 development agenda. Most notably, the Open Working Group draft of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) outlines an ambitious approach to the issue with a dedicated goal backed by specific targets. There are emerging discussions around the relative significance of ‘vertical’ inequality (based on measured outcomes at household level, such as income), versus ‘horizontal’ or group-based inequality, with particular groups of people lagging behind as a result of social exclusion.

Data that show rising wealth and income inequality within countries tend to reflect one dimension of vertical inequality – namely sharp rises in elite incomes and wealth (Piketty, 2014; Lakner and Milanovic, 2013). At the same time, horizontal, group-based inequalities create powerful barriers to equality of opportunity and of development outcomes. While the effects of horizontal inequalities are not restricted to the poorest, it is the most disadvantaged people who face the most serious impacts to their well-being. Such inequalities also block the social cohesion needed for dynamic economies and amplify the risk of conflict.

A third approach goes beyond vertical and horizontal inequalities to examine ‘intersecting inequalities’ (Kabeer, 2010). This approach captures the combination of multiple disadvantages that affect certain categories of people – those whose very identity is subject to deep inequalities. This is the case with the forms of identity that are ascribed from birth and are relatively immutable; such as race, caste, ethnicity and gender. A person can have more than one of these identity ‘markers’ and any or all of them can imply some form of disadvantage (e.g. an indigenous woman living in a remote rural location). These combined disadvantages leave some individuals and groups more constrained in their life chances than others, and more likely to suffer magnified deprivation.

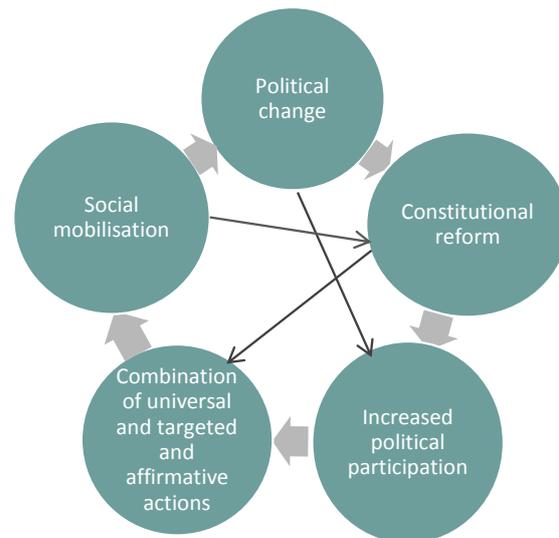
A review of countries that have made significant progress in addressing intersecting inequalities reveals five enabling factors:

- social movements that demand changes in the ‘rules of the game’
- political trajectories and
- processes of constitutional reform that allow such changes
- greater political participation
- policies and programs that show commitment to reduce intersecting inequalities over time e.g. social guarantees and affirmative action (Paz Arauco et al., 2014).

While this suggests that addressing intersecting inequalities requires social and political mobilisation alongside technocratic shifts in aid and policy formulation, this briefing paper shows that it is possible to identify areas of intervention and policies that can make an impact and trigger change for social justice. In other words, efforts to address intersecting inequalities need not wait for the complete transformation of entire societies.

This briefing paper also reviews the inequality goal in the SDGs framework. In particular, it explores the

Figure 1: Essentials of addressing intersecting inequalities



appropriate balance in terms of goals and policies between horizontal and vertical inequality and proposes adjustments to allow a stronger focus on overcoming intersecting inequalities.

### What can be done to address intersecting inequalities?

The model in Figure 1 suggests that social mobilisation contributes to political change, which in turn generates new constitutions, new sectoral policies that combine universal and targeted measures and more space for political participation. Country examples include Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Ethiopia, India, Nepal and Pakistan (for more details see Paz Arauco et al., 2014).

### Trajectories of political change that promote equity and inclusion

The experiences of countries that have made progress in tackling intersecting inequalities can be summarised as reflecting two main types of political trajectories.

First, governments with a strong inclusive and redistributive agenda combined with class-based social mobilisation. In Brazil and Ecuador, for example, governments have developed linkages with social movements that had strong constituencies in marginal ethnic groups as a strategy to build electoral support.

Second, multi-ethnic countries in which movement-based governments result from identity-group mobilisation. Bolivia, Ethiopia, and Nepal all have movement-based governments that are expressions of the multi-ethnic character of their societies. In Bolivia, the excluded ethnic majority of indigenous people managed – eventually – to elect one of their leaders as President. In Ethiopia, the ruling political coalition of the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) is an alliance between the main ethnic groups (Tigray, Oromo and Amhara) that has progressively co-opted and included some

---

previously excluded ethnic minorities in decision-making. Nepal emerged from a Maoist rebellion that recruited disadvantaged ethnic groups with a government committed to tackle their exclusion through affirmative action.

What can be done: while the two trajectories above are not exclusive or deterministic, the implication is that certain political arrangements enable the implementation of policies that promote equity and inclusion. These arrangements are most likely to be achieved when governments develop national projects that can carry a broad consensus around progressive policies, when they are supported by a coalition of political parties and social movements to deliver those projects, when they enable social mobilisation and when they keep opening spaces for civil society.

### Social movements and social mobilisation

Long-term developmental political or policy projects capable of reducing deep-rooted identity-based inequalities will usually have their roots in social mobilisation and social movements that have succeeded in linking to political power. Social mobilisation can work either as a threat factor or as an incentive, via electoral consequences, for democratically-elected governments. The results can include new and more inclusive policies, the opening of spaces of participatory democracy and even a rewriting of the ‘rules of the game’ in the form of a new Constitution.

In Ecuador, a well-organised social movement was first able to bring down three governments and then mobilise nationwide electoral and political support for a new President, Rafael Correa, who promised a political project that recognised the country’s pluri-national character. In Brazil, the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) governing party has maintained strong and systematic links to social movements as a result of historical political alliances. Bolivia’s success in reducing inequalities is the result, in large part, of a long process of mobilisation by the indigenous population, culminating in the election of one of their own – Evo Morales – as President in 2005, followed by the adoption of a new Constitution.

What can be done: continued social mobilisation is vital to ensure that progressive governments remain so and live up to their promises. This is achieved if such governments create and maintain links with civil society, including with marginalised groups, and open spaces for consultation and collaboration around policy making based on reasonably open information flows.

### Constitutions: moments of change

Progressive governments that are underpinned by long term social mobilisation often use constitutional change to mark the passage to new political discourse and policy making. The writing or re-writing of the constitution is a key moment where social transformation that favours highly marginalised groups and addresses deep historical inequities can be set in motion.

In Bolivia (2009), the rewriting of the Constitution was the culmination of years of mobilisation of indigenous

groups for the recognition of their rights – mobilisation that had become increasingly politicised with the affirmation of formal democracy. The revised Constitution incorporates the indigenous worldview through the concept of *Buen Vivir* (Living Well), with social responsibility, social, economic and environmental rights and harmony with nature becoming the fundamental principles for nation-building. Indeed, to guarantee *Buen Vivir*, nature itself is granted rights and the State is made responsible for its protection and rejuvenation.

What can be done: the depth of the transformation triggered by a new Constitution depends on the nature of the coalition of forces that brought it about, while its effectiveness depends on the willingness of present and future political coalitions to turn constitutional reforms into laws, policies and provisions that are actually implemented. Maximising the potential for transformation requires, on one side, the need to ‘get right’ the detail of constitutional provisions and follow-up legislation, and on the other, the need to maximise spaces for consultation with civil society. The more this consultation is allowed to challenge the existing social, economic and political order, the more likely it is that any ensuing reforms will bring about transformative and equalising change.

### Increased political participation

New Constitutions can (under the right conditions) offer a political moment to set aside the traditional political structures in favour of a more participatory process where both civil society organisations and traditionally marginalised groups can find more space and voice.

India’s Constitution was amended substantially in the 1990s to allow women, Scheduled Caste and Tribes special political quotas in local self-governance, effectively increasing their local political participation (Nayaran, 2009). Nepal’s Interim Constitution established a proportional system for the election of the Constituent Assembly that guaranteed the representation of marginal groups, particularly of Dalits and women.

In Latin America, constitutional change has included the introduction of mechanisms to promote decentralisation and the participation of civil society in policy making. Ecuador’s ‘Citizen’s Revolution’, for example, demanded recognition of the country’s pluri-national character and the creation of institutional space for citizens’ participation. This was backed by consultation with 4,000 citizens from different socioeconomic, racial and generational backgrounds who were invited to make policy recommendations for the Plan Nacional Para el Buen Vivir 2009-2013. In Brazil, the PT promoted participatory budgeting (most famously in Porto Alegre) and the creation of national and local consultative bodies, with half of the representatives drawn from civil society, to advise the government on sectoral policies and specific issues.

What can be done: constitutional change can generate mechanisms that encourage the political participation of civil society and, in particular, of disadvantaged groups.

---

The mechanisms depend on context, but may include a proportional electoral system, decentralisation, and the involvement of civil society and local governments in policy discussion through conferences and councils.

## Policies that reduce exclusion and inequality

Beyond political participation, governments that are committed to tackling inequalities tend to pursue a combination of universal and targeted or affirmative action measures.

Bolivia, Ethiopia and Nepal, for example, have mixed universal and targeted policies and other measures. In Ethiopia, universal provision of public services has been mediated by the arrangements for fiscal decentralisation, which have had a strong focus on support for the poorest regions and local governments. In addition, some universal measures have built-in provisions for the poorest people, such as the Productive Safety Nets Programme (PSNP), providing social assistance for the poorest households that cannot take part in the public works components of the programme.

Brazil and Ecuador have both had a preference for universal measures, focusing on the inclusion of groups that were once excluded and that face multiple disadvantages. Social programmes have occupied a central place in policy making in both countries, with public expenditure increasing from 4.8% to 7.7% of GDP between 1990 and 2008 in Brazil, and several significant new programmes in Ecuador since 2006. One key innovation has been Brazil's 'Active Search', designed to go the last mile in ensuring that excluded groups benefit from social policies: professional teams actively seek out people in extreme poverty through door-to-door visits and register them in a single national register managed at the level of municipal institutions.

Affirmative action creates opportunities for socioeconomic and political mobility for individuals from groups that experience exclusion and discrimination. Indeed, in terms of group cohesion and group progress, affirmative action is an indispensable – if not the only – policy tool. Empirical findings show that affirmative action has generally reduced inter-group inequality and favoured political stability in such countries as Brazil, India, Malaysia and South Africa. But even in these cases, large disparities among groups remain, while improvements still need to be made to the integrationist policies that are necessary to achieve good relationships among groups (Brown et al., 2012).

**What can be done:** the tension between universal and targeted approaches can be resolved by targeting basic transfers in cash or kind to those in greatest need, while ensuring universal access to the basic services that are needed by all. Affirmative-action measures should not be seen as a substitute for strong general policies and their implementation; they should also be monitored and recorded to ensure that gains for one social category do not lead to losses for another.

Universal, targeted and affirmative-action measures can be difficult to expand to scale and implement over the long term. On the one hand, progress can be achieved by focusing on just one good programme that then works as entry point for subsequent interventions – the PSNP in Ethiopia can be seen as an example of this. On the other hand, these measures are most likely to succeed if they are grounded in a legislative framework that recognises the rights of minorities and marginalised groups.

## Addressing inequality in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

This section reviews whether the current version of the post-2015 SDGs will be adequate to address intersecting inequalities, and how the framework can be improved to establish global norms and encourage action on social justice at the country level.

In June 2014, the Open Working Group (OWG) released the 'Introduction and Proposed Goals and Targets on Sustainable Development for the Post 2015 Development Agenda' (UN, 2014), which proposes 17 SDGs to be attained by 2030, with 169 associated targets. Goal 10 tackles inequality: *Reduce Inequality within and between countries*.

The overall approach to inequality in the SDGs, and particularly in Goal 10, combines a concern with vertical and horizontal inequality. Goal 10 focuses primarily on orthodox measures of inequality: its headline target (10.1: *by 2030 progressively achieve and sustain income growth of the bottom 40% of the population at a rate higher than the national average*) is a measure of vertical inequality based on consumption/income data at the household level. This target would be much more relevant to disadvantaged groups if the focus was on those in the lowest 5%, 10% and 20% of the income distribution, rather than – or as well as – those in the bottom 40%.

Many other goals contain targets that are clearly relevant to the reduction of both vertical and horizontal inequalities, such as achieving universal health coverage, ending all preventable child deaths (under Goal 3), universal, free and equitable access to quality primary and secondary education (Goal 4), ending discrimination against women and girls (Goal 5) and providing universal access to identity documentation (Goal 16). The majority of targets with clear inequality content are framed in terms of universal access to a service (e.g. basic education) or universal achievement of a state of well-being (e.g. ending all preventable child deaths). A quick review suggests that 24 targets fall into this category. If realised they would act to reduce both vertical (individual/household) and horizontal (group-based) inequality in relation to some outcome dimension, such as health or education.<sup>1</sup>

A smaller group of targets contain clear and more explicit reference to group-based inequality, by either

---

<sup>1</sup> By our reckoning targets 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 1.5, 2.1, 2.2, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.6, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 6.1, 7.1, 7.4, 8.5, 10.1, 10.4, 11.2, 16.2, 16.6, 16.7 belong to this category.

---

referencing such a group (13 targets) or by advancing a principle (e.g. ending discrimination and stigma) that acts to reduce group-based disadvantage (1 target).<sup>2</sup> Gender is, by far, the most frequently mentioned group-based disadvantage, referenced in 11 targets. By contrast, disability is referenced just three times, and ethnicity, indigeneity and religion just once each. Some significant forms of group-based inequality, such as caste, are not mentioned at all.

On the positive side, there is much in the SDGs that could be drawn on by social and political movements normatively to support claims for fair treatment for groups affected by intersecting inequalities. The introduction of a much broader prospectus for universal service access (including governance services such as citizen registration or access to information) has the potential to be transformative. At the national level, this suggests that focused action is necessary – perhaps engaging a range of actors behind a single strategic objective, as seen in the social mobilisation that spurred the establishment of India’s National Employment Guarantee Scheme (Paz Arauco et al., 2014).

While the emphasis on both vertical and horizontal inequality in the SDGs is appropriate, both dimensions could be stronger. Specifically, four key elements could strengthen the traction of the SDGs framework in reducing intersecting inequalities.

- Measuring progress towards the goals and targets will offer the broadest opportunity to include the most marginalised and disadvantaged in the international framework. Focusing on those in the bottom 5%, 10% and 20% of the income distribution across all relevant targets will help to bring the inequalities agenda to the fore. At the moment, targets mention particular groups rather haphazardly, as described above.
- The changes required to address intersecting inequalities will not be achieved in a hurry: they require progress over a period of time. It will be useful to set ‘stepping stone targets’ at the national level that address measurable group-based disparities in context

(e.g. the gap in educational attainment between girls in marginalised livelihood groups and boys in urban centres) and set targets for the progressive narrowing of the gaps (Watkins, 2014).

- There is clear scope to strengthen the ability of information systems to pick up group-based inequalities in many countries and contexts, which would enable the tracking of how effectively different policies or programmes reach groups affected by intersecting inequalities. This can be encouraged through the development of appropriate indicators that focus on marginalised groups across the goals and targets, as well as the development of sampling methodologies, levels of disaggregation and questionnaire design.
- There is one vital area that the formulation of the OWG does not yet fully address, or does so in too generic a way: secure and equitable access to land, which remains a very significant resource for people who face multiple social and economic disadvantages and whose rights to natural resources tend to be only weakly recognised. Given the importance of land to the poorest people we suggest a target to ensure that the poorest 5% 10% and 20% of rural and urban households have access to sufficient land and/or housing to secure a basic standard of life and social status. How countries operationalise this will, of course, vary considerably.

The scope and breadth of the SDGs in their current form will pose real challenges for generating coherent action (Norton et al., 2014). Inevitably, effective policies to tackle intersecting inequalities – and the politics that ensure they are applied in a durable way – will be specific to particular countries. Global monitoring will be important, therefore, to track what is happening in terms of effective action and progress at the national and local level. Ultimately, the effectiveness of the SDGs in motivating action to address the situation of people who are the most marginalised and who face multiple disadvantages must be seen as one of the key criteria by which to measure and judge the success of the post-2015 development framework.

---

<sup>2</sup> Targets 2.3, 4.5, 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, 5.4, 5.5, 5.6, 6.2, 8.4, 8.8, 10.2, 10.6 all mention specific disadvantaged social categories or groups (including gender, ethnicity, migrants, pastoralists, people with disabilities, slum dwellers and indigenous peoples). Target 10.3 refers to the elimination of discrimination without reference to any specific group. We have not included children in the ‘group’ count as we are interested for this purpose in immutable social status categories that are vulnerable to discrimination and disadvantage and from which graduation is difficult.

---

## References

- Brown, G., Langer, A., and Stewart, F. (2012) *Affirmative Action in Plural Societies: International Experiences*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kabeer, N. (2010) *Can the MDGs provide a pathway to social justice? The challenge of intersecting inequalities*. Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, MDG Achievement Fund.
- Lakner, C. and Milanovic, B. (2013) *Global Income Distribution: From the Fall of the Berlin Wall to the Great Recession*. World Bank Policy Research Paper 6719. Washington D.C.: The World Bank.
- Narayan, D. (ed.) (2009) *Moving Out of Poverty: The Promise of Empowerment and Democracy in India*. Washington D.C.: The World Bank; Palgrave Macmillan UK.
- Norton, A., Scott, A., Lucci, P., Avis, W. (2014) *Taking the Sustainable Development Goals from 'Main Basis' to Effective Vision – What's the Roadmap?* ODI Working Paper 402. London: Overseas Development Institute.
- Paz Arauco, V., Gazdar, H., Hevia-Pacheco, P., Kabeer, N., Lenhardt, A., Masood, S. Q., Naqvi, H., Nayak, N., Norton, A., Sabharwal, N. S., Scalise, E., Shepherd, A., Thapa, D., Thorat, S., Hien Tran, D., Vergara-Camus, L., Woldehanna, T., Mariotti, C. (2014) *Strengthening social justice to address intersecting inequalities post-2015*. ODI Report. London: Overseas Development Institute.
- Piketty, T. (2014) *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Boston, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- UN (2014) 'Introduction And Proposed Goals And Targets On Sustainable Development For The Post 2015 Development Agenda'. Zero Draft rev. 1. New York: United Nations. Available at: <http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/4523zerodraft.pdf>
- Watkins, K. (2014) 'Leaving no one behind: an agenda for equity'. *The Lancet*, Vol 383, 9 May 2014.



Overseas Development Institute  
203 Blackfriars Road  
London SE1 8NJ  
Tel +44 (0)20 7922 0300  
Fax +44 (0)20 7922 0399  
[www.odi.org](http://www.odi.org)  
[info@odi.org](mailto:info@odi.org)

ODI is the UK's leading independent think tank on international development and humanitarian issues.

Readers are encouraged to reproduce material for their own publications, as long as they are not being sold commercially. As copyright holder, ODI requests due acknowledgement and a copy of the publication. For online use, we ask readers to link to the original resource on the ODI website. The views presented in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of ODI or our partners.

© Overseas Development Institute 2014. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial Licence (CC BY-NC 3.0).

ISSN: 2052-7160

Front page image: The Advocacy Project: Lahan Vegetable Market.