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'Leaving no one behind' as a site of contestation and reinterpretation

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ABSTRACT

One of the most important elements of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs is the strong commitment to inclusive development, and 'leaving no one behind' has emerged as a central theme of the agenda. How did this consensus come about? And what does this term mean and how is it being interpreted? This matters because the influence of SDGs on policy and action of governments and stakeholders in development operates through discourse. So the language used in formulating the UN Agenda is a terrain of active contestation. This paper aims to explain the politics that led to this term as a core theme. It argues that LNOB was promoted to frame the SDG inequality agenda as inclusive development, focusing on the exclusion of marginalized and vulnerable groups from social opportunities, deflecting attention from the core issues of distribution of income and wealth, and the challenge of 'extreme inequality'. The term is adequately vague so as to accommodate wide ranging interpretations. Through a content analysis of LNOB in 43 VNRs, the paper finds that the majority of country strategies identify LNOB as priority to the very poor, and identify it with a strategy for social protection. This narrow interpretation does not respond to the ambition of the 2030 Agenda for transformative change, and the principles of human rights approaches laid out.

Keywords: Sustainable development, UN 2030 Agenda, Voluntary National Reviews, Inequality, Governance by Indicators, Leaving No One Behind

JEL Classification: O1, O2, I3

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'Leaving no one behind' as a site of contestation and reinterpretation

1 Introduction

'Leave no one behind' (LNOB) has emerged as a central theme, a kind of call to action, of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2030 Agenda (UN 2015). What does this term mean as a concept and how is it being interpreted? Is it mere rhetoric or a core principle that is shaping priorities and strategies of stakeholders in implementing the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development? This paper focuses on the competition over competing ideas in negotiating and implementing the SDGs. Ideas that drive the discourse of development do not appear from nowhere. Dominant ideas emerge through a process of contestation in the marketplace of competing ideas. The process of contestation over the SDGs can thus be thought of as a battle over the control of the discourse of international development.

The LNOB agenda responds to the demand to include inequality in the SDG framework. While there was agreement that inequality had to be an important element, the contestation was about how inequality should be interpreted and structured within the SDG framework and the 2030 Declaration. This paper reviews first the origins of the LNOB agenda in the formulation of the SDGs, and secondly how it is being interpreted by countries as reflected in their Voluntary National Reports (VNRs). It argues that LNOB was promoted to frame the SDG inequality agenda as inclusive development, focusing on the exclusion of marginalized and vulnerable groups from social opportunities, deflecting attention from the core issues of distribution of income and wealth, and the challenge of 'extreme inequality'. As implementation proceeds, countries are taking up the LNOB principle in different ways. A content analysis of the 43 Voluntary National Reports (VNRs) presented in 2017 shows that while the principle is mentioned as a principle by virtually all countries, many reports do not include implementation plans, and those that do have narrow agendas in the range of groups considered vulnerable and excluded, and in the policy measures being considered.

2 LNOB and inequality in the 2030 Agenda

At face value, the 2030 Agenda would appear to contain a strong commitment to reducing inequality. While LNOB is a central theme of the entire Agenda, one of the 17 Goals (goal 10) is to "Reduce inequality within and among countries" (UN 2015). However, as many commentators remarked as soon as the SDGs were adopted in 2015, the inequality goal in fact has no target to reduce the unequal distribution of income and wealth, and it does not include an indicator that would show whether a country's level of economic inequality declined over the period 2015-2030 (Anderson 2016, MacNaughton 2017, Fukuda-Parr forthcoming). There is also no target or indicator on reducing income inequality amongst countries.

Goal 10 includes 10 targets and 11 indicators. The leading target on economic inequality (target 10.1) is worded as follows: "by 2030, progressively achieve and sustain income growth of the bottom 40% of the population at a rate higher than the national average" (UN 2015). The accompanying indicator is the income growth of the lowest 40% of population and that of total population. This is essentially a target for inclusive growth, and it originates from the World Bank's "shared prosperity" agenda, the organization's flagship mission. As a rationale for the use of this indicator of shared prosperity in the SDGs, the World Bank and the Statistics Division of the UN's Department of Economics and Social Affairs note that it, "recognizes that while growth is necessary for improving economic welfare in a society, progress is measured by how those gains are shared with its poorest members".¹ This indicator is defined as one that is unbounded, in the sense

1 See UN Statistics metadata (United Nations n.d.). <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/metadata/files/Metadata-10-01-01.pdf> accessed July 7, 2018

that there is no specific target (or limit) for what the growth rate of the bottom 40 percent ought to be. The absence in this framework of other more used distributional indicators – such as the Gini coefficient or the share of top and bottom percentile income groups in the national income and wealth distribution – is striking. The only indicator that comes close to monitoring economic inequality is the wage share of the national income.

On the other hand, the target and indicator list contain two clear targets for addressing horizontal inequality – exclusion of groups based on “sex, disability, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic and other status” – with respect to socio-economic opportunities and political voice, and strengthening social protection (targets 10.2, 10.3, 10.4). However, these are also open-ended and broadly worded. Curiously the indicator narrows down this target to only economic inclusion, with attention to exclusion by sex, age and persons with disabilities, thus ignoring social and political inclusion, and exclusion by race, ethnicity, origin, religion.

With respect to inequality amongst countries, there is no target that directly addresses disparities in income nor indicators such as GDP per capita that are conventionally used to track North-South ‘convergence’. However, there are six targets that address global issues that are important for developing countries relating to migration, ODA, technology, trade, and voice of developing countries in global economic institutions. But these are very weak and incomplete targets that are vaguely worded and are open-ended, lacking any quantitative milestones to be achieved by 2030. Moreover, several targets point to reforms in national policy, not in global agreements. For example, while access to technology is a major constraint for developing countries, targets address access to the internet and national policies to support industrial diversification. The indicators to monitor the target are on internet access.

In brief, the set of 10 targets and 11 indicators create an agenda around ‘leaving no one behind’, that focuses on exclusion of the marginalized groups from social, economic, and political participation. The problem of between country inequalities is marginalized while within country distribution of income and wealth is off the agenda. Somehow, the goal to reduce inequality within and between countries has evolved into an agenda for ending poverty through the reinterpretation of the goal to targets and to indicators. While the indicators and targets focus on inclusive development, LNOB plays a central role in articulating the narrative. How did this come about? In a forthcoming paper in *Global Policy Journal* (Fukuda-Parr forthcoming), I provide an account of the origins of the inequality agenda. Here I provide a brief summary to explain how LNOB can be understood in the context of the contestation over the inequality norm in SDG negotiations.

3 Origins of LNOB in SDG negotiations

LNOB was an idea put forward in the report of the High Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post 2015 Agenda (UN High Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post 2015 Agenda 2013). Its significance must be understood in the broader context of the contestation over two visions of development: continuation of the MDG agenda or “MDG+”, or a reset to a new agenda for ‘sustainable development’ as envisioned in the UN Conferences on Environment and Development (UNCED) or the ‘Rio process’.

The process and two competing visions of development

The 2030 Agenda was elaborated through two parallel UN processes. The first was the “Open Working Group” of the General Assembly (GA) that was mandated by the Rio+20 Conference on Environment and Sustainable Development to elaborate the SDGs including social, economic, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. This process met 13 times from March 2013 to July 2014 and elaborated a list of 17 goals and 169 targets that was then adopted² by the GA in September 2015. The second was the ‘Post-2015’ process set up by the UN Secretary General (SG) to elaborate

² Modification was limited to some minor editorial corrections.

a development agenda to follow the expiry of the MDGs. This process included a wide range of open consultations amongst stakeholders and a High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons (HLPEP) which was appointed to develop a proposal for the new agenda. Their report submitted in May 2013, as well as reports of multiple other consultations and processes served as inputs to the OWG process.

The two processes were very distinct in their politics; the OWG was state led and continued the momentum of the Rio+20 process on environment and development while the Post 2015 process was more technocratic, orchestrated by the SG with the support of UN technocrats. They were also very different in their thinking: the Rio+20 promoted sustainable development, a non-mainstream vision of development that would change the present course and address exclusion, inequality, and environmental destruction. The Post-2015 process was a follow up to the MDGs, which was an agenda driven by aid donors for development cooperation priorities (which is not the same as an agenda for national and global development). The HLPEP in particular set out to continue the MDG poverty agenda with some adjustments, addressing the criticisms by removing some redundant elements and adding neglected ones (Fukuda-Parr forthcoming).

While the goals and targets were negotiated in the OWG, the indicators were left to a 'technocratic process', the Inter-agency and Expert Group on SDGs (IAEG-SDG) created by the Statistical Commission. This group is comprised of national statistical offices, supported by the UN Statistical Division, while other agencies, civil society, businesses, and academia are invited for consultations. The indicator list was approved in March 2017, though as a framework that would accommodate further evolution.

Inequality in the SDG agenda

One of the major tensions in the formulation of the new agenda centered around inequality. While there was no question that inequality had to be in the agenda, the disagreements were about how to incorporate it. The key negotiating point was whether there would be a stand-alone goal. Most developing countries supported a stand-alone goal, and in the final stages, the G-77 and China unified behind it, and most developed countries opposed it. The argument was redundancy and the need to reduce the number of goals in the SDG framework; the main objective was to achieve zero in reaching the poverty targets and this could be reflected in goals for income poverty, education, health, and others. For the developing countries, reducing inequality between countries was a core objective that could not be abandoned. Civil society groups including prominent academics also argued in favor of an inequality goal. Some focused on social exclusion and horizontal inequality which responded to their poverty and identity-based inclusion mandates. But many were also concerned with extreme inequality as both morally objectionable as well as corrosive to economic growth, social stability, and democracy (see for example Stiglitz and Doyle 2014, statements of Women's Major Groups, and letter signed by 90 academics).

By the time the process started, it was clear that inequality had to be part of the Post-2015 agenda and included in the SDG framework. Inequality could not be avoided since its omission from the MDGs had been highly criticized, and as it was a major issue of the times. Inequality was on the increase and 'extreme inequality' gained attention amongst academics as well as policy makers. Social movements across the world protested the capture of the economy by the 1%. Even the World Economic Forum suggested that inequality ranked first as a major threat to social peace and economic stability. The question was therefore about how to include it in the SDG framework – as a stand-alone goal or as a theme spread across the goals, and on how to interpret inequality.

The thematic consultations on inequality, led by UNICEF and UN Women and involved multiple stakeholders from governments and civil society, recommended a stand-alone goal on reducing inequality. However, the HLPEP did not include an inequality goal, but LNOB was a prominent theme. The argument for a poverty focused inequality agenda can be understood in the context of the vision of developed countries that saw the SDGs as an aid agenda. A goal on inequality for donors would be a distraction, raising issues domestically, related to rising extreme inequality and critique of the prevailing economic system.

Origins of the LNOB concept and inequality as a poverty concern

LNOB first emerged from a report from the UK based charity Save the Children, ‘Ending Poverty within Our Generation: Save the Children’s vision for a post-2015 framework’ (Save the Children 2012) that was published, soon after the post-2015 discussions opened. It was soon picked up and brought into the HLPEP debates as part of the MDG+ agenda promoted by co-chair David Cameron: ‘to go to zero’ by setting targets for universal achievement³. This was an extension of the MDGs and a corrective to one of the widespread criticisms of the MDGs as an unambitious agenda that sought to reduce, not eradicate poverty. Thus the Save the Children report proposed ten goals each of which would be achieved universally.

However, as explained above, the OWG process, led by states and with the strong influence of civil society, was dominated by an alternative strategy for sustainable development. While the HLPF report was submitted in May 2012, the OWG proceeded without much regard for it. In fact, there was a push back to that report by many delegations because the process that produced was not owned by the states, and because the narrow poverty agenda did not resonate with their broader vision of development⁴. This alternative did not reject poverty goals and LNOB but promoted a broader and deeper agenda.

Method of measurement reinterprets the inequality goal

While the inequality goal was in and out of the several drafts of the proposed SDG list, it was included in the final list, largely due to the support from the developing countries. Yet the framework focuses on poverty and did not include a target nor indicators on the distribution of income and wealth, particularly extreme inequality. From early on, the World Bank proposed and vigorously defended its shared prosperity target, backed by most of the developed countries. While many of the UN bodies technical briefing inputs (UNICEF, UN Women, UNDP, UNOHCHR 2013), and some agencies (UNOHCHR in particular), as well as civil society organizations and academics promoted a target for vertical inequality of income and wealth, they did not get traction.

The indicators were another terrain of contestation. During this period, there was considerable debate amongst think tanks and academics about the appropriate measurement. The ‘Palma index’ – the ratio of the top 10% of population’s share of gross national income (GNI), divided by the corresponding share of the poorest 40% - as coined by Cobham and Sumner (Cobham and Sumner 2013) gained traction as the most appropriate measure. The ratio is based on Palma’s observation that data across a wide range of countries show about half of national income captured by the middle five deciles (5-9) and the other half split between the lowest deciles (1-4) and the top decile (10). It is thus more sensitive to changes in the top and bottom of the distribution, in contrast to the Gini coefficient which is driven by shifts in the middle.

There was considerable push back to the shared prosperity indicator during the IAEG consultations. Several country delegations, UN OHCHR, and many civil society groups made counter proposals, most often for the Palma index. Yet there was no real debate and the indicator remained, as it was directly relevant to the target set. No consideration was given to the fact that the indicator does not respond to the core objective of the goal, which is to reduce inequality. Technically, this is clearly recognized. In its background paper for the Expert Group Meeting on the indicator framework for the post-2015 development agenda, the World Bank (2015) recognizes that this indicator of “shared prosperity” is not one of inequality in and of itself: “Measuring the income growth of the bottom 40 percent of the population provides no information on how that compares with the income growth of the rest of the population” (World Bank 2015). They argue that despite these limitations, “an impression of inequality can easily be obtained by comparing the shared prosperity indicator with mean income growth (or income growth of the top 60 percent of the population)”. They conclude their

³ Interview with former Save the Children staff and advisory staff of HLPEP Espey.

⁴ Interviews with several officials from delegations and UN agencies who participated in the OWG, June 2016-July 2017.

background paper by noting that, “the shared prosperity measure implicitly places emphasis on changes in inequality in society” (World Bank 2015).

Thus the goal of inequality is reinterpreted by the targets and indicators as an agenda to reduce poverty and exclusion, keeping out issues of distribution of income and wealth, particularly the concentration of both at the top. Similarly, LNOB as an over-arching principle is often thought to be an important commitment to inequality, but its real social agenda focuses on the deprived and marginalized, not on elite power.

4 LNOB in Voluntary National Reports

Meaning of LNOB

Though there is strong consensus on LNOB as a principle, there are multiple ways in which this term can be interpreted. Perhaps it gained traction and achieved consensus only because it is broad and vague and can accommodate multiple perspectives. Moreover, it is clearly focused on the bottom of the distribution and not the top.

UN norms refer to ‘the most marginalized and vulnerable’, a broad concept in the human rights perspective of the most marginalized and vulnerable, referring to individuals, groups and countries, concerned with exclusion from both benefits and voice and development, and requires priority to the furthest behind. The UN Chief Executives Board, that includes the heads of 31 agencies, submitted a joint action plan that emphasizes the following elements:

“equality (the imperative of moving towards substantive equality of opportunity and outcomes for all groups), non-discrimination (the prohibition of discrimination against individuals and groups on the grounds identified in international human rights treaties) and the broader concept of equity (understood as fairness in the distribution of costs, benefits and opportunities). It addresses both horizontal inequalities (between social groups) and vertical inequalities (in income, etc.) and inequalities of both opportunities and outcomes. Intergenerational equity is addressed, as are inequalities among countries.”

UN Chief Executives Board 2016

In the 2030 Agenda, member states pledge that no one will be left behind, and they express a wish to see the Goals and targets met for all nations and peoples and for all segments of society. The document declares that the member states “will endeavour to reach the furthest behind first”. The states furthermore commit to engage in systematic follow up of the Agenda over the next 15 years, as it will “help countries to maximize and track progress in implementing this Agenda in order to ensure that no one is left behind” (UN 2015, para 72). The member states identify a number of principles that will guide the follow-up and review process. One of these principles is that the processes will be people-centred, gender-sensitive, respect human rights and have a particular focus on the poorest, most vulnerable, and those furthest behind (UN 2015, para 74).

Review of 43 countries – LNOB in Voluntary National Reports (VNRs)

To assess how countries interpret LNOB, we carried out a content analysis of 43 Voluntary National Reports submitted in 2017. These reports are self-reporting documents presented by national governments to the UN High Level Political Forum on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda (HLPF). This analysis contributed to and complements a broader study of VNRs by the UN Committee on Development Policy (2018).

The findings are summarized below while Appendices provide more detailed information by country. Overall, most VNRs do not provide much detailed information on how the LNOB principle is being implemented, and whether this reflects mere rhetorical use of the term of a deeper engagement with implementing a transformative strategy.

As shown on Table 1 most (39 out of 43) countries mentioned LNOB but only 16 articulated an implementation strategy.⁵ Others had strategies for social protection and inclusion which could arguably be considered to reflect LNOB and most had a strategy, though only 16 specifically articulate most of those did not use the term LNOB.

Table 1
LNOB in national SDG implementation strategy

	Mentions LNOB		Strategy				
	Yes	No	Connected to LNOB	Social inclusion	Social protection	Mentions putting the last first*	Addresses economic disparity
Developing countries	28	2	12	9	14	4	17
High Income/OECD	11	2	4	9	5	6	11
Total	39	4	16	18	19	10	28

* Includes similar phrasing like “furthest behind” etc.

What policy measures are pursued and how is LNOB conceptualized? How do they reflect some of the important element of the 2030 Agenda with respect to priority for the most deprived, multiple elements of inequality, and the specific groups left behind?

Many countries conceptualize the principle in the national context, giving it particular meaning. For example, Japan included LNOB as a part of its SDGs Implementation Guiding Principles and states “The key phrase of the 2030 Agenda, ‘No one will be left behind,’reflects the concept of human security, for which Japan has been a leading advocate and practitioner.... This notion is in line with Japan’s domestic policies that promote a society where all citizens can participate and play an active role through its Plan for Dynamic Engagement of All Citizens” (Government of Japan 2017). For Panama, LNOB is stated as a guiding principle when prioritizing actions and making strategic decisions, and a plan for “Zero Poverty” articulates state actions in favour for social inclusion. To ensure implementation, the country has established an institutional focal point with “control tower” functions to ensure alignment of policies, plans, programmes, and recommendations to make sure policies contribute to the goal of reducing asymmetries related to age, ethnic, territorial, and other characteristics, and monitor progress (Government of Panama 2017). Kenya (Government of Kenya, Ministry of Devolution and Planning, 2017) emphasizes social protection programmes and as a strategy to implement LNOB but also the important role of decentralization. In response to citizens’ demand for greater inclusion in public decision-making and to make development more inclusive and people-centred, Kenya’s new constitution provides for a major shift towards devolution. The VNR explains how decentralization opened up numerous opportunities that have catalysed local economic development and enhanced focus on more equitable public service delivery across the country. Nigeria’s VNR has a section called “Targeting the Poor and ‘Leaving No one Behind” that highlights the establishment of a “National Social Register” for the poor and vulnerable households as a signature initiative for social inclusion which is also a policy priority of the national plan (Federal Republic of Nigeria 2017).

One of the most significant aspects of the LNOB principle in the 2030 Agenda is the statement to give priority to those furthest behind – or ‘the last first’. This is a human rights principle which, as Robert Chambers pointed out 20 years ago would challenge national governments to rethink policy in significant ways (Chambers 1997). For example, to continue ‘business as usual’ in resource allocation or, to prioritize primary education for neglected ethnic minorities in an isolated rural area which might mean sacrificing tertiary education⁶.

⁵ Analysis by a civil consortium (Kidorny 2018) found consistent results.

⁶ See for elaboration of policy implications Fleurbaey (2018).

As Table 1 shows, only ten countries have explicit reference to putting the last first or reaching those furthest behind. For five OECD countries amongst them, this refers to countries and aid allocations rather than priorities within their own countries. For instance, Belgium states “The Belgian decision to allocate at least 50% of its ODA to Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and fragile states by 2019 is a deliberate choice to address some of the worst forms of inequalities between countries, by focusing its efforts on those countries furthest behind”. The five developing countries - Bangladesh, Chile, Ethiopia, Guatemala, and Thailand – refer to marginalized groups within their own countries. Thailand for example has an explicit strategy through its 12th National Economic and Social Development Plan that envisages a social system and a structure that is just and capable of reducing social disparity with emphasis on helping people with lowest income. The “Thanyaburi Model” and “Tor-Fan” (Dream Weaving) are projects by the Thai Ministry of Social Development and Human Security to address Target 10.1: By 2030, progressively achieve and sustain income growth of the bottom 40 per cent of the population at a rate higher than the national average.

Countries consistently emphasize social protection and investment in their LNOB strategies, reflecting concern with inequality in social opportunities than in economic income and wealth. As shown in Table 1, many VNRs that include LNOB agendas refer to social exclusion and concern with economic inequality. Further analysis by the UN CDP (2018) however found that while 34 of the 39 reports discussed social protection measures, only 5 had explicit reference to macroeconomic measures.

Whom the different countries identify and recognize as being left behind is indicative of how they deal with the concept of LNOB. While the agenda and many of the SDG framework call attention to ensuring inclusion of several different categories of groups that are subject to group-based discrimination and exclusion, most VNRs refer to exclusion on account of gender and age. As shown on Table 2, almost all of them referred to women⁷ and disabled, and many to children, refugees, and elderly, but only 18 mentioned race/ethnicity/religion, and 11 referred to indigenous groups.

While most reports identify groups that are globally recognized as important, some reports fail to mention groups that are highly important in their domestic context. For instance, India only mentions caste one time in their VNR, and it is in the following manner: “In a significant move towards addressing multi-dimensional poverty, data from the Socio Economic Caste Census, 2011 is being used to identify beneficiaries for development programmes based on various deprivations suffered by households. This is aligned with the policy of ensuring that ‘no one is left behind.’” Caste and LNOB is mentioned in the same paragraph, but the connection is weak and caste is not mentioned in any other contexts in the VNR.

In summary, while countries show diverse responses to the LNOB challenge, they consistently identify the concept with stronger social protection and investment. This is a very limited conception of LNOB in contrast to the ambition of the 2030 Agenda and the definition provided by the UN Chief Executives Board. Those commitments call for a transformative change that would require addressing deep rooted systems – economic, social, political – that not only perpetuate inequalities but ‘push people behind’ (Elson 2018)(Committee on Development Policy (CDP), UN 2018). A combination of policies is needed, starting with social policy, but also including fiscal and other macroeconomic policies conducive to equitable and sustainable growth, voice and accountability, and the fulfilment of human rights. The VNRs reviewed tend to neglect economic policies and extreme economic inequalities, institutionalized discrimination against groups, new approaches to putting the last first, and reforms for greater participatory governance.

⁷ The handbook for the preparation of the Voluntary National Reviews states that “Particular attention should be placed on efforts to empower women and girls.” (United Nations 2018).

Table 2

LNOB – who are the groups needing attention⁸?

	Groups excluded								
	Gender	Disability	Children/youth	Refugees/migrants	Elderly	Geog./admin. region	Race/ethnicity/religion	Indigenous	Other (mentioned in more than one country report)
Developing countries	26	23	20	13	15	15	9	7	Widows, PLHIVs, Unemployed
High income/OECD	11	12	6	10	8	7	8	3	LGBT people, people with mental health problems, Roma people
Total	39	37	28	25	23	23	18	11	

5 Interpreting LNOB and the SDG Inequality Agenda

The review of VNRs shows the multiple ways that LNOB can be interpreted. Though the UN Executive Board conceptualizes it as an agenda to address inequality in its many forms, countries clearly focus more narrowly on addressing exclusion of select groups. And while the 2030 Agenda is conceptualized as a multi-sectoral strategy for sustainable development, countries most commonly approach the problem through social protection and social investments, with less attention to the root causes of exclusion in the lack of voice and access to justice, the unequal effects of macroeconomic policies, and more. And while LNOB has a rhetorical force of a transformative agenda that would reverse the course of growing inequality, environmental destruction, and persistent poverty and injustices, the VNRs present LNOB as part of an on-going national policy framework.

The 2030 Agenda relates human rights principles to the commitment to LNOB. Along with principles of participation and non-discrimination, the agenda engages states to give priority to those furthest behind. It therefore sets a high bar for action, to reach all who are deprived and not just raise the national average, and to address institutionalized discrimination. This has huge implications for policies. Such policies are not expressed in the 2017 VNRs, and many of the countries may therefore fail to meet the high bar conditions that comes with the concept of LNOB.

In these ways, the LNOB as a call frames the inequality agenda in the SDGs flexibly, without obliging countries to address difficult issues of discrimination against excluded subaltern groups. At the same time, it also keeps out concern with ‘extreme inequality’ off the table. It is not difficult to see why there would be no objection to LNOB as a core theme of the 2030 Agenda. It is also not surprising that the inequality agenda in the 2030 Agenda contains a set of contradictory elements: a strong commitment to reducing inequality within and between countries as a goal and in the grounding in human rights principles, but weak measures for operationalization in the way that the targets and indicators are set up, with the ambiguous theme of LNOB that is open to broad interpretation.

⁸ Not all countries mention these groups explicitly in relation to LNOB, but the link is communicated and made possible to identify in analysis of report.

Even if LNOB seems to be having limited effect on changing national policy approaches, they are important in framing the discourse of inequality. Bøås and McNeill argue that framing is an effective strategy for powerful actors to exercise hegemonic influence over development policies through dominating the discourse (Boas and McNeill 2003). LNOB frames the inequality agenda as a problem of inclusion to be addressed by relief to the poor. As such it was a successful exercise of framing on the part of those who opposed the inequality agenda. As implementation gets underway, LNOB can be seen as a coup *against* equality. Nonetheless, for advocates of equality, it can also be a window of opportunity for reforms in an otherwise hostile or an indifferent context.

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Appendix 1: LNOB in VNRs

Country	Strategies			
	Mentions LNOB	Connected to LNOB	Social inclusion	Social protection
Afghanistan	No	No	Yes	Yes
Argentina	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Azerbaijan	Yes	No	No	Yes
Bangladesh	Yes	Yes		
Belarus	Yes	No		Yes
<u>Belgium</u>	Yes	Yes		Yes
Belize	Yes	No		Yes
Benin	Yes	No		Yes
Botswana	Yes	No		Yes
Brazil	Yes	No	Yes	
<u>Chile</u>	Yes	Yes		Yes
Costa Rica	Yes	No		
<u>Cyprus</u>	Yes	No	Yes	
<u>Czech Republic</u>	Yes	No	Yes	
<u>Denmark</u>	Yes	No		Yes
El Salvador	Yes	No		
Ethiopia	Yes	Yes		Yes
Guatemala	Yes	No		
Honduras	Yes	No		
India	Yes	No	Yes	
Indonesia	Yes	Yes		Yes
<u>Italy</u>	No	No	Yes	Yes
<u>Japan</u>	Yes	Yes		
Jordan	No	No	Yes	Yes
Kenya	Yes	Yes		Yes
<u>Luxembourg</u>	No	No	Yes	
Malaysia	Yes	Yes		
Maldives	Yes	No		
<u>Monaco</u>	Yes	No	Yes	No
Nepal	Yes	No	Yes	
<u>Netherlands</u>	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Nigeria	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Panama	Yes	Yes		
Peru	Yes	Yes		
<u>Portugal</u>	Yes	No	Yes	
Qatar	Yes	No		Yes
<u>Slovenia</u>	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
<u>Sweden</u>	Yes	No	Yes	
Tajikistan	Yes	No		
Thailand	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Togo	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Uruguay	Yes	Yes		
Zimbabwe	Yes	No		Yes
Total Yes	39	16	18	19

Note: Developed/OECD countries are underlined.

Appendix 2: Groups

Country	Groups not to be left behind													
	Gender	Disability	Children/youth	Refugees/migrants	Elderly	Geog/admin region	Race/ethnicity/religion	Indigenous	Widows	HIV	Unemployed	LBGT	Mental health	Roma
Afghanistan	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
Argentina	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
Azerbaijan	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
Bangladesh	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
Belarus	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
<u>Belgium</u>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
Belize	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
Benin														
Botswana	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
Brazil	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No
<u>Chile</u>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No
Costa Rica	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No
<u>Cyprus</u>	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
<u>Czech Republic</u>	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
<u>Denmark</u>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
El Salvador	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
Ethiopia	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
Guatemala	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
Honduras	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
India	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
Indonesia	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
<u>Italy</u>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No
<u>Japan</u>	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No
Jordan	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
Kenya	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
<u>Luxembourg</u>	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
Malaysia	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No
Maldives	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
<u>Monaco</u>														
Nepal	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	No
<u>Netherlands</u>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No

(continued)

