

## Introduction

Against a backdrop of sharp inequalities and persisting exclusion, inclusiveness has emerged as a major aspiration of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This is reflected in its central pledges: that no one will be left behind, that all goals and targets will be met for all nations, peoples and segments of society, and that every endeavour will be made to reach those left the furthest behind first.<sup>1</sup> There is a growing recognition that, virtually everywhere, some individuals and groups confront barriers that prevent them from participating in the social, economic and political life of their communities on equal terms with others. Because of their age, gender, race, ethnicity, disability or migrant status, some people lack opportunities, resources and a voice, and are routinely denied respect for their rights. To varying degrees, development is leaving them behind.

Social protection is a key policy tool for addressing poverty, inequality and social exclusion. No country has been able to reduce poverty and improve living conditions on a broad scale without putting comprehensive social protection systems in place. The 2030 Agenda underscores the importance of social protection for the eradication of poverty and the achievement of other goals. Target 1.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is to implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and to achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable by 2030. Similarly, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development includes a commitment to provide fiscally sustainable and nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all. It calls for a focus on those furthest below the poverty line and the vulnerable, persons with disabilities, indigenous persons, children, youth and older persons.<sup>2</sup>

The world is far from reaching those goals. Even where universal coverage is guaranteed by law, not all segments of the population are reached effectively. Gaps in access to social protection and insufficient benefits challenge its effectiveness as a means for reducing inequality and tackling exclusion. Understanding the barriers that people face in accessing social protection is necessary if SDG target 1.3 is to be met.

While there are many positive trends in the promotion of social inclusion, the *Report on the World Social Situation 2016* showed that gaps in access to education, health care, employment, income and other resources among different population groups are not closing fast enough (United Nations, 2016a). The report also noted that deprivations reinforce one another. Unequal access to health, education and social protection systems feeds a vicious cycle of disadvantage and exclusion.

The 2018 issue of the report builds on those findings. Taking access to social protection as a critical marker of opportunity, the report examines the extent to which social groups that are generally disadvantaged are effectively covered by social protection systems. The analysis focuses on seven groups: children, youth, older persons,

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<sup>1</sup> General Assembly resolution 70/1, para. 4.

<sup>2</sup> General Assembly resolution 69/313, para. 12.

persons with disabilities, international migrants, indigenous peoples and ethnic and racial minorities.<sup>3</sup> The focus on these groups aligns the report with the 2030 Agenda: in aspiring to promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all members of society, SDG target 10.2 emphasizes that all should be included irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status. Each of the groups studied in this report is at high risk of poverty and exclusion and faces specific barriers to the enjoyment of their rights. Lack of social protection is one more symptom of their exclusion.

Several recent global and regional reports have examined the provision of social protection throughout the life cycle.<sup>4</sup> They show that the social protection coverage of children, older persons and persons of working age, including persons with disabilities, is still far from universal. Country-specific evidence on the effective coverage of the other groups discussed in the report—namely young people, international migrants, ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples—suggests that there is a gap between their eligibility for social protection programmes and the extent to which they are in fact covered. In addition, the type and level of benefits they receive are at times insufficient to guarantee income security.

However, there have been few attempts to bring this fragmented evidence together to assess the challenges ahead in achieving universal social protection coverage. This report sets out to do just that. Specifically, it seeks to address three main questions: Who enjoys social protection coverage—and who does not? What are the barriers to the effective coverage of the social groups selected? How can social protection programmes be designed and implemented so as to be sensitive to the needs of disadvantaged groups?

Emphasizing the importance of universal social protection, the report examines elements of successful programmes and the interplay between different social protection measures. Many measures, particularly targeted measures, have been criticized for not including some population groups. The report discusses the role of universal and targeted measures in promoting inclusion.

The report consists of eight chapters. Chapter I provides an overview of social protection trends and summarizes evidence regarding the impact of social protection and that of fiscal policy on poverty, inequality and other dimensions of social development. The chapter shows that, overall, social protection programmes do help to reduce poverty and income inequality. They can have a positive effect on the accumulation of human capital and promote inclusive economic growth. Universal access to social protection has proven vital in shielding individuals and groups, including those left furthest behind, from major risks and shocks throughout the life cycle. However, the impact depends greatly on the specific measures in place. Because of the way in which they are designed and implemented, many such measures exclude some potential beneficiaries.

While the effects of social protection on poverty and income inequality have been well documented, comparative analysis of the effect of social protection on different social groups is largely lacking. The data presented in the report indicate that some groups are better covered than others by social protection. But whether social protection is helping to reduce inequalities between social groups—or, conversely, whether it is leaving some people behind—remains largely an unanswered question.

<sup>3</sup> While individuals in each of those groups have shared attributes and may face common challenges, it is important to recognize that the groups are not homogeneous. The report considers how gender, economic status and place of residence intersect with other group attributes and affect access to social protection.

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, ILO (2014a), ILO (2017a), ESCAP (2015a) and Cecchini and others (2015).

Chapters II to VII are devoted to each of the seven social groups selected as case studies. The situation of indigenous peoples and that of ethnic minorities are addressed together in chapter VII, given that, in terms of access to social protection, the two groups share common plights. These chapters follow the same structure: they give an account of the main challenges and disadvantages faced by each group, examine gaps in social protection coverage and discuss best practices for reaching members of these groups, promoting their well-being and empowering them to fulfil their potential.

Chapter VIII summarizes the policy implications of the report's findings. A common conclusion through all chapters is that social protection must ensure the well-being of all individuals—addressing the risks of poverty and exclusion rather than merely their symptoms—throughout the life cycle. Doing so requires making a minimum level of tax-funded social protection, or a basic social protection floor, unconditionally available to everyone. Without basic entitlements to social protection, those who are most disadvantaged and vulnerable will be left behind.

Universal access to social protection, together with access to social services, is necessary to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty and promote inclusion. The findings presented in this report make the case for broad policy efforts to promote redistribution and address the conditions that cause and perpetuate poverty. A comprehensive analysis of policy measures other than social protection is, however, beyond the scope of this volume.