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Priority to the furthest behind

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ABSTRACT

The UN Resolution heralding the Sustainable Development Goals pledges to leave no one behind, and moreover “to reach the furthest behind first”. This priority echoes the priority to the worst-off that is being discussed in philosophy, economics and related disciplines, but also the pleas of many actors who represent or fight for the most disadvantaged populations. This paper argues that serious theories do support such a priority and that the best policies implementing this priority do not necessarily involve the most intuitive anti-poverty targeted measures.

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As we embark on this great collective journey, we pledge that no one will be left behind. Recognizing the dignity of the human person is fundamental, we wish to see the Goals and targets met for all nations and peoples and for all segments of society. And we will endeavour to reach the furthest behind first."

UN 2015, Resolution A/RES/70/1 of the General Assembly

1 Introduction

This paper examines one particular reading of the ideal of leaving no one behind, namely, that the very worst off should receive special, if not exclusive, priority. This special priority runs against traditions that focus on the aggregate achievements of the whole society, as in the utilitarian philosophy, or that find it more effective to invest in helping those who stand the greatest chance of getting out of poverty instead of the most desperate cases. Yet, many scholars and social actors, if not many policy-makers, are attracted by the idea of the special priority of the worst off.

This paper is divided into two parts. In the first part, the arguments for giving special priority to the worst off are examined. In the second part, the policy implications of such a special priority are discussed.

2 Why focus on the worst off?

There has always been a tradition of paying special attention to the poorest people in popular wisdom, especially in connection with religion. Most religions recommend helping the poor, being inclusive, and some traditions contain very harsh words against the rich and in favor of redistribution. Many civil society organizations devote their work to helping the most deprived populations, either locally or internationally. While many such movements were initially paternalist and top-down, there has been a trend toward more participatory approaches in which the voice of the aid recipients is better taken into account and their own participation is key to the organization. Some organizations, such as ATD Fourth World, have taken as their foundational principles that a society should be assessed in terms of how the worst-off of its members fare, and that the liberation of the poor from poverty and the associated indignities and lack of freedom must be the work of the poor themselves. There is therefore a blurry line between organizations that try to help the poorest and movements that seek to organize them.

Scholarly traditions have developed that also argue for giving special priority to the worst-off. The most famous is the theory of justice that John Rawls (1971) has conceived and which had a seminal impact on political philosophy, generating a school of thought called "liberal egalitarianism". The priority to the worst-off, in Rawls' approach, is not absolute in the sense that it only comes after two principles are satisfied, which have a higher rank: the guarantee of basic liberties to all, and the provision of fair equal opportunities to all. Once these two principles are fulfilled, though, the distribution of socio-economic resources which Rawls calls "social primary goods"—meaning general purpose resources which are generally desirable for all types of life plans—is to be guided by the goal of maximizing the life perspectives of the most disadvantaged populations.

The argumentation that Rawls develops for justifying this special priority to the worst-off is based on the idea that the basic institutional structure of a just society would come out of a discussion between designers who would not know their own characteristics and would therefore be totally impartial. Rawls' idea was that, in such a situation of total ignorance of one's position in the society one is designing, one would be very careful about the worst possible position, since this is a whole life affair for the designer. Focusing on the worst possible outcome is referred to in decision theory as the maximin approach. Commentators have been skeptical that an exclusive focus on the worst position would be prudentially advised in such a situation, and alternative accounts of how an impartial observer

would reason have been proposed, which rely on the expected value of payoffs, as is standard in decision theory. The idea of this alternative approach is to imagine a decision-maker who has an equal chance of ending up in any position in society, and therefore gives an equal weight to all possible positions, instead of an exclusive focus on the worst position. It is probably fair to say that most economists consider the expected value approach more convincing than the maximin approach. However, Rawls' theory has been extremely influential and has inspired a lot of research, including in economics, about how redistributive policy would be designed if maximizing the benefits to the worst-off was the goal.

An important development in political philosophy, after Rawls, has involved incorporating a concern for individual responsibility, through the work of authors such as Ronald Dworkin, Richard Arneson, Gerald Cohen and John Roemer.¹ Amartya Sen's (1985, 1992) capability approach can also be associated to this new school. The modification they bring to Rawls' approach is not so much about weakening the priority to the worst-off, but about redefining how the worst-off are identified. The idea is to take account of the degree of responsibility individuals have in bringing about their advantaged or disadvantaged situation. In particular, Cohen proposed to reason in terms of opportunities offered to people, and to consider that justice is achieved if individuals bear the consequences of their "genuine choices" from equal opportunities. Sen's capability approach is similar, since a capability set is the set of options for various achievements in life ("functionings", in his terminology) that an individual has access to and can freely choose from. Arneson's approach (in its latest version), in contrast, does not rely on this dichotomy and only incorporates a modification of the degree of priority an individual receives as a function of personal responsibility. In this way, an individual can still receive great priority if he is in dire straits even if he is mostly responsible for it, because for very deprived people, the concern for their well-being trumps the issue of responsibility.

There has been substantial resistance to this school of thought and to the emphasis on personal responsibility. In particular, extreme harshness has been found in the pure "equality of opportunity" theory according to which once equal opportunities have been granted, any inequality down the line, any amount of deprivation that anyone can bring upon himself by his own foolishness, is not a concern and is solely the responsible individual's private business. Critics² have emphasized that this approach undermines the spirit of solidarity that a good society should foster, and instead will fuel the self-righteousness of the successful and pour shame on the losers; it can also give arguments to the advocates of intrusive policies designed to trace the origins of the poor's disadvantage, echoing and exacerbating paternalistic policies that are already commonplace. The strategy of keeping the strong priority for the worst off while accepting to sort out, among the most deprived, those who are genuinely disadvantaged from those who should only blame themselves, may seem to resonate with the political atmosphere of some countries in which welfare recipients are seen with suspicion. But this may turn out to be nothing else than abandoning the delicate issue of defining social priorities to popular but naïve and ultimately delusional theories of free will.

It is interesting to note, though, that beside those who invoke free will to justify a moral evaluation of people's responsibility, there are approaches, such as Sen's, in which the prime concern is freedom, not responsibility. It cannot be denied that allowing individuals to pursue their personal goals in life, and letting them decide on important life issues, necessarily produces substantial variations in individual achievements. Whether such variations should be considered inequalities or only differences in life orientations is a delicate matter which relies on how interpersonal comparisons of success and advantage are made for the purpose of social evaluation. For instance, when some careers are less lucrative than others, but appear more attractive or fulfilling to those who embrace them, the resulting economic inequalities may appear acceptable if the metric of comparison is not income but something like the fit between life plans and obtained situations. The justification for these inequalities, then, is not that the disadvantaged are guilty of some fault or have made less effort (as would be the case with the theories relying on responsibility), but that they obtain a desirable situation, according to their own view, in a multidimensional choice

¹ See in particular Dworkin (1981), Arneson (1989, 1999), Cohen (1989), Roemer (1993).

² See for instance Anderson (1999), Fleurbaey (1995), Scheffler (2005).

in which income is not the only relevant dimension.³ Certainly, an approach relying on freedom and respecting life plans in this way can never condone the severe deprivations endured by the worst off in every part of the planet. But, interestingly, it can question the paternalistic approaches to poverty and insist on taking account of the poor's capacity to make their own plans and define their own needs, and thereby resonate with the social actors who think in terms of emancipation rather than assistance.

In summary, there is a strong scholarly tradition of giving a strong priority to the worst off. It has recently branched into approaches that would justify restricting such priority to the "deserving poor" out of a concern for personal responsibility, and approaches that, bringing related but more positive autonomy and freedom considerations to the fore, would instead focus on seeking to empower the most deprived.

Another approach which is powerful in making the case for the special urgency of the most deprived invokes the notions of human rights. It is well documented that the worst off are the victims of greater insecurity, both at the hands of criminals and at the hands of the authorities that should protect them but often fall into abusive practices. At the global level, the worst off are afflicted by wars and conflicts which destroy their livelihoods and kill many of them. In addition, it has been argued that the mere fact of being severely deprived is by itself a violation of the human right to be provided with the basic means to live a decent life. This is a little more controversial than the minimal notion of human rights involving a negative notion of rights, but most declarations of human rights contain provisions about having access to a decent life that are unfulfilled for the most disadvantaged populations.

In the last decades, and especially since the end of the cold war, human rights scholars and activists have turned their attention to poverty. And there was quite a move to draw attention to this neglected issue. Amnesty started a "dignity" campaign on poverty. This is not just about economic and social rights and "positive" rights but all rights, and understanding poverty as a set of inter-related deprivations including power and political and civil rights, as well as cultural denigration. In a classical work, Henry Shue (1980) questioned the distinction between positive and negative rights, arguing that if a basic right is characterized by the fact that "any attempt to enjoy any other right by sacrificing the basic right would be quite literally self-defeating" (p. 19), then subsistence is a definitely basic right, like security. Amartya Sen (2004) offered a general theory of human rights as ethical rights that do not depend on the pre-existence of institutions, and can include socio-economic rights insofar as they represent basic freedoms. Philip Alston has through his work called upon the human rights community to engage with development and labor issues.⁴ Beitz (2009) reviews the way the language of human rights has been used on the international scene and identifies pathologies (e.g., self-serving and biased use of the human rights rhetoric in some arenas), proposing ways to collectively resolve them, and defending the relevance of rights in the case of poverty and gender inequalities. Thomas Pogge (2002) argued that the production and preservation of poverty by the architecture of global and national institutions is actually an active attack on the poor that can be seen as a violation of a negative right of integrity, and that all citizens who actively or passively support this architecture are accomplices in this systemic crime.

It is certainly impossible to deny that, insofar as better institutions would provide quick and effective eradication of poverty, the lack of reform toward such institutions is a shame, even taking account of the reasonable disagreements prevailing about the needed reforms among those who are convinced that urgent action is needed. While the definition of ideal institutions is elusive, it is easier to identify practices that are directly harmful and should be eliminated immediately, such as the corruption that diverts the wealth of developing countries toward the profits of transnational companies and private offshore accounts of powerful families, or the surrogate conflicts between superpowers or regional powers that destabilize fragile countries. But against a narrow application of the rights approach, Heintz et al. (2016) argue that the human rights angle can help reshape many policy debates in the socio-economic domain and give momentum to social activism, especially by contributing to making policy goals more focused on human consequences and less on monetary indicators of development and growth.

³ See Fleurbey (2008, Paper 10) for more analysis of these issues.

⁴ See in particular Alston (2005a) on the MDGs and Alston (2005b) on labor standards.

In the economic academic literature, there are actually many formal arguments in favor of giving absolute priority to the worst off. They usually involve positing that the worse off deserve at least as much priority as the better off, which is quite uncontroversial, and then proceed to show that ultimately the very worst off should get all the priority once additional requirements, which seem innocuous, are added to the analysis. Here are two examples of such arguments, which appear more successful than Rawls in actually proving that priority for the worst off should be absolute.

In the first argument,⁵ the starting point is that among people having identical life plans (the term of the art in economics is “preferences”), when someone has more than another in all relevant dimensions of consumption or functionings, a reduction of the inequality in any dimension is a desirable thing, even if it may not be actually feasible (a reduction of inequality consists in an equal variation for the two involved individuals, a positive one for the worse off, a negative one for the better off). This is a minimal priority condition that is indeed rather uncontroversial. If one adds to this the requirement that individual preferences should be respected (meaning that it should be considered desirable to implement changes that better fulfill individuals’ life plans), again another appealing principle, and the requirement that the assessment of a particular situation should only depend on how individuals partition other situations into better, worse, or indifferent, and not on a more detailed classification of the other situations, then one can prove that the worst off should have absolute priority. One can see that, among the three ethical requirements involved in the argument, only the last one appears not so compelling and more a matter of convenience, as it reduces the amount of information about individual preferences needed to make an assessment of a particular situation. But interestingly, it is a requirement that is satisfied by all practical methods of cost-benefit analysis (they instead violate the minimal priority condition, and sometimes they do not even provide a consistent ranking of the possible options) and by most methods proposed in the large literature on fair allocations of resources.

The second example of such an argument⁶ assumes that well-being is well defined as a unidimensional metric (the previous argument did not make any such assumption and considered multiple commodities and functionings), and again invokes the minimal equity principle that reducing inequalities, this time in well-being, is desirable. It adds the further equity requirement that a substantial sacrifice for a badly off person cannot be justified by a negligible gain to well-off people, no matter how numerous they are. For instance, one could argue that bringing a person from \$5,000 a year to \$300 a year for all his life cannot be justified by the possibility to give one cent, only once, to all the people above \$50,000, even if there are many of them. But the combination of these two appealing requirements precipitates an absolute priority for the worse off in all trade-offs, not just in big-loss-small-gain trade-offs as in the above example, but also in small-loss-big-gain trade-offs, if one adds the requirement that the evaluation of a situation should not depend on the number of people involved, but only on the statistical distribution. Again, this last requirement seems a matter of convenience, but is satisfied by most evaluation approaches (which typically violate the second requirement about trade-offs).

These are only two examples in a set of similar arguments that extend mild priority for the worse off into absolute priority for the worst off, with the help of either ethically compelling, or convenient and common, requirements.

In conclusion of this section, there are many arguments in favor of giving a strong priority to the furthest behind, coming from millennial traditions and from recent philosophical and economic reasoning. Such arguments echo the compelling case made by the social actors who defend the cause of the poor and argue not only that their plight deserves special attention, but that respecting their own path toward empowerment is essential. This is where a discussion of policy options and institutional reforms is worth turning to.

⁵ See Fleurbaey and Maniquet (2011).

⁶ See Fleurbaey and Tungodden (2010).

3 Policies for the worst off

Assuming that a strong priority for the worst off is endorsed, what follows for policy? Such a strong priority may require a serious overhaul of priorities, generate puzzling questions about the fight against poverty, the relative priority of the rest of the population, and make certain classical issues about redistribution more vivid.

Chambers (1983), dealing with rural development, emphasized that “putting the last first” requires a reversal in many values and practices. His analysis of values offers an interesting extension of the philosophical literature mentioned in the previous section. The opposition between “first” and “last” categories in many domains generates a divided value-laden vision of the world with “urban,” “sophisticated,” “formal” in one list and “rural,” “simple” and “informal” in the other list. The priorities of experts and professionals, spontaneously attracted to the “first” list, need to be reversed to cater to the needs of the populations whose situation evokes the “last” list. In this light, the human rights approach has been effective in elevating the moral standing of issues concerning the most deprived populations. It has led to an overhaul in the UN efforts to link poverty and human rights much more closely in its approach to development issues. Repeatedly since the 1990s UN bodies wrote to condemn structural adjustment policies,⁷ and the UN Secretary General has appointed Special Rapporteurs on the Right to Food and on the Right to Health. Philip Alston, quoted in the previous section, is now the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights. The UNDP World Development Report 2000 played an important role in this wave. Focused on human rights, it articulated them to basic freedoms in a way foreshadowing Sen’s (2004) approach, and considered a list of basic freedoms including “freedom from want.” One aspect of this transformation of approaches has been a change from a set of policy goals aimed at *reducing* social ills to a set of *eradication* goals. This is not just for extreme poverty. For instance, the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (with strong involvement from UNICEF) has led to putting greater priority on eliminating certain harms such as child sexual exploitation even in countries with small numbers of victims.

Fighting poverty may seem like the natural implication of making the worst off the main focus of policy. However, this is not necessarily the case because it may depend on how poverty is measured. The most common measure of poverty is the headcount ratio, which simply records the fraction of the population that falls below the poverty line. Trying to reduce poverty measured in this way may actually require putting the priority on the people who are just below the poverty line and are therefore easier to move up above the threshold. This is a standard triage problem, as in the battlefield where, among the injured soldiers, the most likely to be quickly back on their feet receive priority for the purpose of maximizing the number of valid fighters. Such a “triage” anti-poverty policy does give priority to populations which are badly off, but not the worst off. In other words, prioritizing the worst off cannot be equated with fighting poverty any more than it can be identified with reducing inequality.

There are several ways of making anti-poverty policy avoid this bias against the very worst off. First, the poverty line can be put low enough so as to increase the probability that the worst off benefiting from the policy will get above the threshold. Second, a policy focused on the “poverty gap” instead of the poverty headcount ratio will give priority to the populations who stand to benefit most from the policy. The poverty gap computes the total amount by which the poor fall below the poverty line, in effect measuring how much in total would be needed to raise every poor to the poverty line, assuming no effect of the policy on the pre-policy distribution. Contrary to the headcount ratio, the poverty gap actually induces a bias against the populations which are just below the threshold, because any additional benefit that they obtain after they pass the threshold has no influence on the poverty gap. In contrast, the populations who remain poor will have their whole benefit recorded in the reduction of the poverty gap. Third, the poverty gap

⁷ In the press release HR/CN/865 22 April 1998 (<https://www.un.org/press/en/1998/19980422.HRCN865.html>), one reads the Commission on Human Rights “affirmed that the exercise of the basic rights of the people of the debtor countries to food, housing, clothing, employment, education, health services and a healthy environment could not be subordinated to structural adjustment policies and economic reforms arising from the debt.” In E/CN.4/2006/44 (<http://www.righttofood.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/ECN.42006441.pdf>), one reads: “Far from improving food security for the most vulnerable populations, these [structural adjustment] programmes have often resulted in a deterioration of food security among the poorest.”

can be modified at the individual level (the individual poverty gap is the difference between the poverty line and the current individual level of the relevant variable in which poverty is measured, such as income, consumption or wealth) by a convex transformation which magnifies the benefits received by the poorer populations, as in the Foster-Greer-Thorbecke poverty index.⁸

Another paradoxical feature of prioritizing the worst off is that it may potentially benefit the best off as well. This paradox comes from the fact that the distribution of weights allotted to the various members of the population must feature an equality of weights for those who are not among the worst off—namely, their weights are all equal to zero. This means that the middle-class and the best-off are then treated with equal (lack of) priority. Now, compare this with a less extreme degree of priority for the worse off, such that all members of the population have a positive weight but declining as one goes up their ranking in the distribution. In such a scheme, the best off have a lower weight than the middle class. Therefore, a shift of priority to the worst off may, under certain conditions, induce a redistribution from the middle class to the best off (as well as to the worst off, of course).

The conditions under which this happens typically involve incentive constraints, as in redistribution of income by taxation of earnings. Indeed, the pattern of optimal tax rates at the top of the distribution depends on how fat the distribution of upper earnings is (the fatter, the more progressive the tax rates), and how quickly the weights of different income strata in the social objective decrease at the top (the more quickly they decrease, the more progressive the tax rates). A tax scheme that puts absolute priority to the worst off typically maximizes the minimum income support received by the population with zero income, and the corresponding tax schedule is then conceived to maximize the tax revenue on the rest of the population. This is typically quite unfavorable to the middle class, since increasing the tax rates of the lower middle class implies greater tax revenues on all the population above them. In contrast, when one reaches the top of the distribution, this reason for having high tax rates disappears, while the opposite reason to avoid distortions discouraging earnings looms large for workers with high skills. Therefore, unless the distribution is really fat at the top, the marginal tax rates decline at the top, and this may produce a situation in which the best off are actually better off under this tax scheme than under a smoothly declining weighting scheme. In summary, incentive considerations at the top and a rebalancing of weights to the detriment of the middle-class may produce a convergence of interests between the worst off and the best off subpopulations, in favor of a policy that grants a strong priority to the former.⁹

A similar but broader convergence of interests can occur for a different set of reasons. It has to do with the relative effectiveness of targeted versus universal social policies. If one wants to lift the poor out of poverty, the most economical policy targets their needs and does not spend resources on the non-poor. This is a very strong argument in favor of targeted policies, and it has often been used in policy debates. The typical examples of a targeted policy include means-tested income support, means-tested food provision programs, and special vouchers for health care or education provided exclusively to people under a threshold of income or in areas with a high fraction of deprived populations. However, targeted policies have several drawbacks that make experts pause about their effectiveness. First, targeted policies may create a stigma effect which is burdensome for the beneficiaries, and hinders their opportunities for social inclusion. This effect may discourage many of them from applying for support. For instance, minimal income support programs have a take up rate which can be as low as 50%. One may wonder if this stigma and discouragement effects are not sometimes cynically crafted by the designers of these programs, with the double aim of saving on the expenses and of penalizing the poor sufficiently so that they seek other ways to lift themselves out of poverty. Making assistance painful is a way to avoid poverty traps, in such a vision. Obviously, it may also be a way to put the poor in severely deprived situations, shutting them down in poverty traps of disability and destitution rather than semi-comfortable dependence.

⁸ For an overview of poverty indicators, see Dutta (2002) or Chakravarty (2008).

⁹ A comprehensive presentation of how optimal income taxation varies with social priority for the worse-off is provided by Tuomala (2016).

Universal programs have the advantage of avoiding these effects. Typical examples of such programs are a universal basic income, public schools and health care, universal childcare or eldercare provision. Such programs have a take up rate of almost 100% (they may still fail to reach marginal populations such as Roma and travelers), and they do not exclude the beneficiaries from the circle of “normal” members of society. Moreover, there is another argument in favor of such policies. They garner greater support, since most people in the electorate belong to the category of beneficiaries or probable beneficiaries. For instance, in a country that is quite hostile to social programs in general, the United States, there is one program, Medicare (a universal health care service provided to all elderly people), which is very popular. The political economy of social programs is such that a program that spreads support well beyond those in need may actually more effectively reach the neediest because it is politically more successful. In summary, the conclusion here is that, in spite of targeted social programs appearing superficially to be the most suited to express a strong priority to the worst off, the most effective programs from the point of view of the worst off may turn out to be universal programs that do not express any explicit priority toward them and benefit almost everyone.¹⁰

In the perspective of empowering the worst off, it is worth revisiting some important distinctions in the field of social policy. One such distinction is about redistribution and predistribution, or, even more precise, about the difference between redistribution post market, pre market, and in market.¹¹ Post-market redistribution is the classical tax and transfer system which takes market incomes as given and seeks to redistribute them. Pre-market redistribution is aimed at preparing individuals for market competition, by endowing them with skills, human capital and related resources such as access to health care. But there is also in-market redistribution, when regulation of market activities contributes to protecting the weakest parties in trades, such as consumers confronting monopolies, workers negotiating with employers, tenants facing landlords, or small farmers interacting with the agroindustry.

What type of policy is the most suited to empowering the worst off? Post-market redistribution may be considered less effective than pre-market action, because it makes the poor dependent on the continuity of the social policy and is more likely to generate the perverse stigmatization and discouragement effects mentioned earlier. However, one should not ignore that post-market redistribution can also make the poor stronger in their market interactions. For instance, it is an important argument of the advocates of a universal basic income that such a program makes the most vulnerable populations stronger in front of employers seeking to enroll them in bad jobs. The Scandinavian welfare state is considered to keep a balance in the relative power of workers and employers for the same reason. Similarly, in-market policies can also substantially shift the balance of power, and in some cases more effectively than any other policy. For instance, no pre-market or post-market redistribution can produce the outcome that private firms are governed in the interest of stakeholders and not just shareholders as well as a regulation that imposes governance bodies representing the relevant parties. The reason why no other policy can achieve this is that the creators of firms have no incentives to adopt democratic governance forms, and that it is extremely hard for the stakeholders to impose such forms when they are in a weak position in the organizational structure.

The association of taxes and transfers with post-market redistribution should not hide the fact that certain taxes and transfers can also contribute to in-market transformation. Regulation of governance structures in private firms can take the form of taxes for bad structures and/or subsidies or tax breaks for good structures. It is also increasingly recognized that taxes that seek to enhance the efficiency of the economy, such as penalties for polluting activities (including a carbon tax, for instance) or taxes on rent-seeking practices (such as speculation or anti-competitive practices), can contribute to improving the situation of the worst off in several ways. They can provide new revenue to the welfare state for investment in human capital (pre-market redistribution) or for post-market redistribution. They can make it possible to decrease taxes on labor incomes, reducing distortions on the labor market and encouraging job creation and preservation (as well as slowing down automation). They can protect the poor from harm, such as pollution which tends to disproportionately affect them, as well as some predatory practices.

¹⁰ Arguments in favor of universal policies can be found in IPSP (2018, Chapter 8) and Van Parijs and Vanderborght (2017).

¹¹ This threefold distinction is made in IPSP (2018, Chapter 3).

In this section, most of the analysis so far has been about national policies aimed at supporting the worst off in a country of any level of development. It is sometimes argued that developing countries are in a very different situation and cannot afford most of the social programs that are commonplace in developed economies. This is often exaggerated, since, in particular, pre-market investment policies tend to repay themselves in greater productivity of the workforce. And many developing countries fail to impose taxes on revenues which could easily be taxed, such as profits from the exploitation of natural resources which are left to transnational companies under leonine contracts.

But the question remains whether a strong priority for the worst off has different implications when one considers national and international development programs seeking to raise the least developed countries. The triage problem is obviously very relevant in this context as well. A lot of foreign aid is denied to the most deprived nations because their structures do not enable them to benefit from external support as much as other countries which are closer to passing the threshold. The categorization of countries in the “least developed” type generates this incentive for external helpers to focus their attention on the most promising countries, which generally turn out to be the least deprived in their category. A smoother schedule of priority, without a threshold, would avoid this problem but would be harder to implement when deciding whether a special advantage (e.g., in trade or in aid conditionality) should be granted to a particular country.

In the international context, the paradoxical pattern of a convergence of interests between the poorest countries and the more affluent ones can also occur when, for instance, an insurance program can benefit many countries through a mutual fund (e.g., for extreme weather events), or when reducing trade barriers or cooperation on security (e.g., against terrorism) is conceived as a mutually beneficial operation. To some extent, the traditional egoism of countries when they bargain on the international scene makes universality almost a requirement of successful programs, and the difficulty of asymmetric programs such as ODA or the Green Climate Fund for the developing countries to reach their budget targets may provide testimony to this pattern. The stigma of targeted programs, such as those designed for the LDCs, seems to operate when countries are eager to leave the category even if it may be in their immediate economic interest to stay longer in the category while they build their capacities.

The distinction between post, pre and in-market redistribution is also very relevant for international development considerations. Post-market transfers that support consumption appear imperfectly empowering, and sometimes harmful (when creating forms of dependence due to vulnerabilities on the receiver side or commercial opportunism on the donor side), while transfers that aim at building up human capital (education, health care) are less criticized, and so are in-market policies that curb anti-competitive practices, corruption, and harmful trade restrictions. However, interesting experiments¹² that bypass the government level and directly provide cash to poor populations have suggested that direct monetary support may help the poor both to sustain their livelihood but also to invest in their future, blurring the distinction between post-market and pre-market redistribution.

4 Conclusion

This paper has argued that the idea of giving priority to the worst off is not particularly outlandish in the field of social philosophy and social policy, since many prominent authors and venerable traditions have found arguments in its favor. As far as implementation is concerned, this priority is not necessarily associated with policies that target the most disadvantaged at the expense of everyone else in the population. The most effective ways of helping the furthest behind may involve general solidarity mechanisms that engage the participation of most citizens, or redistributive schemes that may impose some sacrifices on the middle class but not necessarily everyone other than the poorest.

The motto of “leaving no one behind” is well suited to our current understanding of the expansion of human possibilities over history as involving successive waves of progress that reach various populations with unequal speed,

¹² See, e.g., Baird et al. (2009). For a balanced assessment of unconditional cash transfers, see Banerjee and Duflo (2011).

leaving some to wait before the wave reaches them (Deaton 2013). It is not certain, however, that the most disadvantaged populations are simply the “furthest behind,” in the sense that they simply have to wait a little longer than the others. Many of the poorest populations suffer from exclusion mechanisms that seem to unjustly and systematically block the waves of progress before they can reach them. It is therefore not enough to think of reaching out to them in the standard redistributive ways, one must also fight the exclusion mechanisms that “push them behind.” This question is examined in Elson (2018).

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