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Leaving no one behind: Some conceptual and empirical issues

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of the conceptual and empirical issues involved in the overarching goal of “leaving no one behind” (LNOB). After reviewing some existing documents on the topic, it proposes ways to operationalize LNOB, discusses whether to take a country-focused or person-focused approach, examines various (multidimensional) ways to measure those who are left behind, argues for grounding LNOB on intrinsic and instrumental reasons, suggests ways to identify those at risk of being left behind, and discusses difficult trade-offs with other SDGs for an agenda focused on LNOB.

Keywords: leave no one behind, inequality, poverty, Agenda 2030

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1 Introduction

Leaving no one behind (LNOB) has been a central overarching concern of the 2030 sustainable development agenda that was passed in 2015 as well as of on-going monitoring activities, including, for example, the 2016 High-Level Political Forum convened by the Economic and Social Council of the UN (ECOSOC). At the same time, there is a lack of clarity what exactly is meant by leaving no one behind, what implications this has for the overall 2030 agenda, and how, for example, difficult trade-offs between the call to leave no one behind and other SDGs can be managed.

This paper provides an overview of these issues and seeks to provide some clarity on the problems involved. After reviewing some existing documents on the topic, it will propose ways to operationalize LNOB, discuss whether to take a country-focused or person-focused approach, examine various (multidimensional) ways to measure those who are left behind, argue in favor of concern for LNOB on intrinsic and instrumental grounds, suggest ways to identify those at risk of being left behind, and discuss difficult trade-offs of an agenda focused on LNOB with other SDGs.

One general conclusion arising from this discussion is that LNOB should be seen more as a way to assess how overall development strategies reach those at risk of being left behind (and what can be done to improve such strategies in LNOB) rather than being an agenda for a multitude of finely targeted (and fragmented) programs to separately address each and every form of disadvantage.

2 LNOB in the 2030 Agenda and related documents

In the 2030 agenda, leaving no one behind is seen as a central cross-cutting focus of the entire agenda.¹ In paragraph 4, it states: “As we embark on this great collective journey, we pledge that no one will be left behind. Recognizing that 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). Further down in the document, the focus on LNOB is seen as a way to enhance the previous 2015 agenda and the associated Millennium Development Goals. It states in paragraph 16 that “the new Agenda builds on the Millennium Development Goals and seeks to complete what they did not achieve, particularly in reaching the most vulnerable” (UN, 2015). This statement implies that the MDGs were not sufficiently focused on LNOB. This is only partly true. MDG2, universal primary education could be reached only if all those left behind also were included in education. Other goals which specified a relative rate of reduction (e.g. goal one with targets to halve income poverty rates, underweight rates, and undernourishment rates, or goals 4 and 5 calling for 2/3 and 3/4 reduction in child and maternal mortality rates, respectively) seemingly focused on averages only. But such high rates of progress as called for by the MDG targets could only be achieved if those most deprived were benefiting significantly from improvements.

Nevertheless, it is indeed the case that the SDGs have placed a greater emphasis on LNOB than the MDGs rhetorically by making LNOB a key cross-cutting concern across all MDGs. And beyond rhetoric, LNOB is more firmly entrenched in the SDGs in two ways.

First, it calls for all targets to be reached by everyone and asks for detailed disaggregation of progress by groups to ensure that progress towards these targets is reached by all. In fact, the UN Statistical Commission charged with developing indicators and the overall measurement framework, citing GA Assembly Resolution 68/261, specifically stipulates in paragraph 26 that “Sustainable Development Goal indicators should be disaggregated, where relevant, by income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability and geographic location, or other characteristics, in accordance with the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics” (UN Statistical Commission, 2016). In addition, group-specific averages

¹ Please see the forthcoming contribution by Fukuda-Parr in this series on the origins of the concern for inequality and LNOB in the 2030 Agenda.

are mentioned in many indicators to monitor SDG targets. This focus on groups is closely related to a concern for group-based inequality, as discussed below.

To be sure this disaggregation by groups is less ambitious than a literal interpretation of LNOB as studying the plight of all left-behind individuals, as these sub-group averages will average over better and worse performers and might therefore hide the plight of people left behind within a group. An obvious remedy for that would be to also report on the percentage of people who have reached a certain target within a country.²

And secondly, a substantial number of goals are directly concerned with those currently left behind. This applies, for example, to the goals to eliminate poverty, hunger, and preventable child mortality. And by incorporating a new goal on (income) inequality, it calls for a reduction in disparities, where improvements in the well-being of those left behind will be an important strategy. Similarly, the strengthened gender goal can be seen as a focus on women who are left behind.

When it comes to defining what LNOB means in practice, the relevant UN documents do not provide much clarity. In fact, the 2016 Global Sustainable Development Report explicitly mentions different meanings of LNOB. “Ensuring that no one is left behind’ encompasses multiple meanings. For some, it will mean focusing action on disadvantaged groups of society, for example, people living in poverty, women, indigenous people, youth, older people, persons with disabilities, migrants, or people in conflict and post-conflicts situations. Others will focus on reducing inequalities between countries, including focusing action on countries at the lowest stages of development or facing challenging circumstances. Still others would propose other views and definitions of who those left behind are. Views may also differ on how society can effectively provide opportunities to those left behind. By implication, how different people foresee the timing and sequencing of necessary actions to ensure that no one is left behind might also vary. This has direct implications for how the 2030 Agenda will be implemented.” (UN, 2016:4) Later on in the report, it proposes that LNOB is related to three key features of the SDG Agenda: poverty, inclusiveness, and inequality (UN, 2016:4).

Similarly, a document by the Chief Executives Board of the 31 UN agencies takes a broad view to LNOB. It sees LNOB as a concern for “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 2016:2).

Clearly, it is early days in the implementation of the SDG agenda. Thus it is useful to propose ways in which LNOB can be operationalized. This is what this paper and the others in this series of CDP papers on LNOB are about.

3 Left behind countries, groups, or people?

One ambiguity relates to the unit of observation. Should one be focusing on left-behind people or left-behind countries? Or should it focus on groups within countries, what is often referred to as horizontal inequality? Let us first deal with the distinction of dealing with LNOB within countries (groups or individuals) vs. left-behind countries.

² This could be done, for example, for the education targets. Instead of measuring average performance by groups (e.g. average enrolment or completion rates or test scores), as proposed now, one could measure % of children that reach the target, by groups. This does not work for some indicators that are inherently aggregate statistics, such as the child mortality rate where the percentage reaching a target cannot be calculated. And also note that some indicators already measure the % of people suffering from a particular deprivation, such as the poverty or hunger goals, where group-specific rates immediately provide information on the distance to a target for everyone in that group.

It appears that the spirit of most SDGs focus on people and their well-being or whether they are left behind. At the same time, some SDGs clearly focus on countries, particularly the plight of LDCs. And the inequality goal (goal 10) explicitly mentions both. Of course both issues have great relevance. While (relative) inequality between countries (esp. when weighted by population) has been declining in the last few decades (e.g. Bourguignon, 2015; Klasen et al. 2016), it remains very large. Moreover, the absolute and relative gap between the poorest countries and the world's richest countries has continued to widen. And within-country inequality has been increasing in most parts of the world since the 1980s and now makes up a substantially larger share of global inequality (Klasen et al. 2016). Conversely one could argue that achieving development convergence between countries and reducing inequalities within countries simultaneously would indeed make sure that no one is left behind. But that still leaves the question which of the two should receive greater priority. It is therefore important to clarify whether one wants to focus on left-behind countries or people.

There is, of course, also a third perspective one can take which is to study the plight of the worst off people in the world, regardless of which countries they live in. Such an approach usually assumes a common absolute metric of identifying the worst-off, such as using per capita income, income poverty (such as the \$1.90 a day poverty line), or multidimensional poverty such as the global MPI published by UNDP (UNDP, 2014). Such a borderless focus on the worst off is closely related to cosmopolitan views of social justice.

It may be important to make a distinction between description and analysis on one hand, and policy action on the other hand. At the level of description and analysis, it is useful to focus on the worst-off individuals at the world level, disregarding borders. The worst-off may be present not only in the poorest countries but also in many middle income or even high-income countries. For example, it is well-known that the majority of the world's extremely income poor live in middle-income countries (Sumner, 2012). Therefore it is appropriate that the SDGs include indicators that track hardship using a common metric across countries. It is also an important way in which the SDGs can be seen as a global agenda that focuses on deprivation regardless of borders.³

When one turns to policies, however, it becomes quite clear that borders matter. Most policy-making is done at the national level, and international efforts in general cannot directly design or influence policy specifically for the left-behind in a particular country. International efforts (e.g. via aid, trade or other policies) can affect within-country inequality, but this influence is often mediated by the policies of each country (Klasen et al. 2018). Global governance, aid, trade, finance and technology regimes can, however, greatly affect opportunities and constraints for poor countries, including LDCs, and this will have an indirect effect on poverty in those countries.

But even recognizing that policy is mostly made at the national level, it is still important to track the globally left-behind. Mapping out who the global poor are and where they live, what their disadvantages are, what traps them and keeps them behind, and how best they could be taken out of their predicament, is therefore the preferred focus, even when recognizing the role of borders for policy-making.

When considering LNOB within countries, it is still important to distinguish between a concern for LNOB among individuals or among groups, commonly referred to as vertical and horizontal inequality, respectively. Here the UN documents are quite clear that both inequalities matter, but inequalities among groups are of particular concern as they often reflect particularly pernicious discrimination (in laws or social custom) against disadvantaged groups. Also, there is evidence that horizontal inequality is a source of conflict and social strife in many societies (Klasen et al. 2017).

Thus it is useful to track the left-behind at the global level and monitor particularly the development progress of relevant social groups.

³ This is not the usual way the SDGs are framed as a global agenda. In fact, in the SDG agenda, countries are given great leeway in defining their own appropriate targets and about where to set priorities. Such priorities might then, even for a rich country, focus on meeting the SDGs in their own country rather than supporting efforts to help the world's poorest. We see the SDG as a global agenda that should focus efforts on reducing hardship for the worst off globally.

4 Intrinsic and instrumental concerns for leaving no one behind

When making the case for LNOB, there are intrinsic and instrumental concerns about LNOB. Intrinsically, right-based approaches to development have increasingly emphasized economic and social rights including rights to education, health, a decent standard of living, among others. Those left behind are denied those rights. Related arguments are made by theorists of justice such as Rawls, Sen or Roemer who argue that there is an inherent unfairness that some are left behind and do not enjoy equal basic capabilities (Sen 1999), primary goods (Rawls 1971), or opportunities (Roemer 1998).⁴ Even justice theorists who do not take a global cosmopolitan approach to justice emphasize a global priority for the most deprived, such as Nagel (2005) or also many religiously motivated ethicists (e.g., Mack et al. 2009).

Beyond those important intrinsic concerns for LNOB, there are also instrumental reasons for being concerned about LNOB. First, and most obviously, progress in many SDGs will only happen, or be much faster, if the most deprived show the biggest improvements. This is, by definition, true for goals such as the poverty or hunger targets where only progress among the poor and hungry matters. But it is also the case for goals such as the maternal mortality target (less than 70/100,000 live births) or the non-communicable disease goals (reduce by 1/3), where progress will largely depend on progress among the worst off. Second, progress in one SDG facilitates progress in others, as there are many synergies and complementarities (Lo Bue and Klasen, 2015). For example, better education facilitates better health (and vice versa); clean water is closely linked to improved sanitation, both of which promote health. Third, lower inequality through a focus on those left behind also ensures that the impact of economic growth on reducing poverty and deprivation will be larger (Ravallion, 1998; Klasen, 2008). Fourth, a focus on LNOB will promote social and political stability and cohesion, which in turn can positively affect the overall speed of development.

Lastly, a concern for LNOB can have positive repercussions beyond the borders of the countries concerned. Convergence of economic circumstances across countries as well as falling inequality within countries can help address global problems such as destabilizing conflicts, poverty- or conflict-induced migration flows, or health pandemics.

5 Indicators for the left behind

Clearly, being left behind is a multidimensional concept that can cover many dimensions of well-being and deprivation. Many lists exist of the dimensions of well-being or deprivation. Alkire (2002, pp. 78-84) provides a compilation of many of them (thirty-nine!). These lists include many elements that cannot be reduced to simple measures of market activities and monetary outcomes. Two broad categories in particular deserve to be highlighted.

First, health and education are two dimensions of achievement that strongly determine the possibilities for self-realization of any individual and for valuable social interactions with others. Health is both influenced by social standing and the economic situation, and a factor in getting access to all sorts of personal achievements. Access to health care is one of the most important vital needs. Education is often seen primarily as providing human capital that can be transformed into earnings in the labor market, but it is much more than that. It is one of the most important “social bases of self-respect” (Rawls 1971) and opens minds to understanding the world and interacting with others in a fruitful way.

Second, social relations are very important for people’s well-being, and they can be both a source of disadvantage and the locus where disadvantage originating elsewhere becomes tangible and painful. There does not seem to be an accepted taxonomy of the quality features of social relations, and drawing a list is complex because social relations are of a different sort with different individuals, groups and organizations: family, friends, community, associations, marketplace, service providers, workplace, government agencies, local politics, general politics.

⁴ Rawls makes his case for LNOB within a country, with much weaker arguments for LNOB in his Law of Peoples. Here his views are translated to the global level.

Two broad dimensions of disadvantage in social relations can be distinguished and described as follows. First, there is disadvantage in the form of constraint and lack of freedom, which can be found in subordination (being subject to authority without adequate checks and balances), in dependence (being subject to arbitrary influence or unreliable support), or in obligations and duties (being in charge of others or bearing excessive responsibilities). Second, disadvantage in social relations can also take the form of exclusion, and this can occur in different ways: discrimination (being assigned inferior roles), stigmatization and humiliation (being shamed and blamed), ostracism (being submitted to refusal of contact, including unemployment).

When the dimensions of disadvantage are multiple, as illustrated in the previous paragraphs, the left behind can belong to several categories. One possible taxonomy simply counts the number and/or extent of deprivations, as in measures of multidimensional poverty (such as Alkire and Foster's measure, Alkire and Foster, 2011). The more dimensions and the deeper the deprivation in each of them, the more one falls down the ladder of the left behind. This taxonomy makes it possible to identify those most in need, though it may not identify those who would benefit most from a given amount of support.

Another possible taxonomy examines the main dimensions of disadvantage. For instance, it may be useful to distinguish between those who suffer from outright rejection (stigmatization and ostracism, unemployment) from those who suffer from harmful inclusion (bad jobs, multiple constraints). One can be left behind by being rejected or by being included in a degrading position. The frontier is porous between exclusion and harmful inclusion, and the most disadvantaged move back and forth between the two, but addressing their plight may require different policies for these two different contexts.

A third possible taxonomy involves the mechanisms by which people end up in their disadvantageous position. There are those who inherit it from their social background; those who have been struck by bad luck (e.g. illness, economic downturn in their trade); those who have been attacked or robbed (e.g. victims of war, refugees, raped women); and the victims of policy reforms (e.g. cancellation of social support, forced displacement due to infrastructure projects, rising cost of public services). Once again, this taxonomy may be useful to think about the instruments that can be adapted to the various categories.

A related question of measuring deprivation of those left behind concerns objective versus subjective approaches. It is often argued that the voices of the poor should be listened to, and many participatory studies have been launched, such as the series of World Bank reports under the "Voices of the Poor" initiative (Naraya et al. 2000), or the ATD Fourth World publications (e.g., ATD 2013). Likewise, many academic studies relying on the capabilities approach involve participatory phases (from, e.g., Alkire 2002 to Pogge and Wisor 2016).

There is a fundamental question about how much one should rely on subjective perceptions to document poverty and the phenomenon of being left behind. One can distinguish three broad approaches, each of which has subcategories.

First, there is the purely objective approach that completely ignores subjective aspects. The usual focus on income, wealth or expenditures, or on objective deprivations can be assimilated to this approach. True enough, one can argue that monetary aggregates actually leave it to everyone to decide the details of one's consumption, thereby accommodating the diversity of consumer preferences, but this does not extend beyond commodities and market services. When it extends to non-monetary attributes, the objective approach struggles in the selection and the weighting of the various attributes. Even the most philosophical and principled efforts at drawing a list, such as Nussbaum's (2000) list of basic capabilities, do rely on extensive discussions and consultations. One can safely conclude that a purely objective approach does not exist and that there is always some degree of intersubjective consensus underlying the objective lists that are considered seriously.

Second, the other extreme is the purely subjective approach that relies on expressions of satisfaction or on observed or reported emotions. A key distinction must be made between the subjective scores that measure a cognitive evaluation, a judgment about one's situation, and the subjective scores that focus on affective mental states, emotions and feelings such as happiness, anger, anxiety. The key hurdle for subjective scores of both types is that interpersonal and intertemporal comparisons require that the scales used do not vary with the situation. Satisfaction and happiness treadmills, which

make the scale adapt to the respondent's situation, make it essentially meaningless to use the data for comparisons across people and time. The degree to which the scales are volatile and unreliable may depend on the question and the context, and this is still very much a topic open to research. Decancq and Neumann (2016) compare a variety of approaches and do find that subjective approaches identify some people as the most miserable although on objective attributes they fare rather well, and find a positive but not very high correlation between objective and subjective scores in a multidimensional setting involving income, health and employment status. Layard (2005) addresses the issue and argues that feeling miserable is really a serious disadvantage, warning that any other approach is imposing a paternalistic perspective of life on individuals.

But it is not true that any other approach is like the objective approach imposing weights that may have little to do with the subject's preferences. We have already noted that income itself is respectful of consumer's preferences, and this can be understood by observing that a greater income implies the possibility to obtain a better consumer bundle for whatever preferences the consumer has. The third set of approaches generalizes on this idea and lies in between the objective and the subjective approaches. It retains the subjective element in the weighting of the attributes of (dis)advantage, but keeps an objective scale for interpersonal comparisons. How can one combine subjective weights with an objective scale? Consider income again. The weights it assigns to various commodities are the prices, which are aligned to consumer preferences, whereas the scale of monetary value is objective and can be compared across people without suffering from any treadmill issue. Now, one may argue that income is very special, because the prices on the market generate an alignment of individuals' personal weights (marginal rates of substitution, in the economic jargon) when consumers choose the best bundle they can afford. For non-market attributes, individual preferences are not aligned and personal weights can be expected to differ across people.

The solution to this problem consists in taking a personal "utility function" that reflects the individual's preferences over the various combinations of life attributes, and rescaling it to avoid any treadmill issue. Two rescaling methods are salient in the literature. The equivalence approach (Fleurbaey and Blanchet 2013) picks a path in the space of attributes and measures the individual's position by the point on the path that the individual considers just as good as the individual's current position. For instance, the "equivalent income" measure picks a reference value for each non-market attribute and measures the income that would make the individual as satisfied as in the current situation if this hypothetical income was combined with the referred non-market attributes. To illustrate, consider the case in which health is the only non-market attribute. If the individual is indifferent between his current situation and a situation with income \$X and good health (assuming this is the reference), then \$X is the level of equivalent income for this individual. This method has been developed initially (Samuelson 1974) to compare incomes across countries or periods with different prices, since one can take a reference set of prices and compare people in terms of equivalent incomes associated to reference prices.

The other method, recently revived by Adler (2016), consists in taking a utility function for the individual that reflects risk attitudes over uncertain prospects. Such a function is called a von Neumann-Morgenstern (VNM) utility function. There are actually many such functions for every individual, because multiplying the function by a positive number or adding a constant still represents the same preferences over uncertain prospects. Therefore a further rescaling is needed, and Adler proposes to assign, for individuals, the number zero to a very bad option (starvation) and the number one to a suitably chosen poverty threshold. There are other possibilities (e.g., giving value one to a very good option).

Comparing these various approaches on a German sample for which they estimate preferences for different socio-demographic subgroups, Decancq and Neumann (2016) find that the objective approach and the subjective-weight-objective-scale approaches yield substantial correlation between people, whereas the subjective approach is an outlier. Decancq et al. (2015) further analyze how much difference it makes for the measurement of poverty to take account of the poor's preferences (their subjective weights on life attributes).

As alluded to earlier, another intermediate approach, which is closer to the objective approach, defines uniform weights for all people, but relies on a participatory mechanism for the selection of such weights. This is the approach favored in particular by Sen (1999) and most scholars involved in the capabilities approach. Note that this approach does not solve the problem of comparing people's situations across different communities having chosen different weights.

The key question is whether the poor's preferences should be taken into account, when they are different from the average preferences of the community, or whether the community's preferences are more legitimate after a deliberation process seeking consensus. There are arguments on both sides. One may worry that the poor's preferences are tainted by their disadvantage and reflect the pressure of disadvantage and some adaptation processes. For instance, they may undervalue education for lack of familiarity with it and because of the traditional need to mobilize as much workforce as possible in the family. Or they may undervalue women's rights. On the other hand, they may have different degrees of urgency for different attributes than the average person, and imposing on them the relative weights that suit a more affluent situation can be really harmful (see Alkire 2016 and Fleurbaey 2016 for a debate about these issues).

Clearly, a focus on LNOB will require much more than a large number of objective indicators which is the current focus of the SDG-monitoring framework. Given the subtleties of the processes that cause disadvantage and discrimination, it is critical to develop appropriate indicators that are able to capture this complex reality. The discussion above highlighted some of the issues one needs to be concerned about.

6 Who are the potentially 'left-behind'?

As already discussed above, one can take an aggregate view of who is left behind (left behind countries), or an individual view of who is left behind (left behind individuals or households). There is also an intermediate view, focusing on left-behind groups although this is closely related to the individual view with the added emphasis that individuals in certain groups might suffer from the same or similar disadvantages. We will discuss the individual and the aggregate view in turn.

Focusing on the individual view, one approach to examining the left behind is to focus on those at the bottom of the distribution of a key well-being indicator such as income, education, or health, which is sometimes referred to as vertical inequality. This is clearly useful and important and such assessments of who is at the bottom of the distribution can be easily done with existing household surveys. But such an approach may be limiting as it says little about the causes of such inequalities and also it not always clear which part of inequality is a tolerable price to pay to live in free and diverse societies and where these inequalities are deeply problematic.

Another approach is to look at so-called horizontal inequality, i.e. comparing people who are similar in characteristics but only differ in that they belong to different groups which face different levels of advantages or disadvantages. Important group-based disadvantages may arise due to ethnicity, race, gender, religion, age, disability, or sexual orientation. As has been emphasized by Stewart (2008), such horizontal inequalities are generally seen as being particularly unjust and are often a source of tension and conflict. But of course an individual's level of deprivation is not entirely described by group membership so that it is additionally useful to study vertical inequality within groups or use inequality decomposition techniques that can separate the amount of inequality that is due to between versus within group inequality. When groups are defined in socio-economic terms, between-group inequality does reflect a vertical, rather than horizontal, form of inequality. Horizontal inequalities are generally understood as those that affect groups for which there is no economic rationale for their different level of flourishing.

In line with the multidimensional nature of deprivation, LNOB should particularly focus on people suffering from overlapping disadvantages, as they are the ones that tend to be most at risk of being left behind. In particular, the joint disadvantage arising from ethnicity, gender, and location can create powerful barriers to economic progress and social inclusion. Thus it is critical to not just focus on a particular disadvantage but the combination of many. Fortunately, such analyses can, at least at a descriptive level, be easily done with existing household survey data.

An important question to confront, particularly when comparing deprivation across countries, across regions, or over time, is whether an absolute or a relative perspective should be taken. As we have argued above, for global monitoring of the SDG agenda, as well as for international action on LNOB, there is great merit to take an absolute perspective and

focus on those worst off using the same yardstick, regardless of where they happen to live. Common indicators such as those used in the SDGs will be very useful for that.

At the same time, for many countries, including richer countries, it is important to also focus on those left-behind within their own country, regardless of whether they still seem to be deprived or not using a global yardstick. Moreover, as Sen (1999) has argued, many absolute functionings (such as being able to live without shame) depend on relative attributes such as one's rank in the distribution of income or one's level of education relative to the local community. This is important for equity and justice issues. It is also important for political economy reasons, as the recent rise of populism in many industrialized countries has typically relied on support of people who feel left behind economically.

A last important distinction to make is to identify those who are structurally left-behind and those who are vulnerable to be left behind. The former category typically includes people suffering from multiple disadvantages that compound so that they have little prospect of escaping deprivation unless many of their structural barriers are addressed or they receive special support. In contrast, the vulnerable are typically better off but a negative shock can lead them into a state of deprivation. For them, functioning social protection mechanisms might already be sufficient to prevent them from being eventually left behind.

Turning to the aggregate perspective, much of the discussion above can be mirrored at the country level. One can think of vertical and horizontal inequality at the country level, a multidimensional perspective is important, and overlapping disadvantages really matter. In fact, the LDC category is precisely a way to define countries as left behind based on overlapping disadvantages, i.e. low incomes, poor human assets, and high economic vulnerability. Additionally, an aggregate perspective can highlight the difficulties some countries have in escaping poverty due to poor state capacity, high economic vulnerability, remoteness, and the like.

7 Thinking about policies for LNOB: Some difficulties and issues

There are separate papers on policies so here we will not discuss detailed policies and mechanisms for LNOB. But we will highlight some general issues and difficulties when designing policies.

The first challenge is how to translate a profile of those left behind in a country into a policy framework. One approach, taken also by the UN's Sustainable Development Report, and similar to UN work on the MDGs, is to use such a profile of those left-behind as a tool for targeting interventions specifically at these individuals or groups. While this might be useful in some cases, we argue that it is in general problematic to primarily address LNOB with targeted interventions. Instead, the focus should be on an overall development strategy that will be particularly conducive to include those left-behind. For example, high labor intensive-growth or growth that is particularly high for small-holder farmers can do much more to include those left behind than targeted interventions for those groups. Thus LNOB should be a guide to an overall development strategy, not a guide for specific targeted interventions. Of course, it may be the case that even the best development strategy will leave out some individuals and groups. For them targeted interventions, including removal of discriminatory laws and customs, may be required. But these targeted interventions come as a result of insufficiencies in the overall strategy, not as a replacement of a strategy.

A second difficult issues involves trade-offs. In many settings it may be the case that a focus on LNOB can be very costly, administratively as well as politically difficult, and may come at the cost of promoting efficient use of resources. For example, should infrastructure be focused on backward areas as part of LNOB, even if this means that economic development of the country as a whole slows down as a result? Similarly, should one focus on improving the lives of those left-behind where they live which may be costly, or increase their opportunities to move to economically more dynamic regions? Should a focus on improving the lives of those left-behind take precedence over other goals, such as environmental sustainability? Clearly these are difficult issues and require detailed country-specific analysis and policy responses. Two points are worth noting. First, as also emphasized by Fukuda-Parr in a forthcoming paper in this series, a concern for

those left behind defies a logic of efficiency as in focusing on the low-hanging fruits. That does not, however, prevent such considerations to come into play when prioritizing among policies for LNOB. Second, when choosing policies, one clear guide for such analysis has to be that the long-term well-being of those left-behind is considered a priority. That might then, for example, involve policies that improve their mobility and integration with more dynamic parts of the economy rather than targeted support for their current situation.

8 Conclusion

This short paper has argued that the welcome shift of the 2030 agenda towards LNOB generates a large set of conceptual and empirical questions. While some constructive ambiguity, as currently demonstrated by UN documents, might ensure broad support and buy-in, ultimately it will be important to clearly define the focus of LNOB, work on appropriate indicators, and develop policies that can serve to ensure that truly no one is left behind as policies are developed to implement the SDG Agenda.

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