

FIGHTING INEQUALITIES TO LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND AND TO ACHIEVE SDG 3

Almost four years after the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted by the 193 United Nations (UN) member states, and a few days before Heads of States and Governments gather at the UN in New York to follow up and review progress in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and of the SDGs, where are we in terms of their actual implementation?

The 2019 SDG report of the UNⁱ sheds light on progress made and remaining challenges to achieve the Global Goals. The Secretary General Antonio Guterres emphasizes some positive developments, e.g. that “extreme poverty has declined considerably, the under-5 mortality rate fell by 49 per cent between 2000 and 2017, immunizations have saved millions of lives”, etc. Yet, the report calls for urgent collective attention to overcome major obstacles that could prevent the achievement of the SDGs by 2030, as the international community committed to in 2015. Indeed, the world is lagging behind in terms of concrete implementation of the goals. In its Sustainable Development Report 2019,ⁱⁱ the Sustainable Solutions Development Network (SDSN) admits that “no country is on track to meeting all 17 goals.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Considered as an “Indivisible whole”, the SDGs are nevertheless sector-based and require not only an immense determination to be achieved as such, but also imply reinforcing relationships among actors, building synergies or accepting trade-offs across sectors, as most are closely interlinked and will not be reached independently from one another.

Significant research work was undertaken to define the many interactions and connections between all 17 goals and 169 targets. But if characterizing interactions is important, ambitious collaborative and integrated strategies, political courage, policy changes, significant funding and regular follow-up are necessary to reach the goals at countries level, and to leave no one behind.

Designed to accelerate progress towards achieving SDGs, the pledge to leave no one behind is defined by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) as “taking explicit action to end extreme poverty, curb inequalities, confront discrimination and fast-track progress for the furthest behind”.ⁱⁱⁱ UNDP further identifies five key factors that should shape effective national responses in this endeavour: discrimination, place of residence, socio-economic status, governance, and resilience to shocks. Though seldom disputed and duly acknowledged by most DAC^{iv} countries as necessary to improve equity and build more inclusive societies, “leaving no one behind” has not yet fully “translated into increasing ODA^v levels flowing to

countries most in need, nor into donor sector allocations that are fully guided by country needs.”^{vi} Moreover, just 22% of bilateral and 24% of multilateral allocations of DAC countries aid went to severely off-track countries^{vii} in 2016, where 66% of people in extreme poverty live, suggesting a disconnect between international assistance and actual needs to end poverty and leave no one behind. Also of concern, funding for projects with gender as their principal goal decreased by 5% in 2017 on 2016 (though funding for gender-equality projects doubled from 2009 to 2017, currently standing at US\$ 39 billion).^{viii}

The SDSN identifies six “SDG Transformations” that could help operationalise the 17 goals and help governments develop focused strategies: 1. Education, gender and inequality, 2. Health, wellbeing and demography, 3. Energy decarbonisation and sustainable industry, 4. Sustainable food, land, water, oceans, 5. Sustainable cities and communities and 6. Digital revolution for sustainable development. Addressing “major synergies and trade-offs” needed to achieve the goals, these Transformations are allegedly “aligned with ways in which governments and businesses are organised.”

Reducing inequalities, closing the gender gap, improving access to education and to health care are indeed central elements of sustainable development strategies that countries have to put in place to reach some of the goals. Has some progress been made in this respect since their adoption?

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SDG 3, meant to “ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages”, is a particularly good example of changes and interlinkages needed to attain its targets. Health and well-being are “cross-cutting and unifying themes”^{ix} that can have a multiplier effect: “without good health and well-being for all, achieving the 17 SDGs will be extremely problematic. At the same time, health and well-being are dependent on the achievement of other SDGs.”^x Either a precondition or an outcome of sustainable development, achieving goal 3 requires joint undertaking as well as tackling inequalities in all its forms, social, economic, environmental or gender-based.

Particularly subject to inequalities, key populations are the most vulnerable, underserved, and at-risk, facing increased impact from disease and reduced access to services. According to the Global Fund, in the context of HIV, key populations include men who have sex with men, transgender people, especially transgender women, sex workers, people who inject drugs, people living with HIV, and people in prison and detention. As to tuberculosis, the

Global Fund focuses its interventions on people living with TB/HIV co-infection, migrants, refugees and displaced people, miners, prisoners, and people who inject drugs.

Major progress has been made in improving the health of millions of people since 2000. Maternal and child mortality rates have fallen down, life expectancy keeps increasing globally, and the fight against infectious diseases has experienced major positive developments: the annual number of global deaths from AIDS-related illness among people living with HIV (all ages) has declined from a peak of 1.9 million in 2004 to 770,000 in 2018, 7.7 million people more had access to antiretroviral treatment in 2018 compared with 2010,^{xi} there were an estimated 435,000 deaths from malaria globally in 2017, compared with 607,000 in 2010, an estimated 54 million deaths from tuberculosis were averted over the period 2000–2017 due to early diagnosis and successful treatment.

Despite overall progress in SDG 3, the gains have not been equally shared: adolescent girls and young women as well as pregnant women living in low- and middle-income countries are subject to many inequalities that affect their right to health and access to health care, their economic participation and decision-making: “women spend roughly triple the amount of time that men do each day in unpaid care and domestic work, according to the latest available data from around 90 countries.”^{xii} Close to 300,000 women lost their lives from complications during pregnancy in 2017, many of whom were adolescent girls in low- and middle-income countries. And according to UNAIDS, young women are 60% more likely to become affected with HIV than young men of the same age. 6,200 young women (15–24) are infected every week.^{xiii} Women also continue facing discrimination regarding their sexual and reproductive health and rights: female genital mutilation affected 200 million women in 2017^{xiv}, i.e. over 30% of girls aged 15 to 19 in the 30 countries where the practice is concentrated.^{xv}

As regards malaria, pregnant women, particularly adolescent girls, need special attention, due to their increased biological vulnerability to the disease. However, gender bias often result in increased hardship. Children under 5 also constitute 60% of deaths due to malaria around the world. Among them, poor children are particularly affected.

Inequalities also impact access to care for people living with tuberculosis. Key populations are confronted with social, legal and economic inequalities that contribute to neglect by national health systems, to enhance vulnerabilities while the inability to access health facilities in remote areas exacerbates barriers to care.

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Despite significant gains on SDG 5 targets, the UN notes that “discriminatory laws and social norms remain pervasive, along with harmful practices and other forms of violence against women and girls. Women continue to be underrepresented at all levels of political leadership.”

As to SDG 3, it will not be reached independently from other SDGs, nor will it be attained if inequalities in all its forms remain in place and if the world does not make progress in ending AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria. Building resilient and sustainable systems for health, ensuring that sexual and reproductive health and rights are implemented, addressing gender inequalities, including in giving women more space in the governance of health structures (e.g. in country coordinating mechanisms), are critical steps for succeeding in the fight against the three diseases and for ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all at all ages.

Since its inception, the Global Fund has been a unique financial mechanism, able to mobilise public and private resources globally to fight HIV / Aids, tuberculosis and malaria. In the last 17 years, it has contributed to remarkable progress in reducing the morbidity and mortality linked to the three diseases. Building inclusive health systems, targeting key populations, tackling gender and human rights-related barriers to health services (e.g. by empowering affected populations to know their health-related rights) are also concrete steps taken by the Global Fund to leave no one behind.

Yet, if 27 million lives have been saved, progress has stalled, and resurgences have appeared. These epidemics remain major public health threats. In October, the Global Fund needs to mobilise at least US\$14 billion for the period 2020 to 2022 to get back on track in the fight against the 3 diseases, and accelerate progress towards achieving SDG 3 and Universal Health Coverage. The world has 11 years to fulfil this ambition. There is no time to waste.

ⁱ The SDG Report 2019 - <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2019/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.sustainabledevelopment.report/>

ⁱⁱⁱ UNDP – What does it mean to leave no one behind – Discussion paper – 06.2018

^{iv} The OECD Development Assistance Committee is an international forum of many of the largest providers of aid. It includes 30 members.

^v Official Development Assistance

^{vi} OECD Development Cooperation report 2018 – Joining forces to leave no one behind

^{vii} Severely off-track countries are defined by OECD as those places most at risk of being left behind, i.e. those “countries expected to have poverty headcount ratios above 20% in 2030.” OECD identified 31 of them, of which 23 are in sub-Saharan Africa, many being on the list of fragile states.

^{viii} Donor Tracker – DT Insight – Words to action: The State of ODA funding for gender equality – 08.2019

^{ix} Nunes, Lee & O’Riordan - The importance of an integrating framework for achieving the SDGs: the example of health and well-being – BMJ Global Health, 09.2016

^x Måns Nilsson, Dave Griggs, Martin Visbeck and Claudia Ringler – A draft framework for understanding SDG interactions, International Council for Science, 06.2016

^{xi} UNAIDS - Global AIDS update 2019

^{xii} The SDG Report 2019 - <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2019/>

^{xiii} UNAIDS - Global AIDS update 2019

^{xiv} Though the prevalence of FGM has decreased by 25% since 2000.

^{xv} The SDG Report 2019 - <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2019/>