Background

Chapter 1 of the GSDR 2016 explores the implications of leaving no one behind for the operationalization of the SDGs from a science-policy perspective. Given the importance of the concept of 'ensuring that no one is left behind' in the 2030 Agenda, it is critical that some clarity exists on its implications for implementing the Agenda. At the conceptual level, four broad questions need to be addressed. First, who are those being or at risk of being left behind? Second, why are they left behind? Third, how can strategies and policies reach them in practice? And fourth, what types of strategies and policies would be appropriate in order to leave no one behind? Science can inform decision-making on these broad questions. By revealing to what extent strategies and policies that have been used in various SDG areas are aligned with the objective of leaving no one behind and what their success has been in achieving it, it can also provide elements to assess how challenging it will be to realize this commitment.

The ambition to endeavor to reach the furthest behind first is a transformative aspect of the 2030 Agenda. Does this imply different implementation strategies than those commonly used in the past? What could it mean for important cross-cutting dimensions such as institutions and for the way technology is managed? Here also, scientific evidence can inform the debate.

Many SDG goals and targets directly relate to leaving no one behind and refer to specific objectives and actions as well as groups (of countries or people) that should be the object of sustained attention in this regard. This is particularly the case with goals that were within the scope of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), including poverty, gender, education, health, and means of implementation. In those areas, considerations of inclusiveness in a broad sense have long been part of the main development discourse and practice, and actions and policies to address this dimension have become part of the standard development apparatus.

Defining those left behind

Many criteria can be used to identify those left behind, whether within a country or across countries. Related concepts and associated measures include poverty, inclusiveness, discrimination and inequality.

In practice, those "left behind" with respect to a particular dimension of the Agenda may be different groups in different societies. In addition to the reference to certain groups (e.g., women, indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, the youth, and others) and deprivation indicators focused on single areas or sectors, many indices of multiple deprivation exist, which incorporate social, economic and environmental dimensions.

Deprivations tend to be spatially concentrated and, therefore, policies concerned with leaving no one behind need to take into account geography. In this regard, multiple deprivation maps based on composite indicators have been used as an instrument of planning and management at different levels from national to sub-national to local, both in developed and developing countries.

In addition, it is important to take into account the dynamic nature of deprivation and inequality; in this respect, preventive policies are critical to ensure that new people or group do not fall behind at the same time as others escape poverty and deprivation.

Targeting those left behind

Beyond identifying those left behind, reaching them through delivery mechanisms (such as social services, basic services, training programmes, etc.) and empowering them necessitates general administrative and institutional capacity as well as specific administration and management systems.

A variety of targeting methods have been used to reach those left behind. All require underlying data systems to be implemented, as well as administrative capacity in various institutions. Available evaluations from different SDG areas all suggest that there are significant practical challenges in effectively reaching those left behind. For example, a comprehensive review of 122 case studies of interventions that included cash, near-cash and food transfers, food and non-food subsidies, public works for job creation and social funds, found that different targeting methods showed a range of results in terms of effectiveness in reaching the target groups. Another comprehensive review done by the World Bank in 2005 for electricity and water subsidies found that most of the existing subsidies at the time were regressive, as the combined effects of lower connection rates, lower take-up given access, and lower consumption in the poorest groups meant that the bulk of subsidies was reaching high and middle-income groups.

Targeting, in and by itself, is not sufficient in order to leave no one behind – development interventions, even if properly targeted, can result in at best partial solutions to deprivations and, as a result, only address part of the problem. In addition, strategies to identify beneficiaries may impose costs on the recipients such as transportation costs or may cause social stigma.

Strategies for ensuring that no one is left behind

How concerns relating to inclusiveness can be reflected in development strategies differs across sectors, and evidence is needed to assess how existing strategies have performed in this regard. The GSDR looks at different development strategies – economy-wide growth strategies, social protection systems, area-based strategies, and Sectoral strategies – in order to see how they take into account the idea of leaving no one behind.

In some SDG areas, commonly used development objectives and interventions have the notion of leaving no one behind at their core. For example, providing universal access to water, sanitation, electricity, clean cooking fuels, child protection services, education and health are by definition objectives that focus on those who are 'left behind' with respect to those services. For example, universal access to primary education without discrimination has been at the forefront of international and national efforts.

As a cross-cutting issue and now as a stand-alone SDG, gender equality is one of the main objectives in ensuring that no one is left behind, since women and girls around the world are often excluded. Even though gender equality is already embodied as an objective in many policy interventions, targeted efforts are often needed to ensure the inclusion of the furthest behind, for example by ensuring the security of girls and women in education institutions and on the journey to and from school, in particular during conflict and crises.

Health is also a good example of an area where reaching the furthest behind has been on the forefront of national and international policy discussion. At the national level, the imperative to leave no one behind in this area is epitomized in discussions on universal health coverage, which have matured in many countries over the past two decades. In addition to universal interventions and access provision, broad but targeted schemes, such as conditional cash transfer programmes aiming at tackling multiple deprivations simultaneously, by definition aim at ensuring that no one is left behind.

In other sectors, the alignment between strategies commonly used and 'leaving no one behind' may be less natural. In agriculture, there has been a focus on the need to incorporate small-holder agriculture in policy frameworks and development interventions, by providing them with access to markets, to certification schemes, helping them to address non-tariff barriers, etc. The need to ensure that the legal and regulatory framework and the support system for agriculture that are put in place do not discriminate against smallholders is also increasingly recognized.

Even though sectoral strategies may be well aligned with the objective of leaving no one behind, they may still require concerted efforts in order to reach the furthest behind. For example, despite efforts made to provide free access to education, without additional targeted interventions disadvantaged groups such as children and youth with disabilities will continue to be less likely to start school or attend school and complete schooling than other children. While facilitating access to safe drinking water in urban areas with existing infrastructure might be done with subsidies to facilitate connections to the network at affordable cost, individuals living in remote rural areas may not be reached by such efforts without targeted efforts to widen the network or to provide alternative water sources.

Examples of interventions reviewed for the report that aim to reach the furthest behind first include: nutrition, where the core target of interventions in developing countries is those suffering the most from stunting; area-based interventions targeting the poorest locations; and strategies to provide shelter for homeless people.

Going forward

Based on the limited evidence reviewed in the report, in many areas of the new Agenda, factoring in the imperative to leave no one behind in sustainable development interventions may not present insurmountable difficulties. Undertaking to systematically reach the furthest behind first may represent a much greater challenge and may in some cases imply a more significant departure from present strategies.

A message that comes across strongly throughout the different chapters of the GSDR 2016, even though their topics are very different and the scientific communities involved around each of them are distinct: if no one is to be left behind in 2030, the notion of inclusiveness cannot be treated as an afterthought or even mainstreamed in other areas. Rather, it should be an integral part of institution design and functioning; of research and development, and of infrastructure planning and development.

Success in leaving no one behind is likely to require attention at three levels. First, better taking into account the interests of those left behind will require assessing the way in which strategies and policies are designed. This in turn may require the incorporation of enhanced understanding of the dynamics of poverty, marginalization and vulnerability in a country- and place-specific context. This may also involve ways to give more voice to deprived or marginalized groups in policy discussion and decision-making. Second, there will be a need to review, and possibly update, ways in which strategies are executed, with particular efforts made to reach the furthest behind, addressing gaps in administrative capacity and data to improve the targeting of programmes. Third, at the highest level of decision-making in Government, taking the new Agenda at its word will require a consideration of how social objectives are balanced with other objectives, such as short-term economic efficiency. Ultimately, the priority given to those furthest behind will be reflected in the allocation of resources, both from the public and the private sectors.

Going forward, it will be critical to systematically collect further scientific evidence on how existing development strategies do indeed reach the furthest behind. A first step could be an inventory of existing meta-studies that attempt to review the effectiveness of development interventions in different SDG areas in reaching those left behind. It could also be worth assessing the costs and benefits of investing in more comparable frameworks for evaluating development interventions in different SDG areas. This would likely be a significant undertaking in terms of methodology and costs.

More information
The GSDR 2016, its Executive Summary and other briefs and documents are available on the following website:
https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/globalsdreport