

## Interactive dialogue 2

### Tackling inequalities, empowering women and girls and leaving no one behind

#### I. INTRODUCTION

Focusing only on national and global averages and aggregates makes it easier to miss uneven progress and even growing inequalities at the subnational or community level – including between women and men and girls and boys, or among specific ethnic, age, income, minority or other social and population groups. In many cases, the most remote, marginalized and vulnerable people in the world are the most difficult to reach. This is why the new SDG agenda is underpinned by a strong commitment to reduce inequalities within and between countries, to eliminate all forms of discrimination and to review disaggregated data to ‘reach the furthest behind first’. This is why the new Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development makes a pledge that “no one will be left behind”.

Inequalities cut across all dimensions of sustainable development – social, economic and environmental – and pose obstacles to all goals. Inequalities exist both within and between countries, and the gap in global wealth shares between the richest 1% of the world’s population and the bottom 40 per cent constitutes a significant risk to global stability and sustainable development. Rising inequality is linked to limited access to financial, natural and productive resources, as well as the persistence of violent conflict. Inequalities are evident in a number of dimensions that impact people’s lives: lack of universal access to quality health care, social protection, education, food, electricity, clean water and sanitation services; communities blighted by violence and crime and suffering from spatial segregation; high unemployment rates with little or no access to decent work opportunities and financial services, particularly for women of all ages, as well as youth. Widespread inequalities are also evident in uneven access to natural resources such as land and water, and are a key driver of migration. Furthermore, the impacts of disasters, climate change, biodiversity loss, conflict and economic or humanitarian crises often have the most devastating impacts on those least able to cope – children, older people, persons with disabilities, migrants, minorities, indigenous peoples, displaced persons and those living in poverty or in vulnerable human settlements.

Gender inequality remains the most pervasive form of inequality around the world as evidenced in gender-based violence and discrimination against women and girls, unacceptably high maternal mortality rates, wide gaps in women’s access to decent employment and financial and productive assets, significant under-representation of women in political and economic decision-making, and high levels of unpaid care and domestic work undertaken by women and girls. As proposed in SDGs 5 and 10, as well as targets in a number of other goal areas, ending all forms of discrimination in laws, policies and practices against women and girls, as well as against all people discriminated against on the basis of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, religion, geographic location, economic, migratory, displacement or other status, is necessary for ensuring equal opportunities for all and reducing inequalities of outcome.

Additionally, reducing inequalities between nations remains an enormous challenge to the international community. There are inequalities at the global level in access to financing and other means of implementation required for achievement of the SDGs, as well as inequities in global economic and financial institutions. For example, globally, some 200 million fewer women and girls have access to the Internet, and consequently, digital skills and better-paid jobs. Despite robust economic growth for a number of developing countries, many low- and lower middle-income countries have had less success in boosting shared prosperity than upper-middle and high income countries: the poorer group of countries grew by 2.6 percent while the richer group grew by 4.5 percent. While there has been some convergence, other inequalities are rising as incomes within developing countries, particularly for the poor, are growing at much slower rates than for their counterparts in wealthier nations<sup>1</sup>.

#### II. STOCKTAKING

Equality and non-discrimination are existing moral and legal obligations enshrined in the nine core international human rights treaties<sup>2</sup>, the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)* and the UN Charter. Under these commitments, Member States are already obliged to eliminate all forms of discrimination and to promote equality, including where necessary through special measures and affirmative action. In addition, under the human rights treaties, most Member States have already committed to ensuring universal access for all, without discrimination, to at least minimum essential levels of food, housing, education, health and other services, ensuring their availability, accessibility, affordability and quality. They are also bound to ensure equality for all before the law, to undertake measures to promote universal access to justice, participation in public affairs, and to protect personal security and the freedoms of expression, association and peaceful assembly for all, without discrimination.

In addition to moral and legal obligations, there is also increasing evidence that inequalities are not only detrimental to the health and wellbeing of those directly affected, but to societies as a whole. Highly unequal societies grow more slowly than those with lower income inequalities, are less successful in sustaining growth over long periods of time and recover more slowly from economic downturns.<sup>3</sup> Crime, disease and environmental degradation – including competition over scarce natural resources – are exacerbated by inequality, and when inequality and disparities reach extreme levels, they can foment

discontent, lead to political instability and, in some cases, escalate into violence and conflict.<sup>4</sup> There is evidence to suggest that more equal societies, by contrast, have healthier, more educated people, more innovation and higher social mobility.<sup>5</sup>

Investing in children and young people, both girls and boys – starting in early childhood and at the appropriate times throughout their lives – is one of the most effective ways to reduce inequalities and break the vicious intergenerational cycles of poverty. These interventions, including those that specifically target the most vulnerable, also have some of the most dramatic returns on investment per dollar spent. Prevention of undernutrition in early childhood leads to: hourly earnings that are 20% higher and wage rates that are 48% higher; individuals who are 33% more likely to escape poverty; and women who are 10% more likely to own their own business.<sup>6</sup> Research on equitable access to quality education also shows some promising results. Just one extra year of schooling is associated with increases in an individual's earnings of up to 10 per cent.<sup>7</sup> Investments to reduce inequalities are a smart economic choice.

Truly addressing inequalities hinges on tackling not only the *symptoms*, but the *root causes*. Inequalities are driven and sustained by global and national structural factors and determinants including: discrimination; lack of access to resources; unequal representation and participation; and/or weak, biased, ineffective or corrupt governance structures at national and international levels. They are additionally driven by lack of basic infrastructure needed to provide access to the essentials of life – shelter, water and sanitation, food, health, energy and mobility. All of these factors combined serve as formidable and mutually reinforcing barriers to people reaching their potential and fully participating in society – circumstances that can persist from generation to generation. They also result in limited supply-side capacity of low-income countries to fully participate in global trade flows and financial and knowledge systems, including the Internet and other ICTs; barriers to orderly and safe migration; lack of solutions to displacement; inequalities in the allocation, distribution and use of productive, personal, financial and natural resources; unequal access to markets; rolling back of labour protections; and absence or erosion of social protection and safety net systems.

### III. PROPOSALS FOR ADDRESSING ISSUES IN NEW AGENDA

During discussions on the post-2015 development agenda, Member States have often emphasized the need to tackle explicitly the multi-dimensional nature of inequality, including gender inequality, through “headline” Goals 5 and 10 and targets in a number of other goal areas, as well as measuring policy impacts through the disaggregation of data. Inequalities must also be explicitly addressed throughout all goal areas. In addition to tracking progress in goals 5 and 10, there need to be intensified efforts towards monitoring progress and achieving the progressive reduction of inequality gaps over time for all goal areas and among relevant groups. In accordance with the 2030 agenda, activities should prioritize reaching those furthest behind first.

Tracking these inequalities across different goal areas will require investment in local, national, regional and global capacities for the collection and analysis of disaggregated data, as per SDG target 17.18 and the grounds already identified in human rights law. Data disaggregation on social spending is also essential. A healthy and stable social contract to ensure that inclusive and sustainable growth includes the poorer segments of society through social protection systems and adequate systems of taxation directly contributes towards tackling multidimensional poverty, by promoting income security and access to better nutrition, health care, education. By improving human capacities and mitigating shocks, social protection fosters the ability of the poor to participate in economic growth including through better access to employment.

As a supplement to data collected by national statistics offices, inclusive and people-led participatory monitoring methodologies can be employed for monitoring of the SDGs and their associated targets. These can serve as the “reality check” as to whether the implementation of the goals is truly delivering improvements to people’s daily lives, their communities and the environment. Real-time monitoring systems, information from surveillance systems, polling surveys, perception data, sentiment surveys and other public feedback and data sources could be part of SDG monitoring activities.

Addressing these issues in the context of the SDGs will require Member States, the multilateral system, and other development partners to make adjustments and innovations in service design and delivery, financing, regulation and partnerships, ensuring that progress and reforms benefit the most marginalized populations and all people.

Reducing inequalities requires a range of measures including: eliminating discrimination; increased investments and focus in quality education and health care services, including for sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights; the creation of decent work and full employment, including promotion of MSMEs in the context of inclusive economic growth; improved infrastructure for water and sanitation, transportation, energy and information technology; measures to reduce and redistribute unpaid care work; legal and policy reform to ensure full and equal access to financial and productive resources and assets, especially for women; and universal social protection floors.

It is also particularly important that people who are often seen as *beneficiaries* of development are engaged as active *partners* participating in all aspects of development, including planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Making sure that all groups of people are included in the implementation of the SDGs can give a sense of hope and purpose and can also help to shift

harmful attitudes and biases. It can also make development programmes and initiatives more effective, equitable and sustainable.

Finally, awareness of the goals is key to their fulfilment. All people must have the opportunity to learn about the SDGs and explore how they can be part of achieving them. The SDGs will be fulfilled by people taking action in their communities, empowered by knowledge and an ongoing process of learning about human rights, including their meaning and practical application to their daily lives. Local, national and global efforts to increase public awareness of the critical issues framed by the SDGs will be essential for their successful implementation and for achieving progress in an equitable and inclusive manner.

#### Questions for discussion:

- How can the more explicit focus on reducing inequality -- including gender inequality -- in the SDGs improve the formulation of national development planning and policies and the allocation of national budgets (including on social protection and safety nets)?
- How can the international financial, trade, investment, intellectual property and knowledge systems, including the Internet and ICTs, be adapted in order to address the issues of wide international inequalities among countries?
- What can be done to better understand the root causes of discrimination on the basis of gender, age, income, location and other factors, and identify best practices to reduce discrimination and promote equality in all aspects of sustainable development?
- How can people become fully engaged as active partners in all aspects of development – planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation? What measures can enhance gender equality in all aspects of sustainable development?
- What steps can be taken towards building capacity for collecting and analyzing disaggregated data in order to make more informed policy-making decisions that take into consideration the needs of all, including the most marginalized?

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<sup>1</sup> Links to Growth, Inequality and Inequality of Opportunity, Ambar Narayan, Jaime Saavedra-Chanduvi, Sailesh Tiwari, The World Bank, October 2013

<sup>2</sup>The Nine Core International Human Rights Treaties: 1) International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination; 2) International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; 3) International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; 4) Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; 5) Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment; 6) Convention on the Rights of the Child; 7) International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families; 8) International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance; 9) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CoreInstruments.aspx>

<sup>3</sup>UN System Task Team on the Post-2015 UN Development Agenda: Addressing Inequalities: The heart of the post-2015 agenda and the future we want for all

[http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/policy/untaskteam\\_undf/thinkpieces/10\\_inequalities.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/policy/untaskteam_undf/thinkpieces/10_inequalities.pdf)

<sup>4</sup>[Ibid](#)

<sup>5</sup> The Spirit Level: Why Equality Is Better For Everyone by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, p. 23

<sup>6</sup>2014 Global Nutrition Report: Actions and Accountability to Accelerate the World's Progress on Nutrition:

<http://www.ifpri.org/sites/default/files/publications/gnr14.pdf>

<sup>7</sup>Education for All Global Monitoring Report

[http://www.unesco.org/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/ED/GMR/pdf/gmr2010/MDG2010\\_Facts\\_and\\_Figures\\_EN.pdf](http://www.unesco.org/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/ED/GMR/pdf/gmr2010/MDG2010_Facts_and_Figures_EN.pdf)