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## Inclusiveness

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The 2030 Agenda emphasizes that no one should be left behind in its implementation and in policy alignment for the Sustainable Development Goals. Inclusiveness within and among countries is one of the most pronounced overarching aims of the 2030 Agenda. Yet have these aims been realized? To what extent has the pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals led to more inclusiveness? We explore these questions in this chapter.

The 2030 Agenda needs to face a global economic system characterized by extreme inequalities. Some 735 million people live in extreme poverty on less than USD 1.90 a day (Oxfam 2020), and the world's billionaires alone have amassed more wealth than the poorest 4.6 billion people who make up 60 per cent of humankind. The COVID-19 pandemic might have pushed 119–124 million people back into poverty after prolonged unemployment or underemployment (United Nations 2021). Basic rights such as access to food, education or energy are often denied as well. In 2019, about 820 million people – more than 10 per cent of humanity – suffered from food and dietary deprivations. The World Food Programme estimates that another 130 million people may have fallen into this category because of the global pandemic (FAO 2020). Finally, the space for public participation in politics and respect for civil and political rights are shrinking progressively. In 2019, 40 per cent of the world's population lived in countries where freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression were violated (CIVICUS Monitor 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the situation, and some civil society organizations claim that some governments used the pandemic to enforce more restrictions on civic freedoms (CIVICUS Monitor 2020). Even though the crisis caused by the pandemic is global, low- and middle-income countries have been hardest hit. About 82 per cent of the new poor will be in middle-income countries (World Bank 2020a).

With the deepening of these crises, concerns for inclusion, fairness and justice have gained saliency in political discourse (Biermann and Kalfagianni 2020;

Kashwan et al. 2020; Okereke 2007). In 2015, governments pledged to prioritize the poorest of the poor in their interventions, or, as the United Nations formulates it, ‘reach the furthest behind first’ (UNGA 2015: paragraph 4). In 2020, the United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres confirmed that the ‘2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is designed to address the very fragilities and shortcomings that the pandemic has exposed’, such as poverty and exclusion (United Nations 2020). Many goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda focus on marginalized people and seek to increase inclusiveness and to foster justice, for instance by ensuring access to food (Goal 2), education (Goal 4), energy (Goal 7) or justice (Goal 16), by targeting vulnerable groups (Goal 5) and by adding a goal on reducing inequalities (Goal 10).

Yet, how and to what extent have the Sustainable Development Goals helped to achieve more inclusion and better support for poor and vulnerable groups within countries? And internationally, have the Sustainable Development Goals led to a fairer global economic system and given least developed countries a stronger voice in global governance?

These are the key questions we address in this chapter, which analyses the scholarly literature on the steering effects of the Sustainable Development Goals with a view to inclusiveness within and between countries. We first conceptualize inclusiveness and outline how it relates to concepts such as participation, equity, and democratic legitimacy. We then analyse the evidence in the literature on whether and under what conditions the Sustainable Development Goals have fostered inclusiveness at national and global levels. We assess progress on inclusiveness in different contexts and whether any variation in inclusiveness since 2015 can be attributed to normative, institutional or discursive steering effects of the goals.

### **Conceptualization and Methods**

At the 1995 World Summit for Social Development, governments defined an inclusive society as ‘“a society for all” in which every individual, each with rights and responsibilities, has an active role to play’. Such an inclusive society should develop mechanisms to enable diversity and social justice, accommodate the special needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, and facilitate democratic participation (United Nations 1995: paragraph 66).

We focus in this chapter on different subjects of inclusiveness. First, we study inclusiveness in the national context. Inclusiveness is here mostly understood as intersectional. It varies with criteria of age, class, caste, (dis)ability, gender, indigeneity and race, as well as vulnerability to environmental shocks (Hathie 2019), climate change (Kajiser and Kronsell 2014) or conflicts (Leininger, Lührmann and Sigman 2019; Semenenko, Halhash and Ivchenko 2019). Our focus

is on groups that have been explicitly mentioned in the 2030 Agenda as suffering from exclusion and inequalities, namely children and the youth, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, and migrants and refugees (UNGA 2015: paragraph 23).<sup>1</sup> We also focus on women and girls, who are addressed in Sustainable Development Goal 5, which seeks to ‘achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls’. Second, we study inclusiveness in global governance. Some argue here that the credibility of the many summits, agreements and institutions in global sustainability governance has been challenged by North–South inequities and conflicts dating back to the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (Okereke 2020). We focus on the inclusiveness of global governance regarding the least developed countries, the 46 poorest countries that are home to 13 per cent of the world population and that the 2030 Agenda recognizes as particularly vulnerable (UNGA 2015: paragraph 22).

In scholarly literature, inclusiveness is defined broadly and in relation to other concepts, such as participation (Okereke and Agupusi 2015; Stiglitz 2002), democratic legitimacy (Bäckstrand 2006; Biermann and Gupta 2011; Scharpf 1997), inclusive development (Gupta and Vegelin 2016) and justice (Kalfagianni et al. 2020). Democratic legitimacy is generally understood as the extent to which citizens can influence the content of norms and agreements and hold decision-makers accountable; inclusiveness covers here a political dimension (Nanz and Steffek 2004). In the notion of ‘inclusive development’, the concept relates to human rights (Arts 2017), social–ecological issues (Gupta and Baud 2015) and political dimensions (Hickey 2013). Most definitions of inclusiveness concur that development must include the needs and demands of marginalized people, sectors and countries in all social, political and economic processes (Gupta, Pouw and Ros-Tonen 2015). Inclusive development is thus understood as requiring that burdens and benefits are equitably distributed across societal groups (Hickey, Sen and Bukenya 2015). The notion of inclusiveness also relates to theories of justice, where it is often seen as a pre-condition for a just society. In short, we understand inclusiveness as a normative concept that cuts across democratic legitimacy, participation, inclusive development and justice.

Building on these concepts, in this assessment we unpack inclusiveness along three dimensions: as a matter of *recognition* (all people are free from physical threats, have complete and equal political rights and their cultural traditions free from disparagement); *representation* (all can fully participate in decision-making); and *distribution* (opportunities and risks, burdens and responsibilities are fairly divided) (see Honneth 2001; Kalfagianni et al. 2020). In the first two dimensions, the central question is whether the Sustainable Development Goals have enabled a greater recognition and representation of vulnerable people in a country or, internationally, the redistribution of power to the least developed countries.

Regarding recognition, we ask whether the Sustainable Development Goals helped in providing equal rights and normative recognition to vulnerable societal groups or, internationally, to least developed countries. For representation, we ask whether institutions ensure the equal or equitable participation of vulnerable societal groups and least developed countries in policy and decision-making at national and global levels, respectively. As for distribution, the question is about resources and capabilities to participate in and achieve inclusive development. To assess distribution, we discuss the extent to which vulnerable groups and countries have an equitable share of resources and opportunities in society. At the national level, we explore income or other forms of inequality in access to basic rights. Internationally, we study the integration of the least developed countries into the global economy and whether the Sustainable Development Goals have favoured the economic capabilities of the least developed countries.

How can we attribute any of such variations in inclusiveness to the adoption of the goals? In the literature we look for steering effects of the Sustainable Development Goals that comprise normative, institutional and discursive changes. For normative changes, we look for new norms and policies towards the inclusiveness of vulnerable groups and, internationally, whether new decisions were taken to better include least developed countries in global governance. For institutional changes, we investigate the establishment or modification of departments, committees, offices, or programmes to promote inclusiveness or reduce power asymmetries and inequality. Finally, for discursive changes, we look for evidence that the principle of ‘leaving no one behind’, which is mentioned five times in the 2030 Agenda and has been mobilized in global discourses since then, can be traced back in national and global policy debates and documents since 2015.

Methodologically, our analysis draws on a systematic review of the academic peer-reviewed literature. Using the search engine *Scopus*, we cover all articles published between 2015 and 2020 in the social sciences subject area that contain in their titles, abstracts or keywords ‘Sustainable Development Goals’ (or ‘SDGs’); combined with ‘inclusiveness’, ‘inclusion’, ‘inequalities within countries’, ‘inequality between countries’ (or ‘among countries’), ‘leave no one behind’, ‘least developed countries’, ‘low-income countries’; or with vulnerable groups such as ‘disabled people’, ‘indigenous peoples’, ‘children and youth’, ‘women and girls’, and ‘migrants’ or ‘refugees’. Although articles published in 2015 and 2016 are unlikely to be based on empirical material collected after the adoption of the goals, we included them because their analyses of the negotiations on the Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda allowed us to partly assess the steering effects of the formulation of the goals on the recognitional dimension of inclusiveness. Our search string yielded 793 results.<sup>2</sup>

Overall, we found that scholarship on the actual steering effects of the Sustainable Development Goals on inclusiveness at national and global level remains limited. After a careful reading of abstracts and exclusion of irrelevant articles, we ended up with a database of only 40 articles. Most of these articles addressed inclusiveness at the national or regional level and focused on specific vulnerable groups or on topics such as education, urbanization or jobs. As for international politics, we found scarce literature on inclusiveness with a focus on the least developed countries. Therefore, we added in our database grey literature, such as official reports from global institutions, leading think-tanks and governments, and insights from our own research. We now present the main findings of our review.

### **Research Findings and Practical Insights**

We discuss here our findings about the effects of the Sustainable Development Goals on inclusiveness, first regarding societies at national level and then global governance.

#### ***Steering Effects on Inclusiveness at National Level***

We now review the role of the Sustainable Development Goals in steering intersectional inclusiveness within countries. We focus on five vulnerable groups of people who are mentioned in the 2030 Agenda: women and girls; children and the youth; persons with disabilities; indigenous people; and migrants and refugees. We also study how civil society groups are included. We analyse how vulnerable people and civil society groups are recognized and represented within countries, and how resources and opportunities are distributed to these groups. We outline how the Sustainable Development Goals relate to this and examine the impacts that the goals have had in steering the inclusiveness of vulnerable and civil society groups from recognitional, representational and distributional standpoints.

**The Recognition of Vulnerable and Civil Society Groups.** The Sustainable Development Goals seek to advance the recognition of vulnerable groups in society, and vulnerable groups are often mentioned in the 2030 Agenda and in the goals and targets. Many studies found for instance that women and girls are more prominently recognized in the Sustainable Development Goals than in the Millennium Development Goals. Sustainable Development Goal 5 is a stand-alone goal that aims at achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls, and the 2030 Agenda includes further commitments to end discrimination, eliminate violence, value unpaid care and domestic work, promote women's participation and leadership, and ensure access to reproductive health and rights.

The new stand-alone goal is a substantial improvement on Millennium Development Goal 3; by addressing major gender gaps such as violence against women and women unpaid work, some expected it to be transformative (Rosche 2016). Additionally, the 2030 Agenda made advancing women's rights a key tenet that cuts across all other goals, for instance on health and education, building here on commitments and norms set out in the Beijing Platform for Action and earlier landmark frameworks, including the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (Azcona and Bhatt 2020; Fukuda-Parr 2016).

Similarly, the Sustainable Development Goals aim to strategically advance the recognition of children and the youth, and their inclusion in social, economic and ecological development. This is visible for example in the global goals relating to education (Goal 4), economic growth (Goal 8), cities and urban governance (Goal 11.7) and climate governance (Goal 13.b). The goals also recognize that persons with disabilities must not be left behind, and explicitly refer to 'persons with disabilities' or 'disability' 11 times, in sections related to decent work (Sustainable Development Goal 8.5), education (Sustainable Development Goal 4.5 and 4.a), and sustainable cities (Sustainable Development Goal 11.2 and 11.7) (Abualghaib et al. 2019). Yet despite the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the global development discourse, the lack of good quality, accurate and comparable disability data to monitor their protection and inclusion hampers the assessment of the steering effects of the goals for this group. Especially in developing countries, including persons with disabilities faces many obstacles, including the belief that persons with disabilities constitute a separate focus area rather than a cross-cutting issue, the assumption that the costs of inclusiveness are too high, and the lack of awareness of disability law and policy (Niewohner, Pierson and Meyers 2020).

While the 2030 Agenda has drawn attention to the inclusiveness of vulnerable groups, there is little evidence that the Sustainable Development Goals have fostered the development of new norms and policies to advance the recognition of vulnerable groups. Scholars indeed argue that many policy frameworks promoting the inclusiveness of these groups existed long before the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals. Dhar (2018) points to the fact that prominent programmes to advance girls' and women's rights and dignity in India, such as *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao* and *Swachh Bharat*, were adopted before 2015, and that in the year after the Sustainable Development Goals were adopted, budgetary investments for women's development and empowerment in India were even lower than before. All in all, Dhar (2018) argues that the Sustainable Development Goals have merely been integrated into long-existing programmes for women's equality in India, without any significant additionality.

Regarding the inclusion of persons with disabilities, some studies emphasize the central role of the 2006 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with

Disabilities in steering the adoption of domestic norms and policies favouring the inclusion of persons with disabilities (Abualghaib et al. 2019; Banks et al. 2020). As this convention is legally binding, it provides a stronger framework than the Sustainable Development Goals, which are voluntary. The additionality of the Sustainable Development Goals also remains difficult to determine with respect to the inclusion of migrants. Although the 2030 Agenda recognizes the contribution of migration to sustainable development and directs states, with Sustainable Development Goal 10.7, to be more inclusive towards migrants through ‘well-planned migration policies’ (UNGA 2015), many studies find that the targets and indicators related to migrants build on prior efforts of the International Organization for Migration and other institutions (IOM 2016: 21; UNDESA, IOM and OECD 2019; Pécout 2020; Robinson 2020; UNDESA 2020). At best, the goals have helped to draw attention to migration and to crystalize emerging norms and data collection procedures such as the Migration Data Portal (IOM 2016).

Following the 2030 Agenda, also indigenous peoples should gain more recognition from governments. This is some progress compared to the Millennium Development Goals that did not mention indigenous peoples. The Sustainable Development Goals refer to indigenous peoples six times, in targets on small-scale agriculture and access to education, and the preamble to the 2030 Agenda encourages the empowerment and engagement of indigenous peoples in implementing and reviewing progress on the goals. But compared to other vulnerable groups, indigenous peoples still receive less attention, and many studies argue that indigenous perspectives on development and well-being are largely unrecognized in the 2030 Agenda and global goals (UNCDP 2020). Siegel and Bastos Lima (2020), for instance, show that some Latin American civil society organizations, often more attuned to indigenous values, have at times felt alienated by the mainstream framing of the Sustainable Development Goals. Indigenous philosophies, for example about the relationship between natural and human worlds, are not recognized in the Sustainable Development Goals, which jeopardizes how the achievement of some goals affect the maintenance of indigenous culture and livelihoods (Yap and Watene 2019).

Finally, despite the adoption of Goal 16 which aims to promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies, the recognition and liberty of civil society groups are still under threat in many countries. Only 4 per cent of the world population live in countries where fundamental rights of association, peaceful assembly and expression are fully respected (CIVICUS Monitor 2019). The Economist Intelligence Unit (2018) identifies only 19 ‘full democracies’ and 57 ‘flawed democracies’. The latter category of countries is home to 44.8 per cent of the world population and also includes some high-income countries. These countries are inclusive in the sense that they allow for free and fair elections, but are exclusive in

that they do not include everyone in the distribution of risks, burdens and responsibilities, often because of corruption or governance failure. In even weaker democracies, exclusion extends also to elections and basic checks on the abuse of power. In authoritarian regimes, exclusion continues to permeate in everyday governance, in shaping obligations, in the access to benefits and (for elites) in the sharing of burdens (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012, 2020; Fritz, Levy and Ort 2014). Some scholars even argue that certain targets – for example, Sustainable Development Goal 16.a, which aims to strengthen national institutions to prevent violence and combat terrorism and crime – may lead to counterproductive normative developments that would justify and legitimize restrictions on fundamental rights and freedoms. Weber (2017: 401) argues that Goal 16 ‘anticipates the consolidation of order and security operations in ways that could easily be used against [...] forms of contestation over development initiatives’. Others emphasize that the Sustainable Development Goals lack substantive normative claims about basic democratic rights (Winkler and Satterthwaite 2017) and that Goal 16.10 merely calls for ‘public access to information to protect fundamental freedoms’ (United Nations 2020). Over 127 states had well before 2015 adopted laws that ensure public access to information to protect fundamental freedoms (United Nations 2020). While after 2015 over further 27 states adopted such laws, this resulted often from years of earlier political processes. All this raises doubts about the influence of the Sustainable Development Goals in steering these normative developments.

**The Representation of Vulnerable and Civil Society Groups.** Despite the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals and the large uptake of the leave no one behind principle in the policy discourse, vulnerable groups are still denied equal representation in national governance and policy-making. While formal exclusion (e.g., laws that deny women equal political or economic rights) has declined, women are still underrepresented in national politics. Studies from the grey literature find that only 25 per cent of the 35,127 seats of all parliaments in 153 countries are occupied by women (WEF 2020). And even when women are represented, such representation does not necessarily translate into influence and empowerment in a male-dominated society (Hogg 2009).

Similarly, it has been found that indigenous peoples are drastically underrepresented in the national and local implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. In analysing 162 reports by governments on their progress in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (submitted in 2016–18 in the Voluntary National Review database), Gilbert and Lennox (2019) found that indigenous peoples do not feature prominently and are mentioned only 16 times. Only two countries, Nepal and Malaysia, provided in their reports disaggregated data on indigenous peoples, which is considered essential for progress on the



national inclusion of indigenous peoples. Other countries vaguely refer in official consultations to the representation of indigenous peoples (Chile, Norway) or the empowerment of indigenous and local communities to have the right to give or withhold consent to proposed projects that may affect their lands (Malaysia). Overall, the Voluntary National Reviews by governments show a lack of representation of indigenous peoples in the local and national implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. This reflects patterns of marginalization similar to what indigenous people are exposed to more generally and have been exposed to historically.

There is, however, some evidence of progress in the representation of other vulnerable groups. In some developing countries, the Sustainable Development Goals have steered normative developments towards the inclusion of persons with disabilities. For instance, the government of Ecuador used Sustainable Development Goal 10.2, which aims to ‘empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status’ (UNGA 2015), to prioritize and legitimize the emphasis on disability in welfare spending (Horn and Grugel 2018). In Iceland, the government has focused on inclusive cooperation in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular opening political space, for instance through the Icelandic Youth Council for the Sustainable Development Goals, in which children and the youth can express their voice in decision-making (Government of Iceland 2019). Also, in Serbia, the Sustainable Development Goals have been accepted as an integral part of the Youth 2030 and the National Youth Strategy (2015–2025), a platform for the inclusion of the youth and the expression of their views in implementing the 2030 Agenda (Government of Serbia 2019).

However, the Sustainable Development Goals have had far less influence than the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child and the 1990 African Charter and Welfare of the Child in producing law and policy reform or institutional outcomes that are inclusive to children. The inclusiveness of children and the youth is a right under both these legal frameworks. In many African countries (such as Angola, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mauritania, South Africa, Togo and Zimbabwe), the inclusion and participation of children is entrenched in constitutional, legislative and policy frames (African Child Policy Forum 2020). Therefore, the additional steering of the Sustainable Development Goals towards the representation of children and the youth in national governance and policy-making is still invisible in many developing countries.

Finally, there is some mixed evidence of the role of the Sustainable Development Goals in steering the development of new institutions for the representation of civil society groups in national governance. Brazil, for instance, is one of the few countries that created after 2015 a robust institutional framework

to coordinate the creation of national targets and indicators for the Sustainable Development Goals and to articulate domestic uptake of the goals, with substantive participation from non-state actors through a National Commission for the Sustainable Development Goals. However, the latter was dismantled after President Bolsonaro took office in 2019. In Uruguay, on the other hand, implementing the Sustainable Development Goals builds on existing participatory institutions and processes, including a nationwide consultation, which was only linked to the new goals after 2015. Domestic contexts have therefore been crucial, suggesting that the global goals have only limited potential to create or maintain inclusive institutions when inclusiveness norms and values are not already salient. Furthermore, in the case of Paraguay, there are risks that political elites use the global goals to overlay exclusive institutional settings and add legitimacy to entrenched marginalization (Siegel and Bastos Lima 2020). This reveals that the goals might also suffer elite capture and become counterproductive to inclusiveness.

**The Distribution of Resources and Opportunities to Vulnerable and Civil Society Groups.** One key finding is that despite the launch of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015, resources and capabilities to participate in inclusive development are still unevenly distributed. In most societies, income inequalities have been increasing since the 1980s (Alvaredo et al. 2018), and the situation has not changed much since the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals. Even though extreme poverty had dropped from 10 to 8.2 per cent between 2015 and 2020, it is still projected to be above 6 per cent by 2030 (United Nations 2020). Income inequality, inequalities of opportunities (for example access to education or decent jobs) and other forms of inequalities (for example in access to food, drinking water, health services, energy or justice) have for a long time led to exclusion in the Global South. Inequalities have also increased in the Global North, including in traditionally more equitable countries such as Finland, Sweden or France (Nolan et al. 2019).

There is some evidence that new norms and policies for better including vulnerable groups have been adopted after 2015. Regarding the inclusion of women, for instance, the European Union has developed a Gender Action Plan for 2016–2020 that is aligned with Goal 5 (Wahlen 2016). The government of Malaysia has introduced in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme a Gender Equality Seal Certification, which is aimed at equal opportunities and inclusive work environments for women (UNDP 2016). In some developing countries, the Sustainable Development Goals have strengthened inclusiveness regarding children and the youth in terms of distribution of resources and opportunities. For example, in Sierra Leone, Goal 4 on inclusive and quality education stands out as the government's premier developmental issue. Since

2018, Sierra Leone's budget for education through the Free Quality School Education programme has increased to over 21 per cent, pointing to a more equitable distribution of opportunities (Government of Sierra Leone 2019). However, the causal role of the Sustainable Development Goals in such progress is unclear. Some studies also argue that the lack of gender-specific indicators in the global monitoring of the goals hampers the study of their impact on the inclusiveness of women and girls (Azcona and Bhatt 2020).

There is considerable evidence, however, that the situation of marginalized groups in society has not improved with the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals. For one, progress in advancing inclusiveness of children and the youth has been slow and despite the adoption of the goals in 2015, it is estimated that over 945 million children in developing countries remain out of reach of sustainable development policies (OHCHR 2020; UNICEF 2019). Regarding gender equality, many studies question whether the goals have had any effect. In most regions of the world, women still earn less than men, are more likely to be unemployed and to work in precarious conditions: worldwide, women only make 77 cents for every US dollar men earn (United Nations Women 2017). In addition, the disproportionate burden of household and care responsibilities on women still hampers their inclusiveness. Razavi (2016: 31), for instance, claims that the inclusion of the phrase 'as nationally appropriate' in some targets is likely to create 'a scapegoat for countries that fall behind in progress'. Other studies suggest that the lack of support from ruling elites that purposefully marginalize women or any disadvantaged group limits the steering effects of the goals (Stuart and Woodroffe 2016). Many gender-related studies argue that the Sustainable Development Goals will ultimately fail in achieving gender equality because they do not challenge the assumption that economic growth drives gender equality (Bidegain Ponte and Rodríguez Enríquez 2016; Esquivel 2016; Rai, Brown and Ruwanpura 2019). In fact, growth patterns have maintained gender and class inequalities: for example, Kim (2017) has shown that while South Korea has achieved remarkable economic and social development and has become member of the OECD, it ranked only 108 out of 153 on the Global Gender Gap Index.

While specific studies on the impact of the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals on the inclusiveness of indigenous peoples are still lacking, it has been found that the situation of the 370 million indigenous peoples worldwide has not improved since 2015 (Mamo 2020). Indigenous peoples are among the poorest of the poor: they represent 5 per cent of the world's population but – by conventional standards – make up for 15 per cent of the world extreme poor and up to one third of the rural poor (Hall and Gandolfo 2016). A study by the World Bank of 85 per cent of the world's indigenous peoples found that in ten countries in Latin America, Asia and Africa, indigenous peoples were always poorer than the

non-indigenous population (Hall and Patrinos 2012). Many indigenous peoples live in non-monetary social settings where they seldom use money to meet their needs, and some therefore refuse to be categorized as 'poor'. Nonetheless, indigenous communities do often suffer from higher levels of deprivations, driven by geographical and political exclusion, historical oppression, insecure land and property rights, limited access to infrastructure and physical capital assets, heightened vulnerability to risk and climate change, and many health, education and other related socio-economic disparities. Numerous types of vulnerabilities were aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic, from which indigenous people have often suffered disproportionately (Russo Lopes and Bastos Lima 2020).

The pandemic also deteriorated the situation of migrants and further revealed the distributive losses that disproportionately affect this group. Between March 2020 and February 2021, travel restrictions have increased the vulnerability of migrant workers. The pandemic has also impacted sectors with many migrant workers (e.g., tourism and catering, building industry) and has thrown migrants further into poverty, as they are often excluded from social support systems in their host countries. The travel restrictions have also threatened the remittance flows to developing countries, which have decreased by 40 per cent between 2019 and 2020 (United Nations 2020). Seven countries that accounted for 25 per cent of remittance outflows were among the countries with the highest number of COVID-19 cases (Migration Data Portal n.d.). One study estimated the impact of the pandemic on remittances at USD 978 billion between 2020 and 2021 (World Bank 2020b). Despite all the aim of the 2030 Agenda to ensure 'orderly, safe, and responsible' migration, in the face of a major global crisis, migrants are still left behind. These developments test the credibility of the Sustainable Development Goals in radically improving the conditions of migrants and refugees worldwide (Nurse 2018).

In sum, our analysis has shown that the Sustainable Development Goals have not significantly steered actors towards more inclusiveness beyond advancing the discursive recognition of specific vulnerable groups. Further studies on the inclusiveness of civil society tend to confirm these results. Discursively, the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015 has raised the saliency of inclusiveness and inequality on national policy agendas, with more references to the principle of 'leaving no one behind' in policy discourses. Despite the Sustainable Development Goals, normative changes towards more inclusiveness are scarce. While countries refer to this principle in the voluntary national reviews they present to the High-level Political Forum, few countries report on policy strategies for putting this principle into practice (Cutter 2016; Canadian Council for International Co-operation 2018). According to Sakiko Fukuda-Parr and colleagues from the United Nations Committee for Development Policy, this might

imply that while governments have embraced the principle of ‘leaving no one behind’ for sustainable development, they still fail to translate it into concrete and comprehensive policies that go beyond a single area of intervention (e.g., social protection, participation or productive sector) (UNCDP 2020: 7). Institutional effects of the Sustainable Development Goals are almost indiscernible. In many countries, the goals increase only the saliency of inclusiveness in existing institutions and policy processes (Barbier and Burgess 2017; Siegel and Bastos Lima 2020; Weitz et al. 2018). Overall, it is doubtful whether any improvement towards inclusiveness in countries is causally linked to the Sustainable Development Goals, even though there is some evidence that civil society organizations increasingly use the goals as a reference framework to hold governments to account (e.g., Chancel, Hough and Voituriez 2018; Siegel and Bastos Lima 2020).

### *Steering Effects on Inclusiveness at Global Level*

We now turn to discussing the steering effects of the Sustainable Development Goals on inclusiveness in global governance, and here in particular on whether and how they have made governance more inclusive for the least developed countries. Given the emphasis of the 2030 Agenda on the leave no one behind principle, we should expect that the least developed countries are better integrated in global governance. In what follows, we successively review the recognition, representation, and distribution aspects of inclusiveness for the least developed countries.

**The Recognition of Least Developed Countries.** The 2030 Agenda recognizes that least developed countries deserve special attention in the sustainable development process (UNGA 2015). Throughout the document, least developed countries are mentioned 38 times, in the Preamble, and in many targets related to the means of implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. For instance, Sustainable Development Goal 10.b aims to ‘encourage official development assistance and financial flows, including foreign direct investment, to States where the need is greatest, in particular least developed countries’ (UNGA 2015: 21), while Goal 17.2 encourages developed countries to consider setting a target to provide at least 0.2 per cent of their gross national income as official development assistance to the least developed countries. However, the question remains what is new in this respect. The targets under the goals build, to the extent that they relate to the least developed countries, on decades of earlier international normative frameworks such as the programmes of action for the least developed countries, the first of which was adopted at the United Nations conference on the least developed countries in 1981. By large measure, the Sustainable Development Goals have simply aligned their targets on least developed countries with the Istanbul Programme of Action for the least developed countries for the Decade 2011-2020.

**The Representation of Least Developed Countries.** Beyond this recognition in the 2030 Agenda, have the Sustainable Development Goals strengthened the representation of least developed countries in global governance? Our review finds that the potential of the goals in this respect is low. The progress on Goal 16.8, which aims to broaden and strengthen the participation of developing countries in global governance, is not even reported. Since 2015, none of the progress reports on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals prepared by the United Nations Statistics Division for the Secretary-General includes data on the ‘proportion of members and voting rights of developing countries in international organizations’, the formal indicator adopted to measure this specific target. Additionally, evidence shows that this formal, normative call to greater representation of the developing countries predates the Sustainable Development Goals and can be traced back to as early as the 2002 United Nations Development Programme’s Human Development Report (Choer Moraes 2019).

Overall, the participation of the least developed countries in global governance has not changed following the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals. On the one hand, the principle of sovereign equality grants least developed countries a voice and a vote in most United Nations institutions. All least developed countries have a seat in the United Nations General Assembly, and together they hold 24 per cent of all votes in the assembly (47 out of 193 votes), more than their share of the world population (which is 13 per cent). In the smaller Economic and Social Council, least developed countries account for 14 percent of members. On the other hand, the presidency of this council has been held in the last 75 years only three times by a representative from a least developed country (Biermann and S nit 2022). And beyond the United Nations, the Bretton Woods institutions have developed mechanisms that exclude or weaken the representation of least developed countries. Both the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund weigh voting rights according to the financial contributions that countries make, which severely marginalizes the influence of least developed countries (Fioretos and Heldt 2019; Kaya 2015). Least developed countries are also not integrated in clubs of major economies, such as the Group of 7 or the Group of 20, while these groups play an increasing role in global governance and more inclusive institutions, such as the United Nations General Assembly, are often bypassed by the richer countries. In international trade institutions industrialized countries prioritize often plurilateral or regional trade-talks that lock out smaller developing countries from the macroeconomic benefits associated with global trade and investment (Schwab 2011). Not much change is observable that can be causally linked to the Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda.

**The Distribution of Resources, such as Aid and Trade, to Least Developed Countries.** With 13 per cent of the world’s population, least developed countries

contribute only 1.1 per cent of the global economy measured in gross domestic product in current USD (World Bank n.d.). In 2018, their share in the world's total exports was at a low 1.02 per cent (WTO 2019). This is particularly the case with the seventeen landlocked least developed countries, which are especially remote from, and unintegrated within, the global economy. In recent years, however, both indicators are progressing. The share of least developed countries in the global gross domestic product has increased by 15 per cent between 2015 and 2019. The annual growth of the least developed countries' gross domestic has increased from 3.6 per cent in 2015 to 4.4 per cent in 2019 (World Bank n.d.). Similarly, the exports of goods and services from least developed countries to the rest of the world increased from an annual value of USD 204 million in 2015 to USD 252 million in 2019 (World Bank n.d.). This is an increase of 23 per cent; yet it falls far short of Sustainable Development Goal 17.11, which aimed at doubling least developed countries' share of global exports by 2020.

Least developed countries have scarce and unstable domestic financial resources and limited access to external private finance. While foreign direct investment net inflows to least developed countries increased by 150 per cent between 2010 and 2015, reaching almost 4 per cent of the gross domestic product of these countries in 2015, net inflows of foreign direct investment sharply decreased between 2015 and 2019 (World Bank n.d.). In 2019, net inflows of foreign direct investment represented only 1.7 per cent of the gross domestic product of least developed countries. Remittances also constitute an important share of the domestic resources of the least developed countries (Nurse 2018). These have steadily increased since 2010 and reached 4.7 per cent of the gross domestic product of least developed countries in 2019 (World Bank n.d.). Nevertheless, the United Nations estimated that between 2019 and 2020 remittances were expected to decline by 40 per cent (United Nations 2020). Such a decrease in both foreign direct investments and remittances further questions the role of the Sustainable Development Goals in enhancing the inclusiveness of the least developed countries in the global economy. Financing instruments to enhance the capabilities of the least developed countries thus mainly rely on the support from the international community through official development assistance and other multilateral funding mechanisms such as, for instance, the Green Climate Fund. In some countries, the ratio of official development assistance to the gross national income is particularly high – in Liberia, for instance, it is 62 per cent (2015). Such dependence makes these countries highly vulnerable to a withdrawal of foreign aid.

In 2018, least developed countries received USD 53.6 billion of official development assistance, representing 32 per cent of global aid flows (World Bank n.d.). According to the World Bank, the net official development assistance received by least developed countries has increased by 23.5 per cent between

2015 and 2018. But the role of the Sustainable Development Goals in steering the increase of aid flows to least developed countries is still unclear. In recent years, China has stepped up its aid and investments, claiming that its grants and investments under the Belt and Road Initiative promote the global goals (Banik and Lin 2019). It also claims that new regional institutions such as the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation will provide African countries with more financial resources. Both India and China often portray their South-South cooperation as promoting the Sustainable Development Goals (Banik 2018; Kim 2019).

When looking at the longer trend of official development assistance to least developed countries, the increase of aid flows towards least developed countries began in 2000, when the Brussels Programme of Action for the least developed countries was adopted. After a decrease in 2014, the trend of aid to least developed countries started to increase again in 2016 (World Bank n.d.). However, regardless of whether one considers commitments or gross disbursements, in 2011–2020 the average growth rates of aid flows to least developed countries have been less than half those recorded in 2001–2010 (UNCTAD 2019). In addition, and despite the adoption of the global goals in 2015, official development assistance for least developed countries is merely 0.09 per cent of the gross national income of donor countries, which is below the target range of 0.15–0.20 (Goal 17.2). There is also still a major gap if one compares today's funding with the financial needs of least developed countries. For climate adaptation alone, the International Institute for Environment and Development estimates that the cost for least developed countries of implementing their climate plans are around USD 93 billion per year (Nasir and Feisal 2015). Our review suggests that the Sustainable Development Goals have not performed any additional steering, as the target for aid allocation to least developed countries in the 2030 Agenda simply dates back to the 1981 Substantial New Programme of Action for these countries. These targets have been reaffirmed in every international action programme since then, including the Millennium Development Goals and now the Sustainable Development Goals.

In sum, we do not find evidence of direct steering of the Sustainable Development Goals on the inclusiveness of the least developed countries in global governance. While a few economic indicators for the inclusion of least developed countries in the global economy are encouraging, the causal role of the goals in steering such limited progress is yet to be proven. Some scholars would even argue that such economic integration is further aggravating the poverty trap in which least developed countries are caught (Sachs 2004; Selwyn 2019). In addition, the global political system remains unchanged since the adoption of the goals, as the formal representation of least developed countries in global institutions has not yet increased despite the inclusion of a specific target within the goals. All in all, while



the least developed countries are often prioritized in global discourses around the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, our analysis shows that the goals have not triggered the creation of new norms or institutions that could benefit the least developed countries.

Future research needs to explore how the least developed countries have used the Sustainable Development Goals' institutional framework, the High-level Political Forum, and the reporting exercise, to advance their interests and whether other countries have engaged in addressing global inequalities by helping leverage least developed countries out of their entrenched marginalized position.

### **Conclusions and Future Directions**

This chapter has found that the Sustainable Development Goals have not had significant steering effects that would raise the inclusiveness of vulnerable groups at national level, or of the least developed countries in the global economy and institutions. Vulnerable people and countries are often nominally prioritized in the discourse around the implementation of the goals, as evidenced in the large uptake of the principle of 'leaving no one behind' by policy-makers and civil society. However, our assessment has shown that normative and institutional steering effects of the goals are thus far unclear. At the national level, studies suggest that many policies and institutional frameworks on inclusiveness existed before the adoption of the goals. Rather than fostering normative developments on inclusiveness, the goals have often simply legitimized earlier national policy frameworks. At the same time, civil society organizations increasingly use the goals as a reference framework to hold governments to account (e.g., Chancel, Hough and Voituriez 2018; Siegel and Bastos Lima 2020). Even if this is not evidence of institutional, normative or discursive steering effects as defined in this chapter, it is still important in political contexts that are less welcoming to civil society influence. Internationally, we found no evidence that the Sustainable Development Goals have disrupted long-established legal frameworks to increase political participation of least developed countries in global institutions. Our review suggests a continuous lack of compliance with norms that seek to benefit the least developed countries, such as special commitments on aid and trade, and hence questions a new normative role of the Sustainable Development Goals in steering towards a better integration of these countries in the global economy.

What explains the lack of steering of the Sustainable Development Goals on inclusiveness remains unclear. Our literature review suggests three possible explanations.

The first is inherent to the framing of the goals. If the Sustainable Development Goals did not steer towards more inclusiveness, it may be due to the narrative with

which the goals were framed. As some authors suggest (e.g., Rai, Brown and Ruwanpura 2019), the goals leave the structures of global capitalism unchallenged and remain trapped in frames disconnected from broader movements for global justice. Because the goals are aligned with neoliberal rules and regulations of international development institutions such as the World Trade Organization, some studies even argue that the commitment to 'leave no one behind' only 'serves to justify the further consolidation of the conditions through which deprivations of fundamental entitlements have been sustained and reproduced' (Weber 2017: 400). Other studies argue that to unlock the goals' full potential for steering inclusiveness and overcoming unequal power relations, the goals would need to challenge the mainstream approach to growth and embrace the principles of inclusive development (Gupta and Vegelin 2016), with a view to realizing human rights on a basis of substantive equality (Elson 2019). Such critiques suggest the need for a new and radically different set of goals to advance inclusiveness.

A second explanation is external and relates to the political context. We found that the steering effects of the Sustainable Development Goals on inclusiveness within countries significantly vary and seem to be bound by domestic politics. Our analysis indeed shows the vital role of political leadership and institutional settings that allows for any steering effects of the Sustainable Development Goals. Yet such institutional and normative steering fluctuates with changes in government and domestic policies. Some governments may significantly erode the domestic salience of the Sustainable Development Goals, as the (often unsustainable) interests of the few gain ground. In some cases (for example, Brazil), the official rhetoric becomes antagonistic to international norms on sustainable development, but there are also risks that dominant players use the Sustainable Development Goals to legitimize business as usual, paying lip service to the goals while failing to undertake any significant change.

A third explanation is that while the Sustainable Development Goals have raised attention to the exclusion of groups both nationally and internationally, the international system is designed to address exclusion only in situations with international consequences (Haas 2017; Pellet 2010). Countries tend not to invest in monitoring, assisting or sanctioning each other's policies on inclusiveness; often not even when a country strips its citizens of their citizenship or uses them as forced labour. Only when policies on inclusion have consequences beyond the borders of a state becomes action more likely. If exclusion in one country leads for example to forced migration across borders, we often see international assistance or sanctions to increase inclusion and reduce the outflow of migrants (Fine, Dennison and Gowan 2019). Thus, the impact of the Sustainable Development Goals is limited by both their voluntary nature and the structure of an international system that prioritizes sovereign rights over the inclusion of vulnerable groups.

Finally, more research is needed to understand the varying effects of the Sustainable Development Goals on inclusiveness and the conditions under which the goals can steer inclusion at national and international levels. This chapter has revealed that the impact of the Sustainable Development Goals on inclusiveness is not prominently discussed in the literature. Future research may, for example, involve systematic studies of Voluntary National Review reports to determine the steering effects of the Sustainable Development Goals on the policy strategies related to inclusion. Changes often develop over much longer time periods, and hence researchers must continue to explore the effects of the Sustainable Development Goals in relation to complex issues such as inclusiveness and justice. Only then will we know with more confidence whether the goals can effectively steer global development towards planetary justice.

### Notes

- 1 We exclude, however, two additional groups named in paragraph 22 of the Preamble of the 2030 Agenda, that is, people living with HIV/AIDS and older persons. We do this because of the lack of literature that links the degree of inclusion of those groups at national level to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.
- 2 This dimension was divided into two sub-themes with three separate search strings:  
 Search string 1 [vulnerable groups] TITLE-ABS-KEY ( ('Sustainable development goal\*' OR SDG\*) AND (refugees OR migrants OR 'women and girls' OR children OR youth OR 'indigenous peoples' OR disabled OR disability) AND ('leave no one behind' OR inclusiveness OR inclusion OR inequalit\*)) AND (LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR, 2021) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR, 2020) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR, 2019) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR, 2018) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR, 2017) ) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR, 2016) ) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR, 2015) )  
 Search string 2 [vulnerable countries] TITLE-ABS-KEY (('Sustainable development goal\*' OR SDG\*) AND ('least developed countries' OR LDC\*) OR 'low income countries') AND (LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR, 2021) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR, 2020) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR, 2019) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR, 2018) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR, 2017) ) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR, 2016) ) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR, 2015) )  
 Search string 3 [SDGs and inequalities/inclusion] TITLE-ABS-KEY (('Sustainable development goal\*' OR SDG\*) AND ('inequalities within countries' OR 'inequalities among countries' OR 'inequalities between countries') OR ('leave no one behind' OR inclusiveness OR inclusion)) AND (LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR, 2021) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR, 2020) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR, 2019) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR, 2018) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR, 2017) ) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR, 2016) ) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR, 2015) ).

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