UNDERSTANDING AND PROMOTING THE 'LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND' AMBITION REGARDING THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AGENDA: A REVIEW

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With the adoption of the 2015–2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the United Nations (UN) Member States pledged to ensure that no one would be left behind. This article highlights the essentials (meaning, importance, history, framework, pillars, related key studies, and role of key actors) in respect of the 'Leaving No One Behind' (LNOB) pledge. The review shows that the LNOB pledge has three-pronged strategic development imperatives: (i) to end poverty in all its forms, (ii) to stop the discrimination and inequality that have resulted in unequal outcomes for the disadvantaged population, and (iii) to reach the furthest behind first. The framework for achieving the ambition is anchored on implementing the SDGs, 'empowering the left-behind by ensuring their meaningful participation in decision-making; and enforcing equity-focused policies, and interventions with a dedicated budget to support rights-holders and duty-bearers to address the deprivations of the people left behind. The UN, Governments, Businesses, Civil Society Organisations and other actors should collaborate to translate the mantra into reality by addressing the pervasive societal issues of poverty, inequality, and discrimination. Germane to achieving the LNOB ambition are reliable disaggregated people-centered data, research, and stakeholder/actor commitment to the pledge.

Keywords: sustainable development, sustainable development goals, inequality, discrimination, poverty, leaving no one behind

Introduction

In 2015, the member states of the United Nations (UN) decided to pursue a 15-year (2015-2030) agenda to change the world for the better. In this connection, the states agreed to use their institutions and resources to improve the lives of humanity through a 17-point agenda known as the Sustainable Development Goal (SDGs). A remarkable hallmark of the 15-year agenda is the pledge or ambition to leave no one behind (LNOB), and also to endeavour to reach the 'farthest behind' first (UNDP, 2019a). While some successes in respect of the SDGs may have been chalked since inception, current developments and degree of progress hardly support a considerable move towards the LNOB pledge and the feasibility of fulfilling it by 2030 (Stibbe and Precott, 2020; UN, 2019b). Despite some accomplishments in respect of the 2030 agenda so far, high levels of inequality, discrimination, and poverty persist, especially in the developing world, making it imperative to work harder to overcome the gaps and structural constraints that undermine the feasibility of achieving the LNOB. As the UN (2018; 2020) and Lustig, Jellema, and Pabon (2020) have observed, the outlook is particularly bleak for the developing countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, where both income levels and growth rates are too low to enhance the socio-economic lives of the population.

The bleak situation is due, in part, to the fact that millions of people are unable to fully participate in the agenda (Gabay and Ilcan, 2017; UN, 2020). The low participation is attributed to several reasons prominent among which is the low awareness and inadequate understanding of the concept (Mensah, 2019). Whereas empirical and theoretical information concerning sustainable development (SD) abounds, little is available in respect of the LNOB's ambition to foster understanding and whip up public and research interest in this all-important pledge. Current literature does not provide an adequate understanding of the nexus between LNOB and sustainable development (Machingura et al., 2018; Lustig, Jellema and Pabon, 2020). The debates on the subject matter have disproportionately concentrated on the SDGs and their associated indicators (Weber, 2017), with less attention

being paid to the LNOB pledge. As a result, a large segment of the global population is inadequately informed about the meaning, history, importance, framework, pillars, critical studies, and reports, as well as the roles and responsibilities that different stakeholders and actors should play in fulfilling the pledge (ACSC, 2016). This paper sets out to illuminate understanding in these respects and make recommendations for realising the LNOB dream for sustainable human development.

Materials and methods

The paper adopts the literature review approach. Literature reviews serve academic, scientific, and educational purposes by providing a bridge between the vast and scattered assortment of data and information on a topic and the reader who may not have time or other resources to track the information (Hart, 1999; Maxwell, 2006). Review articles represent powerful information sources for academics, researchers, students, practitioners, and policymakers looking for state-of-the-art evidence to guide their research, decision-making, and work practices (Lau, Ioannidis and Schmid, 1998; Pare et al., 2015). Reviews also present conclusions at the conceptual and theoretical level that empirical research reports may not normally address or do so fully (Baumeister and Leary, 1997; Cajal et al., 2020). The article adopts the narrative review approach. This was adopted because although there is some literature on the issues in question, the narratives and interpretations of the concepts are not comprehensive and self-explanatory enough in terms of the linkage between the LNOB and SD. Green, Johnson, and Adams (2001) argued that using the narrative review approach, a vast amount of information is brought together and written in a manner in which the reader can clearly understand the topic. Kreichauf et al. (2012) supported this argument, opining that a narrative literature review is valuable when one is attempting to link literature from different sources for purposes of reinterpretation, interconnection, clearer explanations, and deeper understanding.

The sources of data were published documents – books, articles, commissioned reports, conference proceedings, and grey literature. Online searches were conducted from Google Scholar. Google Scholar provides a simple way to broadly search for scholarly literature. From Google Scholar one can search across many disciplines and sources: articles, theses, books, reports, and opinions from academic publishers, professional societies, online repositories, universities, and other websites. Cognizant of the fact that not all materials on Googles Scholar are quality, the researchers (reviewers) took pains to determine which ones were quality and suitable for their purpose. Therefore, materials published online by credible publishers such as Taylor and Francis, Elsevier, Emerald, and De Gruyter most of which were indexed in Scopus, Web of Science, Publons, and Research Gate were used. Additionally, material published by international bodies and organisations such as UN, UNDP, UNCTAD, UNESCO, World Bank, and OECD were used. The keywords and phrases that guided the searches were sustainability, sustainable development, leaving no one behind, sustainable development goals, the framework of leave no one behind, pillars of leave no one behind, and stakeholders of LNOB.

The initial search using the keywords and phrases yielded 377 documents. A Series of screening was done by reading the titles and abstracts and in some cases the background page of the retrieved documents. Preference was given to documentary materials from 2015 to date (2022) because the SDGs and the LNOB issues came into being in 2015. However, in some cases documents that predated the coming into being of the 2015-2030 agenda were considered where relevant. Duplicates, non-English materials, and documents that did not have a direct bearing on the SDGs and LNOB issues were eliminated, thereby, reducing the materials to 63. The full-text documents of these were retrieved and read to see those that met the eligibility criteria. The eligibility criteria were relevance, credibility, currency, and intelligibility, which eliminated 11 of the 63. The remaining 51 were subjected to further assessment for consistency of arguments. Additionally, they were assessed regarding their conceptual and theoretical vigour. In short, irrespective of the source of the material, it was included only if the material was credible, relevant, current, intelligible, consistent, clear in terms of English language and content, and represented a unique or conceptual and/or theoretical contribution to the nexus between sustainable development and the leaving no one behind agenda (Mensah, 2020). This reduced the electronic-based materials to 27.

Apart from the electronic (online) search, manual searches were also done using the same eligibility (inclusion/exclusion) criteria. The manual search produced four eligible materials which were reviewed in addition to the electronic ones. Therefore, in all, 31 materials were finally included in the review. The included articles were read and reread to extract the information relevant to the objective and questions driving the paper. The review was undertaken from December 2020 to October 2021 by three researchers (reviewers). All processes of material identification, screening (inclusion and exclusion), analysis, synthesis, and report writing were discussed by the researchers until agreements were reached. The qualitative narrative approach was used in presenting and discussing the synthethised results from the various sources.

Results and discussions

To set the tone for the discussion, sustainable development is briefly explained. This is followed by an examination of the meaning and importance of LNOB; then the historical antecedent of the LNOB pledge is outlined. These are followed by an expatiation of SD Goals as the pillars of LNOB. Then,

a framework for LNOB is examined followed by some critical studies, reports, and projects. Finally, attention is turned to the role of the key actors in making the LNOB ambition a reality. Based on these, conclusions are drawn and recommendations made.

Sustainable development

Sustainable development (SD) connotes the idea that human societies must live and meet their needs without jeopardizing the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Mensah, 2019). The Brundtland Report by the WCED (1987) defines SD as development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of the future generation to meet their own needs. Specifically, what this suggests is that SD is a way of organizing life on earth in such a manner that it can support and sustain meaningful human life in perpetuity. This enjoins humanity to take into account the social, environmental, and economic imperatives of the present and those of the future (Klarin, 2018; Meyer-Ohlendorf, Gorlach and McFarland, 2013). Therefore, SD in the context of the UN definition is fundamentally about striking a reasonable balance between economic, social, and environmental sustainability for equitable benefits of the present and future generations (UN, 2016).

However, within all the three orbits – economy, society, and environment – of SD, there are challenges regarding life support systems for mankind (Meyer-Ohlendorf, Gorlach and McFarland, 2013; Mensah, 2020). Economically, many people cannot make ends meet as they are unable to afford three square meals a day (Adelman, 1986; Galbraith, 2019). Many have no decent and sustainable means of earning income. Socially, many people are displaced due to conflicts and wars (Bebbington et al., 2004; Bissio, 2015). Many have been compelled by wars and conflicts to migrate and are living away from their homes as refugees (ESCAP, 2017; World Bank Group, 2016). Many of these migrants are refugees who are suffering various forms of hardships in life. Environmentally, climate change has put untold pressure on people (Lenhardt and Samman, 2015). Mensah, Tachie, and Potakey (2021) argue that while climate change affects everybody, it affects the vulnerable more due to the vulnerable's peculiar conditions and circumstances. For example, the peasant farmers who depend on rain-fed agriculture are harder hit by the ravages of climate change than those who practise mechanized farming (Schwindenhammer and Gonglach, 2021). The implication is that although all people are affected in one way or the other by some economic, social, or environmental circumstances, some people are more affected due to various forms of vulnerability, thus making them get left behind in the global quest for SD.

Leaving no one behind – meaning, what it entails, and the need for it

Although some people and institutions may have an intuitive understanding of what is meant by the concept of LNOB, it is worth unpacking in detail exactly what it means in relation to the SD agenda for purposes of a broader understanding of the concept and broader participation in efforts to achieve the ambition (ESCAP, 2017; Gabay and Ilcan, 2017). LNOB is defined in terms of a three-prong imperative: to end poverty in all its forms; to stop discrimination and marginalisations that result in unequal outcomes for the disadvantaged population, and to take action to help the furthest left behind first (Stuart, 2018; UNDP, 2019a; UN, 2015). Within the context of the 2030 agenda, the definition is not meant to be prescriptive. Instead, it leaves room for implementers to adapt the goals most relevant to their context and circumstances. The definition sets out broad parameters that offer implementers concrete suggestions for approaches to take (OECD, 2018a).

The LNOB concept holds that people are left behind because they lack the choices and capabilities that enable them to benefit from human development (UN, 2016; Sondermann and Ulbert, 2021). The ambition, as associated with the SD agenda, promises to address the pervasive challenges of poverty, inequality, and exclusion that hinder sustainable and inclusive human development (Gudynas, 2017; Katz, 2018; UN, 2015). In several countries, large segments of the population are living in slums, and the phenomenon is on the increase. In other countries, many people have only basic education or no formal education (Kreichauf et al., 2012; UN, 2019). Not only are some people and countries being left behind, but in several ways and contexts, they are being pushed further behind by several forces (Stuart, 2018), including globalization, technological developments, climate change, and other forms of environmental degradation that render livelihoods unsustainable (Mensah, Tachie and Potakey, 2021; Rise, 2016; UN, 2019).

People who are left behind in development are often economically, socially, spatially, and/or politically excluded – for example, due to ethnicity, race, gender, age, disability, or a combination of these, leading to multiple discriminations (Fukuda-Parr and Hegstad, 2018; World Bank Group, 2015). They are disconnected from societal institutions, lack information to access those institutions, networks, and economic and social support systems to improve their situation, and are not consulted by those in power (Katz, 2018; Machingura and Nicolai, 2018). They are invisible in the development of policies and programmes as they have little to no voice, thus rendering them most at risk of not enjoying their civil, cultural, economic, political or social rights (Lucci, 2015; Lofsdo'ttir, 2016; Meyer-Ohlendorf, Gorlach and McFarland, 2013).

Poverty and inequalities continue to grow in the global community (Moghadam, 2021). In several countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, the majority of people live in poverty (Stuart et al., 2015). The world's 2,153 billionaires have more wealth than the 4.6 billion people constituting over half of the global population (OXFAM, 2020). Futhermore, OXFAM (2020) reports that the 22 richest men in the world have more wealth than all the women in Africa, adding that the world economies are making some people billionaires at the expense of the marginalised lot. Women, girls and children are among the disadvantaged lot who derive the least benefit from the global economic order (UNESCO, 2018; Lichard, Hanousek and Filer, 2019). In many cases, the businesses and economies are driven by women, youth, and other disadvantaged groups and individuals who often have little to no opportunity to receive formal education to enable them to earn a decent living or participate meaningfully in society (Narayan, 2002; UNESCO, 2018; World Bank, 2007; OXFAM, 2020; World Bank Group, 2016), forcing them to get trapped in the left behind category.

LNOB calls for going beyond the averages and ensuring that real progress is made for all population groups on a disaggregated scale (UNDP, 2019a; Machingura et al., 2018). Since people often do not have the same capabilities to take advantage of opportunities, equality in terms of access and opportunity does not necessarily lead to equality in the outcome achieved (Sachs, 2012; Sen, 1999). The better-off generally possess assets, are well educated, and have access to social capital (van Kesteren, Altaf and de Weerd, 2019). Reducing inequalities implies working towards equal opportunities and outcomes for all (Fukuda-Parr and Hegstad, 2018).

The inequality that leads to the vulnerable getting left behind, is not only about levels of income but also the unequal distribution of wealth and power: the entrenched social, economic, cultural, and political norms and triggers that bring people onto the streets (Francisco, Lustig and Teles, 2015; Lichard, Hanousek and Filer, 2019). The UNDP (2019) report states that a new generation of inequalities is opening up, around education and technology –

two seismic shifts that if unchecked, could trigger a new form of inequality in society that has not been witnessed since the Industrial Revolution. Concerning technology, the report reveals that in the advanced countries, subscriptions to fixed broadband are growing 15 times faster and the proportion of adults with tertiary education is growing more than six times faster than in some less developed countries. Although education is the most powerful weapon which can be used to change the world, many children learn under unfavourable conditions, including in ill-equipped classrooms, while some walk long distances to the nearest formal school. Furthermore, due to the direct cost like school fees and indirect costs like school uniforms, education is too expensive for many countries to take advantage of (Galbraith, 2019; UNDP, 2019a; World Bank Group, 2016).

Additionally, people are left behind due to various forms of discrimination. Discrimination based on gender, nationality, race or ethnicity, unfair treatment of persons, people with disabilities, persons living with HIV/AIDS, or based on sexual orientation – remains rampant in some societies and cultures (UNDP, 2019b; Stuart, 2018). Meanwhile, new forms of discrimination are emerging. In particular, practices that penalise those with a genetic predisposition to developing certain diseases or those who have lifestyles that are considered unhealthy (Stuart and Samman, 2017). Discrimination at work is on the rise, even though it is a violation of human rights that literally wastes human talents, with detrimental effects on productivity and economic growth (Arowolo, 2015; Stuart, 2018; World Bank Group, 2015).

Furthermore, in all societies, the furthest behind tend to endure a multiplicity of disadvantages. Social mobility and stark inequalities conspire to perpetuate deprivations that make people get left behind (UN, 2017; Stibbe and Prescott, 2020). Also, millions of people are trapped in the left behind space in fragile states due to the ravages of conflicts, despite the efforts of the international community to broker peace in those turbulent states (Lustig, Jellema and Pabon, 2020; OECD, 2018a). People in fragile states are the victim of persistent poverty, violence, poor facilities and infrastructure, limited civil and political liberties, minimal to no economic growth, and humanitarian crises (Sondermann and Ulbert 2021; UN, 2016; UN, 2017). There is a need to ensure that no one is left behind because it is a human rights issue. Poverty, inequality, and discrimination, which are the major reasons for people being left behind, are all human rights issues (Arowolo, 2015). The LNOB ambition is an important issue for the 2030 Agenda because if it is not achieved, the entire set of SDGs cannot be considered as achieved either (Zeigermann and Böcher, 2019; OXFAM, 2020).

A brief history of the leave-no-one-behind ambition

The LNOB ambition emanates from the 2030 SDGs, therefore, its history is intrinsically associated with the SD and SDGs (Gabay and Ilcan, 2017). At the end of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000, the UN took stock of the MDG indicators and realized that although some gains had been made, the lives of many millions of people were unacceptable because they still endured absolute deprivations or relative disadvantages (Fukuda-Parr and Hegstad, 2018; UNDP, 2014). Absolute deprivation was where the people lived in multidimensional poverty or below other minimally accepted standards of well-being. The relative disadvantage was where the people faced exclusion, discrimination, and/or entrenched inequalities; were less able to gain influence, get educated, secure access to job markets or technologies, thus, making them vulnerable (UNDP, 2019a). These deprivations and disadvantages hindered and continue to hinder people's choices and capabilities to participate in or benefit from human development. Due to these setbacks, people that fell in these categories were below the median MDG outcomes and opportunities and were considered as having

riskier lives (UNCTAD 2014), which rendered them vulnerable to various vicissitudes of life.

With the adoption of the UN SDGs in 2015, the LNOB pledge was made by the global leaders to salvage people in the vulnerable categories. The expectation was that with the economic growth on a global scale the wealth would be fairly distributed across the various segments of the society. As noted by Barkin (2018) and OECD (2018b), though it is an anti-poverty agenda, actors should recognise the naivety of expecting economic growth to trickle down to the socially, economically, and environmentally disadvantaged. Given that the gains from economic growth might not be fairly distributed among the population, the UN and its member states deemed it necessary to make explicit and proactive attempts to ensure that the people whom progress had left out would now be included (Weiland et al., 2021; World Bank Group, 2016). Thus, in 2015 when the Member States adopted the SDG they mooted the idea of reaching out to the vulnerable through the LNOB pledge.

Theoretical framework for achieving the 'leaving-no-one-behind' ambition

The deconstruction of SD ideas to which the LNOB ambition is linked emerged through the critical development studies [CDS] (Baran, 1957; Bowles and Veltmeyer, 2020; Robinson, 2005). The CDS challenges the view that the developing world should escape from 'underdevelopment' by following the capitalist path to development and modernity. In mainstream development studies, the assumption is that capitalism provides the best for achieving development. Thus, development and capitalism are not only seen as coterminous, but they are virtually synonymous (Brown, 1981). The CDS challenges this assumption, arguing that societies can build better lives for their members without resorting to the orthodox models such as capitalism (Barkin, 2018; Bowles and Veltmeyer, 2020). To the adherents of CDS, development is not simply a way of recognizing only economic considerations. It is also about the discursive process of bettering the lot of the vulnerable in society and making them inclusive. The CDS aims at creating the best human development path for the present and future generations – a present and future living space that is environmentally, socially, and economically sustainable for humanity in its entirety (Mensah, 2020; Schuurman, 2009).

The socio-political dimension as highlighted by the critical development scholars (Furtado, 1964; Bebbington et al., 2004; Prebisch, 1950) is relevant to SD constructions: how the benefits of development could reach the unreached, more generally, from the social elites to the marginalized and disadvantaged. Building on the broad insights of the CDS by highlighting the negotiations and tensions of the SDGs that are central to the LNOB ambition, much progress can be made in fulfilling the LNOB pledge. That is, exploring the SD-LNOB nexus could be a powerful driver of transformational change for the marginalised in society. However, the LNOB ambition calls for global excitement and participation in relevant actions to translate ambition into reality. Change agents can only tap into this inspiration and build on the legitimacy of the globally agreed SDGs by mobilising diverse actors to drive progressive action everywhere and consolidating the gains (Zeigermann and Böcher, 2019).

Based on the tenets of the CDS, the UN, through the UNDP (2019a) proposes a three-lever mutually reinforcing framework for achieving the LNOB ambition. The framework suggests pragmatic ways that stakeholders and key actors can use to accelerate progress towards the LNOB ambition, through the achievement of the SDGs. This framework of change is underlain by three key words, namely Examine, Empower, and Enact.

1. 'Examine': means monitoring SDG progress of all relevant groups and people by collecting, analyzing, and making available disaggregated people-driven data and information on who is left behind and why; and tracking the progress of those furthest behind.
2. 'Empower': implies that there is the need to enable people that are being left behind to be equal agents in SD, ensuring their full and meaningful participation in decision-making by providing safe and inclusive mechanisms for civic engagement and voice.
3. 'Enact': means developing integrated equity-focused SDG policies, interventions, and budgets to support rights-holders and duty-bearers to address the intersecting disadvantages and deprivations that leave people behind behind (Risse, 2016; Mensah, 2019; Sachs et al., 2016).

Given the need for partnership, the model seeks to inform how the UN should work, through its agencies with countries to implement the 2030 Agenda, and by extension the LNOB ambition. The model suggests that the disadvantages people face can be understood through a framework of five factors (Weiland et al., 2021). These are the discrimination they face; where they live (geography). Socio-economic status; how they are governed; and vulnerability to shocks.

Discrimination refers to exclusion, bias, or mistreatment based on some aspect of a person's identity (ascribed or assumed) including, but not limited to gender, ethnicity, age, class, disability, sexual orientation, religion, nationality, and indigenous or migratory status (Adelman, 1986). Geography relates to physical isolation, vulnerability, deprivation, or inequity based on a person's area of residence (UN, 2015). By governance, is meant global, national, and/or sub-national institutions that are ineffective, unjust, exclusive, corrupt, unaccountable, and/or unresponsive; and/or laws, policies, and budgets that are inequitable, discriminatory, or regressive (including taxes and expenditures (UN, 2019a). Socio-economic status refers to disadvantages in terms of income, wealth, life expectancy, educational attainment or chances to stay healthy, be well-nourished, be educated; have access to energy, clean water, social protection, and financial services (UNDP, 2019b). Lastly, shocks and fragility refer to vulnerability and exposure to the effects of climate change, natural hazards, violence, conflict, displacement, economic downturns, and other types of shocks (UN, 2020).

The framework asserts that these key factors are intersecting and germane to understanding who is being left behind and the reasons for being left behind. It implies people get left behind when they lack the choices and opportunities required to participate and benefit from development processes (Lichard, Hanousek and Filer, 2019). Therefore, all persons living in extreme poverty, together with those enduring disadvantages that limit their choices and opportunities relative to others in society are left behind (Sondermann and Ulbert, 2021; Smith and Wills, 2018). Based on the three-lever framework, it can be argued that the factors can be applied within the model: to examine the disadvantages people face in and across the five factors; empower those who are being left behind or who are at risk of being left behind; and to enact inclusive, far-sighted and progressive SDG policies. By implication, the framework calls for stimulating dialogues that will result in consensus on delivering the LNOB agenda (Sondermann and Ulbert, 2021; Lustig, Jellema and Pabon, 2020). The pledge to leave no one behind runs across all 17 SDGs, embedded in goals, targets, and indicators that demand disaggregated data, inclusion, and equity in social, environmental, and economic spheres. To leave no one behind, countries must live up to the promise of the SDGs to transform their societies. Success in all countries is

highly dependent on political will, but this is often lacking as the elites tend to defend vested interests (Smith and Wills, 2018; Gabay and Ilcan, 2017).

Pillars of the leave-no-one-behind ambition

The LNOB ambition rests on the concept of SD, and for that matter the SDGs, as its pillars. The SDGs are aimed at addressing sustainability issues woven around social cohesion, economic prosperity, and protection of the environment (Meppem and Gill, 1998; Gudynas, 2014; Hickey, Sen, Bukenya, 2015; Sondermann and Ulbert, 2021). Given this argument, it is not surprising that the Brundtland definition of SD has gained popular acceptance in spite of some disagreement with it. The Brundtland definition suggests that SD is an integrative concept with environmental and socio-economic dimensions. It connotes human use of environmental resources to satisfy their economic needs in a manner that will make them a happy society today and tomorrow, without depleting the resources. Bissio (2015) argues that human society is part of the biosphere and societies are embedded in ecological systems. SD is about creating and maintaining human options for prosperous social and economic development within the context of a stable environment. Based on these considerations, the 17 SDGs were conceptualised as the way forward after the Millenium Development Goals (MDGs). In brief, the SDGs seek to:

1. end poverty,
2. end hunger,
3. ensure healthy lives,
4. ensure inclusive and equitable quality education,
5. achieve gender equality,
6. ensure access to safe water and sanitation,
7. ensure access to affordable and reliable energy,
8. promote sustained economic growth and decent work,
9. build resilient infrastructure for industrialization,
10. reduce inequality,
11. make cities inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable,
12. ensure sustainable consumption and production,
13. combat climate change,
14. conserve the oceans, seas, and marine resources,
15. protect terrestrial ecosystems,
16. promote inclusive societies and access to justice,
17. revitalize the global partnership for sustainable.

Undoubtedly, the SDGs have a universal focus (Sachs, 2012). The universal focus of the SDGs reflects the moral principles that no one, and no country, should be left behind, and that every individual, institution, or country has a common responsibility to achieve the goals and its associated LNOB ambition. The SDGs are crucial to the LNOB agenda and the future of life on earth (Oberth, 2015). They are intended to help countries accelerate their transition to more sustainable paths by 2030, with sustainability, understood to include economic, environmental, and social issues (Sachs, 2012). To achieve the LNOB ambition, this tendency must be confronted through effective partnership for the implementation of the Goals as espoused by Goal 17 of the SDGs.

Some relevant studies and reports

The SDGs-LNOB agenda holds that there is a need for a structural transformation to overcome the obstacle to SD. Considered from this angle, LNOB is an ideologically motivated and fundamental life-sustaining imperative (UN, 2015) as studies have shown. In his study on the politics of LNOB, Weber (2017) describes the first two targets of SDG 10 as central to economic growth. Weber argues that in addition to the foregrounding of economic growth as the means to reducing inequality, LNOB is market-driven. This drive is supported by indicators associated with SDG 10, but it should be noted that the indicators may vary from one country to another (Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2015). However, the critical issue is the normative commitment to the LNOB-SDG nexus.

Several authors (Gabay and Ilcan, 2017; Kumi, Arhin and Yeboah, 2014; Weiland et al., 2021; Zeigermann and Böcher, 2019) focus on the politico-economic dimensions of the SDGs and acknowledge the governance and power relations associated with neoliberal agendas. Additionally, the UN has several reports (UN 2015; 2016; 2017; 2020) on the SDG-LNOB agenda urging the transformation of deeply rooted systems – economic and political systems, governance structures, and business models at all levels, from local to global that impact the life of the people. The LNOB elements in these reports are largely based on the distribution of wealth and decision-making power. The reports highlight that there are threats or perceived threats to the lives of the vulnerable in society by the established interests of the most influential groups. Thus, it is not enough to address inequality by focusing on those "left behind" at the bottom. It is also necessary to address the concentration of wealth, income, and decision-making power at the top.

In setting the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Member States recognized that the dignity of the individual is fundamental and that the Agenda's Goals and targets should be met for all nations and people, and all segments of society (UN, 2015; 2018). This requires a precise understanding of target populations. Researchers, academics, development practitioners (Lucci 2015; Klarin, 2018; Mensah, 2020; Moghadam, 2021), and the UN (UN 2016) acknowledge the importance of disaggregated data in addressing the venerability issues – including children, persons with disabilities, older persons, indigenous peoples, refugees, internally displaced persons, and migrants – as specified in the 2030 Agenda. Few of the current indicators, for example, can shed light on the true state of the marginalisations and vulnerabilities. Even from the limited data currently available, it is clear that the benefits of development are not equally shared (UN, 2020; Weiland et al., 2021).

Other case studies present how the LNOB ambition can be translated into reality, especially in relation to agricultural production, health, education, and energy. Gabay and Ilcan (2017) highlight Spann's article on the post-2015 SDGs and how the business of agriculture' concentrates on sustainability in relation to agriculture and its role in poverty reduction and SD. The project is an alternative to mainstream explanations of eliminating hunger through redesigning food systems projects for sustainable agriculture that would potentially lead to a more socially just world. Spann shows how agriculture and agribusiness underpin the SDGs and offers hope for poverty reduction and SD. Focussing on neoliberal lines Spann argues that agribusiness offers hope for quashing food scarcity and this is the basis for the need to expand global agricultural value chains. He however argues that smallholder farmers are mostly inefficient and non-productive. In his view, the state and private sector could combine their efforts to support these farmers but this has not significantly happened. While maintaining that the SDGs are an opportunity to bring together state and private sector support in a way that could support meaningful agricultural productivity, he advocates global movements for food sovereignty that can propel industrial production. This project could create employment for the grassroots thereby reducing poverty.

Machingura and Nicolai (2018) reported that several factors presented socio-economic difficulties for Zimbabwe including in its health sector. For example, over a 20-year period, it was estimated that 80% of doctors, nurses, pharmacists, radiologists, a and therapists trained in the country left

(Chikanda, 2006), resulting in unfavourable national health outcomes in life expectancy at birth, maternal and child mortality rates, nutrition and the spread of non-communicable and communicable diseases, especially in the rural areas. But the Government and Zimbabwe's Ministry of Health and Child Care were committed to achieving the health-related SDGs – particularly SDG3 and the concept of LNOB (MoHCC, 2017). This commitment was evident in Zimbabwe's national health strategy, which was largely aligned with Agenda 2030 and the SDGs2 (MoHCC, 2017). Overall, the contextualisation of SDG3 in Zimbabwe reveals three key findings:

1. Contextualising the SDGs based on the input of the community can streamline and focus efforts on the 2030 Agenda.
2. When senior decision-makers are interested in supporting the contextualisation agenda and listening to communities, priorities can be clarified.
3. Prioritisation can build the energy needed to sustain pockets of effort in constrained contexts (Machingura and Nicolai, 2018; Machingura et al., 2018).

Additionally, Hathie (2020) reports that in terms of access to clean energy in Ghana – poor households (below the national poverty line) are 16.1% less likely to use clean and improved fuels for cooking than the rich households. In the same vein, poor households are less likely to use clean energy sources for lighting compared to wealthy households. Poor and non-poor households are respectively 10.9% and 21.5% more likely to have access to electricity than extremely poor households. This is similar to Savić et al. (2021) finding that in Assia and the Pacific more than 3 out of 10 people in the region lack access to health care, while nearly two billion people still rely on unclean fuels for heating and cooking. Another case study is presented by Klasen and Fleurbaey (2018) on education. Education is often seen primarily as providing human capital that can be transformed into earnings in the labor market, but it is much more than that. It is one of the most important "social bases of self-respect" (Rawls, 1971) and opens minds to understanding the world and interacting with others in a fruitful way. However large inequalities exist in access to quality education in many developing countries. For example, according to Savić et al. (2021), despite high enrolments, in one-third of the countries in the Asia-Pacific region, attendance rates in secondary education for the poorest quintile remained below 30 percent prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. A reflection on the studies and reports points to the fact that the responsibility to translate the LNOB pledge rests on the shoulders of the stakeholders.

The way forward: role of key stakeholders

While the case studies and reports present approaches to reach the left-behind and achieve more inclusive development, there is no gainsaying the fact that it takes action to translate the LNOB slogan into reality (Stibbe and Prescott, 2020). In order to make the LNOB ambition a reality, the ownership of the SDGs must translate into a strong commitment by the stakeholders to implement the global goals. As argued in the previous section, everyone is a stakeholder and is supposed to act in support of the achievement of the LNOB ambition, but some can be described as key actors. Interestingly, Goal 17 of the SDGs covers means of implementation and global partnerships to achieve the SDGs. It is intended to facilitate global engagement in support of the implementation of all the goals and targets, mobilising all available resources and bringing together the stakeholder actors. These include the UN, Governments, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), Businesses Enterprises, Universities and other research institutions, as well as Donors/Development partners. These could serve not only as the foundation propeller but also as

the driving force for achieving the LNOB ambition. In the next sub-sections, the role that the key actors are expected to play to translate the LNOB ambition into reality is summarised.

United Nations

The UN is expected to champion efforts to achieve SD by facilitating negotiations under the UN Framework Convention and providing assistance to countries, communities, institutions, and agencies to achieve the goals and targets of the SDGs. According to Evans (2012), knowledge and data-gathering is an area where there is broad consensus that the UN has a key role to play. It should encourage a platform for country-based SD performance indices, coupled with a system for SD peer review among countries. The other key innovation that could take place in the UN's data-gathering function regarding the SDGs-LNOB agenda is the possibility of the UN building up a comprehensive system for monitoring and evaluation as well as providing policymakers with useful datasets (Mensah, 2019; OECD, 2018b).

At the country level implementation, the UN system should help to make SD the cornerstone of the LNOB agenda. Sustainability fundamentally needs to be understood as a mainstreaming issue, not as a separate, stand-alone area of activity. The UN should work with governments, human rights institutions, and civil society to institutionalise community feedback mechanisms and use people-centered data to track the SDG progress of the vulnerable, particularly the farthest left behind (Barkin, 2018; Bissio, 2015). To this end, the UN should provide capacity and policy support in its programme countries, including by empowering local leaders seeking progressive change in line with the LNOB pledge. Additionally, the UN should help to disseminate best practices and provide policy support in its programme countries, including to empower local leaders seeking progressive change in line with the LNOB the pledge. The UN should also provide resources for financing research and pro-poor interventional activities that have the potential for driving change and transforming development prospects of the maginalised in society who are being left behind (Lucci, 2015; Lustig, Jellema and Pabon, 2020; Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2015).

Governments

Governments of the member states of the UN must ensure that macroeconomic and fiscal instruments work towards equitable, sustainable growth, job creation, and the reduction of poverty and inequalities, including the extreme concentration of wealth (Sachs et al., 2019; UNCTAD, 2014). Sachs et al. (2019) also maintain that government should implement transformative social policies that combine basic universal frameworks with targeted actions, as well as pre-market, in-market, and post-market redistribution; taking effective action on international cooperation on tax, cross-border financial flows, migration, and remittances, debt relief, and trade. UNDP (2019a) and Schwindenhammer and Gonglach (2021) add that governments should also implement technological innovation policies that can advance inclusive development. In the view of Stibbe and Prescott (2020), governments should implement policies and mechanisms that empower and encourage the participation of all relevant stakeholders in relevant decision-making processes, including in environmental, social, and economic matters as well as ensure the respect, protection, and fulfillment of human rights (Zeigermann and Böcher, 2019).

Governments must build productive capacity through integrated policies, including rural development policies, industrial policies, and human asset policies in support of inclusive development (World Bank Group, 2016). In this regard, UNDP (2019b) advises that the Heads of State should become agents of change, challenging business, as usual, developing, making hard

choices, and finding innovative ways of financing and promoting pro-poor projects. On the one hand, the UN (2016) expects governments to invest in outreach and extension services to the marginalized population groups to raise their awareness of the SDGs-LNOB agenda and take measures to better the lot of the disadvantaged and vulnerable. On the other hand, the UN (2020) expects governments to support and encourage capacity-building and engagement in support of pro-poor policies and activities. However, for governments to be able to fully count and provide for the left behind, the governments need to have data, therefore governments should invest in data collection, analysis, monitoring, and evaluation in relation to the LNOB-SDGs nexus.

Civil society organisations

The 2030 Agenda itself makes multiple references to engagement with civil society in the implementation process (UN, 2015; 2017; 2019; 2020). It proclaims the SDGs as " an agenda of the people, by the people and for the people" and calls for the establishment of a global partnership "with the participation of all countries, all stakeholders and all people" to work on its implementation (ACSC, 2016; Stibbe and Prescott, 2020). In the spirit of partnership, Hickmann (2021) urges CSOs to spur government action through persistent advocacy and act as watchdogs holding governments accountable to their commitments to the LNOB pledge. Additionally, they can advise governments on concrete implementation measures to take, building on their experience on the ground and working with the vulnerable and the marginalized groups. Furthermore, they can support LNOB data collection efforts and policy implementations.

According to ACSC (2016), CSOs should ensure that governments report on progress made in a timely and transparent manner by asking the government where it is with the implementation of the LNOB agenda. In the view of Kumi (2019), CSOs should urge and support the government to conduct their research at the national and community levels, draft shadow reports on progress, and track budgets. Also, they should volunteer to develop oversight mechanisms and plans to promote and monitor the implementation of the agenda. CSOs should identify priority areas for action and initiate public awareness campaigns about the agenda and how it is helping to achieve good social, economic, and environmental outcomes, as well as gender equality (ACSC, 2016; OECD, 2018b).

Business enterprises

While UN, government, and CSOs' contribution is a prerequisite, the achievement of the SDGs will not be possible without the participation of the private sector as the sector is a vital partner to the government (Mensah, 2019). Business enterprises are the main instruments to create economic growth and jobs since they operationalise the value-creating activities in economic systems. According to Carpentier, Landveld and Shahiar (2019), the World Business Council for SD states that the SDGs represent a minimum of $12 trillion business opportunities. These opportunities could be captured by flexible, creative, and nimble companies that can innovate. By doing the integration analysis, companies will be able to take into account the interlinkages, synergies, and trade-offs among the targets and unleash innovation, creativity, and partnerships needed to achieve the SDGs. It is inferred from Klarin (2018) that the role of the private sector is distinct in Goal 8, which recognises the priority of sustainable economic growth and links employment and decent work to it. Specific targets have been defined for each of the SDGs. Several targets under Goal 8 promote the enabling environment for businesses needed for sustainable and successful enterprises that create jobs.

Businesses are expected to create new products and business models and offer dignified employment to the people. Their success in this regard leads to broader improvements in the quality of human life as it will reduce poverty and even bolster economic sustainability (Carpentier, Landveld and Shahiar, 2019; International Trade Centre, 2017). Therefore, they should engage with relevant line Ministries to inform policy discussions on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The SDGs aim to redirect global public and private investment flows toward the challenges they represent (OECD, 2018c; Osborn, Cutter and Ullah, 2015). Whilst the business case for corporate sustainability may already be established they are expected to align their priorities with the SDGs and strengthen the engagement of customers, employees, and other stakeholders to stabilise societies and markets (International Trade Centre, 2017; Katz, 2018; Lenhardt and Samman, 2015).

Universities and other research institutions

To achieve the SDGs, the global community will need to overcome many difficult and complex social, economic, and environmental challenges (Bhowmik, Selim and Huq, 2017). These would require research to effectively and efficiently address them. Universities and other research institutions, through their extensive research capabilities and activities, have a critical role to play in providing the necessary knowledge, evidence-based solutions, and innovations to assist in this direction. To contribute to the SDGs through research, universities can: support the full spectrum of research needed to address the SDGs, including interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research (Long, 2015). They can support and incubate innovation for SD solutions, actively supports the national and local implementation of the SDGs, and advocate for national support and coordination of research on the SDGs (Bhowmik, Selim and Huq, 2017).

The Universities and other research institutions can support capacity building for developing countries to undertake and use research on the SDGs-LNOB agenda. They can promote the SDGs as a teaching topic and research within the university and encourage and support researchers to engage in efforts to support the SDGs (such as international assessments and syntheses of the current state of knowledge of SDG and the LNOB agenda (El-Jardali, Ataya, and Fadlallah, 2018). They can help other researchers to understand how their research currently relates to the SDGs and map how the Universities' research aligns with the SDGs. Above all, the Universities and other research institutions can provide disaggregated data and indicators for tracking the SDGs-LNOB agenda (Siegel, 2012).

Donors/Development partners

Official development assistance (ODA) and philanthropists have become important actors in national and international development agendas, especially in the development finance landscape. UNCTAD (2014) cited in Kumi (2019) argues that given that financing development has become one of the key cornerstones for the SDGs, the philanthropic sector is expected to contribute toward addressing the SDGs annual investment gap of about US$5 trillion–US$7 trillion. As donor funding tends to support long-term projects that can bring about structural change, such institutions are expected to continue to play important roles. However, they should align their activities with national government priorities and the SDGs (Johnson, 2018) and provide support to CSOs in addressing critical social and economic challenges (Callias, Grady and Groshevac, 2017). While official development assistance is crucial in the path toward leaving no country behind, donors must fulfill their commitments in this field. Beyond the important goal of fighting poverty, donor policies should also contribute to guaranteeing minimum social standards for all people, reducing inequality, and providing

public goods (Kumi, Arhin and Yeboah, 2014; UN Department for Economic and Social Affairs, 2019).

The foregoing suggests that the SDGs-LNOB nexus demands a new model for development that places issues of poverty, inequality, and discrimination at the centre stage. The framing of the SDGs and the LNOB pledge has the potential to generate momentum and excitement among a range of stakeholders and actors to address the identified global challenges (OECD, 2018a; Stuart, 2018; UNDP, 2019b). However, without collaborative measures by the key actors to effectively and efficiently manage the data systems, budgets, legal frameworks, and policies, the ambition risks becoming an 'empty pledge' – a cover for inaction rather than a call for transformative change in the interest of the left behind and the farthest behind (Sachs et al., 2019; Savic et al. 2021). The key actors have a great role to play to translate the LNOB mantra into reality.

Conclusions

The global community took a bold decision in 2015 to improve the well-being of humanity through the SDGs. At the heart of the SDGs is the ambitious human-centered pledge to 'leave no one behind by 2030. The critical development studies theorists argue that the LNOB pledge is critical to creating a present and future living space for humanity that is environmentally, socially, and economically sustainable for all. While the relevance of the pledge is seldom disputed in principle, the complexity of its practical implementation is also indisputable. The appropriate policy choices for creating such a sustainable space are those that target all humans groups and ensure macroeconomic stability, productive capacity development; mechanisms that actively encourage inclusion and the participation of all in relevant decision-making processes, ensure the protection of human rights, access to resources, as well as equitable distribution of wealth. Therefore, to leave no one behind, international national, local, and individual action must be coherent and support countries' capacity to examine, empower, and enact development pathways that seek to undo poverty, discrimination, and inequalities. In this regard, the SDGs constitute the fulcrum around which the fulfillment of the LNOB pledge revolves. Regarding the way forward, the critical success factors include a solid and robust identification of those left behind; understanding the drivers of discrimination, disadvantages, exclusion, and the interactions among the multiple deprivations; having a strong will and support from management and leadership; country ownership and strong political commitment; using disaggregated data; building inclusive and multiple stakeholder partnerships ' using participatory approaches; learning from evaluation and sharing knowledge, and integrating long-term sustainability into policies and projects.

Indeed, the LNOB pledge is challenging and ambitious. Successfully fulfilling the pledge requires a strong commitment to managing trade-offs and allocating resources efficiently and fairly. Although the SDGs and LNOB pledge are not legally binding, the localization of the goals into domestic legal systems could provide some form of legal accountability and opportunities for enforcement, and facilitate the achievement of the pledge, as there is a symbiotic relationship between the SDG and the LNOB ambition. There is the need for a new development model with far-reaching transformations in how we produce, distribute, consume and live in society. It demands progressive structural change that, on the one hand, can attain sustained and sustainable levels of economic growth based on the intensive incorporation of knowledge and innovation, on gains in productivity and the creation of value-added and, on the other, can bring about greater distributive justice and strengthen our welfare regimes and the social policies that govern them.

Since no individual, institution or country can fulfill the LNOB pledge all by itself, there is the need for partnerships among the actors at the international, regional, national, local, and institutional levels The UN and its agencies, Governments of Member States, Business Entities, Donors, CSOs, NGOs, as well as Universities and other Research Institutions have a greater role to play to fulfill the LNOB pledge. While all the SDGs are exceedingly important and relevant for realising this dream, stakeholders and actors are encouraged to draw inspiration from SDG 17 – "Building Partnership for Development" to achieve the ambition.

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