

**Synthesis of Key Messages on**  
**Social Inclusion**  
**to support preparation for the Second World Summit for Social Development**  
**16 April 2025**

**I. Introduction**

Thirty years ago, the Copenhagen Declaration and Programme of Action of the World Summit for Social Development marked a paradigm shift in the international development agenda. At the Summit, Governments made a series of ambitious commitments aimed at putting people at the centre of development efforts. Chief among them were the three interlinked core pillars of poverty eradication, full and productive employment and decent work for all, and social integration. The Copenhagen Declaration embraced a broad and integrated vision of social development aimed at social justice, solidarity, harmony and equality within and among countries.<sup>1</sup> Achieving its vision, now enshrined in the 2030 Agenda, requires actively reducing inequality, advancing social justice, strengthening solidarity, and upholding human rights and fundamental freedoms.<sup>2</sup> the three pillars of social development and aligned with the “fields of action” identified in the co-facilitators’ [Food for Thought](#) paper.<sup>3</sup> To ensure full coverage of issues and areas presented by the Food for Thought paper, a fourth related non-paper, prepared by the summit secretariat, provides an overview of the mandates contained in the main outcome documents from selected United Nations summits and conferences, with respect to follow-up implementation, monitoring and review. These non-papers are meant to serve as a resource for Member States in their preparations for the Summit. To ensure full coverage of issues and areas presented by the Food for Thought paper, a fourth related non-paper, prepared by the summit secretariat, provides an overview of the mandates contained in the main outcome documents from selected United Nations summits and conferences, with respect to follow-up implementation, monitoring and review. These non-papers are meant to serve as a resource for Member States in their preparations for the Summit.

The 1995 Copenhagen Declaration established the global commitment to promoting social integration by fostering societies that are stable, safe and just and that are based on the promotion and protection of all human rights, as well as on non-discrimination, tolerance, respect for diversity, equality of opportunity, solidarity, security, and participation of all people – especially for disadvantaged and vulnerable groups and persons. According to its Programme of Action,

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<sup>1</sup> Copenhagen Declaration, para. 29.

<sup>2</sup> Copenhagen Declaration, para. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Consulting entities/offices at time of preparation: ECA, ECE, ECLAC, ESCAP, ESCWA, DESA, DGC, DCO, FAO, ILO, IMF, IOM, ITU, OHCHR, UN Women, UNDP, UNEP, UNESCO, UNFPA, UN Habitat, UNICEF, UNIDO, UNRISD, WBG, WHO, UN Youth Office, Office of the USG for Policy.

social integration aims to create a “society for all” in which every individual, each with rights and responsibilities, has an active role to play.<sup>4</sup>

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development echoes this commitment to social integration through promoting social inclusion, and in its central pledge to ensure that no one is left behind. It aims to achieve all goals and targets for all nations, peoples, and parts of society, endeavouring to reach the furthest behind first.<sup>5</sup> Sustainable Development Goal 10 (SDG10) contains two targets<sup>6</sup> related to social inclusion, although the other SDG 10 targets on income inequality also impact group-based inequality. A sizeable part of observed income inequality can be attributed to inequality among social groups<sup>7</sup>, which reflects accumulated disadvantage due to a combination of poverty and discrimination based on social identity, including economic status, gender and area of residence.<sup>8</sup>

The relevant SDG 10 targets envision social inclusion as a process of improving people’s participation in economic, social and political life, ensuring equal opportunity and reducing inequalities of outcomes based on a person’s age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic, migration or other status, including through tackling discrimination. The 2030 Agenda acknowledges that fostering social inclusion, along with eradicating poverty, combating inequality, preserving the planet and creating sustainable economic development are interlinked and interdependent objectives.<sup>9</sup>

## II. Progress and gaps: a snapshot

### Measuring group-based (or horizontal) inequalities

Despite progress towards social inclusion since 1995, inequalities based on age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, place of residence, as well as migration, economic and other statuses, persist and are, at times, growing. Group-based inequality is particularly concerning among children because their early experiences have a significant impact on their health, education, productivity, and well-being throughout their lives. Despite global improvements over time in children’s health, school attendance and access to basic infrastructure and services, access to opportunity and rights remains

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<sup>4</sup> A/CONF.166/9, Report of the World Summit for Social Development, Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development, Commitment 4 and Chapter 4, paragraph 66. See also A/RES/66/122, Promoting social integration through social inclusion (2 February 2012).

<sup>5</sup> A/RES/70/1, “Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”, paragraph 4.

<sup>6</sup> Target 10.2 - By 2030, 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. Target 10.3 - Ensure equal opportunity and reduce inequalities of outcome, including by eliminating discriminatory laws, policies and practices and promoting appropriate legislation, policies and action in this regard.

<sup>7</sup> Although large differences are found across countries. See the Global Estimates of Opportunity and Mobility data visualization tool, available at <https://geom.ecineq.org>.

<sup>8</sup> The combination of vertical and horizontal inequalities is labelled intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Kabeer, 2014; UNRISD (2022), *Crises of Inequality: Shifting Power for a New Eco-Social Contract*.

<sup>9</sup> A/RES/70/1, “Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”, paragraph 13.

heavily influenced by where children are born and their parents' circumstances, as poverty and entrenched inequalities are often transmitted across generations resulting in lower social mobility.

In developing countries with data, child outcomes differ significantly by children's household characteristics, including place of residence, household wealth, education level and ethnicity of the household head. For example, since the 1990s, stunting has declined faster among the best-off children than among the worst-off children, and improvements in secondary school attendance and learning among the worst-off children have not been fast enough to close the gap.<sup>10</sup> As a result, under a business-as-usual scenario, those children who are furthest behind will remain so by 2030.

Access to decent and productive employment is a key foundation of social inclusion, yet labour market inequalities persist and are, in some cases, growing.<sup>11</sup> Such inequalities are reinforced by intersecting structural factors that compound and perpetuate disadvantage. Persons with disabilities, for example, face significant and persistent challenges in the labour market, reflected in disproportionately high unemployment rates and overrepresentation in informal and low-skilled employment.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, women and girls carry a high burden of unpaid care and support responsibilities, including domestic work, which precludes access to stable employment and education.<sup>13</sup>

Exclusion from decision-making processes reinforces structural inequalities and exclusion. Women, persons with disabilities, Indigenous Peoples, migrants and people in situations of disadvantage often face legal, institutional, and cultural barriers that limit their participation in political, economic and social decision-making. In 2024, women held only 26.7 per cent of parliamentary seats worldwide, with even lower representation among minority women.

Historically marginalized groups and people in vulnerable situations are also disproportionately exposed to social and political violence. Gender-based violence remains a major obstacle to social inclusion. One in three women globally experiences physical or sexual violence during her lifetime. Fear of violence restricts mobility, participation, and access to services.

Among the barriers to social inclusion, discrimination remains a universal and pervasive barrier, denying human rights, encouraging violence, abuse, exploitation, hate speech and xenophobia,

<sup>10</sup> United Nations (forthcoming). *World Social Report 2025: a new policy consensus to advance social progress* and (2020), *World Social Report 2020: inequality in a rapidly changing world* (chapter 1).

<sup>11</sup> United Nations (2016), *Report on the World Social Situation 2016: Leaving no one behind – the imperative of inclusive development*. The contribution of decent work to promoting social inclusion is covered in the accompanying brief on employment and decent work.

<sup>12</sup> United Nations (forthcoming), *World Social Report 2025: a new policy consensus to advance social progress*. The contribution of decent work to promoting social inclusion is covered in the accompanying brief on employment.

<sup>13</sup> Barrantes, A and Cretney, M., (2024), *Age Sensitive, Disability Inclusive and Gender Responsive Care and Support Systems*, Social Protection Technical Assistance, Advice and Resources (STAAR) Facility.

constraining opportunities, limiting choices, and undermining well-being.<sup>14</sup> While much has been done to end discrimination through legal reforms and policy changes, barriers are often hard to detect and overcome. Globally, one in six people has experienced discrimination based on any grounds.<sup>15</sup>

### III. Catalysing change – Key action areas

The persistence of group-based inequality in outcomes signals that opportunities remain unequal and depend on a host of factors other than a person's efforts and merit, including structural barriers and governance failures that prevent people from exercising their rights on an equal footing with others. This highlights the extent of social exclusion across different dimensions of well-being and points to key areas where policy action is needed to promote social inclusion. While several mandates have been established to address the situation of some social groups, including women and girls, persons with disabilities, Indigenous Peoples, older persons, children and young people, social inclusion is more than the sum of discrete efforts for specific groups. The policy actions listed below are interlinked and mutually reinforcing and cannot be pursued in isolation if they are to be effective.

- **Anchoring policy responses for social inclusion in human rights**

Key human rights standards and principles, such as equality and non-discrimination, meaningful participation, empowerment, transparency, accountability, and rule of law can guide effective policy formulation and implementation, leading to sustained progress towards social inclusion. Approaching policymaking from the perspective of the indivisibility of all human rights can help address the different experiences of exclusion and discrimination lived by members of those groups based on their identity. Integrating an intergenerational lens to social policy can significantly enhance social inclusion and mutual well-being between current and future generations. It also enables the identification and redress of discrimination and inequalities experienced and accumulated throughout the life course, and their impact at different stages of life. An analytical perspective based on a multidimensional approach to addressing inequality beyond income, and the recognition that issues of social inclusion cut across many groups, should guide further efforts.<sup>16</sup>

- **Investing in people to deliver universal access to quality education, health, care and support and other services**

Inclusive societies are those that have ensured equal access to opportunities and social rights and guaranteed fairness, particularly through the universal provision of quality services. There is broad

<sup>14</sup> See UNRISD (2022), *Crises of Inequality: Shifting Power for a New Eco-Social Contract* (chapter 3).

<sup>15</sup> United Nations (2024), *Sustainable Development Goals Report 2024*. See also UNODC, OHCHR and UNDP, *Global Progress Report on Sustainable Development Goals 16 Indicators* (2024).

<sup>16</sup> Adapted from E/CN.5/2010/2, Promoting social integration, Report of the Secretary General, paragraph 70.

agreement on the importance of universal access to quality education, healthcare, including sexual and reproductive healthcare services, robust and resilient care and support systems, safe and affordable housing, accessible digital infrastructure and other services to break the intergenerational cycle of inequality and exclusion and encourage social mobility. A universal approach makes a significant contribution to realizing the normative human rights commitments that underpin social inclusion and should be responsive to the specific needs of those who face systematic or structural barriers to access.<sup>17,18</sup>

- **Guaranteeing universal access to rights-based, universal, comprehensive, sustainable and resilient social protection**

Universal social protection is a potent policy tool that can alleviate poverty, inequality and social exclusion.<sup>19</sup> Social inclusion requires that social protection systems meet the needs of a diverse population at all stages of the life course; however, some social groups enjoy better coverage than others. Globally, almost half of the world's population lacks access to any social protection benefit.<sup>20</sup> Universal programmes – available to all without conditions – are most likely to ensure inclusion and non-discrimination. Related actions include:

- **Strengthening protections against violence to advance social inclusion:** Enact and enforce comprehensive legislation addressing all forms of violence, including gender-based, social, and political violence and scale up survivor-centred services. Integrate violence prevention into education, media, and community programmes, with a focus on addressing harmful social norms and fostering environments of safety and respect for all individuals, especially women, girls, and marginalized groups.
- Promoting universal, comprehensive, sustainable and resilient social protection systems, that provide a **blend of contributory schemes and rights-based universal, tax-financed programmes** that are accessible to all to promote social inclusion.<sup>21</sup>
- Increasing greater **cross-sectoral coordination** of social protection policies with a **life course approach**, and greater articulation between contributory and tax-financed programmes.
- Accelerating efforts to achieve **universal health coverage**, including immunizations and vaccinations, and sexual and reproductive health, by increasing investment in health, strengthening primary health care and addressing social determinants of health.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>17</sup> UNRISD (2010), *Combating Poverty and Inequality: Structural Change, Social Policies and Politics*.

<sup>18</sup> See the Synthesis Brief on Poverty Eradication for additional and more detailed action-oriented recommendations.

<sup>19</sup> United Nations (2018). [Report on the World Social Situation 2018: Promoting inclusion through social protection](#); Razavi and others (2024), [Combating inequalities: what role for social protection?](#)

<sup>20</sup> ILO (2024). [World Report on Social Protection 2024-2026](#).

<sup>21</sup> See United Nations (2018). [Report on the World Social Situation 2018: Promoting inclusion through social protection](#) for specific recommendations regarding social protection to promote the social inclusion of children, youth, persons with disabilities, older persons, international migrants, Indigenous Peoples and ethnic minorities.

<sup>22</sup> See the Pact for the Future, paras 27 (f) and 60 (b)

- **Ensuring an enabling environment where macroeconomic and social policies work together**

Social policies alone will not bring about the structural transformations necessary to promote social inclusion. What is needed is a paradigm shift towards economies that put people and planet at the centre, underpinned by a rights-based approach actively combatting discriminations and supported by greater policy coherence between economic and social policies.<sup>23</sup>

- **Building inclusive, participatory, accountable and transparent institutions and governance systems**

As the laws, policies, structures, rules and practices that shape the way people exercise their rights, institutions play a key role in either perpetuating exclusion or promoting and achieving social inclusion. Promoting inclusive and participatory institutions involves identifying and eliminating barriers to meaningful, inclusive and safe participation, including discrimination, as well as actively creating enabling conditions for all people and social groups – including children and young people – to participate and express their voices freely and without fear. When those who are most at risk of exclusion are able to participate in society, institutions are more likely to address their needs, protect their rights, and be perceived as legitimate and accountable. These measures are not only important to promote social inclusion, but also to build trust and social cohesion.<sup>24</sup> People are less likely to trust in and cooperate with governments that are perceived as corrupt, authoritarian, repressive, opaque or non-responsive to their needs. People also tend to lack trust in their government when they feel they do not have a say in what it does. Over the past two decades, trust in governments seems to be declining: currently, 57 per cent of people report having low trust in their government, a clear sign of a broken social contract.<sup>25</sup> Related actions include:

- Embracing **diverse multisectoral and multistakeholder participation in policymaking** in a meaningful, inclusive and safe way at all stages, with age equality and gender parity, active use of targeted permanent and temporary special measures<sup>26</sup>, enhanced accessibility, and inclusive civic engagement strategies, from development and design to implementation and monitoring.
- Promoting **accountability of and participation in policymaking**, including by making information about policies accessible and promoting the engagement of women, young people and groups in vulnerable situations.

<sup>23</sup> See the Synthesis Brief on Poverty Eradication for additional and more detailed action-oriented recommendations.

<sup>24</sup> A/RES/79/1, Pact for the Future, Action 6.

<sup>25</sup> United Nations (forthcoming). *World Social Report 2025: a new policy consensus to advance social progress*. See also E/CN.5/2025/3, Strengthening social cohesion through social inclusion, Report of the Secretary-General to the Sixty-third session of the Commission for Social Development (8 January 2025).

<sup>26</sup> Adapted from CEDAW GR 40, e.g., paragraph 26 (d).

- Strengthening civic education, fostering inclusive public consultations, and supporting community-based leadership initiatives that empower underrepresented groups to engage meaningfully at all levels of governance.
- Ensuring that the **digitalized government services** are accessible to all.
- Enhancing **social dialogue processes** to create a shared vision and broad agreements on social policy, funded by equitable fiscal reforms to ensure the financial sustainability of comprehensive policies aimed at reducing inequality.
- Fostering a healthy information environment by **combatting mis- and disinformation, hate speech and xenophobia**, and protecting information integrity with accurate, evidence-based and plural information sources.
- Tackling **prejudice, stereotypes and discrimination** including by mainstreaming the human rights principles of equality and non-discrimination to promote social inclusion and leave no one behind.
- Ratifying and strengthening the implementation of **international human rights treaties** and aligning national legal and policy frameworks with these commitments.
- Promoting **decent employment opportunities through the elimination of discriminatory laws and policies**, the expansion of collective bargaining rights, support for equal pay legislation and other active labour market policies.

- **Generating better data to leave no one behind, now and in the future**

Member States have committed to identify those who are being left behind and reach those who are the furthest behind first.<sup>27</sup> Inclusive and disaggregated data systems are essential for realizing this commitment. Data divides, including age, gender and geographical data gaps, can lead to inequitable distribution of benefits, the misuse and misinterpretation of data and biased results.<sup>28</sup> Tracking progress towards social inclusion and assessing who is being left behind is challenging for several reasons. People can be excluded from many domains of life, and there are many characteristics that put people at the risk of disadvantage and exclusion, especially in the absence of public services and redistributive policies; the relevance of each characteristic depends strongly on the country and local contexts. In addition, much about group-based inequality is still to be understood and has yet to be measured, particularly among groups excluded from traditional data collection efforts, such as internally displaced persons, people living in institutions, and people experiencing homelessness. These populations are often the hardest to reach, not only through data collection efforts but also through the opportunities and resources needed to promote their inclusion. Research and greater knowledge sharing are also needed. Related actions include:

<sup>27</sup> A/RES/78/1, Political declaration of the high-level political forum on sustainable development convened under the auspices of the General Assembly, paragraph 37 (outcome of the 2023 SDG Summit).

<sup>28</sup> A/RES/79/1, Pact for the Future, paragraph 40.



- Strengthening the capacity of national statistical agencies to better collect and utilize **population, household- and individual-level data** to understand current population changes and future demographic trends and their social impacts, and to inform and develop policies that ensure that those furthest behind are prioritized, especially in light of the uncertain future of the Demographic and Health Surveys.
- Collecting, analysing and disseminating data on poverty, access to decent work and social protection **disaggregated by age, sex, place of residence and disability status**.
- Ensuring **data collection and linkages between data sources on social groups that are underrepresented in or rendered invisible** by current data collection efforts, which are often at the highest risk of being left behind.<sup>29</sup>
- Furthering the **multidimensional measurement of inequality** to inform public policy and the design of comprehensive strategies for advancing inclusive social development.
- Developing data and metadata standards aligned with human rights principles to **prevent and address bias, discrimination or human rights violations and abuses throughout the data life cycle**, including through regular data auditing.<sup>30</sup>
- Strengthening **social information systems** by using digital tools, increasing data integration and encouraging interoperability for better decision-making and emerging risk response.
- Scaling up the use of **indicators that go beyond GDP** to assess economic and development progress and to drive policy making towards social inclusion.
- Better capturing activities that are not adequately measured, such as **unremunerated care and support work**.

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<sup>29</sup> UNECE (2020), *Approaches to Measuring Social Exclusion*, paragraph 209.

<sup>30</sup> OHCHR (2018) *A Human Rights-based Approach to Data*.