DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS

PROMOTING SOCIAL INCLUSION: WHAT'S THE SCORECARD?

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Abstract

Since the 1995 World Summit for Social Development, significant progress has been made in promoting the inclusion of historically marginalized groups, often in vulnerable situations. Increased recognition and protection of their rights, as well as efforts to combat discriminatory practices, have marked important steps forward. Improvements in measurement have helped understand social inclusion better. An increasing body of data, from traditional and new sources, captures the wellbeing and perspectives of diverse populations in growing detail. However, progress has not been fast or far-reaching enough. At the current pace, many people and entire groups will be left behind for many decades and across generations.

Introduction

Leaving no one behind requires socially inclusive societies where all people and groups enjoy equality of opportunities, where everybody is equal before the law and where the human rights of everyone are respected. No country can reach the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) if a share of its population is excluded from social progress.

The efforts of the global community to tackle social exclusion have increased in the 30 years since the Copenhagen Declaration was adopted, as evidenced by the core pledges of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to leave no one behind and reach the furthest behind first, as well as the inclusion of a stand-alone goal of reducing inequality within and between countries and an accompanying target on promoting inclusion (target 10.2). Concurrently, our ability to measure who is being left behind and how has improved significantly, allowing for evidence-informed action to make development more socially inclusive.

This paper provides a brief overview of where the world stands in promoting social inclusion and illustrates how the measurement and understanding of social inclusion have improved since the 1990s. There are positive trends: from a reduction of inequalities between groups of the population in many indicators of wellbeing, including children's health and access to education to the growing representation of disadvantaged groups in political processes (United Nations, 2016). Yet the examples shown in this paper indicate that countries are off track in terms of ensuring equal opportunity for all by 2030. Progress has not been fast enough among the furthest behind to close the well-being gap between groups. Unless progress accelerates, leaving no one behind will remain a distant goal. The paper draws attention to the role of discrimination as well as to policy efforts to end it and measures taken to alleviate its persistent adverse effects.

A. The challenge of measuring social inclusion

Target 10.2 of the SDGs aspires 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. This target speaks to the 1995 Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development and Programme of Action's commitment to promote social integration and to subsequent resolutions on social inclusion as a means for achieving social integration, [1] as well as the core pledge of the 2030 Agenda to leave no one behind and reach the furthest behind first.

Tracking progress towards social inclusion and assessing who is being left behind is challenging for several reasons. For one, people can be excluded from many domains of life. Given its multiple dimensions, data to measure exclusion generally come from a variety of sources that are different in scope and purpose. Some are fairly comparable across

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[1] See, for example, A/RES/66/122, "Promoting social integration through social inclusion" (2 February 2012).

countries, but others are not. Some are available for long periods of time while others offer only one data point. This paper focuses on two domains for which broadly comparable data are available across countries: (1) access to education, health, and other basic services which enhance people's opportunities to fully engage in economic, social, and political life throughout their life course; (2) access to employment. The analysis is based on data from internationally standardized surveys with relatively long time series and extensive coverage across many countries at different levels of development.

In addition, there are many characteristics that put people at the risk of disadvantage and exclusion. The relevance of each characteristic depends strongly on the country and local contexts. While caste may be the most relevant characteristic in India, race matters more in South Africa and place of birth or nationality have a strong effect in Europe. Since data limitations preclude a comprehensive analysis of all the attributes affecting a person's access to opportunity, the paper only examines the impact of some such characteristics: in line with target 10.2, it draws attention to the effect of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin and socioeconomic status – attributes which have historically put people at risk of exclusion across societies. The paper examines inequalities across groups of the population based on these characteristics through illustrative examples.

Much about group-based inequality is still to be understood and has yet to be measured, however, particularly among groups traditionally excluded from household surveys and population censuses, such as transitory populations, internally displaced persons (see box 1), institutionalized populations and people experiencing homelessness (see box 2, later in this report). 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.

Box 1. The global picture of internally displaced people

Christelle Cazabat, Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre

People who are forced to leave their homes because of conflicts, violence or disasters are amongst the most vulnerable to risks of poverty, insecurity and exclusion. Amongst them, those who do not cross an international border and remain displaced within their home countries – internally displaced people (IDPs) – are often the most invisible in data, policies and programmes. Yet they represent the majority of displaced people, with an all-time high of 71 million IDPs recorded in 2022 and a recurrent increase in numbers year after year (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2023). Nearly 90 per cent of them were displaced because of conflicts or violence, including in highly affected countries like Syria, Ukraine, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Colombia, Yemen or Afghanistan. Disaster-related displacement affects more countries in all regions and resulted in 8.7 million IDPs in 2022. Climate change is expected to aggravate this phenomenon in many parts of the world.

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) publishes annual estimates at the global level by analysing hundreds of different sources including national registries and databases, data from the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees, the International Organization on Migration, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and other multilateral organisations, civil society organisations and media reports. While IDMC manages to collect data for approximately 150 countries each year, dozens of countries still lack information on internal displacement, and for many others the available figures are largely underestimated. Insufficient financial resources, difficulties accessing affected areas as well as methodological and political barriers are some of the most frequent causes of IDPs' invisibility in data.

Certain countries have prioritised high quality information on internal displacement and stand out as examples for others to learn from. Colombia's National Registry of Victims or the Philippines' Disaster Response Operations Monitoring and Information Centre (DROMIC) are amongst such efforts. But many countries heavily affected by internal displacement also face large-scale conflicts, generalised violence, low levels of socioeconomic development or the impacts of recurring disasters and climate change, stretching their resources thin for more inclusive data collection.

While efforts are underway to improve estimates of the number of IDPs, there is little information on their characteristics. The information available suggests that displacement adds layers of disadvantage to the challenges that women, people with disabilities or ethnic minorities, for instance, already faced before they had to leave their homes and communities.

Unveiling these disadvantages and the diverse needs of different groups of IDPs is essential to provide them with tailored and inclusive support. The 2022 United Nations Secretary-General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement recognizes the need for improved data systems on IDPs, and the International Recommendations for IDP Statistics approved by the United Nations Statistical Commission in 2020 were a step towards better information at the national level, but many gaps remain. Some of the most glaring gaps are on sex, age and disability disaggregated-data on IDPs; on protracted displacement and the situations IDPs find themselves in after weeks, months or years; on certain types of displacement, such as displacement in a context of climate change, or small-scale events leading to displacement, for which very little data exists. These gaps result in underestimates of the scale and severity of the phenomenon, insufficient interest from governments, donors and the international community, and inadequate resources to address it. Better data on internal displacement would not only raise awareness on the scale of the issue but also help governments and their partners prioritise their limited resources to support affected people in the most effective way.

B. Who is being left behind? Trends and patterns in social exclusion

A significant proportion of total inequality can be attributed to inequality among social groups, although there are large differences across countries. Recent estimates indicate that a sizeable share of total income inequality – almost 80 per cent in South Africa, about 60 per cent in many Latin American countries, 50 per cent in India and 40 per cent in the

United States – can be attributed to characteristics that should have no bearing on people's economic standing, such as their race or ethnicity, caste, sex, place of birth, race, or even mother's education or father's occupation.[2] The persistence of disadvantage based on these attributes is hard to justify in our modern and interconnected world, where the policy options to promote social inclusion and leave no one behind are well-known (United Nations, 2020).

Ensuring equality of opportunity is a universally shared aspiration. All children should be able to develop and advance their capabilities, including through access to quality education and health care services. Infancy and early childhood, in particular, are periods of great opportunity and risk. Shocks in utero and in early childhood (including, household poverty, parental unemployment, illness, poor nutrition, etc.) can lead to lifelong problems with considerable personal and societal costs. Given the tremendous impact of early life conditions on health and economic well-being across the life course, a potential way to address deep-seated inequality – and head off the forces that may drive inequality upward in the future – is through investments that promote equality among infants and children.

## 1. Group-based inequality is not declining fast enough

Despite global improvements over time in children's health, school attendance and access to basic infrastructure and services, access to opportunity remains heavily influenced by where children are born and their parents' circumstances.

Trends in group-based inequalities reveal both areas of progress and significant shortcomings. There has been some progress in improving child health as measured by the percentage of children stunted based on household wealth, place of residence and the educational level and ethnicity of the household head (see figure 1). The observed rates of decline between different groups, however, raise concerns about whether the gaps can be closed by the SDG target year of 2030. For instance, the proportion of children stunted declined by 10 percentage points among households in the poorest quintile between the 1990s and the 2020s, and by 8 percentage points among households in the richest quintile during the same period. While stunting rates among both groups are improving, the richest households are reducing stunting at an annual rate of 2.4 per cent, a faster than the 1.4 per cent decline among the poorest households. Since lower stunting rates indicate better child health, the richest households are progressing more rapidly, meaning that a wealth gap in stunting of over 17 percentage points will persist well beyond 2030 under a business-as-usual scenario.

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[2] Based on the Global Estimates of Opportunity and Mobility database, available at https://geom.ecineq.org/world-view (accessed 26 July 2024). See also "Global Estimates of Opportunity and Mobility: A new database", available at https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/inequalities/2024/06/11/global-estimates-of-opportunity-and-mobility-a-new-database (accessed 26 July 2024).

Similar patterns emerge when considering household head characteristics, such as ethnicity and educational attainment, and place of residence. In all cases, the rate of decline in stunting among children from the most disadvantaged groups – whether rural households, the worst-off ethnic groups, or households where the head has no formal education – is too slow to close the gap between the best-off and worst-off children. Under a business-as-usual scenario, those children that are furthest behind in terms of stunting will remain behind, not only until 2030 but well into the future.

Figure 1. Trends in the proportion of stunted children by household and household head characteristics, 1990s to 2020s
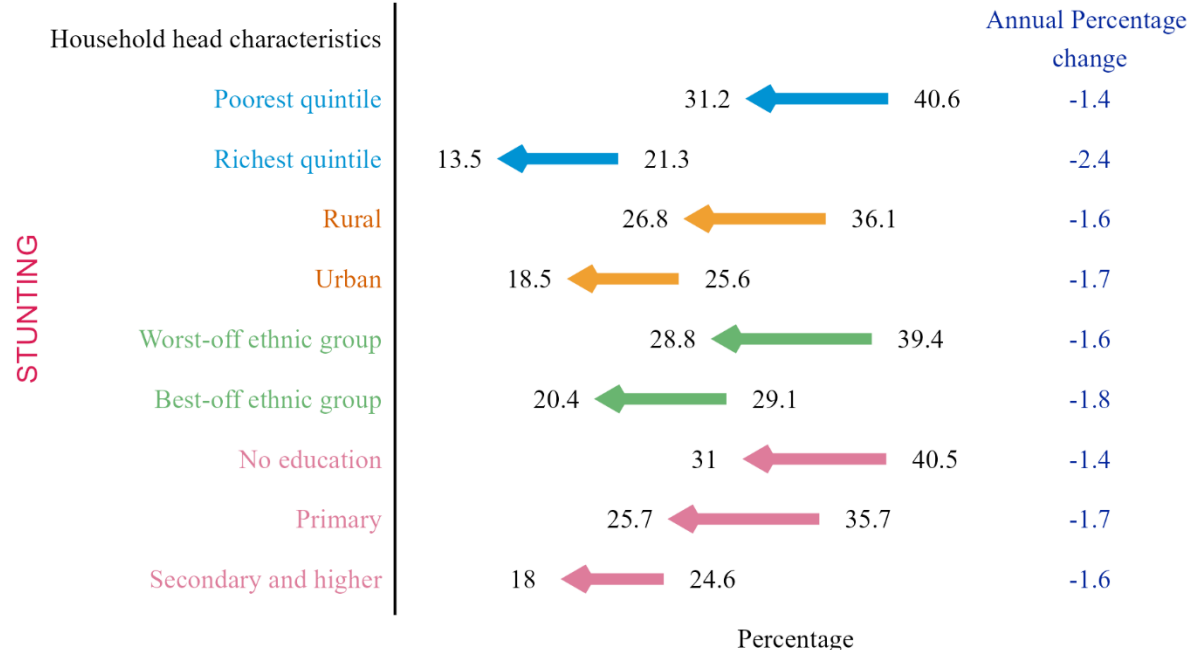
Source: Calculations based on data obtained from Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) and Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS).
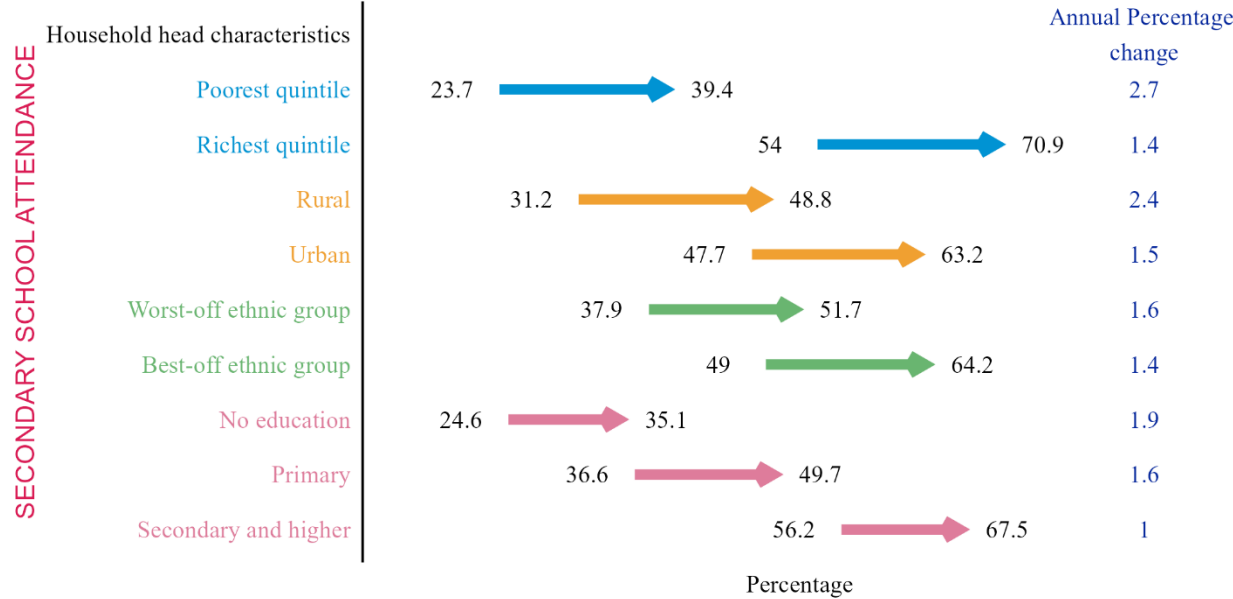Notes:
a. A child is considered stunted if she or he is below minus two standard deviations from the median height-for-age of WHO's Child Growth Standards. Stunting estimates are based on data for 59 countries.
b. Household wealth as measured by DHS is based on a household's ownership of selected assets, materials used for housing construction and access to water and sanitation facilities.
c. Ethnic groups are selected and classified as "worst-off" and "best-off" based exclusively on the prevalence of stunting in the starting year. Estimates by ethnic group are based on data for 35 countries, including 20 in Africa, 6 in Latin America and the Caribbean, 6 in Asia and 3 in Europe.
d. Data collection ranges from 1994 to the early 2000s for the earliest survey, and from 2010 to 2022 for the most recent survey.

Access to good-quality education can help level the playing field or reinforce existing inequalities, depending on how it is distributed. With the notable success achieved at the global level in the provision of primary education, gaps in secondary education have received increasing attention, including in the 2030 Agenda. As shown in figure 2, secondary

school attendance increased from 37.9 to 51.7 per cent among the worst-off ethnic groups, on average – an annual increase of 1.6 per cent – while among the best-off ethnic group, it rose from 49 to 64.2 per cent, an annual rate of 1.4 percent. Although a notable gap remains, the faster progress among the worst-off group suggests a narrowing trend, signaling that with sustained effort, further convergence could occur eventually. Yet at the current pace, convergence between the best-off and worst-off groups is projected to occur by approximately 2085, meaning that achieving full equality by 2030 remains unlikely.

Figure 2. Trends in secondary school attendance by household and household head characteristics, 1990s to 2020s

Source: Calculations based on data obtained from Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) and Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS).
Notes:
a. Secondary school attendance estimates are based on data for 61 countries. Estimates by ethnic group are based on data for 34 countries, including 20 in Africa, 5 in Latin American and the Caribbean, 6 in Asia and 3 in Europe.
b. Household wealth as measured by DHS is based on a household's ownership of selected assets, materials used for housing construction and access to water and sanitation facilities.
c. Ethnic groups are selected and classified as "worst-off" and "best-off" based exclusively on the prevalence of stunting and secondary school enrolment in the starting year. Estimates by ethnic group are based on data for 35 countries, including 20 in Africa, 6 in Latin America and the Caribbean, 6 in Asia and 3 in Europe.
d. Data collection ranges from 1994 to the early 2000s for the earliest survey, and from 2010 to 2022 for the most recent survey.

Beyond attending and completing school, acquiring relevant knowledge and skills – measured by learning outcomes – is crucial for shaping future opportunities. A composite index that considers parental education, occupational status, and household wealth reveals that socioeconomic status significantly influences student performance at age 15.

On average, across the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, socio-economically advantaged students (those in the top quarter of the index's distribution) scored 93 points higher in mathematics than disadvantaged students – those in the bottom quarter of the distribution (OECD, 2023). Similarly, non-immigrant students scored 29 points more than immigrant students in mathematics, showing that foreign-born status is an important marker of opportunity. However, once socio-economic status and the language spoken at home were accounted for, the performance gap shrank to just five points. This suggests that the primary barriers to immigrant students' academic success may lie not in their immigrant status per se, but in the socioeconomic disadvantages and linguistic challenges they face.

2. Unequal access to basic infrastructure and the digital divide

Health and educational disparities intersect with another marker of opportunity: infrastructure. Access to basic infrastructure, such as electricity and improved sanitation, forms the foundation of a healthy and productive life. Over the past three decades, progress in electricity access has been consistently faster among the most disadvantaged groups (see figure 3), while advancements in sanitation access have primarily benefited the most advantaged (see figure 4).

Figure 3. Trends in the proportion of households with access to electricity, by household and household head characteristics, 1990s to 2020s
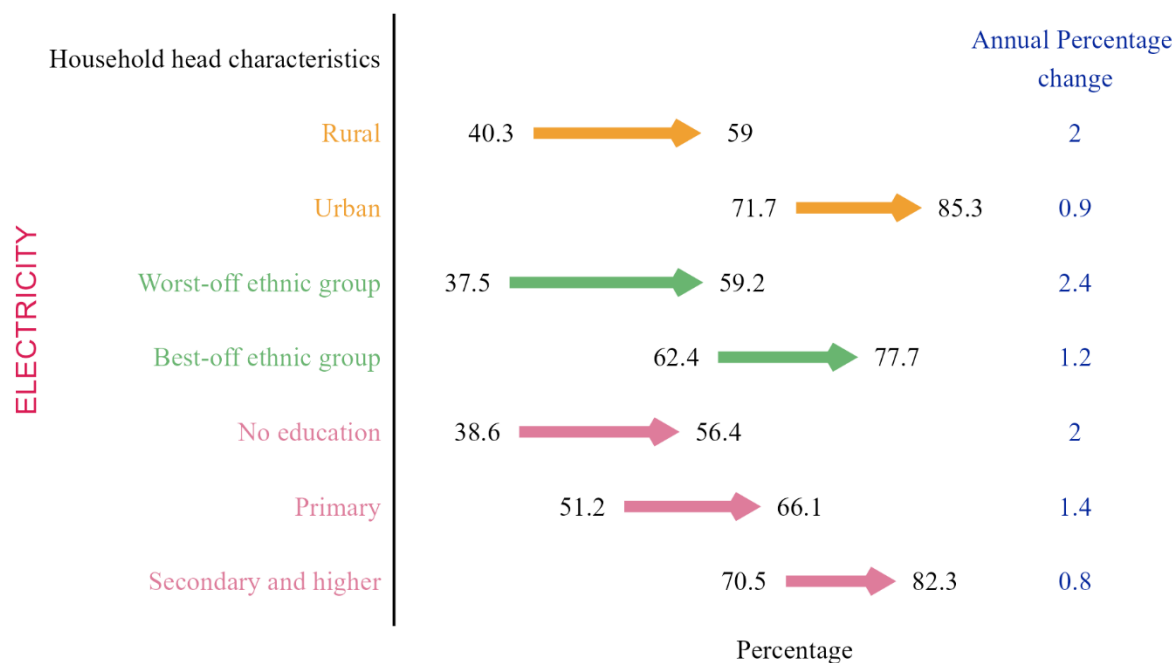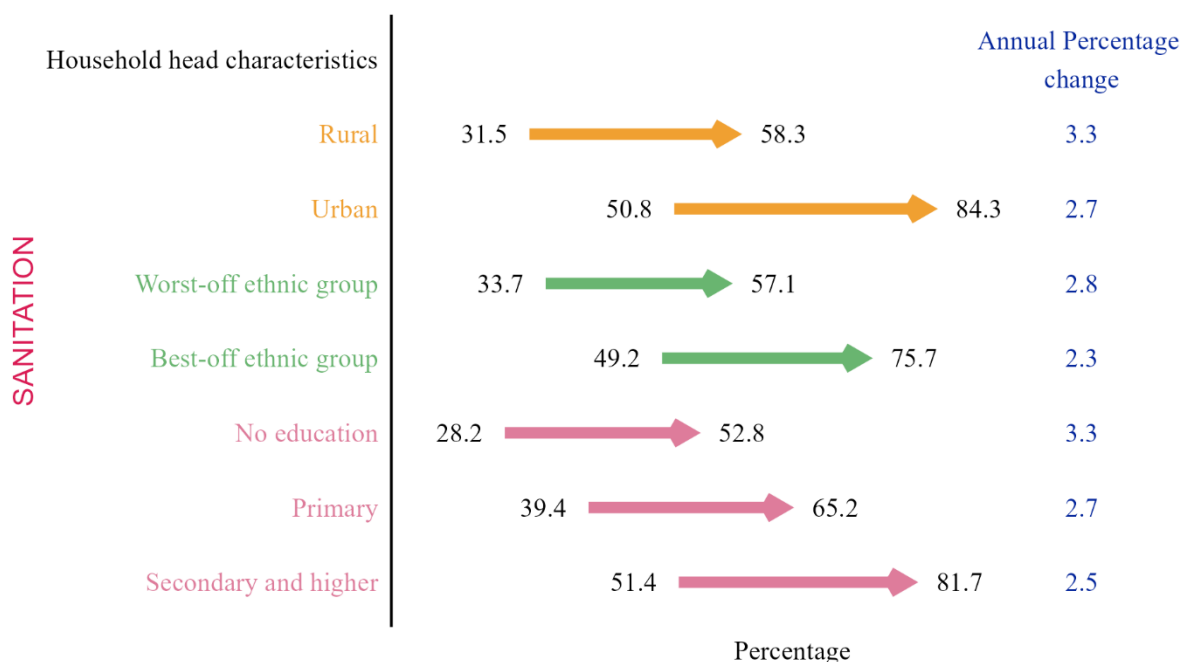

Source: Calculations based on data obtained from Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) and Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS).
Notes:

a. Access to electricity estimates by education of the household head are based on data for 63 countries. Estimates by ethnic group are based on data for 35 countries, including 20 in Africa, 6 in Latin America and the Caribbean, 6 in Asia and 3 in Europe.

b. Ethnic groups are selected and classified as "worst-off" or "best-off" based exclusively on their access to electricity and improved sanitation in the starting year.

c. Data collection ranges from 1994 to the early 2000s for the earliest survey, and from 2010 to 2022 for the most recent survey.

Figure 4. Trends in the proportion of households with access to improved sanitation, by household and household head characteristics, 1990s to 2020s

Source: Calculations based on data obtained from Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) and Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS).

Notes:

a. Improved sanitation is measured by the type of toilet facilities used by a household, and where the contents of the facility eventually end up (if this information is available). An improved sanitation facility is one that hygienically separates human excreta from human contact. Access to improved sanitation estimates by education of the household head are based on data for 65 countries.

b. Ethnic groups are selected and classified as "worst-off" or "best-off" based exclusively on their access to electricity and improved sanitation in the starting year.

c. Data collection ranges from 1994 to the early 2000s for the earliest survey, and from 2010 to 2022 for the most recent survey.

These differing trends in indicators of infrastructure highlight the complex and uneven nature of social inclusion, where gains in one area do not necessarily translate to similar improvements in others. Moreover, this divergence underscores the importance of adopting a multidimensional perspective in assessing and addressing social exclusion. Different

indicators capture distinct aspects of social exclusion, making it essential to monitor progress across a broad spectrum of dimensions to avoid overlooking critical inequalities. And, as highlighted at the beginning of this paper, there continue to be indicators of social exclusion for which little data exists. A focus on housing conditions, for instance, sidesteps the challenges of those experiencing homelessness and the unhoused population, which are often overlooked due to measurement issues (see box 2).

Box 2. "Seeing" homelessness through data collection

Lydia Stazen, Ruff Institute of Global Homelessness (IGH)

Homelessness is an issue that is present in nearly every country in the world to some degree. Homelessness is a complex topic, lying at the intersection of poverty, housing costs, physical and mental health, problematic substance use, gender-based violence and other forms of sexism, and racism and discrimination. It is impacted by displacement between and across borders due to armed wars and conflicts, natural disasters, climate events, and growing inequality. Without coordinated, multilateral action, the homelessness crisis will continue to grow globally.

Yet, despite being "both a concrete violation of human rights and an indicator of extreme poverty and social exclusion"[3], the state of global homeless data is woefully lacking. The Ruff Institute of Global Homelessness (IGH) recently launched its Better Homeless Data Project as an interactive map where users can explore what data exists on homelessness and where the gaps are. IGH's Better Homeless Data Project found that only 44 countries have official government statistics on homelessness, and only 12 per cent of all countries have reported their statistics publicly since 2017. And despite the issue of homelessness intersecting with multiple SDGs, such a Goal 1 "no poverty" and Goal 11 "sustainable cities and communities", none of the SDGs' 169 associated indicators target homelessness.

Hearkening back to old management maxims, we know that 'what gets measured gets done.' Access to quality data is essential in confronting the complex challenge of homelessness. Quality data allows for informed decisions by identifying trends and measuring the success of interventions, and providing the information needed to secure resources.

The first step in measuring homelessness more accurately is for countries to define homelessness. Building on commonly used definitions like the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion, IGH's Global Framework for Defining Homelessness, and a United Nations expert group meeting on homelessness, several United Nations resolutions now use the following description of homelessness: "people living on the streets or other open spaces; people living in temporary or crisis accommodation; people living in severely inadequate and insecure accommodation, such as slums or informal settlements; and people who lack access to affordable housing." Each country can further describe what those categories look like according to their context and begin to measure.

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[3] United Nations, General Assembly (2023). Inclusive Policies and Programmes to Address Homelessness: Report of the Secretary-General. July 24. A/78/236.

There are many types of methodologies for collecting homeless data and each methodology has pros and cons. Developing the methodology for homeless data collection should start with a consultative process that includes key stakeholders such as government ministries, civil society organizations, health care agencies, people with the lived experience of homelessness, police/law enforcement, and community leaders. Countries should select the methodology that is best for their context and capacity, and consider using more than one methodology. Methodologies include Point-in-Time or snapshot counts, registry weeks or 'by-name lists,' service-based sampling, capture/recapture, administrative databases, and censuses.

Whatever methodology is selected, countries should collect disaggregated data on the demographics of people experiencing homelessness. These data points should include, to the extent possible: age, sex, type and size of household, geographic location, mental or physical health status, length of time a person has experienced homelessness, causes/drivers of a person's homelessness (e.g., "reason for loss of last settled home), income, race, ethnicity, migratory status, and other characteristics relevant in national context. It is crucial when gathering sensitive information, that data consent, security, and privacy concerns should factor centrally into any data strategy and processes.

Countries should collect homeless data at minimum, once each year and at the same time annually to allow tracking of trends. To the extent possible, the data collection should be geographically comprehensive and include both urban and rural areas. Once collected, countries should work with its key stakeholder groups to analyze and share aggregate data, information about groups that are more likely to experience homelessness, and trends over time.

Defining and measuring homelessness are critical tools in helping homelessness be 'seen' by communities and governments and then tended to, via informed and targeted action. Definitions and measurement of issues such as homelessness and poverty will never be one hundred percent perfect or accurate. We must also stay wary of the power of definitions to exclude or stigmatise, the danger of measurement to obscure issues or be used for political talking points, and the risks of data being co-opted for harm, such as in the case of criminalizing homelessness. However, despite the imperfections and risks, definition and measurement are critical building blocks to progressive action on homelessness.

For more information and resources on homelessness definition and measurement, please visit ighomelessness.org.

Access to technology and the internet is an increasingly critical aspect of infrastructure for education and economic opportunities in an age where information is primarily disseminated online. Students without reliable internet access or devices may struggle to complete homework, access learning resources, or participate in remote learning, leading to wider educational gaps. People without access may miss out on job opportunities, online work platforms, and the ability to develop digital skills needed for modern jobs. Country-specific studies show that poorer, less educated and older individuals tend to be the furthest behind in ICT skills, with often virtually no skills at all. Among these characteristics,

the completion of higher education is a strong, consistent predictor of ICT skills (Woser, 2023).

A snapshot from the most recent available data focusing on young adults – who globally are most likely to use the internet compared with other ages [4] – paints a picture of stark disparities by various household head characteristics, gender, and place of residence in access to the internet (figure 5).

Figure 5. Percentage of young people who have never used the internet by household head characteristics, sex and place of residence, most recent year
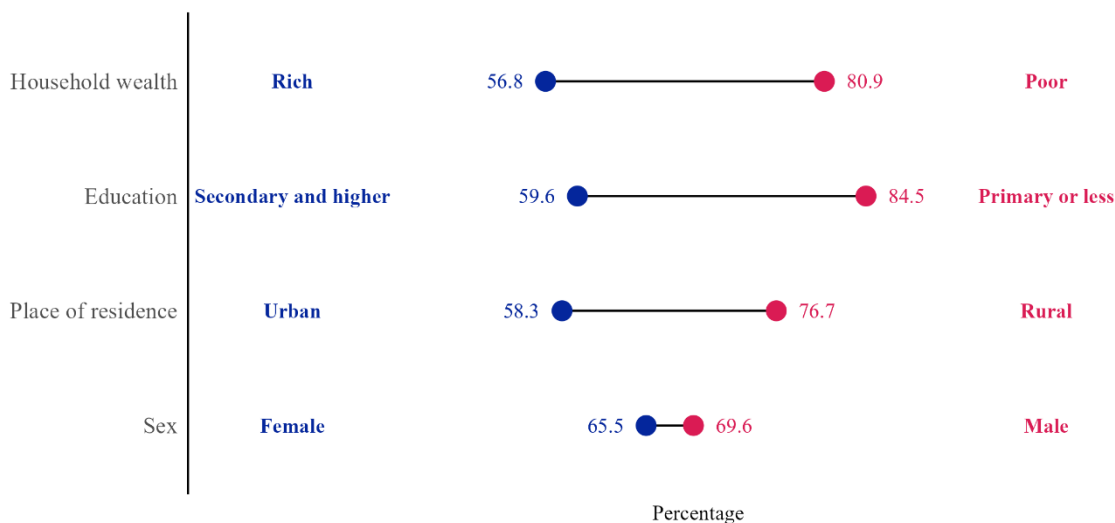
Source: Calculations based on data obtained from Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) and Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS).
Notes: Estimates are based on data for 38 developing countries. Data collection ranges from 2014 for the earliest survey to 2021 for the most recent survey.

Significant differences based on individual and household characteristics emerge. Among household characteristics, the largest disparity is observed in household wealth: youth from the poorest households are much less likely to have internet experience compared to those from the richest households.   Regarding individual characteristics, education stands out as a major determinant. Youth with secondary or higher education are far more likely to have internet experience than those with only primary or less education. Gender differences in internet usage are minimal, with males and females showing similar levels of access. However, stark disparities exist between urban and rural areas, with urban youth far more likely to have used the internet than their rural counterparts.

Overall, socioeconomic factors play a critical role in digital inclusion. "Digital poverty" is primarily driven by barriers such as limited access, high costs, and insufficient skills.

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[4] ITU (2022). *Measuring Digital Development: Facts and Figures 2022*. Available online at
https://www.itu.int/hub/publication/d-ind-ict_mdd-2022/ (accessed on 12 October 2023).

Economically and educationally disadvantaged groups are often the most affected, leaving them excluded from the digital world as well[5]. This digital exclusion restricts their ability to access online opportunities like education, quality jobs, public services, and cultural experiences, further deepening their poverty and social isolation.

The Covid-19 pandemic exposed and exacerbated the digital divide, highlighting significant disparities in access to technology, infrastructure, and support, with negative effects on schooling. While governments relied on distance learning solutions to maintain educational continuity during school closures, these approaches often excluded the most disadvantaged. For instance, school closures disproportionately affected students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, who struggled with multiple barriers to remote learning. These students often lacked access to essential ICT resources such as devices and reliable internet, making it difficult to engage with digital education platforms (van de Werfhorst, 2021).

3. Limited upward mobility

While overall levels of education and income have risen globally, upward intergenerational mobility has not increased at the same rate. Improvements in income, education, occupation, or social status from one generation to the next should be achieved independently from a parent's social or economic status. Yet many people find themselves at the same socioeconomic level as their parents, rather than moving up (van der Weide and others, 2023; Narayan and others, 2018; OECD, 2018). Those at the top of the socioeconomic ladder tend to remain at the top while children from economically disadvantaged families often struggle to achieve higher education levels and earn more than their parents did (OECD, 2018).

Factors other than education and income also influence intergenerational mobility. Upward intergenerational mobility has traditionally been lower among children belonging to ethnic minorities than among children in the majority ethnic group across most countries with data (Funjika and Gisselquist, 2020). In the United States, Chetty and others (2024) find that children from families of African descent at all parental income levels have recently experienced improvements in economic mobility, while those from low-income families of European descent have faced declines. This trend has been driven by falling employment rates for low-income parents of European descent compared to low-income parents of African descent and high-income parents of European descent (Chetty and others, 2024).

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[5] United Nations, General Assembly (2024). Information and digital technologies for advancing social development: opportunities and challenges for improving social policies, Report of the Secretary-General. 15 July. A/79/154.

Children born into wealthier families have better access not only to economic resources, but also to networks and opportunities that help them maintain or improve their status. Policies and societal structures can also facilitate upward social mobility, however (see box 3).

Box 3. Investing in Ladders of Opportunity – an agenda for Twenty-first Century development

Anirudh Krishna, Duke University

Talent is everywhere, but not opportunity. Talent has risen to the top wherever an infrastructure of opportunity was made available to ordinary individuals.

In the 21st century, the greatest gains will be made in the opportunity economy – a truth that politicians grasp intuitively and highlight for its transformative quality. But these gains will not accrue automatically. Just as the manufacturing economy needs the infrastructure of roads and railways and electricity, and the financial economy that of stock exchanges, credit ratings, and deposit guarantees, reaping the gains of the opportunity economy is premised upon building the infrastructure of opportunity that enables people to rise to the full height of their abilities.

Money is important but does not determine who will build the elements of the infrastructure of opportunity. Many poorer societies have built these elements more successfully than richer societies.

The infrastructure of opportunity is not one single edifice but is composed of a variety of ladders of opportunity that operate in parallel and correspond to different kinds of capabilities (or talents).

Examples from around the world – Jamaican and Kenyan runners, Estonian tech entrepreneurs, Finnish teachers, each among the best in the world in their own distinctive spheres – demonstrate the transformative potential of ladders of opportunity.

While they are different in many regards, these and many other ladders of opportunity are united by seven core design principles – including open access, transparent standards, vibrant role models, soft landings, competition and collaboration, an all-society effort – that are possible to put into practice by communities around the world (Krishna, forthcoming).

Fully developed ladders of opportunity reach deep into the grassroots and rise unbroken to the highest international levels; stopping any earlier would be to deny opportunity to some individual. Each ladder is democratic and open access. Anyone who is interested can readily enter at the lowest level. Only those who perform better move up the ladder.

Since individuals have talents of different kinds, societies need diverse ladders of opportunity. If you have the capability to be a world-class runner, you need a track-and-field-related ladder, but if, on the other hand, you are a talented artist or a gifted musician or an exceptional mathematician, you will advance on the basis of your talents if (and only if) a painting ladder and a music ladder and a coding ladder are available in your vicinity.

Where talents are systematically identified and groomed through successively higher levels of competition, the probability is low that the best in the land will remain hidden. Excellence is co-produced with opportunity in every instance. Each ladder of opportunity is also a flow of world-class excellence.

Climbing all the way to the top is not the only way to gain rewards. Soft landings are built into the system. Apart from a handful of superstars, many others who climb partway can gain decent livelihoods and respectable careers. This is what's special about the opportunity economy: it's about raising every individual, now and in the future, to the height of their ability.

Genetics, geography, and culture have little to do with why a particular flow of excellence has come up in a particular location. Talent is randomly distributed at birth. Anyone can build a ladder of opportunity.

The more diverse and specialized are its ladders, the more sophisticated is the opportunity economy of a country. The less sophisticated is its collection of ladders, the worse a country performs at transforming human potential into productive activity. In the ideal case, every individual is matched with an opportunity commensurate with their interests and abilities, and no one has an incentive to move to a different situation.

As children find better outlets for their talents, they lead more meaningful lives, and having more people employed in higher value, higher-paying jobs produces economic growth and raises a country's productivity. As opportunities grow and people move even part way up a ladder of opportunity, the income gap decreases, communities and nations flourish, and economies expand. This is the promise of investing in the opportunity economy.

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4. Labour market opportunities: not only a matter of skills

Access to decent and productive employment is a key foundation of social inclusion. Yet labour market inequalities persist and are, in some cases, growing (United Nations, 2016). Such inequalities are not only due to differences in education or skills among workers. The labour market continues to make socially-driven distinctions based on personal attributes that should have no bearing on job opportunities or workers' competencies and skills.

Persons with disabilities, for example, face significant and persistent challenges in the labour market, despite an increasing percentage of persons with disability who completed secondary school or higher (United Nations, 2020). The unemployment rate for persons with disabilities is markedly higher compared to those without disabilities, illustrating the multifaceted barriers they continue to face in securing work [6] (see figure 6). Negative

[6] It is important to note that many persons with disabilities are not actively seeking employment, either due to pervasive stigma that strongly discourages them or because disability benefits are contingent on their unemployment status. As a result, in many

stereotypes about their capabilities, often perpetuated by societal biases, contribute to discrimination in hiring practices. Moreover, workplaces remain largely inaccessible, whether due to physical barriers, a lack of accommodations, or limited adoption of assistive technologies. These issues are compounded by the frequent mismatch between the skills of persons with disabilities and labour market demands, a gap that stems from often limited access to inclusive education and training programmes. By way of example, youth with disabilities are almost twice as likely to not be engaged in education or employment compared to youth without disabilities (United Nations, 2024a).

For those who do find employment, the data reveals that persons with disabilities are disproportionately represented in the informal sector, where jobs are precarious and lack essential protections (see figure 6). Informal work offers little in terms of security, leaving workers vulnerable to sudden income loss and exploitation. Benefits such as health insurance, pensions, and paid leave are virtually non-existent, and career advancement opportunities are minimal. This overrepresentation in informal employment underscores the structural barriers that prevent persons with disabilities from accessing formal and secure job opportunities.

Figure 6. Unemployment rate and by disability status in selected countries (2015-2020s)

Unemployment rate | Informal employment rate

25.8 % | 14.4 %

9.1 % | 5.8 %

Persons with disabilities | Persons without disabilities

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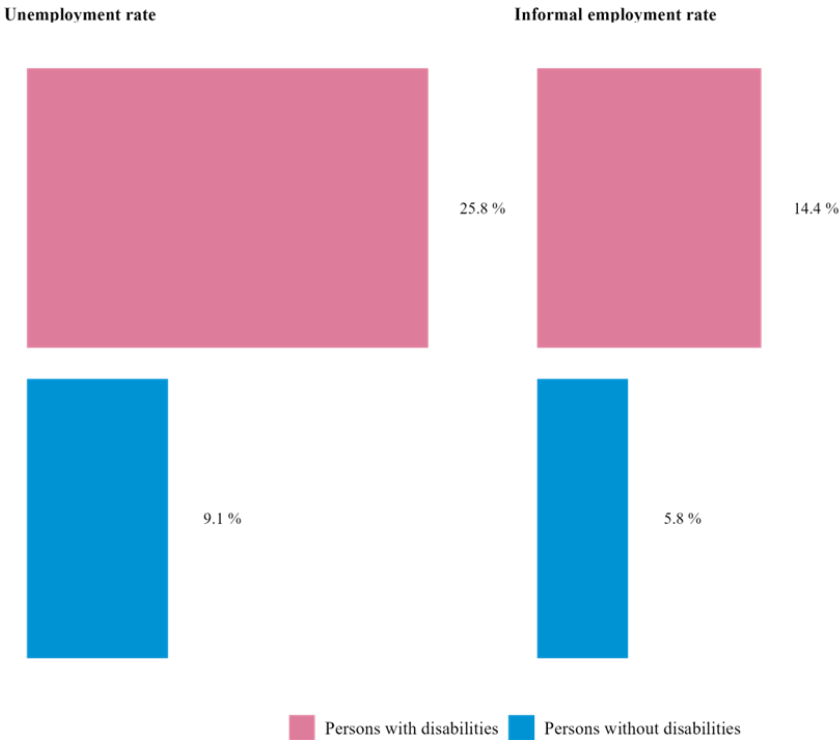
countries, including sub-Saharan African region, employment rates for persons with disabilities can be paradoxically higher than those for individuals without disabilities.

Notes: The average unemployment rate is calculated using data from 42 countries, each of which has at least one data point in each of the following periods: 2000–2009, 2010–2014, and 2015–2020. Similarly, the average informal employment rate is determined for 30 countries that meet the same data coverage criteria.

These disparities are not uniform; they intersect with factors such as education, for example, further compounding disadvantages for some groups (see figure 7). Education plays a critical role in shaping labor market outcomes. The data suggest that individuals with disabilities who lack access to quality education are disproportionately working in informal jobs, which are often low-paying, insecure, and lacking social protection. Moreover, the gap in access to quality jobs between persons with disabilities and those without is more pronounced at lower educational levels.

While obtaining higher levels of education reduces the risk of informal employment for persons with disabilities, it does not entirely eliminate the disparity in informality between persons with disabilities and those without. Strikingly, the informal employment rate among persons with disabilities who hold an advanced degree remains higher than the informal employment rate of persons without disabilities who have only a basic level of education. This underscores a broader systemic inequity: even with significant educational attainment, persons with disabilities continue to face barriers in accessing formal, secure, and well-compensated jobs, highlighting the need for inclusive labour market policies and greater efforts to dismantle stigma and discrimination.

Figure 7. Intersecting inequalities: the combined effect of disability status and educational attainment on informality
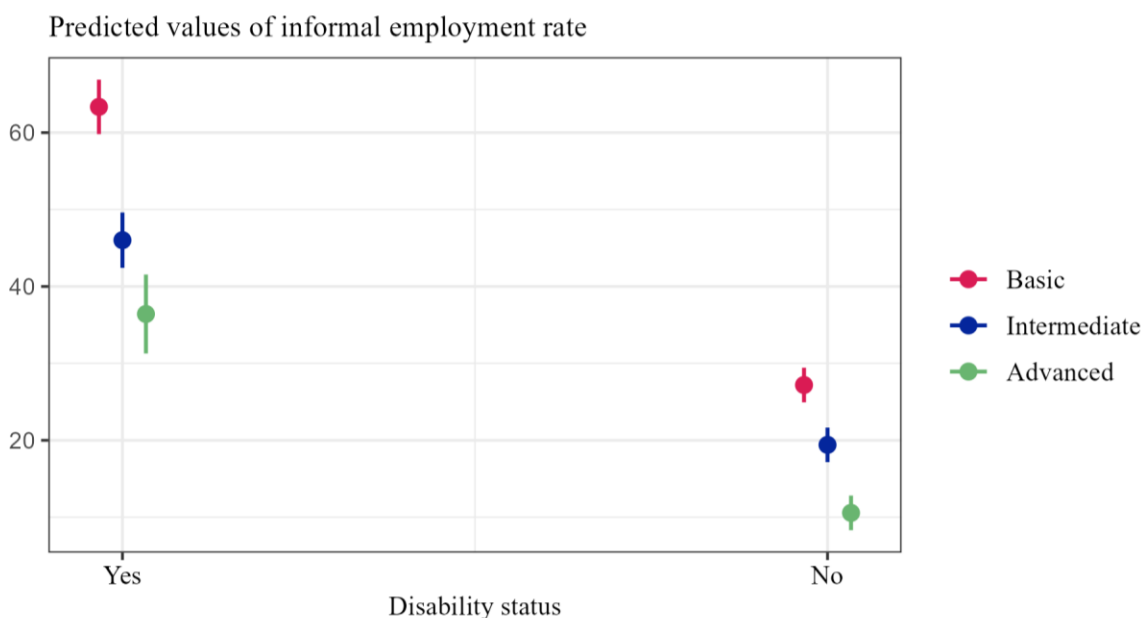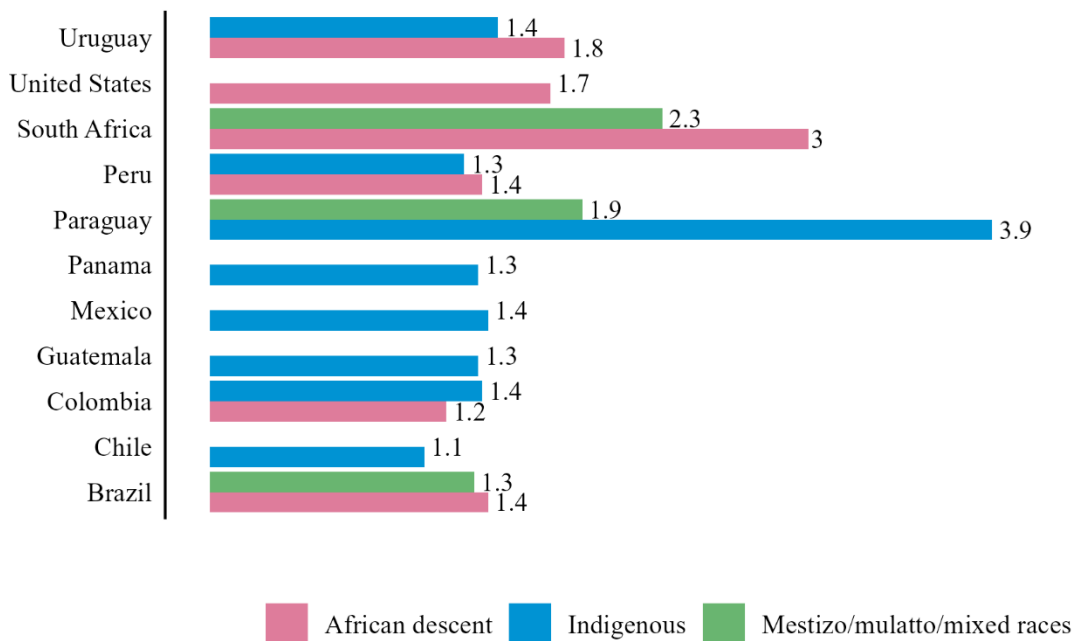

Source: UN DESA analysis based on harmonized labour force surveys by the ILO.

Similarly, education gaps are not sufficient to explain occupational differences among ethnic groups. For some Indigenous Peoples and some ethnic minorities, employment opportunities could also nr curtailed by spatial disadvantages, as they live more often in rural, remote areas characterized by poor infrastructure and little access to off-farm work. Yet at the same levels of education, among people of the same gender and the same place of residence (be it rural or urban), workers belonging to Indigenous and ethnic minority groups are more likely to be employed in unskilled occupations than their non-indigenous, not of African descent counterparts that share characteristics other than race and ethnicity (see figure 8).

Race has a strong effect on occupation, particularly in South Africa, where formal discrimination and the denial of opportunities during the apartheid era left a legacy of racially embedded inequalities, including in the labour market. The relative odds of working in a low-skilled job are three times as large for workers of African descent as compared to workers of European descent with equivalent levels of education in this country. Racial differences in occupation are also large in the United States. Indigenous status also has a significantly negative effect on occupation in all the countries shown and especially in Paraguay, where the odds of working in an unskilled job are almost four times as high for Indigenous Peoples than for the non-indigenous. Likely at play is the long dispossession of Indigenous land by other interests in the country, leading to the productive exclusion and marginalization of Indigenous Peoples in Paraguay, notwithstanding the recognition of Indigenous Peoples and their rights to ancestral lands in the country's 1992 Constitution (Ioris, 2024; Minority Rights Group, n.d.).

Figure 8. Likelihood of low-skilled employment by ethnicity, selected countries, latest available year

Source: UN DESA analysis based on the Luxembourg Income Study.

Notes: Results are derived from logistic regressions controlling for gender, age, place of residence, and education level. The plotted odds ratios are statistically significant (p < 0.001). Odds ratios greater than 1 indicate a higher likelihood of working in an unskilled occupation. The analysis focuses on Indigenous Peoples, people of African descent, and those of mixed ancestry relative to non-Indigenous, non-African descent populations in selected countries (most recent year available). Statistically significant odds ratios greater than 1 are also observed for individuals of Asian and Latin/Hispanic descent in the United States (results not shown).

C. Promoting participation and empowerment in the pursuit of social inclusion

1. Equality before the law is key to social inclusion

Discrimination on the basis of identity or socioeconomic status is not the only driver of group-based inequality, but it is a particularly pervasive one. Indeed, one in six people globally experience discrimination based on any grounds, with women, ethnic minorities, and people with disabilities disproportionately affected (United Nations, 2024b). Most intra-state conflicts are linked to exclusion and discrimination against ethnic, religious or other groups. In an interconnected world, these conflicts often spill over to neighbouring countries and their effects reverberate more and more to all corners of the world.

Discrimination affects people's opportunities, their wellbeing, their sense of agency and can lead individuals to internalize the prejudice or stigma that is directed against them. People who have self-reported experiences of racial discrimination exhibit signs of poorer mental and physical health, more high-risk behaviours and fewer healthy behaviours than those

who did not report experiences of discrimination.[7] Discrimination can act as a chronic stressor for those who experience it, leading to gradual and cumulative wear and tear on people's health, thus driving group-based inequality in health outcomes (Geronimus, 2023). Discrimination in schools can lead to stereotyping of lower aptitude among some children, leading to a self-fulfilling prophecy that lowers affected students' self-esteem, self-efficacy, engagement and motivation to learn, and academic achievement (Zajda, 2022). This stereotype threat – that stereotyped people are inherently limited because of their group membership – can extend to negatively affect employment productivity as well (Bertrand and Duflo, 2016).

2. Legal foundations for equal treatment

The principle of non-discrimination applies throughout international human rights law and legally obliges Governments to respect, protect and fulfil human rights.[8] The adoption of international conventions which promote equality and non-discrimination and protect the rights of historically vulnerable and marginalized groups have helped build coalitions to make norms more inclusive at the national level.[9]

Indeed, ratifying international conventions that recognize groups and promote their rights is just the first step in the national project to promote the participation and empowerment of those who have been historically marginalized and discriminated against based on their identity. Historically, many laws and policies have explicitly limited or denied rights to specific groups. Democratization and the demand for equality rights have led many Governments to repeal discriminatory laws and policies that sustain unfair treatment. Most constitutions now enshrine the principles of equality and non-discrimination.

However, formal discrimination persists in many countries. Repealing discriminatory laws alone is not sufficient. Protective laws spelling out the equal rights and representation of social groups that have been victims of discrimination are often needed as well. Where anti-discriminatory laws are in place, however, their enforcement poses challenges and is often inadequate. Ministries of justice, the police force and other law enforcement institutions must have significant administrative capacity, as well as thorough knowledge of the law and resources, to respond. Meanwhile, acts of discrimination are grossly underreported. Many

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[7] See Williams and others (2019) for a global review.

[8] According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, discrimination on the basis of race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status is prohibited. See General Assembly resolution 217(A)III.

[9] These include the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1966), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1998), the International Convention on the Protection of Rights of All Migrant Workers and their Families (1990) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006).

people do not know that they are legally protected against such acts, and may not know how to report them (United Nations, 2020).

The benefits of legal and institutional frameworks that prohibit discrimination and promote equality can reap positive benefits for the reduction of group-based inequality. For example, countries with more gender-egalitarian laws exhibit smaller conditional gender gaps in vulnerable employment. Laws regulating marriage, parenthood, assets, and entrepreneurship are particularly powerful predictors of employment quality among women (Lo Bue and others, 2022).

Yet even in places where formal discrimination has been repealed or outlawed outright, interpersonal discrimination persists. Experiments from around the world have documented hiring discrimination based on groups for which unequal treatment is forbidden under law, not only among ethnic minorities, but also immigrants, persons with disabilities, and older persons, particularly in European countries (Lippens, Vermeiren and Baert, 2023). Underlying acts of discrimination are commonly held prejudicial norms and stereotypes that shape people's actions and state institutions. For example, biased gender social norms are widespread worldwide, and prevalent among both men and women: almost 90 percent of people have at least one bias against women in the educational, economic, and political spheres, or regarding gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health and rights (UNDP, 2023).

3. Affirmative action and access to justice

Beyond repealing discriminatory laws and introducing protective measures, many countries have turned to affirmative action to redress the social exclusion of groups who have been historically discriminated against. This has included quotas or reservations to improve the representation of women or minority ethnic groups in decision-making roles, quotas and scholarships to improve access to education, and preferential treatment in hiring for certain jobs.

A recent review on the effectiveness of affirmative action policies targeted by ethnicity alone from across the world found that about two thirds of studies indicated strongly positive effects of affirmative action policies on the target groups' education, employment and political participation. While affirmative action generally improved the numerical representation of target groups, the qualitative improvement in the outcomes of people's lives remained ambiguous (Schotte, Gisselquist and Leone, 2023). Previous reviews similarly have found the evidence on the impact of affirmative action on reducing discrimination and group-based inequality is thin, and often contradictory (Marcus, Mdee and Page, 2016). The dearth of strong findings, however, may be due to the limited number of countries which have introduced affirmative action policies and the difficulty in assessing the long-term causal impacts of these policies on reducing of group-based inequality and promoting social inclusion over time.

D. Conclusions

Since the 1995 World Summit for Social Development, significant strides have been made toward improving the social inclusion of historically marginalized and vulnerable groups. Key advancements include better access to basic services such as health and education, greater recognition and protection of the rights of many groups and efforts to combat discrimination and improve access to justice. However, progress remains insufficient in scope and speed. Development continues to leave some individuals and groups behind, limiting their ability to participate meaningfully in economic, social, and political life. Unequal access to opportunities perpetuates cycles of disadvantage and exclusion.

Despite progress in access to education, healthcare, and basic services like electricity and the internet, significant disparities persist across social groups. Although some trends are encouraging, improvements in one area often do not translate to others. For instance, employment inequalities persist even at comparable levels of educational attainment across groups.

Notwithstanding improvements in data, many marginalized groups remain statistically invisible, excluded from household surveys and population censuses. Political recognition and advocacy often precede their identification in official data. Strengthening the capacity of national statistical agencies to collect better household- and individual-level data is crucial to ensure that the most vulnerable are accounted for and prioritized. Enhanced data collection, including more comprehensive and frequent surveys, is essential to identify and address exclusion. Social groups omitted from current datasets are often at the highest risk of being left behind. Expanding the availability of microdata and improving data quality will help ensure that no one is overlooked.

Discrimination remains a universal and pervasive barrier to inclusion, constraining opportunities, limiting choices, and undermining well-being. While much has been done to end formal discrimination through legal reforms and policy changes, informal barriers often persist and are harder to detect. The persistence of prejudice underscores the need for ongoing efforts to address both overt and subtle forms of discrimination and exclusion. Eliminating discrimination requires a long-term, multifaceted approach. This includes investing in equity to promote equal access to opportunity and challenging entrenched norms and behaviours, including through institutional change. Failure to empower excluded groups and enable their participation in society comes with significant social and economic costs.

The road to inclusion is complex and requires addressing deeply entrenched systems of inequality. Yet the costs of inaction are high. Failure to create the conditions for inclusion undermines social cohesion, exacerbates inequalities, and perpetuates cycles of poverty and disadvantage. The commitment to social inclusion – as reaffirmed by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – provides a powerful impetus for action. By embracing this

commitment and taking bold, coordinated action, the international community can pave the way for a future where all individuals, regardless of their background, have the opportunity to achieve their full potential.

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