

The "Leaving No One Behind" Challenge - a litmus test for achievement of the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development

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I congratulate ATD Ireland warmly on the success of the first round of "Leaving No One Behind" conversations. It has been a distinct honour and pleasure for me to serve as patron for this remarkable initiative. And I am delighted to continue in this role as ATD Ireland embarks on a second round of these conversations. May there be many more.

These discussions and workshops are playing a vital role in raising awareness at local and grassroots level of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and what it means for this country. ATD Ireland's initiative has helped many different communities in Ireland to grasp the potential of the Sustainable Development Goals and to understand the contribution which they can make to eliminating poverty, inequality and exclusion both in Ireland and elsewhere around the world. It has put the spotlight on the central pledge made by world leaders in 2015 to "leave no one behind" and to try to "reach the furthest behind first". The Leaving No One Behind conversations have enabled a wide range of participants all over Ireland to express their views on what deserves priority attention as the world sets out on the road to 2030 - a destination which is now no longer so distant. In particular, this initiative has given an invaluable voice to the poor, the marginalised and the vulnerable in our society.

The "leaving no one behind" challenge can be seen as a litmus test for achievement of the entire 2030 Agenda. If we fail in our collective promise to leave no one behind, then the entire vision we have set out in the SDGs for a better and fairer world fails. The way we have defined many of the Goals ensures that leaving no one behind - tackling the needs of the poorest and most disadvantaged people on our planet - is really the core part of the 2030 Agenda. And there is no doubt about the urgency which we have attached to this: when world leaders spoke of "reaching the furthest behind first", this meant frontloading this aspect of the Agenda, making it a top priority for the initial phase of implementation.

As we enter the fifth year of the 2030 Agenda, the evidence suggests that leaders and Policy-makers have not in fact been honouring what they promised to do. The accounts of national performance presented by many countries at the High Level Political Forum in New York each year have shown little sign of concerted efforts being made at national level to prioritise the needs of, or to direct significantly increased investments towards, the poorest and most vulnerable groups. There is also little evidence of countries being willing to look in an integrated manner at the needs of these groups. The Agenda, after all, asks countries to recognise that real and lasting transformation will come about only if they take into account the countless interactions across all Goals and targets. Yet many persist with traditional silo approaches which ignore this aspect. This is disappointing.

On the positive side, a large amount of valuable work is being done by international organisations and by civil society, academic and research institutions to analyse what "leave no one behind" should mean globally and in individual countries, to identify who should be the targets of focussed assistance under that heading and to suggest how that assistance can best be delivered.

At a special UN summit held last September to mark the first four years of the Agenda, leaders did reaffirm their commitments both to "leaving no one behind" and to "reaching the furthest behind first". However, there was no in-depth engagement with this key challenge. It is to be hoped that this will now follow rapidly. If the worst-off in our societies do not see their lives improving significantly in the early years of SDGs implementation, this will be a profound betrayal of everything we have set out to do in this Agenda and of all the values which underpin it.

This year we begin a so-called 'Decade of Action' to mark the final ten years for SDGs implementation. A series of events over the next few months will culminate in a major summit in the autumn. Officially this summit will be a celebration of the UN's seventy-five years of existence; in practice, it will be an opportunity to renew, and hopefully to deepen, the many commitments made in the 2030 Agenda. I hope that the Agenda's central pledge to "leave no one behind" will get the sustained attention it deserves, with leaders declaring more robustly the overriding importance of this commitment and ideally agreeing on a series of steps across many policy domains to give practical effect to it.

When announcing the SDGs in 2015, the world's leaders made clear that they wished to see the Goals and targets met for all nations and peoples "and for all segments of society". They also declared that they would not consider the Goals and targets met unless these were met for everyone. Such sentiments signalled very clearly that the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable groups in every society would be given top priority. It is time to re-emphasise this core undertaking and to ensure that we realise for these groups the full promise of this Agenda. It is no use making progress on other parts of the SDGs if those with the greatest needs remain on the sidelines. The time to make this policy shift, furthermore, is now.

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