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‘Leaving no one behind’ – the role of intersecting inequalities

Sarah Byrne, November 2015

With their pledge that ‘no one will be left behind’, the authors of the new Sustainable Development Goals acknowledge that the significant progress in human development achieved over the past two decades has been unevenly distributed. The progress reported for the Millennium Development Goals, while impressive, was based on averages – data aggregated at national and international levels. Such reported figures do not sufficiently represent substantial disparities and the continued exclusion of different disadvantaged groups from this progress. Addressing inequality thus emerged as a key theme in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

While the reasons for different groups having been ‘left behind’ are complex and situated in different political, economic and social dynamics, in almost every society and region on earth certain social groups face systematic and sustained discrimination. This results in cultural inequalities, spatial inequalities, economic inequalities and political inequalities (1). While each of these inequalities represents significant hardship in different areas of life, it is their interaction that causes the most disadvantageous and difficult to change outcomes. This is because the different forms of discrimination are not experienced in parallel, or even simply added together, but rather they interact and reinforce each other. Intersecting inequalities create compounded and cumulative disadvantages for the people experiencing them (2).

Discrimination on the basis of ethnicity a significant predictor of inequality

The pernicious effect of intersecting inequality is something that people working with disadvantaged groups (whether in the global south or north) will be aware of. However, it is useful to have quantitative evidence at a comparative scale to inform, guide and target development-oriented interventions. A new report from the ODI does just this – looking at education and health outcomes for women in 16 countries in the 1990s and in the 2000s (3). The report focusses on the effects of intersecting inequality, analysing the effects of place of residence, belonging to different ethnic groups and different wealth groups. Among the report’s key findings are that poor women from disadvantaged ethnic groups are the most likely to have been ‘left behind’ by progress in human development in these 16 countries. Depending on the country, ODI researchers found that ethnicity explained from 5% to 25% of inequality in women’s health and education outcomes (specifically, child mortality and years of schooling). Place of residence also accounts for 5-25% of inequality. However, it is at the intersection of ethnicity and place of residence that the results are particularly salient: the joint effect ranges from 12% in Zimbabwe to nearly 40% in Bolivia. Significantly, this combined result is higher than for each of the component parts. For example, in Bolivia ethnicity and place of residence each explain about 25% percent of inequality, but the two together bring the result to nearly 40%. This reveals that there are very large gaps between the population average and the outcomes experienced by women from disadvantaged ethnic groups living in certain parts of countries. Similarly, the intersection of wealth group and ethnicity reveals a stark marginalisation of some groups.

What does this mean for development organisations?

Addressing intersecting inequality in the context of development practice can be challenging because it necessitates an added layer of complexity in identifying and targeting disadvantaged groups. There can be tensions around naming or labelling different kinds of group-based inequalities (4) or between different rights-agendas (5). Producing or accessing data, which is already challenging in many contexts, is difficult at this level of disaggregation. More participatory or community based methods of identifying intersecting inequalities (6) can provide rich and contextualised information, but this is difficult to aggregate at a project or country programme level, as would be needed for monitoring and reporting. Of course the extent of the political and data-related challenges depends from context to context.

Taking intersecting inequality into account would have implications both for the kinds of things development organisations do (targeting of resources) and also how interventions are implemented (tailoring of services to accommodate different barriers to access). In terms of the former, an analysis conducted by Naila Kabeer for the MDG Achievement Fund provides a number of practical suggestions, including strengthening the resource base of disadvantaged groups (i.e. land reform and land titling programmes); addressing spatial disadvantage through infrastructure interventions that would allow excluded groups better access to markets and services; improving the quality and outreach of basic social services (education, health) on which disadvantaged groups depend and social protection measures to enhance resilience (7).

In terms of tailoring interventions, a better understanding of the situation and needs of people facing intersecting inequality would be important to assessing why and how they fall into gaps - are not reached or not able to access different development interventions. A recent article by Christian Aid staff working with single and Dalit women in India highlights a number of practical challenges, such as the complicated and lengthy bureaucratic procedures required to access entitlements, coupled with the frequent need to pay bribes or a portion of the entitlement to officials (and brokers) (8). As these cases show, simply making social security available is not sufficient to ensuring that most vulnerable can actually access it. As the ODI report notes, while material measures may help to mitigate inequalities arising from place of residence or income group, intersecting inequalities cannot be resolved without addressing the social discrimination underlying inequality in terms of gender, ethnicity, caste and other ascribed identities.

- (1) Kabeer, Naila (2010). *Can the MDGs provide a pathway to social justice? The challenges of intersecting inequalities*. New York: MDG Achievement Fund. Available at: https://www.unnngls.org/IMG/pdf_MDGs_and_Inequalities_Final_Report.pdf
- (2) Ibid.
- (3) Lenhardt, and Emma Samman (2015). *In quest of inclusive progress: exploring intersecting inequalities in human development*. London: ODI. Available at: <http://www.odi.org/publications/10041-intersecting-inequality-women-gender-rural-urban-education-ethnic-ethnicity>
- (4) Carter, Jane (2015). *Targeting Inequality* (blog post). Available at: <http://blog.helvetas.org/targeting-inequality/>
- (5) Van der Hoogte, Liesbeth and Kloos Kingma (2004). "Promoting cultural diversity and the rights of women: the dilemmas of 'intersectionality' for development organisations." *Gender & Development*, 12:1, 47-55. Available at: <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/promoting-cultural-diversity-and-the-rights-of-women-the-dilemmas-of-intersecti-131544>
- (6) Such as wellbeing ranking, see <http://pubs.iied.org/pdfs/G02100.pdf> and <http://blog.helvetas.org/well-being-inequalities-and-crime-a-mozambique-village-perspective/>.
- (7) Same as 1.
- (8) Mangubhai, Jayshree P. and Chiara Caparo (2015). "'Leave no one behind' and the challenge of intersectionality: Christian Aid's experience of working with single and Dalit women in India". *Gender & Development*, 23:2, 261-277. Available at: <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/leave-no-one-behind-and-the-challenge-of-intersectionality-christian-aids-exper-560915>