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# Inclusive development, leaving no one behind, justice and the sustainable development goals

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## Abstract

The focus on inclusive development within the 2030 Agenda highlights the contradiction between an inherent ‘business-as-usual’ approach subject to a few restrictions and a radical reformation of the global system. Inclusive development is elaborated through the idea of leaving no one behind, a human rights and a justice approach. Against this background, this perspective argues that there is need for clarity about the words used and about the implications of the words used. It defines inclusiveness to imply social, ecological and relational elements; that inclusiveness is not incorporation of the ‘other’ but based on recognition and epistemic justice; and that inclusiveness redefines the content of development. It argues that justice needs to be unpacked into issues of access to minimum resources and allocation of the remaining resources, risks and responsibilities. Achieving access in an unequal world will lead to crossing Earth system boundaries and is affected by increasing pollution. Both imply that access cannot be met without changing rules of allocation, with market-based allocation reproducing injustices. Finally, while inclusiveness requires greater partnership and responsibility, this is undermined by the way the 2030 Agenda ignores liability for harm caused to others. Sharpening the understanding of inclusion and justice among key stakeholders and a better articulation of the Earth system justice approach is a way forward.

**Keywords** Climate change · SDGs · Inclusiveness · Leaving no one behind · Full permanent sovereignty

## Abbreviations

GDP Gross Domestic Product  
NGO Non-Governmental Organization  
SDGs Sustainable Development Goals

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## 1 Introduction

Although the 2030 Agenda focuses on sustainable development, it also emphasizes principles of inclusive development (Gupta & Vegelin, 2016), allowing space for achieving social, ecological and relational inclusiveness. These principles are further shaped by its pledge to leave no one behind and to reach the furthest behind first (United Nations, 2015). As such, the conceptualization of inclusive development in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) builds on respecting human rights and achieving social justice which are the groundwork for the 17 goals and 169 targets of the SDGs. While potentially creating conditions for just transformations, we argue that the terminologies and their meanings must be further sharpened in order to ensure this. If the final objective is implementation of goals that achieve the principles of inclusive development and justice, then there must be more certainty that the understanding of those goals actually facilitates this. Implementation based on unclear targets could be as damaging as no target at all, lead to unjust outcomes, and undermine the SDG agenda.

## 2 Defining inclusive development and justice

There is a lot of confusion about the term inclusive development. What exactly is to be included and what does this imply for development? We have previously shown that inclusion refers to three things: social inclusion, ecological inclusion and relational inclusion (Gupta & Vegelin, 2016), and find elements of each of these present in each of the 17 goals. Moreover, we argue that real inclusive development takes all three of these aspects into account, and cannot be pursued in exclusion from each other. In practice, this can be broadly understood as promoting political change which ensures social inclusion within ecological limits from the local to global level. Inclusive development further maintains that social inclusion begins from recognizing the rights of humans to water, food, energy, education, and so on. It likewise argues that the lack of such rights reflects past political decisions and hence the need to change politics and the way such decisions are made.

However, it is important to address if inclusion means the same to all, if nuances about its implementation are taken into account, and the risk of inclusion working in the opposite direction than what is intended. There is little clarity in the SDGs about the exact interpretation. For instance, there is doubt about whether ‘inclusion’ implies ‘incorporation’—making the ‘other’ accept dominant values; and about whether ‘human rights’ are essentially western concepts that promote individualism over collective community values (Bakker, 2007). We argue that without further clarity in the terminology, there is a risk that inclusion is only in name, without considering the quality of such inclusion, and can lead to unjust outcomes, stemming from ‘incorporation’ or ‘misrecognition’ (Yaka, 2019). Perhaps with a better understanding of inclusion and justice, we would not have had such setbacks due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as was documented in a recent SDG update report (United Nations, 2023). We encourage further dialogue to sharpen the meaning of inclusion to ensure that only transformative forms of inclusion guide the way policies are designed and implemented. This process implies a different decision-making structure, building on recognition and epistemic justice (Dutta et al., 2021), and calls for finding common ground among differences.

Finally, the transformative inclusiveness we propose and that matches the apparent spirit of the SDGs implies changing the content of development. If we put the last first based on a mutual discussion of what the last wants, this changes the way we do development. If we link that with the aim of living within ecological limits, this further changes the way we do development. Nonetheless, suggested mechanisms for implementation in the SDGs (present in nearly half the goals) do not go far enough to bring meaningful change to the way we do development. Partnerships and collaboration for growth are more technical than transformative in nature, risking business-as-usual and a focus on merely increasing GDP (Rammelt & Gupta, 2021). We should rather take seriously that inclusiveness is close to justice and that Earth system justice has been operationalized to be, *inter alia*, about meeting minimum access needs, setting Earth system boundaries (Rockström et al., 2009) at multiple levels of governance, and the fair allocation of the remaining resources, risks and responsibilities (Gupta et al., 2023). This will be looked at more closely in the following sections.

### 3 Meeting minimum access needs

In terms of access, just as many of the SDGs list the kinds of minimum needs to which people should have access, SDG 16 specifically calls for “A just, equitable, tolerant, open and socially inclusive world in which the needs of the most vulnerable are met.” (United Nations, 2015). This raises a number of questions related to the meaning of inclusion: for instance, how high should the minimum needs be, how can they be articulated into actual calories of food, or liters of water, and what does this imply for global governance?

In a separate work (Rammelt et al., 2022), a thought experiment was conducted to identify the appropriate minimum levels mentioned above. Two levels were identified—dignity and escape from poverty. These were translated in terms of access to water, food, energy and infrastructure. The experiment concluded that meeting the needs of those below threshold levels in 2018 (pre-Covid) would lead to crossing planetary boundaries. Thus, meeting these needs within the boundaries is not possible without radically changing society. They cannot be met through business-as-usual and a bit of pro-poor policies on the side. This is not because the bottom three billion will consume so much; it is because the top 1–4% consume as much as the bottom 3 billion, if they were to only consume minimum resources (Rammelt et al., 2022).

If the thought experiment had been more generous in the numbers for escaping from poverty and had included access to education and health care, which is clearly implied in leaving no one behind, this would require even more radical transformation of global systems. Expecting those living below \$6 per day to be able to pay for education, health care, housing, etc., is impossible. Thus, systems based on pricing, markets, and cost-recovery—which assumes that business-as-usual can be complemented with some market-based pro-poor policies—will fail. This shows in one way that inclusion, as used in the SDGs, must take these factors into account, and this must be understood by all stakeholders, in order to appropriately inform future changes.

#### **4 Meeting minimum access is affected by environmental harm; leaving no one behind is becoming illusory**

Moreover, the achievement of these access goals is increasingly challenged as a consequence of environmental change. The SDGs also talk about reducing harm to air, water, land, and oceans and about addressing climate change. This is necessary to halt the damage to ecosystems and biodiversity given that we are currently experiencing the sixth worst biodiversity extinction (Ceballos et al., 2017). It is also necessary as climate change (we are already at 1 °C above pre-industrial levels) is now seen as a driver of other environmental changes. But more than that, on an annual basis some 7 million people die from air pollution, 1.3 million die from water pollution, 2.3 billion are affected negatively from land degradation, and millions more suffer from combined air, water and soil pollution (UNEP, 2019). Floods and droughts are killing and displacing people worldwide. The top 10 climate-related disasters in 2022 cost the world billions of dollars (Christian Aid, 2022).

Since most of the people affected by pollution are the homeless, vulnerable or local communities, the literature refers to this as ‘dispossession by contamination’ (Leifsen, 2017). At one time, poor people had access to free clean air, relatively clean water and a stable climate. Today, their air and water are polluted from large-scale industrial and agricultural activities. In New Delhi, rich families are trying to supply and cope with air purifiers in every room and a water purifier in the kitchen. While this could raise the GDP of Delhi in terms of creating new markets for new products, it impoverishes the poor further.

Moreover, debates on the long-term objectives of the climate change regime have often revolved around theoretical questions such as whether ‘dangerous’ climate change is a scientific or political question (Tol & Yohe, 2006). Further, what can we do about the tension between the need to reduce emissions quickly as opposed to what leaving no one behind implies for climate change negotiations? We have argued that 1 °C is more just than 1.5 °C, but even at 1 °C, ecosystems are affected, and people die or are displaced (Rockström et al., in press). So what is the value of the concepts of ‘leaving no one behind’ and inclusion from the perspective of the growing worldwide pollution of the environment?

#### **5 Access needs cannot be met without reallocation**

We argue that pushing for a better understanding of inclusiveness means that the terms for allocation will be clarified to address the urgent needs outlined above. This speaks to the recent UN progress report on the SDGs, which notes that there is not sufficient support at national levels to change patterns of allocation (United Nations, 2023, p. 27/43). The report presents this in relation to normative and institutional deficiencies, and in relation to specific issue areas such as gender (United Nations, 2023, p. 12/43). This increases the urgency of our argument that meeting basic needs requires massive changes to the existing allocation of resources, risks and responsibilities worldwide, which likewise depend on a better understanding of the goals. Access cannot be met without reallocation because (a) historic allocation systems have created the poor and vulnerable; (b) allocation systems based on pricing of scarce resources and markets for buying and selling these resources lead to rising prices making resources unaffordable for the poor; production of ‘certified’ goods are unaffordable for the poor; and wastes are dumped on the poor; (c) allocation systems based on externalizing the environment, as the market is very efficient in doing, end up with further dispossessing the poor through pollution; (d) aid and philanthropic

organizations that aim to address access issues often inadvertently or deliberately keep the unjust allocation system intact—see, for example, how western governments used export credit to continue to support fossil fuel dependency in the global South; and (e) procedural justice which aims at incorporation or equality of opportunity may miss the point: it needs to allow room for recognition and epistemic justice as well as providing greater opportunity to the poor in order to give them a level playing field in the stakeholder arena (Gupta et al., 2020).

## 6 What are the implications for a better understanding of inclusion and justice?

If our argument is to sharpen the terminology used and ensure that meanings are shared, then it becomes important to look at the role that the 2030 Agenda gives to the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development. Partnership requires treating countries as equal and that countries recognize that nature is interconnected and indivisible, but also requires acknowledging that our systems of trade and investment and our discourses on ‘growth’ may be problematic. It also means that all stakeholders from the public to the private sectors together scrutinize the terminology used and promote more discussion and debate on how these play out in multi-level policy-making, strategy-making and in everyday life. Several goals address partnership, but Goal 17 could be revised to address the need to develop shared understandings in a more concrete way.

Promoting real justice and inclusion may also mean reconsidering limitations to the principle of sovereignty. In 1972, and as recently as the 2015 Paris Agreement, countries recognized the need to ensure that, despite their sovereignty, they should not cause harm to other countries. However, the 2030 Agenda reverted back to a different narrative: “We reaffirm that every State has, and shall freely exercise, full permanent sovereignty over all its wealth, natural resources and economic activity.” This reflects how rich countries were able to postpone decision making on the long-term objectives of the climate change convention until 2015, during which time, they continued with their greenhouse gas emission activities, while also encouraging developing countries to do the same through the transfer of inappropriate technologies and funding that would force those countries into fossil fuel addiction. Now that more than 80% of the remaining fossil fuels are in the jurisdiction of the Global South (Bos & Gupta, 2018), possibly we have lost control over the climate change problem through the sovereignty principle. On water, this is a reversal from the principle of equitable and optimal utilization of transboundary watercourses as enshrined in the Watercourses Convention of 1997.

## 7 Conclusion

Will GDP which has been used to classify countries as low-, middle-income and high-income countries continue to dominate national priorities? Will the scarcity of resources be at the background of growing racial and religious conflicts and lead to the on-going shrinking of civic space in countries? If we are serious about not leaving anyone behind, we have to realize that we cannot continue with business-as-usual and a little bit of money for pro-poor policy. We argue thus that while change needs to happen quickly, it makes no sense to push through policy changes, strategies and other actions based on misunderstandings

of the key principles behind them. We know that globalization has led the rich countries and people to expand their share of ecospace through benefitting from virtual water trade, dumping their wastes on other countries, engaging in land and water ‘grabbing,’ investing in extractive industries at the cost of local pollution and exploitation in the poorer nations, and dumping their shares of assets that are doomed to become stranded on poorer countries. We know also know that this drastically reduces the ecospace for use in poorer countries and by poorer people and that the growing accumulation by dispossession and by contamination has created the very vulnerability that putting the last first requires us to address. We need to make better decisions which can happen through a better articulation of our Earth system justice approach and the meanings embedded in it. We need to take a step back before we take the next step forward.

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