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# What is holding back the implementation of the 2030 Agenda?

Insights from the United Nations Committee for Development Policy

## No. 2 – People being pushed behind

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Ahead of the SDG Summit in September, members of the United Nations Committee for Development Policy, a subsidiary body of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), reflect on the factors that are holding back implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and what can be done about them.

**Development is a disruptive process. It changes people's lives, often for the better, though it sometimes bypasses them, leaving them behind. But for too many, the kind of development that prevails today pushes them behind, making them worse off in absolute terms, reducing their standard of living, depriving them of their livelihoods, and in the worst cases, depriving them of their lives.**

Schumpeter recognised the 'creative destruction' of innovation, driving some businesses out of the market and ushering in new, more productive, ones. In Silicon Valley they say, 'Move fast and break things'. But all too often, if development is driven by the interests of powerful and wealthy owners of economic, social and political resources, what gets destroyed and broken is not just businesses and things, but people.

There are examples of people being pushed behind in all parts of the world:

- by land enclosure and appropriation in the name of improving productivity and infrastructure, (and sometimes in the name of mitigating climate change);
- by development-induced climate change;
- by pollution;
- by poorly designed and implemented trade liberalisation;
- by employment in conditions that are harmful to health; and
- by financial crisis and subsequent austerity policies.

There is no specific international body producing data on how many people have been pushed behind. But even one person driven to hunger, despair and or avoidable death, is too many. There is no possible compensation that will make good some kinds of damage (such as premature avoidable death or loss of culturally-valued ancestral lands). Where compensation would be possible (such as for loss of income and employment), it often does not materialise.

If economic policy had to face the test of compliance with human rights treaties, the process of people being pushed behind would be ended. Measures that can contribute include strengthening the land rights of peasants and indigenous people, ending subsidies to for industries that produce harmful emissions, regulations to reduce pollution, subsidies for clean technologies, ending the drive for trade liberalisation and financial liberalisation, strengthening the rights of workers to a safe and healthy workplace, and institution of effective systems of employment creation and social protection. All of these would be given priority if human rights were used as a policy framework; and many organizations campaigning for these kinds of policies are using the human rights system as a resource to strengthen their efforts.

What is needed to prevent anyone being pushed behind is a different kind of development that is not driven by financial calculus and the interests of those who possess economic, social and political power, and takes private property rights as foundational; but one that puts first the dignity and worth of each human being, takes human rights as foundational and seeks to realise everyone's human rights on a basis of substantive equality. The sustainable development goals go some way to address the creation of better forms of development but fall short in many ways. Evaluating policies against human rights obligations can point us in the right direction and can help to build coalitions between different groups across the world who are struggling for social justice. All policies should be subject to the question: is this policy likely push some one behind, and if so, will this loss be mitigated or must it be prevented from happening in the first place?

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