Towards 2030: Grassroots Experiences with Inequalities
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In May and June of 2019, the Grassroots Task Force of the NGO Committee for Social Development distributed a survey to grassroots community organizations to gather observations about inequalities and to assess whether the situation with inequalities has improved since adoption of the United Nations Agenda 2030. Responses were received from 208 individuals in 48 countries, representing all regions and including a mix of High Income, Upper Middle Income, and Lower Income countries.

Inequality in income and wealth was the most frequently observed manifestation, although inequality was revealed as multidimensional and includes disparities in access to health care, employment opportunities, education, housing, access to water and sanitation, and more. Groups that suffer disproportionately from inequality include women, children and youth, elderly persons, migrants and refugees, minorities, people with disabilities, persons living in poverty, indigenous peoples, those who are homeless and those who identify as LGBTQ; women and children are affected most severely. Existing inequalities are magnified when conflict, violence or natural disasters occur, conditions experienced by 20-25% of respondents.

About one-half of respondents said the situation with inequalities has remained about the same as prior to 2015. Of the remaining responses, slightly more reported improvements than worsening, but with significant regional differences. Respondents from all regions observed worsening in income and wealth. Education and health were the areas most frequently rated as improved; jobs and housing led as elements of inequality that have worsened. There were considerable differences by income group and region, with Lower Income country respondents reporting the most improvement in education and health, whereas almost all reports of worsening of housing were from High Income countries.

An important dimension and consequence of inequality is exclusion. Many groups continue to be excluded from participation in economic, political and social life. Over 40% of respondents said participation in economic life had worsened and almost 40% said the same about political participation. In contrast, more respondents said participation in social life had improved.

Numerous programs and policies have been introduced by NGOs and by governments to address inequality. More respondents rated NGO programs as effective than was true for government programs. Effective NGO programs use participatory approaches, meet immediate needs of people, and emphasize women’s equality. Several noted the ability of NGOs to reach those most likely to be left behind by other efforts. Effective government programs are measurable, well-communicated, inclusive, organized and well led. Corruption is a significant barrier to effectiveness of government programs in some locations.

The findings suggest that the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have made an impact in Lower Income countries. Improvements were cited in education and health, both targeted in the MDGs. Changes in government in some High and Upper Middle Income countries have reversed gains made, by cutting funds for income supports, education, and health care and by introducing policies that discriminate against vulnerable groups. There were no clear findings on the impacts of the SDGs, perhaps due to the relatively short amount of time elapsed since adoption. The findings do underscore the continued importance of attention to poverty eradication, climate change, gender equality, social protection and basic services, and especially, to the promise to leave no one behind.
INTRODUCTION

Worsening inequality within and between countries has been widely acknowledged as a problem in the early 21st century. Numerous studies by intergovernmental organizations and NGOs have documented growing income and wealth gaps as a global issue. These include UN DESA’s World Social Report 2020 (Inequality in a Rapidly Changing World), UNDP’s Human Development Report 2019 (Beyond income, beyond averages, beyond today: Inequalities in human development in the 21st century), and periodic reports by Oxfam. Some of the statistics in these studies are quite dramatic and show large wealth disparities and gaps in human well-being, such as sizable country to country differences in maternal mortality.

The UN 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) make a commitment to address inequality in all its forms. Three of the SDGs specifically focus on reducing inequality: Goal 1 on poverty eradication; Goal 5 on gender equality; and Goal 10 demanding reduction in inequality within and between countries. In agreeing to Goal 10, the members of the United Nations acknowledged that inequality is more complex than income and wealth and requires attention over and above poverty eradication. In many ways, all of the SDGs speak to inequalities. The Goals that address health care, education, water, employment, decent housing, and more all deal with issues of access to necessities that are not equitably distributed. Inequality is increasingly appreciated as a multidimensional reality. Our survey was designed to elicit reports from the grassroots about the dimensions of inequality as locally experienced.

Although inequality has been given significant attention, few if any of the reports published to date address how inequality is experienced at the very grassroots level. How do people on the ground experience inequality? What inequalities do they see and who suffers most from these? Have people at the grassroots seen improvements in their lives and communities since 2015 when the SDGs were launched? Without more data from the grassroots, it will be difficult to measure progress on Goal 10. The Grassroots Task Force of the NGO Committee for Social Development explored these questions in a 2019 survey in an attempt to bring the voices of the marginalized into UN deliberations. This report summarizes the findings of the NGO survey. It must be noted that the survey was conducted in May-June of 2019. It therefore predates the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and should be viewed as a picture of inequalities at the grassroots before the impact of Covid-19.

METHODOLOGY

The survey on inequality was designed and carried out by the Grassroots Task Force of the NGO Committee for Social Development. The survey instrument contained questions that could be answered with a check (yes/no questions) followed by more open-ended questions asking for details. Respondents were free to skip questions they were unable to answer. The numbers of non-respondents are indicated in the analysis where relevant.
The instrument and the accompanying cover letter were prepared in English and translated into Arabic, French, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish. The surveys were distributed electronically with a link to the form in Survey Monkey to allow completing online for those with adequate internet access and to facilitate analysis. The questionnaire was also included as an attachment in Word that could be downloaded and filled out and then returned by email. This option was included to make it more accessible for those without sufficient internet access and to permit local staff to engage their participants in answering the survey. The majority of respondents (71%) used the Survey Monkey option.

Conducting global research that reaches people at the grassroots is not easy. It is not possible to implement a design that approaches random sampling. The results are not intended to be generalizable to all communities and NGOs. However, the effort was successful in reaching projects at the local community level, as intended. The survey was distributed primarily through international NGOs that are affiliated with the Committee for Social Development, members of the NGO Major Group and other NGOs that could be reached. These NGOs then distributed the survey to their projects at local levels in diverse countries in late spring 2019.

Analysis of results was a multi-stage process. Responses were entered into an Excel file. Those from closed-ended questions could be easily counted. More open-ended responses had to be sorted by theme and coded before counting. Many respondents included comments that gave richness to the data. These comments were recorded and are included selectively in this report. The total responses are reported for each question. In addition, the report will give a break-down of responses by geographic region, country income group, and whether the respondent is from a city, a town or a rural area. These three dimensions reveal differences in observed inequalities. We used the World Bank classifications of country income groups. Low Income countries are those with a Gross National Income (GNI) per capita of $1,025 or less; Lower Middle Income countries have a GNI per capita between $1,026 and $3,995; Upper Middle Income economies are those with a GNI per capita between $3,996 and $12,375; and High Income countries have a GNI per capita of $12,376 or more. In most of our statistics, due to response size, we will report Low and Lower Middle Income countries as a single group labeled Lower Income. We received 10 responses from Low Income Countries and 69 from Lower Middle Income Countries; they are reported as a single group of countries with a GNI per capita of less than $3995.

**Respondents**

There were 208 respondents to our survey from 48 countries. Of these responses 56 were from Asia (38 from India, 8 from Pakistan, and the rest from Cambodia, Indonesia, Iraq, Myanmar, Nepal, the Philippines and Singapore); 45 from Latin America (26 from Brazil and the rest from Belize, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela); 43 from Europe (16 from Italy, 12 from Spain, 6 from the United Kingdom and the rest from Andorra, Germany, Ireland, Kosovo and Switzerland); 31 from North America (24 from the USA, 7 from Canada); 28 from Africa (Benin, Cameroon, Egypt, Gabon, Ghana, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, Nigeria, South Africa, Togo, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe) and 5 from Oceania (Australia, Fiji, Kiribati and Samoa).
Of the responses, 37.5% were from High Income countries, 24.5% from Upper Middle Income countries, and 38.0% from Lower Income countries. The majority of respondents (63.2%) were self-identified as coming from cities, 19.6% from towns and 15.3% from rural areas.

Women comprise 69.9% (144) of respondents, and men 30.1% (62). A sizeable group (36.5%) self-identified as director, program coordinator, president or a similar role, suggesting positions of some authority within their organization. Many (13%) were engaged in education: professor, teacher or student. A slightly smaller group (10.6%) were social workers or psychologists, while 29.8% had a variety of roles and 10.1% did not indicate their position. It was clear that all were engaged with grassroots groups, many working directly with them. Thus, the responses, while not all from grassroots individuals, do reflect the reality on the ground in the many countries represented.

Of the 208 respondents, most gave information about their organization. While some areas of concern and work were not country or culture-specific (adult literacy, care of the homeless, women’s empowerment, work with immigrants and refugees), others were country-specific (self-help groups for women in India; socio-pedagogical programs to strengthen a sense of identity for street children in Brazil). Almost all the organizations work with women (88.6%), and more than half with children (74.1%), or youth (70.6%). About half (48.5%) work with the elderly and a small number (18.4%) with the LGBTQ community. Thus, virtually all population groups are represented in our survey.
MANY FACES OF INEQUALITY: INEQUALITIES OBSERVED IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES

In identifying the experiences of inequality observed in their local communities, the respondents illustrate the multidimensional “face” of inequality which includes, but goes far beyond, the traditional focus on income and wealth. The aspects identified closely highlight the overlapping effects of intersecting inequalities. The chart below illustrates the main expressions of inequality identified by respondents by income classification of their country.

Differentials in income and wealth were seen as the primary and most obvious expression of inequality in most regions of the world with 65% of respondents highlighting economic factors. Respondents from rural communities were slightly more likely to highlight income and wealth disparities than those from urban settings.

Availability of, and access to quality health care was seen as a major expression of inequality by nearly half of all respondents. The difference between rural and urban communities was clear, with nearly 60% of rural respondents highlighting health inequalities compared to 40% of urban dwellers. Reasons include long distances to clinics, absence of medicines and specialized personnel, and use of cheap treatment alternatives because of poverty. One respondent from Pakistan noted that “There are quacks in practice who provide cheap but incorrect prescriptions to those who cannot afford treatment at some good private clinic or with medical specialists”.

Disparities in employment opportunities and working conditions were seen to characterize inequality in the local communities of one third of the respondents. Respondents from Europe spoke of unequal job markets and poor working conditions, citing long hours, lack of contracts and employment benefits for specific job categories (domestic workers, farm laborers and the hospitality industry). Respondents from North America highlighted race and immigration status as factors leading to differential job and life opportunities. “Racial inequality is the basis for many other inequalities such as transportation to doctors and jobs, substandard public education, job opportunities” (USA).
Numerous people highlighted differences in educational opportunities, the quantity and quality seen as both the cause and effect of income and job disparities. A respondent from Zambia noted “The quality of education is poor throughout the district. Salaried workers can afford to send their children elsewhere. The majority cannot.”

The lack of affordable housing was cited by a number of respondents, all but 4 of whom were from urban settings, mostly in the global north. This was associated with street homelessness and reliance on shelters in higher income urban centers. A respondent from Spain said “In this city there are many thousands of people who live in shelters of Religious Communities or Caritas, - but thousands live in the street”.

The lack of potable water and sanitation was linked to urban areas of Lower Income countries in Africa and Asia, while in rural areas water access problems were associated with poor rainfall and reduced flow in rivers and streams.

Other dimensions of inequality included differences in social service provision, the availability and reliability of local transport services, and access to justice and security at the neighborhood level.

In identifying the multidimensional aspects of inequality, respondents highlighted groups experiencing inequality in opportunity because of the interacting influences of gender, race, ethnic identity and/or immigration status, pointing to the importance of intersectionality.

**GROUPS AFFECTED BY INEQUALITIES**

Women were by far the largest group noted as experiencing adverse effects of inequalities, followed by children, youth, and elderly persons, as indicated by the chart at left.

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**Case Study 1**  
**Multidimensional Inequalities- Lukulu, Zambia**

“Musole” is a 14 year old girl suffering from severe malnutrition and TB. Musole weighs only 20 kgs and lives with her old grandmother in a mud thatch house constructed over 10 years ago before her father died in 2009. The roof is badly broken and the rain pours in during the wet season. Her biological mother abandoned the child and they have no source of income or food apart from the little the grandmother grows and begs from the local community.

It is a very traditional and patriarchal society, and girls and women receive less education, and thus have less opportunity to provide for themselves. A social welfare department exists but has few resources. This woman has been to Social Welfare many times and has been turned away empty handed. Social Cash Transfer has been introduced for the most vulnerable in the society. Yet this woman has been unable to access it. It seems that communities have local coordinators who decide who receive and in many cases these coordinators are corrupt or politically aligned. Therefore those who should receive frequently miss out.
Women were identified as suffering from inequality because of patriarchal systems. Race was the basis for many inequalities including poor quality services and low paying jobs. Minority populations, such as Dalit communities in India, face multiple barriers to accessing services. Migrants, refugees, and undocumented people were seen to be excluded from access to social services, reported mostly in the advanced economies of North America and Europe.

Who Suffers Most?

Women, children, and youth were the groups identified as those suffering most from inequalities with elderly persons, migrants, and refugees also noted, though mentioned at a lower frequency. In addition to these groups, minorities, persons with disabilities, indigenous, homeless, persons in poverty, trafficked persons, LGBTQ, and others were also mentioned. The table highlights the number of times these groups were identified as most affected by inequalities, with numerous respondents naming more than one group.

Why Do They Suffer?

Common reasons for the suffering of women and children include vulnerability and voicelessness. One respondent noted that women, children, and elderly are in a position of vulnerability and helplessness at all levels, lacking resources, income, food, and services. For these groups, vulnerability may lead to exclusion and violence. Unsurprisingly, domestic violence contributes to the suffering of women and children.

For women, patriarchy, machismo, culture, and tradition are root causes of suffering and inequality, often resulting in lack of decision-making within the home and few opportunities outside the home. Lack of access to (or not being allowed to have) bank accounts, and lack of control over their bodies are also reasons women suffer. Women also bear primary responsibility for children and carry the burden of other duties, a respondent observed.
In the words of a Pakistani respondent, women “continue to struggle to keep their families fed, clothed, educated, to pay the rent, the bills. They and their husbands are working in very low paid jobs and often the husbands have abandoned the family or are on drugs.” In an area of Uganda which had experienced insurgency “most women lost their husbands during this war, thus rendering them most vulnerable.”

Children can suffer due to poor parenting skills, abuse and neglect. “When parents’ basic needs are not met, children suffer,” commented a respondent from the United States. Also, children cannot change their position, may face sexual issues or be subject to child labor.

Among the specific reasons why youth suffer are, unemployment, lack of mental health services, family dysfunction, physical, sexual and/or emotional abuse, and vulnerability to drug traffickers. The connection between youth and drugs was sobering: “Because of drugs and violence many do not reach adulthood,” said a Brazilian respondent. On a different note, one respondent from India said parents were afraid to send their girls to school out of fear. Migrant youth face yet more challenges, such as illiteracy, prejudice, social vulnerability, and lack of a track to citizenship. Youth escaping rural poverty face challenges in adjusting to city living.

Elderly or older persons, suffer from poor public transportation, poor housing, loneliness, insufficient income, lack of family care or access to services, and poverty. They are often excluded, unnoticed, voiceless, and unable to take part in common social activities. It was further observed that social protection is nonexistent for some, and for elderly persons who receive them they may not be timely, or are insufficient to cover expenses. Some have added responsibilities as well, such as “... grandmothers must take care of the grandchildren so that the mother can go out to get the bread of each day.” (Peru)

Case Study 2
Inequalities Experienced by Children and Youth Surviving on the Streets – Kumasi, Ghana

“In Northern Ghana, it is customary to give a girl-child to an aunt to be raised. Some aunts turn these girls into household helpers, abuse and maltreat them. Many of these girls escape this exploitation and slavery by migrating to Kumasi to work for their survival. However, when the children get to Kumasi, they soon realize that they have no qualifications or job skills for dignified jobs. They end up carrying loads as “head porters” or engage in commercial sex, or wash plates for food vendors, or commit armed robbery for a living. Some end up as drug addicts, while others suffer all sorts of abuses from gangsters they meet on the street. Another reason many young girls go to the street is to flee forced or early marriages, which is another way their fathers trade on their girl-child. Boys are also among the children on the street. A young boy dropped out of school when his poor widowed mother could no longer provide for his school needs. In order to survive, he came to the street, hoping to engage in petty trade to support his daily needs as well as his family. On the streets, he had no place to sleep and nothing to eat. The struggles he encountered left him depressed and emotionally unstable.” (He is now making progress).
Migrants and refugees often suffer exclusion and discrimination rooted in prejudice and racism. They also experience lack of employment, access to education and services, all of which are exacerbated when they are constantly on the move. When they are employed they tend to be overworked and underpaid, and voiceless in these situations. Difficulty in obtaining documentation, as well as language issues, can further impede access to jobs and services.

Minorities, often looked down upon, may be illiterate and lack property. They lack opportunities, have no voice, experience caste and/or religious discrimination, and face ideological, social, and cultural barriers. A US respondent commented, "Systemic attitudes and policies create many obstacles to opportunities (for minorities)."

Persons with disabilities were often named with other groups, suffering due to lack of income, lack of government support, or "because of . . . exclusion, discrimination, lack of support from the community." (Zambia)

**HAS THE SITUATION IMPROVED SINCE 2015?**

An important purpose of the survey was to determine whether people at the grassroots assess any change in the presence of inequalities since the adoption of the SDGs in 2015. More than half of those who responded (52.8%) said that inequalities had remained about the same as before the adoption of the UN 2030 Agenda. Just over a quarter (26.1%) noted that there have been improvements in the situation since 2015, whereas 21.1% said inequalities have gotten worse. This indicates that slightly more people serving grassroots communities see progress in combatting inequalities than those who see a worse situation. Most, however, believe that conditions are largely the same as pre-2015.
Almost half (47.2%) of the respondents from Asia stated that there were fewer inequalities, compared to just under 7% of those from North America. More respondents from South America, Europe and North America said inequalities had grown rather than lessened since 2015, including almost one-third (32%) of South Americans.

An important finding is that those working at the grassroots in Lower Income countries see more improvement than those in High or Upper Middle Income countries. The numbers are quite telling: almost 40% of respondents from Lower Income countries reported that the situation of those experiencing inequalities had improved, while only 13.7% of those in High Income countries saw improvement. The percentages reporting that conditions had stayed the same were fairly similar across all income groups, but only 10.5% from Lower Income countries noted that inequalities had worsened.

There were also differences between the responses from rural areas and urban settings. Only 9.4% of respondents from rural areas reported that inequalities had gotten worse, compared to 25.4% of those coming from urban settings. In assessing overall conditions, those working in cities were least likely to see a positive change.

**Aspects That Improved or Worsened Since 2015**

With regard to the areas of life that have improved or worsened for the most disadvantaged, respondents highlighted inequalities in several different sectors. This gives a more complete picture of the complexities of inequalities because it allowed respondents to identify some areas that had improved and others that worsened. A total of 92 respondents listed areas that had improved and 95 listed areas that had worsened, with some noting both.

One respondent noted, “Because the economy has improved here again there is more opportunity to find work. The cost of housing is a major problem for those who are working as they cannot save enough for mortgages.” (Ireland) Another one from Australia said that “Things are pretty much the same, except for housing which is worse.”

Education (39 responses) and health (26 responses) were the most frequently identified areas that had improved, followed by gender equality.
A respondent from India noted, “The areas of good health and wellbeing have improved among the women and children. School dropouts have been reduced and the children are regular to school. Malnourished children’s health has improved.”

Improvement in gender equality was seen in Africa: “Number of girls continuing to completion of secondary schools, women married without FGM, general awareness that FGM is harmful to women, family and society have all improved”. (Kenya)

In some countries, health (20 respondents) was one of the leading areas that had worsened since 2015, along with income/wealth (24 respondents), housing (19), food (19), discrimination and prejudice (14).

Differences were noted according to country income level. On a positive note, the Lower Income countries reported more improvement than High or Upper Middle Income countries; 67% of those highlighting improvements in education were from Lower Income countries, as were 65% of those reporting improved health. It is also important to note that only 3 respondents from Lower Income countries said that education had worsened and only 4 reported declines in health care. Five out of six responses noting improvements in water and sanitation came from Lower Income countries, not surprising given the areas where potable water and appropriate sanitation are likely to be more generally unavailable.

Proportionately more rural respondents (53.1% / 17 of 32) listed areas of improvement than worsening, whereas the opposite was true for city respondents - (42% / 55 of 131) reporting improvements. Slightly over half the city respondents (66 / 50.4%) identified areas that had worsened compared to 11 (34.4%) of rural respondents. Percentages for responses from those working in towns fell in between, with 44.2% identifying improved areas and 41.9% worsened.

The majority of respondents identifying improved education and health care were from Asia, with 22 respondents from Asia saying that education had improved and only one indicating it had worsened. Regarding health, 15 noted improvement and one worsening. Those from North America and Latin America accounted for 15 of the 20 who said health care had worsened. Increased inequalities in access to housing were observed most frequently in Europe and North America (15 out of 19 responses). Respondents from every region reported that the gaps in income had grown and all except Oceania reported increased inequalities in employment. More from Europe and Latin America identified a worsening job situation. A total of 14 respondents said that discrimination and prejudice had increased. North America led with 6 responses, followed by 3 each from Europe and Asia.

Differences can be seen in responses from the same country as is evident from two respondents from Brazil: “Social assistance, with social programs, has helped in the moving up and empowerment of disadvantaged persons. . . . Creation of food banks has helped to reduce hunger.” (Brazil) “In Brazil, due to the change in government, especially since 2016, the mechanisms for income distribution, poverty eradication, guarantee of public access to education and healthcare . . . have been disrupted or dismantled. . . [and] programs to give subsidies to small farmers were eliminated and the health system for the indigenous has been threatened.” (Brazil)
The second comment illustrates how easily improvements in addressing inequality can be reversed. Also citing a change in government, a respondent from Italy said: “There has been a lessening of services for the family, a cut in resources for the schools, more evictions, especially due to innocent defaults that have, in these years, worsened the situation of families, especially those with young children.”

**Provision of and Access to Services**

Improvement in access to and quality of services is one of the key indicators of human development and differential access is associated with growing inequality, as noted in reference to seven specific areas or services, and the perceived changes over the years since 2015.

While 50% of the respondents said that overall, the level of inequality had remained the same since 2015, when asked about provision of and access to particular services, they highlighted various areas of inequalities lessening or worsening. This revealed nuanced insights into the factors determining levels of inequality. Overall, most improvements regarding services were recognized in the areas of maternal health, child care and education whereas stagnant or worsening income levels received the most negative assessment regarding areas of inequality. (See chart below)

Improvement in access to services varied greatly by income level of the country as well as by type of service. In general, improvements were more frequently noted by Lower Income countries in relation to specific services that had been covered by the Millennium Development Goals, including education, child care and maternal health, rather than in economic and environmental areas.

On the other hand, more than 40% of those who responded said that income levels and services relating to housing or jobs had worsened since 2015, particularly in upper income countries. Some interesting country-specific differences can be seen in the assessment of these changes.

In the case of India, a Lower Income country, improved investment in health care was associated with favorable changes in government policy, such as the introduction of universal health care. “Previously, people were not given medicine. The tests were not carried out in the government hospitals but now all the medicines are available and tests are done free of cost.” Concrete improvements in energy access were also identified. However, inequality in access to jobs, social services and opportunities were highlighted. Where good programs existed, they did not reach all groups, thereby heightening inequality.
Positive changes identified by respondents from Zambia, a Lower Income country, highlighted the introduction of free primary health care. However, the significance of this improvement was offset by limited access to drugs and health care services.

“Access to health care has improved in that primary health care is free but it is not near enough to the community in most cases. People have to walk long distances to access it.”

In several Lower Income countries it was noted that more children were now attending secondary school, but there was a general lack of educational resources such as textbooks. Electricity had improved in town centers, but was neither accessible nor affordable in rural villages. These indicate widening inequality.

Comments from upper income countries highlighted the interlinkages between worsening employment opportunities, inadequate income and lack of low income housing for those in poverty.

In the case of Spain, respondents made a link between high rents, mortgages and rising unemployment linked to the economic crisis. It seems that social protections are inadequate to address housing needs.

“... the problem of mortgages is not solved. Banks have taken over people’s houses... There are too many families living as squatters because they cannot pay rent because of the lack of stable work.”

More positively, with the influx of refugees, health services had been opened up to the undocumented.

Respondents from the United States highlighted the fact that programs geared to addressing inequality had been eliminated and salaries do not cover basic needs. The high cost of housing in urban areas led to families doubling / quadrupling in housing. Rural areas were generally underserviced and few services were available for the undocumented. In the words of one respondent:
“People living in this rural area face many challenges such as a deteriorating school system, un-repaired roads and bridges, natural disasters, high incidence of crime, high rates of diabetes, obesity and unemployment, limited income. 43% of the population of Holmes County [Ohio] live below the poverty level.” (USA)

In the case of Brazil, an Upper Middle Income country, many respondents noted some positive steps taken in education, child care and housing provision, but also reported recent cut backs of some of the helpful programs introduced 10 years earlier.

“With the change of government many rights were taken away relating to retirement, access to health; programs for pregnant women; free travel for the elderly etc. . . . Femicide has increased as well as male chauvinism and hate speech.” (Brazil) Some improvement in water access was recognized but it was noted that rainwater was being affected by the use of pesticides by agribusiness.

In Pakistan, a Lower Income country, good schemes had been introduced by the government but were limited in their outreach, with service provision generally lacking in rural areas. Even in urban settings, a successful housing scheme had been carried out, but in only three cities.

“Scarcity of clean drinking water is another major issue. People have to travel long distances to fetch a bucket of clean drinking water, especially in Sindh and Balochistan”.

PROGRAMS AND POLICIES TO REDUCE INEQUALITY AND THEIR EFFECTIVENESS

Many respondents gave information about programs aimed at reducing inequality, distinguishing those put in place by NGOs or governments, and before or after 2015, along with their perceived effectiveness. A total of 81 respondents reported NGO programs started prior to 2015 and 66 identified government programs. Respondents reported fewer programs started after 2015: 56 NGO-sponsored programs and 53 government programs.

Types of Programs

NGO programs implemented prior to 2015 were extremely varied, including education, houses for the poor, income generation for women, an anti-trafficking effort, legal awareness, food banks, projects on AIDS, home vegetable gardens, and empowerment of domestic workers. Not surprisingly, government programs were more likely to involve services or provision of financial assistance. Among those mentioned were free high school, student financial aid, better access to primary health care, and new gender labor equality regulations. Cash transfer programs, such as the bolsa familia of Brazil, were cited by a number of respondents. Other programs mentioned were improved rights for the physically challenged, reforestation, and plans of action on poverty and exclusion.
Concerning programs adopted after 2015, six NGOs specifically mentioned the SDGs as their program focus. Other programs initiated by NGOs included children’s education, women’s empowerment projects, work on violence against women, adult literacy, Kurdish liberation, financial literacy, and a project to stop child marriage. Recent government programs identified dealt with girls’ education, women’s development, and broader poverty eradication efforts. In keeping with powers of government, programs included an increase in the minimum wage, improvements to the tax code, infrastructure repairs, improved pensions, and a modern clean energy project.

Overall, more respondents rated programs sponsored by NGOs as effective. For those adopted prior to 2015, 88.9% said that the NGO programs they named were effective as compared to 57.6% for government programs. For programs implemented since 2015, the response was similar: 87.5% rated NGO programs as effective in reducing inequalities with only 49.3% saying this of government-initiated programs.

**Post-2015 Program Effectiveness and Per-Capita GNI**

Perceived program effectiveness for programs adopted after 2015 was considered by countries’ per-Capita GNI. Of the 24 respondents from Lower Income states who reported new NGO programs aimed at reducing inequality, 22 (91.7%) were reported to be effective and only 2 (8.3%) ineffective. For government programs, 50% were judged effective and 50% ineffective. The responses from High Income countries were similar; 100% rated the NGO programs as effective, whereas 44.4% rated government programs effective. Responses from Upper Middle Income countries were more balanced: 63.6% rated NGO programs as effective and 56.9% rated government programs effective in reducing inequality.

**Introduction and Effectiveness of Laws and Policies Post-2015**

In addition to programs, 69 respondents reported that new laws or policies to address inequality have been adopted since 2015. Of these, 50 (75.8%) said that the laws/policies have been effective; 16 (24.2%) indicated that they were ineffective. One noted that the law has not yet been implemented, and two did not respond to this. The largest number of respondents reporting new policies were from cities (40 or 58%); 19 were from towns (27.5%) and 10 from rural areas (14.5%). As a percentage of the total respondents from each type of community, 44.2% of respondents from towns reported awareness of new laws or policies. The percentages for city and rural respondents was similar—30.5% and 31.3%, respectively. The percentages rating policies as effective was also very similar across the three community groups, ranging from 70% for rural respondents to 78.9% for respondents from towns. Therefore, we can conclude that one third of survey respondents are aware of post-2015 policies that address inequality and three-quarters of these policies are considered effective.
A range of different policies and/or laws were identified: laws that granted marriage equality for lesbians and gays (Australia), a white paper on social inclusion (Kosovo), the Disability Act of 2016 in the United Kingdom that expanded accessibility, a law making gender violence punishable by prison (Zambia), the Family Law Act 2017 that expanded women’s rights (Fiji), a policy on educational inclusion (Colombia), and other efforts across diverse countries to expand health insurance, childcare entitlements, a minimum wage, early childhood education, and food for those in need. One respondent said there was a new emphasis on the SDGs on homelessness and hunger, and several mentioned anti-corruption acts.

What Makes a Program or Policy Effective?

The survey clearly indicates that respondents believe that NGO-sponsored programs have been more effective in reducing inequality. This may indicate some response bias, as the survey was distributed among NGOs. However, it may also relate to factors that make programs effective, such as a participatory approach, more common among NGO programs.

Government Programs

Overall, respondents described effective government policies or programs as ones that are measurable (UK), well communicated (Kenya), and awareness-raising (India, Nigeria, and UK). A respondent from India said government programs are effective if they have “effective leadership, coordination, monitoring and assessment” (India). Effective government policies, particularly in South Asia, were consistently noted to be effective when they were inclusive of women. “Women and children are becoming aware of their rights. Many children and women’s cases are taken into consideration.” (India). Government programs often provide “real benefits”: more girls in school, more health care, ramps for people with disabilities, new opportunities for the poor to attend university, and cash transfers. As with NGO programs, government programs can gain in effectiveness if they engage beneficiaries. A program in Brazil was described as effective “because it is part of public policies established in the country with social participation.”

More women report gender violence now and are supported by law (Zambia). Better enforcement of children’s rights was also acknowledged by some. Another policy “allows women to now have more clout in their life. When a husband leaves them, they can file for support and especially maintenance from the partner” (Fiji).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>Policies Introduced</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Judged Effective</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>City (131)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>30.5%</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>70.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Town (43)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>44.2%</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>78.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural (32)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>31.3%</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>70.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (206)</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>33.5%</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>72.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
While many reasons were advanced for the ineffectiveness of government programs, corruption was identified as a major reason by respondents from diverse countries, including India, Belize, South Africa, Zambia, the UK, and the US. “A government program, however good it is, fails to percolate to the grassroot level due to a few corrupt officials and lack of will among the authorities.” Too much bureaucracy, rigid rules, and lack of information also limit the capacity of government programs to serve those in need. Programs may be underfunded, poorly implemented or provide limited coverage: there is “difficulty in getting access to very needy people in rural villages.” (Zambia). In other cases, both lack of sensitivity to needs and bureaucratic rules limit effectiveness: “It does not consider family relationships and social ties. It (the program) builds temporary shacks and requires documents that nobody has because they lost their houses with everything inside.” (Brazil).

**NGO Programs**

Respondents described effective NGO programs as awareness raising (Pakistan, India, US) and collaborative (Canada). The theme of effective programs incorporating women and meeting their needs continued, “The women and men are seen equally and the women are respected. The women take part in decisions for their village development. Employment opportunities are the same and wages are the same for both men and women. The women are very confident and able to raise their voices in local self-government to demand their rights.” (India). Effective programs also “respond to the immediate needs of people” (Ireland) and some help people with essentials. NGO programs credit success to the use of participatory approaches, involving local communities, including “grassroots, bottom-up councils.”

In keeping with the UN 2030 Agenda’s promise to leave no one behind, several respondents credited NGO programs’ ability to reach those most in need as part of their effectiveness: “These programs all are located and reach the most needy members of the community.” (United States) “These programs are effective because they target the grassroots level, the very marginalized segments of society.” (Pakistan)

Finally, many mentioned the commitment of staff and volunteers.

The most frequent reason given for why NGO programs are ineffective was lack of or inadequate funding (Canada, India), or lack of an appropriate structure. Several others said that people sometimes don’t have the necessary documents to access programs or are not able to meet program requirements. Limitations of scale—the inability to reach large numbers—was also mentioned.

**PARTICIPATION IN ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND SOCIAL LIFE**

Since equality includes persons’ participation in different areas of life, the survey also addressed the question of people’s ability to participate in Economic, Political and/or Social Life.
Participation in Economic Life

Interestingly, participation in economic life has worsened in High and Upper Middle Income countries according to approximately 50% of the respondents from those countries, with less than 20% noting an improvement. For the respondents from Lower Income countries, a significant number (42.6%) considered participation in economic life to have remained the same.

Respondents from Upper Middle Income countries noted the lack of stable jobs as one cause, with many of the employed not earning a living wage and agricultural workers unable to sell their products at prices that are just. In the words of one respondent from Brazil: “The economic crisis ... reduced the number of stable jobs, led to precarious work conditions, income generation and family support.”

Some of the respondents in High Income countries stressed that the lack of support for NGOs, the stagnation of wages, financial insecurity and lack of access to bank loans were among the factors that worsened people’s ability to participate in economic life.

While one person from Pakistan, a Lower Income country, said “In my country inflation has increased so much that ordinary people find life difficult,” a Cambodian respondent said “the economy improves every year.”

Participation in Social Life

Whatever the country income level, most respondents said that the ability to participate in social life has remained the same, though a significant number of those from Lower Income countries expressed that participation has improved. A quite different situation was noted by those from Upper Middle Income countries where more considered the ability to participate in social life to have gotten worse than to have improved.

The respondents that identified an improvement commented that, generally, improved education and awareness are among the factors that have led to more participation in social life.

This was evident in both Asia and Africa. In the words of one respondent from India: “Socially the people have become more conscious.” A voice from Zambia declared that “awareness programs have helped people know their rights.”
The respondents from Upper Middle Income countries noted that the weakening of labor unions and social movements, lack of access to education on all levels, as well as apathy in engagement, were among the important factors that worsened people’s ability to participate in social life.

While numerous respondents from Upper Middle Income countries declared that participation in social life has gotten worse or remained the same, a few comments spoke of an improvement. One person from Brazil noted that there is a growing “movement of reorganization and resistance, [with] groups reorganizing themselves.”

Some comments from the respondents of High Income countries reflected improved participation, while others reflected worsened engagement. On the positive side, low-income families are receiving medical and education aid and more social programs are available with Civil Society Organizations helping the undocumented. Less ability to participate is found for several reasons, including the fact that “millions of undocumented remain in the shadows.”(USA) In Italy one person noted that, due to a poorer quality of education “schooling no longer acts to lift children to a living condition above that of their parents.

**Participation in Political Life**

Interestingly, participation in political life has gotten worse, according to almost half of the respondents (48.5%) from Upper Middle Income countries, while 45.2% of respondents from High Income countries considered participation in political life to have remained the same.

Several comments from Lower Income countries indicated that participation in political life has improved since more persons are being educated about and involved in the political process. In the words of one respondent from Cambodia: “More people are aware of political issues and participate more.” This is clearly not true across the board as noted by the few who spoke of corruption in government.

The comments from respondents coming from the Upper Middle Income countries were very divergent, with some recognizing greater participation in the political process at the local level, while others noting apathy to the political process and saying that persons entered politics simply for the money. Several also pointed out the existence of rampant corruption, as well as the fact that the government controlled all political discourse.

Even though 45.2% of respondents from High Income countries stated that participation in political life remained the same, most of the comments reflected a worsening reality due to limited participation, corruption and disillusionment with inefficient politicians.
**Who is Excluded?**

The inability to participate in economic, political or social life indicates that some persons are excluded, a fact noted by almost four-fifths (79.5%) of the 146 that responded to this question, from countries of all income levels. Interestingly, those from Lower Income countries were slightly less likely to point to exclusions than those from High or Upper Middle Income countries. Of the 57 respondents from Lower Income countries, 70.2% noted exclusions, while a similar response was given by 84.2% of the 38 respondents from Upper Middle Income and 86.5% of the 52 High Income country respondents. There was greater variation in the perception of exclusions depending on the level of urbanization, with the highest percentage coming from cities – 82.2% (74 of 90 respondents). Although the sample size of participants from a rural setting was small (22), of these 77.3% (17 of 22) noted exclusions with a similar percentage (72.7% or 24 of 33) of respondents from towns.

The list of those being excluded was very wide-ranging. However among the groups most mentioned were those living in poverty, migrants and asylum seekers, the undocumented, and indigenous peoples. Reference to migrants, asylum seekers and the undocumented came mostly from High Income countries, though a few responses from Upper Middle and Lower Income countries also pointed to these groups. Women, youth and the elderly were mentioned as excluded groups by respondents from all income levels, which was also true regarding persons living in poverty.

It is clear from the responses that persons are excluded from economic, social and political life in countries across the income divide and whether they live in rural, town or urban settings.

**IMPACT OF CONFLICT, VIOLENCE AND DISASTERS ON INEQUALITY**

Conflict, violence and natural disasters often worsen inequalities, with those suffering most harm and loss being usually the most vulnerable groups in the affected area. Eighty-seven respondents (41.8%) said their areas had experienced conflict, political violence and/or a natural disaster since 2015.

Respondents from Lower Income countries reported the most conflict, political violence, and natural disasters. However it is important to note that the number of respondents reporting such phenomena in Upper Middle and High Income countries was also significant.
Forty-six respondents (22.1%) reported that conflict had occurred, while 45 (21.6%) said that political violence had taken place, with some indicating they had been subject to both. A small number of respondents (8) reported that their areas had experienced all three crises since 2015: UK, India, Peru, Pakistan (2), Brazil, Cameroon and Madagascar.

Of the 208 respondents, 58 (27.9%) reported that a natural disaster had struck their area since 2015. Lower Income countries were particularly affected, with 36.7% of respondents reporting a natural disaster in their area as compared to only 15.4% of those from High Income countries.

The most common type of disaster reported was flooding due to extreme weather events such as storms, cyclones, hurricanes (44%). The Wordle gives an impression of the variety of disasters experienced and their frequency among our sample.

Who is Most Affected or Disadvantaged?

In terms of conflict and political violence, the groups most affected are mostly the same as those who suffer from inequalities in general: people living in poverty, women and children, immigrants, minorities and indigenous peoples.

It was interesting to observe that for those who noted their area experiences only conflict, persons living in poverty were named as most affected, followed by youth, women and children.

But for those respondents reporting their areas experience only political violence, women and children topped the list of those most affected, followed by persons experiencing poverty, minorities and others. In those areas experiencing both conflict and political violence, persons experiencing poverty again were most mentioned, followed by women and children, and indigenous persons. One respondent from Pakistan noted everyone can be affected: “There have been tragic bombings, where whoever is present is killed or injured.”

In terms of natural disasters, those whose localities had been impacted by climate-related disasters since 2015 stated that poverty and income inequality were associated with vulnerability to extreme weather events, which often damaged or destroyed housing, especially true in Lower Income countries, but also among lower income groups in Higher Income countries.
Specific populations of people whose housing and livelihood had been most negatively affected by extreme weather events include those in precarious housing, the homeless or landless, persons in areas subject to landslides or flooding and indigenous communities and “quilombolos” (in Brazil).

Why They Are Affected

Not surprisingly, persons experiencing poverty or living on the margins are most affected by conflict and/or political violence because they are vulnerable: without access to insurance, health care or education (United States); face difficulty accessing services (Italy); unable to defend themselves (Brazil and India).

“Though women have (become) empowered and able to take part in decision-making and demand for their rights, still the women continue to suffer and experience violence and inequality among men as they are not taken into consideration. Their ideas are not taken as the men feel that they are the decision makers.” (India)  Women and children are vulnerable, lack financial resources and can experience violence and loss of loved ones.

Youth are disadvantaged in a number of ways, including involvement with drugs and poor education. One respondent noted that youth may be out of school, as in the case of one location in Pakistan, where schools for girls were forcibly closed or destroyed.

Several respondents viewed immigrants as those most affected, because they have no political clout, lack skills in communicating, and “need all their energy just to survive.” (Canada)  Those who mentioned indigenous peoples as those most affected cited poor education and poor access to government programs (Colombia).  One Brazilian respondent noted indigenous peoples are most affected because of “soy agribusiness and destruction of the Amazon.”  In India “[Tribals] are the least educated, least informed and least included in the development process.”

The impact of extreme weather events, (destructive storms, flooding, drought) was associated not only with the loss of homes and livelihoods but also with the loss of income needed to rebuild and recover from their losses.  Those living in poverty are most vulnerable to the impact of natural disasters, with the consequences leading to a deepening cycle of poverty and vulnerability, illustrated here:

“. . . they often have inadequate housing that suffers the most damage during severe storms and they also have less income to put towards unexpected things such as storm costs. Often one unexpected expense can put someone in poverty behind, financially, for months or even years.” (USA)

“Because they lack decent housing, and do not have employment to support leases and so they build in subnormal areas, being completely vulnerable to these natural calamities”. (Columbia)

The absence of adequate social protection was highlighted in many different contexts.

“People living in poverty were most affected… There is a lack of finances to escape. “Poor housing in poor areas where climate change will affect them adversely.” (Myanmar)
“Communities’ ability to cope and adapt to climate change will be limited by a number of other interconnected factors such as housing, poverty, food security, language, modernization, and the erosion of traditional land-based skills. All of these factors have direct impacts on the maintenance of Inuit cultural identity, and the health and well-being of Nunavummiut” (Canada)

The particular problems of people living in the Small Island Developing States is seen in one response from Kirabati: “The destruction caused by extreme high tides destroying coasts and homes close to the sea and the very heavy rainfall flooding homes”

In the Brazilian context, several respondents highlighted the specific cases of Mariana and Brumadinho as more than natural disasters:

**Case Study 3**

**Comunidade Eclesial de Base- Linhares, ES, Brazil**

Naiara (not her real name) is one of the community leaders and animators of a “comunidade eclesial de base” in Linhares, ES Brazil. She helps to organize celebrations, feasts and awareness raising sessions, The inequalities faced by her local community center around the areas of unemployment, lack of inadequate health care and lack of housing. Policies such as “Minha casa, minha vida” (My House my Life) and “Medico para todos” (Doctors for all) were successfully introduced by the Government in 2008. However, with the change of Government, many programmes relating to health, retirement, maternity care have been ended. Workers have lost their rights and trade unions have been weakened. But, resistance is now growing among the people, who are speaking out.

The livelihood of people in the community is closely tied to the river - Rio Doce. In November 2015, the Samarco Mine tailings dam in Mariana burst, submerging villages in a river of toxic mud that flowed 500 miles to the Atlantic ocean. This environmental disaster continues to negatively affect people downstream, having contaminated the river, destroyed property, displaced villagers, introduced new water-borne diseases, and negatively impacted fishing as a source of livelihood. Other impacts of this environmental crime are depression, alcoholism, prostitution and femicide. Highlighting the inequality, Naiara notes “Only the rich think of capital and not of life. Water is a commodity for big business owners”. She sees the solution as being stronger community organization by those who have been affected, clear policies to defend nature, having well trained and well-paid lawyers to defend the poorest and a church that speaks out. Calling for the Government to have better oversight of extractive industries, she notes, “our concern is with our youth, with the care of nature and with the organization of the people so they can address a government that takes everything, destroys values and sells Brazil to foreigners”.

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“Two mining dams collapsed (Mariana and Brumadinho), killing 20 + 272 people, and causing serious damage to the Rio Doce and Rio São Francisco basins. We cannot consider these events simply as natural disasters, but as environmental crimes caused by the mining companies Vale and BHP Billiton leading to Displacement of families... Polluted water brought disease, took away the possibility of fishing, crafts, etc.”

“There is also environmental racism in these crimes, because most of the victims are black and poor (groups forced to live in areas at risk, or in more isolated and less protected regions).”

Four Recommendations for Addressing Vulnerability

Respondents had many ideas for addressing vulnerability to conflict, political violence and natural disaster. Responses fell into four main categories:

a) Improved social protection systems and floors for vulnerable groups, including programs to address poverty, housing and education.

A Brazilian respondent suggested that government officials prioritize and enable quality education and quality basic health care with priority audiences (children, adolescents, young and old), as well as ensure plausible salaries which enable workers to support a family.

b) Respect for human dignity and human rights; dialogue, and inclusion.

Many respondents highlighted the importance of implementing human rights laws. Educating people regarding their rights and the services available to them was one suggestion (Peru). Another commented that there should be public policies for the protection of human rights, and that the State should ensure public safety (Brazil).

c) People-centered policies with greater opportunities for community participation of grassroots groups.

“Putting the poor first, not just economic growth” (UK) was seen to be key. Also stressed was the need to “Guarantee access to public policy formulation and community participation in the process of compensating people/communities affected” (Brazil).

d) In the case of natural disasters, better information-sharing and strengthened early warning systems.

The need for awareness building concerning risk factors and preventative measures to mitigate the effects of climate change was highlighted, including good watershed management (India), disaster preparedness and provision of emergency relief as soon as disaster befalls the area (Malawi). The importance of fast communication systems, appropriate machines to lessen the effect of sea wall damage and flooding were noted by the small island state of Kiribati.

In summary, violence, conflict and natural disasters all are reported to affect those who already suffer most from other inequalities and leave them with fewer resources to recover. This should serve as an important warning in the face of continued climate change and the experience of a global pandemic. Although Covid-19 hit the world about 7 months after our data was collected, it is almost certain that it, too, has worsened inequality within and between countries.
CONCLUSIONS

Findings from the NGO Committee for Social Development 2019 survey confirm that inequality is multi-dimensional and involves numerous deprivations, disparities and exclusions in addition to income and wealth. This was reflected in the ways in which respondents experienced and reported inequalities in their communities as well as in the information they gave about social, political and economic exclusion and inadequacy of services. Lack of access to economic resources does weigh heavily and is linked to lack of other essentials, such as food, housing, health care, water, and sanitation. These findings support the importance of SDG 10, the Agenda 2030’s commitment to address inequality in all its dimensions. Goal 10 is also universal in applicability. Inequalities are prevalent in countries at all income levels and in urban and rural contexts, although there are some differences in details and in assessments of progress made. For example, disparities in health and in access to health care were mentioned by a large number of respondents; this was true in High Income countries and more often among rural respondents in Lower Income countries. The focus on inequalities in health is noteworthy, as these data were collected before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, which will surely exacerbate existing inequalities.

Agenda 2030 promised to address those most vulnerable and most likely to be left behind. Women and children suffer the most from inequalities, but many other groups are also disadvantaged. Groups that have long been identified as disadvantaged remained so in 2019, four years after adoption of the SDGs. Existing inequalities are exacerbated by events such as natural disasters, political violence and conflict with severe consequences for those who are already vulnerable.

Where progress and improvements were identified, most were related to the MDGs and were more frequently reported by those in Lower Income countries. This suggests that the MDGs have made a positive impact, especially on health and education. Services and inequalities not addressed in the MDGs, such as housing and jobs, were more likely to be rated as having worsened. This was especially true for Upper Middle and High Income countries, most of which were not included in the MDG process. Other gains reported in Lower Income countries were increased awareness of rights, political literacy, and improvements in gender equality. Gender, however, remains an important marker of inequality. It is a cross-cutting issue and related to numerous vulnerabilities.

It is likely that lags in implementation of the SDGs and recently introduced programs and policies resulted in less evidence of SDG impact. The one exception was the report of improved access to modern energy in Lower Income countries. The level of awareness of programs and policies on the ground is varied. There appeared to be limited awareness of the SDGs among respondents. When respondents were aware of programs, they reported initiatives to address inequality introduced both before and after 2015. Most respondents rated NGO-sponsored programs as more effective than government programs. The good practices responsible for this included building community awareness on political, economic and social rights, and participatory approaches that engage people at the grassroots in decisions that affect their lives. Governments were recognized as having important roles to play. They can adopt new policies that extend rights (such as access for persons with disabilities, marriage equality, and interventions in domestic violence), and adopt and implement social protection measures that are essential in addressing inequalities.
The importance of social protection was underscored in a number of ways. Programs that provide health care, expand access to child care and education, and basic income grants were all hailed as lessening inequality. But these gains can be easily reversed. Respondents in several High and Upper Middle Income countries that had recently experienced government changes that reduced social protection benefits reported a worsening of life situations for vulnerable populations. Political philosophy and political will may be more important than economic capacity in determining social protection provisions.

Lessons Learned on Methodology

Before giving our recommendations on addressing inequalities, we offer a few suggestions on survey methodology drawn from our experience. It is tempting to conduct surveys fully online for ease of return and analysis. This project gave respondents the choice of using survey monkey or returning the surveys in Word by email. Almost one-third (29%) chose to use the Word option. This suggests that relying exclusively on online tools may miss potential respondents. Those missed are most likely to be persons living in areas or conditions with poor or limited internet access—those who are most likely to be left behind.

We also assert the value of translating survey instruments and invitations into multiple languages. We are confident that translations resulted in higher response rates. In addition to French, Spanish and England, our survey was distributed in Italian, Portuguese, and Arabic. This resulted in good response from Italy, Brazil and Portugal. There was only one response in Arabic, probably because relatively few of the participating NGOs operate programs in countries that are predominantly Arabic-speaking.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on survey results, the following recommendations are made:

a) Goal 10 should be carefully monitored at local, country and global levels to ensure that progress is made. As Agenda 2030 stressed, disaggregated data is required to measure progress on inequalities and to ensure that the needs of the most vulnerable are addressed.

b) Social protection is essential in reducing inequalities. The United Nations and civil society should continue global pressure for adoption and maintenance of social protection floors and systems in all countries and offer assistance to lower income countries.

c) Health care should be given added emphasis. Access to health care was highlighted as a key facet of inequality even before the Covid-19 pandemic. The Covid-19 pandemic has made this more evident and the need for universal access to care more urgent.

d) Countries should prioritize the needs of vulnerable groups in planning for disaster mitigation and response.

e) Participatory approaches should be used in designing and implementing programs to address inequality, engaging the most vulnerable in decisions that affect their lives.

f) NGOs and governments should enhance education about people’s rights and ensure that human rights are upheld and safeguarded.

g) It is essential to take the special needs of women and children into consideration in policies on a wide range of issues that affect well-being and to ensure equal space for women in decision-making. It is also important to offer more opportunities for youth.

h) Countries should build on the complementary roles of NGOs and governments in addressing inequality. The power of government to adopt fiscal policies to address inequality and to change discriminatory laws is important. NGOs appear particularly effective in delivering programs at the grassroots level.

i) Governments and NGOs should continue to raise awareness of the SDGs among grassroots groups and expand opportunities for engagement in social, political and economic activities and for broader participation in the Voluntary National Review (VNR) process.

j) Governments are called upon to eliminate corruption, ensure transparency of government processes, and provide competent public security.

k) There should be greater access to financial resources from national and international sources to address these recommendations.
REFERENCES


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