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Conceptualizing 'Leave No One Behind'

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Abstract

The term ‘leave no one behind’ is at the heart of the Sustainable Development Goals that were adopted by United Nations (UN) member states in 2015, and the phrase has frequently been used in the humanitarian realm. In its literal sense, leaving no one behind as an objective seems to be unattainable in contexts where humanitarian needs are overwhelming and humanitarian actors have limited resources and access. Therefore, instead of aiming to ‘leave no one behind’, the issue, rather, is who to leave behind and on what grounds. In light of this, this working paper explores the conceptualization of the term and the political dimensions that lie behind it.

1 The Gap between Ideals and Pragmatism

The term ‘leave no one behind’ captures an ideology that can be seen to guide development cooperation and humanitarian action at the United Nations (UN). However, given its ideological standing and all-encompassing objective, a question arises: how pragmatic is such an objective? In the context of humanitarianism, the objective, as guided by the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, seems to be both essential and unattainable. The term aligns with humanitarian principles, including humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence, and fits the humanitarian imperative—to offer and receive humanitarian assistance. Nonetheless, the world’s humanitarian needs are enormous and seemingly ever-growing, something that current humanitarian capacity is unable to fully satisfy.

I call this a paradoxical gap between ideals and pragmatism. In similar vein, Stanley et al. (2017: 913) refer to it as a “rhetoric-implementation gap,” while Clements (2020: 35) borrows the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue’s term “operational paradox.” An illustration of this gap in humanitarian action is that it faces a financing dilemma: only people in the direst of humanitarian needs are expected to receive help if necessary funding comes through. As a rough estimate,¹ in 2020, approximately 167.6 million people worldwide were in humanitarian need, meaning one in every 45 people.² It was expected that 108.8 million people would receive humanitarian aid in 2020, with an estimated funding need of US\$28.8 billion. This meant that 58.8 million people in estimated humanitarian need were left behind to begin with as they were not included in the targeted funding. As humanitarian action suffers from chronic underfunding, a possible—or, regrettably, even likely—failure to gather the necessary funds often translates into more people being left behind.

Humanitarians are left with a clear dilemma: who will be left behind? Whereas the answers to this dilemma remain context-specific and actor-dependent, certain similarities can be drawn on the politics and ideas behind these decisions. In discovering these, in this working paper I examine how ‘leave no one behind’ can be conceptualized in humanitarianism. This conceptualization provides perspectives that open up further avenues to understand decisions that humanitarians make on the ground.

Humanitarians are left with a clear dilemma: who will be left behind?

2 Conceptualizing ‘Leave No One Behind’

Historically, the term ‘leave no one behind’ derives from the Latin phrase *nemo resideo* (Eng. ‘no man left behind’). *Nemo resideo* originates in ancient Greek and Roman terminology and particularly, warfare. War was, and perhaps continues to be, an ultimate function by which states measured their dominance. It also called for loyalty, a sense of belonging, and community. For example, Fagan and Trundle state that “in the ancient world, war was the ultimate demonstration of state power, coercion, and cohesion.

¹ Figures from The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. (2019). The Global Humanitarian Overview (GHO) 2020. Available at www.unocha.org/global-humanitarian-overview-2020.

² Figures before the COVID-19 pandemic. This outbreak showcased the difficulty in allocating numbers to humanitarian needs: estimates remain as such, and any figures given have a high level of subjectivity and unpredictability.

Organized violence was a phenomenon that united communities and consumed their resources like no other” (Fagan & Trundle 2010: 1). Today, warfare’s use of ‘leave no one behind’ is associated particularly with the United States’ military organizations (see, for example, Rubel 2004), and it has also entered the country’s educational realm through the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (see, for example, Abernathy 2007; United States Congress 2001; Domina, Ghosh-Dastidar, & Tienda 2010; Rhodes 2012).

In the context of the UN, ‘leave no one behind’ gained its current momentum when it was integrated into the 2030 Agenda. In the launch summit declaration of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015, UN member states pledged to ensure that “no one will be left behind” and to “endeavour to reach the furthest behind first” (United Nations General Assembly 2015: 3). However, little to no information is available on the emergence of the term in the UN, which is in line with the limited scholarly attention that has been paid to the UN’s role in generating ideas (Emmerij 2005).

Numerous publications, both academic and policy-audience oriented, provide empirical examples of implementing the ‘leave no one behind’ ideology (see, for example, Biao 2007; Domina, Ghosh-Dastidar, & Tienda 2010; Gertz & Kharas 2018; Greenhill & Rabinowitz 2017; Kharas, McArthur, & Rasmussen 2018; Ohno, McArthur, & Kharas 2020; Stuart & Samman 2017; Vanore, Mazzucato, & Siegel 2015). However, few inquiries have been made into a conceptual understanding of the term. To contribute to this, I argue that ‘leave no one behind’ can be approached from subject and action perspectives, based on the phrase’s current usage. These further direct the discussion toward vulnerability (subject perspective) and empowerment (action perspective), thereby creating a political understanding of the concept and its use.

Figure 1. Conceptualization of ‘leave no one behind’

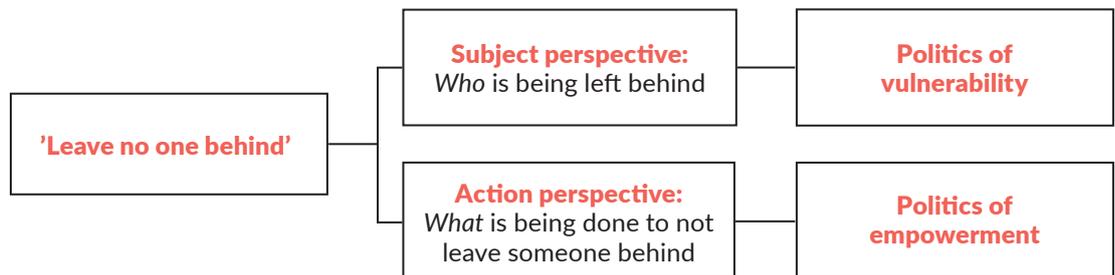


Figure by the author.

I suggest that ‘leave no one behind’ in the context of the UN can be approached in two ways.³ The term can be seen as inclusive of subjects in who the targeted people are who are likely to be left behind (see, for example, Fatehkia et al. 2020; Kharas et al. 2018; Ohno, McArthur, & Kharas 2020: part I; Sander & Murphy 2017). This perspective – or narrative, alternatively – often includes discussions, ideologies and understandings of vulnerability. Then, ‘leave no one behind’ can also be seen as a matter of action in what is being done in order not to leave someone behind (see, for example, Chapman 2016; Fleurbaey 2018; Greenhill & Rabinowitz 2017; Kyle 2020; Ohno, McArthur, & Kharas 2020: part II). This perspective is often joined with ideas of empowerment. Both these routes lead into political understandings guiding humanitarian decisions, as vulnerability and empowerment are both terms inclusive of tension, power and struggle.

³ Despite it being analytically meaningful to keep them separate, there is a certain overlap between the two perspectives. For example, both direct us toward geographical and socio-economic locations in which the people being left behind can be found, and also in which the possible related policy, operational, and programmatic actions take place. Yet even in cases where these perspectives can be separated (such as Abualghaib, Groce, Simeu, Carew, & Mont 2019 discussing the need for disability-disaggregated data) these two perspectives are still present (using the same example, the subject perspective is people with disabilities and the action perspective is the need for disaggregated data).

3 'Leave No One Behind': The Subject Perspective & Politics of Vulnerability

From the subject perspective, left-behind groups are often discussed in parallel with vulnerable people, in phrases such as 'the furthest behind' and 'the most vulnerable'. For example, the former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon stated in 2015 that 125 million people live in "acute vulnerability," urging that they should be placed at the center of collective decision-making in humanitarian action and other areas of intervention.⁴ In 2020, the incumbent Secretary-General António Guterres launched a Covid-19 'Global Humanitarian Response Plan' with his Under-Secretary-General Mark Lowcock for Humanitarian Affairs, stating that "this is the moment to step up for the vulnerable."⁵ Vulnerability presents a catalytic discussion in humanitarianism due to its potentially worsening nature, as existing vulnerabilities can be exacerbated and new ones created by immediate threats to life and a person's dignity caused by humanitarian crises (Zhukova 2020).

Defining vulnerability itself is a political act signalling power, status and hierarchy. Being 'furthest behind' or 'most vulnerable' is a complex stigma that carries several context-specific intersectional meanings. Vulnerability, suggesting "the condition of being particularly susceptible to harm" (Sözer 2019: 2), is commonly associated with groups such as women, children, youth, minorities, and persons with disabilities, as is exemplified in the UN General Assembly Resolution adopting the 2030 Agenda (United Nations General Assembly 2015).⁶ Who is vulnerable in the eyes of who and on what grounds? These discussions commonly include individual level attributes, such as those listed above. These attributes are relational in nature as they often oppose symbols of power, dominant groups and privilege in societies. These relations are dependent on cultures, history and time. For example, men's privileges in respect of livelihoods, independence and influence have historically depended on women's restricted access to those privileges.⁷ Or, disabled bodies are socially relational to abled bodies in societies in which infrastructures are designed for the latter.

Ultimately, how vulnerability is approached and dealt with depends on how societies are constructed and which values thrive in them. For example, how are states seen as being responsible for their most vulnerable citizens? At a collective level, understanding vulnerability goes beyond a mere moral notion in the sense of political economy. Vulnerability risks becoming an instrument or token if it is used for politically oriented or economic goals instead of altruistic ends. In particular, a neoliberal logic that serves the interest of Western corporations can deepen the negative effects on vulnerable populations (Chouliaraki 2013a). In Western states, the neoliberal influence of capitalist societies—grounded in outsourcing, privatization, and deregulation—confronts welfare state ideals and their premise that the state will care, at least in part, for its weakest (Mattei & Nader 2008). At an extreme end of the spectrum, humanitarianism can be viewed as part of the global system in which vulnerability can become a method by which the global well-being imbalance can be maintained – wherein vulnerability intervention has become vulnerability redistribution (Sözer 2019).

Defining vulnerability itself is a political act signaling power, status and hierarchy. Being 'furthest behind' or 'most vulnerable' is a complex stigma that carries several context-specific intersectional meanings.

4 The United Nations, "The Future of Humanitarian Action", available at www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/future-humanitarian-action.

5 The United Nations, "This is the Moment to Step Up for the Vulnerable", available at www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/moment-step-vulnerable.

6 The UN General Assembly Resolution adopting the 2030 Agenda discusses vulnerable groups as "all children, youth, persons with disabilities ... people living with HIV/AIDS, older persons, indigenous peoples, refugees and internally displaced persons and migrants" (2015: 7). The document refers to women 32 times compared with men 8 times.

7 See complementary discussion on masculinity and femininity by Cynthia Enloe (2004).

4 'Leave No One Behind': Action Perspective & Politics of Empowerment

From the action perspective, 'leave no one behind' translates into measures that are taken not to leave someone behind. These measures are commonly guided by the idea of progressive universalism, which means prioritizing and fast-tracking the implementation of policies and advancing action in the interest of the 'worst-off' groups (Greenhill & Rabinowitz 2017; Stuart & Samman 2017). These measures can include tackling extreme poverty, inequality, and discrimination with an overall focus on closing gaps between social groups (Stuart & Samman 2017, The United Nations Development Programme 2018). The action perspective of 'leave no one behind' entails addressing issues such as geographical isolation, neglected populations in governance, and deprivation due to socio-economic status (The United Nations Development Programme 2018).

However, realizing progressive universalism in practice faces various challenges, some of which are underlying causes for vulnerability to begin with, such as peripheric isolation.

However, realizing progressive universalism in practice faces various challenges, some of which are underlying causes for vulnerability to begin with, such as peripheric isolation. These challenges can include inaccurate targeting of the poor, insufficient budgets, understaffed facilities responding to increased demand, limited capacity, and unequal opportunities in rural areas, as has been seen in the healthcare sector in Peru (Neelsen & O'Donnell 2017). Thus, being 'left behind' poses an additional challenge for humanitarian aid providers in which the pragmatic struggle to deliver aid begins already with those who are not contextually the 'worst-off' groups.

The action perspective is correlated with the concept of empowerment. The term originates in Western social movements of the late 1960s that alleviated discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation (Billaud 2020). As an illustration of how the concept is used in the UN context, a discussion paper from the UN Development Programme (UNDP, 2018: 4), under the subtitle "Realizing the opportunity to leave no one behind," states the following:

Empower those who are left behind: To achieve the SDGs, the people that are being left behind must be full, equal agents of sustainable development. Urgent action is needed to enable and empower them, including by ensuring their meaningful participation in decision making and establishing safe and inclusive mechanisms for their civic engagement. (The United Nations Development Programme 2018: 4, emphases added)

The act of empowering brings in a political aspect once more—who is able to empower whom, and why? What kind of interventions are appropriate in forwarding these causes, and who are they conducted by? In answering these questions, one of the known academic definitions of empowerment is given by Rowlands, who states that:

Empowerment is ... more than simply opening up access to decision-making; it must also include the processes that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to occupy that decision-making space, and so overlaps with the other categories of 'power to' and 'power from within'. (Rowlands 1995: 102, emphasis added)

Rowlands notes that empowering those who are the most marginalized requires the most effort, including organizational capacity and resources. This demand poses a risk of resulting in failure to engage with the most marginalized. The author continues that intervening actors are preoccupied with showcasing results—for example, for donor reporting—and might lean on the temptation to work with other than those who are worst off. For Rowlands, the processes of empowerment cannot come from outsiders, but rather from external intervention and support that can encourage and speed up existing self-initiatives (Rowlands 1995.) This approach calls for critical examination of several development aid and humanitarian programming practices, in which interventions

are often driven by other priorities, such as a mix of organizational expertise, available resources, thematic interest and mandate, donor interests, and physical access.

5 Concluding Remarks

The request to ‘leave no one behind’ can translate into various interpretations in a context-specific manner as to who can be considered vulnerable and the furthest behind, and what can be done to empower them. Through its politics of vulnerability and empowerment, ‘leave no one behind’ involves the centrally dominant discussions in global power relations. Who is perceived as vulnerable and according to who and which ideology? Who gets to empower someone and how is that done?

Both subject and action perspectives draw attention to geographical locations that are problematic to define, particularly from a postcolonial stance. The danger emerges from the asymmetric relationship between and colonial history of the West and the Global South (Chouliaraki 2013b). This can be called cosmopolitan politics, and it carries with it cosmopolitan dispositions in which resources are unequally distributed on “the West–South axis, [which] reproduces the prosperity of the former whilst perpetuating the poverty of the latter” (Chouliaraki 2013a: 3). This distribution argument serves as a backdrop to how the West is positioned to act upon the distant suffering of the other in the Global South (rather than the Global South influencing the West’s actions and those left behind there), and humanitarian communication can be seen as “the main carrier of this imperative” (ibid.).⁸ This social relationship between the two is mediated by multilateral agencies, such as the UN (Hattori 2003). Striking a balance between these realities is easier said than done.

‘Leave no one behind’ is a noble ideal, yet a challenging practice. Because of its elevated ambitions, such as empowering the ‘furthest behind,’ criticism is not hard to find. The latest academic tendency is to focus on the 2030 Agenda (see, for example, Demaria & Kothari 2017; Gideon & Unterhalter 2017; Struckmann 2018; Weber 2017). One of the central issues—if the mission of the 2030 Agenda is not rejected outright—is the lack of accountability (Esquivel 2016; Kvangraven & Reddy 2015). Accountability in the humanitarian context can be defined as “the responsible use of power in an unbalance setting where humanitarian actors have significant power over populations affected by crisis and emergency” (Turunen 2020: 1). Lack of such would thus signal an irresponsible use of power. The discourse around accountability has also found new manifestations, such as shifting the onus of responsibility from donors to recipients (Kvangraven & Reddy 2015). In the context of ‘leave no one behind,’ accountability remains unresolved. Deciding who is understood as left behind, or which measures should be taken in their best interests, remains a subjective, thus political question estimate.

Deciding who is understood as left behind, or which measures should be taken in their best interests, remains a subjective, thus political question estimate.

⁸ This, of course, does not imply that humanitarianism and development aid are confined to the West–South axis and relationship. For example, some of the South–South development cooperation actors employ seemingly opposite ideologies as their premise. These include rejection of the donor label, similar country identity, subject area expertise, and insistence on mutual opportunity (Mawdsley 2012).

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