

POLICY CHOICES FOR LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND (LNOB): OVERVIEW FROM 2023 SDG SUMMIT COMMITMENTS

BACKGROUND

In the lead up to the 2023 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Summit (18-19 September, New York), the Secretary-General urged all Member States and stakeholders to present forward-looking commitments to accelerate sustainable development in the coming years. A total of 39 Member States¹ and 1 non-member observer state² submitted 141 commitments via the SDG Summit Acceleration and Accountability Platform³. This policy brief reviews these national commitments from the 2023 SDG Summit, focusing on how countries are translating the leaving no one behind (LNoB)⁴ concept into different policies across various country settings.

PROFILE OF COUNTRIES COMMITTED TO LNOB

During the 2023 SDG Summit, 31⁵ out of these 40 countries explicitly prioritized advancing the LNoB agenda in their national commitments through specific policy measures or institutional reforms. Of these 31 countries, 20 are middle-income countries (MICs) (65%), 6 are high-income countries (HICs) (19%) and 5 are low-income countries (LICs) (16%) (Figure 1). Proportionally, the MICs seem slightly more inclined to commit to advancing LNoB agenda (20 out of 23 total number of MICs that announced national commitments: 87%) compared to their LIC (5 out of 7: 71%) and HIC (6 out of 10: 60%) counterparts (Figure 1).

In terms of regional breakdown, Africa had the largest number of LNoB-committed countries among the 31 that submitted national commitments (9 out of 12: 75%), followed by Europe (7 out of 11: 64%). Notably, all countries from Latin America and the Caribbean region that announced national commitments prioritized the LNoB agenda (6 out of 6: 100%). This may be attributed to challenges typically faced by MICs, as research notes that Latin America and the Caribbean, being

Key Messages

- » Prioritizing leaving no one behind (LNoB), 31 countries have introduced new policies and commitments aimed at eradicating poverty, enhancing human capital, addressing uneven access to basic necessities, improving decision-making processes on sustainable development and ensuring no country or locality is left behind.
- » These LNoB policies, developed in diverse contexts, share a common strategy – integrating equity, inclusion and sustainability across various thematic areas to include the poorest and those in vulnerable situations or reaching the farthest left behind first, informed by their active participation.
- » The LNoB principle is essential for achieving the 17 SDGs. It must be seen as a pathway to accelerate sustainable development, not as a political burden that delays progress. A shift in mindset is crucial.
- » Development cooperation, including ODA, plays a unique role in advancing the LNoB agenda by aligning with national LNoB strategies of developing countries and prioritizing those with the weakest capacities.

a middle-income region, experiences significant unequal distribution of growth across households⁶. Countries from both Asia and the Pacific (5 out of 6: 83%) and Western Asia (4 out of 5: 80%) also showed a strong emphasis on LNoB in their commitments, all of them being MICs. Due to the small sample size and potential selection bias, however, deriving any definitive regional trends from this analysis is challenging, warranting further research.

DIVERSE POLICY APPROACHES TO LNOB

In the context of 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development⁷, the ethos of LNoB permeates all 17 SDGs. The national commitments from the 2023 SDG Summit highlighted a diverse range of priority themes, with a significant emphasis on the LNoB agenda. Analyzing these commitments reveals

¹ Argentina, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Belarus, Belize, Benin, Botswana, Chile, Costa Rica, Czechia, Denmark, Egypt, Eswatini, Germany, Ghana, Greece, Honduras, Jordan, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Lesotho, Liberia, Luxembourg, Madagascar, Malawi, Moldova, Montenegro, Mongolia, Panama, Serbia, Sierra Leone, Slovakia, South Africa, South Sudan, Thailand, Turkmenistan, Uganda, United Kingdom, Uzbekistan.

² State of Palestine.

³ Accessible from: <https://sdgs.un.org/SDGSummitActions>.

⁴ See: <https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/2023-10/SDG%20Summit%20Commitments%20and%20Actions.pdf>.

⁵ Argentina, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Belarus, Belize, Benin, Botswana, Chile, Costa Rica, Egypt, Eswatini, Germany, Honduras, Jordan, Kyrgyzstan, Lesotho, Liberia, Luxembourg, Madagascar, Moldova, Mongolia, Panama, Serbia, Sierra Leone, Slovakia, South Africa, State of Palestine, Thailand, Uganda, United Kingdom.

⁶ See: <https://www.undp.org/latin-america/blog/graph-for-thought/rethinking-development-latin-america-and-caribbean>.

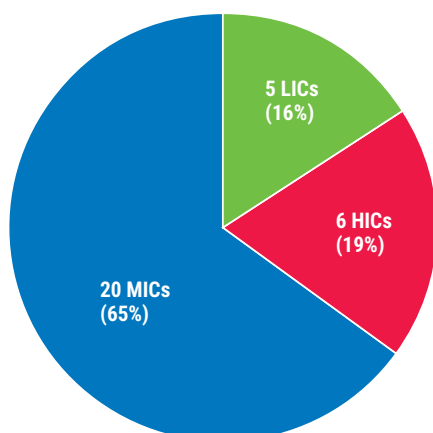
⁷ Paragraph 4 in particular highlights the LNoB principle: "As we embark on this great collective journey, we pledge that no one will be left behind. Recognizing that the dignity of the human person is fundamental, we wish to see the Goals and targets met for all nations and peoples and for all segments of society. And we will endeavour to reach the furthest behind first."

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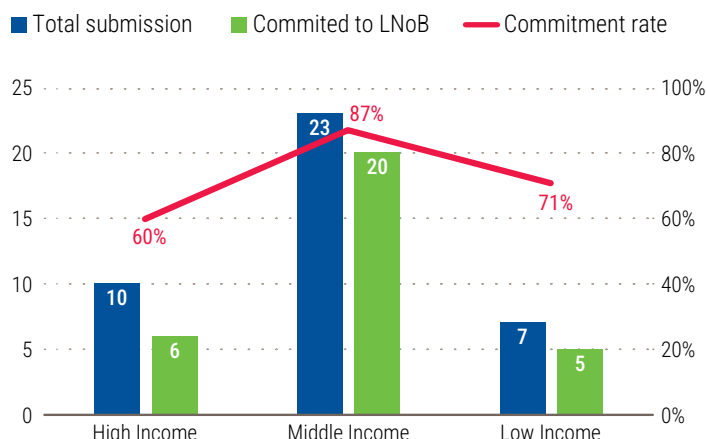
Figure 1

LNoB-committed Countries (31 out of 40 countries) by Income Level

Countries committed to LNoB, by income



Countries committed to LNoB compared to total submissions, by income



Source: Author's illustration using data from 2023 SDG Summit National Commitments.

Figure 2

Geographical Distribution of Countries Committed to LNoB (31 out of 40 countries) by Income Level

	Africa	Asia and the Pacific	Europe	Latin America & the Caribbean	Western Asia
High income			Germany, Luxembourg, Slovakia, United Kingdom	Chile, Panama	
Middle income	Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, South Africa	Bangladesh, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Thailand, Uzbekistan	Belarus, Moldova, Serbia,	Argentina, Belize, Costa Rica, Honduras	Azerbaijan, Egypt, Jordan, State of Palestine
Low income	Benin, Liberia, Madagascar, Sierra Leone, Uganda				

Source: Author's illustration using data from 2023 SDG Summit National Commitments

that the policies addressing LNoB largely focus on five interdependent and mutually reinforcing areas including: (i) eradicating poverty; (ii) enhancing human capital; (iii) addressing uneven access to basic necessities; (iv) improving decision-making process on sustainable development; and (v) ensuring no country or locality is left behind.

(i) policies to eradicate poverty

To prioritize scaling up poverty eradication, 15 countries presented new benchmarks, with 13 specifying a poverty rate target for 2027. Three countries⁸ targeted a 30-50% rate, nine⁹ targeted 10-30%; one¹⁰ targeted below 10%; and no country targeted a 0% rate.

Among the most ambitious, Sierra Leone is dedicated to reducing absolute poverty from 57% to 35%; extreme poverty from 11% to 5%; and multidimensional poverty from 65% to 50% by 2027, while increasing the income share of the bottom 20% from 8.1 % to 8.6%. Lesotho aims to reduce poverty from 50% in 2016/17 to 44% in 2026/27 by enhancing income

growth for the bottom 40% and addressing gender equality, infrastructure development and public sector capacities. Uganda commits to transitioning from the informal to the formal economy to increase incomes, improve quality of life and eradicate poverty at the household level.

Additionally, of 15 countries indicating their poverty eradication benchmarks, five countries¹¹ specified their target Gini index, indicating specific, time-bound national efforts to reduce inequality.

(ii) Policies to enhance human capital

Many countries dedicated to the LNoB agenda have introduced new education policies to empower those living in poverty and vulnerable situations, addressing the issues of marginalization and discrimination. Evidence shows that a 1 % increase in public funding for education in developing countries could lift 35 million of the 731 million primary-aged children out of learning poverty.¹² In light of this, Montenegro commits to raising its education budget from 9% to 13%.

⁸ Lesotho, Liberia, Sierra Leone.

⁹ Argentina, Bangladesh, Belize, Egypt, Ghana, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, State of Palestine, Uganda.

¹⁰ Uzbekistan.

¹¹ Argentina targets a Gini Index of 0.3940 by 2030. Bangladesh projects a decrease from 0.499 in 2022 to 0.485 by 2030. Kyrgyzstan aims for 0.22 by 2027; Lesotho 0.40 by 2026/27; and Uganda 0.37 by 2025.

¹² Transforming education with equitable financing, UNICEF, January 2023, New York.

A common LNoB measure in the education sector is shifting to a competency-based curriculum that responds to the needs of groups in vulnerable situations to enhance their educational attainment. For instance, Egypt mandates the development of curricula that address the needs of children with disabilities; build teachers' capacities for inclusive education strategies; and considers the special needs for refugees and asylum seekers, including those with disabilities¹³. Other measures include scaling up holistic youth skills development including digital skills¹⁴; increasing youth participation in decision-making processes; enhancing transparency and autonomy in educational funding; and utilizing technologies where appropriate (e.g. assistive technologies for persons with disabilities) to support at-risk learners, among others.

Countries also committed to labour policy reforms to: actively promote employment and decent work for people living in vulnerable situations¹⁵; ensure equal pay for equal work for women¹⁶; increase women's participation in underrepresented sectors¹⁷; support micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in functional global value chains (GVCs)¹⁸; reduce the percentage of youth aged 15 to 24 who are neither employed nor in education (NEET)¹⁹; transition to a formal economy²⁰; maintain an acceptable wage-to-pension ratio^{21, 22}; and provide employability/skill development training²³ (Box 1).

Box 1

Sierra Leone's Labour Policy for Youth

Sierra Leone commits to:

- i. Creating 500,000 jobs with the 'Youth Employment Scheme' over the next five years;
- ii. Offering tax breaks to stimulate private sector youth employment;
- iii. Establishing Youth Opportunity Centres in every district to support youth job seekers;
- iv. Improving capital access for young entrepreneurs;
- v. Providing training, startup kits, loans and support for youth in agriculture, aquaculture and various value chains;
- vi. Setting up graduate incubation facilities and offering entrepreneurship opportunities to recent graduates;
- vii. Enhancing the Ministry of Labour's capacity to certify vocational training and establishing a Labour Management Information System (LMIS).

Source: <https://sdgs.un.org/national-commitments-sdg-transformation/22533>.

¹³ Handicap International (2022). Factsheet: Disability-inclusive education in Egypt.

¹⁴ Of 40 countries, 16 (Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Belarus, Belize, Botswana, Costa Rica, Germany, Greece, Jordan, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Liberia, Moldova, South Africa, Turkmenistan, Uganda) included specific measures to bridge digital divide.

¹⁵ Costa Rica, Egypt, Lesotho, Montenegro.

¹⁶ Azerbaijan, Egypt, Panama.

¹⁷ Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Panama.

¹⁸ Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Lesotho. Functional GVCs refer to the interconnected sequence of activities optimizing global production, distribution and delivery for maximum value (OECD).

¹⁹ Bangladesh, Montenegro.

²⁰ Uganda.

²¹ While "acceptable ratio" varies, common minimum pension is 40-60% of the minimum wage or 25-40% of the average wage (OECD, European Commission).

²² Azerbaijan.

²³ Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Botswana, Costa Rica, Liberia, South Sudan.

(iii) Policies to address uneven access to basic necessities

Several countries have developed policies to ensure those at risk of being farthest left behind have equal access to basic necessities such as food, water, sanitation, energy and social protection.

For instance, Honduras's National School Feeding Program, led by the President, aims to ensure equal access to food for children in the poorest areas, preventing school dropout and combating socio-economic inequality. Kyrgyzstan plans 46 water management projects to irrigate 67,000 hectares of new land and increase water availability, promoting equal access to water for all, including those in vulnerable situations. Uzbekistan is improving water efficiency by 25% to ensure access to clean water and sanitation for children in all preschools. Bangladesh targets 100% access to clean drinking water and sanitation by 2030 and aims to provide equal access to energy for all by reducing primary energy consumption per GDP by 20% by 2030.

Chile and Egypt are focused on enhancing access to universal health coverage, primary health care and rural health facilities for all; Belize plans to approve a costed Social Protection Strategy in 2024, including a social protection floor and accompanying institutional mechanisms.

(iv) Policies to improve decision-making process in support of LNoB

Eleven countries²⁴ are implementing measures to enhance decision-making processes around sustainable development to advance the LNoB agenda. These efforts typically include establishing multi-stakeholder councils and platforms to ensure inclusive participation and foster accountability mechanisms²⁵; and improving the transparency and efficiency of public administration procedures²⁶, among others.

Moreover, ten countries²⁷ are adopting data-driven approaches to collect and disaggregate data, promoting evidence-based decision-making in support of LNoB (Box 2). They aim to improve public access to data infrastructures and enhance monitoring and evaluation systems, including citizen-initiated mechanisms. For example, Moldova's policy reform seeks to enhance public access to information and feedback mechanisms, enabling a demand-driven monitoring and governance system. These efforts address poverty, inequality and marginalization while building a more inclusive and transparent accountability system.

Research indicates that big data can detect and reach those in vulnerable situations, often overlooked by conventional statistical methods. The private sector plays a key role in data partnerships to enhance big data infrastructure for the LNoB agenda, while addressing privacy concerns²⁸. In this context, Uganda's new inclusive Big Data Utilization

²⁴ Azerbaijan, Belarus, Botswana, Egypt, Germany, Jordan, Moldova, Mongolia, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Uganda.

²⁵ Belarus, Mongolia, South Africa.

²⁶ Azerbaijan.

²⁷ Argentina, Botswana, Chile, Costa Rica, Egypt, Jordan, Moldova, Serbia, Sierra Leone, Uganda.

²⁸ UNDESA (2018). Issue Note: Building Momentum for the SDGs: Role of Big Data for Public Good.

Strategy (BDUS) requires all government and private organizations to implement its data security and privacy protection measures.

According to the 2022 UN E-Government Survey, few countries have recent evidence of e-consultations with groups in vulnerable situations, and even fewer show that public input is considered in policy decisions. This highlights the need to proactively reach out to those in vulnerable situations with tailored e-services and to use e-participation mechanisms as a complement, not a replacement, for traditional public participation²⁹.

Box 2

Chile's Data-Driven Approach for LNoB Policies

Chile, led by the Presidential Inter-ministerial Advisory Council, is implementing a data-driven policy to support populations in vulnerable situations. Key initiatives include the National Care System, informed by the 2022 National Disability and Dependency Survey, which provided valuable insights into the living conditions of caregivers and care recipients. By August 2023, over 58,833 unpaid caregivers were identified, with plans to formalize caregiving through certification programs. The system, expanding services with new community centers and long-term care facilities, is set for implementation during 2024-2026.

Chile also supports women affected by gender-based violence (GBV) through data-driven policies. Over the past three years, the National Women and Gender Equity Service (SERNAMEG) has assisted approximately 235,342 individuals. A unified GBV registry, supported by the World Bank, consolidates records for better responses and prevention. Led by the Ministry of Women and Gender Equity and SERNAMEG, this initiative ensures privacy, informed consent and gradual implementation to prevent re-victimization and improve service delivery.

Source: <https://sdgs.un.org/national-commitments-leadorg-list?leadorg=Chile>.

(v) Policies to leave no country or locality behind

Development cooperation plays a unique role in advancing the LNoB agenda by aligning with national LNoB strategies of developing countries and prioritizing the countries and localities with the weakest capacities. During the 2023 SDG Summit, both developed and developing countries, articulated their commitments to enhancing cooperation and partnerships to support the capacities of those farthest left behind, including in the forms of official development assistance (ODA), development guarantees, climate finance and South-South/triangular cooperation, among others (Box 3).

Developed countries can support developing countries by changing policies to create enabling rules for a more equitable distribution of development opportunities, going beyond simply transferring money or knowledge³⁰. Germany aims to enhance policy coherence and foster trade diversification and resilience while mitigating the 'spillover' effects of its trade policies in developing countries. Germany supports its trade partners in adapting to and complying with evolving legal requirements within its national policy frameworks³¹.

²⁹ For more information, see: <https://desapublications.un.org/sites/default/files/publications/2022-09/Web%20version%20E-Government%202022.pdf>.

³⁰ UNDESA (2015). DCF Policy Brief No.1. "What is development cooperation?"

³¹ Through Act on Corporate Due Diligence Obligations in Supply Chains (LkSG) and by means of Team Europe initiatives, among others.

These policies align with Germany's consistent emphasis on trade facilitation as a primary focus of their aid-for-trade (AfT) strategies³².

Box 3

Development Cooperation Policies to Leave No Country Behind

Luxembourg is channeling EUR 42.5 million in SDG investments through multilateral development banks (MDBs) and international financial institutions (IFIs) in 2024-2026, while providing 1% of GNI for ODA to least developed countries (LDCs). It also re-channelled 253 million special drawing rights (SDR) to the IMF's Resilience and Sustainability Trust.

United Kingdom is providing a guarantee of up to USD 300 million to the Innovative Finance Facility for Climate in Asia and the Pacific (IFCAP); GBP 180 million to the International Finance Facility for Education (IFFEd); and USD 25 million to the Caribbean Water Utilities Insurance Collective (CWUIC) for disaster risk insurance schemes.

Denmark plans to contribute DKK 500 million (USD 75 million) annually from 2024 to 2030 to the Danish Investment Fund for Developing Countries (IFU) to increase climate finance.

Germany pledged to raise its annual international climate finance contribution to at least EUR 6 billion by 2025, with EUR 1.5 billion earmarked for international biodiversity finance.

Eswatini is stepping up capacity-building and technology transfer in sectors like employment, water, sanitation and gender equality, including through South-South and triangular cooperation.

Source: <https://sdgs.un.org/SDGSummitActions/National>.

At the sub-national level, 21 countries³³ are prioritizing the strengthening of local ownership and capacities to ensure no locality is left behind. Common strategies include bolstering the fiscal capacities of local governments. For instance, Bangladesh has developed a set of "39+1" national priority targets (NPTs) for LNoB agenda; the 39 indicators were identified as crucial to the local context, while one additional indicator was selected by each local administrative unit through workshops to ensure inclusivity.

Chile is planning to allocate 390 billion pesos from mining royalties to 89% of its neediest communities while Egypt is implementing structured funding formula for public investments. United Kingdom is supporting the local tax systems of developing countries through enhanced development cooperation.

Other strategies focus on strengthening human resources capacity through training programmes for municipalities, local committees and residents³⁴; enhancing data capacity to include those in vulnerable situations at local level³⁵; establishing multi-stakeholder local coordination mechanisms for LNoB³⁶; supporting sustainable agriculture through development cooperation³⁷; and promoting inclusive disaster preparedness and resilience at grassroots level³⁸.

³² OECD (2022, 2019). Aid for trade self-assessments from DAC members. Paris.

³³ Argentina, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Botswana, Chile, Costa Rica, Egypt, Germany, Honduras, Lesotho, Liberia, Luxembourg, Madagascar, Moldova, Serbia, Sierra Leone, Slovakia, South Africa, Thailand, Uganda, UK.

³⁴ Honduras, Luxembourg.

³⁵ Bangladesh, Egypt, Liberia, Serbia.

³⁶ Costa Rica, Lesotho, Uganda.

³⁷ Germany.

³⁸ Thailand.

LNOB: WHAT IT TAKES TO ACHIEVE THE SDGS

Failing to uphold the LNoB principle will jeopardize achieving the SDGs. Although it requires more time, resources and deliberate policy interventions, research³⁹ suggests that focusing on marginalized groups can lead to better and sustainable development results. For instance, a recent UNICEF report indicates that investing USD 1 million in the health of the most disadvantaged children prevents nearly twice as many deaths as the same investment in better-off

children⁴⁰. Prioritizing populations in vulnerable situations also strengthens community relationships, reduces disputes, enhances social cohesion and fosters a greater sense of belonging and participation among everyone⁴¹.

All actors must view LNoB as a pathway to accelerate sustainable development, not a political burden. As the African proverb says, “If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together”. Embracing this perspective and uniting our efforts can lead to a more sustainable future for all.

³⁹ UNDP (2018). UNDP Discussion Paper: What does it mean to leave no one behind? New York.

⁴⁰ UNICEF (2017). Narrowing the Gaps: The Power of Investing in the Poorest Children, New York.

⁴¹ UNDESA (2018). Issue Note: Inclusive Business Models for Women and Vulnerable Groups, New York; and UN Global Compact (2013). A Reference Business Guide: UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Available at: <https://unglobalcompact.org/library/541>.