



# Leave no one behind: Progress, gaps and recommendations for the UK

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**Leave no one behind is the central transformative pledge of Agenda 2030. This compels us not only to transform the lives of those who are the furthest behind but to also fight discrimination and the root causes of inequality within and among countries.**

This is difficult to achieve. It means being committed to prioritising the people who are the most marginalised and demands ambition and an appetite for risk. It means working in the most fragile contexts and supporting the most complex of needs, whilst also seeking to rebalance power, opportunities and outcomes between groups and individuals across all areas of international development and assistance.

The UK had a good track record of recognising the importance of leaving no one behind, particularly the need for robust, disaggregated data to inform targeted approaches that reach under-represented communities. In July 2018, the Department for International Development (DFID) supported the launch of the Inclusive Data Charter, committing partners to ensure that no one is left behind in the pursuit and measurement of social and economic progress. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) also provides comprehensive supporting materials and expert advice on data disaggregation to further support the SDGs and the leave no one behind agenda<sup>3</sup>.

However, since 2019, the UK's commitment to leave no one behind has been largely absent as a core consideration and principle, given the decisions and changes that have been made to its international policies, programming and investments. For example, the UK's response to the Covid-19 pandemic has centred on domestic needs and national

interests at the expense of its commitments to those furthest behind, particularly in the purchase and distribution of vaccines and in the reduction of official development assistance (ODA) budget. Analysis of the cuts to ODA has shown that people who are the most marginalised have been the hardest hit<sup>4</sup>, particularly women, girls, people with disabilities and those impacted by conflict and crises. The impact of this has been unnecessarily made worse by government analysis of this impact being withheld from the development community, which could respond to support those most affected.

However, there are opportunities for the UK to build on its track record and demonstrate solidarity and commitment to leaving no one behind, if it can find the will and resources to implement well thought-through strategies; for example, by delivering on its *Inclusive Data Charter Action Plan*<sup>5</sup>. There is also a need to make the most of the FCDO merger; to align defence, diplomacy, trade and development to address various but interconnected global challenges, and the most complex needs in the most fragile places, by reaching across departments and ensuring interventions are coherent.

The world is facing complex challenges. New and protracted conflicts<sup>6</sup> are compounding the impacts of climate change<sup>7</sup>, and other local and international political, health and environmental shocks, to increase humanitarian needs and deepen existing inequalities. Crises disproportionately affect people who have already been marginalised, particularly women and girls. So we must respond in ways that reach the furthest behind first. This demands concerted and targeted efforts, not broad-based responses.

3. UN, '[Increasing the transparency of SDG data in developing countries \(unlocking the power of data through new presentation and dissemination techniques\)](#)' [web page, accessed June 2022]

4. UK Parliament (8 March, 2022), '[Government obstructing scrutiny after misleading MPs on impacts aid cuts have on women and girls](#)' [online article, accessed June 2022]

5. DFID/FCDO (6 March 2019), '[Policy paper: Inclusive Data Charter Action Plan](#)' [web page, accessed June 2022]

6. Mitchell, D. and Karr, V. (eds.) (2014), *Crises, conflict and disability: Ensuring equality* [p.226], New York, Routledge..

7. Kett, M. and Cole, E. (2018), *Disability and Climate Resilience Research Report*



## Covid-19

Covid-19 has not affected all groups equally.<sup>8</sup> Children, refugees, migrants, indigenous peoples, ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities, LGBTQ+ people, older people and people with disabilities<sup>9</sup>, including people with intellectual disabilities<sup>10</sup>, have been among the worst affected<sup>11</sup>.

Since the pandemic began, people who are marginalised and economically disadvantaged, particularly people who work in urban health and sanitation sectors (many of whom lacked adequate protection), had a greater risk of contracting Covid-19 and were more likely to die from it. This is driven by a lack of access to quality, well-capacitated health systems (see more in Goal 3).

People who are marginalised have been unfairly impacted by measures to contain the virus. For example, people employed in the informal sector – disproportionately, minorities, women, people with disabilities and LGBTQ+ people – have little access to social protection when their incomes are frozen due to lockdowns. In 2020, between 119 and 124 million people are estimated to have been pushed into extreme poverty by the pandemic.<sup>12</sup>

The pandemic also threatens to reverse 20 years of education gains, as many education systems have failed to meet even the basic learning needs of children (see more in Goal 4).<sup>13</sup> Before the pandemic began, 258 million children and young people were already out of school<sup>14</sup>, a figure that undoubtedly will have increased. Girls and children with disabilities have the greatest risk of never returning to school<sup>15</sup>. Covid-19 has also led to the number of children in child labour growing to 160 million, the first increase in two decades.<sup>16</sup>

Covid-19 has also put at risk the limited progress made on gender equality. The pandemic's impacts are exacerbated for women and girls in all spheres, from health to economy, food security to social protection (see more in Goal 5).

8. Civil Society Collaborative on Inclusive COVID-19 Data (2021), [An Unequal Pandemic: Insights and Evidence from Communities and Civil Society Organisations](#)

9. Inclusive Futures (2021), [Consequences of exclusion: a situation report on organisations of people with disabilities and COVID-19 in Bangladesh, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe](#)

10. Bosworth, M. et al. (2021), ['Deaths involving COVID-19 by self-reported disability status during the first two waves of the COVID-19 pandemic in England: a retrospective, population-based cohort study'](#), *The Lancet Public Health*, Vol 6, 11, e817–e825

11. Inclusive Futures (2021), [Evidence of the impacts on and risks to people with disabilities from the COVID-19 pandemic and how international development actors are responding November 2020-March 2021](#)

12. World Bank (2021), ['Updated estimates of the impact of COVID-19 on global poverty: Looking back at 2020 and the outlook for 2021'](#) [online article, accessed June 2022]

13. UN (2020), [Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Children](#)

14. UNESCO, ['Out-of-School Children and Youth'](#) [web page, accessed June 2022]

15. Humanity & Inclusion (2020), [Let's break silos now! Achieving disability-inclusive education in a post-COVID world](#)

16. UNICEF (9 June, 2021), ['Child labour rises to 160 million – first increase in two decades'](#) [online press release, accessed June 2022]

For some women and girls, such as those with disabilities, intersecting inequalities have further increased their risk of experiencing violence.<sup>17</sup>

## Impact of ODA cuts

In March 2021, the FCDO assessed the impact that proposed ODA cuts would have on equalities. The report, published in March 2022<sup>18</sup>, found the cuts would have a negative impact on women, girls, people with disabilities and others who are marginalised because of protected characteristics, and would also harm the FCDO's aspirations on disability-inclusive development. The assessment found there would be a significant reduction in the number and size of targeted programme activities aimed at those furthest behind and that, 'without targeted initiatives, development gains may not benefit the 'hardest to reach''. It flagged that, although there are existing mechanisms to maximise the positive use of ODA, it would not be possible to fully mitigate against the impacts of the cuts on efforts to achieve more equal societies. Despite these concerns, the FCDO went ahead.

The ODA cuts had a huge impact on programmes that seek to address gender equality. There was a 75% cut in bilateral programming to address violence against women and girls (VAWG), a 70% cut for sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) bilateral programming, and an 80% cut for SRHR central programming. The FCDO's own assessment flagged that the cuts would impact girls' education and wider efforts on gender equality. Yet, at the same time, the UK was championing gender equality, through its Action Plan on Girls' Education, the G7 Girls' Education Declaration and the Global Education Summit.

There were also significant cuts to existing disability inclusion programmes as well as to mainstreaming the needs of people with disabilities across bilateral programmes. For example, the withdrawal of FCDO support to all neglected tropical disease (NTD) programmes left more than 200 million of the world's poorest people at risk from NTDs. Other examples include the cancellation of UK Aid funding for a project supporting communities affected by leprosy and disability in Bangladesh. As a result, thousands of people who are marginalised and living in extreme poverty missed out on health education and income generation opportunities, which they could have used to lift themselves out of poverty. The cuts to social protection, estimated at around 60% of bilateral spend, cut programmes that, in the FCDO's own words, 'seek to reduce poverty and are a key tool in mitigating Covid-19 social and economic shocks for the poorest and most marginalised'<sup>19</sup>.

17. UNICEF (2020), [COVID-19 response: Considerations for Children and Adults with Disabilities](#)

18. International Development Committee/ International Relations and Defence Committee (7 February 2022), [Gender equality in UK aid spending](#) [letter to Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs]

19. International Development Select Committee (8 March 2022), ['FAO International Development Committee: Equalities Impact Assessment'](#), [online document accessed June 2022]



## Spotlight: The UK's action on disability inclusion and girls' education

The UK has played an instrumental role in influencing other actors to do more on disability inclusion. At the recent Global Disability Summit, the FCDO launched its new Disability Inclusion and Rights Strategy 2022–2030, along with 18 UK government commitments. Although this ambitious strategy is welcome, the commitments made at the summit are vague and contain very few measurable objectives or financial commitments, and there is a lack of transparency on how the strategy will be implemented. It is important that the strategy is implemented through a delivery plan with clear timelines, indicators, funding allocations and accountability mechanisms to enable quality impact that can be fully demonstrated, developed and monitored in full consultation with organisations of persons with disabilities.

The 'equality continuum' within the strategy is an interesting concept and we welcome the commitment to ensure that, at a minimum, interventions do no harm. This approach could be an important mechanism to mainstream inclusion across the FCDO, and the department should provide further clarity on how this will be implemented in practice. This should be assessed for each programme and the definition of do no harm clearly defined to ensure it encompasses not exacerbating existing inequalities between groups. As a leader on disability inclusion, the FCDO should make a clear commitment to move from minimum to at least medium standard (i.e. to actively address the needs of diverse identity groups and address barriers). A delivery plan should set clear targets for this, alongside specific timelines for when all programmes will exceed the minimum standard.

The UK government also played a key role in securing the Girls' Education Declaration at the 2021 G7 Summit, and in 2021 it launched a new Girls Education Action Plan, which sets out the UK's strategy for supporting children who have been marginalised the most into education. The strategy highlights the Girls' Education Challenge transition and the Leave No Girl Behind project as success stories, but unfortunately falls short of committing to scale up, build on or extend these initiatives. To continue to be seen as a positive force on inclusion, the scale of the UK's investment on inclusive education, and particular allocations to girls with disabilities as well as girls from ethnic minority and indigenous backgrounds, should be clearer. In addition, the strategy could be clearer on how the FCDO intends to monitor progress on education for children with disabilities and ethnic minority and indigenous girls. It could also be better aligned with FCDO's Global Disability Summit commitments, including the commitment to track results disaggregated by disability across all new education activities and ensure an inclusion focus in reporting.

The impact the cuts will have on the prioritisation, across the UK's ODA spending, of groups that have been marginalised is very concerning. The UK has previously played an influential role on the principle of leaving no one behind, for example, by hosting the first ever Global Disability Summit and leading the G7 in 2021 to adopt a Declaration on Girls' Education. However, these commitments are unlikely to deliver to communities that have been marginalised if they are not backed up by continued leadership, appropriate financing and clear implementation plans, targets and indicators. Additionally, it is essential for the FCDO to be clear about how the increased women and girls' budget<sup>20</sup> will be allocated to prioritise those hardest hit by the ODA cuts and ensure the UK government meets its promise to leave no one behind.

### DFID/FCO merger

It is positive that the FCDO is responsible for deciding the final departmental allocation of ODA and administering the majority of UK ODA. While other government departments can play a key role in delivering ODA, when relevant to their areas of expertise, the FCDO is best placed to spend the majority of ODA as it can build on the expertise and experience that DFID had in using ODA to concretely address entrenched poverty (including tackling complex and intractable poverty traps that keep groups behind). But the FCDO is a new department and many of its processes and policies are still in development, while significant numbers of ex-DFID staff are leaving. It is therefore critical that the appropriate mechanisms are put in place, and that DFID's expertise is built upon, to ensure that ODA is administered effectively and equitably. This means administering it in line with the UK International Development Act, the Gender Act, the 2030 Agenda commitment to leave no one behind and the Paris Agreement. As an example, the FCDO should ensure that it consistently uses the OECD's Development Assistance Committee's (DAC) gender and disability markers, and that these markers are also used to monitor funding in these areas.

20. GOV.UK (17 November, 2021), '[Preventing sexual violence in conflict: Foreign Secretary's speech at the Gender Equality Advisory Council](#)' [online text of Foreign Secretary speech]



## Inclusive data

In the early weeks and months of the Covid-19 pandemic, the UK was one of the first to publish data disaggregated by ethnicity and religion, which revealed infections and deaths significantly varied by community. However, data availability continues to be a serious constraint, holding back progress on reducing inequalities and promoting sustainable development.

The 2019 voluntary national review (VNR) recognised the important role the UK plays in supporting other countries in 'strengthening and modernising their national statistical systems to enable them to gather and analyse good quality disaggregated data', as well as pressing for a coherent and aligned global monitoring system<sup>21</sup>. The 2019 VNR also recognised the importance of data, and it committed the UK to promoting inclusive, disaggregated data, innovative data collection and the use of non-official data.<sup>22</sup>

While the ONS has published its action plan to implement the Inclusive Data Charter<sup>23</sup>, the UK government – despite being one of the charter's earliest champions – has yet to publish a whole-of-government action plan with clear guidelines on how it will monitor progress on the charter. Progress on the Inclusive Data Charter has been largely paused since 2019, and there has been no progress on advancing data disaggregation by ethnicity. Furthermore, the government does not publish data on cross-government ODA spending, appropriately disaggregated. It is also highly concerning that the UK's commitment to supporting data disaggregation efforts around the world was entirely absent from its new international development strategy.

It is critical that the FCDO prioritises and promotes the importance of collecting evidence and research on under-represented groups to better understand progress being made on the SDGs, to inform policy and decision-making, and to assess the impacts of its own policies, such as the Modern Slavery Act. This should include supporting the disaggregation of monitoring and surveillance data by all feasible protected characteristics, using internationally recognised tools. This will ensure all actors can understand impact and allocate resources equitably. The FCDO must also go beyond official data sources as they do not capture the complex needs of communities that have been marginalised, particularly those affected by conflict and crisis. The FCDO must also ensure effective use of OECD DAC gender and disability markers to analyse how much ODA is both gender-equitable and disability-inclusive. The SDG's emphasis on inequality and groups that have been marginalised provides an opportunity to rethink the data that is collected and look for information that is more relevant to those left furthest behind.

To build on the UK's strengths in this area, the government should urgently publish an updated Inclusive Data Charter action plan, building on DFID's initial commitments and increasing ambitions on inclusive data, including disability-inclusive and ethnically disaggregated data.

### To ensure no one is left behind, the UK government should:

1. Ensure the new international development strategy and all other thematic strategies and underpinning policy frameworks are informed by, promote, and uphold the principles enshrined within the 2030 Agenda. The principles include commitments to respecting human rights, leaving no one behind, and approaches that are universal, inalienable, indivisible, interdependent, equal and non-discriminatory.<sup>24</sup>
2. Improve transparency and accountability towards commitments and targets aimed at those furthest left behind. Commitments made at summits and in strategies should be implemented through clear delivery plans, with clear timelines, indicators, funding allocations and accountability mechanisms that are developed by meaningfully engaging communities that have been marginalised.
3. Conduct analysis to understand whether cuts to mainstream programmes have disproportionately impacted groups that have been marginalised and take action to revise these trends if identified. Additional equalities assessments should be conducted and published on a regular basis to ensure transparent and accountable decision-making.
4. Ensure effective use of the OECD DAC gender and disability markers to analyse how much ODA is both gender-equitable and disability-inclusive.
5. Urgently publish an updated Inclusive Data Charter action plan with responsibilities clearly defined alongside priorities and activities, and ensure that learnings from the implementation of DFID's original Inclusive Data Charter action plan<sup>25</sup> are incorporated.

24. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/jpo/wp-content/uploads/sites/55/2017/02/2030-Agenda-for-Sustainable-Development-KCSD-Primer-new.pdf>

25. UK aid (2019), [Inclusive Data Charter Action Plan](#)

21. HM Government (2019), [Voluntary National Review of progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals](#)

22. Ibid

23. ONS (13 July, 2021), '[Inclusive data charter action plan for the global Sustainable Development Goals](#)' [online document, accessed June 2022]