



Inequalities: a concept note

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Belgian development agency

enabel

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Why an Enabel **concept** note on inequalities ?

“Nothing as practical as a good theory”¹

We can distinguish among four reasons to reiterate this long-standing statement.

Reason ①

**If we want to do something significant about inequalities,
we will at least need a backbone of common language and understanding.**

What is inequality, and is it always plural? Or should we say inequity? Why is it of utmost importance to reduce inequalities? Wasn't focusing on poverty good enough? What kind of equality do we want, equality of opportunity or of outcome? Didn't we forget equality of process? Is it enough to look at economic inequality to understand inequality, and is income inequality the same as economic inequality?

Answers on all these (and more) questions have been given by all sorts of scholars: “the disciplines that have contributed to a holistic understanding of inequality include sociology, history, politics, economics, health, literature, statistics, moral philosophy and psychology; and even this exceptionally broad list may not be complete”². And also policy makers used inequality in multiple ways. Unsurprisingly then, diversity of perspectives on inequality is reflected in divergent definitions and opinions. One contemporary scholar even argues that “few ideals have been more widely discussed, yet less well understood, than the ideal of equality”³.

¹ A truism going a long way, starting with Kurt Lewin in 1952:

Lewin K (1952) *Field theory in social science: selected theoretical papers*. London: Tavistock.

Weiss C (1995) [*Nothing as practical as a good theory: exploring theory-based evaluation in complex community initiatives for children and families*](#). In: J Connell, A Kubish, L Schorr & C Weiss (eds) *New approaches to evaluating community initiatives*. Washington DC: Aspen Institute.

Pawson R (2003) [*Nothing as practical as a good theory*](#). *Evaluation* 9(4): 471-490.

² Shifa M & Ranchhod V (2019) [*Handbook on inequality measurement for country studies*](#). Cape Town: University of Cape Town, African Centre of Excellence for Inequality Research.

³ Temkin L (2001) [*Inequality: a complex, individualistic, and comparative notion*](#). *Philosophical Issues* 11(1): 327-353.

Reason ②

Reducing inequalities is a core task for humanity, but not an easy one.

Reducing inequalities needs decisive and coordinated action.

While a theoretical concept note will only have indirect effects on bringing down inequality, it is a sine qua non for better understanding and hence for more effective action.

Ever since the adoption of the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) – with its core principle [Leave no one behind](#) and the inclusion of Goal 10 [Reduce inequality within and among countries](#) – the pursuit of equality has gained a place as game changer for development, wellbeing and survival. Without curbing inequality, the 2030 Agenda cannot be realised. As stated by the [UN Secretary-General](#): “Implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals requires eliminating all forms of discrimination, reducing economic inequalities that undermine human rights and promoting the empowerment and inclusion of people who are furthest left behind”.

Yet the road is long and demanding. A [2018 implementation report](#) of the UN Committee for Development Policy saw inequality “at the heart of resistance to change”. The [2019 UN Secretary-General progress report](#) provided more detail: “Inequality within and among nations continues to be a significant concern despite progress in and efforts at narrowing disparities of opportunity, income and power. Income inequality continues to rise in many parts of the world, even as the bottom 40 per cent of the population in many countries has experienced positive growth rates. Greater emphasis will need to be placed on reducing inequalities in income as well as those based on other factors”. This year’s [World Social Report](#) confirms still widening inequalities and identifies four related megatrends: technological change, climate change, urbanization and migration. The report concludes: “Whether these megatrends are harnessed to encourage a more equitable and sustainable world, or allowed to exacerbate disparities and divisions, will largely determine the shape of our common future”.

The relationship between inequality and growth has also been examined more in-depth during the last decades, which changed the way experts today consider the association between these two phenomena. This allowed to finally question the long accepted theory that reducing inequality inherently conflicts with economic efficiency⁴, and that at least some level of inequality has to be maintained to foster growth. By 2011, [Ostry and Berg](#) were able to reveal two overlooked causal chains, in advanced and developing economies alike: (1) inequality hampers growth, for example by amplifying the risk of crisis or making it difficult for the poor to invest in education; (2) equitable income distribution is what makes a country’s growth more sustainable over time⁵. Three years later, [Ostry, Berg and Tsangarides](#) were able to add another important finding: redistribution (a key measure to reduce inequalities, but long considered a culprit for lack of economic progress) is generally pro-growth. Thus, beyond humanitarian values and ethical reasons, we now also have welfare-economy arguments to reduce inequalities.

⁴ As famously posited by Arthur Okun in his 1975 ‘Equality and efficiency: the big trade off’. For a summary, see: [https://assets.aspeninstitute.org/content/uploads/files/content/docs/OKUN_EQUALITY_AND_EFFICIENCY_\(AS08\).PDF](https://assets.aspeninstitute.org/content/uploads/files/content/docs/OKUN_EQUALITY_AND_EFFICIENCY_(AS08).PDF)

⁵ The result is what is called a longer ‘growth spell’. This association is robust, even after controlling for external shocks, initial income, institutional quality, openness to trade and macroeconomic stability.

Reason ③

As a national development agency and development agency working for the EU and other parties, Enabel has a clear mandate to tackle inequality; yet a clear and comprehensive conceptual cornerstone to inform its action is still lacking.

In response to the 2030 Agenda, the European Union in 2017 committed itself to a [New European Consensus on Development](#), which explicitly includes mainstreaming the reduction of inequality in development cooperation, “wherever people live and regardless of ethnicity, gender, age, disability, religion or beliefs, sexual orientation and gender identity, migration status or other factors”. The [European Commission](#) (EC) recognized that “High levels of inequality are an obstacle to all aspects of sustainable development and to achieving the objectives of the 2030 Agenda. They hinder sustainable economic growth, hold back poverty eradication, and threaten democracy, stability and social cohesion as well as other social outcomes. They can also lead to environmental degradation, which in turn mostly affects the poor and other vulnerable groups”.

In 2019, [Addressing inequalities](#) (‘building a world which leaves no one behind’) became the central theme of the European Development Days. The European Commission also presented its staff working document [Implementation of the new European Consensus on Development](#), with the main objective “to analyse opportunities to better integrate the reduction of inequality in EU development cooperation”. The [Council](#) welcomed the document and in turn asked its member states “to strengthen their tools and approaches to make them more effective in addressing inequality and to mainstream the reduction of inequality in their development cooperation”. A guidance document for policy proposals and a draft diagnostic tool for countries were produced⁶, but without a coherent conceptual basis put to the proof and agreed on⁷.

⁶ The first is an output of the Research Facility on Inequalities, delegated by the EC to the AFD: David A (2019) [Reducing inequalities: policy proposals for the development cooperation agenda](#). Paris, Agence française de développement.

The second is the German Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) Inequality diagnostics tool, independently drafted and still unfinished to date.

⁷ In fact, both the AFD guidance document and the GIZ draft diagnostics refer for conceptual issues to: Klasen S, Scholl N, Lahoti R, Ochmann S & Volmer S (2016) [Inequality: worldwide trends and current debates](#). Discussion paper No. 209. Göttingen: Georg-August-Universität, Courant Research Centre Poverty, Equity and Growth.

Reason ④

The present concept note is a first step towards the Enabel strategy note (for each field of expertise) on inequalities. The ex-ante impact assessment tool and the tool for monitoring, evaluation and learning will be conceptually rooted in the present concept note.

At the heart of Europe, and with a rich expertise in social policy and practice, Belgium is in a prime position for contributing substantially to the tasks described above. Enabel, the Belgian development agency, in 2019 put forward inequality as a global challenge. As such, it can be regarded as a transversal theme, applying to most (if not all) interventions, or even as a theme of intervention within a given sector.

Within Enabel, the EST department⁸ was commissioned to spearhead the development of a state-of-the-art strategy for inequality reduction. This will include a tool to assess the equity impact of planned interventions and a tool to mainstream the consideration of equity in evaluating and monitoring ongoing interventions and in learning from actions. Both tools will be based on a carefully crafted Enabel strategy note on inequalities for each field of expertise.

⁸ *Sectoral and thematic expertise (EST = Expertise sectorielle et thématique).*

What *to expect* from this concept note on inequalities ?

By combining clarity with comprehensiveness, this note aims to provide a conceptual cornerstone for informed judgment and appropriate action, to position Enabel as a forerunner in the fight against inequalities.

Clear definitions

Few concepts generate such wide-ranging opinions as inequality. Different disciplines, with their interplay of intuitions and reason, interests and power, have led to a plethora of distinct (and often competing) problem identifications, aspirations, and even definitions.

In development cooperation praxis – when theory is translated into action – this is more than only impractical, and providing a common glossary is not enough. Preferences for one definition over another, for aspired solutions, for particular indicators more than others, are all interlinked, but their relationship is rarely made explicit. If one thing is clear from the start, it is the need for clarity.

This note aims to be clear and instructive, by both defining and contextualizing current inequality concepts.

A broad view

Actors of the Belgian development cooperation, including Enabel, have long-standing expertise in domains closely related to inequality reduction and/or that can be considered constituent aspects of it. [Sustainable agriculture](#), [integrated water resources management](#), [capacity development for environmental sustainability](#) and [inclusive local governance](#) are just a few examples. Expertise in social protection and access to [health](#) and [education](#) are established strongholds of our development cooperation. [Private sector development](#) and [Digital-for-Development initiatives](#) are recent add-ons to Enabel's portfolio where due attention for equity can make a difference. And of course, human rights and [gender equality](#) are part and parcel of all projects.

The [mainstreaming of gender equality](#) in all Belgian development cooperation interventions shows the way forward for addressing equity at large. Within-sector consideration of equity, however well-informed, is insufficient: any intervention in one sector will also impact equity in other sectors. To avoid doing harm and to address inequalities effectively, the whole picture has to be taken account of. A first and necessary condition to make this possible is to complement sector-bound expertise on equity with awareness and knowledge of even broader systemic manifestations of inequalities⁹.

A concept note facilitates such broad comprehension as a user-friendly entry point¹⁰ to the vast literature on inequalities, but can obviously not replace it.

This note aims to be comprehensive, without however compromising the conciseness of a concept note format.

⁹ A second step then is to have available the tools to check and follow up the equity impact of all interventions in all related sectors.

¹⁰ Insofar as is feasible, terms are explained throughout the note. In addition, a glossary is provided in annex.

The format adopted in this concept note allows for reading at several levels (quickly or in-depth).

If in a hurry, the red text will provide all essentials

The black text will provide an informed reading of these essentials

Whenever a relevant reference document is publicly available, a [hyperlink](#) is provided

When a reference document is not publicly available, the full reference is given

References in full text can be regarded as key readings for in-depth understanding

References in footnotes are meant to be complementary, just like the footnotes themselves

In addition, at the end of the text you can find a glossary in which key terms are defined

level 1, red text in a box will do

level 2, black text too

level 3, look it up

level 4, the ins and outs

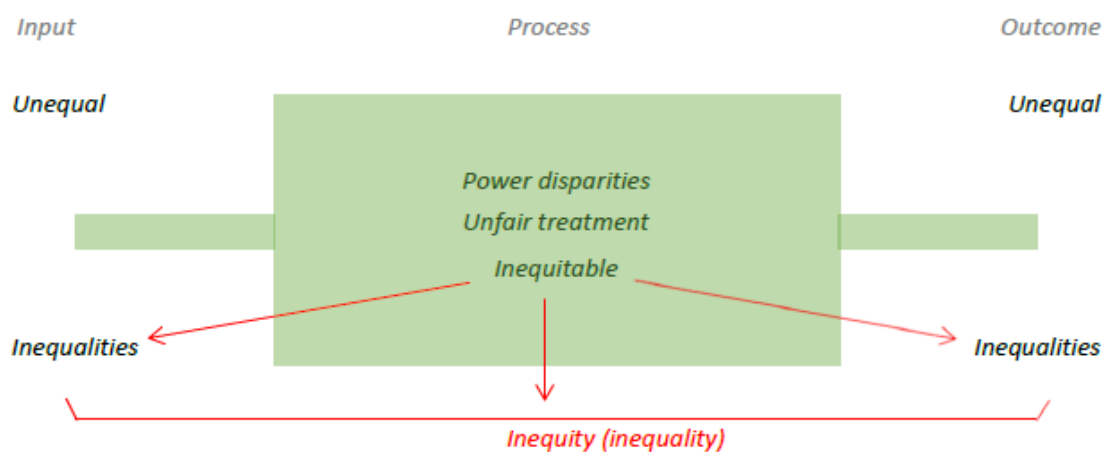
1. In search of a definition and its implications: Inequality, inequalities or inequity ?

To put things plain and simple: when two things are different, they are **unequal**, and the condition of being unequal is called **inequality**.

When we talk about people, there's nothing wrong as such with being different: every person is unique. Plenty of differences can be taken for granted¹¹.

When people *are treated* unfair, that is inequitable, leading to unequal outcomes which are also unfair, and the whole of both the process and the inequalities involved¹² is called inequity.

Figure 1:
An input-process-outcome scheme of inequity :



Consequently, it is of relevance to distinguish among differences and inequalities. In their classical work on health inequity, Whitehead and Dahlgren in 2007 state that “[Three distinguishing features, when combined, turn mere variations or differences in health into a social inequity in health. They are systematic, socially produced \(and therefore modifiable\) and unfair](#)”¹³.

Today, aside from the health equity field and to the extent of becoming a common denominator, ‘inequality’ is increasingly used instead of ‘inequity’ in both academic and policy circles, but the conceptual attributes as advanced by Whitehead are usually recognised.

¹¹ In addition, there would be no ground to reverse or equalise them. For instance, no reasonable person would ever ask women to suffer from prostate cancer, or men from uterine cancer.

¹² Which can be, among others: unequal inputs, unequal opportunities, and eventually unequal outcomes.

¹³ This work followed Margaret Whiteheads classical book ‘concepts and principles of equity and health’ (1990) and takes into account the new body of research that emerged since the 1990s and has shown the social cause of many health inequalities.

Several implications follow from this delineation of inequity.

At least seven implications are worth mentioning and we will elaborate each of them.

- ① Process is part and parcel of inequity
- ② Monopolization of power is a key mechanism within that process
- ③ Inequity is essentially about people
- ④ Inequity is generated by people and therefore can be acted upon
- ⑤ Inequalities are systematic: they do not occur randomly
- ⑥ Inequalities need systemic action over life fields and within sectors
- ⑦ Consensus on what fairness entails is needed and can be based on human rights

1.1. *Process is part and parcel of inequity*

Inequalities in opportunities, outcomes and process and the added value of the capability approach

Too often, inequity is reduced to inequalities in opportunities and inequalities in outcomes, thereby largely ignoring the black box of process in between. Equality of opportunity refers to starting situations (where people begin), whereas equality of outcomes points to results (where people end up).

The [European Commission](#) for example recognizes that the distinction “made between inequality of outcomes and inequality of opportunity” is important, that “it is difficult to disentangle causal relationship and derive simple answers as to whether policies should prioritise one or the other” and that these “dimensions of inequality are closely interrelated”, but makes no effort to identify the process that may explain the relationship between opportunity and outcomes.

Also, the [discussion paper](#) to which both AFD and GIZ turn for conceptual clarity on inequalities leaves process largely unaddressed and refers to Amartya Sen’s [Equality of what?](#) for what is called “the most important distinction (...) between equality in opportunities and equality in outcomes”. Amartya Sen developed, together with Martha Nussbaum and others, the capability approach. It should be noted however that Sen – in this and many other publications – rightfully made the distinction¹⁴, but never claimed opportunity and outcome to be the only dimensions¹⁵. In fact, his introduction of the capability* concept in a way was a shift from seeing opportunity as merely input-related (as to resources or status) to opportunity as capability¹⁶, or the ability to do something, which clearly implies a process component.

Process and development are interlinked. In Sen’s words: “The concentration on distinct capabilities (...) points to [the necessity of seeing development as a combination of distinct processes](#), rather than as the expansion of some apparently homogeneous magnitude such as real income or utility. The things that people value doing or being can be quite diverse, and the valuable capabilities vary from such elementary freedoms as being free from hunger and undernourishment to such complex abilities as achieving self-respect and social participation. The challenge of human development demands attention being paid to a variety of sectoral concerns and a combination of social and economic processes”.

The first ever [Human Development Report](#) – building on Sen’s inference of the capability approach – stressed that development “denotes both the *process* of widening people’s choices and the *level* of their achieved well-being”¹⁷.

[Alkire and Deneulin](#) state that the “human development and capability approach combines a focus on outcomes with a focus on processes”, while identifying equity as one of its principles and defining equity “in the space of people’s freedom to live valuable lives”¹⁸.

¹⁴ In his 1979 [Equality of what?](#), Sen did not make such distinction in terms of ‘opportunities’ and ‘outcomes’. Instead, he juxtaposed ‘goods’ and ‘utilities’.

In ‘Freedom, achievements and resources’, the 2nd chapter of his 1992 [Inequality reexamined](#), he distinguishes ‘freedom’ from ‘resources’ (“the means to freedom such as primary goods and resources”) and warned of “significant variations in the conversion of resources and primary goods into freedoms”.

¹⁵ Other scholars emphasized the relative character of this distinction.

[Labonté & Gagnon](#) for example, see equality in opportunity and equality in outcome as “ideal types; neither exists in ‘true’ form. They represent aspirational ideas of what societies strive to create for their members (fairness in outcomes) and how they believe this should be accomplished (fairness in opportunity)”.

¹⁶ In Sen’s words: “[shifting attention from goods to what goods do to human beings](#)”. See also, further: ③ Inequity is essentially about people.

¹⁷ Italics in original.

When equity is at stake: to make sure that human rights make a real difference in people's lives, both capabilities/opportunities ("substantive opportunities") and processes ("freedom of processes") have to be taken account of¹⁹.

First of all, by considering inequity as unfair *treatment*, we focus our attention on the process that generates and is part and parcel of inequity. In our equity assessments, we give due attention to process. Therefore, we complement the already used human rights framework²⁰ with the capability approach.

The capability approach draws attention to the dynamic interaction between structural elements and agency

The process that shapes the path between inequality of opportunities and inequality of outcomes, consists of the interaction between structural elements and agency of people. Agency refers to the freedom and autonomy that denote individuals' ability to choose, act and bring about change. By contrast, socialisation, cultural schemes, legal frameworks and material resources refer typically to structural elements.

When using the capability perspective, a word is in place on the concept and interpretation of 'agency': it refers to "a person's ability to act on behalf of what he or she values and has reason to value"²¹. Increasingly, reinforcing the disadvantaged's agency is seen as a core contributor to equity according to development actors. Agency is of value for the individuals themselves (it gives them dignity); people know at best themselves how to increase their well-being, and it enriches human life and can lead to the transformation of values and norms.

An example of agency is highlighted by law scholars. People use various strategies to cope with regulation, given their 'legal consciousness' (i.e. how people think and act in relation to the law and how they construct legality in their daily lives)²². They distinguish among three manners by which people construct and interpret their legal experiences, namely 'standing before the law', 'playing with the law', and 'up against the law'. In the first case, individuals imagine legal rules as a field of disinterested action, distant from their lives, which they cannot control. They do not see the connection between the law and ordinary life. In the second situation, people understand legality as a

¹⁸ Alkire S & Deneulin S (2009) *The human development and capability approach*. In: S Deneulin & L Shahani (eds) [An introduction to the human development and capability approach: freedom and agency](#). Ottawa: International Development Research Centre (pp 22-48).

¹⁹ See Sen A (2004) [Elements of a theory of human rights](#). *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 32(4): 315-356; and Sen A (2005) [Human rights and capabilities](#). *Journal of Human Development* 6(2): 151-166.

²⁰ As specified in the [New European Consensus on Development](#): "The EU and its Member States will implement a rights-based approach to development cooperation, encompassing all human rights. They will promote inclusion and participation, non-discrimination, equality and equity, transparency and accountability. The EU and its Member States will continue to play a key role in ensuring that no-one is left behind, wherever people live and regardless of ethnicity, gender, age, disability, religion or beliefs, sexual orientation and gender identity, migration status or other factors. This approach includes addressing the multiple discriminations faced by vulnerable people and marginalised groups".

²¹ Alkire S (2008) [Concepts and measures of agency](#). OPHI working paper 9. Oxford: Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative.

Alkire here builds further on Sen, who in his 1984 John Dewey lectures had already conceived agency freedom as "what the person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important".

See: Sen A (1985) [Well-being, agency and freedom: the Dewey lectures 1984](#). *The Journal of Philosophy* 82(4): 169-221. Different definitions of agency are to be found in all branches of social science including economics, and even in the ramifications of the capability approach. Within the latter, Claassen recently defined agency as "freedom + autonomy". See: Claassen R (2016) An agency-based capability theory of justice. *European Journal of Philosophy* 25(4): 1279-1304.

²² Ewick P and Silbey S (1999) 'Common Knowledge and Ideological Critique: The Significance of Knowing That the "Haves" Come out Ahead', *Law & Society Review*, 33(4): 1025-1041.

game in which they can invent new rules, using diverse resources, to serve their interests and values. In the last situation, individuals see law as a product of unequal power and understand legality as arbitrary. People act against the law by using ruses to avoid or appropriate law's power. Consequently, legality can be a space for powerful action.

The limits of the agency of the deprived

There is no doubt that enhancing the agency of the deprived is both worthwhile on its own and possibly conducive to equity. Yet, its leveraging effect should not be overestimated: when taking a perspective larger than the disadvantaged only, the (usually much stronger) agency of the privileged should also be taken account of²³, and structural elements already predetermine the possibilities for action and limit the autonomy and freedom of deprived people.

Overemphasizing individual agency tends to overlook the many barriers that persons can face in the process on the way to a valued outcome. Therefore, the capability approach was often criticised for being too individualistic. Yet, the capability perspective is less individualistic than often perceived. Amartya Sen urges us to also consider “the (...) variability in the relation between the means, on the one hand, and the actual opportunities, on the other”, including “variations in non-personal resources” and “different relative positions vis-à-vis others”²⁴.

Further exploring what Sen termed ‘variability’ allowed Ingrid Robeyns to distinguish three strands of ‘conversion factors’, namely personal conversion factors (i.e. personal differences, for example some people have a handicap, while others not), social conversion factors (e.g. people have an extended network or are very lonely) and environmental conversion factors (e.g. people live in the mountains far away from a road versus close by a road)²⁵. Bringing these insights together about various types of conversion factors together with those of Hvinden and Halvorsen²⁶, individual agency cannot be considered in an isolated way (or as a panacea for inequality reduction), yet it is always in need of enabling non-personal conversion factors²⁷. When agency takes “the form of bargaining and negotiation”²⁸, collective agency (e.g. group action) can be a powerful extension of individual agency²⁹.

²³ As noted by gender and development scholar Naila Kabeer, “Agency has both positive and negative meanings in relation to power. In the positive sense of the ‘power to’, it refers to people’s capacity to define their own life-choices and to pursue their own goals, even in the face of opposition from others. Agency can also be exercised in the more negative sense of ‘power over’, in other words, the capacity of an actor or category of actors to override the agency of others”.

See: Kabeer N (1999) [Resources, agency, achievements: reflections on the measurement of women’s empowerment](#). *Development and Change* 30(3): 435-464.

²⁴ Sen A (2005) [Human rights and capabilities](#). *Journal of Human Development* 6(2): 151-166.

²⁵ Robeyns I (2005) [The capability approach: a theoretical survey](#). *Journal of Human Development* 6(1): 93-114.

Robeyns I (2017) [Wellbeing, freedom and social justice: the capability approach re-examined](#). Cambridge: Open Book Publishers.

²⁶ Hvinden B & Halvorsen R (2018) [Mediating agency and structure in sociology: what role for conversion factors?](#) *Critical Sociology* 44(6): 865-881.

²⁷ This is by no means a pessimistic view. Hvinden and Halvorsen make the point that “it would be unfortunate if the term ‘conversion factors’ only refers to structures that make conversion processes challenging or difficult. Rather than just seeing conversion factors as *hindrances* and *constraints*, it is equally worth asking whether some conversion factors are serving as *facilitators* and *enablers* for desirable outcomes”.

²⁸ Kabeer N (1999) [Resources, agency, achievements: reflections on the measurement of women’s empowerment](#). *Development and Change* 30(3): 435-464.

²⁹ The opposite is also true: this year’s ‘World Social Report’ gives declining membership in trade unions as an example of diminished collective agency and bargaining capacity, leading to growing vulnerability and inequality in the world of work. See: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2020) [World social report 2020: inequality in a rapidly changing world](#). New York: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

1.2. Power is a core element of the process generating inequity, and the monopolisation of power is a key mechanism within that process

Power as a mechanism generating inequity

Generally, power is seen as a core element of inequity³⁰.

Inequity is often related to processes such as [discrimination](#) and [social exclusion](#). Social stratification, market liberalisation and measures taken during austerity (to name just a few) are also mentioned as 'drivers' of inequity³¹. These phenomena have power in common³².

We are aware that [many definitions of power](#) exist. When pointing out power as core in the inequity generating process, we pay attention to *power over* (over people, resources, and the use of resources). For the peoples affected by inequity, this then results in lack of *power to* (shape their life), and both reduced *power within* (self-esteem) and reduced *power with* (for collective action)³³.

Monopolization of power as key mechanism generating inequity

From the step of identifying power as core element of inequity to the stage considering monopolization of power as the key mechanism within the process constituent of inequity is a reasonable step³⁴. Therefore, we turn to some classical studies. Already a century ago, while discussing his 'social closure' concept, Max Weber mentioned that "Such closure, as we want to call it, is an ever-recurring process (...).The tendency towards the monopolization of specific, usually economic

³⁰ Among the most elaborated recent inquiries on power and inequity is the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) project 'Overcoming inequalities in a fractured world: between elite power and social mobilization', exploring "the drivers of inequalities and the institutional factors that perpetuate them" and "creating a new conceptual approach and an interdisciplinary global research network working on inequalities from structural and actor-centred perspectives". A wealth of publications is available for consultation at www.unrisd.org/OvercomingInequalities.

For a concise summary, see: [Overcoming inequalities in the context of the 2030 agenda for sustainable development](#), in which the point is made "that to address inequalities, one must look to formal and informal institutions that perpetuate unequal power relations, ranging from electoral rules to education systems, property rights, access to finance and capital, and social norms".

³¹ See, among others: International Panel on Social Progress (2018) [Rethinking society for the 21st century \(Summary\)](#). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

³² The relevance hereof for development practice cannot be overstated.

See, in Deborah Eade's preface to [Development and Social Diversity](#): "the interventions of official agencies and NGOs alike have often exarbed inequality, and further disempowered the powerless, largely because they have ignored differences in how poverty and oppression are constructed, or the way in which our identities are mediated by power".

³³ For a concise introduction to this influential perspective on power, see:

Rowlands J (1997) Power and empowerment. In: J Rowlands [Questioning empowerment: working with women in Honduras](#). Oxford: Oxfam UK and Ireland (pp 9-28).

³⁴ For a political science argument for the explanatory power of processes (and of mechanisms in processes), see:

Tilly C (2001) [Mechanisms in political processes](#). *Annual Review of Political Science* 4: 21-41.

For a philosophy of science introduction to mechanisms, see: Bunge M (2004)

[How does it work? The search for explanatory mechanisms](#). *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 34(2): 182-210.

For an overview of concept, usefulness and application of mechanisms in social science, see: Hedström P & Ylikoski P (2010) [Causal mechanisms in the social sciences](#). *Annual Review of Sociology* 36: 49-67.

opportunities is always the driving force”³⁵. At the end of the 20th century, Charles Tilly linked Weber’s social closure with the roots of what he termed ‘durable inequality’³⁶.

It is worth remembering that talking of monopolization of power is not synonymous with malevolent practices or blaming higher forces: no bad intentions are needed for this mechanism, which can be identified at every level of human interaction³⁷. Power does not have to be repressive or coercive, is not limited to institutional relations, but exercised by all persons in all their relations³⁸. Echoing Michel Foucault, power is ubiquitous³⁹. Yet, monopolization causes disparities, and disparities generate inequities.

An alert on the role of power was already formulated half a decade ago, in the field of health inequity: “Power asymmetry and global social norms limit the range of choice and constrain action on health inequity”⁴⁰.

In Latin America, the mechanism of monopolization of power is conceptualised as the ‘culture of privilege’, described as “the bedrock for inequality and its reproduction”. The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean distinguishes three basic features in such culture of privilege: (1) the normalization of inequalities as differences of a supposedly natural order; (2) the imposition of a hierarchical order by the privileged; and – of particular importance for inequality reduction (3) the perpetuation of privileged power positions and inequality through social institutions and practices⁴¹.

Today, in its flagship [World Social Report 2020](#), the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs confirms the challenging nature of breaking the vicious circle of inequality throughout the world and in all spheres of life: “efforts to reduce inequality will inevitably challenge the interests of

³⁵ Weber M (1968) [German 1st edition 1921] [Economy and society: an outline of interpretive sociology](#). G Roth & C Wittich (eds) [*Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft: Grundriss der verstehende Soziologie*. J Winckelmann (ed)]. Berkeley: University of California Press (ch 2, p 342).

³⁶ See Tilly C (1998) *Durable inequality*. Berkeley, University of California Press.
First chapter (‘Of essences and bonds’) republished as ‘The roots of durable inequality’ in J Manza & M Sauder (eds) (2009) *Inequality and society: social science perspectives on social stratification*. New York: Norton (pp 432-442).
A parallel reasoning about unequal power relationships as driver of both poverty and inequality can be found in:
Green D (2012) [From poverty to power: how active citizens can change the world \[2nd edition\]](#). Rugby: Practical Action.
Tilly’s power-focused view on inequality lay the foundation for what is know today as ‘relational inequality theory’, a framework recently applied to workplace and other organisational inequity. The concept of relational inequalities can be considered advantageous when further mainstreaming equity in the decent work agenda. For an introduction, see:
Tomaskovic-Devey R & Avent-Holt D (2019) [Relational inequality theory](#). In: R Tomaskovic-Devey & D Avent-Holt *Relational inequalities: an organizational approach*. New York: Oxford University Press (ch 3, pp 43-69).

³⁷ *The conceptualisation of power being “a relation rather than a thing” owes much to the reasoning of political scientists Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz, sociologist Steven Lukes and philosopher Thomas Wartenberg, as synthesized by critical theorist Iris Marion Young: “conceptualizing power as relational rather than substantive, as produced and reproduced through many people outside the immediate power dyad, brings out the dynamic nature of power relations as an ongoing process”. See:*

Young IM (1990) [Justice and the politics of difference](#). Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press (pp 30-21 & 39-65).
Wartenberg T (1988) [The forms of power](#). *Analyse & Kritik, Journal of Philosophy and Social Theory* 10(1): 3-31.
Lukes S (1974) [Power: a radical view](#). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan (2nd edition, 2005, pp 14-59).
Bachrach P & Baratz M (1962) [Two faces of power](#). *The American Political Science Review* 56(4): 947-952.

³⁸ *As, again, concisely summarized by Iris Marion Young in her treatise on justice, oppression in modern society “designates the disadvantage and injustice some people suffer not because a tyrannical power coerces them, but because of the everyday practices of a well-intentioned liberal society”.*

Young IM (1990) [Justice and the politics of difference](#). Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press (p 41).

³⁹ *In Foucault’s view, power is a necessary condition for any social action, and can be both enabling and constraining.*

See: Bălan S (2010) [M. Foucault’s view on power relations](#).

Bucharest: Institute of Philosophy and Psychology Constantin Rădulescu-Motru.

⁴¹ Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (2018) [The inefficiency of inequality](#). Santiago de Chile: ECLAC.
While the concept ‘culture of privilege’ is no doubt useful to explain what the ECLAC terms ‘normalization’, ‘imposition’ and ‘perpetuation’ of power disparities, when describing the generating mechanism it seems preferable to use ‘monopolisation’ over ‘privilege’, as the latter suggests more a status than a process.

certain individuals and groups. At their core, they affect the balance of power. Understanding the political constraints to reducing inequality and devising ways to overcome them is key to breaking the current stalemate”.

We use ‘monopolization of power’ as common denominator for the central mechanism that generates, exacerbates and reproduces inequity, bearing in mind that this mechanism has several complementary manifestations. Obviously, the central role of power in the process of generating and reproducing inequity has consequences for the strategies used for inequality reduction too.

The ‘Matthew effect’, an effect amplifying existing inequalities

A word is in place here on the ‘Matthew effect’, a popular term among social scholars, coined by Robert Merton⁴² as a confirmation in all spheres of society of a quote from Matthew’s gospel: “Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them”. In the health equity literature, the Matthew effect finds its counterpart in Tudor Hart’s ‘inverse care law’, which describes how “The availability of good medical care tends to vary inversely with the need for it in the population served”⁴³.

It seems wise to consider the Matthew effect as what Merton called it, an ‘effect’, in this case one effect (or manifestation) of the mechanism of monopolization of power, and more precisely one that amplifies existing inequalities⁴⁴. For Pierre Bourdieu, this is all part of the broad set of mechanisms that “contribute to the reproduction of the social order and the permanence of the relations of domination”⁴⁵.

An alert was already formulated half a decade ago, in one field: “Power asymmetry and global social norms limit the range of choice and constrain action on health inequity”⁴⁶.

⁴² Merton R (1968) [The Matthew effect in science: the reward and communication systems of science are considered](#). *Science* 159(3810): 56-63.

⁴³ Tudor Hart J (1971) [The inverse care law](#). *The Lancet* 297(7696): 405-412.

⁴⁴ In technical terms, a combination of cumulative advantage and disadvantage.

⁴⁵ Bourdieu P (1990) [The logic of practice](#) [translated by Richard Nice]. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press.

1.3. Inequity is essentially about people, not between characteristics only

Inequity is about people and is social

When concerned about equity, differences between any kind of *things* (characteristics, resources, wealth, outcomes, ...) are important insofar as they are unfair for *people*. Hence, equity is in essence a human-centred concept, and more specifically a relational one⁴⁷.

The human-centred nature of inequity has implications for framing and assessing inequity. Anything related to human society and its organisation is fundamentally [social](#). It seems thus only logical to consider the social phenomenon inequity as the umbrella under which inequity in all areas of human interaction (politics, the economy, the environment, ...) can be grouped.

This is not however how inequality is usually framed. One example among many others, the European Commission puts [economic, social, political and environmental inequality](#) side by side, and economic inequality first. This is understandable, but conceptually flawed and to some extent counterproductive when tackling inequity. It is understandable if only because economic inequalities are the most visible, for which indicators are relatively easily available. It is flawed once we realize that the between-people dimension encompasses all other spheres. And for practical reasons above all, it entails the risk of concealing the power imbalances that – as observed today by United Nations experts – “[hinder effective action to reduce inequality](#)”. Some scholars go a step further and see the latter deficiency as a consequence of a dominant worldview (i.e. the mainstream economic paradigm) in need of a mindshift⁴⁸.

The narrow focus on economic inequality: caveats and merits

While an excessive focus on economic inequality might be deemed inadequate, substituting income inequality for economic inequality is even more reductionist. As [Amartya Sen](#) has forcefully argued, “we ought to pay much more attention than we conventionally do to economic inequality in an appropriately broad sense, taking note of the fact that income inequality, on which economic analysis of inequality so often concentrates, gives a very inadequate and biased view of inequalities (...) The important point to note is that the valuation of income is entirely as a means to other ends and also that it is one means among others”. The relation between income (as one input) and achievements (outcome) is far from constant, co-determined as the latter are by a whole range of personal, social and environmental resources, enablers and barriers.

Moreover, wealth inequality⁴⁹ today is increasing faster than income inequality⁵⁰, while the capital share of total income increases and the labour share decreases⁵¹, even in developing countries.

⁴⁷ As recognised by European authorities: “Unlike poverty – a characteristic that can be defined at the individual level – inequality is a relational concept that refers to differences between individuals and groups”.

See: European Commission (2019) [Implementation of the new European Consensus on Development – Addressing inequality in partner countries](#). Commission staff working document. Brussels: European Commission.

⁴⁸ See: Göpel M (2016) [The great mindshift: how a new economic paradigm and sustainability transformations go hand in hand](#). Berlin: Wuppertal Institute Berlin office.

Göpel’s ‘Great mindshift’ comes to similar conclusions and propositions as Kate Raworth’s [Doughnut economics](#), appearing a year later.

⁴⁹ With ‘wealth’ typically defined as the value of one’s financial assets plus real assets (e.g. housing) minus debts.

⁵⁰ See: Davies J & Shorrocks A (2018) [Comparing global inequality of income and wealth](#). UNU-WIDER working paper 2018/160. Helsinki: United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research.

When – for lack of income data, as is usually the case in low-income economies with a prevailing informal labour sector – income is further replaced by consumption, additional problems arise: imputing values on non-monetary items is ambiguous⁵², and consumption underestimates the monetary resources of the most affluent⁵³. When compared to inequality estimates based on income, inequality assessments based on consumption tend to be underestimations⁵⁴, and thus even more reductionist. The World Bank fully recognizes this as well as a range of other measurement issues and challenges⁵⁵, but maintains its focus on monetary data⁵⁶ for assessing inequality.

Despite all shortcomings of using income and consumption measures, there is no reason not to use monetary data at all. First, in some instances, they might be the only ones available. Second, because they do say something about inequity. The double challenge then consists in making sense out of them as what they mean to people, and complementing them with non-monetary data, such as indicators on inequality of opportunity (access to basic services) or multi-dimensional inequality measurements⁵⁷.

Equity is in essence a human-centred concept, and more specifically a relational one. Economic inequity can therefore be seen as part of social inequity. Though, social inequity usually comes to the fore through economic inequalities. Plenty of lessons can be drawn from indicators. Ultimately, people count.

Credit Suisse Research Institute (2019) *Global wealth report 2019*. Zürich: Credit Suisse Group. *This report, after noting that wealth inequality is bigger than income inequality everywhere, also points out how particularly problematic this is in developing countries, where real assets are most needed to compensate for still rudimentary social protection.*

⁵¹ Piketty T (2014) [*Capital in the twenty-first century*](#). Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

⁵² United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research (2019) [*World income inequality database \(WIID\): user guide and data sources*](#). Helsinki: United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research.

⁵³ World Bank (2016) [*Poverty and shared prosperity 2016: taking on inequality*](#). Washington DC: the World Bank.

⁵⁴ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2020) [*World social report 2020: inequality in a rapidly changing world*](#). New York: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

⁵⁵ Lakner C, Negre M, Cuesta J & Silwal A (2016) [*Measuring inequality isn't easy or straightforward – here's why*](#). World Bank Blogs: Let's talk development – World Bank research findings.

⁵⁶ Publicly available for consultation and analysis since 2016 on [PovcalNet](#).

⁵⁷ The International Monetary Fund (IMF) for example intends to estimate inequality of opportunities by following access to basic services and by tracking health and education outcomes for different income groups, see Dabla-Norris E, Kochhar K, Suphaphiphat N, Ricka F & Tsounta E (2015) [*Causes and consequences of income inequality: a global perspective*](#). IMF staff discussion note 15/13. Washington DC: International Monetary Fund.

1.4. Inequity is generated by people, and is therefore also remediable

Inequity can be changed

Inequity is neither fixed nor inevitable, it is amenable to change⁵⁸. Paraphrasing Jean Ziegler: what is man-made, man can unmake it⁵⁹. Or, in the words of OECD secretary-general Gurría: “There is nothing inevitable about high and growing inequalities. Our policies have created a system that makes them grow and it’s time to change these policies”⁶⁰.

While the bottom line of equity is fairness at the individual level (human-centred fairness, between people and for all people), the flourishing of individuals depends on how society is constructed and reconstructed. To redress inequity and bring about fairness for all, transforming the social processes and mechanisms that generate inequity is essential⁶¹.

As summarised by the United Nations Development Programme: “There is nothing inevitable about high inequality. The widening of gaps in income, wealth or other dimensions of well-being is not an unavoidable price to pay for development. In fact, many countries over the last years have managed to significantly reduce income and non-income inequality through a combination of progressive economic and social policies, often accompanied by the greater participation and empowerment of those who had been left behind by the development process”⁶².

Equitable distribution of opportunities, process, outcome or all of them?

Fair opportunities and satisfaction of basic needs at individual level are contingent on one particular societal conduct: distribution⁶³. While there is no doubt that distribution affects inequity and that redistribution can make a society more equitable, disagreement continues to exist on what should be

⁵⁸ Whitehead M & Dahlgren D (2006) [Levelling up \(part 1\): a discussion paper on concepts and principles for tackling social inequities in health](#). Studies on social and economic determinants of population health No 2. Copenhagen: WHO Europe. See also: Stiglitz J (2015) *The great divide: unequal societies and what we can do about them*. New York: W.W. Norton.

⁵⁹ See Ziegler’s account of hunger in the world, after having served as UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food:

Ziegler J (2011) *Destruction massive : géopolitique de la faim*. Paris: Editions du Seuil (original).

Ziegler J (2013) *Betting on famine: why the world still goes hungry*. New York: the New Press (English translation).

⁶⁰ Gurría A (2011) [Divided we stand: why inequality keeps rising](#). Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

⁶¹ See, among others ‘A new social contract: alliances for transformative change’, in [Overcoming inequalities in the context of the 2030 agenda for sustainable development](#): “a transformative approach is necessary to achieve lasting change and the paradigm shift envisaged in the 2030 Agenda for Social Development. Despite many barriers, innovative policy approaches and reforms with progressive outcomes can be found from the local to the national level in many countries. In those places where they have been successfully implemented, they have curbed inequalities, shared costs and benefits of reforms more fairly, and made societies more just and green”.

As for power, the relevance of transformation for development practice cannot be overstated. See footnote 28.

See also ‘Understanding difference and building solidarity: a challenge to development initiatives’, Mary Anderson’s introductory chapter to [Development and Social Diversity](#) (pp 7-15): “If disadvantage were ‘natural’ - that is, the inevitable result of innate characteristics of a certain group - then programmes might simply be developed to meet the needs of such groups (...). However, recognition that the systems which marginalise people according to a ‘natural’ characteristic such as age, sex, or race are socially constructed meant that one could devise strategies for altering and reconstructing systems to end marginalisation”.

⁶² United Nations Development Programme (2013) [Humanity divided: confronting inequality in developing countries](#). New York: United Nations Development Programme.

⁶³ For an in-depth discussion on equity, inclusion and distribution, see: Gray J (2000) *Inclusion: a radical critique*.

In: P Askonas & A Stewart (eds.) *Social inclusion: possibilities and tensions*. London: Macmillan Press.

For an extension of distribution to Foucault’s concept of power (that “can be always contested, so power relations must be permanently renewed and reaffirmed”), see: Bălan S (2010) [M. Foucault’s view on power relations](#).

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distributed first and foremost. Most experts will agree that distributing outcomes is utopian, but not all scholars will agree that such utopia is worth striving for. Milton Friedman for example argued that equality of outcome is at odds with liberty, leaves people without opportunity, and is thus not equitable at all⁶⁴. Libertarians will thus radically opt for equality of opportunities, and leave it to the market to distribute the outcomes. It can however be argued that it is in the distribution that Adam Smith's 'invisible hand' becomes visible: it is people who distribute, and power of people that shapes the distribution, for good or for wrong.

Societies can opt for distribution of goods and resources precisely because they aspire fairness in outcomes, and believe fairness in opportunities through carefully distributing goods and resources will achieve this. Yet a fair distribution of goods and resources will not by itself be equitable⁶⁵. As Amartya Sen reminds us, there are "significant variations in the conversion of resources and primary goods into freedoms"⁶⁶. Ultimately, the advantages and disadvantages that characterise inequity result of the "relationship between persons and goods"⁶⁷.

Acknowledging that distributing inputs is insufficient⁶⁸ and that distributing outcome is simply not feasible, we have good reason to apply distribution and the rule of fairness over a broad spectrum⁶⁹: goods and resources (including income), opportunities, capabilities (enhancing the opportunity aspects of freedom) and fair treatment (core to the process aspects of freedom)⁷⁰.

Redistribution, distribution and pre-distribution

Conceptually, a distinction can be made between *redistribution*, *distribution* and *pre-distribution*

Redistribution can be interpreted as a core element to redress inequalities, by rebalancing the shares of unequal goods and resources up to the margins of utility and process freedom (in a broad sense, see above), or in a strict sense as "removing resources from one individual or group and giving them to another individual or group"⁷¹.

⁶⁴ Friedman M & Friedman R (1980) [Created equal](#). In: M Friedman & R Friedman *Free to choose: a personal statement*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich (pp 128-149).

⁶⁵ *Though it is worth mentioning that eminent scholars have considered distribution of goods and resources as sufficient. John Rawls for example developed his primary goods approach, with priority to be given to the interests of the worst-off, based on the assumption that primary goods are the embodiment of advantage. For an assessment of John Rawls' reasoning, see Amartya Sen's [Equality of what?](#)*

⁶⁶ See Amartya Sen's [Inequality reexamined](#)

⁶⁷ See Amartya Sen's [Equality of what?](#)

⁶⁸ And often neither possible nor desirable, as is the case for inborn differences and those distinctive differences that make every human person unique.

⁶⁹ Please note that not all scholars agree: Iris Marion Young for example argues that "serious conceptual confusion results, however, from attempting to extend the concept of distribution beyond material goods to phenomena such as power and opportunity". She further clarifies: "The reification, individualisms, and pattern orientation assumed in the distributive paradigm, moreover, often obscures issues of domination and oppression, which require a more process-oriented and relational conceptualization (of justice)". While a focus on distribution only indeed entails this conceptual (and practical) risk, the present concept note emphasizes the need for process-orientation and a relational view all the way from its initial delineation of inequity as based on unfair treatment, over its focus on process, power and people, up to its ultimate offshoot: a processual Equity Impact Assessment Tool.

For Young's conceptual objection to speak of distribution beyond goods and resources, see:

Young IM (1990) [Justice and the politics of difference](#). Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press (pp 8-9 & 16-33).

⁷⁰ For an in-depth discussion on the distinction between opportunity and process freedom, and the need for both, see: Sen A (2004) [Elements of a theory of human rights](#). *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 32(4): 315-356

⁷¹ The World Bank adheres to this strict definition in [Poverty and shared prosperity 2016: taking on inequality](#) but recognizes in the same document that "not all equity-enhancing policies must rely on redistribution in this strict sense. Some may achieve progressive distributional changes simply through legislation. For example, legislation on the minimum wage does not involve any direct government redistribution of resources, but often nonetheless affects the distribution of income. Moreover, the term redistribution is frequently used among pundits to refer to anonymous changes in the distribution regardless of their cause".

Distribution is the actual balance of these resources and freedom, part of the baseline a project or programme implementer is interested in to be able to assess results and impact on equity during a project or programme.

Pre-distribution then refers to what “address(es) potential inequalities early on, before the inequalities emerge” and “also level(s) the playing field and help(s) equalize opportunities throughout the life of an individual”⁷², but also to the set of regulations and practices in place over time that may explain the actual distribution. Arguably, both are important, and the latter has its implications for policy design, as it becomes increasingly clear that the combined impact of redistribution on equity and welfare also depends on the entrenched practices of the actual distribution⁷³.

Re- and pre-distributive policies

A range of policies can be identified that can contribute to reducing inequalities and changing systems. First of all, more progressive⁷⁴ fiscal policies can avert crises, support growth and reduce income inequalities⁷⁵, when combined with increased public spending in health and education, and reduction of tax loopholes and evasion. Education merits a special mention, as access- and quality-promoting public investments in this field make less affluent people less dependent on their monetary resources and facilitate the accumulation of human capital. Such investments also help improve the income prospects of future generations⁷⁶. The importance of access to good nutrition, quality health services, and basic education and schooling has to be stressed to break circles of deprivation⁷⁷. They can be considered to be important human capital investments in the fight against inequity.

Furthermore, social protection is one of society’s equalizing instruments⁷⁸, and an institutionalised application of the principle of distribution. As classically conceptualised by the International Labour Organization (ILO), it can serve as an example for a reasonable broad approach. It comprises three dimensions: *promotive* measures (to enhance real income and capabilities), *preventive* measures (to prevent deprivation, including old-age pensions, social insurances and unemployment benefits) and *provisional* services (to protect from deprivation, including social services and social assistance). Nobody would argue that any of these three dimensions would guarantee full social protection on its own. Some scholars argue that still an additional (or transversal) dimension of *transformative* measures is needed (including advocacy to enhance social equity and to improve regulatory frameworks)⁷⁹. Examples of transformative measures are measures that go beyond resource transfers, such as the delivery of appropriate social services or measures that act upon the division of intra-

⁷² As defined by the World Bank in [Poverty and shared prosperity 2016: taking on inequality](#). Investments in quality education for all and universal healthcare coverage are given as examples. In a way, this comes close to the ‘redistribution by design’ at the heart of Kate Raworth’s [Doughnut economics](#).

The UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs in its [World social report 2020: inequality in a rapidly changing world](#) outlines how fair education, health and labour market policies can equalize the distribution of human capital, skills and wages, also for the next generations.

⁷³ Dabla-Norris E, Kochhar K, Suphaphiphat N, Ricka F & Tsounta E (2015) [Causes and consequences of income inequality: a global perspective](#). IMF staff discussion note 15/13. Washington DC: International Monetary Fund.

⁷⁴ In its technical sense: higher tax rates according to higher income and wealth.

⁷⁵ International Monetary Fund Fiscal Affairs Department (2014) [Fiscal policy and income inequality](#). IMF policy paper. Washington DC: International Monetary Fund.

⁷⁶ Dabla-Norris E, Kochhar K, Suphaphiphat N, Ricka F & Tsounta E (2015) [Causes and consequences of income inequality: a global perspective](#). IMF staff discussion note 15/13. Washington DC: International Monetary Fund.

⁷⁷ Martorell R (1999), [The nature of child malnutrition and its long-term implications](#). *Food and Nutrition bulletin*, 20 (3): 288-292.

⁷⁸ As recently corroborated by the UN Secretary-General: “Social protection policies are powerful instruments in reducing the consequences of inequality and promoting inclusive growth and essential for the 2030 Agenda. (...) Social protection schemes are instrumental in breaking intergenerational cycles of poverty and vulnerability”.

See: United Nations Economic and Social Council (2019) [Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality](#). Report of the Secretary-General (E/2019/65). New York: United Nations.

⁷⁹ Sabates-Wheeler R & Devereux S (2007) [Social protection for transformation](#). *IDS Bulletin* 38(3): 23-28.

household resource ownership. The [inclusion](#) of the ILO's '[Decent work' agenda](#) within the SDGs can be seen as one step in that direction.

Legislation, implementation and complaints

In addition, legislation (and ratification of international agreements) is an important instrument to establish a human-rights framework. However, such legislation should not remain dead letter and it needs always interpretation to be implemented. Though, it will never be possible to foresee every human situation. Therefore, legislation typically leaves discretionary power to the people who implement the legislation. But during implementation, people interpret information and decisions can be influenced by cognitive biases⁸⁰. Procedures through which people can make claims in case of unfair treatment are therefore important complementary instruments. Also how choices are framed and how default options (e.g. opting in or opting out for a service) are set during implementation are found to strongly influence the choices that people make⁸¹. Therefore, careful design of legislation, implementation procedures, the choice architecture and claiming procedures is important; as these instruments can be used in various ways (i.e. affecting positively or negatively human rights and agency of individuals).

Central and decentral governance

How the governance of schemes and services is organised is also of relevance for equity considerations. This points our attention to the type of (de)central organisation of (public) services (for example who defines regulation, who finances, who implements and what is the optimal size of local entities), with as well centralisation as decentralisation having their advantages and inconveniences. A decentralised organisation is typically seen in the literature as more efficient and adapted to local preferences and situations⁸². It can allow also more innovation and local partnerships. On the contrary, decentral schemes or services can have difficulties to acquire the necessary expertise at local level, and the poorest entities may be the ones with the highest needs. This is particularly true in developing countries where human capacity at the decentral level is often very limited, combined with very little financial means. A central organisation has generally more opportunities in terms of combatting inequalities across

⁸⁰ Kahneman D (2011). *Thinking Fast and Slow*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux.

⁸¹ Kahneman D & Tversky A (Eds.) (2000) *Choices, Values, and Frames*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Thaler R H & Sunstein C R (2008) *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth and Happiness*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

We note that the most vehement critique to nudging was grouped under "behavioural conditionality (:): behavioural economics and its offspring libertarian paternalism". It was formulated by development scholar Guy Standing. He argues that behavioural conditionality is at odds with at least three ethical principles: "First, there is the Security Difference Principle, which, drawing on John Rawls, states that a policy is socially just only if it reduces the insecurity of the most insecure. If it helped some groups that were not among the most insecure, and made the insecurity of the most insecure worse in absolute or relative terms, the policy would be flawed. Second, there is the Paternalism Test Principle, which is that a policy is unjust if it imposes controls on some groups in society that are not imposed on the most free. Third, there is the Rights-not-Charity Principle, which is that a policy or institutional change is just if it enhances the rights of the recipients and limits the discretionary powers of the providers".

See: Standing G (2011) [Behavioural conditionality: why the nudges must be stopped – an opinion piece](#). *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice* 19(1): 27-38.

Notwithstanding these and other critiques, nudging and behavioural economics, supported by randomised controlled trials, have become increasingly popular. Richard Thaler – who coined 'libertarian paternalism' together with Cass Sunstein – was awarded the 2017 Nobel prize in economics for his contribution to behavioural economics. Abhijit Banerjee, Esther Duflo and Michael Kremer – who applied the nudging principle to poverty reduction – were honoured with the same prize in 2019.

⁸² Giguère S (2003) [Managing Decentralisation and New Forms of Governance, OECD, Decentralisation. A New Role for Labour Market Policy](#). Paris: OECD.

Greffe X (2003) *Decentralisation: What Difference Does it Make? A Synthesis*, OECD, [Managing Decentralisation. A New Role for Labour Market Policy](#). Paris: OECD.

individuals and across areas and can generate economies of scale and pool risk groups⁸³. On the contrary, it is typically less flexible and can be slow to adapt. In practice, the details of each design in terms of governance matter. The right strategic mix of centralisation and decentralisation (sometimes called centrally coordinated decentralisation) seems promising to combine equity considerations with other concerns (e.g. efficiency)⁸⁴.

Universalism and targeting

When considering strategies for remediating inequity, it is worth touching upon the discussion about universalism versus targeting. It is worth taking notice of what is known as the ‘paradox of redistribution’⁸⁵: the counter-intuitive finding that non-targeted (universal) interventions – despite leakage to the well-off, including the Matthew effect – in the long term benefit the worst-off more than targeted interventions. One explanation is that universal policies, by also including the middle class, receive broader support and are more enduring⁸⁶. A more technical explanation is based on the combined effect of larger coverage and the relative absence of exclusion errors in universal programmes⁸⁷. The mere existence of the paradox remains contested⁸⁸, but the ongoing discussions were definitely influential in putting redistribution centre stage in social policy circles. From 2016 onwards, the World Bank warns against “excessive attention to efficiency and equity trade-offs” and puts forward redistribution as a key intervention in its ‘Shared prosperity’ approach⁸⁹.

It seems the time has come to consider the choice between universalism and targeting a false choice⁹⁰: well-designed universal policies are an effective basis for redistribution and inequality reduction, whereas targeting is the needed complement to make them more effective⁹¹. Such pragmatic shift is perhaps best illustrated by the International Monetary Fund’s renewed strategy for social spending: “The Fund does not have any bias in favour of one approach. Rather, it sees these approaches as complementary tools for achieving social objectives”. At the same time, the IMF emphasizes “that a

⁸³ Boadway R & Shah A (2006) *Intergovernmental Fiscal Transfers. Practices and Principles*. Washington: The World Bank.

Oates W (1972) *Fiscal federalism*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Pollitt C (2005) Decentralization: A central concept in contemporary public management. In Ferlie E, Lynn L & Pollitt C (Eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Public Management* (pp. 371-397). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kazepov, Y (Ed.) (2010) *Rescaling Social Policies: Towards Multilevel Governance in Europe*. Farnham: Ashgate.

⁸⁴ Kazepov, Y (Ed.) (2010) *Rescaling Social Policies: Towards Multilevel Governance in Europe*. Farnham: Ashgate.

⁸⁵ Korpi W & Palme J (1998) [The paradox of redistribution and strategies of equality: welfare state institutions, inequality and poverty in the Western countries](#). *American Sociological Review* 63(5): 661-687.

While this phenomenon was coined based on an analysis in affluent countries, evidence was also documented in poor countries. See, among others:

Ghai D (1997) [Social development and public policy: some lessons from successful experiences](#). Social Development and Public Policy discussion paper 89. Geneva: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development.

Mehrota S & Jolly R (eds) (2000) *Development with a human face: experiences in social achievement and economic growth*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

⁸⁶ Danson M, McAlpine R, Spicker P & Sullivan W (2013) *The case for universalism: assessing the evidence*. London: Centre for Labour and Social Studies.

⁸⁷ Wingborg M (2018) [Not just for Swedes: universal social protection in Sweden’s international development cooperation](#). Uppsala: Church of Sweden.

⁸⁸ See, among others, two Belgian contributions to the debate:

Marx I, Salanauskaitė L & Verbist G (2013) [The paradox of redistribution revisited: and that it may rest in peace?](#) IZA discussion paper No 7414. Bonn: Forschungsinstitut zur Zukunft der Arbeit.

Gugushvili D & Laenen T (2019) [Twenty years after Korpi and Palme’s “Paradox of redistribution”: what have we learned so far, and where should we take it from here?](#) Leuven: Centrum voor Sociologisch Onderzoek.

⁸⁹ World Bank (2016) [Poverty and shared prosperity 2016: taking on inequality](#). Washington DC: the World Bank.

⁹⁰ Mkandawire T (2005) [Targeting and universalism in poverty reduction](#). Social Policy and Development Programme paper. Geneva: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development.

⁹¹ Already in 2000, the [Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean](#) conceived of universalism as the overarching social policy, and put forward that “targeting (...) is not a social policy as such, but rather a method, which, if properly applied, enhances the effectiveness of universal social programmes”.

greater reliance on universal-type transfers typically involves fiscal costs which need to be financed through efficient and progressive taxation”⁹².

Fair distribution can be brought closer by combining direct action on resources (e.g. through taxes and transfers) and enhancing capabilities and freedoms (e.g. through adequate nutrition, education and health care, and through capability-enhancing legislation, implementation, claim procedures and appropriate governance). Universalist approaches are key, but targeting can contribute, and can be complementary if careful strategic choices are made.

⁹² See: International Monetary Fund (2019) [*A strategy for IMF engagement on social spending – Background papers*](#). IMF policy paper. Washington DC: International Monetary Fund.

1.5. Inequalities are systematic: they do not happen just occasionally

Patterns of inequalities are not random: rather structural, though not necessarily intentional

Arguably, not all unfair and unequal outcomes at societal level are intentional. They can also be the consequence of policy failure by misinformed policy design or inadequate policy implementation, or simply by lack of public policy, exacerbating market failure⁹³. In any case, clear patterns of inequalities can be recognised. Unfair outcomes rarely occur isolated. Quite the contrary, across all populations, clusters of people – sharing ethnic, socioeconomic and other attributes – with similar unfair outcomes can be identified⁹⁴.

One explanation for this systematic clustering is structural inequality theory⁹⁵. Structural inequality is defined as “a condition that arises out of attribution of an inferior or unequal status to a category of people, in relation to one or more categories of people, a relationship that is perpetuated and reinforced by a confluence of unequal relations in roles, functions, decision rights, and opportunities. Structural inequalities based on gender and tribal, ethnic, or racial differences were the most pervasive. Typically, such inequalities persist when they are not recognized as arising out of pervasive structural conditions. Lack of recognition breeds a vicious cycle that reinforces those unequal relations”⁹⁶. Structural inequality is rigid, but – generated by people – not unchangeable.

Structural inequality, when left untouched, repeats and reproduces itself. While its burden is on individuals, its origin and the pathway out of it are societal. On the one hand, it is individual people who become disadvantaged, “suffer from unequal power relations and lack voice, leading to passive behavior and acceptance of the adverse terms of recognition ascribed to them”⁹⁷. On the other hand, addressing systematic inequality traps is about relational change and different ways of organizing society⁹⁸. This is where the pursuit of righteous power balances becomes a necessary add-on to redistribution for sustainable reduction of inequalities.

⁹³ Some civil society actors may have a more outspoken opinion: the European NGO Confederation for Relief and Development states that “Inequalities are not accidents of fate – they are the results of deliberate actions and policy by people in power in the social, economic and political spheres”.

See CONCORD (2019) [Inequalities unwrapped: an urgent call for systemic change](#). Brussels: CONCORD Europe.

⁹⁴ The occurrence of these clusters does not call into question [Sen’s observation](#) of the “significant variations in the conversion of resources and primary goods” and should not distract from intra-group inequity. What it does mean is that we have no valid excuse not to notice them.

⁹⁵ For an in-depth introduction to structural inequality theory, see:

Sørensen A (1996) [The structural basis of social inequality](#). *The American Journal of Sociology* 101(5): 1333-1365.

Intimately related to structural inequality is what Charles Tilly termed ‘categorical inequality’ in his exploration of systematic inequalities: “large, significant inequalities in advantage among human beings correspond mainly to categorical differences such as black/white, male/female, citizen/foreigners, or Muslim/Jew rather than to individual differences in attributes, propensities, or performances”.

See: Tilly C (1998) *Durable inequality*. Berkeley, University of California Press.

⁹⁶ Dani A & de Haan A (2008) *Social policy in a development context: structural inequalities and inclusive institutions*.

In: A Dani & A de Haan (eds) [Inclusive states: social policy and structural inequalities](#). Washington DC: the World Bank.

⁹⁷ Dani A & de Haan A (2008) *Social policy in a development context: structural inequalities and inclusive institutions*.

In: A Dani & A de Haan (eds) [Inclusive states: social policy and structural inequalities](#). Washington DC: the World Bank.

⁹⁸ For an extensive overview of the many different ways in which this change can happen, see:

Bebbington A, Dani A, de Haan A & Walton M (2008) *Inequalities and development: dysfunctions, traps, and transitions*.

In: A Bebbington, A Dani, A de Haan & M Walton (eds) [Institutional pathways to equity: addressing inequality traps](#). Washington DC: the World Bank.

Selection effects may also reinforce structural inequality. People who share similar (unobserved) characteristics tend to select themselves into similar situations. For example migrants who ask for citizenship in a new host country, people having a birth certificate, and people living in the same neighbourhood typically share some characteristics, tend to make similar choices with the possible positive but also negative outcomes (more structural inequality).

Intersectionality as a characteristic of patterned inequality

A first manifestation of patterned inequality draws our attention to the concept and importance of intersectionality. From an intersectional perspective, “[inequities are never the result of single, distinct factors. Rather, they are the outcome of intersections of different social locations, power relations and experiences](#)”. Intersectionality is an emerging research paradigm that gives importance to the interaction between categorical differences (black/white, male/female, urban/rural, ...) and thereby challenges identity politics that reduce unique human individuals to a common characteristic⁹⁹. Ever since its appearance in critical race theory¹⁰⁰, the concept of intersectionality has contributed substantively to a better understanding of vulnerability, discrimination, exclusion, gender inequality, health inequity¹⁰¹ – and inequity at large¹⁰². Ultimately, intersectionality helps both to better understand within-group inequities and to effectively address them¹⁰³.

Time and space structuring differences and inequalities

All processes are *embedded in time and space*¹⁰⁴. Consequently, time and space are important structuring elements of inequity. It is of relevance to see how inequalities are articulated spatially and in time. Opportunities and risks, capabilities and freedoms, and outcomes during people’s life courses are (partly) shaped by the conditions present in the historical times (e.g. cohorts share an economic crisis or war or a change in legislation). In addition, they are shaped by their ‘personal times’, their life

⁹⁹ Hancock AM (2007) [When multiplication doesn’t equal quick addition: examining intersectionality as a research paradigm](#). *Perspectives on Politics* 5(1): 63-79.

¹⁰⁰ Crenshaw K (1989) [Demarginalizing the intersection between race and sex: a black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics](#). *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1(8): 139-167.

¹⁰¹ For a handful of recent examples, see:

Chaplin D, Twigg J & Lovell E (2019) [Intersectional approaches to vulnerability reduction and resilience-building](#). *Resilience Intel* 12: 1-35.

Silver H (2016) [Social exclusion](#). In: J Stone, D Rutledge, P Rizova, A Smith & X Hou (eds) *The Wiley Blackwell encyclopedia of race, ethnicity and nationalism*. London: Blackwell.

Atrey S (2019) *Intersectional discrimination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (2019) [Women’s autonomy in changing economic scenarios](#). Santiago de Chile: ECLAC.

Ravindran S & Gaitonde R (2018) [Health inequities in India: a synthesis of recent evidence](#). Singapore: Springer Nature.

¹⁰² Gemma Hunting thus argues that intersectionality allows for “more contextualized and reflexive understandings” and provides “a foundation for more effective and relevant public policies that advance social justice”. Participatory action research is seen as a core method to inform an intersectional perspective. See:

Hunting G (2014) [Intersectionality-informed qualitative research: a primer](#).

Vancouver: Simon Fraser University, Institute for Intersectionality Research and Policy.

Gaventa J & Cornwall A (2006) [Challenging the boundaries of the possible: participation, knowledge and power](#). *IDS Bulletin* 37(6): 122-128.

¹⁰³ An illustration of the latter is the adoption, at the Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean (Montevideo, 2016), of a gender agenda that “takes account of the ways in which the different categories, positions or situations (cultural, identity-related, social, age-group, ethnic, racial and others) produce specific forms of discrimination or combine to aggravate or deepen existing inequalities”.

See: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (2016)

[Equality and women’s autonomy in the sustainable development agenda](#). Santiago de Chile: ECLAC.

¹⁰⁴ Elder G H J, Kirkpatrick Johnson M & Crosnoe R (2003) The Emergence and Development of Life Course Theory. In Mortimer J T & Shanahan M J (Eds.) *Handbook of the Life Course* (pp. 3-18). New York: Kluwer.

Mayer, K. U. (2009). [New Directions in Life Course Research](#). *Annual Review of Sociology*, 35(1), 413-433.

courses among birth and death, and when they experience life-events and experiences (e.g. end of schooling, leaving the parental house, marriage, having children, death of children, ...). The age or timing of life-events matters. In addition, people typically accumulate also inequalities over the life course (e.g. poor people die earlier)¹⁰⁵. Processes of cumulative (dis)advantage may play over the life course. DiPrete and Eirich define cumulative advantage as a general mechanism generating inequality across any temporal process in which a favourable relative position becomes a resource that produces further relative gains¹⁰⁶.

Similarly, opportunities and risks, capabilities and freedoms, and outcomes during people's life courses are also shaped by the places (and virtual access) they experience over the life course (e.g. living in a poor or rich neighbourhood, living in a village or in the capital city). Urban/rural disparities are typically pronounced. Therefore, we can speak about spatial inequality, which can be defined as "inequality in economic and social indicators of well-being across geographical units". Important spatial inequality is very present in many African countries.

Linked lives structuring differences and inequalities

Furthermore, the events and experiences (e.g. death) lived by individuals linked to their lives (partners, parents, children, ...) matter. People can accumulate inequalities within families and over generations (e.g. through inheritances and through the intergenerational transmission of social and cultural capital). Hence, it is of relevance to consider individuals within their social networks.

Systematic inequalities repeat and reproduce themselves when left untouched. To redress them, fair treatment over the life course has to complement redistribution policies.

Intersectionality is an important characteristic of inequality. Also experienced life-events are characteristics of inequality.

Time (calendar time and personal time) and space are important structuring elements of processes generating inequalities. So are also linked lives.

¹⁰⁵ Therborn G (2013) *The Killing fields of inequality*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

¹⁰⁶ DiPrete T A & Eirich G (2006) Cumulative Advantage as a Mechanism for Inequality: A Review of Theoretical and Empirical Developments. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 32, 271-297.

1.6. Addressing inequalities requires systemic action in terms of life fields and sectors with long-term follow up

The need for systemic action over various fields of life with follow-up

As most themes and sectors¹⁰⁷ (in development cooperation terms) roughly correspond to personal life spheres, any intervention to promote equity in one sector will most likely also have an equity impact in other sectors. Besides, and this can unexpectedly complicate things, a positive equity impact in one sphere/sector will not always generate a positive one in other spheres/sectors.

Recent feminist critique on conditional cash transfers (CCT) targeted to poor women can serve as a cogent example of the latter. Without questioning the immediate output of these initiatives¹⁰⁸, Serene Khader argues that the underlying ‘empowering’ discourse is translated into a straightjacket that is unfair for women¹⁰⁹ and actually disempowering them. Building on empirical work of Molyneux and Tabbusch¹¹⁰, and the concept of ‘feminisation of responsibility and obligation’ introduced by Chant¹¹¹, Khader criticises CCT as a “shift in international development agenda, wherein women’s unrecognized labor subsidizes development and men retain or increase their power over women”¹¹².

¹⁰⁷ At present, Enabel is active in 10 themes: (1) agriculture and rural development; (2) digitalization; (3) education, training and employment; (4) energy; (5) environment and climate; (6) gender; (7) governance; (8) health; (9) private sector; and (10) water and sanitation. See <https://www.enabel.be>

¹⁰⁸ What Olivier de Sardan and Piccoli call an unsurprising a priori positive impact: “receiving money is always ‘convenient’ for people who lack it”.

See: Olivier de Sardan JP & Piccoli E (2018) [Cash transfers and the revenge of contexts: an introduction](#). In: JP Olivier de Sardan & E Piccoli (eds) *Cash transfers in context: an anthropological perspective*.

¹⁰⁹ A decade earlier, Jane Jenson also saw feminist ideals “lost in translation” in development practice, with equality claims of women sidelined in favour of investment in children, and women being instrumentalised for the latter.

See: Jenson J (2009) [Lost in translation: the social investment perspective and gender equality](#). *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 16(4): 446-483.

¹¹⁰ Based on a review of Latin American conditional cash transfer programmes, Molyneux noted that “the ‘empowerment’ that women are said to achieve (...) does not give them significantly greater opportunities of autonomy or security or significantly amplify their choices. Women have thus acquired more recognition as mothers along with more responsibility, but not significantly more power or autonomy in these programmes and, in most cases, few, if any, new rights. In addition, the conditionalities that accompany women’s receipt of the transfers reinforce women’s normative roles and responsibilities, so that insofar as they are empowered at all it is within the existing social relations, ones through which disempowering gender asymmetries are reproduced”.

For the review, see: Molyneux M (2009) [Conditional cash transfers: ‘a pathway to women’s empowerment’?](#) Pathways working paper 5. Sussex: Institute of Development Studies.

For the extensive background bibliography, see: Molyneux M & Tabbusch C (2009) [Conditional cash transfers and women’s empowerment: annotated bibliography](#) (prepared for IDS Pathways project on women’s empowerment). Sussex: Institute of Development Studies.

¹¹¹ Sylvia Chant was instrumental in drawing attention to a neglected aspect of what was called ‘feminisation of poverty’ since the mid-1990s: ‘feminisation of responsibility and obligation’. Understood as an overlooked form of gendered privation, the concept consists of three elements: (1) diversification and intensification of women’s work versus declining inputs from men; (2) persistent and/or growing disparities in women’s and men’s capacities to negotiate obligations and entitlements in households; and (3) increasing disarticulation between responsibilities and rights. See:

Chant S (2006) [Re-thinking the “feminization of poverty” in relation to aggregate gender indices](#). *Journal of Human Development* 7(2): 201-220.

Chant S (2008) [The ‘feminisation of poverty’ and the ‘feminisation’ of anti-poverty programmes: room for revision?](#) *Journal of Development Studies* 44(2): 165-197.

¹¹² Khader S (2019) [Global gender justice and the feminization of responsibility](#). *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 5(2): article 8. In her conclusions, Khader takes the argument a step further and posits that “development interventions that rely on women’s labor to improve the well-being of families and communities both threaten to worsen women’s exposure to sexist domination and involve Northerners taking unfair advantage of women in the global South”.

Jenson and Nagels describe how ‘empowerment’ over time disappeared from the CCT justification and formulation, with promotion of gender equality first making place for gender sensitivity with little place for gender equality, to be finally replaced by a prescription for instrumental motherhood¹¹³. Today, in a review of long-term impact of CCT¹¹⁴, the World Bank focusses on children as beneficiaries, but keeps silent on the women who received the transfers.

The point here is not that conditional cash transfers are per se bad. The point is that the pursue of equity in one sphere for one group of people – like women’s empowerment in the initial set of CCT objectives – can unexpectedly lead to a negative equity impact in other spheres or in the long term, for the same people. In the case of conditional cash transfers to women, this means that money transfers will only realize their equalizing potential when concomitantly women’s position in family and society is addressed¹¹⁵ and harmful masculinity practices are also addressed¹¹⁶. In Olivier de Sardan and Piccoli’s words: the challenge for any CCT programme is being “capable of better understanding the contexts in which it is implemented, of taking them in account systematically, and of adapting to the reactions of these contexts to it rather than trying to make the reality adapt to its model”¹¹⁷. In synthesis: when it comes to reducing inequalities, a systemic perspective is needed. Doing collateral harm is no option.

To illustrate the need for systemic action over the life fields, consider for example four confirmed findings:

- (1) women are more susceptible to the impact of climate change than men¹¹⁸;
- (2) women get disproportionately hit by hunger and famines¹¹⁹;
- (3) needy people receive less health care than the wealthy¹²⁰; and
- (4) poor people when consuming health services often become poorer¹²¹.

¹¹³ Jenson J & Nagels N (2018) Social policy instruments in motion. Conditional cash transfers from Mexico to Peru. *Social Policy & Administration* 52(1): 323-342.

¹¹⁴ Molina Millán T, Barham T, Macours K, Maluccio J & Stampini M (2019) [Long-term impacts of conditional cash transfers: review of the evidence](#). *The World Bank Research Observer* 34(1): 120-159.

¹¹⁵ Chant S (2008) [The ‘feminisation of poverty’ and the ‘feminisation’ of anti-poverty programmes: room for revision?](#) *Journal of Development Studies* 44(2): 165-197.

¹¹⁶ Khader S (2019) [Global gender justice and the feminization of responsibility](#). *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 5(2): article 8.

¹¹⁷ Olivier de Sardan JP & Piccoli E (2018) [Cash transfers and the revenge of contexts: an introduction](#).

In: JP Olivier de Sardan & E Piccoli (eds) *Cash transfers in context: an anthropological perspective*.

Olivier de Sardan and Piccoli also give due attention to the need to take in account the broader context, including the implicit paradox of imposing the condition of using public services where the quality and accesibility of these services remains problematic, as is the case in most of sub-Saharan Africa.

¹¹⁸ Islam S & Winkel J (2017) [Climate change and social inequality](#). DESA working paper 2017/152. New York: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

¹¹⁹ See, among other works of Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen:

Drèze J, Sen A & Hussain A (eds) (1995) *The political economy of hunger*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Jean Drèze is an outstanding example of Belgian expertise in human development and equity. In the [biography](#) that Amartya Sen provided when receiving his 1998 Nobel prize in economics, he noted: “By the mid-1980s, I was collaborating extensively with Jean Drèze, a young Belgian economist of extraordinary skill and remarkable dedication. My understanding of hunger and deprivation owes a great deal to his insights and investigations, and so does my recent work on development, which has been mostly done jointly with him. Indeed, my collaboration with Jean has been extremely fruitful for me, not only because I have learned so much from his, imaginative initiatives and insistent thoroughness, but also because it is hard to beat an arrangement for joint work whereby Jean does most of the work whereas I get a lot of the credit”. An Indian national since 2002, Jean Drèze was co-architect of India’s 2005 National Rural Employment Guarantee Act and 2011 National Food Security Act.

¹²⁰ Tudor Hart J (1971) [The inverse care law](#). *The Lancet* 297(7696): 405-412.

¹²¹ See, among others: Whitehead M, Dahlgren G & Evans T (2001) [Equity and health sector reforms: can low-income countries escape the medical poverty trap?](#) *The Lancet* 358(9284): 833-836.

Now imagine a not so far-fetched example of sudden flooding and a subsequent food crisis in a coastal area, where the majority of the poor (as in most parts of the world) are women. Only a coordinated systemic approach will be able to prevent or to deal with the negative equity impact of such a situation. No single-targeted approach *on its own*¹²² would be sufficient to make a significant and lasting difference¹²³.

The need for systemic action within one development sector or domain

Inequity has been described as a complex and wicked societal problem. Its origins are caused by a multitude of societal structures and dynamics, complicated further by personal choices (conscious or not) and largely unpredictable life events at the more individual level. Inequity is the outcome of a complex system (society as a whole) and therefore can only change through a systemic approach.

We know from system thinking, that (social) systems behave in a non-linear, unpredictable manner and have the tendency to behave conservatively if put under pressure by external factors (change initiatives). This implies that any corrective measure, especially a 'one-bullet' type of measure, is likely to be confronted with a societal response against change and/or with emerging unexpected perverse effects.

Inequity, as all other societal phenomena, need a system's approach to be tackled. Measures have to be taken carefully, considering a wide range of contributing factors at a time and an attitude of learning in order to constantly adjust or diversify initiatives. Such approach allows for early detection and response to eventual unwanted side effects or to refine the intervention strategy for ever better results. It demands a broad analysis of the situation, taking into account contextual factors and an attitude of learning by doing and flexibility in the options for action. Therefore also, fighting inequity takes time, magic bullet solutions simply do not exist.

A system's approach does not signify that the inequity problem has to be tackled in all its aspects at a time. Instead, constructing a society with less inequity is demanding strategic decisions for partial solutions, an incremental change through 'learning by doing' and always aware that perverse effects might occur that need new adaptations of the strategy and with the modest attitude of recognising that the whole inequity question reaches far beyond particular initiatives.

In the frame of development aid, as development support initiatives usually have an horizon of 4 to 5 years only, isolated projects can only **contribute** to the fight against inequity. This is not a plea for inaction, but rather to scale down short-term ambitions and to consider a development horizon of 10 to 12 years by successive interventions that provide strategic continuity and consistency.

Please note that deepening or persisting poverty can occur with or without catastrophic expenditure, a measure reflecting only the tip of the iceberg.

For catastrophic health expenditure, see: Xu K, Evans B, Kawabata K, Zeramdini R, Klavus J & Murray C (2003) [Household catastrophic health expenditure: a multicountry analysis](#). The Lancet 362(9378): 111-117.

¹²² *This is no plea for inter- or multi-sectoral interventions only. Focused, sectoral action – grounded in expert knowledge balanced and adapted to local peoples' needs and context – is fundamental to successful interventions and tangible results. It does mean that such sectoral action should always take in account the whole picture ("life is one") and be planned, enacted and evaluated in coordination with all other relevant sectors.*

¹²³ *As formulated by the United Nations Development Programme: "The complexity and multi-dimensionality of the drivers of inequality call for a complex and multi-dimensional response. In fact, only a genuinely holistic approach can fully address the multiple factors that cause inequality and create the conditions for a truly inclusive society".*

See: United Nations Development Programme (2013) [Humanity divided: confronting inequality in developing countries](#). New York: United Nations Development Programme.

For people, life is one. Any impact of inequity in one sphere of one person's life will have ramifications (over time) in the other spheres of life of that person and can affect future possibilities. This should affect the way interventions are designed and (possible) impacts are assessed.

To become aware of the systemic expressions of inequity, we have to look beyond the boundaries of any corrective initiative in a particular domain or topic in order to understand the systemic reactions and the relativity of the solutions forwarded.

To avoid doing harm with the best of intentions, we need to look over the walls and assess possible perverse effects at a societal level.

A first and necessary condition is applying a societal, systemic perspective in context evaluation and project follow-up. Subsequently, we need to follow up long-term effects. Our equity impact assessment tools serve exactly that purpose.

1.7. Consensus on what fairness entails is based on the human-rights framework

The inherent attribute of inequity of being unfair is based on moral judgment, which differs across tenets and ideologies. Assessment of inequity and reduction of inequalities is thus contingent on **consensus** on what fairness entails.

Amartya Sen reminded us that a theory of justice (or fairness) is the ethical cornerstone of equity, for which a capability perspective alone would be insufficient, and that the human rights framework provides such theory¹²⁴. He also reminded us that human rights have generated scepticism among many legal and political theorists¹²⁵. The latter is no less the case today, with criticism of Eurocentrism and questioning of universality adding up to earlier concerns. We assume that the 1948 [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), complemented with the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (and its optional protocols), is the best moral compass available and avoids the volatile temporality of ideologies. It avoids the difficult and probably endless discussion about the role of luck, fate and responsibility that may be seen in various ways by cultures and individuals. It is a pragmatic approach that we can build a consensus on¹²⁶.

One of the doubts on the utility of the human rights framework is its cumbersome realisation: at best enshrined in constitutions and laws, but all too frequently only partially put in practice. Related to that is the, often misunderstood, inherent human rights principle of 'progressive realisation'¹²⁷. There is a tendency to interpret progressive realisation as a pretext for inaction, thereby delaying the realisation even further. This is erroneous: *progressive* realisation indicates the dependency on available resources for full realisation, but does not in any way diminish the *immediate* obligation to take appropriate steps towards full realisation¹²⁸.

We take notice from the fact that – in development cooperation as elsewhere – human rights are indivisible and are all equally important¹²⁹, from the right to dignity for every human being up to a "social and international order in which the rights and freedoms (...) can be fully realized"¹³⁰.

¹²⁴ Sen A (2005) [Human rights and capabilities](#). *Journal of Human Development* 6(2): 151-166.

Not all capability scholars agree that their concept is insufficient as a theory of justice. Martha Nussbaum for example argues the contrary. See:

Nussbaum M (2004) Beyond the social contract: capabilities and social justice. *Oxford Development Studies* 32(1): 1-18.

¹²⁵ Sen A (2004) [Elements of a theory of human rights](#). *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 32(4): 315-356.

¹²⁶ *It is also consistent with a focus on inequity as a process between people. As Iris Marion Young argues: "Rights are relationships, not things; they are institutionally defined rules specifying what people can do in relation to one another. Rights refer to doing more than having, to social relationships that enable or constrain action".*

See: Young IM (1990) [Justice and the politics of difference](#). Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press (p 25).

¹²⁷ *It is worth noting a more than just convenient parallel between the deep-rooted principle of 'progressive realisation' in the realm of human rights and the more recent 'progressive universalism' as adopted by the 2030 Agenda. Progressive universalism is a concept borrowed from the health sector that made headway in broader development circles. It became a key principle of the SDGs, encapsulated in the words "no one will be left behind ... and we will endeavor to reach the furthest behind first". See:*

Stuart E & Samman E (2017) [Defining 'leave no one behind'](#). ODI briefing note. London: Overseas Development Institute.

Mir G, Karlsen S, Mitullah W, Bhojani U, Uzochukwu B, Okeke C, Mirzoev T, Enso B, Dracup N, Dymski G, Duong D, Ha B, Ouma S, Onibon F, Ogwezi J & Adris S (2020) [Achieving SDG 10: a global review of public service inclusion strategies for ethnic and religious minorities](#). Occasional paper 5. Geneva: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development.

¹²⁸ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (2008) [Frequently asked questions on economic, social and cultural rights](#). Fact sheet No 33. Geneva: Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

¹²⁹ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (2006) [Frequently asked questions on a human rights-based approach to development cooperation](#). Geneva: Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

**We conceptualise fairness as the progressive realisation of all human rights
– with a particular focus on economic, social and cultural rights –
at interpersonal, inter-group and overall societal level.**

Adoption of a universal rights approach as a normative framework to assess and aspire to equity has an important practical implication: it allows us to frame and critically appraise all other concepts. For one example, let us consider social cohesion, increasingly mentioned and endorsed as instrumental justification for equity¹³¹.

Whatever the scope of a group considered (mankind, a nation, a city, a community, a family, ...), when social cohesion is considered as desired outcome of within-group equity, and as means for making that within-group equity sustainable, cohesion is without doubt to be appraised as a positive feature. When social cohesion however overrules recognition and acceptance of diversity, it can become a driver of Weber's 'social closure'¹³², "to reserve positions with a higher power potential (...) and to exclude from them members of other groups"¹³³, achieving "stability by practices of subordination and hierarchy"¹³⁴. In that perspective, social cohesion can also limit the options and freedoms of many an individual, and be in conflict with the universal character of human rights.

When taking a between-group perspective, cohesion becomes tricky. The ECLAC (the Economic Commission for Latin America of the UN) already called attention to the risk of a sense of belonging and cohesion at 'micro' scale co-existing with the opposite at 'macro' scale: "when the members of sizeable social groups identify strongly with one another but feel distanced from other groups".

It is worth remembering regarding equality and difference that "greater equality of opportunities must be combined with policies of recognition. Belongingness is based not only on greater equity, but also on greater acceptance of diversity. A society cannot internalize the concept of a 'we' if it acts as though certain collective identities were invisible, if it practices institutionalized or informal discrimination against groups on the basis of social, geographic, gender, age or ethnic differences, or if it perpetuates social disparities rooted in ethnicity, gender, age or religion". Ideally, "social cohesion is reflected in a constructive approach to diversity"¹³⁵.

¹³⁰ United Nations (1948) [Universal declaration of human rights](#).

¹³¹ *Social cohesion has a long track record in post-war European political discourse, culminating in the Treatment of Maastricht (1992) and the development of the Laeken indicators (2001 onwards) for the monitoring of social policies in the EU. In parallel, the OECD wanted the future social welfare state to maximise the return to social expenditures "in the form of social cohesion" (1997). Rather than strictly defined, social cohesion was formulated as a state-centred social policy objective, a response to poverty and exclusion, with a particular focus on social rights. The concept was enriched – and differentiated from social inclusion – in Latin America (2007) with "a sense of belonging", referring to "the perceptions, value judgements and attitudes of the members of society".*

Conceptually, social cohesion is multifaceted, part of a "semantic universe" related to and conflated with social inclusion, social integration, social capital, solidarity, reciprocity, wellbeing, and the exercise of citizenship. Despite this lack of clarity, social cohesion gained political traction in times of perceived social fragmentation. Apart from being described as an end in itself, cohesion is also increasingly seen as a facilitator of economic growth, and – ultimately – of sustainability.

¹³² Weber M (1968) [German 1st edition 1921] [Economy and society: an outline of interpretive sociology](#).

G Roth & C Wittich (eds) [*Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft: Grundriss der verstehende Soziologie*. J Winkelmann (ed)]. Berkeley: University of California Press (ch 2, p 342).

¹³³ Elias N (1994) *A theoretical essay on established and outsider relations*

[originally published 1977 as *De gevestigden en de buitenstaanders*, Utrecht: Norbert Elias Stichting].

In: N Elias & J Scotson *The established and the outsiders*. London: Sage (pp xc-lviii).

¹³⁴ Gray J (2000) *Inclusion: a radical critique* In: P Askonas & A Stewart (eds) *Social inclusion: possibilities and tensions*.

London: Macmillan Press..

¹³⁵ Jenson J (2019) [Intersections of pluralism and social cohesion](#). Ottawa: Global Centre for Pluralism.

A similar reasoning leads Fonseca and colleagues to a new definition of (ideal) social cohesion: "The ongoing process of developing well-being, sense of belonging, and voluntary social participation of the members of society, while developing communities that tolerate and promote a multiplicity of values and cultures, and granting at the same time equal rights and opportunities in society".

1.8. Concluding: reducing inequalities, aiming for equity

Inequalities, inequality, or inequity? We have good reason to talk preferably in terms of ‘inequity’ and ‘equity’¹³⁶, but recognize that ‘inequality’ and ‘inequalities’ have become mainstream, as reflected in UN/SDG vocabulary¹³⁷. As long as ‘inequality’ and ‘inequalities’ are understood as encompassing unfairness, this should be no major problem.

When mentioning ‘inequalities’ that neither lead to nor are the result of ‘inequity’, we prefer to call them ‘differences’¹³⁸. We reserve the term ‘inequalities’ for those differences where unfairness is involved.

Reducing inequalities – at the input side of the spectrum – is about (re)distribution of goods, resources, and fundamentally about enhancing capabilities, contributing to people’s freedom of opportunity. To this has to be added freedom of process: the realisation of human rights plus fair treatment. In Amartya Sen’s words “the fairness of equity of the process involved, (...) the freedom of citizens to invoke and utilize procedures that are equitable”¹³⁹. Together, this will lead then to reduced inequalities at the outcome side¹⁴⁰.

When we check the changes brought about by our interventions, we don’t only check for ‘inequalities’. For that purpose, the more comprehensive term ‘equity’ seems most appropriate: we thus call our instruments ‘Equity Impact Assessment Tools’ (EIAT).

We use inequity, inequalities and inequality interchangeably, but always with the notion of unfairness implied.

We aim for equity. Bringing about equity implies the need to integrate the reduction of inequalities, the enhancement of capabilities, the realisation of human rights, and fair treatment for all.

¹³⁶ And a case could be made to call ‘inequalities’ ‘inequities’ if unfairness is involved (not a common practice today, except in the health equity literature).

¹³⁷ This was not always the case: as late as 2006, when arguing for a human rights approach to development cooperation, UN high commissioner Louise Arbour still stated that “poverty and inequities between and within countries are now the gravest human rights concerns that we face”.

¹³⁸ Canadian equity experts pioneered this use of ‘differences’. They also use ‘disparities’ (e.g. in the [Health Equity Impact Assessment Workbook](#)) as synonym for ‘inequities’, a custom less widespread globally. [Harper and colleagues](#) note “some disagreement over whether ‘disparity’ is synonymous with inequality or with inequity, although in the United States it is commonly understood to refer to the latter”.

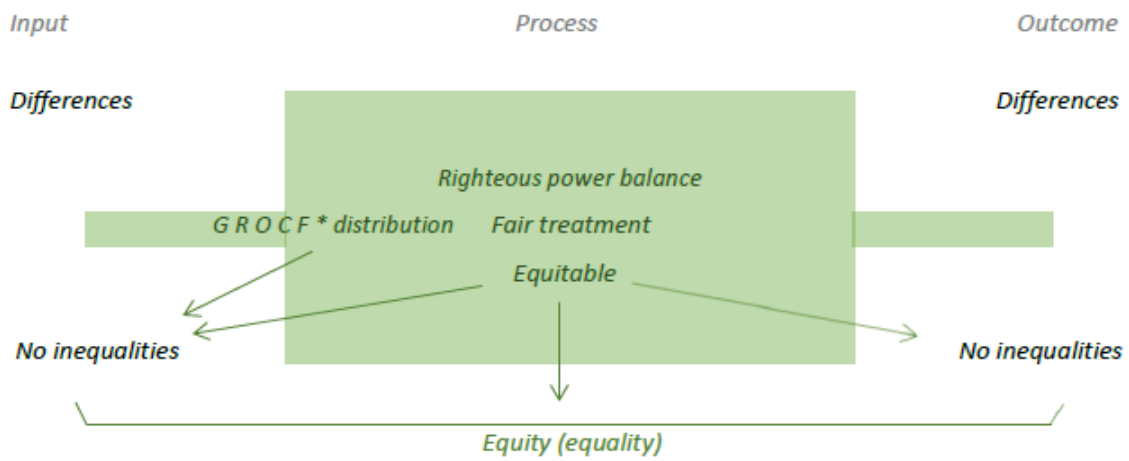
For an elaborate argument in favour of the distinction between ‘inequalities’ and ‘differences’, see: Brubaker R (2015) [Grounds for difference](#). Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

¹³⁹ Sen A (2004) [Elements of a theory of human rights](#). *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 32(4): 315-356

¹⁴⁰ In less conceptual terms, the global policy community today increasingly embraces an equally comprehensive perspective. See, for example, this definition and framing of inequality as put forward by the UN Secretary-General: “Inequality is a multidimensional phenomenon that encompasses equality of means, opportunities, capacities and recognition. Inequalities of access related to health, education, housing and services exacerbate and reproduce income inequality and deepen the inequitable distribution of wealth. Inequality hampers progress in poverty reduction and the realization of human rights, threatens social and political stability and is a drag on economic growth”.

United Nations Economic and Social Council (2019) [Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality](#). Report of the Secretary-General (E/2019/65). New York: United Nations.

Figure 2:
An input-process-outcome scheme of (ideal) equity :



* Goods, resources, opportunities, capabilities, freedoms

2. Inequality and poverty reduction

Inequality and poverty reduction as two important goals

When considering inequality and poverty reduction, two things are beyond dispute:

- (1) The mutual relationship between inequality and poverty¹⁴¹;**
- (2) The welcome adoption of inequality reduction as Sustainable Development Goal.**

The [Millennium goals](#) (MDGs, 2001-2015) had no specific goal on inequality reduction but put poverty reduction in the forefront, with [Eradicating extreme poverty and hunger](#) being Goal 1. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the corresponding [2030 Agenda](#) kept poverty reduction in place (with Goal 1 now [End poverty in all its forms everywhere](#)), but also introduced inequality reduction: Goal 10 [Reduce inequality within and among countries](#). The new focus on inequality reduction was also reflected in the 2030 Agenda's catchphrase [Leave no one behind](#).

The inclusion of equity in the global goals was long awaited. Already in 2005, the United Nations made an explicit plea for it when reformulating its UN Development Agenda¹⁴². Fukuda-Parr summed it up in 2010, indicating the "need to include a goal on reducing inequality within and between countries"¹⁴³, and she was not the only one. The adoption of SDG 10 in 2015 came to no surprise.

Inequality or poverty reduction: what to prioritize?

When it comes however to assess the extent of poverty, the scope of inequality, the main direction in the relation between inequality and poverty, and to setting priorities among inequality and poverty reduction, things have been much less undisputed.

Today, there should be no more doubt that reversing the widening inequality trends is urgently needed, also for timely, significant and lasting poverty reduction.

When introducing this note, we asked "Wasn't poverty reduction good enough?". Related to the same, the question if poverty reduction or inequality reduction should come first has long puzzled many development actors. Accumulating evidence however allows for clear answers.

Recent history shows us that inequality appears more resistant to change than poverty does. Already in 2007, the United Nations posited that "Reducing poverty may not necessarily reduce inequality, and it may be difficult to significantly improve income distribution in the short-term. However, this should not be allowed to discourage immediate efforts in this direction: distributional equity is a permanent goal against which to judge the effects of short-term measures"¹⁴⁴. In 2008, the social policy unit of the World Bank advocated for a focus on inequality, at national level: "not from an ideological commitment that sees inequality as more politically significant than poverty, growth, or some other concern, but rather from the analytical argument that in many respects inequality—or more precisely,

¹⁴¹ This recognition goes back to Adam Smith's 1776 [An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations](#). When discussing the duty of "protecting, as far as possible, every member of the society of the injustice or oppression of every other member of it", Smith noted: "Wherever there is great property there is great inequality. For one very rich man there must be at least five hundred poor, and the affluence of the few supposes the indigence of the many".

¹⁴² Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2007) [The United Nations development agenda: development for all – Goals, commitments and strategies agreed at the United Nations world conferences and summits since 1990](#). New York: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

¹⁴³ Fukuda-Parr S (2010) [Reducing inequality - the missing MDG: a content review of PRSPs and bilateral donor policy statements](#). *IDS Bulletin* 41(1): 26-35.

¹⁴⁴ Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2007) [The United Nations development agenda: development for all – Goals, commitments and strategies agreed at the United Nations world conferences and summits since 1990](#). New York: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

the social processes that create it—precedes poverty or growth”¹⁴⁵. All this suggests making inequality reduction a priority goal.

By 2015 however, discussions on poverty – ongoing ever since the introduction of the dollar-a-day standard in 1980 – revived. In its [Millennium Development Goals report](#), the United Nations proclaimed that the target of reducing by half the proportion of people living in extreme poverty had been achieved five years earlier, and that “The poverty rate in the developing regions has plummeted, from 47 per cent in 1990 to 14 per cent in 2015, a drop of more than two thirds”. Within a couple of months, Jason Hickel argued that those claims were “misleading at best and intentionally inaccurate at worst”¹⁴⁶. Yet, leaving aside the ongoing debate on poverty measurement and income inequality statistics¹⁴⁷, consensus grew about the need for poverty reduction through inequality reduction.

Particularly revealing was David Woodward’s 2015 estimation that eradication of extreme poverty by economic growth would take at least 100 years¹⁴⁸. In 2016, the World Bank recognized that “the goal of eliminating extreme poverty will not be achieved by 2030 without significant shifts in within-country inequality. Ultimately, poverty reduction can occur through higher average growth, a narrowing in inequality, or a combination of the two. So, if poverty reduction is to be achieved in a context of slow growth, such as the current context, more equitable income or consumption distribution will be required”¹⁴⁹. Today, in its latest report on global inequality, the United Nations confirm this, expand the evidence base, and make a case for “creating more equitable societies”¹⁵⁰. Poverty is an outcome of inequality, and needs substantial inequality reduction for its eradication.

¹⁴⁵ Bebbington A, Dani A, de Haan A & Walton M (2008) *Inequalities and development: dysfunctions, traps, and transitions*. In: A Bebbington, A Dani, A de Haan & M Walton (eds) [Institutional pathways to equity: addressing inequality traps](#). Washington DC: the World Bank.

¹⁴⁶ Hickel J (2016) [The true extent of global poverty and hunger: questioning the good news narrative of the Millennium Development Goals](#). *Third World Quarterly* 37: 749-767.
Hickel substantiates his critique by referring to “shifting goalposts” (from halving the proportion of the world’s poor in the Millennium Declaration to halving the proportion of the poor in developing countries in the MDGs) and “redefining poverty” (from 1.08\$ at 1993 purchasing-power parity to 1.25\$ at 2005 purchasing-power parity). See also:
Pogge T (2009) [How world poverty is measured and tracked](#). In: E Mack, M Schramm, S Klasen & T Pogge (eds) *Absolute poverty and global justice*. Aldershot: Ashgate (pp 51-68).
Reddy S & Pogge T (2010) [How not to count the poor](#). In: S Anand, P Segal & J Stiglitz (eds) *Debates on the measurement of global poverty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (pp 42-85).

¹⁴⁷ For a recent example, see: Lawson M, Espinoza P & Mager F (2020) [What lies behind the phony war over inequality statistics?](#) Oxfamblogs ‘From Poverty to Power’ (January 28).

¹⁴⁸ Woodward calculated this with the optimistic assumption that growth would maintain its 1993-2008 pre-crisis pattern and with a poverty line of 1.25\$ at 2005 purchasing-power parity (then the proposed poverty line for SDG1; the later adopted 1.90\$ poverty line would imply a still longer time span). Such growth however would be countered by the adverse effects of climate change and the cost of adaptation to it. He concluded that poverty eradication could only realistically be achieved in an acceptable time span by putting equality at the centre of our development policies. See:
Woodward D (2015) [Incrementum ad absurdum: global growth, inequality and poverty eradication in a carbon-constrained world](#). *World Social and Economic Review* 4: 43-62.

¹⁴⁹ World Bank (2016) [Poverty and shared prosperity 2016: taking on inequality](#). Washington DC: the World Bank.

¹⁵⁰ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2020) [World social report 2020: inequality in a rapidly changing world](#). New York: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

What about 'Leaving no one behind?'

What 'Leave no one behind' asks us within the 2030 Agenda is to give immediate attention to the most disadvantaged, not to neglect all others, and to include the disadvantaged into the realm of rights and dignity.

Once we have agreed on the need to substantively reduce inequalities, it is time for a critical reflection on the SDG maxim 'Leave no one behind'. While this is an attractive catchphrase (and there is definitely no reason not to answer the call of the [UN development agenda](#)), it can be misleading when interpreted out of context: (1) when understanding it as justification for an exclusive focus on the worst off; (2) when translating it as inclusion being a panacea for inequality reduction. As for the first caveat, we should always be aware that only addressing the bottom of the distribution (the poorest, the worst off) is not necessarily redistributive. To bring about the fairness that is part and parcel of equity, redistribution is needed along the whole spectrum: bottom, centre, and top¹⁵¹. As for the second caveat, some clarification is needed for the term 'social inclusion'. The term is omnipresent in social-exclusion literature, from which a couple of lessons mention to be drawn:

- (1) it is crucial to be aware of *the terms of inclusion*;
- (2) equally important is being conscientious of *what people are actually included in*.

When people are included in unfavourable terms, not responding to their own needs and reinforcing the social relationships responsible for their disadvantage, that is actually disempowering and inequitable. For an extreme example, think of the 'inclusion' of Dalits in Hindu society: not left out but locked in. This then should better be called 'adverse inclusion' or 'adverse incorporation'¹⁵².

When people are included in a market (e.g. an insurance market), that doesn't necessarily guarantee them the opportunity to arrive at a fair outcome. The government-subsidised health insurance for the poor in India (RSBY), for example, perfectly managed to enrol millions of families, but only a fraction of them eventually enjoyed the benefits they were entitled to¹⁵³. Not any inclusion is the flip side of exclusion¹⁵⁴, nor a panacea for inequality reduction.

¹⁵¹ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2020) [World social report 2020: inequality in a rapidly changing world](#). New York: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

For a more outspoken view, see the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development's [Overcoming inequalities in the context of the 2030 agenda for sustainable development](#): "In considering how to reduce inequalities, the time has come to adjust our focus to include not just the bottom of the pyramid, but also the top: elite power and its ramifications, as well as the sources of these power imbalances, the fractures they have wrought, and the drivers of policy change to level out social stratification and devolve power and resources from elites to non-elites".

¹⁵² See, among others:

Wood G (2000) [Concepts and themes: landscaping social development](#). Social development SCOPE paper 9. London: Department for International Development.

Labonté R (2004) [Social inclusion/exclusion: dancing the dialectic](#). *Health Promotion International* 19(1) 115-121.

Hickey S & du Toit (2007) [Adverse incorporation, social exclusion and chronic poverty](#). CPRC working paper 81. Manchester: Chronic Poverty Research Centre.

Nathan D & Xaxa V (2012) *Introduction and overview*. In: D Nathan & V Xaxa (eds) *Social exclusion and adverse inclusion: development and deprivation of Adivasis in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press (pp 1-15).

Geof Wood interestingly places adverse incorporation at the interplay between agency and structure, at all levels of society (including within households, where women and children are particularly affected): "In contexts of highly imperfect markets, corrupt state practices, and patriarchal norms, poor people (...) face a problematic search for security (...). They are obliged to manage this vulnerability through investing in and maintaining forms of social capital which produce desirable short-term, immediate outcomes and practical needs while postponing and putting at permanent risk more desirable forms of social capital which offer the strategic prospect of supporting needs and maintaining rights in the longer term".

Please note the parallel with Guy Standing's critique, a decade later, on behavioural economics and nudging (footnote 104).

¹⁵³ As became evident applying a tool for stepwise analysis of inclusion/exclusion in social protection programmes. See:

Soors W, Seshadri T, Dkhimi F, Mladovsky P & Criel B (2014) [Health Inc methodology and the SPEC-by-step tool](#). In: Health Inc consortium (eds) *Health Inc: towards equitable coverage and more inclusive social protection in health*. Studies in Health Services Organisation & Policy 32. Antwerp: Institute of Tropical Medicine, ITGPress.

¹⁵⁴ The World Bank (2013) [Inclusion matters: the foundation for shared prosperity](#). Washington: the World Bank (p 61).

3. Enabel, the 2030 Agenda, equity, human rights and capabilities

With this concept note, we hope to contribute to Enabel's strategy for reducing inequalities, aiming for equity.

We have framed equity in line with the global 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, building on the concept of justice offered by the Human Rights framework and insight from the capability approach.

The Belgian development agency's convergent commitment to the 2030 agenda, equity, human rights and capabilities is well embedded right from the opening phrase of [Enabel's vision statement](#): **for a sustainable world (the overarching framework) where women and men (at the heart of equity) live under the rule of law (as the enactment of human rights) and are free to thrive (sum and substance of capabilities).**

Enabel is thus appropriately positioned to tackle the global challenge of inequality throughout its interventions.

When it comes to monitoring and evaluating the equity impact of Enabel's interventions, conceptual building blocks are meant to be informative but might not be sufficient. Particularly the measuring of capabilities is no easy task. To overcome this problem, we suggest to borrow from Max-Neef the concept of 'satisfiers'¹⁵⁵, which matches what Robeyns called 'conversion factors'¹⁵⁶ and what we could aptly call (following Hvinden and Halvorsen) 'enablers'¹⁵⁷. What makes Max-Neef's contribution unique – and still relevant – is the fact that he didn't construct a listing of satisfiers out of academic wisdom (a critique that can be formulated to e.g. Martha Nussbaum's list of central capabilities) but leaves the "choice of satisfiers" to the disadvantaged, in their time and space.

An additional advantage is that by locating satisfiers in four fields (people's being, having, doing and interacting), they cover the entire spectrum of equity, from inputs (having) over process (interacting) up to outcomes (being, doing). It is surprising that the complementarity of Max-Neef's satisfiers to the capability approach' conversion factors has, to our best knowledge, not been explored before.

¹⁵⁵ Our suggestion is not to borrow from Max-Neef his categorisation or definition of human needs, nor in any way to fall back on the human needs approach that preceded the capability approach.

For Max-Neef's original contribution, see:

Max-Neef M (1992) [Development and human needs](#).

In: P Ekins & M Max-Neef (eds) *Real-life economics: understanding wealth creation*. London: Routledge (pp 197-213).

For a recent rediscovery of Max-Neef enabling matrix, which in her view "ensures a (...) balanced and therefore resilient change process controlled by the people it affects", see:

Göpel M (2016) [The great mindshift: how a new economic paradigm and sustainability transformations go hand in hand](#). Berlin: Wuppertal Institute Berlin office (p67).

¹⁵⁶ Robeyns I (2005) [The capability approach: a theoretical survey](#). *Journal of Human Development* 6(1): 93-114.

Robeyns I (2017) [Wellbeing, freedom and social justice: the capability approach re-examined](#).

Cambridge: Open Book Publishers.

¹⁵⁷ Hvinden B & Halvorsen R (2018) [Mediating agency and structure in sociology: what role for conversion factors?](#) *Critical Sociology* 44(6): 865-881.

4. Enabel: from concept to a strategic translation for action

This concept note is not meant to cover comprehensively the strategic aspects for development interventions in terms of fighting inequity. From the above, broad domains of pertinent interventions can be directly deduced though. The following paragraphs highlight the most important ones, implying that the purpose is not to be exhaustive, neither to neglect the fact that the inequity problem is also a transversal theme for all our interventions¹⁵⁸. Therefore, the assessment tools that are developed parallel to this concept note, are applicable to all interventions in preparation and to “M&E” of all existing ones.

Education and health services

From the above analysis, quality public services geographically and financially accessible in the education and health sectors are among the strongest and first redistribution measures countries, and especially fragile states should engage in.

Investing in education is a strong corrective structural measure that can lift individuals as well as communities out of their poverty. In education, the perspective is a long-term one and is therefore very pertinent for development. The fruits can only be collected when a significant number of children benefitted from quality basic education, where youth and adults can benefit from relevant VET to get the rights skills. Important is to take attention so that these skills development could lead to a decent work in their socio-economic context.

Health has an immediate impact on individuals by preventing or treating illness, preventing people among other things, of losing income due to illness. People with an handicap or children with sight or hearing problems can benefit lifelong from simple corrective measures. Decentralised public health facilities providing curative preventive and promotive health care is needed to reach the most vulnerable in society, those that have few rights in terms of equity.

Malnutrition is a special aspect in the health domain. Childhood malnutrition is one of the strongest negative factors that jeopardises the future of children. Malnutrition lowers the intellectual and physical capacity of the victims lifelong and constitutes an invisible cause of inequality in society. Malnutrition cannot be simply addressed by health services, but is a condition that should also be addressed through basic agriculture and through schools for instance.

Publicly subsidised and organised large-scale health insurance is a strong tool to provide the necessary financial access to health services. If indeed significantly subsidised by the government, it is an important redistribution tool that brings basic services to the most vulnerable.

Also the various ways of financing the education sector, including family incentives to stimulate schooling of the most disadvantaged children is a strong corrector of inequity.

Redistribution through social protection mechanisms

Social protection is a multifaceted strategy in any society in order to protect people, poor more than rich because of a different risk pattern, from hazardous events in their lives. Many aspects of social protection are quasi inexistent in many LMIC, among other reasons because the formal economy is

¹⁵⁸ Gender is an important transversal theme also in the frame of fighting inequity. It is already covered by a separate specific strategic note.

relatively small compared with the informal sector and because poor civil registration makes global initiatives complex.

Social protection in health was already discussed. It is very feasible in many countries because, however weak the public health service might be, patients are 'easily identifiable' and packages of care falling under the insurance are 'easily' identified. There is a strong link with the formal private sector in which health insurance for employees can be made obligatory.

Strategic financing for education is the way the education sector is financed, in order, not only to simply finance the costs of the system, but also to influence people's behaviour, be it teachers (supply side) or parents and children (demand side). Strategic aspects are the payment of incentives, initiatives to keep children (girls) longer at school, free education initiatives, school nutrition, scholarships, etc.

Family allocation strategies or allocations targeting the poorest are strong initiatives of redistribution of wealth, often with a link to access to health care (free health insurance contributions) or schooling (free education).

Sustainable business opportunities and decent job creation

In the private sector, many opportunities exist to fight inequity. **Job creation** is a sharp weapon against inequity. Unfortunately, the formal sector in many countries is small and weak, making job creation a slower tool, but with a very structural and therefore lasting result.

Creating a prosperous environment in which the private sector can thrive has a significant role to play in the fight against inequity. Unregulated market mechanisms are known to increase inequity in society systematically. Still, corrective measures from authorities are known to be feasible and above all to be stimulating the private sector development, especially through market-based solutions.

Additionally, rather than merely fixing market failures when they arise, public entities should move towards actively shaping and building markets that deliver **sustainable and inclusive growth and stimulating female entrepreneurship**. Such an approach addresses the inequity issue up-front and even before it appears, primarily through market-based solutions like inclusive business models.

Tax-reforms towards **more progressive tax-paying systems**, protection of private property rights, a secure banking system, and access to credits are known factors to stimulate the private sector and can act on inequity if adequately regulated. **Obligatory health insurance and contributions for unemployment or pensions schemes** are aspects for which the private sector and national authorities have to meet.

Drinking water and energy supplies (electricity) for the poor

Many of these social supply systems are in fact not equitable. Rich people are often benefitting more of new electricity grids, have more opportunities to invest in for instance solar energy and tend to profit proportionally more of drink water supplies.

When correctly targeted though, drink water supply or electricity connections for urban slums for instance, or economically non-viable electricity supplies in rural areas are aspects in which a government can invest to compensate for existing inequities.

Addressing conversion factors : Sexual Health rights and family planning

Many socio-cultural and environmental factors determine the degree to which people can realise their full potential. The rapid demographic growth is one of these structural problems as well as the gender problem and jeopardised sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) of women and adolescents.

Providing for SRHR and the access to quality family planning services in particular are strong positive contributing factors for fighting power relations that are institutionalising inequity.

Closing the digital divide

The use of digital devices, e-services (including mobile money), and the internet (supporting the right to access information and freedom of speech) has become part and parcel of people's lives in both rural and urban Africa, even in LDC's and fragile states.

The increased availability of mobile phones, e-services (both commercial and public) and internet connectivity however has in many ways also increased inequality, as some vulnerable groups (especially women and rural youth) lack the basic digital literacy to make full use of the advantages of the digital revolution. Public administrations in partner countries often lack the digital skills that would allow them to lead the digital transformation of their countries and ensure that the opportunities of digital technologies are made available for their populations.

Investing in accessible IT applications and creating IT literacy therefore can significantly contribute to lowering inequity in this domain.

5. Glossary

Any concept note will use terms in need of an explanation, and this concept note cannot pretend to be the exception to the rule. Hence this brief glossary, with one double caveat: in the field of equity as elsewhere, many alternative (and differing) definitions co-exist, and even 'equal' definitions can be open to more than a few interpretations.

We hope, however, that this selective glossary will be instructive – by shedding light where needed – and suggestive – by stimulating further thought – without being dogmatic.

A

adverse incorporation

Inclusion of disadvantaged people in structures that actually reinforce their disadvantage in the long term

agency

1. People's capacity to act in a given environment (*philosophy*)
2. People's capacity to act independently and to make their own free choices (*sociology; see also: structure*)
3. People's ability to act on behalf of what they value and have reason to value (*capability approach*)

autonomy

People's capacity to make informed, uncoerced decisions

B

behavioural economics

A branch of economics inspired by **bounded rationality** that focusses on how to influence or change people's behaviour, based on the premise that the choice architecture proposed influences people's choices (*see also nudging*)

bounded rationality

The theory that people's rationality in decision-making is often limited: shortcuts are made that lead to sub-optimal choices (*see also behavioural economics*)

C

capabilities

People's effective opportunities to do what they want to do and to be what they want to be

capability approach

A framework for the evaluation and assessment of individual wellbeing and social arrangements, with a focus on what people are effectively able to do and to be (*developed by Amartya Sen, Martha Nussbaum, and others; see also agency, conversion factors, capabilities and functionings*)

conversion factors

The personal, social and environmental factors that determine the degree to which people can transform resources into **functionings** (*Ingrid Robeyns; see also satisfiers and enablers; see also functionings*)

D

differences

Those unequal inputs (e.g. goods and resources) and outcomes (including **utilities**) of people that are not the result of **inequitable** treatment and cannot be considered unfair (*see also inequalities*)

distribution

The actual dispersal of goods, resources, **opportunities**, **capabilities**, **freedoms** and **power** among people in a given context (*see also pre-distribution and redistribution*)

E

economic inequality

1. Unequal and unfair **distribution** of **income** and **wealth** between people (*economics*)

2. Unequal and unfair **distribution of income, wealth** and all other means to wellbeing (*Amartya Sen*)

economic, social and cultural rights

Part of the birth right of every human being, to be respected, protected and fulfilled by all governments, related to the workplace, social security, family life, participation in cultural life, and access to housing, food, water, health care and education

(*human rights framework*; see also **immediate obligation and progressive realisation**)

enablers

Conversion factors that facilitate people's valued achievements (**functionings**)

(*Hvinden & Halvorsen*; see also **satisfiers**)

equality

1. The condition of being equal (*Oxford dictionary*)
2. A synonym for **equity** (*UN/SDG vocabulary*)

equitable

Involving fair **distribution** and **process**, leading to **equity**

equity

That what is fair and right (*Oxford dictionary*)

The ideal state characterised by fair **distribution** and **process**, righteous **power** balances, and human wellbeing (*see also equality 2.*)

F

fairness

Justice

A sense of justice as checked against the realisation of human rights (*Amartya Sen*)

freedom

People's ability to make uncoerced choices (*see opportunity freedoms*) and to reach valued outcomes through a fair process (*see process freedoms*), without imposing constraints on what others are permitted to do

functionings

People's valued achievements, i.e. what they want to do and to be
(see also **capabilities, capability approach** and **conversion factors**)

H

human rights approach

An approach based on the **human rights framework**

human rights framework

A framework based on but not limited to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, also including the successive treaties, covenants, statutes, protocols and conventions

(see also **economic, social and cultural rights, human rights approach, immediate obligation** and **progressive realisation**)

I

immediate obligation

As regards the **economic, social and cultural rights**, the immediate obligation of all governments

- (1) to respect, protect and fulfil those rights not subject to **progressive realisation** (e.g. non-discrimination);
- (2) to take steps and monitor progress towards the full realisation of those rights subject to **progressive realisation**;
- (3) to meet the minimum core obligations of all rights (e.g. ensure freedom from hunger and access to housing, sanitation and free primary education for all)

(*human rights framework*)

income

The value of what people receive as wages, salaries, pensions or welfare payments
(*economics*;
see also income inequality; compare to wealth)

income inequality

The unequal **distribution** of **income** in a population, part of **economic inequality**

inequalities

Those unequal inputs (e.g. goods and resources) and outcomes (including **utilities**) of people that lead to or are the result of **inequitable** treatment and should be considered unfair
(*see also differences*)

inequality

1. The condition of being unequal
2. A synonym for **inequity**

inequality of opportunity

Inequality of starting situations (where people begin)

(*see also opportunity*)

inequality of outcomes

Inequality of results (where people end up)

inequitable

Said of a process in which people are treated unfair, leading to **inequity**

inequity

The whole of unequal inputs (e.g. goods and resources) and outcomes (including **utilities**) of people that lead to or are the result of unfair treatment, including the **process** that connects, causes and reinforces those **inequalities**

intersectionality

An analytical framework that identifies how social locations (e.g. gender, ethnicity) and **power** dynamics interact and generate **privilege**, oppression, and **inequity**

L

libertarianism

Libertarianism is a collection of political philosophies and movements that uphold liberty as a core principle. Libertarians seek to maximize political freedom and autonomy, emphasizing freedom of choice, voluntary association and individual judgement. Libertarians share a scepticism of authority and state power, but they diverge on the scope of their opposition to existing economic and political systems.

libertarian paternalism

The idea and practice of steering people's behaviour by **nudging** their choices
(*see also behavioural economics and bounded rationality*)

M

mechanism

A pattern of events that regularly brings about a particular kind of outcome in particular contexts and can explain that outcome (*note that by taking in account contexts, a mechanism-based explanation avoids the generalization of a covering law*)

More metaphorical descriptions of mechanisms are ‘the nuts and bolts, cogs and wheels that can be used to explain complex social phenomena’ (*Jon Elster*), ‘pieces of the furniture of the real world’, and ‘what makes a concrete system tick’ (*Mario Bunge*)

monopolization

Obtaining exclusive possession or control of something
(*Oxford dictionary*; see also **power** and **privilege**)

N

nudging

Coaxing gently into something (*Oxford dictionary*)

Applying small changes in people’s environment that are easy and inexpensive to implement (nudges) and that make it more likely that people will make a particular choice or behave in a particular way
(*Thaler & Sunstein*; see also **behavioural economics**)

O

opportunity

A set of circumstances that makes it possible to do something

opportunity freedoms

Or more precisely **opportunity aspects of freedom**: the extent to which people are free to choose among combinations of **functionings**, which is reflected in a person’s **capabilities** (*Amartya Sen*).

Also called **substantive opportunities** (*Amartya Sen*) and **option freedoms** (*Ingrid Robeyns*)
(see also **process freedoms**)

P

power

The ability to influence people and processes (see also **monopolization** and **privilege**).

A distinction can be made between **power over**, **power to**, **power with**, and **power within**

A constituent of all **social action**, enabling or constraining the latter (*Michel Foucault*)

power over

Power as control, with or without coercion, over people, resources, and the use of resources. Can be responded with compliance or resistance

(*Jo Rowlands*;

see also **power to**, **power with** and **power within**)

power to

Power as life-shaping force, generating opportunities and actions (including resistance)

(*Jo Rowlands*;

see also **power over**, **power with** and **power within**)

power with

Power through collective action

(*Jo Rowlands*;

see also **power over**, **power to** and **power within**)

power within

Power based on self-esteem

(*Jo Rowlands*;

see also **power over**, **power to** and **power with**)

pre-distribution

The set of regulations and practices in place over time that might or might not have prevented **inequalities** and explain the actual dispersal of goods, resources, **opportunities**, **capabilities**, **freedoms** and **power** among people in a given context

(see also **distribution and redistribution**)

privilege

A right, advantage or immunity granted to or enjoyed by a person or a class of people, beyond the usual rights or advantages of others

(Oxford dictionary;

see also **monopolization and power**)

process

A continuous series of actions, events, or changes

(Oxford dictionary;

see also **process freedoms and social action**)

process freedoms

Or more precisely **process aspects of freedom**: the extent to which people are free to undertake and complete a fair process in pursue of their **functionings**

(Amartya Sen; see also **opportunity freedoms**)

progressive realisation

As regards the **economic, social and cultural rights**, the recognition that – given resource constraints – full realisation of several rights can only be achieved over time. Progressive realisation includes the obligation to take appropriate measures towards full realisation to the maximum of available resources, and does not diminish a government's **immediate obligation**

(human rights framework;

see also **progressive universalism**)

progressive taxation

The application by government of higher tax rates according to **income** and **wealth**

progressive universalism

As endorsed in the 2030 Development Agenda: “no one will be left behind ... and we will endeavour to reach the furthest behind first”

(see also **progressive realisation**)

R

redistribution

The rebalancing of the actual dispersal of goods, resources, **opportunities**, **capabilities**, **freedoms** and **power** among people in a given context, in pursuit of **equity**

(see also **distribution and pre-distribution**)

S

satisfiers

What contributes to the fulfilment of people's being, having, doing and interacting

(Manfred Max-Neef;

see also **conversion factors and enablers**)

social action

Any action wherein people take in account the behaviour of other people and is thereby oriented in its course

(Max Weber; see also **power and process**)

social closure

The process of **monopolization** that limits the competition for livelihood (goods, resources and **opportunities**)

(Max Weber; see also **power over, privilege and social exclusion**)

social cohesion

The ongoing process of developing wellbeing, sense of belonging, and voluntary social participation of the members of society, while developing communities that tolerate and promote a multiplicity of values and cultures, and granting at the same time equal rights and **opportunities** in society

(Fonseca, Lukosch & Brazier)

Many other definitions exist, mainly differing in locating **social cohesion** as related to wellbeing: social cohesion is seen by some as a positive outcome to be generated, and as a factor contributing to the hoped for wellbeing by others

(Jane Jenson)

social exclusion

The dynamic, multi-dimensional **process** driven by unequal **power** relationships interacting across four main dimensions – social, political, economic and cultural – and at different levels (individual, household, group, community, country, global) that results in a continuum of inclusion/exclusion characterised by unequal access to resources, **capabilities** and rights

(WHO Social Exclusion Knowledge Network;

*see also **social closure** and **social inclusion**)*

social inclusion

The **process** of improving the terms on which individuals and groups take part in society – improving the ability, **opportunity** and dignity of those disadvantaged on the basis of their identity

(the World Bank)

Ideally, the inclusion of disadvantaged people in the realm of rights and dignity. In practice, still too often part of an inclusion/exclusion continuum.

*(see also **adverse incorporation** and **social exclusion**)*

social inequality

Basically a pleonasm, as all **inequality** (in the sense of **inequity**) is essentially social. Encompasses **economic inequality**, political inequality and environmental inequality

structure

The recurrent patterned arrangements that influence or limit the individual's **autonomy** and choices. Socialisation, cultural schemes, legal frameworks and material resources are typically seen as structural elements.

*(sociology; see also: **agency**)*

systematic

Of regular appearance, in accordance with **mechanism** and context

systemic action

Taking into account all spheres of life

Taking into account the complex relationships between the various actors (and institutions) in a development sector or domain and the social context in which to act

T

targeting

In social policy, the principle and practice that eligibility for benefits is limited to people meeting specific criteria

Few if any policy regimes are purely based on targeting or **universalism**: they tend to lie somewhere between the two extremes on a continuum, and are often hybrid

U

universalism

In social policy, the principle and practice that eligibility for benefits is a basic right, to be enjoyed by all people

Few if any policy regimes are purely based on **targeting** or universalism: they tend to lie somewhere between the two extremes on a continuum, and are often hybrid

utility

The state of being useful, in the sense of bringing satisfaction, happiness, or profit

W

wealth

The value of what people own: financial assets plus real assets (e.g. housing) minus debts

(economics;

*see also **wealth inequality**; compare to **income**)*

wealth inequality

The unequal **distribution** of **wealth** in a population, (increasingly important) part of **economic inequality**
