

Forum: SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION [SDC]

Issue: Combating rising social inequality: social inclusion as an aspect of sustainability [SDG1-SDG5]

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Introduction

Social inequality is a significant global challenge. It affects people's access to resources, opportunities and participation in society. Although economic development has improved living conditions for many people, inequality remains in access to education, healthcare, employment, social protection and other basic services. Groups such as people living in poverty, women, people with disabilities and other marginalised groups can face barriers that limit their opportunities.

Social inclusion is important for sustainable development because a sustainable society must allow different groups to participate and access essential services. Improving inclusion can reduce poverty, improve health and education, and support greater equality. This issue is connected to Sustainable Development Goals 1 to 5: No Poverty, Zero Hunger, Good Health and Well-being, Quality Education and Gender Equality. Progress in these goals is interconnected, meaning that improvements in one area can support progress in others.

This report looks at the origins and current state of social inequality, groups most affected, previous international efforts and possible solutions that could be considered in resolutions.

Definition of Key Terms

Social Inequality

Social inequality is the unequal distribution of resources, opportunities, rights and access to services among groups within a society. It can occur through differences in income, education, healthcare, employment and living conditions.

Social Inclusion

Social inclusion means improving people's ability to participate fully in society and access opportunities, resources and services, particularly for marginalised groups.

Sustainability

Sustainability means meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability



Figure 1: UN Sustainable Development Goals relevant to this topic

of future generations to meet their own needs.

Sustainable development goals (SDGs)

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals were adopted by United Nations Member States in 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. They provide a framework for addressing global development challenges. This issue is connected to SDGs 1 to 5.

Gender Equality

Gender equality means that people have equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities regardless of gender. It includes equal access to education, employment, healthcare and participation in public life.

Poverty

Poverty is a condition in which people lack sufficient resources to meet basic needs and access essential services. Poverty can restrict access to education, healthcare, food, housing and employment.

Marginalised Groups

Marginalised groups are groups that face reduced access to economic, social or political opportunities because of factors such as discrimination, poverty, disability, age or location.

Background Information

Origins and Development of Social Inequality

Social inequality has existed throughout history through differences in wealth, social status and access to resources. However, it is not only an issue of income. Differences in wealth and social conditions can influence access to education, healthcare, housing and employment. Inequality can therefore affect a person's opportunities over their lifetime. The SDGs recognise that poverty, hunger, health, education and gender equality are interconnected and require improvements in both social and economic conditions.

Current Situation

According to the World Bank's Poverty, Prosperity, and Planet Report 2024, almost 700 million people, or 8.5% of the global population, live in extreme poverty on less than US\$2.15 per day. Around 3.5 billion people live below US\$6.85 per day, a poverty line relevant to upper-middle-income countries. The World Bank also reports that around

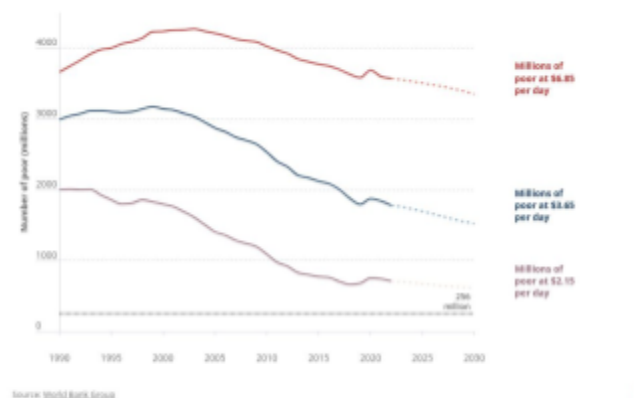


Figure 2. Global Poverty and inequality trends (world bank, 2024)

one-fifth of the world's population lives in countries with high inequality, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean. Poverty reduction has also slowed since the COVID-19 pandemic. The United Nations' *Sustainable Development Goals Report 2025* found that progress since 2015 has included improvements in education, maternal and child health and digital access. However, progress remains uneven, with millions still experiencing poverty, hunger, inadequate housing and limited access to basic services. Conflict, climate-related disruption, rising inequality and high debt costs are also slowing progress.

Education, Health and Unequal Opportunities

Education and healthcare are important parts of social inclusion because unequal access can affect opportunities throughout people's lives. Education can improve employment opportunities, while healthcare can affect education, employment and household financial security. However, large differences remain based on wealth and geography. The 2025 SDG Report states that 272 million children and young people remained out of school in 2023, with significant inequalities linked to gender, wealth and location.

Healthcare also has financial and geographical barriers. The World Health Organization identifies primary healthcare as an important way to improve equitable access and address wider social determinants of health. Without affordable and accessible healthcare, poorer households can face greater financial pressure when they need treatment. (World Health Organization, 2024)

Digital access is another part of social inclusion. Education, employment, financial services and government services increasingly use digital systems. In 2024, 2.6 billion people remained offline, while internet use was lower in less developed regions. People without reliable internet access or digital skills may therefore face additional barriers. .

Gender Inequality

Gender inequality affects access to education, employment, healthcare and participation in public life. The 2025 Gender Snapshot reports that, if current trends continue, 351 million women and girls could still be living in extreme poverty in 2030. It also reports that nearly 64 million more adult women than men experienced moderate or severe food insecurity. Gender inequality can also be connected to employment and access to economic resources. Differences in participation, pay and access to higher-paying employment can increase financial inequality between men and women.

Marginalised Groups, and the different forms of inequality

Social inequality can become more complex when people experience several disadvantages at the same time. Poverty, gender, disability, geographical location, age and

social background can overlap and create additional barriers. For example, a person with a disability living in a low-income rural area may face economic, physical and geographical barriers simultaneously. Policies focused on only one form of inequality may therefore fail to address all of the barriers experienced by particular groups.

Previous International Efforts

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted in 2015, established SDGs 1 to 5 and created international targets addressing poverty, hunger, health, education and gender equality. SDG target 1.3 calls for nationally appropriate social protection systems, while target 1.4 focuses on equal rights and access to basic services and economic resources.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, adopted in 1995, established international commitments to improve the rights and opportunities of women and girls. However, the 2025 Gender Snapshot shows that major gender-related inequalities remain.

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, adopted in 2006, established international commitments to equal rights, inclusion and participation for people with disabilities. Its implementation has helped establish an international framework, but barriers to education, employment, healthcare and participation remain.

Organisations and Major Countries Involved

The United Nations (UN)

The United Nations is the main international organisation involved in sustainable development. Through the 2030 Agenda, Member States established the SDGs and targets addressing poverty, essential services, social protection and equality.

The World Bank

The World Bank works on poverty and inequality through development financing, research and data. Its 2024 report identifies better jobs, education, infrastructure and basic services as important for reducing poverty and increasing shared prosperity.

The International Labour Organization (ILO)

The International Labour Organization works on employment, labour rights and social protection. Its *World Social Protection Report 2024–26* found that 52.4% of the world's population was covered by at least one social protection benefit, while 3.8 billion people remained completely unprotected.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

UNESCO works on education and reducing educational inequalities. Its research highlights continuing differences in educational access and completion based on wealth, gender

and geography.

UN Women and the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA)

UN Women and UN DESA monitor gender equality and women's participation in development. Their *Gender Snapshot* provides data on poverty, food insecurity, education, employment and other areas affecting women and girls.

Possible Solutions

Expanding social protection:

Member States should strengthen nationally appropriate social protection systems, including cash assistance, pensions, unemployment support and support for vulnerable households. Programmes should prioritise groups facing the greatest barriers while remaining financially sustainable. This is particularly relevant because 3.8 billion people currently remain without any social protection benefit. (International Labour Organization)

Improving access to education:

Governments should improve access to affordable and inclusive primary and secondary education. Measures could include scholarships, school transport, accessible facilities, school meals and digital learning programmes, with resources targeted towards areas with large rural, gender or wealth gaps.

Strengthening accessible healthcare:

Member States should expand affordable primary healthcare and reduce financial barriers to essential treatment. Investment in local facilities, healthcare workers and preventative care could improve access in underserved communities. The World Health Organization identifies primary healthcare as a foundation for equitable access and universal health coverage. (World Health Organization)

Reducing gender inequality:

Governments should improve women's access to education, employment, social protection and financial services. Measures could include enforcing equal employment rights, improving access to childcare and supporting women's participation in the labour market and public decision-making.

Improving digital inclusion:

Governments should expand affordable internet access and digital skills training for disadvantaged communities. Programmes should consider rural communities, low-income households, women and people with disabilities. This would reduce barriers to education,

employment and government services.

Better data collection:

Governments and international organisations should collect data separated by income, gender, age, disability and geographical location. Better data can help identify which groups are being left behind and allow resources to be directed towards areas with greater need.

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