The Politics of Social Inclusion: Bridging Knowledge and Policies Towards Social Change

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1. The UN Agenda for Sustainable Development and its aspiration of social inclusion

Arguably, social inclusion is the overarching message of the UN’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It’s catch phase is ‘leaving no one behind’.

The logic of the 2030 Agenda is rooted in human rights and universality. The aspiration of social inclusion is present in many of the sustainable development goals (SDGs) and targets, such as the – perhaps central – goal of addressing inequality within and among countries (Goal 10) and the goal on empowering women and achieving gender equality (Goal 5).

Inclusiveness is a driving notion with regard to making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable (Goal 11), and with regard to promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, providing access to justice for all, and building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels (Goal 16).

Inclusiveness informs the goals and targets, even when inclusiveness is not used as a concept. There is the commitment to universal health coverage (target 3.8), universal access to sexual and reproductive healthcare services (target 3.7), and to inclusive and equitable quality education with lifelong learning opportunities for all (Goal 4).
Goals concerning water and sanitation (Goal 6) and access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy (Goal 7) posit inclusiveness: access ‘for all’. The goals for sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all (SDG 8) and sustainable industrialization (SDG 9) too are explicitly cast under an inclusiveness agenda.

Many of the indicators developed to measure progress are to be disaggregated by factors such as gender, age, location (rural/urban), indigeneity, and living with a disability. Such data could help reveal differential outcomes, for example in poverty and hunger eradication, owing to social exclusion.

The Agenda and its 17 SDGs are a vision we must hold on to with determination and creativity. Today, 5 years after its adoption, the geopolitical winds have turned and it would hardly be possible to adopt, at the multilateral level, a document so expressly committed to human rights and social inclusion.

2. Social exclusion and the politics of power

However, as the book argues, the 2030 Agenda is flawed. It does not address the politics of exclusion/inclusion, and makes only a subtle reference to the "enormous disparities of opportunity, wealth and power" (Agenda 2030 para 14) – disparities which both academe and civil society are acutely aware of.

Indeed, academic discourse, UN and NGO studies have long delivered evidence on five aspects:

- Social exclusion takes on many forms, based on ethnicity, indigeneity, caste, language and cultural identity, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, age, health status, education level, location, migration status, and many others, creating intersecting inequalities and deprivations. Gender-based exclusion is inherent in all forms of exclusion, and exacerbates and deepens the marginalization experienced even more.

- Processes of social exclusion undermine social justice, and are interwoven with the genesis and the re-production of poverty, because they bar from economic, political, social and cultural participation.

- They are a manifestation of and cement asymmetrical, hierarchical power relations.

- A relational, power-aware concept of exclusion or inclusion is needed to understand multidimensional poverty.

- A comprehensive set of ‘inclusion policies’ is required if we genuinely want to achieve poverty eradication, and this in all relevant dimensions, regarding income poverty and beyond.
The 2030 Agenda, however, as a consensual text, avoids clearly identifying the causes of poverty, hunger and inequality - an analysis that is prerequisite to tackling exclusion, poverty, and inequality head-on. As the on-the-ground studies in the book demonstrate vividly, social exclusion permeates experiences at the personal, community, government and international level.

In Bolivia, for example, the ‘Vivir bien’ philosophy is an alternative paradigm of development based on a pluralist vision and a promised respect of indigenous or peasant communities and their choices, which addresses the issues of inclusion and exclusion. Implementation of the ‘Vivir bien’ model has however ‘been erratic and partial’ (Nelson Antequera Durán).

A number of transformations took place in Bolivia in recent years with some positive impacts on socio-economic outcomes. However, income poverty resulting from a lack of decent employment persists, making it difficult for adults to balance their roles as the primary carers for their family, and as providers of the family’s material base. This is seen as the main driver of dysfunctional families, in turn generating societal exclusion. Fieldwork in La Paz, for example, reveals that ‘poverty, exclusion and inequality result in the progressive deterioration of social relationships, negatively influencing affective ties and notions of identity’. Nelson Antequera Durán therefore argues that national and local governments should emphasize conditions for strengthening the community so as to genuinely overcome social exclusion.
A similar nexus is documented in case studies from urban communities in two Caribbean countries, Jamaica and Haiti. Patriarchy, poverty and the lack of employment, arduous access to health facilities, and the slum location itself generate extreme forms of violence at the interpersonal level. The processes of economic and social exclusion in turn recreate violence (Aldrie Henry-Lee). Physical violence and destruction of personal property are also reported in case studies from two villages in India by Rachel Kurian and Deepak Singh.

In many of the book’s country experiences, hierarchical power relations perpetuate deeply embedded processes of social exclusion at the community level. These processes are complex and multi-layered. Gender is the overarching vector of exclusion in all of the case studies, regardless of geographic location. It is ‘interlocking and cumulative’ (Rachel Kurian and Deepak Singh), exacerbating all other drivers of exclusion. Caste (Rachel Kurian and Deepak Singh; Gabriele Koehler and Annie Namala; Ahok Kumar; Joop de Wit.), ethnicity (Aldrie Henry-Lee; Antequera Durán), location (Judith Audin Henry-Lee; Ashok Kumar; Joop de Wit), as well as ability, age and migrant status (Judith Audin, Askok Kumar) are additional social exclusion determinants. In India and other parts of South Asia, exclusion of communities runs along the intersecting lines of patriarchy and caste.

These each have a built-in interface with income poverty (Paul Spiker, Enrique Delamonica; Gabriele Koehler and Annie Namala; Aldrie Henry-Lee) and with cultural poverty (Nelson Antequera Durán). The case studies moreover illustrate that social exclusion is relational – determined by interactions which are subject to power asymmetries and hierarchical stratification. As a result, dominant groups, to their own benefit, divert public resources or extract personal resources, exclude people from income-earning opportunities or access to social services, and exert violence against disadvantaged groups, based on ‘socio-religious and cultural practices’ (Rachel Kurian and Deepak Singh).

The studies also reveal the systemic disconnect in national or local-level policies. For example, caste-based exclusionary practices such as untouchability undermine poverty alleviation schemes in rural India, as illustrated in the research of Kurian and Singh: ‘in spite of progressive legislations, schemes, central monitoring system and a pro-Dalit political party in power, there has been no significant change in the livelihood options’ in the villages they studied. They add that ‘local power relations revealed the limitations of laws and policies as instruments for changing the lives of people who function in different social fields associated with informal, hidden rules that are often stronger and where compliance is enforced face-to-face, at micro-level’ (Rachel Kurian and Deepak Singh).
The research from Bolivia, Jamaica and Haiti, and the studies from India reconfirm that disadvantaged communities are excluded, or adversely included, on grounds of ethnicity, income and political affiliations (Nelson Antequera Durán; Aldrie Henry-Lee; Joop de Wit). Garrison communities in Jamaica for example were political enclaves built to secure votes after the country’s independence, but they have become ‘characterized by chronic poverty, social exclusion, violence and misery’ and a systematic lack of access to quality education (Aldrie Henry-Lee). In the case of urban planning outcomes in Delhi, women are the most affected, losing their employment opportunities, and facing additional mobility restrictions. In addition, the people displaced are migrants from other states in India, engaged in the informal sector, who have no networks into local power centres (Ashok Kumar).

A number of the cases summarize field work in urban or village settings. Urban slum dwellers see their rights violated in processes of city planning. This is the case in cities in Jamaica and Haiti, in Uganda and in India (Joop de Wit; Ashok Kumar; Aldrie Henry-Lee; Gilbert Siame). In China, social work is caught in the tensions between providing support to disadvantaged citizens and controlling their access to social assistance, and even becoming complicit in the razing of their settlements or imposing family planning (Judith Audin).

The analysis at the local level is important for two reasons. The local environment is where individuals and communities experience exclusion or inclusion – be it adverse or empowering – and can coalesce to organize and fight for the realization of their rights. Ashok Kumar illustrates how spatial exclusions cause and perpetuate deprivation, with seemingly inclusionary planning policies resulting in multiple exclusions. In his study, public–private partnerships in Delhi led to the ‘displacement of citizens from one place to another’ and ‘also exclusion from work, particularly for poor women’. One conceptual notion in this connection is the right to centrality – the right to the urban (Ashok Kumar, based on Henri Lefebvre) – which encompasses rights to social services, infrastructure, and – extremely importantly – the right to decent and secure housing. This plane of discussion, second, interfaces with SDG11 – the recognition of space as constituting a key area for human dignity, identity, well-being, and hence for policy-making as well as collective action.
Findings from the book demonstrate how processes of social exclusion are exacerbated by a lack of democracy. In Mumbai, ‘patronage democracy’, observed in the slums, ‘malfunctions for the poor as it neither gives them real voice nor helps towards uniform pro-poor services and policies’ (Joop de Wit). It also isolates citizens, as they seek support through vertical relationships with powerful players in the community, rather than coalescing for collective action in horizontal relationships among peers. In several cases, individuals and communities witness impunity for violations of their rights, despite legal provisions in place (Rachel Kurian and Deepak Singh).

In urban China, residents’ committees are in charge of implementing public policies, such as the urban registry system, family planning and birth control policies, as well as social assistance programmes. They are also tasked with organizing sociocultural activities, or mediating conflicts among neighbours. This is a broad and at the same time invasive remit, demonstrating an understanding of social inclusion that is opposed to the empowering notions of social inclusion that characterize the academic literature, or UN normative frameworks. Based on ethnographic work in Beijing and Chongqing, Judith Audin highlights the challenges that social workers face. On the one hand, they are assigned to enforce public policies regarding access to social assistance in cases of disability or unemployment, or compliance with family planning laws.

The community-level social work also controls residents, and serves to exclude rural migrants who until recently had no residence rights in cities, co-opting neighbours into scrutinizing entitlements to social assistance or public housing. On the other hand, they have, and do internalize, a responsibility for social care work, designed to help the ‘weak and vulnerable groups’ in each neighbourhood. Their roles hence oscillate between a conveyer of state control of the family and the individual, and social work for social inclusion. While not characterized as such, this constitutes a form of adverse inclusion, also experienced in other settings, such as is apparent in the Mumbai case (Joop de Wit).
Many of the examples illustrate the effects of global processes. They reveal the socio-economic impact of neoliberal policies, a topic not often elaborated in the context of social exclusion research. Public services – access to social services and basic urban infrastructure such as drinking water and sanitation, and garbage collection – have been dismantled and privatized. This seems to be the case even in the context of the centralized state-party form of governance in China. In Mumbai, the ‘local state has shrunk, with services increasingly provided by the private sector, so that poor people are squeezed between reduced public services and costly private ones. In contrast, private sector firms benefited greatly: they have a strong voice in governance, while financing and influencing politician’s election campaigns’ (Joop de Wit). In several situations, incorporation into the system is ‘adverse’ – against the objective interest of the individual or community concerned.

An important observation is that exclusions at the personal or community level are mirrored by exclusionary politics affecting nation-states, driven by power relations in the multilateral context (Juan Telleria). As Aldrie Henry-Lee argues for the group of Small Island Developing States (SIDS), they are marginalized systematically by the functionings of international monetary policy, international trade, and development assistance. Despite commitments to consider the special geo-climatic challenges of island nations, the international power hierarchy plays out to the detriment of these smaller countries.

3. Policies for Social Inclusion

What does this distressing evidence imply for policy? At the conceptual level, it shows the connections between poverty and exclusionary processes which create and reinforce poverty. As Paul Spicker puts it, ‘discussions of exclusion come closer to the idea of poverty than much of the literature on poverty in itself, offering a way to escape from the limitations of the academic analysis of poverty’. There is a need for a ‘distinct view of society, based on networks of social solidarity’ (Paul Spicker). There are indeed many instances of collective action for policy change, as documented in the chapters by Joop de Wit; Rachel Kurian and Deepak Singh; Nelson Antequera Durán; and Gilbert Siame.

In the policy approaches that emerge, there is an agreement that inclusion policy needs to be grounded in the ethics of social solidarity (Paul Spicker). It needs to be genuinely participatory and empower the excluded (Rachel Kumar; Gilbert Siame; Joop de Wit). As Nelson Antequera Durán argues, for the marginalized and deprived, collective agency can be more powerful than individual agency; an individual is unlikely to achieve much alone, and power may be realized only through collective action.
Policy action also needs to be multipronged (Rachel Kurian and Deepak Singh; Gabriele Koehler and Annie Namala), as follows from the analysis that social exclusion operates on so many levels. One example is community urban planning processes in Kampala, where urban slum dwellers created civic movements and partnered with local stakeholders to achieve gains in inclusive urban development: ‘mechanisms have included use of boycotts, protests, propositions of alternative city development pathways, negotiations, and the introduction of leadership structures that seek to lead and not to be led by city officials and politicians’, as Gilbert Siame points out. He argues for a ‘co-production’ approach in urban planning: by ‘consciously and cautiously engaging with issues of deep difference, diversity, livelihoods, a weak state and a divided civil society, co-production ... crafts a normative position that attempts to address social justice and equity issues’.

Civil society in India has developed another strategy, advocating for a five-layered approach to social inclusion (Gabriele Koehler and Annie Namala). This is necessary to overcome the shortcomings in the policy responses in place in many countries in South Asia, where there is a long history of attempts to overcome some forms of exclusion, notably gender discrimination and violence, and caste-based exclusion. Strategies need to include the socio-cultural dimension. This is especially important since many policies in place at the government level have insufficient traction or are undermined by lack of political will and financial resources, and compounded by stereotypes at the interpersonal level, and the effects of power hierarchies at the local level.
In sum, policies must be sophisticated if they are to overcome poverty and social exclusion, and enable genuine transformation at the personal, the socio-economic and the political levels: the politics of social inclusion need to be multipronged, multidisciplinary and multi-layered. Secondly but not separately, policies need to tackle power relations. What the book contributes, then, is recommendations for change and glimmers of hope.

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