

**Out of the closet and into the fire:**  
**Will the Sustainable Development Goals push SOGIESC minorities behind?**

Kevin Dowling

Introduction

In her 2018 study, *Push No One Behind*, Diane Elson argues that modern ideas of development are too often founded on utilitarian ethics, placing an excessive focus on economic growth (1). In reference to the Leave No One Behind principal that is central to the United Nation's (UN) 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Elson goes a step beyond the concept of *being left behind* and analyses the ways in which people can often be left worse off by destructive impacts of development practices. This harm can be caused by a wide range of processes, including "land enclosure and appropriation in the name of improving productivity and infrastructure (and sometimes in the name of mitigating climate change); by development-induced climate change; by pollution; by poorly designed and implemented trade liberalization" (1).

In this way, there are often winners and losers in development activity. The success of a policy or practice is typically assessed on whether those who experience economic growth gain enough to compensate for the losses incurred by others. Unfortunately, however, this compensation is often not enough to account for the losses - for example, monetary payments for lives lost - or worse still, it never materialises at all. Elson effectively outlines how those with lower economic, social and political power are most at risk of being *pushed behind* by those with more power (1).

Under this lens, we will examine the 2015 framework and people whose sexual orientation, gender identity and expression or sexual characteristics (SOGIESC) differ from societal norms, ie

‘SOGIESC’ minorities (the value of such a term over an equivalent like ‘LGBTQIA+’ is in its absence of direct reference to any specific identity factor, thereby preventing any specific group from being excluded from a given narrative). With these minorities being some of the most marginalised members of society in terms of economic, social and political power, has their lack of representation within the SDGs left them worse-off than at the onset of this new development era?

### Exclusion in the pre-SDG era

Upon its unveiling, the Leave No One Behind approach that is at the core of the SDGs was praised for its inclusive and far reaching ambitions to promote the development of peace and prosperity for all (2). As a philosophy, this appeared to be a fundamental step forward for SOGIESC minorities in their struggles to achieve substantive equality. Up until the establishment of the SDGs, UN mandates have historically failed such minorities. When the UN’s General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948, it recognised that “the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world’. Yet social exclusion, discrimination and violence have remained synonymous with these communities across the globe (2). The UN’s recognition of the entitlement of equal rights for all humans has failed to manifest into reality for those without heteronormative and cisnormative SOGIESC, lending itself to the question, is membership of this “human family” an exclusive ticket? If all people are equal, how have governments continued to breach fundamental human rights for SOGIESC minorities, even after the signing of the UDHR? The truth is, the validity of the principal that SOGIESC-related discrimination is a human rights issue

is polarising within UN operations and, as such, the concept of the “human family” has been shrouded in vagueness and uncertainty.

Decades later, the UN’s Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) similarly did little to advance development for SOGIESC minorities. These goals were widely regarded as too narrow and shallow to bring about substantive change in most areas of development practice. Having been designed in a non-participatory fashion by a designated UN taskforce, the goals focused on the alleviation of extreme poverty through increased provision of basic needs (3-6). Touted by some as the “minimum development goals” (7), the 8 goals and 21 targets represented a modest concept of development that failed to recognise the intersectional relationship between such poverty and a plethora of other environmental, social and economic factors (8). As such, representation of SOGIESC minorities was inevitably out of focus. When the 2030 Agenda was ushered in by the SDGs, the newly adopted framework contrasted with the MDGs in design, concept and scope. The design phase took place over three years and marked a major scale-up of participation from governments, civil society groups, academics, business groups and UN agencies around the world (4,6,9). What resulted was a set of 17 goals and 169 targets which covered a much more expansive idea of development. At its core was the principle that all goals are connected to each other and that reaching any given goal will require careful consideration of its intersectional connectivity with others. In addition, while the MDGs focused on the contexts of developing countries, the SDGs were lauded for their global applicability and relevance to development in all countries. The framework proposed that to effectively promote poverty alleviation and sustainable development, all aspects of inequality and marginalisation must be addressed (including through an increased emphasis on environmental wellbeing) (3-6). In doing so, the complex nature of sustainable

development was recognized like it hadn't before, and the SDGs provided a much more realistic and hopeful opportunity for substantive change, not just for SOGIESC minorities, but for all (8).

### SOGIESC minorities and the 2030 Agenda

Despite the promise of a more inclusive development agenda, the SDGs were quickly met with criticism for failing to make explicit reference to SOGIESC minorities (8,10-13). This appeared to be a glaring omission, particularly when contextualised against the political climate at the time. Between 2013 and 2015, as key deliberations for the 2030 Agenda were taking place, various high-profile politic affairs were occurring on the world stage that were in direct breach of the human rights of SOGIESC minorities. In 2013, legislation criminalising the distribution of LGBTQIA+ information to children was passed into Russian law, coinciding with a dramatic surge in reports of vigilante groups and hate crimes throughout the country (14). In Africa, on the other hand, Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Act of 2014, dubbed by the media as the 'Kill the Gays Bill', was passed into law the same year that the national parliament in Nigeria passed legislation prohibiting same-sex marriage and public displays of intimacy or relationships (15,16). With such stark examples of human rights violations occurring across the globe, the failure to mention SOGIESC minorities in the framework for the 2030 Agenda appeared particularly imprudent. The UN is, however, a highly political body with representation from 193 member states, and if consensus is to be reached amid vast differences in opinions, cultures and political agendas, compromises must often be made (8,11,12). Naturally, as such, deliberations on global issues often require officials to 'pick their battles'. No doubt, the geo-political climate stymied direct reference to SOGIESC minorities within the SDG framework, despite the extensive efforts of civil society organisations and development actors for a more visible representation within the framework (10).

To ensure that SOGIESC minorities are not *left behind* or *pushed behind* under the 2030 Agenda, committed development actors have conscientiously interpreted the language of the framework to make meaning of the goals for such individuals (10). As Stonewall International suggests, though “the SDGs could have gone further by explicitly calling for LGBT equality” there is “potential to advance equality for all” (17). In accordance with the Leave No One Behind approach, various all-inclusive terms have been used throughout the framework’s wording and have been valued as a means of inclusion for such minorities (10). For example, how can we strive to “end poverty in *all its forms*” (Goal 1) or achieve “*universal* health coverage” (Goal 3) or “*justice for all*” (Goal 16) if SOGIESC minorities are excluded from the discourse? The inclusion of “*other status*” in Goal 10 (‘Reduce inequalities’) holds particular importance after having been strategically advocated for by individuals and organisations with intentions of SOGIESC equity (10,11). Both the universal and specific needs and rights of SOGIESC minorities must be included in development activity if the target to “empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion *of all*, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or *other status*” is to be achieved (18). These examples outline just some of the entry points into the SDGs that can and should be used to ensure that Leave No One Behind translates into inclusive practice and policy for SOGIESC minorities (10). Will these openings be enough for substantive development? Or will these communities be *left, or pushed, behind*?

### Push or pull?

By Elson’s definition, being *pushed behind* involves people being left in worse conditions from development activities that are aimed to benefit others (1). With scant literature suggesting this might be the case for SOGIESC minorities, one might reach an initial conclusion that these groups

will be more likely to be *left behind*. The two key mechanisms by which individuals or groups get *left behind* by society - social exclusion and discrimination - continue to devastate SOGIESC minorities throughout the SDG era. Take, for example, the ‘gay purges’ of Chechnya in 2017 where a minimum of dozens of men were detained, tortured or executed on account of their real or perceived sexual orientation (19), or the reverse of two county-level bans on so-called ‘conversion therapy’ in Florida, in the United States, in 2020 (20). In Ecuador that same year, the central government vetoed a code which would have increased protection against this same pseudo-therapy for SOGIESC minority youth (20). In Hungary, the ‘anti-LGBT law’ passed in 2021 continues to prohibit the sharing of information considered to be in promotion of homosexuality or gender reassignment with minors, as well as banning content relating to SOGIESC minorities from daytime television or organisational campaigns of solidarity or allyship (21). While each of these events have left the affected people in situations devastatingly worse than they had been before, they did not occur as a direct result of development practice - rather a lack of it. By failing to include and support SOGIESC minorities within the SDG framework, their equitable development is hindered and they will continue to be left behind in such way by unspecific and/or non-inclusive policies and practices.

The inevitability of SOGIESC minorities being *left behind* by their invisibility within the SDGs is outlined in a 2015 report by The Institute of Development Studies (10). Upon carrying out a meta-analysis on 18 empirical literature reviews relating to gender, sexuality and development, the overarching thematic findings identified the key “mechanism of exclusion” that have repeatedly left SOGIESC minorities behind by development policies and practices. By mapping these mechanisms against the SDGs, thematic overlap was identified across 12 of the 17 goals, including in relation to poverty, health, education, gender equality, economic growth, human settlements and

justice and accountability. Thus, the widespread potential for SOGIESC minorities to be excluded from this development era is evident. The researchers concluded that without deliberate action targeted specifically toward SOGIESC minorities, the social exclusion and discrimination that they have long experienced will remain a fundamental threat and they will be *left behind* once again (10).

Though the literature does not directly suggest that SOGIESC minorities will be *pushed behind* by 2030 Agenda development practices, it is important to address the significant shortcomings in the evidence-base. Comprehensive data pertaining to the intersection between development practice and SOGIESC minorities is lacking across the globe, particularly in developing countries. Repeatedly, researchers quote insufficient data as a limitation to their ability to draw robust conclusions from their studies (10,11,22,23). In *The Irony of Homophobia in Africa*, Semugoma *et al.* outline how the lack of SOGIESC visibility in society directly perpetuates the lack of funding and research that is required to improve the livelihoods of such communities - “it is difficult to research a closeted, hidden population of pariahs who are subject to arrest and other legal sanctions” (22). In addition to these logistical obstacles, SOGIESC-disaggregated data has been a relatively untapped source of information in demographic research and needs assessments worldwide. While collecting data on someone’s SOGIESC has traditionally been seen as inappropriate, irrelevant or insensitive, its value is now being recognised more widely (24). SOGIESC minorities must be visibly accounted for in demographic data so that the true impacts of societal exclusion and discrimination can be identified and then addressed (23).

With these data-related limitations in mind, there is a case to be answered for as to whether SOGIESC minorities are in fact being *pushed behind*, however their lack of representation in research and policies means that the effect is not as easily identified. If, as Elson outlined, low

economic, social and political power are the key determinants of one's vulnerability to being *pushed behind*, this would suggest that SOGIESC minorities are in fact some of the most at-risk groups in society. The heteronormative and cisnormative hegemonies upon which societies are built pave the way for violence, discrimination and exclusion for those who do not conform, thereby limiting their security, wellbeing and power (25). In turn, this discrimination has adverse impacts on participation in, or access to, fundamental needs and rights, including pertaining to education, healthcare, safe settlements, economic stability and political and civic participation (26). As a result, the rates of poverty, homelessness and food insecurity are significantly higher among SOGIESC minorities across the globe (10,26,27). In Canada, for example, research suggests that these minorities account for as high as 25%-45% of all homeless youth (28). Similarly, through a national survey in the United States of 34,759 LGBTQIA+ youth, the Trevor Project found that 28% of its participants have already experienced periods of homelessness or housing instability at some point in their lives (29). The criminalisation of non-hetero-cisnormative SOGIESC is another dire mechanism by which these minorities are left marginalised and lacking power. The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association's (ILGA) *State-Sponsored Homophobia Report 2020* highlights, for example, that there are still 67 UN member states that criminalise same-sex relations, 6 of which can legally punish such by the death penalty (20). On the other hand, less than a third of all member states have legal provisions in place to protect against discrimination based on sexual orientation. Only about a tenth have protection against discrimination based on gender identity (20,26). In a vicious cycle, these shortcomings in law serve to reinforce social stigmas around SOGIESC minorities, thereby stymying progression toward more just legal systems (26).



The societal and legal mechanisms of exclusion that work against SOGIESC communities strengthen the argument that they will be *pushed behind*. It is well accepted in the development arena that the most marginalised and poverty-stricken members of society are the most vulnerable to external destructive forces, such as pollution or land appropriation. What is under-represented in the literature, however, is the specific ways in which these apply to SOGIESC minorities. For example, while the intersection between climate change and the gendered inequality experienced by cisgender women has been widely studied (30), there is little research into the increased susceptibility of SOGIESC minorities to harmful climate impacts. This heightened threat is a harsh reality, however. To start, for example, the higher rates of homelessness and poverty among such groups increases their vulnerability to the devastating impacts and aftermaths of natural disasters. In addition, discrimination in emergency response activities has also been evident. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, for example, reports were repeatedly made of transgender individuals being refused entry into emergency shelters. Similarly, SOGIESC minorities are generally reported to have more difficulty seeking asylum in response to disaster (31). When development practice plays a contributory role in the destructive climate events that leave SOGIESC minorities less stable or displaced, the conditions of Elson's definition of '*pushed behind*' are met. Without any reference to this intersectional relationship within the SDGs, it seems inevitable that these groups will be *pushed* like so. Unfortunately, the response to climate change is only one mechanism by which development can adversely impact those with low social, economic and political power. The *queering of poverty* and the invisibility of SOGIESC minorities in the SDG framework suggests that these groups will be subject to other mechanisms by which the marginalised tend to be *pushed behind*. Further research is required to identify the correlations between SOGIESC minorities, and the various mechanisms outlined by Elson, including land enclosure and appropriation, pollution,

trade liberalisation and hazardous working conditions (1). Without this disaggregated data, it is disturbing to think of the invisibility with which so many of these minorities might be *pushed behind* by the end of the 2030 Agenda.

## Conclusion

In 2015, the establishment of the UN's SDGs ushered in a more hopeful development era for SOGIESC minorities across the world. Progressing from uncertainties and vagueness surrounding the UDHR and the MDGs, the new 2030 Agenda was celebrated by many for the undebatable universality of the language of '*all*'. However, though the phrasing of the framework allows various entry points for more inclusive development, whether SOGIESC minorities get *left behind* or *pushed behind* will depend on how development actors decide to interpret it (2,8,10,32). Due to the lack of explicit reference to the needs and rights of SOGIESC minorities, however, we have already seen ways in which members of these communities have been *left behind* by the SDGs. Even more concerning is that because these minorities are often some of the most lacking members of society in terms of social, economic and political power, there is reason to believe that the consequences will be a step further in intensity and they will, in fact, be *pushed behind* in their struggle toward equity. Increased SOGIESC-disaggregated data and research into the destructive impacts of development on these minorities is required if more inclusive development policies and practices are to be implemented. In 2030, the curtain will likely be raised over a new framework of goals for a new agenda in a new era of development. We must ensure that SOGIESC minorities are not swept under it. It is time now to start pulling.

## **References**

1. Elson D. Push no one behind. CDP background paper no 43. United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. 2018.
2. Ongsupankul W. Finding sexual minorities in United Nations Sustainable Development Goals: Towards the deconstruction of gender binary in international development policies. *LSE Law Review*. 2019;5:1-30.
3. Stuart E and Woodroffe J. Leaving no-one behind: can the Sustainable Development Goals succeed where the Millennium Development Goals lacked? *Gender & Development*. 2016; 24(1):69-81.
4. Fukuda-Parr S. From the Millennium Development Goals to the Sustainable Development Goals: shifts in purpose, concept, and politics of global goal setting for development. *Gender & Development*. 2016; 24(1):43-52.
5. Razavi S. The 2030 Agenda: challenges of implementation to attain gender equality and women's rights. *Gender & Development*. 2016; 24(1):25-41.
6. Cornwall A and Rivas AM. From 'gender equality and 'women's empowerment' to global justice: reclaiming a transformative agenda for gender and development. *Third World Quarterly*. 2015; 36(2):396-415.
7. Harcourt W. The Millennium Development Goals: A missed opportunity? *Development*. 2015; 48:1-4.
8. Logie CH. Sexual rights and sexual pleasure: Sustainable Development Goals and the omitted dimensions of the leave no one behind sexual health agenda. *Global Public Health*. 2021; 18:1-12.
9. Norton A and Stuart E. How far down the road? Comments on the Secretary-General's Synthesis Report on Post-2015. *ODI Research Reports*. 2014.

10. Mills E. 'Leave no one behind': Gender, sexuality and the Sustainable Development Goals. Sexuality, poverty and law evidence report no 154. Institute of Development Studies. 2015.
11. Poku NK, Esom K and Armstrong R. Sustainable development and the struggle for LGBTI social inclusion in Africa: Opportunities for accelerating change. *Development in Practice*. 2017; 27(4):432–443.
12. Sciortino R. Sexual and reproductive health and rights for all in Southeast Asia: More than SDGs aspirations. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*. 2020; 22(7):744–761.
13. Vaast C and Mills E. Gender, sexuality and development: Avenues for action in a post-2015 development era. In C. L. Mason (Ed.), *Routledge handbook of queer development studies*. 2018; 57-70.
14. Guardian News and Media Limited. Russia passes law banning gay 'propaganda' (webpage from the internet). 2013. Available from:  
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/11/russia-law-banning-gay-propaganda>
15. Human Rights Watch. Uganda: anti-homosexuality act's heavy toll (webpage from the internet). 2014. Available from: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/05/14/uganda-anti-homosexuality-acts-heavy-toll>
16. Equal Rights Trust. Nigeria becomes the latest country to pass dangerous anti-gay legislation (webpage from the internet). 2014. Available from:  
<https://www.equalrightstrust.org/news/nigeria-becomes-latest-country-pass-dangerous-anti-gay-legislation>

17. Stonewall International. The sustainable development goals and lgbt inclusion (e-guide from the internet). 2016. Available from: <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/system/files/sdg-guide.pdf>
18. United Nations Development Programme. The Sustainable Development Goals (webpage from the internet). Accessed Oct 2021. Available from: <https://www.undp.org/sustainable-development-goals>
19. Steinmetz K. A victim of the anti-gay purge in chechnya speaks out: 'The truth exists'. Time USA. 2019. Available from: <https://time.com/5633588/anti-gay-purge-chechnya-victim/>
20. The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association. State-sponsored homophobia report 2020. ILGA World. 2020.
21. Guardian News and Media Limited. Hungary passes law banning LGBT content in schools or kids' TV (webpage from the internet). 2021. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/15/hungary-passes-law-banning-lbgt-content-in-schools>
22. Semugoma P, Nemande S and Baral SD. The irony of homophobia in Africa. The Lancet. 2012; 380(9839):312-314.
23. Park A. A development agenda for sexual and gender minorities. The Williams Institute. 2016.
24. Stonewall International. Do ask, do tell: Capturing data on sexual orientation and gender identity globally. 2019. Available from: [https://www.stonewall.org.uk/sites/default/files/do\\_ask\\_do\\_tell\\_guide\\_2016.pdf](https://www.stonewall.org.uk/sites/default/files/do_ask_do_tell_guide_2016.pdf)

25. Ivory S. How can the consideration of sexuality and gender diversity improve outcomes in the SDGs and for queer communities in Aotearoa, New Zealand? United Nations Association of New Zealand. 2018
26. United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. Leave no LGBT person behind (Statement by human rights experts on the International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia). United Nations. 2018. Available from: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=23092&LangID=E>
27. Fraser B, Pierse N, Chisholm E and Cook H. LGBTIQ+ homelessness: A review of the literature. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 2019; 16(15):2677.
28. Quilty A and Norris M. A qualitative study of LGBTIQ+ youth homelessness in Ireland. *Focus Ireland*. 2020.
29. The Trevor Project. Homelessness and housing instability among LGBTQ Youth. 2021.
30. United Nations Development Programme. Overview of linkages between gender and climate change. United Nations. 2013.
31. Randall C. Why climate change is an LGBTQ+ issue (webpage from the internet). Friends of the Earth Scotland. 2020. Available from: <https://foe.scot/why-climate-change-is-an-lgbtq-issue/>
32. Izugbara C, Sebany M, Wekesah F and Ushie B. “The SDGs are not God” Policy-makers and the queering of the Sustainable Development Goals in Africa. *Development Policy Review*. 2021; 00:1-16.