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Accelerating the United Nation's 2030 Global Agenda: Why Prioritization of the Gender Goal is Essential

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Abstract

In September 2015, Member States of the United Nations (UN) committed to work towards a transformative policy agenda consisting of 17 ambitious Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be achieved by 2030. However, implementation progress has been slow and at the current rate the SDG agenda will fall far short on delivery of its 169 targets. In order to accelerate progress at global, national and local levels it is necessary to prioritize goals and targets. One standalone SDG that is also cross-cutting and universal is Goal 5: Gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls. In this article we assemble evidence to make the case that decisively (and politically) placing the gender equality goal (SDG5 and its 9 targets) together with 54 gender indicators across all goals as the priority focus of the 2030 agenda is the most impactful way to ensure measurable achievements are made across the agenda to deliver on all 5 pillars of the global commitment: namely People, Planet, Peace, Prosperity and Partnerships.

Prioritization is essential for the SDG agenda

The United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is an ambitious strategy to transform our world into a more equitable, peaceful and healthy planet. It is the world's first truly global policy, complete with targets, indicators, implementation plans; monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Ratified by 193 Member States of the United Nations, the 2030 agenda commits nations to working together towards a shared vision based on a human rights approach to sustainable development. The 17 goals are articulated as indivisible, universal and integrated (UN, 2015a): a positive step towards a holistic approach to tackling global challenges. All goals are presented as equally important and therefore no goal is prioritized. However, we argue that without some form of prioritization it is already quite clear that this global agenda of 17 goals, 169 targets and the 230 individual indicators is unachievable.

By the close of 2018, 111 Voluntary National Reviews of SDG progress at country level have been completed and reviewed by the High Level Political Forum. The available data are clear and calls for more discussion on strategies for implementation are being made at the highest UN levels (UN DESA CDP, 2018): In short; at this current rate the

world's first global strategy is set to fail. António Guterres, Secretary General of the United Nations, already acknowledges that the challenge is great and implementation too slow (UN, 2018).

The modus operandi of the SDGs and current evaluation frameworks examine the agenda goal by goal, target by target, indicator by indicator with cross cutting values such as 'leave no one behind' and an overarching imperative to stimulate action along the 5Ps: People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnership. Critics, even early on, raised concerns that target-by-target approaches to implementation would result in duplication, resource wastage, unintended and even perverse effects (Nilsson et al., 2016). Feminist critiques include concerns that targets which contain most transformative potential will be neglected through selectivity, simplification and national adaptation resulting in a dilution of the ambitions of the agenda (Fukuda-Parr, 2016).

Even if such a target-by-target approach were theoretically possible, the evidence from annual progress reports (UN, 2018; World Bank, 2018a) is clear: there is an urgent need to change the way we have been proceeding so far in order to utilize limited resources more effectively and efficiently. It is therefore clear that the complimentary and multiplying interrelations between each of the goals have to be

leveraged if we as a global community want to deliver on the 2030 agenda. Thus, the question arises: Are some goals more important, impactful or more urgent than others? In short, can the SDGs be ranked and consequently prioritized?

Several attempts have been made in this regard; one suggestion is a target-based ranking (Leitner, 2017) whilst others have suggested prioritizing a single cross-cutting objective to achieve horizontal progress (Starbird et al., 2016). Both of these attempts, however, are target-centred and fail to see the 2030 agenda as a dynamic whole. To our knowledge, the bolder suggestion of prioritizing one SDG comprehensively has not yet been made. Coming from a global health and development perspective we ask: would success in any one goal result in a positive downstream effect contributing to the accomplishment of other goals?

People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnership – the 5Ps – are the pillars upon which the 2030 agenda and its strategic goals are built. This structure can serve as the organizing principles around which prioritization of goals can be achieved. With this framework in mind we propose that eliminating the most pervasive form of discrimination – making gender inequality history – should lead the way, delivering gains across the 5Ps in the process.

The challenges of goal 5 are great – but they are globally shared and therefore capable of galvanizing a truly global commitment even in notably challenging places where some data point to a backslide (World Economic Forum, 2017). No country has yet achieved gender equality; all countries – high, middle and low income alike – come under the scrutiny of goal 5. It would require that we eliminate what we call the ‘gender data gap’ that leaves only 10 of the 54 gender-specific indicators with sufficient accurate data to report (UNWomen, 2018b). As Christine Loew (2018), Director of the UNWomen Liaison Office Geneva, emphasised during the recent Intersessional Expert Meeting held by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, closing this data gap is an immediate priority for the achievement of the 2030 agenda.

Even despite the *gender data gap*, evidence clearly suggests the interlinkages of gender inequality and other SDGs (Taukobong et al., 2016; UNWomen, 2018b). Looking beyond mere linkages we argue that data supports the prioritization of Goal 5 showing that it produces plentiful downstream effects. We draw on evidence from medicine, social and health sciences to illustrate a number of ways in which moving the dial on gender equality contributes across the SDG agenda.

Why gender?

Gender equality refers to the equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of all women and men and girls and boys and non-binary genders. Equality between women and men and all Sexual Orientations and Gender Identities (SOGI) is seen both as a human rights issue and as a precondition for, and indicator of, sustainable people-centred development (UNHRC, 2019; UNWomen, 2018a).

Gender Equality – like the 2030 agenda itself – is founded on the fundamental principles of the 1946 UN Charter and the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) and is enshrined (not without critique of gendered language) in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. A gendered approach to the SDG agenda that prioritizes this still unmet human right can provide the dynamic to trigger the goals’ working in unison as indivisible and universal. Prioritizing a transformative and intersectional gender approach cross-cuts the global agenda (Gupta et al., 2019; Kapilashrami and Hankivsky, 2018) and, we argue, will facilitate the achievement of all other goals. This makes gender equality an urgency and at the same time the one SDG that can cascade its impact through the goals and across the 5Ps. Drawing on our collective disciplinary expertise we present just some of the data-driven arguments to support the prioritization of goal 5 (see also Figure 1).

Discussion

Underpinning the SDGs are the 5Ps and it is around these that we present a selection of evidence to support the prioritization of gender equality – as a transformative intersectional approach – and the most impactful way to cascade progress through the entire global agenda.

People and planet

From our disciplinary perspective of global health sciences, two of the pillars underpinning the global agenda are considered so deeply interconnected that they are most usefully considered as a single integrated whole. For this reason, we recouple them in the following discussion adopting an earlier concept of One Health, and more recently Planetary Health to align synergies (Brousselle and Butzbach, 2018; Pongsiri et al., 2017).

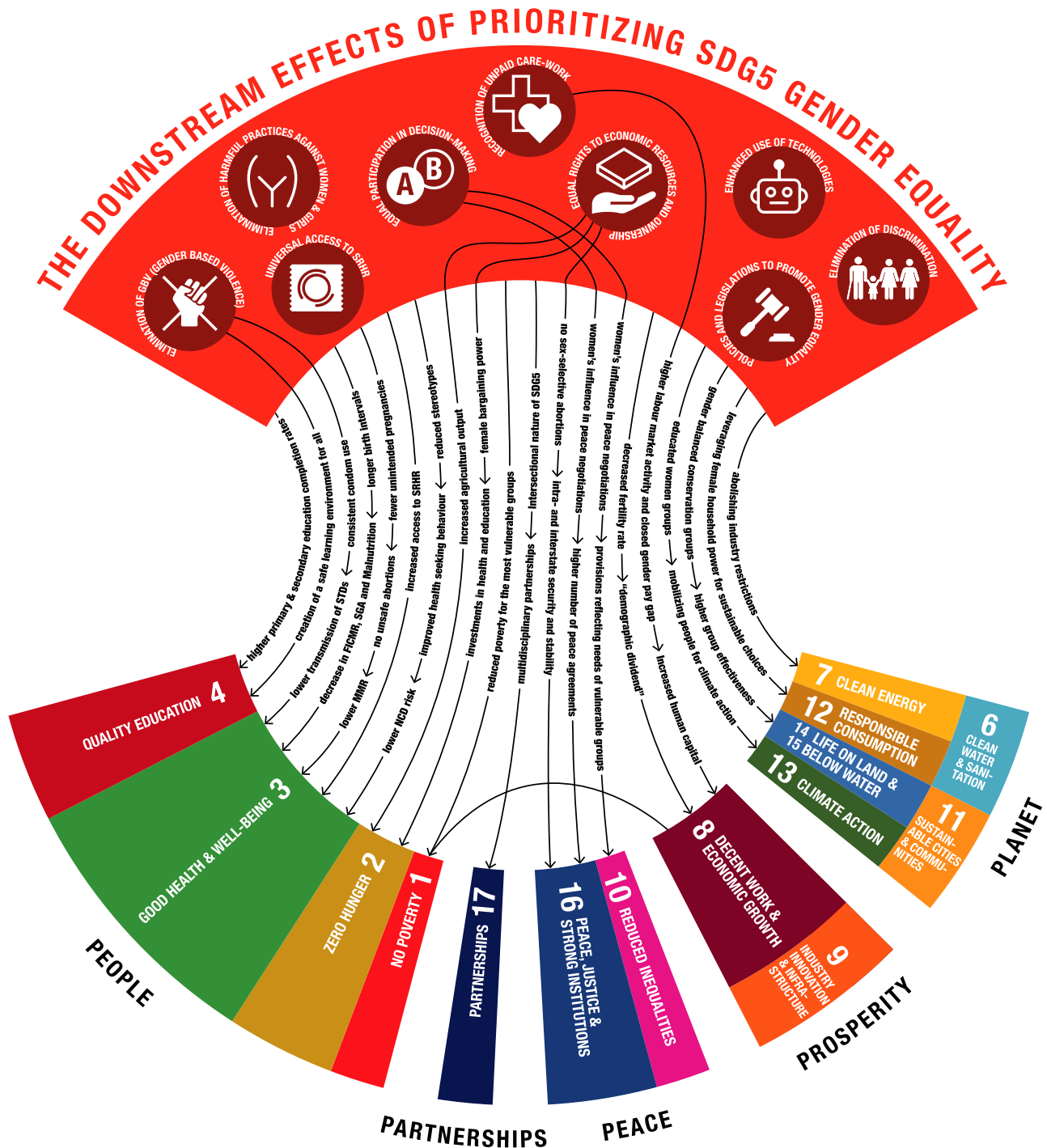
The concept of planetary health integrates the state of human health and the state of the nature and ecological systems on which it depends. It is not possible to promote nor sustain health of humans without conserving our environment (Horton et al., 2014; Whitmee et al., 2015). Thus, we cannot evaluate the impact gender equality will have on the people-centred SDGs without evaluating its impact on the Planet.

In the following section we cite a few of the many examples to illustrate how gender equality can impact people and planet alike. Firstly illustrating some health examples, then moving to our planet, always highlighting the interactions.

The core of the SDG agenda lies in ensuring that all people are able to fulfil their full potential and lead a life in dignity. Progress in this area depends firstly on ending all forms of discrimination, making gender inequality the intuitive intersectional starting point. This will facilitate progress towards health and education, which in turn are essential for overcoming hunger and poverty.

For example, moves towards greater gender equality results in significantly enhanced outcomes across all health

Figure 1. FICMR – fetal, infant & child mortality rate; MMR – maternal mortality rate; NCD – noncommunicable disease; SGA – small for gestational age infant; SRHR – sexual and reproductive health and rights; STDs – sexually transmitted diseases.



domains not only sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) although this is where most data tend to cluster. Recent data show that access to reproductive services remains an unmet need for 214 million women globally (WHO/RHR, 2018) and current backlash globally are testament to a concerning trend. Female genital mutilation and early, forced and child marriage remain intractable issues

and according to the Pew Research Centre, 117 countries including the USA still permit child marriage (Sanstrom and Theodorou, 2016). Women's decision-making power is strongly associated with the use of modern contraceptive methods and is an essential part in policies to improve gender equality and SRHR (Ahmed et al., 2010; World Bank, 2018a).

Much research shows that gender equality in general and more specifically SRHR are key to tackling maternal and infant mortality – independent of cultural, religious and other factors. A plethora of evidence around fertility rates, adequate interpregnancy intervals, the risk of unintended pregnancies shows, that infant and child mortality, the risk for small for gestational age of new-borns and child malnutrition (Conde-Agudelo et al., 2006; Rutstein, 2005; WHO, 2007) unsafe abortion and related maternal mortality (Glasier et al., 2006; Grimes et al., 2006) all heavily depend on gender equality (Maxwell et al., 2018; Sano et al., 2018; World Bank, 2018a). Maternal and Child Health (MCH) most broadly is a critical indicator of gender equality (Wang, 2014).

Further still, gender inequality and gender-based violence (GBV) contribute severely to the burden of sexually transmitted diseases affecting men, women and their offspring alike. HPV and Chlamydia are examples of epidemics still plaguing many countries in the global north whilst HIV remains a challenge disproportionately impacting the global south and preventative measures such as condom use are repeatedly shown to be positively correlated with gender inequalities (Pettifor et al., 2004).

The transversal impact of gender, and specifically gender inequities, impact all aspects of health and was, as early as 2008, recognized as a social determinant of health in the WHO Commission (CSDH, 2008) and, more recently, been conceptualized by some of the papers in the recent Lancet series (Gupta et al., 2019) and Manandhar et al. (2018) to impact health seeking behaviour and systems alike. Nevertheless, further empirical research is needed to unpack the intersectional axes of discriminations, power and privilege that generate health inequities in areas as diverse as NCDs (Marcos et al., 2013) to vaccination resistance (Taukobong et al., 2016).

In our second example we look at education. Over 130 million girls are out of school in 2016 and two-thirds of the world's 775 million illiterate adults are women (UIS, 2016; UN, 2015b). Achieving SDG5 will contribute substantially to an increase in completion of primary and secondary education; analysis has shown that in countries where early marriage is twice as prevalent among women, only 60 women per 100 men complete secondary education. In comparison, 90 women per 100 men complete secondary education in countries where early marriage is not likely (OECD, 2017). Other studies show that the use of modern contraceptives before the first birth, that is, the ability to control one's own reproductive time table, is strongly associated with advancements in education (Erfani, 2015). The 2017 UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report suggests that, tackling gender based violence (GBV), one of the most important factors in school-related violence, is essential for ensuring a safe learning environment for all (UNESCO, 2017). These findings imply that working towards different targets of SDG5 will strongly contribute to achieving the majority of SDG4 targets.

The intersection of gender equality and SDG goals and targets aimed at securing land rights, food security, nutrition, sustainable agricultural production are interdisciplinary

problems, connecting Health, Education and the Planet. Ensuring equal rights to economic resources, access to ownership and control over land will significantly contribute to ending hunger by increasing agricultural output worldwide. The 2011 FAO report estimates a 17 per cent reduction in people suffering from hunger through a 20–30 per cent increase in output per farm, if women were granted the same access to productive resources and control over land and property as men (Ghanem, 2011). Data suggest that increasing a woman's bargaining power in the household have very significant effects on long term nutritional status of families where women's control over household resources leads to a higher proportion of income being invested in health and education of offspring, especially improving their nutritional status (Djebbari, 2005; Hazarika and Guha-Khasnobis, 2008; Smith et al., 2003). A holistic gender and environmentally aware approach to land right's reforms also holds a great opportunity to advance planetary health.

Another essential part of a healthy planet is the growing field of clean energy production. However, discriminatory laws and regulations in the labour sector still persist in 104 economies, including OECD nations, hindering the full participation of 2 billion women globally. Industry restrictions are still common place with 55 economies banning women from the energy or water sector (World Bank, 2018b). As numerous successful pilot projects launched across the world (see Box 1) show how removing these barriers can unleash a vast potential to boost clean energy innovation and entrepreneurship (Glemarec et al., 2016). These innovations are essential in order to democratize environmentally sustainable energy production.

Gender equality is a critical factor in community based environmental activities. Transforming gendered drivers in communal forest conservation, for example, have found positive outcomes although are still limited by gendered access to technologies. (Agarwal, 2009; Mwangi et al., 2011).

In short, even this brief scan of the data indicates that transformative and intersectional gender approaches are critical to planetary health.

Peace

Peace and security are the prerequisites for all sustainable development without which none of the other goals can be achieved. There are data that indicate gender equality is a primary driver of sustainable peace and that.

Effective participation of women in social, political and economic life has a positive effect on peace processes. A recent global study revealed that reaching agreements in peace negotiations is significantly correlated with the influence women were able to exert. This means the likelihood of (re)starting and/or reaching a peace agreement increases when women are able to take on an active role. A prominent example for this is the involvement of women delegates in the Inter-Congolese Dialog, which formally ended the Second Congo War in 2003 (see Box 2). Additionally, negotiations with women involvement more often resulted in regulations or provisions that reflect the vulnerabilities of

Box 1. Senegal: energy opportunities for women

In Tambacounda and Kedougou, rural regions of Senegal, under 10 per cent of the population have access to energy, making them dependent on unclean energy sources like firewood. Apart from being highly time consuming, this has serious implication for their health and the environment.

In 2014 the Global Village Energy Partnership (GVEP) International in partnership with the Social and Ecological Management (SEM) Fund and ENERGIA launched a project in these areas to facilitate and strengthen female participation in energy provision. One hundred and sixty female entrepreneurs with micro and small enterprises trading solar energy lamps and cleaner cook stoves were supported through business training, financing and mentoring. Furthermore, the project aimed to build gender awareness in the communities.

By boosting gender equality an estimated 400 000 people will have improved access to clean energy.

Sweden: Qvinnovindar –boosting clean energy investment

Wanja Wallemyr, a farmer and rural activist, was determined to invest in clean wind energy projects in her community. However, she was faced with the reality of not being able to afford the minimum investment of roughly US\$154,000. She took this opportunity to found 'Qvinnovindar' – a financial all-women wind energy cooperative to enable women's investment in clean and renewable energy. The cooperative allows the investment of smaller sums, bringing together women of all financial backgrounds and different professions.

As of 2013 Qvinnovindar has invested US\$1.5 million in Swedish wind energy projects, aiming to boost the clean energy sector.

Case studies adapted from: Roots for the Future (Boyer and Owren, 2015), [grist.org\(Haugen, 2013\) and energy4impact.org\(Energy4im-pact, 2017\).](http://grist.org(Haugen, 2013) and energy4impact.org(Energy4im-pact, 2017).)

some groups in conflict and post-conflict situations (Paffenholz et al., 2016).

Evidence from other sectors finds links between deep structural inequalities and levels of societal violence. In countries where equality in economic rights are not guaranteed, having a girl child places an economic burden on families. This has led to practices of sex selective abortions resulting in extremely unbalanced sex ratios, especially in some Asian countries where restrictions in family planning (China) or cultural traditions amplify this burden further (India). In China, only 86 females are born per 100, compared to a regular ratio of 95/100 in Europe and North America, a number even undercut by areas in northern and western India (79–87/100) (Sen, 2003). The causes of female feticide are complex and not fully understood, but the law – particularly property and inheritance law, dowry and bride wealth norms – and the perpetuation of structural inequalities are part of the problem (Bossen, 2005). This trend has led to a surplus of single men, a phenomenon associated with an increase in violence, especially coalitional violence,

Box 2. Democratic Republic of Congo: women's role in the Inter-Congolese Dialog (2001–2003)

As a reaction to the initial underrepresentation of women in the peace processes a high-level problem solving workshop was held for 64 women representatives from government officials, armed groups and civil society organizations. This workshop enabled and empowered the women to exert pressure, leading to the inclusion of 40 well prepared female delegates at the official negotiations at Sun City and Pretoria. Additionally, the female delegates, despite coming from different cultural backgrounds, formed a unified voice further increasing their influence.

This led to several achievements most prominently:

- The signing of the peace agreement – formally ending the Second Congo War: It was the pressure of the female delegates that led to its ratification. The women had formed a human chain to prevent anybody from exiting unless the agreement was signed.
- The creation of a Ministry of Women and Family Affairs in the transitional administration.

Case study adapted from: Inclusive Peace & Transition Initiative (Paffenholz et al., 2016).

against women and even more so between men (Dreze and Khera, 2000; Mesquida and Wiener, 1996). Historical comparison as well as recent literature suggest that this poses a serious threat for intra and interstate security and stability, potentially leading to civil unrest, the formation of authoritarian governments as well as expansionist warfare (Betzig, 2008; Boone, 1983; Hudson and Boer, 2002).

Prosperity

Apart from contributing to the preconditions of socioeconomic growth, namely planetary health and peace, gender equality directly impacts economic development. First, evidence suggests that gender equality would increase human capital; currently, unequal pay and participation in the labour market means that women account for 38 per cent of human capital on a global level. The World Bank recently estimated that closing this gap, would increase global wealth by more than US\$160,000,000,000,000,000,000 (that is US\$160 trillion) (Wodon and de la Brière, 2018). The first major factor that has the potential to close this gap in human capital is the recognition of unpaid care work and consequent promotion of shared responsibilities through the provision of infrastructure and services. However, not one of the 193 countries committed to the SDGs has achieved an equal distribution of unpaid work (World Bank, 2018a). This high burden placed on women is partially responsible for the unequal pay, with the global gender pay gap still standing at 12.5 per cent as of 2018 (Cuttillo and Centra, 2017; Ferrant et al., 2014; Qi and Dong, 2016; UN, 2018). There is also a strong correlation between women's time spent on unpaid work and activity in the labour market (Ferrant et al., 2014; Hallden and Stenberg, 2018). The second key factor for the full and equal realization of human

capital is ensuring equal access and control over productive assets; particularly land, credit, insurance and savings but also key skills and education (Knowles et al., 2002; Wodon and de la Brière, 2018). This is illustrated in the recent World Bank (2018b) report, showing that more women hold a leadership position in businesses when their equal right to property is ensured.

There are many sources of data that refer to the 'demographic dividend' as a consequence of enhanced gender equality. The concept describes the phenomenon whereby a rapid decline in fertility rates results in a shift in the ratio of dependents to working-age people in a population. This transformation in the demographic structure can contribute to a boost in economic growth (Bloom et al., 2003). Detailed case-study based investigations and mathematical models reveal that investment in female participation in the labour force, leverages this effect further (Bloom et al., 2009; Schultz, 2009). In East Asia, scholars regard the changes in age structure to have been extremely important for the region's 'economic miracle' (Bloom et al., 1999). Similar positive predictions exist for the effect of declining dependents ratios in Sub-Saharan Africa, though the magnitude depends heavily on advances in access to education and is discussed controversially (Ahmed et al., 2016; Eastwood and Lipton, 2011).

Poverty is a persistent challenge of the SDGs and one that is highly gendered. Recent reports from the World Bank and UNWomen have shown that the largest groups of people living in extreme poverty are children (both male and female) and women of reproductive age (UNWomen, 2018b). Addressing gender equalities across all the sectors discussed above will significantly contribute to the poverty challenges of the 21st century.

Partnerships

It is clear that the 2030 agenda can only be achieved with strong cross-sectoral and multidisciplinary partnerships. As we highlighted throughout this article gender equality is an intersectional driver of global inequities. Implementing policies to advance the targets of SDG5 will inevitably bring together stakeholders from private and public sectors as well as civil society, including unconventional transdisciplinary partnerships bringing together fields as diverse as family planning and aquaculture (Robson et al., 2017). Furthermore innumerable initiatives promoting gender equality are emerging in academia, the private sector and non-governmental organisations. We believe leveraging this trend by prioritizing a holistic approach to gender equality holds the vast potential to unite these stakeholders under this common cause. Gender transformative approaches to inequalities will be key to forming functional and long lasting global partnerships for sustainable development.

Conclusions and implications

Pressure to deliver on the SDGs will need innovative approaches. Ranking priorities is a bold move but prioritizing goals is a leadership challenge of all long-term

strategies. We propose that goal prioritization is necessary and argue that only one goal can deliver across and through the entire agenda: Goal 5 – *achieving gender equality*. Without the full participation of all women and men and all people free of the historical and persistent pervasiveness at the intersections of sex and gender discrimination none of the SDGs will deliver as planned.

Further, we suggest that a target by target approach to the global agenda risks dilution, duplication, diversion of resources in areas that will not deliver and even possibly dissuade future global leaders from engaging in future global policy mandates. The very simple 5Ps stand as pillars on which all global efforts should rest; they are the foundational priorities of global humanity and all global initiatives should seek to respond on these. And on all, full and equal participation of all regardless of gender must be assured as a driver for success.

We have not covered every goal but rather chose to illustrate the evidence for some in a more integrative and elaborate manner. For some SDGs, the positive impacts of gender equality are rather obvious and well-studied (health, education). For others, data on the complex relations are still too scarce and only gender disaggregated data can enlighten us, but nevertheless the connection between gender and the goal is evident (water, life on land).

Coming back to our main question: should we start by tackling gender equality to achieve a positive downstream effect that resolves numerous other SDGs? – we feel the answer is: Yes. Not only because efficient allocation of resources is vital but because gender inequality is a root cause of challenges in every one of the 17 goals. Gender inequalities intersect with all other inequalities, imbalances of power and discriminatory practices and as such are the route into addressing the root causes that prevent sustainable development globally. Prioritizing gender equality is ultimately political. The evidence is unequivocal. Conversely, the global community cannot rely on the achievement of other goals to address SDG5, not least because sustainable economic development alone does not result in gender equality for all (Kim, 2017; World Economic Forum, 2017).

When working towards achieving gender equality, harnessing all its downstream effects, it is essential to use a horizontal integrative approach, taking SDG 5 forward in a comprehensive manner, in order to account for the interconnected design of the SDGs.

Even more so we have to strive to go beyond the targets set by the international community. The OECD Development Centre's social institutions and gender index (SIGI) shows that the underlying drivers of gender inequity are to be found in social norms, laws and practices that restrict women's access to resources and power (Cerise and Francavilla, 2012). These root causes are deep seated and the SDGs make little mention of the primary cause of all inequalities: power imbalance.

The institutionalized power relations are sometimes opaque, often unconscious and therefore difficult to tackle. Following our suggestion to first work on SDG5, gender

equality, we need to look into the root causes and the hidden obstacles in achieving this goal.

Note

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