

# Can SDG 10.7 transform the World by 2030?

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In September 2015, the Heads of State, Government, and High Representatives met at the United Nations Headquarters in New York to announce the new 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN, 2015a). Said Agenda aims to overcome the challenges faced by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and build on them to complete what they failed to achieve. This new Agenda, which includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 139 targets, seemed to present a promising change in the right direction, showing a more integrated and indivisible balance in the development agenda, with the running theme to 'Leave No One Behind' in the process. Thus, unlike the MDGs, the Sustainable Development Goals involved the entire world, developed and developing countries in the hope of ending all forms of poverty, protecting the planet, ensuring prosperity, and leaving no one behind by 2030 (UN, 2015a).

This vision to 'Leave No One Behind' claimed to focus particularly on vulnerable people, such as refugees and internally displaced people and migrants (UN, 2015a). Nonetheless, as argued by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) (2019, p.1) in their report *Missing Persons: Refugees Left out and Left Behind in the SDGs* and throughout this paper, migrants, and especially refugees are largely ignored across the SDGs, rendering them to be neglected and in serious need. Denaro and Giuffr  (2022) reveal that out of 42 countries that submitted Voluntary National Reporting (VNR) to outline the progress in achieving SDGs in 2019, only 13 referred to the well-being of refugees, and such reports lacked data to measure their progress. Given the statistics, it is not surprising that the IRC claims refugees are 'invisible in all SDGs Reports' (2019, p.1). Other authors like El Zein et al. (2016, cited in Suliman, 2017, p.425) have realised this and assert that 'some of the most marginalised people around the world- refugees and international migrant workers, especially women- are at serious risk of being excluded from the SDG process'.

Target 10.7, which calls to 'facilitate orderly, safe, regular, and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies', is the only target amongst all SDGs focusing exclusively on migration. The aim of this paper is to critically analyse how one single target can possibly provide benefits to national and international mobility, but more importantly, to bring to light the wide variety of crucial aspects that have not been considered in this target and SDG 10- 'Reduced Inequalities' as well as in all the other SDGs to include refugees in the international framework. Finally, this paper will analyse and discuss the lack of interrelation between all SDGs with a focus on migration, by doing so, it will demonstrate how the SDGs have failed to deliver their core value to 'Leave No One Behind' and have indeed left migrants, and more specifically refugees, behind. Ultimately, it will demonstrate how SDG 10.7 cannot change the world by 2030 by identifying the gaps and evaluating the remaining challenges to successfully do so.

## 2. PROGRESS AND INDICATORS OF SDG 10.7

When it comes to refugees, there is a long history of agreements that have failed to consider their inclusion, starting with the MDGs, and continuing with the SDGs, as their first draft, did not include any goals to tackle migration in any way, let alone forced migration. It is, however, hard to believe that, despite the fact that the MDGs Report by the UN (2015b, p.8) reported that 'By the end of 2014, conflicts had forced almost 60 million people to abandon their homes', the

SDGs failed to include an indicator for refugees in the initial proposal, which was, and still is, of critical importance.

Finally, in 2019, and after several years of negotiations, the UNHCR and the Joint IDP Profiling Service (JIPS) achieved the inclusion of an indicator for forced migration in the framework for the Sustainable Development Goals- 10.7.4 'Proportion of the population who are refugees, by country of origin'- which, according to Nahmias and Baal (2019), constitutes a great achievement, as they agree with the UNHCR statement that 'to effectively achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, it is imperative to improve the situation of refugees, internally displaced and stateless people and to implement sustainable solutions, particularly in conflict-affected regions'. (UNHCR, 2023). This was the first step towards an improvement of the situation of millions of refugees.

These facts might come as a surprise, as the numbers of migrants and forcibly displaced people continuously grow every decade (IOM, 2020). At the end of 2021, the total number of forcibly displaced people worldwide was 89.3 million -or 1 in 88 people-, which is more than double the 42.7 million people who remained forcibly displaced at the end of 2012- or 1 in 167- (UNHCR, 2022). Of those, 53.2 million were internally displaced as a result of conflict and violence and 5.9 million due to disasters (IDMC, 2021). The growth of international migration has also been significant over the past decades, reaching 281 million people living outside their country of origin in 2020- representing 3.6 per cent of the world's population and up from 221 million in 2010- (UNDESA, 2020).

In terms of the progress made by Goal 10.7 up to now, there are four indicators used to measure it, however, these indicators are argued by different authors to be conceptually unclear and difficult to measure, and therefore insufficient to improve the migration framework, and more specifically, refugees and forcibly displaced people's conditions (Denaro and Giuffré, 2021). First of all, 10.7.2 refers to the 'Number of countries with migration policies that facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people'-; in 2021, 62.3 per cent of 183 countries with data demonstrating having a wide range of policies to facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, reported to have policy measures for 80 per cent or more of the 30 sub-categories under the six domains of the indicator (UNDESA, 2022). These figures might seem positive, as they are fairly high percentages, however, this type of data is not regularly produced by all countries, and what is more important, as highlighted by the United Nations Statistics Division ((UNSTAT), cited in Denaro and Giuffré, 2021) some of the indicators mentioned above are not conceptually clear, which really produces a significant gap in terms of migration policies.

Secondly, indicator 10.7.3- 'Number of people who died or disappeared in the process of migration towards an international destination'- fails to include internal migration, which is a growing issue due to different causes, including climate change or the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine. In fact, the war in Ukraine rapidly exacerbated internal migration and, 7.1 million internally displaced Ukrainians were recorded by January 2023 (IOM, 2023). According to the Internal Displacement Monitor Centre (IDMC), the number of internally displaced people is rapidly growing and stated that the number of people living in internal displacement worldwide in 2022 had reached 'an all-time high' (IDCM, 2022). This data highlights the importance of considering internally displaced people in the SDG framework.

Finally, indicator 10.7.4- 'Proportion of the population who are refugees, by country of origin'- is the only indicator that mentions refugees, however, there is no mention of migration policies that account for refugees' rights during their journey or the asylum-seeking procedures in the country of arrival. In this way, Denaro and Giuffré (2022) rightly question how this indicator can possibly indicate the existence or lack of well-managed migration policies in order to facilitate orderly,

safe, and responsible migration and mobility of people. In terms of progress, even with the Covid-19 restrictions, the global number of refugees reached its highest in 2020 (UNDESA, 2021). Moreover, the number of displaced people due to war, conflict, persecution, human rights violations, and public disorder has increased annually for over a decade, as well as the ratio of refugees, which has increased by 87 per cent from 2015 (UNDESA, 2023).

All this data is truly alarming, and even though there are now indicators focused on refugees and migration more generally, it is argued that these are either conceptually unclear or are missing essential information required to create the necessary measures to help and protect some of the most vulnerable people in the world (Koch & Kuhnt, 2020). In fact, the ICR in their 'Missing Persons' Report' declared that 'well-being measures such as poverty levels, learning outcomes and nutrition levels, are not regularly or systematically collected for refugees, most refugee-hosting countries do not collect data or produce statistics on refugees' (2019, p.6). Therefore, it is essential to acknowledge these gaps if change is to be made.

### 3. PITFALLS OF THE SDGS

This section aims to examine the significant absences in the SDGs in terms of refugees and migration, and their relation to other SDGs, by analysing the Migration-Development nexus in the framework of international negotiations and in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, in order to demonstrate how the way in which the SDGs have been designed, and their sustained problematic understanding of migration is not and will not transform the world by 2030.

#### *3.1. The Migration-Development Nexus*

To comprehend the SDG framework in relation to migration, it is important to understand the migration-development nexus and how the processes of global capitalism are deeply embedded in it. To do this, this paper will focus on two main arguments; first, the emphasis of the SDGs on migration's role in development as primarily financial, and second, as set out in Target 10.7, the fact that human migration is seen as something that has to be 'well-managed', and therefore, framed as problematic.

In terms of the economic focus, Suliman (2017) argues that the SDGs frame migration and migrants as a driver towards accumulation and growth, which essentially diminishes them. In fact, the first indicator -10.7.1<sup>1</sup>- measures the progress of migration policies by registering the contributions of migrants in relation to economic costs. These entrenched socio-economic-political structures are supported by many development discourses that defend that migration can be managed in a way that would produce optimal outcomes- the acclaimed 'win-win-win scenario' (de Haas and Skeldon, cited in Suliman, 2017, p.419). This seems to be a running theme, as migration is not the only indicator within the SDGs in which the focus is on economic growth, rather than on people. SDG 2 - 'Zero hunger'- measures progress in this goal by growth in productivity instead of looking at the underlying processes of hunger. It is not a coincidence that these two goals, and probably many others, directly link development with economic growth, as the SDGs seem to reflect the neoliberal and state-centric interests of the main stakeholders, however, some authors argue that this view of migration can lead to dependence on remittances and to inequality and exploitation (Nikenhuis and Leung, 2017). Furthermore, this inherent globalised view of development sets a very unethical framework for migration (including forced), which completely leaves out questions of the rights, entitlements, dignity, and well-being of migrants and refugees. As Nikenhuis and Leung (2017) argue, the 2030 Agenda clearly reflects the interests of the main stakeholders, which is economic, and hardly elaborates on how to tackle issues related to migration, such as the protection of migrant

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<sup>1</sup> 'Recruitment cost borne by employee as a proportion of monthly income earned in country of destination'.

workers' rights, refugees' rights during their journey and the resettlement process, among others.

Secondly, the 2030 Agenda sustains a problematic understanding of migration and frames it as a negative factor in development (Nikenhuis and Leung, 2017). Therefore, the promise to 'Leave No One Behind' can be critically challenged by the ways in which migrants and refugees are depicted in the SDGs. This problematic imagery of migration, Nikenhuis and Leung argue, is 'firmly rooted in the development practice' (2017, p.61) and it has become a common understanding that promoting economic development in the Global South, will potentially reduce migration to the Global North (Castles, 2019). Suliman (2017) explains that since the MDGs, migration has been seen as a potential impediment to development and a marginal issue within it, and as seen in the SDGs, migration is a factor that needs to be overcome for the realisation of the Goals. This is explained by a continuation of colonial policies, which are often designed to 'well-manage' these flows, but in reality, disguise the refusal of some migrant flows. Other authors, such as Bauman (2006) agree and explain that 'migrants have for a long time been victims of the 'human waste disposal industry' (cited in English and Mayo, 2019, p.226). These migration policies to reduce migration flows are by no means human-rights oriented and seem to fail the core principle to "Leave No One Behind".

In Mali, Trauner and Deimel (2013) studied the impact of EU migration policies in the country, and it is made clear in their study how said policies, take into no account the specific circumstances of the country or any local knowledge in relation to the particular migration situation in the country. The authors argue that, with an inward-looking focus, the EU's aid and cooperation have focused purely on migration control, which has turned into criminalisation and detention of irregular migrants, who are often returned with few belongings to the borderlands of neighbouring states. It is clear, and the authors claim, that these detention practices that have been 'intensified with the European pressure to reduce migration, often fail to meet core human rights standards' (Trauner and Deimel, 2013, p. 29). A human-rights approach should be therefore the approach for EU and Global North migration policy-making processes, and this includes, therefore, the SDGs. As Castles (2009) explains, many migration scholars consider human mobility as a way for people to exercise agency to improve their livelihoods. This concept is key to understanding the rights of migrants and forcibly displaced people, who, in many cases, have to leave extremely difficult situations, including female genital mutilation, conflict and war, and violation of human rights, amongst others, and should be considered in the 2030 Agenda as a normal part of social transformation processes.

### *3.2. Significant Absences in the SDGs*

Arguably the most detrimental pitfall of SDG 10.7 is the lack of interdisciplinarity with the rest of the SDGs; in other words, migrants and refugees are virtually ignored across all the other goals, except for SDG 8.8<sup>2</sup> which includes migrants but again, leaves refugees out, despite the fact that IRC (2019) in their 'Missing Persons' Report' states that 'Allowing refugees to have access to decent work opportunities, and thereby generate a stable income, can help reduce poverty levels and aid dependency over time.' (p.8). This suggests that the indicator for refugees was just carelessly added to the SDGs, despite the fact that all the other goals can and should include migrants and refugees. This section examines some of the most crucial SDGs that fail to introduce migration -including forced- into their indicators in an attempt to demonstrate how the SDGs have truly left some behind.

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<sup>2</sup> 'Protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrant workers, in particular women migrants, and those in precarious employment'.

As mentioned previously, refugees and migrants are one of the most vulnerable people in the world, and at risk of many diseases due to the conditions of their journeys and of the refugee camps. However, throughout the SDGs, the health and well-being of migrants and refugees are not recognised at any point. The World Health Organisation (WHO, 2022) explains that migrants and refugees are often excluded from national health programmes and argues that they 'have the human right to health, and countries have an obligation to provide refugee and migrant sensitive health care services'. As much as this provides the recognition of migrants and refugees, the reality is very different; a research article about the Calais informal refugee camp, which was Europe's largest in 2016, housing over 3000 people, reported the lack of access to public health as a common issue (Dhesia, Isakjeeb and Davies, 2018), which can have profound health consequences due to the conditions of camps (lack of shelter, food and hygiene provisions, flushing toilets, etc.), such as alarming hygiene conditions, respiratory problems, the spread of infections, or gastrointestinal issues. Moreover, refugees are at risk of poor mental health outcomes (WHO, 2022), which, as Kaufman et al. argue, 'must be integrated into an overall care plan which ensures that basic needs are met' (2022, p.3).

To continue, education is a fundamental right in a person's development, and migrants and refugees should not be denied it. Sen (1933, p.5) realised its importance and argues that 'what people can positively achieve is influenced by economic opportunities, political liberties, social powers, and the enabling conditions of good health, basic education and the encouragement and cultivation of initiatives'. However, for refugee children, access to education is not always granted, in fact, refugee children are five times more likely to be out of school than other children (IRC, 2019, p.10). Among all the previously mentioned, women and girls refugees and migrants should have their own indicators, as they face particular challenges in displacement, such as 'gender-based violence and increased barriers to accessing work, education, and adequate health care' (Refugees International, n.d.). Even though Gender Equality is a Goal in itself (SDG 5), the SDGs do not address the structural gender discrimination embedded in our society and do not mention the 'feminization of poverty, women's unpaid labour, human rights violations committed against women, or discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity' (Hari and Hennebry, 2019, p.81). For these relevant reasons, it is vital that displaced women and girls count on specific humanitarian response planning and care.

Finally, climate change undoubtedly presents one of the most detrimental and rapidly growing issues in today's world, and it particularly affects migration, disproportionately impacts the world's poorest people and violates human rights (Tower, 2021). The devastating effects of climate change are leaving people with no choice but to migrate to other places. These forcibly displaced people are referred to as climate refugees, but under the 1951 Refugee Convention, they are not considered refugees and therefore have no support or protection when they are forced to migrate. Naturally, they are also ignored in the SDGs, which shows, one more time, how they have failed to 'Leave No One Behind'. Tower (2021) points out that the number of people forcibly displaced by climate change is now equal to or greater than any other category of refugee. For this reason, it is essential to draw attention to this new type of refugee, which has emerged primarily due to the actions of the capitalist global North.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, at first glance, the 2030 Agenda might seem a promising framework, nevertheless, when examining it closely, it is easy to realise that capitalist stakeholders' goals are a priority, and the unclear language and vague indicators in its framework, as well as the lack of implementation policies, support socio-economic-political structures embedded in the Global North, which deal with migration as a negative factor in development and mainly focus on economic growth. This can only keep benefiting the few who design the policies rather than the

millions of refugees, whose numbers seem to keep rapidly growing and desperately need assistance, as well as a shift in the way support is provided to them.

This paper has showcased how incomplete SDG 10.7 and its indicators are, in terms of measures and the underlying processes which have led to its absences, as well as the wider implications of such insufficiencies. It has also made clear how SDGs have indeed left someone behind, in particular, refugees and climate refugees, but all migrants as well. Moreover, the 2030 Agenda has failed to recognise the interdisciplinarity of its goals and the importance of recognising migrants in all other goals, such as health, education, gender equality or climate change. It will not be until refugees are properly included and migrants' well-being is recognised as essential, that Goal 10.7 can actually be achieved and have a chance to change the world by 2030, until then, the framework will persist in failing to embody its core belief, as millions will continue to be left far behind.

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