

## **Participate: Response to the Report of the High Level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda**

### **The *Participate* Initiative**

This response is based on in-depth participatory research with people living in poverty and marginalisation, from 18 organisations working in over 30 countries worldwide, which together form the Participate initiative's Participatory Research Group network. The research has included people with disabilities, older people, people with mental health issues, urban dwellers, people living in slums, rural communities, indigenous communities, farmers, people affected by natural disasters, youth, vulnerable children and children outside of parental care, marginalised women, sex workers and sexual minorities.

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### **Citizens at the Centre**

It is encouraging that the Panel has evidently listened closely to some of the issues raised by people living in poverty and marginalisation. The focus on eradicating poverty, promoting sustainability, addressing conflict and violence, and protecting human rights and dignity are welcome. The strong stance on gender equality reflects the gendered nature of poverty and discrimination articulated by people participating in this research across the world. The acknowledgement that strong accountability and the participation of the poorest and most marginalised is essential but most of all, the commitment to 'leave no one behind' marks a potential shift in the global approach to development.

However, ultimately the High Level Panel report does not go far enough in its focus on those most affected by poverty and marginalisation. **A 'people-centred' agenda is one in which the transformation of societies is led by citizens themselves—including the poorest and most marginalised. This must be the guiding principle that underpins the new global development framework.** Whilst the report emphasises transformative shifts, it does not fully recognise the most important transformative shift of all—recognising the ability of those living in poverty and marginalisation to act to address their own situation, and then building a global development framework that supports them rather than reinforcing existing powerful interests. Going forward, the UN process needs to take the perspectives of those living in greatest poverty much more seriously in how the agenda is set.

### **Transformative shifts?**

The High Level Panel Report proposes 5 'transformative shifts', needed for the new global development framework. If these transformative shifts were seen through the perspectives of those living in greatest poverty and exclusion, there would be some important differences.

#### **'Leave no one behind'—but don't lose sight of who is getting ahead**

We welcome the strong **focus on the poorest and most marginalised** in the intention to 'leave no one behind.' But for the most marginalised, not being left behind is not enough if at the same time the gap between them and the richest is increasing. Addressing extreme poverty is important to those facing it, but not without also addressing how resources and power continue to be concentrated in the hands of the few. *Participate* research shows

clearly that the poorest and most marginalised have not benefitted over the last two decades from many policies and interventions; in many cases their quality of life has worsened. The Panel recognised that despite some gains under the MDGs, the impact was very rarely on the poorest. Under the MDGs, targets can be met by picking ‘low hanging fruit’ (improving the lives of those who are not hardest to reach). Zero targets, and a focus on universal human rights, combined with disaggregated data, will make those strategies harder to justify. Leaving no one behind without addressing who is getting ahead is not enough.

### ‘Put sustainable development at the core’—but don’t force people to make impossible choices

The report recognises the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainability yet much of the focus lies in environmental sustainability and investment in green growth. Development that is environmentally sustainable is important to the most marginalised but a focus on only the environmental dimension of sustainability misses other dimensions of how the poorest and most marginalised live. *Participate* shows that **trying to fix one problem in people’s lives without understanding how it relates to others is a recipe for failure** because it forces the most marginalised to make impossible choices. *Participate* research has documented many examples: children who can’t go to school because they have to water crops due to drought; women who can’t benefit from public toilet and girls who can’t go to school because of the risk of sexual violence; indigenous women who choose not to access health services because of the discrimination they face.

Truly sustainable development requires an understanding of complex local realities and the interrelated challenges faced by people living in poverty. Integrated local responses which test solutions against real experience, and promote community engagement through participatory governance structures enable solutions to be tailored by local people. The global development framework must emphasise the need for holistic approaches to implementation. Longer term relationships need to be built to counteract the damaging effect of short-term projectised development which builds dependency and is ultimately unsustainable.

### ‘Transform economies for jobs and inclusive growth’—but growth isn’t always good

*Participate* shows that **growth often impacts negatively on the poorest**. While the Panel asks for a rethink of growth, clearly stating that it must be understood in the context of environmental resource scarcity, much of the report rests on the assumption that growth is the only way to achieve poverty eradication:

*“There is an urgent need for developed countries to re-imagine their growth models. They must lead the world towards solutions to climate change by creating and adopting low-carbon and other sustainable technologies and passing them on to other. Otherwise further strains on food, water and energy supplies and increases in global carbon will be inevitable.” (p.5)*

*Participate* research is full of examples and stories of the ways in which growth, even as it benefits some, seriously harms the poorest. Inner-city developments push the poorest further to the margins (displacing their livelihoods); mining destroys local habitats that people in poverty are reliant on; large-scale farming undermines local subsistence. Extreme poverty has as much to do with resource distribution and access, as with availability. The

poorest cannot afford to pay for 'access' to vital services and resources that growth delivers. While growth may create more schools and jobs, marginalised groups, including people with disabilities remain excluded.

Furthermore the focus on growth puts undue weight on economic wealth as opposed to well being. Those living with the greatest poverty and marginalisation value dignity, hope, security, and empowerment, at least as highly as economic wealth.

Despite the HLP making an explicit call for a new way of thinking about growth, the narrative is underpinned by a deeply flawed assumption that growth is the solution to poverty, and the report fails to build income inequality into its goal framework. Growth as a panacea for poverty fails to understand that inequality and distorted power relations prevent the dividends of economic growth from reaching the very poorest. Development cannot be compartmentalised and separated from trade and business; economic democracy is as important for poverty eradication as political democracy.

### **'Build peace and effective, open and accountable institutions for all'—but don't ask if you won't really listen**

The need for **citizen participation** and **participatory governance** highlighted throughout the report echoes calls of those living in the greatest poverty and marginalisation to have greater control over the decisions that affect their lives. Citizen participation can ensure that people are empowered, enable local solutions to local problems, and support local ownership, resulting in more appropriate and sustainable solutions.

However, it is all too easy to equate participation with 'consultation' – while power over decision-making remains with elites, whether in government or business. Participation must mean that people have the ability to influence the decisions which affect their lives. The report states that:

*"The powerful in today's world can no longer expect to set the rules and go unchallenged. People everywhere expect businesses and governments to be open, accountable and responsive to their needs. There is an opportunity now to give people the power to influence and control things in their everyday lives." (p.4)*

For this to be meaningful, the post-2015 development agenda must prioritise mechanisms that empower those who have less. Without a culture of active engagement in decision-making, top down development processes which fail to provide the poorest with basic services or routes out of poverty will continue.

The report makes clear that stronger accountability is crucial to the success of the post-2015 framework. The poorest don't only talk about the accountability of governments, increasingly they talk about the accountability of NGOs and businesses to their constituencies and the communities they impact upon. The private sector has been largely excluded from debates about democracy and it is time for companies to be held accountable to people, alongside other institutions.

### **'Forge a new global partnership'—but it must be led by citizens**

**Citizen participation in the partnerships underpinning the post-2015 agenda is emphasised** throughout the report, with the explicit inclusion of marginalised people:

*“This partnership should involve governments but also include others: people living in poverty, those with disabilities, women, civil society and indigenous and local communities, traditionally marginalised groups, multilateral institutions, local and national government, the business community, academia and private philanthropy” (p9)*

Governments, businesses, academics, civil society and the people should not be seen as equal partners. Citizens should be at the centre of this partnership. Other actors should be in service of the people and a human rights-based approach means starting with the poorest and most marginalized. The emphasis on the engagement of citizens as subjects and not objects of development is important and needs to be embedded in new development thinking –this includes children and youth. The reason why people are poor is because of imbalanced power structures and vested interests.

## Further comments on the agenda that has been set by the High Level Panel

### Understanding intersecting inequality

Progress towards any of the goals should not be recognised unless inequalities are addressed. The HLP report narrative highlights the importance of tackling inequality and it is very encouraging to see a **specific focus on the most excluded and vulnerable groups**.

*“However, the Panel believes that truly inclusive, broad-based growth, which benefits the very poorest, is essential to end extreme poverty. We propose targets that deliberately build in efforts to tackle inequality and which can only be met with a specific focus on the most excluded and vulnerable groups. For example, we believe that many targets should be monitored using data broken down by income quintiles and other groups. Targets will only be considered achieved if they are met for all relevant income and social groups” (p.16-17)*

However, the High Level Panel does not go far enough to recognise the social, political, economic, environmental and cultural exclusions and inequalities that drive and sustain poverty. Inequalities are intersecting and multidimensional, ensuring that violence and exclusions are maintained at every level of society. As such, marginalised groups must be involved in setting targets, monitoring and planning the process of development. The post-2015 development framework must be responsive to the needs, experiences and agency of vulnerable groups.

### Challenging discrimination and unequal social norms has been missed as a ‘transformative shift’

One of the strongest messages from *Participate* is that **the poorest and most marginalised do not get what they need because of discriminatory social norms** and local and institutional power relations. People are denied access because they are considered ‘dirty’ or are stigmatised. Some forms of discrimination have been highly resistant to change, particularly experienced by women, disabled people, indigenous peoples; while others have worsened as a result of changing societal norms. The research highlights the plight of older people abandoned by their families because they are regarded as a burden. The research also shows that positive change is experienced when discrimination is addressed, as described by indigenous people in Bolivia and people living with HIV and AIDS in Uganda.

While discrimination is mentioned in the report but much greater emphasis needs to be placed on initiatives that address discriminatory attitudes and behaviour and promote the equal dignity and rights of all people.

### Empower girls and women and achieve gender equality

The High Level Panel has outlined women's empowerment and gender equality as an illustrative goal. The *Participate* research sees this as critical in terms of addressing the **gendered structures** that continue to predominantly discriminate against, exploit and abuse women and girls preventing them from being able to determine their own development. However, despite promoting gender equality as a cross-cutting issue that should be addressed across the development framework, the content of the High Level Panel proposals do not themselves explain clearly how this can be done and why this is critical. In all areas of the framework positive shifts in social norms and understanding, reflected in policy and legislation, which is then acted upon to ensure the full realisation of women and girls' human rights, can result in transformative change to the benefit of all genders.

### The data revolution

We welcome the call for disaggregated data, and think that it is an important component in the broader endeavour not only to 'not leave people behind' but, not to leave people out. However, in order to ensure that the right questions are being asked, and that being counted extends to those most excluded **statistical information has to be combined with other forms of data**. There is a need not only for statistical data, but also for real-time qualitative and participative data on people's experiences and how they are changing. The data revolution described needs to encompass how people experience, see and interact with the world around them so that interventions can be assessed in relation to people's real lives. There is also an important question about the value of people's own data that needs to be considered within this new paradigm. We would also caution that data generation can easily become a new industry in itself – distracting from the real task of transforming lives.

### Conclusion

The High Level Panel report provides a welcome input to the global discussions on the post-2015 agenda. As advocates in this process, *Participate* looks to the Panel members to continue to articulate the importance of inclusion of the poorest and most marginalised people in on-going debates and processes of policy formulation, as well as the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the successor framework to the Millennium Development Goals.

To further respond to the reality of High Level proposals for a post-2015 global development agenda from the perspectives of people living in poverty and marginalisation, *Participate* is hosting four Ground Level Panels in June and July 2013.

The Ground Level Panels will create a space for those who 'live' with poverty and those who 'experience' the impacts (or lack) of national and international development initiatives to make their own assessments of what is needed from the current post-2015 global policy process. These Panels will provide a unique insight into what is happening on the ground, how it is experienced, what needs to change, and how change must happen if it is to be sustainable. Keep updated by following us on @participate2015 and [www.participate2015.org](http://www.participate2015.org).

## Appendix 1

### Comparison of HLP and Participate headline messages

High Level Panel narrative	Participate synthesis of participatory research
The MDGs did not focus enough on reaching the very poorest and most excluded people.	Development frequently doesn't reach the very poor and most marginalised
The MDGs were silent on the devastating effects of conflict and violence on development.	Poverty is increasingly characterised by uncertainty, crisis, conflict insecurity and volatility
The importance to development of good governance and institutions that guarantee the rule of law, free speech and open and accountable government	Poor governance re-enforces poverty for the poorest and most marginalised
... a voice in the decisions that affect their lives are development outcomes as well as enablers	Development that is sustainable requires meaningful participation that leads to strong local ownership