

# Caste and Development: tackling work and descent-based discrimination to achieve the SDGs for all

This brief provides a summary of the key messages, findings and recommendations of the Bond report, *Caste and Development: tackling work and descent-based discrimination to achieve the SDGs for all.*<sup>i</sup> It sets out the reasons why policy makers and development practitioners should pay more attention to caste and other forms of discrimination based on work and descent (DWD).

## Points for policy makers

- Caste and other forms of discrimination based on work and descent (DWD) remain significant barriers to educational attainment, social and employment mobility, justice, equality and resilience, and are important factors in contemporary slavery. The impacts cut across Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) goals and targets, demanding comprehensive approaches.
- These forms of discrimination are strongly bound up with gender inequality. They affect the status and dignity of women and girls, contribute to their exploitation, impede their access to resources, and increase their risk of violence.
- DWD and caste-based disparities in development outcomes need to be made visible in SDG monitoring data so that progress in reducing them can be monitored. The need for more and better data should not delay urgent action to reduce inequalities and protect rights, which can be informed by a wide range of available evidence.
- Effectiveness of interventions should be assessed in terms of the levels of exclusion and marginalisation addressed, not just numbers reached. It is time to direct resources to the needs of the most marginalised.
- Humanitarian, risk reduction and development programmes and policies should be informed by analysis of DWD/caste power dynamics, and address vulnerabilities associated with social exclusion and marginalisation.
- Conditions need to be created for sustained social change, including through public education and broad participation in efforts to end discriminatory norms and practices.
- The public and private sectors both have important roles to play in ending discrimination in provision of public services, in recruitment, in the workplace and in supply chains.
- The meaningful participation of affected communities, and Dalit rights and other organisations that represent them, in the planning, implementation and monitoring of action to achieve the SDGs is paramount.

## A widespread cause of inequality

DWD and caste discrimination are important structural causes of multi-dimensional poverty and exclusion across generations. They trap affected groups in poverty and persist, in part, because of the economic benefits they confer on privileged groups, which contributes to inequality. Despite this, DWD and caste are largely invisible in global development policy debates. Their implications for delivering the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are not given the same significance as other characteristics, such as ethnicity, age or disability.

Caste as it occurs in South Asia and its diaspora has been described as ‘an important determinant of life opportunity for a fifth of the world’s population’.<sup>ii</sup> In the UK and US, as well as in South Asia and other diaspora communities, people affected report serious personal consequences.<sup>iii</sup>

Many of those affected identify as Dalit, and this identity forms the foundation of a growing social movement that is reaching out to groups affected by DWD around the world. Distinct forms of DWD are also found in Japan, Micronesia, Yemen, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Mali, Chad, Ghana, Niger, Mauritius, Mauritania, Madagascar, Nigeria, Kenya, Ethiopia and Suriname – and possibly more countries.<sup>iv</sup> This frequently hidden problem is responsible for the exclusion and marginalisation of some of the world’s most vulnerable groups and is associated with a distinct set of rights violations (see box).

### Characteristics of DWD and caste

- Inability or restricted ability to alter inherited status.
- Socially enforced restrictions on marriage outside the community.
- Private and public segregation, including in housing, education, access to public spaces and public sources of food and water.
- Subjection to dehumanising discourses referring to pollution or untouchability.
- Limited freedom to renounce inherited occupations or degrading or hazardous work.
- Subjection to debt bondage.
- Generalised lack of respect for human dignity and equality.

## Why urgent action is needed

**Marginalised people must be prioritised.** Agenda 2030 sets out our shared commitment to reducing inequality and ensuring that no one is left behind in progress towards the SDGs. More attention to DWD and caste discrimination is warranted, because they are a source of some of the most extreme forms of social exclusion and deprivation. In 2016, the UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues stressed their continued importance and the need for attention targeted to those affected.<sup>v</sup>

**Caste and DWD increase vulnerability.** Development programmes, risk reduction and humanitarian relief efforts are often insufficiently responsive to inequalities and power dynamics associated with these forms of discrimination, or to the needs of affected groups, resulting in some of the most marginalised people being overlooked or even being made more vulnerable in some cases. In the face of increasing risks from climate change, reducing the vulnerability of socially excluded groups such as Dalits should be a priority.

**Gender equality demands that DWD and caste be addressed.** Caste discrimination affects women disproportionately. Dalit women face high levels of violence and deprivation, both in their communities and at work, where caste and gender inequalities are exploited. Public humiliation and violence are frequently used to reinforce caste hierarchies and rules against inter-caste marriage. Power inequalities mean Dalit women and girls are very vulnerable to sexual violence, and impunity is common as they face

enormous challenges in seeking justice. In many aspects of their lives, Dalit women may experience other intersecting barriers associated with their caste or their status as ethnic or religious minorities.

**Discrimination has intergenerational consequences.** Entrenched discriminatory social norms and practices have significant impacts on children and young people's education, confidence, aspirations and opportunities, and on Dalit families' access to services and social protection. Ending these practices will take time and requires efforts to challenge discrimination and prejudice wherever they happen and create the conditions for inclusion and equity.

**Data challenges can be addressed.** Estimates of the numbers affected need to be updated. Evidence from human rights monitoring bodies, non-governmental organisations and researchers indicate that social marginalisation and economic exploitation of Dalits are persistent and possibly underestimated problems. In delivery of SDGs, data disaggregation by caste status for relevant targets, alongside focused surveys or methods of gathering data to reveal specific barriers, such as experiences of discrimination, will help to make these issues visible and inform appropriate action. The need for more and better data should not prevent urgent action to secure the rights and meet the needs of affected people, based on all available evidence.

## Issues for the 2019 reviews of progress towards SDGs

Evidence from the South Asian experience of caste discrimination points to some important and persistent patterns, particularly concerning how caste reproduces poverty and exclusion in ways that often cut across SDG goals and targets. This means that progress in one area can be undermined by lack of attention to the issue in other areas. The interconnected problems associated with caste discrimination need greater consideration in planning for delivery of SDGs. Some of these are highlighted below, with reference to the global goals that will be reviewed at the high-level political forum on sustainable development in July 2019.



Discrimination in schools and universities is a barrier to educational attainment. In Bangladesh, a 2014 study found that 28.5% of Dalit children were registered in school, in contrast to the national average of 96.7%, and discriminatory practices, along with poverty and poor health, contribute to very high drop-out rates.<sup>vi</sup> The location and quality of schools and facilities also often disadvantage Dalits. In India, privatisation of education has left most Dalits concentrated in underfunded government schools.<sup>vii</sup> Restricted opportunities in education and

employment perpetuate poverty and insecurity among Dalit families, who often have to take children out of school as a result.<sup>viii</sup> The risk of violence is another factor that prevents many Dalit girls from attending school, especially after puberty. In 2014, national school enrolment for girls in Pakistan was 48%, but just 10% of Dalit girls were in school and less than 1% of Dalit women had studied up to eighth grade.<sup>ix</sup>



Dalits are often excluded from the benefits of economic growth. Caste-based discrimination in employment and job segregation persist, with many Dalits trapped in bonded labour, hereditary occupations and new caste-based employment categories that are emerging.<sup>x</sup> In Bangladesh, 43% of the estimated 5.5 million Dalits do cleaning jobs, 22% work in agriculture and 14% work in tea gardens.<sup>xi</sup> In India, discrimination and power inequalities depress wages, contributing to inequality, and Dalits also face discrimination in business.<sup>xii</sup> As economies develop, a premium on education and skills in job

markets further marginalises Dalits. South Asia ranks lowest among all regions for depth and breadth of social protection coverage.<sup>xiii</sup> This, plus discrimination in accessing entitlements, means Dalits, including many children, have little choice but to accept the most exploitative forms of work.



The exploitation of Dalit labour and Dalit businesses in global supply chains deserves closer attention. Colonial rule in South Asia displaced many Dalits to work as labourers, often in plantations. Their descendants continue to produce goods (such as tea) for global markets, often in unfavourable conditions.<sup>xiv</sup> Within countries, caste-based poverty and inequality are multi-dimensional. Caste discrimination excludes Dalits from access to resources and many aspects of social and political life, and these factors underpin economic inequalities. For example, segregated settlements and discrimination in rental markets can limit

access to housing for affected groups, which can be a barrier to their breaking out of 'traditional' caste-based forms of employment.<sup>xv</sup> The exclusion of Dalits from land ownership, along with indebtedness, contributes to relationships of dependency with land-owning castes and traps Dalits in low-paid labour. Attempts to break out of these relationships are regularly met with violence.



Vulnerability to climate change is acute in South Asia, based on a variety of indicators, including multi-dimensional poverty.<sup>xvi</sup> Dalit homes and settlements often lack infrastructure and services and are very exposed to hazards, and Dalit livelihoods may also be at risk from depletion of resources such as common land and water. The barriers Dalits face in accessing land or housing could mean that predicted increases in migration associated with climate change, which could be dramatic in South Asia, could affect Dalits disproportionately.<sup>xvii</sup> In India, national plans for disaster response have been criticised for not always

addressing the additional vulnerabilities of socially excluded groups, and Nepal's plans have been found to be inadequate in providing for participation of excluded groups in decision making.<sup>xviii</sup>



Violence is commonly used to reinforce caste hierarchies or displace Dalits from land or other resources. In Pakistan, persecution of Dalits who are religious minorities is also a feature.<sup>xxix</sup> In India, violent hate crimes have been found to correlate with a narrowing gap between the standard of living of Dalits and dominant castes.<sup>xxx</sup> Across the region, violence frequently takes the form of sexual violence perpetrated against Dalit women, who are least able to seek redress due to pressure from privileged castes as well as their own families not to prosecute to avoid social stigma.<sup>xxxi</sup> In India in 2014, cases of rape against Dalit

women reportedly had a 2% conviction rate, compared to 24% for rape cases against all women.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Caste is a barrier to claiming rights and justice because of discrimination within criminal justice systems, fear of reprisals (contributing to under reporting), notions that caste-based discrimination needs to be solved within the community rather than treated as a crime, and refusal to register such cases as criminal offences justified as preserving 'social harmony'.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Caste-affected groups are also under-represented in decision making, so are less able to influence appropriate responses. For example, in a survey of districts in Pakistan that are home to most of the country's Hindu Dalits, 91.5% of Dalit respondents said they do not think any political party gives them importance and only 7% were affiliated with any political party.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

## Recommendations

The ways in which DWD and caste manifest, and the appropriate responses to them, are context specific. There is no 'one size fits all' approach, but much can be learned from the experiences of governments and civil society organisations working to secure the human rights of affected people, and more could be done to respond to the needs and priorities as they are voiced by those affected. Their participation in the planning, delivery and review of SDGs is critical. More 'caste-sensitive' approaches to sustainable development are also needed, including changes in law and policy, attention to challenging discriminatory norms, prejudice and power inequalities, and measures to amplify the voice and influence of excluded groups calling for social justice.

### What donors and NGOs working in caste-affected countries can do

- Take steps to ensure staff are more representative of diverse communities and are trained on caste, non-discrimination and inclusion. Ensure that internal policies for non-discrimination and equality of opportunity include caste.
- Address caste in context analysis; involve Dalits and other marginalised groups in programme design and implementation; monitor the extent to which programmes help address caste-based inequalities; and disseminate learning about effective responses.
- Support Dalit advocacy platforms and Dalit participation in SDG delivery; promote policy changes to address caste and intersecting barriers to rights, equality and the SDGs; and support community-level programmes to challenge discrimination and harmful practices.
- Support and encourage national governments to improve the collection of caste-disaggregated data in ways that are inclusive and appropriate to national contexts.
- In engagements with the private sector, recognise and advocate rights-based and caste-sensitive approaches, including addressing the exploitation of Dalits in global value chains.

- Promote coherent domestic policies to stop caste discrimination wherever it happens.
- Deliver inclusive and appropriate humanitarian response, working closely with representative community-based organisations.

### **What governments of caste-affected countries can do**

- Prioritise measures to remove the caste-specific barriers to the SDG goals and targets faced by socially excluded groups, based on all available evidence. Develop caste-sensitive indicators to monitor progress.
- Ensure adequate budget allocations and effective mechanisms for utilisation of these funds.
- Work with Dalit and rights organisations towards compliance with the [Draft UN Principles and Guidelines for the Effective Elimination of Discrimination Based on Work and Descent](#).
- Deliver training and campaigns to challenge discriminatory social norms and raise awareness among public and government officials, teachers and media practitioners on caste, gender and other forms of discrimination, and of rights to non-discrimination.
- Invest in public education and discussions to help change mindsets around damaging social norms; facilitate common spaces for interaction between people of different communities on equal terms; and celebrate diversity.
- Involve Dalit organisations in delivery and review of SDGs, including at subnational level. Enable citizen-led mechanisms to strengthen social accountability, so that Dalits can highlight specific barriers they face and comment on the appropriateness and effectiveness of national policies for delivery of the SDGs.
- Put special mechanisms in place to address the issues faced by Dalit women.

## Resources

- The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has produced a guidance tool: [www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Minorities/GuidanceToolDiscrimination.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Minorities/GuidanceToolDiscrimination.pdf)
- *ISDN Roadmap to the UNOHCHR Guidance Tool* offers a quick introduction to the key recommendations covered in the tool: <https://idsn.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Digital-Final-IDSN-Guide-to-UN-GT.pdf>
- A 2011 Joint Declaration and Global Call to Action offers good practices and strategies to eliminate caste discrimination by governments, civil society, national and international institutions and agencies: [https://idsn.org/wp-content/uploads/user\\_folder/pdf/New\\_files/IDSN/Consultations/IC\\_Declaration\\_and\\_Recommendations.pdf](https://idsn.org/wp-content/uploads/user_folder/pdf/New_files/IDSN/Consultations/IC_Declaration_and_Recommendations.pdf)
- *Draft United Nations Principles and Guidelines on the Elimination of (Caste) Discrimination based on work and Descent: A comprehensive legal framework to eliminate caste discrimination globally:* [http://idsn.org/uploads/media/UN\\_Principles\\_And\\_Guidelines\\_-\\_IDSN.pdf](http://idsn.org/uploads/media/UN_Principles_And_Guidelines_-_IDSN.pdf)
- *Benchmarking the Draft UN Principles and Guidelines on the Elimination of (Caste) Discrimination based on Work and Descent.* These reports assess status and make recommendations in relation to national implementation of the Draft Guidelines in three countries:
  - Nepal: [www.asiadalitrightsforum.org/images/imageevent/1819514436nepal.pdf](http://www.asiadalitrightsforum.org/images/imageevent/1819514436nepal.pdf)
  - Bangladesh: [www.asiadalitrightsforum.org/images/imageevent/311337486bangladesh.pdf](http://www.asiadalitrightsforum.org/images/imageevent/311337486bangladesh.pdf)
  - India: <http://asiadalitrightsforum.org/images/imageevent/1956137726india.pdf>
- Leaving no one behind: Social inclusion programming in South Asia: [www.changealliance.in](http://www.changealliance.in)
- Reimagining Identities: Addressing Intersectionality in Development Programming: [www.changealliance.in](http://www.changealliance.in)
- *An Introduction to Social Equity Audit* contains a framework and set of tools that help to identify forms and levels of exclusion that might exist in the work that we do: [www.socialequitywatch.org/social-equity-audit.html](http://www.socialequitywatch.org/social-equity-audit.html)
- A useful summary of vulnerability mapping, inclusion monitoring and inclusive programming approaches suitable for risk reduction, emergency response and long-term development programmes can be found in the *Equality in Aid* report: [https://idsn.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/EqualityInAid\\_web\\_version.pdf](https://idsn.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/EqualityInAid_web_version.pdf)

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