



LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND (LNOB): A PATHWAY THAT DELIVERS

BACKGROUND

Amid uneven SDG progress and overlapping crises, efforts to deliver sustainable development that leaves no one behind continue to face persistent, intersecting barriers—even where commitments are strong. Consider, for example, the experience of a woman with a disability in an informal settlement: she cannot afford assistive devices, faces inaccessible infrastructure, encounters weak enforcement of rules, experiences hiring bias and may struggle to evacuate during an earthquake. This scenario shows how multiple barriers converge to deepen exclusion.

This policy brief highlights five dimensions where exclusion is often observed—affordability, access, governance, participation and external shocks, among others—and illustrates how governments are responding in each through policy examples and observations. Insights are drawn from 2024–2025 country implementation updates from thirteen countries¹ that announced commitments at the 2023 SDG Summit², as well as 2025 Voluntary National Review (VNR) reports from three additional countries³ with such commitments. The analysis is intended to inform global policy discussions, including, as relevant, the World Social Summit under the title Second World Summit for Social Development.

The countries under review span high-, upper-middle- and lower-middle-income contexts (Figure 1). To provide clarity on both the structure and the country samples, the brief organises the policy observations under five dimensions (Figure 2).

1. Affordability: High costs are pricing people out of essentials

The *World Economic Situation and Prospects 2025* notes that global inflation is easing, yet at different rates in developed

¹ Azerbaijan (2025), Belarus (2025), Benin (2025), Botswana (2024), Czech Republic (2025), Denmark (2024, 2025), Germany (2024), Greece (2024), Honduras (2025), Kyrgyz Republic (2025), Moldova (2025), Thailand (2024, 2025) and United Kingdom (2025).

² In 2023, forty-one countries announced national commitments at the SDG Summit. For more information: <https://sdgs.un.org/SDGSummitActions>

³ Bangladesh, Ghana and Lesotho. These countries were selected as they announced commitments at the 2023 Summit and were among the 35 countries presenting VNRs at the 2025 HLPF, with their VNR Reports providing the basis for assessing progress. All VNR Reports 2025 are accessible from: <https://hlpf.un.org/2025/vnrs>

Key Messages

- » **Progress towards leaving no one behind continues to be held back by a range of constraints:** including rising costs of essentials, unequal access to essential services, weak delivery capacities, structural barriers to participation and fragile systems unprepared for shocks, among others.
- » **Capacity must be judged by outcomes, not systems alone:** Equitable delivery of public services depends on agile laws and policies, capable institutions, skilled personnel and trusted data, in addition to adequate resources^a. Digital tools such as e-justice platforms and social registries may support these capacities, but only with adequate safeguards for privacy, transparency and independent oversight. The real test of governance and delivery capacity is whether it expands access and inclusion or undermines dignity and deepens exclusion.
- » **Resilience requires global and national reforms:** key gaps include inadequate emergency credit lines for low-income countries, the lack of debt restructuring for middle-income countries and ad hoc, unpredictable humanitarian finance. At the national level, government emergency measures must be inclusive, time-bound and subject to legislative approval to ensure accountability.
- » **Demand-driven approaches deliver durable impact:** From community-managed school feeding in Honduras to locally adapted farming in Kyrgyz Republic, experience shows that when policies reflect people's real needs, they are more effective and sustainable. Listening to those furthest behind is not only a matter of equity, but also the surest strategy for lasting progress.

^a In this analysis, fiscal capacity is treated as part of the broader policy and institutional capacities that mobilize, allocate and manage finance—domestic, international, public and private.

and developing economies; real wages in some countries remain below 2019 levels and food inflation still persists in many developing contexts.⁴ The resulting cost-of-living crisis has eroded household purchasing power worldwide, with rising prices for essentials such as energy and food hitting lower-income groups, rural communities and older persons hardest, deepening “inflation inequality.”⁵

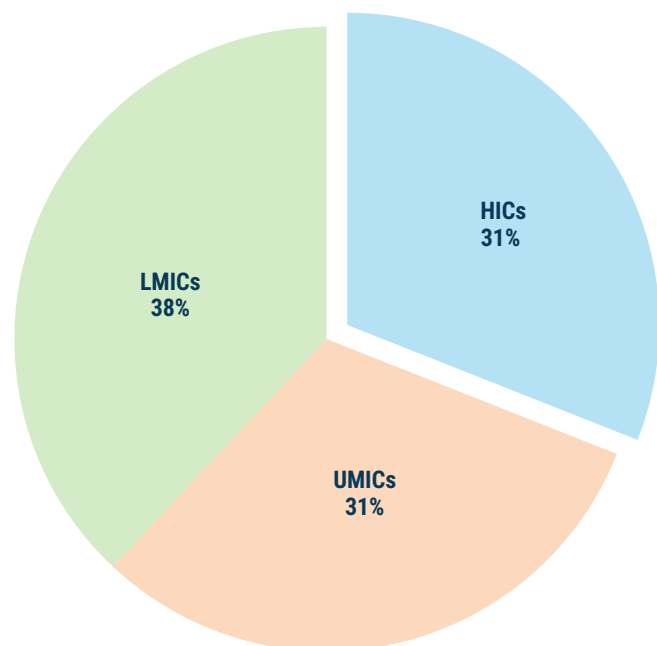
⁴ UNDESA (2025). *World Economic Situation and Prospects 2025*. New York: United Nations.

⁵ OECD (2022). *A cost-of-living squeeze? Distributional implications of rising inflation*. OECD Economics Department Working Papers, No. 1744, OECD Publishing, Paris.

Author: Sumi Han, Division for Sustainable Development Goals, UN DESA.

Figure 1

Income Status of Countries Under Review



Source: Sumi Han, Division for Sustainable Development Goals, UN DESA.

a Not exhaustive; overlaps indicate mutually reinforcing effects.

Compounding this, the global housing affordability crisis now affects 3 billion people.⁶

Governments⁷ are responding with a mix of social protection, sector-specific and labour-market measures to protect incomes, keep essentials affordable and build resilience.

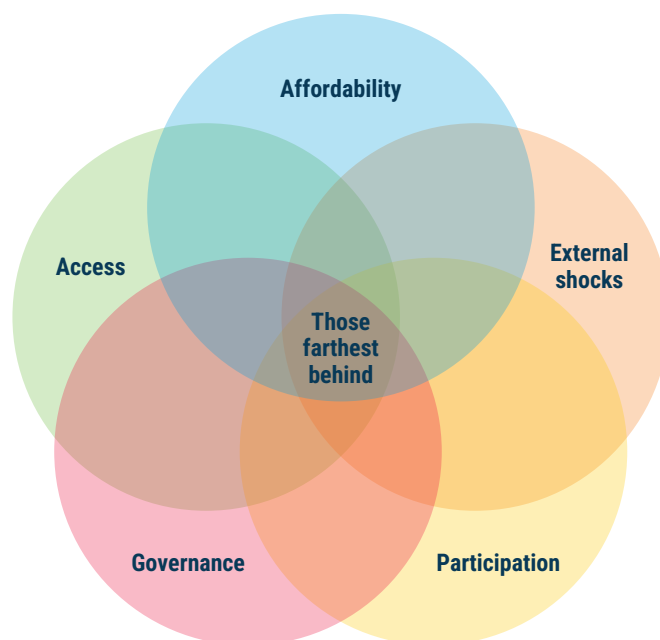
Social protection coverage is being expanded by countries through different measures, such as a unified registry and cash transfers (Lesotho), targeted education vouchers (Kyrgyz Republic) and inflation-indexed benefits (Ghana, see Box 1). Sectoral measures include subsidized health coverage for nearly 870,000 poor households (Benin); reforms cutting catastrophic out-of-pocket medical costs (Thailand); a multi-stakeholder school meals programme for 1.3 million children that sources over 90% of food from local smallholder farmers supporting local economies (Honduras); and energy subsidies to ease utility bills (Moldova). Labour market measures—from higher minimum wages and pensions (Azerbaijan) to public works schemes (Lesotho)—also aim to shield workers from volatility.

⁶ UNDESA, Statistics Division (2025). *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2025*. New York: United Nations.

⁷ Azerbaijan (2024), Ghana (2025) and Lesotho (2025), *VNR Reports*, United Nations HLPF; and Azerbaijan, Benin, Honduras, Kyrgyz Republic, Moldova and Thailand, *annual updates 2025 on the implementation of 2023 SDG Summit commitments*.

Figure 2

Five Illustrative Dimensions Where Exclusion Persists^a



Box 1

Ghana: Indexing Cash Transfers Against Inflation

Ghana has institutionalized an inflation-adjustment mechanism for its flagship *Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP)* programme, ensuring cash transfers for extremely poor households retain their real value. Introduced in September 2023, the reform links benefits to the 12-month average inflation rate, capped at 50 per cent to safeguard fiscal sustainability. By aligning grants with cost-of-living changes, it preserves beneficiaries' purchasing power, protects real incomes and cushions households from inflation inequality.

Source: Ghana VNR Report 2025.

What this means: Cushioning measures can help ease cost pressures, but their effectiveness depends on being carefully tailored to the needs of vulnerable groups. Broader proposals for universal coverage, such as Universal Basic Income (UBI), are resurfacing in global debates, raising both hopes and concerns (see Box 2).

Box 2

Universal Basic Income (UBI)—Balancing Appeal and Risk

UBI—unconditional payments to all—is gaining renewed attention ahead of the Second World Summit for Social Development. It promises predictable income and reduced exclusion, but also raises concerns about fiscal, macroeconomic and behavioural risks.

Early evidence from Kenya's 12-year trial^a shows UBI increased savings, investment and entrepreneurship without reducing work effort, while effects on inequality were mixed and design-dependent. Shorter pilots in Namibia, India, Iran and Zambia recorded welfare gains, but showed that their sustainability hinges on political leadership and fiscal priorities.^b Inflationary pressures resulting from UBI measures appear context-specific: negligible in integrated markets, but significant in weaker ones^c. The ILO further notes that labour supply effects vary, with potential inefficiencies such as work disincentives already present under existing safety nets.^d

Bottom line: UBI can support inclusion, but real equity gains depend on design, sustainable financing and integration with broader social protection—making it no substitute for focused measures that directly address exclusion^e.

^a Banerjee, A., Faye, M., Krueger, A., Niehaus, P., & Suri, T. (2023). *Universal Basic Income: Short-Term Results from a Long-Term Experiment in Kenya*.

^b Banerjee, A., Niehaus, P., & Suri, T. (2019). *Universal Basic Income in the Developing World*. MIT/NBER.

^c Gentilini, Ugo, Margaret Grosh, Jamele Rigolini, and Ruslan Yemtsov, eds. 2020. *Exploring Universal Basic Income: A Guide to Navigating Concepts, Evidence, and Practices*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

^d ILO (2018). *Universal Basic Income proposals in light of ILO standards: Key issues and global costing*. ESS—Working Paper No. 62. Isabel Ortiz, Christina Behrendt, Andrés Acuña-Ulate, Quynh Anh Nguyen. Geneva: International Labour Office.

^e UN DESA (2020). *World Social Report 2020: Inequality in a Rapidly Changing World*. New York: United Nations.

2. Access: Unequal access to basic services persists

Exclusion often begins at the frontline service delivery—when schools, clinics and other facilities are out of reach or not accessible. The *World Social Report 2025* stresses that universal access to education, healthcare and other basic services is vital to breaking inequality, yet quality often falls short.⁸ For instance, without universal design⁹, which makes facilities and systems accessible to all, including persons with disabilities, expanded infrastructure risks bypassing large segments of the population¹⁰.

Evidence shows that these gaps remain stark. According to the *United Nations Sustainable Development Goals Report 2025*, in least developed countries (LDCs), over half of primary schools lack electricity; over a third lack basic sanitation; two-thirds have no digital tools; and only one in five offer disability-friendly facilities. Additionally, 84% of people without electricity in 2023 lived in rural areas globally, reflecting entrenched geographic inequalities in infrastructure investment.

⁸ UN DESA and UNU-WIDER (2025). *World Social Report 2025: A New Policy Consensus to Accelerate Social Progress*. New York: United Nations.

⁹ Based on the Article 2 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

¹⁰ UN DESA (2024). *Disability and Development Report: Accelerating the Realization of the Sustainable Development Goals by, for and with Persons with Disabilities*. New York: United Nations.

Against this backdrop, governments¹¹ are responding with targeted investments to enhance the reach and quality of essential services.

In education, access is widening through distance and family-based learning, with targeted support for low-income children and those with disabilities or medical needs, alongside expanded early-intervention services (Kyrgyz Republic). Resource centres and one-stop hubs now reach more youth, including those with disabilities (Botswana). The UK contributed £180 million to the International Finance Facility for Education (IFFEd)¹² for marginalised children, including girls, the poor and those facing rural-urban disparities. In healthcare, services are extending to hard-to-reach localities and vulnerable groups through mobile care teams (Moldova, see Box 3). Also, safe drinking water is being provided through community-managed desalination plants (Bangladesh); and an emergency transport system has been set up for expectant mothers in rural areas (Lesotho, see Box 3).

Box 3

Ringing Care to the Doorstep—Moldova and Lesotho

In Moldova, the *RESTART* reform scaled mobile social work teams from 18 to all 33 districts, bringing home-based care and counselling directly to older persons and persons with disabilities—expanding access without requiring travel.

In Lesotho, the *M-Mama* initiative uses mobile technology and a decentralised driver network to provide expectant mothers in rural areas with swift, affordable access to clinics. With 3,800 drivers enrolled and full government funding since 2025, it has reduced delays in life-saving care.

Sources: [Moldova Annual Update 2025](#) and [Lesotho VNR Report 2025](#).

What this means: Governments should use demand-driven approaches to close access gaps: identify those furthest behind, remove barriers (e.g., cost, transport), design and deliver services locally and monitor delivery for accountability¹³. Recent analyses suggest high returns to investing in those furthest behind¹⁴: further context-specific evidence should be accumulated.

3. Governance: Weak capacities undermine equitable delivery of public services

Exclusion persists when governance is weakened by gaps in laws, policies, institutions, human resources and data

¹¹ Bangladesh, Kyrgyz Republic and Lesotho, *VNR Reports 2025*, United Nations HLPF; and Benin (2025), Botswana (2024), Greece (2024), Moldova (2025) and United Kingdom (2025), *annual updates on the implementation of 2023 SDG Summit commitments*.

¹² For more information, see: <https://iff-education.org/>

¹³ UN DESA (2022). *CEPA Strategy Guidance Note on Promotion of Social Equity*. New York: United Nations.

¹⁴ In Brazil, electricity access for employed rural women is associated with about a 59 per cent higher income. UN Women and UN DESA (2025), *Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The Gender Snapshot 2025*. New York: United Nations. Additional evidence is found in UN DESA (2018). Issue Note: *Partnering for resilient and inclusive societies: contributions of the private sector*. New York: United Nations.

management. Ultimately, governance shapes whether and how people benefit equitably from what governments provide and regulate.

To address these systemic gaps, countries¹⁵ are reinforcing core governance and delivery capacities so that services reach intended beneficiaries equitably and predictably.

- **Legal capacity** is enhanced through uniform frameworks such as mandatory Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans (Greece); and through justice system reforms (Bangladesh, see Box 4), which fall under broader e-justice measures highlighted in the *World Public Sector Report 2023*.

Box 4

Bangladesh's Justice Reforms for More Responsive Delivery

Bangladesh embedded *Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR)* in the Civil Procedure Code, cutting backlogs and speeding civil cases. Related reforms—digitized case management, fast-track and mobile courts and expanded legal aid—aim to improve efficiency and responsiveness, reducing delays that disproportionately affect those with fewer resources.

Source: Bangladesh VNR Report 2025.

- **Policy capacity** is advancing through embedding the principle of leaving no one behind in long-term development strategies (Thailand); and institutionalizing predictable ODA policy (Denmark, see Box 5).

Box 5

Denmark's Development Cooperation for Leaving No One Behind

Denmark maintains ODA at 0.7% of GNI through a budget-balancing mechanism, even when in-donor refugee costs fluctuate. In 2023, 21.8% of bilateral ODA went to LDCs (0.16% of GNI; within 0.15–0.2% target). Denmark uses the OECD-DAC disability marker and supports the *Beyond the Grid Fund for Africa (BGFA)*¹⁶, which had reached 1.3 million people in Uganda by 2024 with off-grid solar, alleviating energy poverty.

Sources: OECD (2024); Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark.

- **Institutional capacity** is strengthened through consistent, nationwide application of social assistance laws via Territorial Social Assistance Agencies (Moldova) and by a national SDG forum that includes vulnerable groups in decision-making (Lesotho).

¹⁵ Bangladesh, Lesotho and Thailand, *VNR Reports 2025*, United Nations HLPF; and Belarus (2025), Benin (2025), Botswana (2024), Denmark (2025), Greece (2024), Kyrgyz Republic (2025), Moldova (2025) and Thailand (2024, 2025), *annual updates on the implementation of 2023 SDG Summit commitments*.

¹⁶ The initiative is managed by NEFCO, an international financial institution established by the Governments of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden in 1990.

- **Human resources capacity** is expanding through workforce growth, targeted training and improved remuneration for frontline workers.¹⁷ Recruitment now requires gender- and age-sensitive skills; police officers must hold social work or psychology qualifications (Botswana).
- **Data and digital capacity** are scaling, with cross-sectoral data platforms (Moldova); data integration (Thailand, see Box 6); and upgraded digital social registries for coordinated social assistance (Benin).

What this means: Equitable delivery rests on capacities for coherent laws and policies, capable institutions, skilled personnel and trusted data, all underpinned by robust accountability mechanisms. Digital tools—such as data integration, e-justice platforms and social registries—may support these capacities only with safeguards against bias and misuse and for privacy, transparency and independent oversight. The test is whether capacity expands access and inclusion or undermines dignity and deepens exclusion.

4. Participation: Structural constraints restrict equal opportunities

Barriers to equal participation often stem less from missing infrastructure or services, but more from the ways rules, incentives and institutional processes are structured and experienced unequally across society. **To tackle these challenges, governments¹⁸ are embedding equity into national frameworks and systems**, for example through justice reforms with child-friendly courts, ombudsman mechanisms and specialised policing procedures (Botswana); wide-ranging legal and institutional reforms towards gender equality (Azerbaijan); Roma integration strategies that expand opportunities in education, employment and housing while recognising anti-gypsyism as a barrier to social cohesion (Czech Republic); and gender-responsive budgeting (Lesotho).

What this means: Overcoming exclusion requires strategic reforms that address structural exclusions and biases, realign incentives and translate commitments into practice, ensuring that all people can participate on an equal footing.

5. External Shocks: Fragile systems fuel exclusion

External shocks, from economic downturns to disasters and conflicts, are vulnerability multipliers. They compound existing gaps in affordability, access, governance and participation, and strain systems faster than they can adapt. These also come against a backdrop of rising debt burdens that squeeze social spending and global safety nets that fall short. Without resilient systems, shocks risk pushing vulnerable populations deeper into poverty and exclusion.

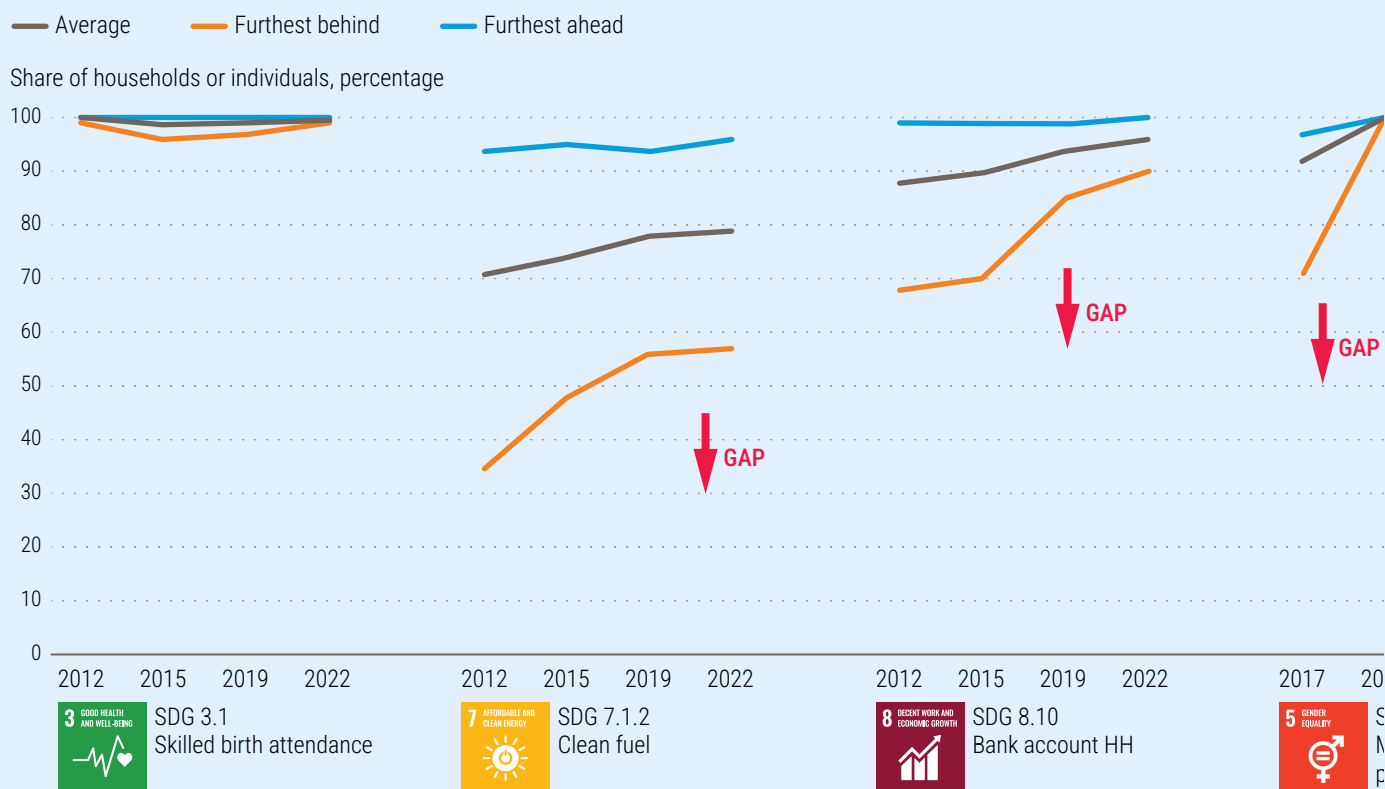
¹⁷ Botswana, Kyrgyz Republic, Lesotho, Moldova.

¹⁸ Azerbaijan (2024), Czech Republic (2025) and Lesotho (2025), *VNR Reports*, United Nations HLPF; and Azerbaijan (2025) and Botswana (2024), *annual updates on the implementation of 2023 SDG Summit commitments*.

Thailand's Data Integration

Thailand uses the UNESCAP's *Leaving No One Behind Platform* to integrate national surveys^a to identify those furthest behind across 20 SDG indicators and inform national planning.

Over time progress in selected SDG indicators (2012–2022)



To counter these pressures, governments¹⁹ are strengthening shock-responsive systems to help households withstand crises and recover more equitably.

In Ghana, the integrated national financing framework (INFF) and SDG Investor Maps are being employed as country-owned risk-management tools²⁰ to diversify financing under debt pressures, support inclusive budgeting and harness remittances as a buffer against shocks.²¹ At the global level, €5 billion were invested in global food security to cushion war impacts and promote long-term resilience (Germany).

¹⁹ Czech Republic and Ghana, *VNR Report 2025s*, United Nations HLPF; and Belarus (2025), *Czech Republic* (2025) and *Germany* (2024), *annual updates on the implementation of 2023 SDG Summit commitments*.

²⁰ United Nations, Inter-agency Task Force on Financing for Development (2024). *Financing for Sustainable Development Report 2024: Financing for Development at a Crossroads*. New York: United Nations.

²¹ Resilient remittance flows have become Ghana's most significant external financial resource, surpassing FDI and grants and reinforcing household incomes and national reserves despite global and domestic shocks (Ghana VNR Report 2025).

In preparation for natural disasters, cooperative insurance schemes are helping utilities recover quickly (United Kingdom, see Box 7); waste management is being modernized through regional recycling complexes to strengthen urban resilience (Belarus); and dataset systems are advancing environmental monitoring and early warning (Czech Republic).

Box 7

Cooperative Insurance for Rapid Service Restoration

A UK-led initiative, “*Caribbean Water Utilities Insurance Collective (CWUIC)*” pool risk across Caribbean water utilities. After Hurricane Beryl in 2024, insured utilities, including Grenada’s NAWASA, received rapid payouts (over \$2.2 million), enabling water services to be restored within two weeks.

Source: United Kingdom Annual Update 2025.

In the Sahel, where drought and fragility exacerbate vulnerabilities, adaptive social protection measures bridge humanitarian relief and long-term poverty strategies, reaching displaced populations (Germany's cooperation). In conflict contexts, integration strategies support the inclusion of refugees in host communities (Czech Republic, see Box 8).

Box 8

Leaving No Refugees Behind—Czech Republic

By 2024, Ukrainians made up 3.5% of the Czech Republic's population, one of the highest shares in the EU. Government and community measures are helping to turn displacement into new beginnings, with 80% of Ukrainians working, most renting homes and thousands of children enrolled in schools. Civil society initiatives, such as the *Memory of the Nation Adaptation Centre*, complement these efforts with language and cultural support.

Source: Czech Republic VNR Report 2025.

What this means: Resilient financial systems and emergency services, supported by effective development cooperation, are key to softening

the impacts of external shocks. Urgent reforms are needed, among others, in expanding emergency credit lines for low-income countries; extending debt restructuring frameworks to middle-income countries; and securing predictable humanitarian finance²². Such measures also help to address structural inequities in the international financial system that perpetuate poverty and inequality.²³ At the national level, emergency measures should be inclusive, strictly time-bound and extended only with legislative approval to safeguard accountability.²⁴

Demand-driven pathways to leaving no one behind

This stock take shows that gaps in affordability, access, governance, participation and resilience must be tackled together to ensure no one is left behind. Across contexts, a common thread is the imperative of demand-driven solutions—from Ghana's inflation-indexation system that directly shields the people living in poverty from cost-of-living shocks, to Honduras' community-driven school feeding programmes anchored in local procurement, Bangladesh's locally managed desalination systems that secure safe drinking water, and Lesotho's transport service designed for expectant mothers in rural areas to reach care. When policies are grounded in real needs, they are more likely to last. Listening to those furthest behind is not only a matter of equity, but also the surest strategy for lasting progress.

²² International Commission of Experts on Financing for Development (2025). *Financing a Sustainable Future: Proposals for a Renewed Global Development Finance Agenda*.

²³ Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary-General (2023). *Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR) 2023: Times of crisis, times of change: Science for accelerating transformations to sustainable development*. New York: UN DESA.

²⁴ UN DESA (2023). *World Public Sector Report 2023: Transforming institutions to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals after the pandemic*. New York: United Nations.