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Promoting social integration through social inclusion

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 78/178 on promoting social integration through social inclusion. It contains an exploration of the central role of social capital as a transformative strategy for addressing multidimensional poverty and strengthening inclusive societies. Recognizing that poverty is both economic and relational in nature, the report serves to highlight how investments in trust, participation and social networks can reduce structural barriers, expand opportunities and foster a shared sense of belonging.

In the report, national experiences are used to illustrate how social capital can be mobilized across key sectors, including employment, education, health, housing and community development, to address multidimensional poverty. The importance of inclusive governance, intergenerational solidarity and institutional trust as foundations for social inclusion is emphasized.

The report contains key policy recommendations for Member States, including on the promotion of inclusive and participatory decision-making, support for community-driven initiatives, investment in intergroup collaboration and the integration of social capital into poverty eradication strategies. These actions are essential to realizing the vision of a just, cohesive and sustainable society for all.

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I. Introduction

1. Thirty years ago, Heads of State and Government adopted the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development, in which they committed to creating an economic, political, social, cultural and legal environment that would enable people to achieve social development (see A/CONF.166/9). At the core of that commitment was the vision of social integration aimed at the creation of a "society for all" based on respect for all human rights and the principles of equality among individuals, non-discrimination, access to basic social services and promotion of the active participation of every member of society.

2. Over the years, poverty eradication strategies have placed greater emphasis on addressing the root causes of poverty and on structural barriers, inequality, discrimination and resilience-building. In adopting the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Member States expressed their determination to end poverty and hunger, in all their forms and dimensions, and to ensure that all human beings could fulfil their potential in dignity and equality and in a healthy environment. In the Pact for the Future, poverty eradication was placed at the centre of efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda, and a commitment was made to take comprehensive and targeted measures to eradicate poverty by addressing its multidimensional nature, including through rural development strategies and investments and innovations in the social sector, especially in education and health (see General Assembly resolution 79/1). The Second World Summit for Social Development, to be held from 4 to 6 November 2025 in Doha, will provide an opportunity to address the gaps and to recommit to the Copenhagen Declaration and the Programme of Action of the World Summit for Social Development and its implementation and give momentum towards the implementation of the 2030 Agenda (see Assembly resolution 78/318).

3. Leaving no one behind requires addressing multidimensional poverty, which involves not only income deprivation, but also deficits in health, education and living standards, among other areas. According to the United Nations Development Programme, across 112 countries and 6.3 billion people, 1.1 billion people (18.3 per cent) were living in acute multidimensional poverty in 2024. Over half of those people (584 million) were children under the age of 18 years. Common deprivations include inadequate housing, limited access to sanitation, electricity and cooking fuel, poor nutrition, and low school attendance.[1] According to the Multidimensional Poverty Measure of the World Bank, almost 4 in 10 people living in multidimensional poverty are not covered by monetary poverty measurements, as they are deprived only in terms of the non-monetary dimension of poverty.

4. Indeed, many aspects of poverty are challenging to measure. Issues such as dignity, agency, harmful social norms and the presence of social networks are therefore often excluded from both analytical and policy approaches to poverty eradication, while barriers to social integration and inclusion continue to obstruct access to essential services, resources and rights, thereby limiting participation in economic life and increasing the risk of poverty and inequality (A/78/188, para. 15). Social capital may serve as a key enabler in breaking down those barriers and fostering more inclusive societies.

5. The Copenhagen Declaration and Programme of Action provide a foundational reference for understanding the role of social capital in advancing social development. Although the term "social capital" is not explicitly used in the Declaration, principles such as inclusive participation, community empowerment and institutional strengthening, all of which are aligned with the conceptional elements of

[1] United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, "Global Multidimensional Poverty Index 2024: poverty amid conflict" (2024).

social capital, are affirmed. In recognizing the mutually reinforcing objectives of poverty eradication, productive employment and social integration, the Programme of Action implicitly addresses the value of shared norms, networks and mutual support in building resilient societies.

6. Building on that foundation, the General Assembly has reaffirmed the importance of inclusive participation, civic trust and community engagement (see General Assembly resolution 78/178). Member States have emphasized the need to enhance the involvement and meaningful participation of women, young people, older persons, persons with disabilities and persons in vulnerable situations in political, social and economic life. Discussions have underscored the potential of community-based approaches and institutions grounded in shared values. Strengthening both horizontal relationships among communities and vertical linkages with public institutions empowers individuals not only to gain access to support systems, but also to shape the decisions that affect their lives. The need to strengthen both human and social capital has been recognized as essential to inclusive development, including with respect to youth employment and equitable opportunities (see E/CN.5/2025/L.3).

7. The role of social capital in promoting social inclusion and poverty reduction has been studied for several decades. In its human development reports, the United Nations Development Programme has highlighted social capital as a critical enabler of poverty alleviation and sustainable development. The Development Centre of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, through its research and policy work with developing countries, has provided concrete examples of how the three pillars of a cohesive society – social inclusion, social mobility and social capital – can act as effective means for sustainable poverty reduction.[2]

8. The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 78/178. The report is focused on the role of social inclusion in addressing multidimensional poverty and promoting social integration. It builds on the analysis of the previous report (A/78/188), which served to identify barriers to social integration and inclusion that prevent people from accessing resources, goods and services and enjoying their full human rights, and that limit their participation in gainful employment and economic opportunities, thereby leading to increased multidimensional poverty. The present report serves to explore how building social capital could contribute to reducing those barriers and addressing multidimensional poverty by promoting social inclusion and social integration.

II. Role of social capital in reducing multidimensional poverty: conceptual foundation

9. While there is no clear definition of social capital[3] in the United Nations context, the significance of social capital has been reflected in its application to a wide range of development challenges, including poverty alleviation, conflict recovery and

[2] See www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2017/04/Alexandre-Kolev-OECD-inputs-to-UNDESA-poverty-expert-meeting4may2017.pdf.

[3] The conceptual framing of social capital used in the present report is informed by foundational perspectives synthesized in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *The Well-being of Nations: The Role of Human and Social Capital* (Paris, 2001), and World Bank, *World Development Report 2000/2001: Attacking Poverty* (Washington, D.C., 2001), in which the roles of trust, networks and shared norms in fostering social cooperation and development outcomes are examined. It is also informed by the analysis contained in Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *Report on the World Social Situation 2016: Leaving No One behind – The Imperative of Inclusive Development* (United Nations publication, 2016).

institutional reform. Social capital can contribute to institutional reform by fostering inclusive networks and reinforcing shared norms that enhance participation, institutional legitimacy and responsiveness. Strengthening these foundations can improve service delivery, accountability and governance reforms that are essential for sustainable development.[4]

10. Social capital has been recognized as a distinct and essential form of capital, fundamentally different from human, physical or financial capital, that can meaningfully contribute to ongoing discussions on social integration and poverty alleviation. It is inherently embedded in networks of interaction, and grounded in shared norms, values and expectations that facilitate cooperation within and among groups. Social capital functions largely as a public good. It is generated and sustained through ongoing social engagement, shaped by both cultural inheritance and the active investment of time and effort by individuals and communities. In that regard, it can enhance the capacity of societies to resolve shared problems, ensure compliance with collectively beneficial norms, and foster more stable and cohesive communities.

11. The conceptualization of social capital often involves multiple dimensions commonly categorized as bonding, bridging and linking capital. Bonding capital refers to the strong ties within homogeneous groups, such as among family members or close-knit communities, that serve as a source of solidarity and mutual aid. Bridging capital involves heterogeneous, horizontal connections that cut across different social groups, broadening access to networks and resources while promoting inclusive social integration through the exchange of ideas. Linking capital encompasses vertical relationships with formal institutions and individuals in positions of authority, connecting communities with support systems and enabling their access to decision-making spaces. Well-balanced interaction among these three forms is critical to ensuring that social capital fosters cohesion and inclusion, rather than reinforcing division or inequality.

12. Social capital generally emerges as a by-product of social interaction rather than a direct result of development interventions. Nevertheless, its benefits often extend beyond the original purposes of such interaction by generating positive externalities that enhance societal well-being. Although social capital is a whole-of-society undertaking, Governments play a key role in fostering enabling environments for social capital through public policies. Trust is central to groups and societies that enjoy high levels of social capital. It serves as both an outcome and a precondition of cooperative behaviour, reflecting the underlying shared values that enable individuals to engage in collective action with confidence, on the basis of mutual reciprocity.

13. Social capital holds both integrative and exclusionary potential. While it can foster trust, cooperation and inclusive participation, it may also reinforce inequality when networks and resources remain confined within narrow or homogeneous groups. High levels of bonding capital can promote solidarity but risk fostering insularity or exclusion if not complemented by bridging and linking ties. Structural inequalities limit equal access and the building of social relationships, which, in turn, further exacerbates inequalities and hinders the participation of marginalized populations in economic, social and civic life.

14. Moreover, individuals' ability to generate or access social capital is shaped by intersecting forms of discrimination on the basis of gender, age, disability, ethnicity, income level, national context or migratory status, among others.[5] For instance,

[4] UNDP, *Strengthening Social Cohesion: Conceptual Framing and Programming Implications* (New York, 2020).

[5] Syden Mishi, Kin Sibanda and Godfred Anakpo, "The concept and application of social capital in health, education and employment: a scoping review", *Social Sciences*, vol. 12, No. 8 (August 2023).

women may be excluded from decision-making networks dominated by men, and persons with disabilities may face environmental and attitudinal barriers to civic participation. These intersecting forms of discrimination can create compounded disadvantages in gaining access to equitable and high-quality education, employment or health services.[6] Designing interventions that are mindful and inclusive of the vulnerabilities experienced by different social groups is therefore essential to ensure that social capital contributes to equitable social integration.

15. Measuring social capital is challenging due to its inherently relational and often informal nature. Common proxies used to measure it, such as trust levels, social participation and civic engagement, are only approximate, as there are deeper dynamics at play. Composite indices often blend subjective measures, such as interpersonal trust, with behavioural indicators, such as voting, volunteering or membership in associations, but it is difficult to isolate the individual effect of each domain, and their interpretation must account for cultural and contextual variation. Moreover, indicators such as declining interpersonal trust or growing exclusion can also not be assumed to directly represent the erosion of social capital.

16. Social capital can play a vital role in addressing multidimensional poverty. Multidimensional poverty reflects overlapping disadvantages experienced by individuals across multiple dimensions and throughout the life course. While material interventions remain essential, addressing multidimensional poverty also requires tackling the relational and institutional barriers that perpetuate exclusion. Social capital can meaningfully contribute to that effort by improving how individuals connect to services, opportunities and one another across different dimensions of well-being.[7]

III. Building social capital to address multidimensional poverty and social exclusion[8]

17. Empirical studies have demonstrated a positive association between social capital – often reflected in the strength and quality of social networks – and various development outcomes, including improvements in education, child welfare, public safety, neighbourhood vitality, physical and mental health, happiness and democratic governance.[9] In recent years, the role of social capital has also been found in government policies and programmes aimed at addressing issues related to employment, health, education, housing and community development.

Employment

18. In the domain of employment, social capital can expand individuals' access to opportunities by facilitating the flow of information, referrals and guidance through trusted networks of mentors, peers and local leaders. Evidence indicates that job candidates who secure referrals are more likely to be hired and to retain employment over time. Moreover, the strength of social ties plays a critical role, with strong connections proving more effective than weak ones in promoting employment

[6] United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), *Turning Promises into Action: Gender Equality in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (New York, 2018).

[7] World Bank, *Inclusion Matters: The Foundation for Shared Prosperity* (Washington, D.C., 2013).

[8] Examples cited in this section are based on the inputs received in response to a note verbale sent on 30 January 2023 from the Governments of Armenia, Belarus, Guyana, Mexico, Poland and Thailand.

[9] OECD, *The Well-being of Nations: The Role of Human and Social Capital*.

outcomes and fostering self-sufficiency.[10] Programmes that cultivate social capital among young people have shown positive impacts on work readiness, confidence-building and access to decent employment opportunities, thereby helping to drive upward economic mobility, particularly for groups in vulnerable situations.[11]

19. One illustrative example is the "Youth building the future" programme in Mexico. Under the programme, unemployed young people are offered a 12-month training placement, a monthly stipend and health insurance. What distinguishes the programme is its community-based delivery model; where possible, apprentices are placed with local employers in their home communities. The localized approach reinforces community ties and reduces migration by expanding local economic opportunities.

20. The Government of Guyana has implemented development projects with an emphasis on sourcing labour and materials from within the communities they serve. The model, which is being implemented in both the coastal and hinterland regions, enables Amerindian community village councils to execute development activities directly. The approach generates employment, builds local capacity and enhances economic inclusion.

21. To support the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the labour market, the Government of Guyana has partnered with the National Council on Disabilities – a non-governmental organization – and the National Commission on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities – a statutory body – to craft training programmes aimed at enhancing the employability and entrepreneurial skills of persons with disabilities. Under a government initiative, visually impaired persons have been trained using assistive technologies, such as screen readers and pre-programmed tablets.

22. In Armenia, a network of resource centres focused on the economic empowerment of women is implementing activities to develop women's skills and capacities through training and complementary support programmes. The centres are aimed at strengthening the capacities of rural women, creating the conditions necessary for the equal enjoyment of rights, freedoms and opportunities for women and men, and preventing all forms of discrimination and gender-based violence.

Health

23. Social capital can also contribute to better health outcomes – directly, by providing emotional support, and indirectly, by mitigating the effects of deprivation. Among low-income populations, those with stronger social connections report fewer barriers to care and greater satisfaction with health services.[12] That finding was reinforced in a systematic review of the role of social capital in access to healthcare, in which it was shown that trust-based community networks enhance access to healthcare by building confidence, disseminating health knowledge and facilitating cooperation between communities and providers.[13] In that way, social capital can strengthen the informal systems that complement formal healthcare, thus potentially improving overall well-being in underserved areas.

[10] See https://aspe.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/private/aspe-files/261791/socialcapitalsupportingeconomicmobility.pdf.

[11] Ashley Boat, Amy Syvertsen and Peter Scales, "The role of social capital in promoting work readiness among opportunity youth", *Children and Youth Services Review*, vol. 131 (December 2021).

[12] Megan Perry and others, "Social capital and health care experiences among low-income individuals", *American Journal of Public Health*, vol. 98, No. 2 (February 2008).

[13] Kathryn Derose and Danielle Varda, "Social capital and health care access: a systematic review", *Medical Care Research and Review*, vol. 66, No. 3 (June 2009).

24. According to research by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development on the health impacts of social capital, social isolation often precedes illness, which reinforces the view that it is a cause, rather than a consequence, of poor health. For instance, a three-year survey of 1,200 persons conducted by the Stockholm Gerontology Research Centre found that, among other factors, extensive social networks protect against dementia.[14]

Education

25. Supportive social environments also play a central role in educational achievement by linking families, schools and communities. Trust and support within these relationships strengthen students' motivation and engagement, helping them to navigate educational pathways and sustain participation in lifelong learning.[15] School- and home-based social capital, through peer support and parental involvement, significantly enhance academic performance.[16] Cohesive social environments also reduce dropout rates and promote equitable educational outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged groups.[17]

26. In Malawi, the social cash transfer programme includes a community case management system through which local volunteers are assigned to work directly with vulnerable families. The case managers help to ensure that children are enrolled in and regularly attending school, while addressing social risks, such as child labour and early marriage.[18]

Housing

27. In the housing sector, social capital plays a vital role by enabling community-based support systems that facilitate access to housing solutions. Neighbourhood cohesion fosters mutual assistance, builds trust and promotes shared responsibility, thereby strengthening community resilience.[19] Conversely, individuals facing housing insecurity often struggle to maintain such connections, which limits their access to essential support.[20] Community-led initiatives can effectively mobilize resources and collective action to expand access to housing. In that way, social cohesion can provide both immediate protection and long-term stability.

28. Under the Baan Mankong programme in Thailand, slum communities and their networks are placed at the centre of a process aimed at developing long-term, comprehensive solutions to land and housing challenges in cities in Thailand. This unconventional housing programme is the result of a sustained development process that drew on successful community-driven practices in Thailand and other countries in Asia. While initially aimed at supporting local communities, the programme's scope was later expanded to building and strengthening networks of poor urban communities, enabling them to hone their managerial skills in the field of urban

[14] OECD, *The Well-being of Nations: The Role of Human and Social Capital*.

[15] John Field, *Social Capital and Lifelong Learning* (Bristol, Bristol University Press, 2005).

[16] Toby Parcel and Mikaela Dufur, "Capital at home and at school: effects on student achievement", *Social Forces*, vol. 79, No. 3 (March 2021).

[17] Syden Mishi, Kin Sibanda and Godfred Anakpo, "The concept and application of social capital in health, education and employment: a scoping review".

[18] See https://transfer.cpc.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Malawi-SCTP_Comprehensive-Summary-of-Impacts_2017-Brief.pdf.

[19] Stephanie Chassman and others, "Substance use and housing stability among individuals experiencing homelessness and a traumatic brain injury: the role of social support", *Psychoactives*, vol. 2, No. 2 (April 2023).

[20] Cheryl Hyde and Karin Eyrich-Garg, "Urban silos: community and social capital of low-income residents and the implications for anti-poverty initiatives", *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, vol. 34, No. 4 (2024).

housing. Subsequently, the Baan Mankong programme has evolved into a national programme rooted in a community-driven approach, aligned with the Government's commitment to decentralize policymaking processes by allowing local people and communities to become core actors in policy formulation. Each community works in close collaboration with local government, professionals, universities and civil society to develop plans and projects for their own cities. The programme encourages partnerships that integrate the needs of low-income communities into urban development processes, thereby leading to more sustainable housing solutions.

Participation

29. Social capital may even significantly shape how poverty is experienced and addressed, not only through material support, but also by fostering inclusion, participation and dignity. Individuals facing poverty often endure discrimination, social exclusion and limited community engagement, which can exacerbate feelings of isolation and marginalization. Strong interpersonal ties and shared norms can promote belonging, empower individuals to advocate for their rights and strengthen participation in community decision-making.[21] These relational foundations are particularly important for historically excluded groups. In that way, social capital can contribute to a human rights-based approach to development, where empowerment and social integration are central to poverty reduction.[22]

30. For instance, evidence from rural Viet Nam shows that strong community relationships can significantly reduce multidimensional poverty by improving access to essential services and supporting asset accumulation, especially among disadvantaged groups.[23] Similarly, studies in rural China have found that robust social networks reduce the likelihood of experiencing multidimensional poverty. Households with higher levels of trust in their neighbours, in particular, are less likely to face compounded challenges in areas such as health, education and income.[24]

31. In Mexico, there are government initiatives aimed at enabling Indigenous Peoples and people of African descent to effectively exercise their fundamental rights and determine their own development paths, as well as promoting respect for their self-determination and independence through community-focused and regional measures that are based on a sustainable vision and respond to their legitimate demands, claims and life aspirations.

32. In Belarus, 140 senior citizens' councils have been created across all regions to facilitate the participation of older persons in addressing issues that affect their interests. The councils are empowered to submit proposals to local executive and administrative bodies in order to address socially significant challenges and improve the daily lives of older persons, with consideration for specific situations.

33. Armenia has also invested in the inclusion of older persons, through a national programme aimed at improving care services and expanding access to community-based models. Such initiatives not only enhance social protection, but also ensure that

[21] UNDP, *2016 Human Development Report for Serbia: Social Capital – The Invisible Face of Resilience* (United Nations publication, 2016).

[22] See https://press.un.org/en/1998/19980520.eco5759.html.

[23] Anh Thu Quang Pham and Pundarik Mukhopadhaya, "Multidimensional poverty and the role of social capital in poverty alleviation among ethnic groups in rural Vietnam: a multilevel analysis", *Social Indicators Research*, vol. 159, No. 1 (July 2021).

[24] Jinfang Wang, Hui Xiao and Xiaojin Liu, "The impact of social capital on multidimensional poverty of rural households in China", *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, vol. 20, No. 1 (December 2023).

older persons can remain active members of their communities and live with greater autonomy and dignity.

34. In Poland, the “Senior support corps” programme responds to challenges posed by demographic changes. Under the programme, financial support is provided to municipalities to enable them to offer assistance services for persons aged 65 and over, on the basis of locally identified needs. The programme is also aimed at establishing cooperation among local government units, youth-focused non-governmental organizations and volunteers by creating local partnerships in order to ensure the safe and independent living of older persons at their places of residence. Since 2015, the “Senior+” programme has been aimed at establishing a network of support centres for older persons by providing municipalities and local governments with financial support to create and maintain day-care centres for older persons.

35. The “Senior+” support centres across Poland offer a wide range of services for older persons, including social engagement, education, sports, cultural and educational activities, rehabilitation, social services and various forms of occupational therapy. Regular participation in those activities enriches the daily lives of older persons and provides them, above all, with safe and varied forms of activity, tailored to their interests, needs and abilities. Such experiences contribute to increased self-confidence and independence among the participants, while access to intellectually stimulating activities has been shown to enhance cognitive well-being. Joint participation in cultural and recreational events, team-building trips and diverse types of workshops foster a sense of belonging to a group and thus reduce loneliness. Over time, participants become more independent, and the opportunity to choose among activities further reinforces their sense of agency.

36. Building inclusive social capital requires targeted policy instruments that promote community engagement, trust-building and intergroup collaboration. Inclusive community-driven mechanisms, such as participatory budgeting, local development initiatives and school-community partnerships, empower populations to set priorities, allocate resources and reinforce institutional trust. As digital technologies increasingly mediate these interactions, they offer new avenues for forming social capital, particularly among young people, diaspora populations and socially excluded groups. However, digital exclusion can also undermine those efforts, making it essential for policy design to account for unequal access and digital literacy.[25] Embedding such approaches into poverty reduction strategies can translate social capital into sustained improvements in social integration and well-being.[26]

IV. Policy recommendations

37. Social capital can serve as a critical enabler of social inclusion and integration by fostering cooperation and institutional engagement. It supports collective action and resilience and helps to address the multiple dimensions of poverty. However, its distribution is often uneven, with closed networks among privileged groups reinforcing exclusion. To reduce inequality and strengthen poverty reduction strategies, it is essential to invest in inclusive forms of social capital that connect

[25] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and International Commission on the Futures of Education, *Reimagining our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education* (Paris, 2021).

[26] UNDP, *Strengthening Social Cohesion: Conceptual Framing and Programming Implications* (New York, 2020).

diverse communities and expand access to shared opportunities and decision-making spaces.[27]

38. **Member States are encouraged to consider the following recommendations:**

(a) **Develop strategies and policies aimed at creating an enabling environment for the promotion of social capital, with a view to addressing barriers to social inclusion, strengthening community resilience and reducing multidimensional poverty;**

(b) **Design policies and programmes that are sensitive to the impact of all forms of discrimination, including on the grounds of gender, age, disability, ethnicity or any other relevant grounds, on equitable access to the benefits of social capital;**

(c) **Support inclusive engagement mechanisms that enable the meaningful participation of civil society and relevant stakeholders, especially marginalized population groups, including by strengthening their self-organization and collective action and ensuring their active involvement in the design, implementation and monitoring of programmes aimed at promoting social inclusion;**

(d) **Leverage digital technologies to promote social inclusion and create an enabling environment, in particular through the promotion of digital inclusion through accessible and gender-responsive technological solutions and policies;**

(e) **Invest in intergenerational activities that foster relationships and partnerships between generations, and promote a supportive, inclusive and enabling environment for all;**

(f) **Strengthen trust in public institutions by fostering inclusive, transparent and accountable governance practices and by supporting social capital initiatives aimed at promoting citizen participation, institutional responsiveness and shared norms of cooperation;**

(g) **Improve the collection and use of data disaggregated by age, sex, disability and other relevant factors in order to inform evidence-based policies and programmes aimed at advancing social inclusion.**

[27] World Bank, *Inclusion Matters: The Foundation for Shared Prosperity*.