



THE COMMITMENT TO REDUCING INEQUALITY INDEX 2024

Executive Summary

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Now in its fifth edition, the Commitment to Reducing Inequality Index (CRI) assesses the commitment of 164 countries and regions to fighting inequality. The CRI 2024 offers powerful new evidence on whether governments are acting to reduce inequality through policies on public services, fair taxation and labour rights. It reveals negative trends in the vast majority of countries since 2022. Four in five have cut the share of their budgets going to education, health and/or social protection; four in five have backtracked on progressive taxation; and nine in ten have regressed on labour rights and minimum wages. Nine out of ten countries have backtracked in one or more area, meaning without urgent policy actions to reverse this worrying trend, economic inequality will almost certainly continue to rise in 90% of countries.

Despite some progress, the IMF and the World Bank could do far more to prioritize the fight to reduce inequality. This report assesses their actions across the three CRI pillars of public services, taxation and labour rights. It makes recommendations for how the IMF and World Bank should stop promoting policies that increase inequality and instead support those policies that reduce it, as a matter of urgency.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We are living through a time of extraordinary economic inequality. After gradually closing for decades, the gap between the Global South and the Global North has suddenly grown more rapidly than at any time since World War II. Billions of people face the terrible hardship of high and rising food prices and hunger, while the number of billionaires has doubled in the last decade. Inequality at the national level is either high or rising in 60% of the countries in which the IMF and World Bank are operating.

The Commitment to Reducing Inequality (CRI) Index 2024 offers powerful new, up-to-date evidence of this deeply concerning trend. Reviewing the actions of 164 governments across three areas critical to reducing inequality – social services, taxation and work – for the first time since the CRI began in 2017, we identify strongly negative trends for the overwhelming majority of countries. Combining data from these three pillars, at least **nine out of ten countries are implementing policies and actions likely to increase economic inequality.**

FIGURE 1 NINE OUT OF TEN COUNTRIES ARE IMPLEMENTING POLICIES LIKELY TO INCREASE ECONOMIC INEQUALITY



COMMITMENT TO REDUCING INEQUALITY INDEX 2024 RESULTS

The CRI 2024 Index measures the commitment of 164 countries and regions to reducing inequality. It assesses their performance across the three pillars of public services (education, health and social protection); progressive taxation; and labour rights and wages (see **Figure 2**). The Index methodology and the 2024 database can be accessed at www.inequalityindex.org. The statistical audit can be found [here](#).¹

FIGURE 2 STRUCTURE OF THE CRI INDEX

	PUBLIC SERVICES SPENDING	TAX PROGRESSIVITY	LABOUR RIGHTS AND WAGES
Policy indicators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PS1a Education • PS1b Health • PS1c Social protection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • T1a Personal income tax • T1a Corporate income tax • T1a Value added tax • T1b Harmful tax practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • L1a Labour rights • L1b Women’s labour rights • L1c Minimum wage
	Spending as % of total budget	Progressive tax structures	Governments’ efforts to protect workers in law and practice
Implementation or coverage indicators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PS2a Secondary education completion by poorest quintile • PS2b Universal health coverage and out-of-pocket expenditure • PS2c Pension coverage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • T2 Tax productivity across VAT, PIT & CIT 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • L2a Unemployment • L2b Vulnerable employment
Impact indicators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PS3 Impact of spending on inequality (Gini) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • T3 Impact of tax on inequality (Gini) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • L3 Impact of labour income (wage) on inequality (Gini)
Total CRI score	Average of 3 pillar scores		

Note: VAT=value added tax, PIT=personal income tax and CIT=corporate income tax.

GOVERNMENTS ARE INCREASING INEQUALITY

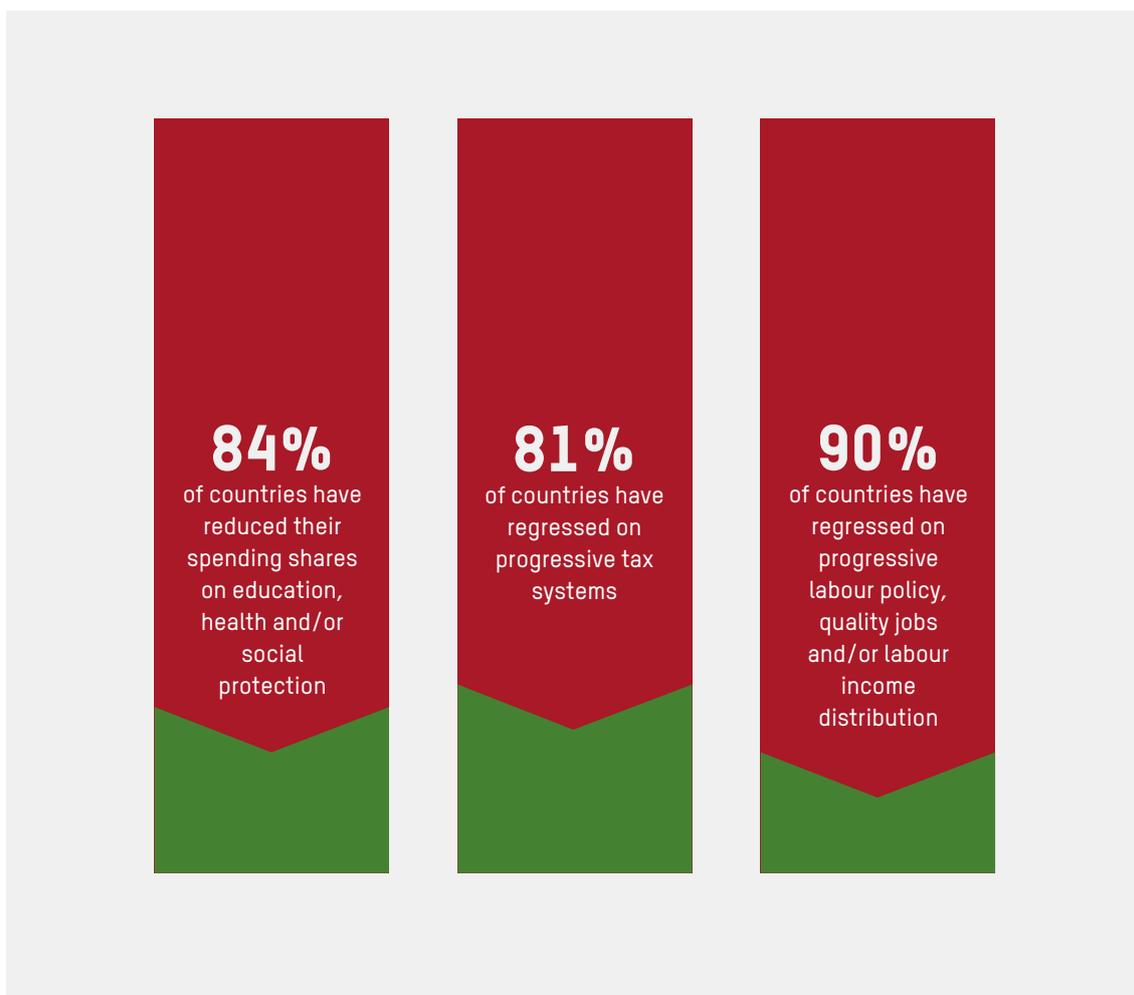
In recent years, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, data availability on inequality at national level has worsened dramatically, from an already low level. For 28 countries, the most recent estimate of income inequality is over a decade old. For all countries, household surveys, which structurally underestimate the incomes of the richest, and therefore inequality, remain the main source of inequality data.

The CRI, with its focus on work, public spending and taxation, offers a unique way of compensating for this major gap in recent high-quality inequality data.

Looking across the three pillars, it shows that 84% of countries have reduced their spending on education, health and/or social protection. Progressive taxation, tax collection and their impact on inequality has regressed in 81% of countries. Labour rights, minimum wages, vulnerable employment and/or labour income inequality have worsened in 90% of countries.

When combined, we find that this means nine out of ten countries are implementing policies and actions that are highly likely to increase economic inequality.

FIGURE 3 REDUCED SPENDING ON EDUCATION, HEALTH AND/OR SOCIAL PROTECTION.



TOP PERFORMERS

As in previous editions, the top performers in this CRI are all high-income OECD countries led by Norway (see **Table 1**). Due to their labour policies, these countries start from much lower wage inequality. They have high social spending and collect more tax revenue, allowing widespread coverage of public services and the greatest impact on inequality.

However, even these top performers are lagging in many indicators. For example:

An average of 5% of their citizens face catastrophic out-of-pocket healthcare costs.

Many have less progressive tax policies than they should. For instance, many do not have measures to make very high value added tax (VAT) less regressive, while corporate income tax (CIT) rates are generally low, except in Japan. High earners also pay a lower effective tax rate than most other citizens: in Denmark, the effective tax rate paid by the richest 1% has fallen by five percentage points over the last two decades.

Coming third overall, Australia scores poorly on labour rights. It has very short fully paid parental leave, currently 11 weeks.

TABLE 1 TOP AND BOTTOM 10 COUNTRIES IN THE CRI 2024 INDEX

Top and bottom ten countries in the CRI 2024 Index			
Top ten		Bottom ten	
Rank	Country	Rank	Country
1	Norway	164	South Sudan
2	Canada	163	Nigeria
3	Australia	162	Vanuatu
4	Germany	161	Haiti
5	Finland	160	Zimbabwe
6	Denmark	159	Uganda
7	Austria	158	Central African Republic
8	Japan	157	Liberia
9	Slovenia	156	Sierra Leone
10	France	155	Burundi

Belarus, Costa Rica and **South Africa** are at the best-performing of the low- and middle-income countries, coming in at positions 31, 32 and 33, respectively. They have relatively higher social spending, service coverage and tax collection than their peers, but perform poorly on many other indicators.

BOTTOM PERFORMERS

The bottom performers are low- and lower middle-income countries (see Table 1), all in sub-Saharan Africa, except **Haiti** and **Vanuatu**. They have very low social spending due to low tax revenues, which results in poor service coverage and limited impact on inequality. They also have extremely high levels of catastrophic out-of-pocket health spending. As a result, millions of children are out of school, and tens of thousands of women are dying from preventable deaths as they cannot access basic healthcare.

Their tax policies are also highly regressive, as the poorest people shoulder most of the tax burden through sales taxes such as VAT. Their performance on labour rights and minimum wages is poor, leaving 80% of citizens in vulnerable employment with no rights.

The debt crisis, conflict and climate shocks are severely constraining spending in low- and lower middle-income countries. On average, they are spending 48% of their budgets on debt service. Some six of the bottom ten countries are in or at high risk of debt distress.

Nonetheless, some countries at the bottom of the rankings perform well on some indicators. For example, the **Central African Republic** has the second most progressive tax policy on paper, **Uganda** increased its health budget by 29% since 2021, and **Vanuatu** increased its minimum wage by over 50%.

BOX 1 RISERS AND FALLERS BETWEEN CRI 2022 AND 2024

Compared to CRI 2022, a few countries have shown some significant improvement across the three pillars, indicating growing commitment to reducing inequality. Others have regressed significantly.

IMPROVERS

Due to policies initiated under the civilian administration, **Burkina Faso** has shown significant progress by increasing its minimum wage for the first time in a decade, and made VAT more progressive by introducing a higher threshold.

Croatia has boosted its health spending and is ensuring that essential healthcare is more accessible to its citizens, and has reduced the rate of unemployment.

Under the previous government, **Ecuador** boosted its public spending by a third, raised the top personal income tax (PIT) rate by two percentage points, and reduced the unemployment rate by 90%.

Paraguay increased its health budget by two thirds and health coverage by 18%. It also nearly doubled its minimum wage, and cut vulnerable employment and unemployment.

FALLERS

Argentina is facing significant challenges since a new government came into power. The health and education sectors have faced dramatic budget cuts of 76% and 60%, respectively, the wealth tax is being phased out and labour rights are being gutted.

Pakistan cut education and social protection budget shares by a third due to a debt crisis and IMF-imposed austerity measures.

PERFORMANCE ACROSS THE THREE PILLARS

PILLAR 1: PUBLIC SERVICES

Since the last Index in 2022, the global polycrisis and conflict have exacerbated the debt crisis and inflation, straining most countries' public finances and leading to pressure to enact extreme austerity measures. This has led to cuts in spending and coverage for education, health and social protection.

At the top of the Public Services pillar overall are high-income OECD countries with more tax revenues to invest in public social services, which play a key role in reducing inequality. At the bottom are low- and lower middle-income countries, most of which are fragile or conflict-affected, with low social spending, poor coverage and thus much less impact by public services on inequality.

Budget cuts in the majority of countries

On average, compared to the 2022 CRI, total spending across the three sectors largely stagnated at 43.4% of total expenditure. However, compared to the 2022 figures:

- Education budgets were cut in 56% of countries;
- Health budgets were cut in 43% of countries; and
- Social protection budgets were cut in 46% of countries, and stayed the same in 26%.

The ten biggest fallers on spending all had a debt service burden that exceeded 20% of total expenditure in 2023, with the exception of **Ukraine**, where the war with Russia has taken a heavy toll on public spending. Our analysis shows that there is a strong correlation between debt servicing and cut in public spending.

Other countries bucked this worrying trend, including **Ecuador** and **Chile**, the latter having dramatically increased healthcare spending as part of a policy of establishing quality primary care services.

Coverage stagnating

With only six years until the 2030 deadline for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the proportion of the population getting access to free education, healthcare and social protection is stagnating. The secondary school completion rate for young people from the poorest 20% of households is less than 1% in more than 13 countries; a further 45 have a completion rate below 10%.

Universal health coverage averages only 65%, up only marginally from 64% in the 2022 CRI. In a quarter of countries, more than half of citizens remain uncovered. The proportion paying catastrophic health costs out of their own pockets has increased slightly since 2022, to 8.6% on average.

Pensions coverage has stagnated at 59% on average. Some 41 (mostly high-income) countries have universal coverage. On the other hand, less than 10% are covered in 26 countries.

Impact of public services on inequality

Public services are reducing inequality in every country in the CRI, but by widely varying degrees. The majority of the best performers are high- and upper middle-income countries, while most lower-income countries see much lower impact, largely due to low spending. Overall, since the 2022 CRI, the average impact of public services on inequality has fallen from 0.19 Gini points to only 0.16, with the impact on inequality increasing in only 52 countries.

PILLAR 2: TAX PROGRESSIVITY FALLING

Overall, tax policies have been becoming more regressive. While tax collection has increased since the COVID-19 pandemic, this is largely due to growth in sales tax/VAT receipts, exacerbating inequality. There is an urgent need to accelerate global and national tax reforms in ways which generate not just more tax revenue, but in more progressive ways, especially in the countries of the Global South. The rich – who in many instances pay a lower share of their income than other citizens – must be required to pay a bigger share of their income and wealth in tax.

The list of the 2024 CRI best performers continues to be dominated by lower-income countries that have not cut income taxes like richer countries. As in previous CRI editions, the worst performers are those with virtually no progressivity in their tax systems, i.e., high VAT rates with no pro-poor exemptions, and very low and/or ‘flat’ income tax rates that do not rise with income.

Tax systems on paper are becoming more regressive

The average VAT rate (adjusting for food exemptions and registration thresholds) has risen from 7.9% to 8.2%, reversing slight falls in earlier CRI editions, with 15 countries increasing their ‘adjusted’ VAT rate due mainly to the elimination of food exemptions, and 9 reducing it. Only 37 countries make the maximum effort to make VAT have a ‘neutral’ effect on inequality, by exempting food and setting high thresholds.

PIT rates have on average regressed since the last CRI. Some twenty countries continue to have either no PIT (almost all in the Gulf States) or flat taxes (almost all in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union). CIT rates have stagnated at 23.3% since the 2022 CRI. Only 13 countries have CIT rates above 30%, while 12 have rates below 15%. **Colombia’s** current government increased its CIT rate in 2022, but ten countries cut theirs.

Tax collection increasing – but from regressive sales taxes

The CRI uses tax productivity (tax collected compared to potential receipts) to measure the success of tax collection. Since CRI 2022, productivity has increased from 36% to 39% on average. However, this mostly reflects increases in VAT collection (due to the elimination of exemptions). The worst performing countries on tax productivity have been embroiled in conflict or are highly dependent on oil revenues.

Tax systems are having less impact on inequality

As measured by impact on the Gini coefficient, there has been a dramatic increase in the regressivity of the tax system since CRI 2022 – mainly because much more VAT is being collected. The average unweighted impact of the tax system on increasing inequality has doubled, raising inequality by 0.6% on average, compared with 0.3% in CRI 2022.

PILLAR 3: LABOUR RIGHTS AND WAGES

Across almost all indicators in this pillar, the situation has stagnated or worsened in a majority of countries since 2022.

Backpedalling on labour policies in law and practice

Labour rights and unionization in law and practice regressed in 41% of countries compared to the 2022 CRI. The most severe setbacks have been observed in **Afghanistan, Jordan, Zimbabwe** and **Bangladesh**. However, some countries bucked the trend. **South Korea** improved the most, as it ratified two important International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions.

In terms of women's labour rights, Sierra Leone in particular has beefed up laws on equal pay and non-discrimination in hiring.

The average length of paid parental leave remained unchanged at 158 days, but only one in five countries meet the 18 weeks of paid leave recommended by the ILO. Four countries (**The United States, Papua New Guinea, Lesotho** and **Tonga**) still have no paid parental leave.

Minimum wages fell or stagnated as a share of per capita GDP in almost half of countries compared to CRI 2022. Several countries increased their minimum wage, notably Vanuatu, Türkiye and Niger, but 16 countries have either no national minimum wage or have not updated it for more than two decades.

Vulnerable employment increasing in the world's most populous countries

Compared to the CRI 2022, vulnerable employment increased in 60% of countries, including many of the most populous countries in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. Globally, half of the labour force is in vulnerable employment, i.e., they have no labour rights.

Inequality in labour income is increasing

As a result of these backward policy steps, wage inequality worsened in 53% of countries, most notably in **Zambia**. Overall, about 70 of countries have a labour income Gini of 0.4 or higher, and only 12 are below 0.3. Sub-Saharan Africa has the widest gap, reflecting high levels of vulnerable employment. Indeed, the 20 countries with the highest Gini of labour income are all in sub-Saharan Africa, where the top 10% of wage earners gobble up two thirds of all labour income, while the bottom 50% takes just 3.3%. This shows that governments need to put much more emphasis on anti-inequality labour policies, instead of just relying on fiscal policies.

INEQUALITY, THE WORLD BANK AND THE IMF

The high and persistent levels of inequality found in the majority of countries undermine the economic, social, environmental and institutional goals of the World Bank, the IMF and the UN.

The CRI 2024 shows that countries with World Bank and IMF programmes are implementing regressive policies and actions that could widen inequality:

- 94% of the countries with World Bank programmes cut the budget shares allocated to education, health and/or social protection since the last CRI in 2022. Among International Development Association countries – the world's poorest – 95% did so.
- 95% of countries under IMF programmes cut budget shares for education, health and/or social protection.

In 2023, the World Bank introduced a new 'vision indicator' – focused on reducing the numbers of countries with high inequality (Gini of 0.4 or above), for the first time in its 80-year history. The UN is currently considering adding the Palma ratio to its inequality indicators under SDG10.

Yet despite these positive developments, we find that the World Bank and the IMF are still pursuing policies that all too often increase rather than reduce inequality. Both institutions can and should do far more to prioritize closing the divide.

The World Bank needs to promote free public social services, expand its work on progressive taxation, and take a proactive role in enhancing labour rights and minimum wages.

After a promising start in 2015–22 involving many studies, speeches and country papers defining and recommending anti-inequality policies, the IMF's focus on reducing inequality appears to be receding. Its social spending floors are proving inadequate; it has been emphasizing regressive VAT increases and has no consistent policies on labour rights or minimum wages.

Both institutions need to do much more to help all of their member states reduce inequality to the level (a Gini of 0.3) at which it no longer undermines growth. This needs to be accompanied by global action to address the debt crisis and climate threats, end conflicts and reach global agreements on taxing the rich more effectively to fund public services.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Inequality is not inevitable. It is a policy choice. Each country has the potential to reduce inequality. However, to succeed, countries will also need strong measures to be taken by the international community.

It is encouraging that inequality is now being better measured and mainstreamed by international organizations, with a new World Bank inequality indicator and potentially a new inequality indicator within SDG10. But both the IMF and World Bank (and the broader international community) need to step up their efforts to support countries in implementing policies that reduce inequality sharply.

As **priorities for governments**, we recommend the following, tailored to each country's existing achievements and level of development:

1. Develop clear national timebound plans to reduce inequality. All countries should put in place realistic and timebound National Inequality Reduction Plans (NIRPs) to reduce inequality, with regular monitoring to check their progress. Every country should be aiming for an income Gini coefficient of less than 0.3 and/or a Palma ratio of no more than 1. The NIRPs would contain the combination of policies identified in this index (as well as, for example, other structural policies on access to land and finance) that are estimated to reduce Gini and Palma to these levels. The impact of policies on these indicators will also need to be monitored annually (rather than every 3–5 years as currently) in lower-income countries through smaller sample surveys and modelling of the type used in OECD and UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean countries.

2. Prioritize public spending on essential public services such as education, healthcare and social protection. All countries, particularly low- and lower middle-income countries, should ensure that their health budget is at least 15% of total public expenditure and education 20% – and that this spending benefits the poorest people by improving access to and quality of education, health and social protection, so that they maximize progress to universal coverage targeted by the SDGs.

3. Increase progressive taxation by taxing the income of the richest 1%, for example to a minimum of 60% of their income from both labour and capital, with higher rates for multi-millionaires and billionaires. The wealth of the super-rich should be taxed at rates high enough to reduce the concentration of extreme wealth, reduce inequality and lower power concentration. In addition, tax authorities, especially in low- and lower middle-income countries, should be strengthened, and establish high-net-wealth tax units to combat tax evasion and avoidance among the richest people.

4. Intervene in the labour market to protect all workers. All countries need to place even more emphasis on reducing the inequality produced by the labour markets by ratifying and enforcing all ILO standards to minimize violations. A few countries also need to introduce laws for anti-discrimination and equal pay, and against rape and sexual harassment. However, the main challenge now is to enforce these laws effectively. Parental leave needs to be lengthened and paid at 100% of prior earnings, as well as more evenly distributed between women and men. Minimum wages need to rise sharply in many countries, to at least match per capita GDP and 'living wages', which cover basic spending needs. Youth minimum wages that are lower than the national minimum wage should be eliminated. Governments should also explore measures to restrain the highest pay, such as caps on CEO-to-median workers' pay ratios of 20:1, and equitable distributions of companies' profits to workers and shareholders. Finally, they need to work harder to bring down unemployment and underemployment, and to ensure that vulnerable workers receive formal contracts or are covered by labour rights and social protection systems.

5. Develop gender-responsive policies to recognize, reduce and redistribute unpaid care work and ensure that paid care workers are represented and rewarded justly. The public nature of care services needs to be clearly stated, i.e., the duty of the state as the primary provider of public care services. Care systems have the power to transform gender relations and women's lives: this includes the provision of fully paid parental, maternity and paternity leave. Redistribution of care work between men, women and the state is needed to reduce the care workload on women. This is in addition to challenging harmful social norms and racist, colonial and sexist beliefs that care work is the responsibility of women, girls, migrants and racialized communities.

As urgent **priorities for the international community, especially the World Bank and the IMF**, to help reduce inequality, we make the following recommendations:

6. Focus World Bank and IMF efforts on reducing inequality. Both the World Bank and the IMF should support country-owned governments' NIRPs and not undermine them. Country Partnership Assessments should clearly align with NIRPs. The World Bank and the IMF need to put reducing inequality at the centre of their efforts to promote growth, stability and development. This means prioritizing reducing inequality in all their loan programmes, policy advice, technical assistance and research – and making strong recommendations for higher and more pro-poor social spending, progressive taxation, and enhanced labour rights and minimum wages. Ideally, they should focus on increasing the number of countries with low inequality, rather than only reducing the number of countries with high inequality.

7. Working with the UN, the World Bank should systematically produce, publish and use data on the impact of fiscal action on inequality. The World Bank has a particular role to play, as one of the leading global actors supporting household surveys, and as the 'custodian' of the largest global inequality databank and of SDG indicators 10.1 and 10.4.2. It needs to produce more frequent and higher-quality data on inequality, including enhancing analysis of top incomes in developing countries using administrative tax data and other methods. The Bank should also help countries to move to annual tracking or modelling of inequality. It also needs to scale up its programme analysing the impact of fiscal policies on inequality to produce annual analysis for all member countries, and work with the ILO to establish a similar system to estimate the impact of labour market policies on wage inequality.

8. Reach and implement global agreements to tax super-rich individuals and corporations. The G20 and UN need to work further on developing better international standards to tax super-rich individuals and multinationals more effectively, through minimum effective tax rates on their income and wealth, and with a fair share of the resulting revenues coming to lower-income countries. In particular, they should build on initial progress on taxing rich individuals in the G20, and use the UN Tax Convention to strengthen and reform the inadequate OECD BEPS process.

9. Take urgent measures to tackle the debt crisis and increase concessional financing flows. The current crisis is mainly one of high debt service rather than stock, and for countries which have been accessing global and national commercial bond markets. The international community led by the G20, IMF, the World Bank and the UN need to take urgent measures to reduce debt service burdens by bringing down global interest rates, reducing borrowing costs for middle-income countries that have to go to the markets to fund their budgets, and providing long-term rescheduling or cancellation for lower-income countries. They also need to redouble efforts to provide more concessional financing, including through higher official development assistance and South-South cooperation, new issuances of Special Drawing Rights and by selling IMF gold. All these measures will help to free the maximum funds through to 2035 and to maximize anti-inequality spending on public services.

If the world's governments, supported by the international community, are able to implement these measures urgently, then we can accelerate progress in overcoming the inequality crisis, reducing conflict and reaching all the other SDGs.

¹ Laguerre Gonzalez, J., Ravanos, P. and Smallenbroek, O., (2024). *JRC Statistical Audit of the Commitment to Reducing Inequality index 2024*. Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2024, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2760/4586505, JRC138805>

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For further information on the issues raised in this paper please email advocacy@oxfaminternational.org

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Cover photo

Aerial image of a rich and very poor neighbourhood jammed against each other in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Photo credit: Johnny Miller/Unequal Scenes.

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