

Caste-based discrimination in Norway's development policy

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and

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Norway's new development policy should recognise caste discrimination as a structural driver of poverty, inequality and exclusion, and incorporate caste-responsive measures across all development work. Caste systems divide people into unequal and hierarchical social groups, where the most marginalized are stigmatized as inherently inferior or ritualistically unclean by more dominant groups. While especially pronounced in South Asia, affecting a population of approximately two billion people, caste is practiced in various forms around the world. Recognition of caste would not create an additional stand-alone priority but would enable Norway to reach people who are systematically excluded from existing priorities.

Why caste belongs in the Vendepunkt agenda

The Vendepunkt process seeks a long-term strategy for Norwegian development policy which will attract broad support in the Norwegian Parliament. This strategy should allow for consistent engagement in a rapidly changing world and identify where and how Norway can make the most productive contribution to development. The current Minister of Development, Åsmund Aukrust, has indicated inclusive investment, economic growth and job creation as a crucial set of objectives. Another important set is reduction of inequality, promotion of rights and democracy and international rule of law.

[Caste-based discrimination](#) is directly relevant to these sets of objectives as a cross-cutting issue and the structural driver for poverty and violations of human rights. Across the globe, an estimated 260 million people are subject to extreme forms of discrimination, segregation and exploitation simply because of the perceived caste into which they were born. Despite formal protections in law in some countries, caste-based discrimination remains endemic and discriminatory societal norms are continually reinforced by both government, private structures and practices, particularly in caste-affected countries like [Nepal](#), [India](#), [Pakistan](#), [Bangladesh](#) and [Sri Lanka](#), where the most oppressed castes call themselves 'Dalits'. Caste-based violence and killings, slavery and forced labour and other atrocities against Dalits continue to increase while perpetrators enjoy impunity. This underscores the urgent need for both international and grassroots action to pressure state actors to set up effective institutions and implement appropriate legal and policy frameworks that can ensure Dalits' access to justice and appropriate redress.

The commitment to [leave no one behind](#) cannot be fulfilled when an entire system of exclusion is not identified in policy design, data, implementation and monitoring. Caste is not a country-specific concern. It is a cross-cutting human rights and development issue that determines who benefits from public services, economic growth, climate action, humanitarian assistance and international trade.

Norway's leadership role

The White Paper 10 (2014–2015), Opportunities for All, commits Norway to increased attention to caste in international forums. Norway has since used the United Nations human rights mechanisms to highlight the plight of Dalits and urge caste affected countries to respect Dalit human rights. Most recently, in Nepal's 2026 Universal Periodic Review, Norway recommended free and inclusive quality education,

explicitly including Dalit children (A/HRC/62/9). Norway has also made recommendations concerning gender-based violence, human rights defenders, labour rights, child marriage, religious minorities, hate speech and access to justice in the Universal Periodic Reviews of Nepal in 2020 (A/HRC/47/10), Bangladesh in 2023 (A/HRC/55/13), Pakistan in 2023 (A/HRC/55/13) and India in 2022 (A/HRC/52/11). These commitments, if honoured, would significantly improve the lives of those suffering from caste-based discrimination.

The new policy should consolidate this record of championing Dalit rights as human rights into a coherent approach. Doing so would strengthen, rather than fragment, Norway's priorities. It would help translate broad, cross-cutting commitments on equality, gender, minority rights, democracy and decent work into action for communities that are routinely overlooked.

Caste-responsive policy would strengthen Norway's chosen priorities

Cross cutting perspectives

The focus on fewer priorities should not mean overlooking forms of discrimination that cut across these priorities. Caste is a strong determinant of whether people benefit from education, decent work, private investment, political participation, freedom of religion or belief and access to justice. It intersects with gender, socio-economic status, religion and other protected grounds to deepen exclusion. A cross-cutting caste perspective would allow Norway to pursue a more concentrated development policy, ensuring that it reaches those furthest behind. Dalit-led organisations are important partners in this effort, strengthening rights, participation and accountability.

Job creation, decent work and responsible business conduct

The emerging emphasis on job creation strengthens the case for caste-responsive development. Minister Aukrust has identified job creation as a central objective for Norway's future development policy. In caste-affected societies, however, access to work, especially decent work, is not equal. Caste shapes what kinds of occupation are available, health and safety conditions, wages and possibilities of advancement. Dalits and other subjugated castes are disproportionately represented in the lowest-paid, exploitative and [most dangerous work](#). This kind of discrimination is especially widespread in the informal sector, especially in [sanitation](#), agriculture, textiles and garments, leather, stone, [sanitation](#) - generally any professions involving contact with so called 'unclean materials'. Norwegian investments should therefore consider who gains access to new employment opportunities and whether they challenge or reinforce caste-based segregation and discrimination.

Norwegian support for job creation and private sector development should promote decent work and ensure that businesses identify caste-related risks in their risk based due diligence, engage meaningfully with affected communities and provide remediation where abuses occur. Integrating caste in this way would support the implementation of Norway's Transparency Act, the UN [Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#), the [OECD Guidelines](#) for Multinational Enterprises on Responsible Business Conduct and ILO standards. IDSN's [Caste in Global Supply Chains](#) provides practical tools for identifying and preventing caste-based discrimination and exploitation in operations and supply chains. Economic growth and job creation should reduce rather than reinforce structural discrimination.

Recommendations

1. Commit Norway to a caste-responsive approach by integrating a caste lens into the cross-cutting work of all development aid to reduce global inequalities.
2. Identify caste as structural barriers to equality, poverty reduction, democracy and sustainable development, and include them within Norway's leave-no-one-behind approach.
3. Use Norway's core support and governance roles in the UN, development banks and global funds to promote application of the [UN Guidance Tool](#), meaningful participation, safeguards, disaggregated data and accountability for caste-affected communities.
4. Issue guidance for Norwegian companies, embassies and public financing institutions on caste-responsive human rights due diligence; promote [Caste in Global Supply Chains](#) and the [Ambedkar Principles](#); and require meaningful engagement with Dalit workers, unions and civil society.

Conclusion

A more focused Norwegian development policy should not become less attentive to structural discrimination. Concentration has the greatest legitimacy and effect when it directs resources and political attention towards people whom institutions and markets systematically exclude. By addressing caste explicitly, Norway can make its existing priorities on responsible business conduct, human rights, equality, democracy, gender justice and decent work more effective and coherent. In order to create more decent jobs, the Vendepunkt White Paper should commit Norway to integrating a caste-responsive approach, developed and implemented with Dalit-led organisations.

Signatories

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