

## Millennium Development Goals (07-07-2007): Half Way Through?

Friday, 06 July 2007

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July 07, 2007 is being observed all over the world by civil society organizations and other local campaigns as mid point for reminding Governments about the commitments they have made towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). At the Millennium Summit in 2000, 189 heads of State and Governments made a commitment to make a safer, more prosperous and equitable world for all by 2015. Eight MDGs were adopted which promised to tackle the grinding poverty, to provide better and accessible basic services like health, education and other essential needs with a view to wipe out poverty, hunger, malnutrition, illiteracy, gender inequality, child mortality, maternal deaths, HIV/AIDS, environmental degradation and also to work towards a global partnership for development by the year 2015.

Now we have reached half way through and the fanfare with which it started in the year 2000 is slowly and gradually fading out. There are missing links in the proclaimed commitments by the Governments in many parts of the world. The institutional and the financial arrangements that are required to meet such important tasks somehow lack the zeal and enthusiasm that could push ahead the process for meeting these challenges.

The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP)'s latest report released on July 2, 2007 on its assessment of the performance on MDGs by the Governments in Asia Pacific has observed rising inequality and a widening economic disparity in the region despite a huge drop in poverty. It is heartening to know that proportion of people living in extreme poverty has come down to 9.9 percent and 6.8 percent in Eastern Asia and South-Eastern Asia respectively by the year 2004. This is certainly an uneven trajectory that is the hallmark of Asia in terms of meeting the MDGs. It is corroborated further by the fact that the benefits of the economic growth are not being shared equally across different parts of the continent since in Southern Asia around 30 percent of people still live on a dollar a day. At the same time it is noted that the positive trend in poverty reduction in certain parts of Asia is accompanied by rapidly rising inequality within countries. There are bigger challenges to be met in other areas too - such as health, environmental sustainability and gender equality. These also include deforestation, unplanned urbanization and the high rate of HIV/AIDS infection in some parts of the region.

Universal primary education has been showing marked improvements but high drop-out rates are a growing concern. Access to education for children from the low income and socially marginalized communities (Dalits, Indigenous and others) still remains a big challenge. It is no wonder that Southern Asia has one of the highest proportions of children (26 percent, or 42 million) who are out of school. Enhanced budgetary allocation and quality education to all without any kinds of discrimination are called for to meet the challenge in education sector.

Southern and Southern-East Asia still accounts for malnutrition with 46 and 28 percent respectively for children under the age of five. The goal of promoting gender equality and empowerment still remains a grim reality to the extent that large numbers of women are still shut out of jobs and receive poor health care. Southern Asia also shares along with Sub-Saharan Africa the dubious distinction of having the highest number of maternal deaths. Effective participation of women and other vulnerable groups like the Dalits (in Southern Asia), indigenous people in the decision making process and governance has not been realized to a greater extent. The discourse on development does not have social equity focus and these marginalized groups have been completely kept out of the MDG process and even the SAARC Development Goals (SDGs). The required political will and the commitment to initiate socio-economic transformation is still somehow missing.

The progress in meeting most of MDGs is unacceptably slow. It goes without much of a saying that a rights based approach, a system of good governance and an effective delivery system should be accorded utmost priority as most of the countries in the region are found wanting on these score. The growing defence budget in most of the countries in the region also leaves little to address socio-economic disparities. The growing number of trafficking in women and girl child, existence of bonded labour, prevalence of untouchability and atrocities against Dalits, lack of social security in the unorganized sector and lack of proportionate representation of different disadvantaged communities in the power structure, civil war like situation and growing sectarian violence have altogether put this region in a bad light.

Most of the countries in the region have been found to be lacking in commitment and accountability regarding the different indicators as far as meeting the MDGs are concerned. It is high time that greater involvement on the part of civil society organizations was encouraged for the achievement of the task of ensuring a prosperous and an equitable socio-economic and political order in Asia. High GDP growth rate does not necessarily reflect equitable distribution of resources and the fruits of growth. That is why an equitable development paradigm should be given utmost priority while addressing MDGs and other needs for lessening the growing inequality.