

Reduce inequality for meaningful development

Nisha Agrawal

In 2000, the world adopted the United Nations Millennium Declaration, setting out a series of time-bound targets — with 2015 as the deadline — that are known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The eight MDGs range from halving extreme poverty to halting the spread of HIV/AIDS and providing universal primary education.

On Wednesday, at a special session at the United Nations, leaders agreed to scale up action against extreme poverty, hunger and disease and called for a summit to adopt the next set of post-2015 goals that will balance the three elements of sustainable development: providing economic transformation and opportunity to lift people out of poverty, advancing social justice and protecting the environment.

After 13 years, India has made progress but has not achieved the MDGs: according

to the government's *Statistical Handbook of India 2013*, the poverty ratio is likely to be 26.7% by 2015 as against the target of 23.9%, while infant mortality rate (IMR) would be 43 per 1,000 live births as against the target of 27. The child mortality rate would be at 52 per 1,000 live births compared to the target of 42. Similarly, the maternal mortality rate (MMR) would come down to 139 per 1 lakh births by 2015 from 437 in 1990. The nation is expected to reduce MMR by three quarters between 1990 and 2015 to 109 per 1 lakh births.

While the country seems to have made progress on the MDGs, certain socio-economic groups continue to lag behind. Among Dalits, Muslims and tribals, poverty rates range between 30% and 33%, and the gap between these groups and the national average is increasing.

The reduction in poverty incidence has been slowest in the growth centres, the cities: annual reduction has been 2.3% in cities

against 2.5% in rural areas between 1993 and 2010. This paradox highlights some of the systemic factors that skew the country's development benefits towards relatively more privileged groups. A plan for reducing inequality was a major omission in the original list of MDGs. Without targeted efforts to reduce gaps between the rich and poor, the next set of global development goals cannot be met. So, 'inequality' must be included in a future framework for development. High levels of inequality are not just morally objectionable, they are also damaging for social stability and growth.

Instead of under-investing in human development, the Indian government needs to provide sufficient resources to make the MDGs a success. To achieve this, it needs to raise additional revenue and introduce innovative financing mechanisms like a financial transactions tax.

*Nisha Agrawal is CEO, Oxfam India
The views expressed by the author are personal*