

CIVIL SOCIETY AND MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

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Context of South Asia:

The people of Nepal have proven that they can change their traditional way of thinking and the old autocratic structure. Though difficult, old norms, values and practices can be changed with persuasion, perseverance patient and above all commitment. Today, the people of South Asia, comprising two third of the global poor are struggling in a world of political corruption, criminalization, conflict, militarization and poverty, despite the presence of world's largest democracies in the region.

The problem of poverty is further aggravated by various other social deprivations and discriminations as well as by outlying and remote locations, inaccessible to free social services. The structural adjustment policies of the current open economy – industrialization strategy, are likely to further burden the poor.

Economically, South Asian countries are becoming increasingly dependent on the global market. Secondly, international politico-economic processes, corrupt political leadership, inefficient state institutions and growing militarization are effecting regional development. Thirdly, decisions are not based on socio cultural and geo political conditions. Fourthly, local communities are gradually losing their significance as they are drawn into the 'modernization projects' of the government. Fifthly, high-powered groups continue to enjoy their high positions. Finally, the small increment in literacy, income and participation has not generally changed the conditions of women.

Instead of scaling the citizen's security by realizing their creative potential the governments in South Asia have pursued through increasingly destructive military apparatuses for national security. For example South Asia currently spends US\$15 billion annually on the military.

Despite years of economic development there is increasing hunger, illiteracy and preventable diseases. Children who embody the future of the region are in a far worse condition. The region is witnessing a massacre of the innocent. Still, South Asian governments continue to waste resources on weapons of mass destruction.

Civil Society Organization is build to the arena of uncoerced action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors, and institutional forums, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often populated by organizations such as registered charities, development non –governmental organizations, community groups, women's organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, trade unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy groups.

Achieving the Millennium Development Goals within a Human Rights Framework:

The international community brought a different, a more hopeful, universal vision to the challenges of the 21st century at the UN General Assembly in September 2000. They articulated a global consensus in the Millennium Declaration focusing on global justice through commitment to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals by 2015. For all donors, these Goals were to become the defining paradigm of international cooperation for the next 8 years. The MDGs place an unequivocal responsibility on all development actors – official donors, multilateral institutions, civil society organisations (CSOs) and the private sector – to contribute to their realisation.

The imperatives to act, and the costs of inaction, are morally shocking. One third of all human deaths – some 18 million people a year or 50,000 daily – are due to poverty-related causes (such as starvation, diarrhoea, pneumonia, tuberculosis, measles, HIV / AIDS, malaria, prenatal and maternal conditions). This death toll since the end of the Cold War in 1990 is about 270 million people, a majority of them being women and children, roughly the population of the United States. The UNDP's 2003 Human Development Report has demonstrated that the era of globalisation has accompanied such levels of poverty with a widening

inequality gap, where the richest 5% of the world's people receive 114 times the income of the poorest 5%. Nearly half the world's population (2.7 billion) with 1.9 billion in Asia / Pacific lives on less than US\$ 2 a day and command a mere 1.25% of the world's global social produce, while a third as many people in rich countries command 64 times the income and 81% of the global social product.

The South Asian region with a population of 1.35 billion out of the total world population of 5.68 billion has the highest incidence of poverty not only in terms of absolute numbers but also as a percentage of the population, compared to any other regional group of countries in the world. Thus, in South Asia, as much as 43 percent of the population lives in absolute poverty, compared to 14 percent in East Asia (excluding China), 24 percent in Latin America and 39 percent in sub-Saharan Africa. That places the number of poor, according to these estimates, between 330 million to 440 million, more likely on the higher side. If it is taken at 40%, then nearly 360 million poor would have been living in the rural areas and 80 million in the urban areas. Urban poverty is, to a considerable extent, a spillover of rural poverty. Governments in South Asia at the same time have primarily pursued national security through increasingly destructive military apparatuses, rather than seek citizen's security through actualizing their creative potential. For example South Asia currently spends US\$15 billion annually on the military snatching the poverty reduction budget.

The eight MDGs are clear and committed benchmarks for donor and developing country governments. Yet they are also exceptionally modest in their reach. For example, the first goal to reduce the proportion of people living on less than US\$1 a day by 2015, if it is achieved, will still leave an estimated 900 million people in absolute poverty. Eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005, and at all levels by 2015 projects only a dream which cannot be easily attained. Goals to reduce by half the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water or achieving significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers, by 2020 is far from reality.

Now adopted by the UN General Assembly, the Goals they were proposed and passed in 1996 by developed country aid ministers operating within the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC). Many civil society commentators at the time were highly critical of donor ministers who thereby avoided commitments to, and drew attention away from the critical structural issues for global economic justice. Among these were debt cancellation, fair trade and equitable participation in global institutions, which had been raised repeatedly in the 1990s' global UN conferences by both developing country governments and many participating CSOs.

In spite of coordinated campaigns by the UNDP and some CSOs, ordinary citizens have little sense of ownership of the MDGs. Indeed, the Goals are silent in basic issues of citizens' rights, empowerment and improved equality, and thus ignore the politics inherent for their achievement in many countries. Even the World Bank recognises, at least intellectually that empowerment and equality are essential social conditions for overcoming poverty.

CSOs are concerned about an overt shift to a new agenda that conflates the combating of terrorism and combating of poverty, as if they were the same thing. Indeed, the US, in its war against terrorism in Iraq and Afghanistan, has spent billions that could, surely, have been put to better and more productive use.

The obligation to respect, protect and fulfil human rights rests with the State. There is little doubt that the objective of governance in developing countries is to empower citizens living in poverty. In practice, however, donors and governments alike have focused largely on the technical management of government resources and effective implementation of macroeconomic and anti poverty policies.

Challenges and Opportunities for Poverty Reduction:

Various sectoral interventions such as Women's Empowerment, Food Security, Effective Service Delivery, Reducing the Digital Divide, Resource Management etc. undertaken by the states and CSOs, claim to support the MDG goals. However, ending poverty is inherently a political process, specific to local economic, social, cultural, ecological and gender equality. As the work of Amartya Sen demonstrates, people-centred development for poverty eradication is ultimately about recognising the rights of the vulnerable and transforming the power relations and cultural and social interests, that sustain inequality. Development is therefore a political process that engages people, particularly people who are poor and powerless, in negotiating with each other, with their governments, and with the world community for

policies and rights that advance their livelihood and secure their future in their world. But the focus of discussions on governance in the developing countries has been on procedures and has ignored political and economic forces, both internal and external.

People in poverty are not subjects to be acted upon by 'development' but rather central actors in sometimes conflict politics seeking pro-poor development strategies. Consequently, finding avenues to address unequal power, capacity, and access to resources for whom rights are beyond reach – due to poverty and marginalisation – is a fundamental challenge to development actors wanting to link poverty reduction to democratic governance and participation. The UN system, the Charter, and its various Declarations and Covenants on Human Rights, provide a normative framework within which these issues can be addressed.

Based on international legal codes and covenants, the rights framework is a dynamic one that continues to evolve through intense national and multilateral political processes. It has been the result of many decades of struggles by peoples' organisations – women's movements, indigenous nations, gay and lesbian networks, workers and labour organisation, fishers' and farmers' organisations and human rights defenders. Human rights are essentially active and should not merely be 'promoted' or 'protected', but must be practiced and experienced. They have implications for the actions of all donors, governments, and non-state actors in development. The challenge for development practitioners, the civil society and official aid agencies alike, is to make the language and analysis of rights accessible to citizens and organisations working to overcome the conditions of poverty.

In this context, the MDGs are one expression of economic, social and cultural rights, which all governments are bound and accountable to. Achieving these goals would be a positive though insufficient step towards the eradication of poverty. The MDGs are minimal but very useful targets, which can serve as a political framework for leveraging political commitment to poverty-focused development. Some NGOs focus on the MDGs in their advocacy for accountability with their governments and multilateral institutions, with strong support from the UNDP. Others, understanding the importance of a holistic approach to poverty, point to the limitations noted above. But the MDGs can only be achieved within a rights framework whereby citizens and governments are engaged in restructuring global and national power relations in order to transform the root causes of poverty. Hence democratic governance and citizens' rights at all levels, with full local ownership of development initiatives, are fundamental.

The decision making processes at the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the WTO must be reformed and democratized and brought within a new framework led by the United Nations. The renewed partnership and spirit of the Monterrey Consensus included a commitment to 'broadening and strengthening of participation of developing countries with economies in transition in international economic decision-making and norm-setting'. The Civil Society has long challenged the legitimacy of the International Financing Institutes (IFIs) in terms of their impact on governance and democratic accountability in the poorest developing countries.

CSOs, monitoring the impact of the WTO on development options for poverty reduction in developing countries, also seek to bring current rounds of global trade and investment negotiations at the WTO and in regional forums within the overarching normative framework of the UN system. The WTO processes have been characterised as secretive and opaque in which developing countries, particularly the poorest, have little opportunity to influence outcomes. In recent years, leading members of the WTO have organised highly undemocratic Mini-Ministerials, by invitation only, to 'advance' the negotiating agenda. In the words of a global coalition of CSOs involved in WTO issues, 'the lack of internal transparency, participation and democracy is appalling in such an important organisation whose decisions and actions have such far reaching effects on the lives of billions of people'.

The civil society joining with donors and developing country governments insists that aid must focus on effective strategies to address poverty. However, authentic ownership of such national poverty strategies, depends on the quality of national efforts to consult those most affected, often with very little capacities to participate, and to reach often difficult social consensus on appropriate poverty reduction goals and socio-economic policy.

Humility is a critical ingredient on the part of donors, the civil society and governments, to ensure structural reforms and gender equality. Well targeted and effective country designed poverty reduction strategies will

require a diversity of approaches and policy mixes that may often challenge the policy prescriptions emanating from the Bank and Fund that currently seem to define the overarching contents of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) of the World Bank.

It is suggested that the poor will better be served by "breaking up the aid industry monopoly practices and, above all, by closing of gaps between citizens at the receiving end and those who take aid decisions on their behalf. Donors must stop dictating what they think the Least Development Countries (LDCs) must do. They must instead support national political processes for determining appropriate strategies in relation to local economic, social, cultural, ecological and gender equality circumstances for poverty reduction.

A rights based approach puts people, particularly those living in poverty, the vulnerable and the marginalized, at the centre of local and national political processes. A few donors, such as DFID in the UK, have set out " a rights based approach" to the development and achievement of the MDGs, which includes "incorporating the empowerment of poor people". What are the realities of these donors' commitments and practices towards meeting the MDGs? What are the implications of these practices for more effective delivery for improved governance and citizens' rights in the recipient countries? What are the perceptions, perspectives and approach of the people to eradicated poverty? How do the poor define poverty and ways to deal with these issues?

Effective strategies for official bilateral aid that focus exclusively on ending global poverty, and achieving the targets contained in the MDGs, must be grounded in a rights framework. Ownership is not an absolute condition, but rather a definition of relationship and the power and influence of different stakeholders to negotiate the content of this relationship. Local ownership cannot be understood without understanding gender equality or inclusive participation. Do women, *dalits*, tribal ethnic and minority communities have equal access to the society's resources and power? What are the options and opportunities to determine their lives provided to them? Donors and governments have to move beyond the rhetorical respect for local ownership with real change, evidenced in institutional practice and donor commitments to expanding the resource base for international cooptation.

Similarly, the path to successfully achieving the MDGs is to determine the right strategies, tools, process and mechanism. Goal 8 includes a target to make available the benefits of ICTs to all the world's inhabitants. As well this commitment, ICT can play a major role in achieving most of other goals. For example Micro Finance Institutions (MFIs) claim to help change the size of landholding, change household asset accumulation and food sufficiency, increase the self-confidence of women, increase women's status in the family, access health services, improve health outcomes including HIV/AIDS and give safe birth. It thus increases incomes and assets, decreases vulnerability, provides better nutrition, reduces child mortality and provides employment alternative. Whereas ICT claims to increase access to market information and lower transaction cost for poor farmers and traders, influence public opinion on gender equality, enhance delivery of basic medical services, increase information sharing on diseases and famine, increase effective resource management through remote sensing technologies and communication networks, create service sector job opportunities, promote digital literacy and create a critical mass of knowledge workers with the use of open knowledge and open content.

A number of critical factors determine the local politics of development for poverty reduction – the resource availability to local government, the parallel role of traditional/ local power structure in communities, the influence of local CSOs and community associations, open avenue for participation by those living in poverty and vulnerable in decisions that affect their lives. However, many donors conflate these issues within simplistic notions of decentralization and deal exclusively with administrative capacity, budgetary and corruption issues associated with program delivery, while strongly encouraging private/ local government partnerships to overcome capacity problems. They seldom engage local communities, who require substantial roles and support in the planning and delivery processes, through the appropriate use of ICTs .

There is a great deal of evidence that donors have compromised human rights in their 'war on terrorism' in countries such as Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Nepal has also followed with arms import for human security to deal with the Maoists insurgency in the name of 'war on terrorism'.

The MDGs are an expansion of commitment to economic, social and cultural rights and define a set of steps to enable those rights to be realised. If MDGs are to contribute to the international goal of poverty eradication, efforts to achieve them must be founded on strategies that empower and recognise the rights of all people, including all the poor no matter where they live despite their caste, class, religion and gender. With growing modernization, the effective utilization of ICTs alone the results of poverty can not be minimized. Aid must be treated as money held in trust for people in poverty. Current attempts to divert resources for poverty reduction to pay for donors' security interests are the most serious expression of the endemic problems of aid resource being hijacked to fund rich country priority. The people of this region has the right to choose what is poverty and the problems, concern and issues pertaining to these and how they want to tackle the issues of poverty. MDGs therefore must make provisions for poor to have control over resources and decision making processes, if it wants to ensure the effective results of MDGs.

CSOs have a critical role to monitor the progress of MDGs. It has to watch for the effective implementation of the targeted programs implemented by various stakeholders. CSOs need to critically analyse the gaps to suggest for positive actions towards mitigating the gaps especially knowledge gaps. Causes of slow and ineffective progress have to be addressed by providing the justifiable actions. Wherever possible CSOs should act as watch dog to keep an eye on how the state actors and non state actors are working. With the appropriate advocacy measures it should influence the governments to adopt and adapt policies and actions to speed up the process of complete the target set up by MDGs.

Thank you