
Book Review

The Chronic Poverty Report 2008–09, Chronic Poverty Research Centre 2008

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The timing of this report could not be better. As we review the progress of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and chart the course for the second half of the time frame to halve poverty and end extreme poverty by 2015, we need to focus on those people whose lives have not been touched by the progress made to date.

There is a huge amount of misinformation on MDG performance at the mid-point. This problem has been partly created by all of us portraying the MDGs as some kind of global master plan, progress against which is to be measured through global aggregates. Hence on the one hand, we hear that the world is on track to achieving Goal 1 on poverty, yet we know that this is quite misleading because of the degree to which China and partly India skew this result. On the other hand, we are told that Africa is lagging behind on all the Goals and that it will take 150 years before Africa can achieve the Goals. I was in Zambia recently and the country is on track to achieving six of the seven Goals, with the exception of the environment Goal. The fact of the matter is that almost every country in the world, including Africa, has made very important progress on the Goals over the last 8 years. In fact, at least 15 of the poorest countries in Africa including Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, Rwanda, Mozambique, Ethiopia, Zambia, Ghana, Malawi, Mali, Burkina Faso and Senegal are on track to achieving many of the Goals. Not all of them are on track to achieving all the Goals, but my point is that these are not stray cases. The more important question for us to ask at this stage is why these countries have registered better performance compared to others and what the learnings are for the second half.

While celebrating the important and fairly widespread success that we have seen, the direction of change is right in most countries but the pace continues to be unacceptably slow and progress is very uneven. What the Chronic Poverty Report does is specifically draw attention to those citizens who are stuck in poverty and for whom the progress towards the MDGs has so far had very little impact. These are the people who are being left behind even as we see progress at the macro level and we need to be asking the question: why is the rising tide not lifting their boat?

Unlike Collier's *Bottom Billion*, this Report starts with identifying the poorest people rather than countries. The telescope is inverted as we look outwards from the lens of poor people. Right down to the household and even individual. It is at the next stage these people are located in geographies, which is done in more depth, through four country categories (chronically deprived countries; partially chronically deprived countries; partial consistent improvers and consistent improvers) – in my view, a far more realistic view and certainly a far more helpful approach from a policy perspective.

The issue of inequality, which the Report looks at, is indeed a massive challenge facing us as we look at MDG performance as well. Brazil is one of the most unequal countries in the world and is, by official records, on track to achieving all the MDGs, except the sanitation one. However, by 2015 out of the 180 million people in Brazil, how many million will have achieved the Goals? And what of the millions of people in the poorest states, indigenous people, Afro-Brazilians and women who will have been left out? If you

go back to the Millennium Declaration, the MDGs are clearly defined as human rights – equal and non-discriminatory, rights that belong to one and all. If the tens of millions of chronically poor Brazilians don't achieve the MDGs, what was the point of the MDGs in the first place? I also like referring to Brazil because it offers us hope. It is one of the few countries where determined state action has started to reverse the inequality trend, reminding us once again that even against the most challenging odds, change is possible.

The Report has very practical recommendations on how to address this challenge – focusing on delivering political commitments and resource allocation.

Historical factors that cause inequality, in my view continue to be perpetuated by three interrelated factors: (i) the policy and budgetary choices governments make including the growth model, (ii) societal choices leading to discrimination and exclusion of social groups based on religion, region, caste, gender and so on and (iii) the behaviour and practice of governance institutions.

We know that the political contract between state and citizens, particularly the poor, has broken or in many places simply did not exist. Why democracies do not deliver for poor people must be the central question of our times. And here the Report moves into choppy waters suggesting that less democratic regimes like Vietnam and Ethiopia have had

more success at dealing with chronic poverty. But that effectively challenges the very basis of the indivisibility of human rights. The subject, I am sure, for future Chronic Poverty Reports.

For now, distilling the key policy-practice recommendations from this report and more importantly setting the agenda for the second half of the MDG period is a key task facing all of us collectively. These policy recommendations are: social protection, public service provision, anti-discrimination and gender empowerment, asset building for individuals and collectives, strategic urbanization and migration.

In conclusion, let us not forget that unless our political leaders feel that their inaction has political consequences, not much will change. Just as campaigns and political mobilization without good policy analysis is unproductive, having great policy clarity without applying political pressure will also be futile. The policy recommendations contained in the Chronic Poverty Report need to be promoted and championed to political leaders in order to ensure that they are translated into practical action on the ground.

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