

Information note:

Human Rights – Foundation for engagement to achieve the MDGs

Governments that pursue development hand-in-hand with human rights stand a better chance of reaching the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

By incorporating human rights principles into national development strategies and fulfilling their human rights obligations, governments are more likely to be successful in meeting the MDGs (to reduce poverty, hunger and disease and promote gender equality, education, environmental sustainability and global partnerships) and in realizing the UN Charter's vision of a more equal and just world.

Human rights and development policies are mutually reinforcing. They use different yet complementary tools and strategies for achieving the same objective: improving human wellbeing. But while development strategies prioritize economic growth, human rights establish universally accepted legal guarantees to protect the freedom and equality of all individuals. Human rights standards and obligations put the State at the service of the people to ensure that everyone benefits from growth and enjoys a life with dignity.

At a UN Summit meeting of world leaders, to be held in New York in September 2010, States will be asked to make a renewed commitment to reach these Goals in the next five years. The "action agenda" they agree on at this meeting will be crucial in determining whether or not the MDGs become reality by the 2015 target date.

The UN Secretary-General points out in his report for the September meeting, "Keeping the Promise", that accelerated progress towards achieving the MDGs can be accomplished by adhering to the standards contained in international human rights instruments. These norms and values "provide the foundation for engagement, in particular the key human rights principles of non-discrimination, meaningful participation and accountability."

These principles should drive national and international development efforts. But just as the MDGs cannot be successfully attained in isolation from each other, so too these human rights principles are complementary and must be pursued together. Applying just one principle will not do the job.

Development is more likely to be successful if everyone affected is included in the process. The involvement of individuals and communities enables them to have a say and allows the government to better understand their real needs. As a result, policies will be more responsive to the people and thus governments will be more accountable. In order to ensure that everyone benefits from development, governments must combat discrimination that marginalizes some groups and ensure their active and meaningful participation.

Non-discrimination

Development typically fails when its benefits do not reach groups of people who are systematically disempowered, discriminated against, excluded and/or suffer multiple human rights deprivation. Even in countries where economic growth has lifted some people out of poverty, large inequalities still persist, with millions of people left behind in the process towards achieving the MDGs.

- Governments must take proactive measures to counter discrimination and remove obstacles that prevent the poorest and most marginalized people from accessing basic services, information and remedies.

- Disaggregating global average MDG targets and indicators can help better identify the situation of such groups and enable governments to design appropriate national policies and target budgets accordingly. Without suitable data, such groups remain invisible without priority attention and resources, thus widening the inequality gap.

Participation

The human rights principle of participation can ensure that the people for whom the MDGs are designed become agents of change to take ownership of their development rather than being mere recipients. While having the formal 'space' for participation is a fundamental pre-requisite, it is not enough.

- Governments must remove laws and regulations and change discriminatory attitudes that prevent people from participating.
- Pertinent information should be made available and easily accessible.
- To enable participation, public policies should promote education, access to justice as well as freedom of association and expression.

Accountability

The current MDG accountability system will need to be further strengthened to achieve the MDGs by 2015. Human rights offer a framework for strengthened accountability by clarifying the duties and responsibilities of developing states, donor states and non-state actors. This would also ensure more transparency and commitment in national and international efforts. Development strategies should link human rights and MDG accountability systems:

- At the national level, for example, human rights institutions and non-governmental stakeholders could be involved in monitoring and evaluating strategies to reach the MDG targets.
- At the international level, the Universal Periodic Review and Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council, as well as treaty monitoring bodies, can review national efforts to achieve the MDGs. This can help governments translate their commitments and obligations into concrete action through more operational guidance and better documentation of "best practices" in integrating human rights in development work.

Meeting the MDGs will also require strengthened international cooperation, which is a human rights obligation of all States as clearly spelled out in the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights instruments.

"A denial of rights engenders or perpetuates dire conditions of exclusion and want, including poverty. In turn, poverty undermines basic human rights, such as access to food, to shelter, and to education. It entrenches discrimination and marginalization and makes it difficult for victims to obtain justice and remedies when their rights are violated. In sum, poverty, discrimination and marginalization are both causes and effects of violations of economic, social, cultural, political and civil rights," the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, told the Human Rights Council in June. "As we prepare for the MDG Summit and review progress towards the achievement of the MDGs, I urge all States to keep the full realization of human rights, including the right to development, at the forefront of their action and progress."

Further information is available at: <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/millennium-development/index.htm>

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