

G20

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A new way forward

Time for equity and justice



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Around the world, many people are articulating their disappointment with leaders and with governance and economic systems. A sense of disillusionment, anger, and helplessness has prompted uprisings and/or protests from Wall Street to the Middle East.

The issues being raised are not new. We live in a very unequal world. Despite tremendous progress in many respects, extreme poverty persists. Estimates of global income inequality reveal that, as of 2007, the wealthiest 20 per cent of humankind enjoyed almost 83 per cent of total global income, while the poorest 20 per cent had just a single percentage point of that income. At the current rate of improvement, it would take the poorest one billion people more than 800 years to access 10 per cent of global income (Ortiz & Cummins, 2011).

The sheer magnitude of current inequalities serves as a call to action for a revised development framework that puts tackling poverty and promoting equity and social justice at its centre.

A social justice agenda for development

Over a decade ago, 189 world leaders signed the Millennium Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)

were launched. The Millennium Declaration was based on a set of fundamental values which included a firm commitment to social justice as the guiding principle for development efforts.

Over more than 10 years of work to advance the MDGs, we have witnessed the power that they have had in mobilising the international community, national governments and civil society towards a common end. But 10 years of implementation has also shown us that, despite numerous gains, progress has been uneven – and, indeed, characterised by deep disparities between different social groups.

Intersecting Inequalities and Social Exclusion

Evidence from a recent global study produced by the MDG Achievement Fund (MDG-F) and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), shows that in almost every society, in every region of the world, both rich and poor, there are certain groups of people who face systematic social exclusion as the result of the intersecting inequalities that characterise their lives. These include:

- Cultural inequalities: forms of discrimination and devaluation that treat members of these groups as somehow inferior to others;
- Political inequalities: the denial of voice and influence in the decisions which affect their lives and their communities;
- Spatial inequalities: such groups frequently live in places that make them harder to reach or easier to ignore;
- Economic inequalities: they are at the receiving end of an unfair distribution of assets and opportunities.

Each of these inequalities is a source of injustice in and of itself, but it is their interaction which explains the persistence of social exclusion over time, and its resistance to 'business-as-usual' approaches to development. Caste, race, ethnicity, language, and religion are among the most common markers

Indigenous communities from the Colombian Pacific Coast organise to discuss community nutrition, food security and health. Isolation and the countries' ongoing conflict has exacerbated already vulnerable conditions



Health volunteers and district nurses work together to reach women living in the remote villages of Tigray, Ethiopia in order to monitor child health



of exclusion. As elsewhere in society, gender cuts across all these, so that women and girls from marginalised groups generally fare worse than men and boys.

This story of inequality and social exclusion matters. It matters because inequality undermines progress on the MDGs and other development goals. It matters because it slows down the rate at which a given level of economic growth translates into poverty reduction. At the level of everyday life, inequality undermines people's sense of self-worth and agency, and can be associated with despair, depression, substance abuse, and criminal activity.

Inequality and social exclusion do not occur by chance. They are the outcome of policies and practices. This means that they are not immutable and are susceptible to change. Fora such as the G20 and other global spaces can be vehicles for putting forth alternatives.

Policies options and a macro-enabling environment

Change could include :

- Matching the drive for economic growth with an even stronger drive for equity: redistributive fiscal policies, reformed taxation systems and more investment in those currently left behind helps;
- Strengthening the resource base of marginalised groups through land reform and land-titling, asset transfers, and inclusive financial systems;
- Investing in broad-based, employment-centered economic growth;
- Investing in infrastructure and area-based development to improve connections between marginalised groups and the rest of society;
- Improving the outreach and quality of basic social services, and ensuring that they are relevant to citizens;
- Comprehensive social-protection measures to sustain basic living standards;

- Comprehensive collection and dissemination of information. The level of disaggregation of the information base from which we plan and measure progress on development has equity implications;
- Legislating against discrimination and taking other measures, such as affirmative action;
- Investing in developing participatory monitoring tools that encourage greater government accountability;
- Enabling excluded groups to organise and unite around and participate in the collective decisions that affect their lives;
- Focusing on transformative approaches that address the root causes of inequality;
- Strengthening formal and grassroots democratic processes, and committing to greater international solidarity and the promotion of inclusive spaces for global policy debate.

This may be an ambitious agenda which is easy to articulate and hard to implement, but in the words of the late Sergio de Mello, "If we don't aim for the seemingly impossible, we will risk settling for mediocrity".

The MDG Achievement Fund is a joint United Nations initiative which supports national efforts to eradicate poverty and inequality.



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