

Poverty, Social Exclusion and the MDGs: The Challenge of 'Durable Inequalities' in the Asia Context

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Summary

Introduction

Economic growth and poverty reduction have occurred unevenly across, and even within, Asian countries. This paper focuses on the chronic nature of poverty, and explores why social exclusion makes it more difficult for some sections of the poor to take advantage of the opportunities generated by economic growth. Social exclusion therefore presents a particular challenge to achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in Asia.

Main findings

This paper provides evidence that a person's social identity (e.g. caste, religion or ethnic group) can make them chronically poor – poorer than others, or poorer for longer periods of time. So too can belonging to a group that faces discrimination (such as people with HIV/AIDS, or people with disabilities). There are also gender and spatial dimensions to poverty that overlap with economic deprivation and identity-based discrimination.

Poverty is usually measured according to level of income or ownership of assets, and there is a proven link between low income and unfavourable life chances. But there is also considerable overlap between income poverty and social exclusion, spatial disadvantage and the shortfalls in human development indicators embodied in the MDGs. Social exclusion can be viewed in terms of 'clustered inequalities' rather than the one-dimensional inequality captured by income distributions.

Key research findings

Progress has already been made in reducing poverty in the region. But the multiple and overlapping nature of disadvantage represented by social exclusion implies a multi-pronged strategy to overcome it. Integral to achieving the MDGs, this would entail measures to:

- challenge the cultural norms and values that underpin discrimination, utilising the media, education systems and public campaigns
- amend legal frameworks to ensure that discrimination on the grounds of race, ethnicity, disability, gender or age is rendered unacceptable
- specifically target the children of excluded groups in an attempt to break the inter-generational transmission of poverty
- change the attitudes of those responsible for policy delivery and create mechanisms that allow those who have a stake in the success of these efforts to participate in their design
- promote civil society networks that help mobilise socially excluded groups to voice their needs and influence decision-making processes.

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