

# Module 1 Unit 2

This is a **REQUIRED READING**.

Kabeer, N. (2010). Can the MDGs provide a pathway to social justice?  
The challenges of intersecting inequalities. Brighton: IDS. [5 p.]



# Can the MDGs provide a pathway to social justice? The challenge of intersecting inequalities

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# Executive summary

**A**t the start of the 21st century, 189 world leaders signed the Millennium Declaration and pledged to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – a set of eight benchmarks to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, achieve universal primary education, promote gender equality and empower women, reduce child mortality, improve maternal health, combat major diseases, ensure environmental sustainability and develop a global partnership for development by the year 2015. This commitment provided a ringing call to action to the international community to concentrate efforts on freeing men, women and children from the abject and dehumanising condition of poverty. The Declaration was based on a set of fundamental values that included **freedom, equality, tolerance and solidarity**, which together spell out a firm commitment to social justice as the guiding spirit of all efforts.

Unfortunately, the social justice agenda was lost in the process by which the Declaration was translated into an agenda for action centred on the eight MDGs and their targets and indicators to monitor progress. While the MDGs acknowledge the multiple dimensions of poverty, they pay very little attention to inequality or social injustice. They are largely formulated in terms which measure ‘average’ progress in relation to the goals. While these measures capture overall progress at global or national level, they do not indicate whether such progress has been broad-based or equitable.

**The persistence of intersecting inequalities undermines progress on the MDGs and betrays the promise of social justice contained in the Millennium Declaration**

The starting point for this report is that inequalities matter for the achievement of the MDGs. Inequalities matter at the macroeconomic level because they slow down the pace at which a given rate of growth translates into poverty reduction. They also matter for society at large because they generate high levels of social tensions, crime and conflict, with adverse effects for human wellbeing and progress. In addition, inequalities ensure that the poorer sections of the world’s population are generally bypassed by ‘average’ rates of progress on the MDGs.

This report argues that it is the socially excluded sections of the poor who are systematically left out or left behind from their countries’ progress. Their excluded status is the product of multiple and intersecting inequalities. Along with the economic deficits generally associated with poverty, excluded groups face additional discrimination on the basis of socially marginalised identities such as race, ethnicity, caste and sometimes religion or language, with gender cutting across these various groups. Socially excluded groups suffer from spatial inequalities; they tend to be concentrated in disadvantaged locations – remote and challenging rural terrains or overcrowded slum neighbourhoods. Social, economic and spatial inequalities in turn contribute to political exclusion; such groups are generally denied voice and influence in collective decisions that affect their lives.

It is the intersecting – and mutually reinforcing – nature of these inequalities that makes socially excluded groups harder to reach than other sections of the poor. It ensures that they do not benefit to the same extent, if they benefit at all, from national progress on the MDGs. It gives their poverty an enduring quality, lasting over a lifetime and often over generations.

This report brings together evidence from Latin America, South/Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa to demonstrate the relationship between social exclusion and the MDGs and to deepen understanding of its underlying dynamics. It focuses particularly on those countries for which data are available on how socially excluded groups are faring in relation to MDG-related objectives concerned with extreme poverty, children’s education and maternal and child health. These data support the main contention of this report: the persistence of intersecting inequalities undermines progress on the MDGs and betrays the promise of social justice contained in the Millennium Declaration.

Latin America continues to be among the most unequal regions in the world. These inequalities have strong ethnic, racial and spatial dimensions. Extreme poverty is much higher among indigenous and Afro-descendant populations compared with the white/Latino population in most countries.

Asia, as a region, is on track to meet the target on reducing extreme poverty, primarily due to

the extraordinary performance of China in recent years. However, this has been accompanied by increasing income inequalities in many of the region's countries, including China. It is also evident from the data that the decline in poverty has been uneven across different social groups: ethnic minorities remain over-represented in the poorest strata. Caste and religious differences are also reflected in unequal health, education and poverty outcomes.

Sub-Saharan Africa, as a region, is most off track in relation to the MDGs, but some countries in this region are among the most successful in the developing context when progress is measured in absolute terms. However, data on how socially excluded groups are faring in relation to the MDGs are, with the exception of South Africa, not readily available. Data for the countries covered in the report point to spatial, religious and ethnic variations in terms of progress on MDGs.

The evidence on the relationship between social exclusion and the MDGs reviewed for the report allows for two broad generalisations. The first is that the intersecting and mutually reinforcing nature of the inequalities which give rise to social exclusion helps to explain its persistence over time and its apparent resistance to the forces of change. The second is that these inequalities are not immutable; while progress on the MDGs in relation to excluded groups has been extremely slow and uneven, there is, nevertheless, evidence that it has occurred.

There are policy lessons to be learned from both these generalisations. Understanding the intersecting dynamics that reproduce social exclusion over time points to the domains in which policy must operate and the underlying causalities that it must address if progress on the MDGs is to be accelerated. Understanding the dynamics of change, and the role of policy in making change happen, provides lessons on what has worked in different contexts and how this can be adapted to address similar problems in other contexts.

The cultural dynamics of social exclusion – the systems of norms and beliefs that define some groups as inferior to others – do not merely promote discriminatory behaviour towards subordinated groups. Persistent reminders of their inferiority erode the self-confidence and sense of self-worth of members of these groups and their belief in the possibility of escaping poverty. High levels of substance abuse, criminality and conflict are often consequences of such frustration.

The economic dynamics of social exclusion operate through inequalities in the distribution of productive assets and livelihood opportunities. These economic dynamics can operate through



**Vietnam: minority hill-tribe woman with corn from her field, pauses on the road to Dien Bien Phu, near the Laos border. Tanks and other ordnance from the famous 1954 battle still litter the landscape. Photographer: Chris Stowers/Panos Pictures**

explicit norms such as legal restrictions on land ownership for specific social groups, and their confinement to predetermined, and generally stigmatised, occupations. Or they can operate through the discriminatory behaviour of others, making it harder for excluded groups to translate the assets at their disposal into sustained pathways out of poverty.

The policy dynamics of social exclusion reflect the availability, affordability and terms of provision of the basic services essential to the achievement of the social MDGs. There is a very clear spatial dimension to this dynamic: areas in which marginalised groups are located tend to be the most underserved by essential services. Financial constraints also constrain access. This was dramatically illustrated by the fall in utilisation of health and educational services when user fees were imposed as part of structural adjustment programmes.

There are also problems of quality and relevance of services. The failure to reflect the needs, priorities and constraints of marginalised groups in the provision of health and education, the language used to communicate, the behaviour displayed towards members of these groups – all of these shortfalls in the quality of service help to explain the poor pace of progress on the health and education objectives of the MDG agenda.

The political dynamics of social exclusion operate through the denial of the opportunity to socially excluded groups to participate in the collective decision-making processes of their community and society. Formal democratic processes are unlikely to be sufficient to overcome historically entrenched exclusions, particularly



**Colombian boy from the mountainous indigenous region of Paletará peers through the window. The community has long been fighting for their rights to land and livelihood.**  
Photographer: Luis Alfonso Ortega Fernandez

since these groups are often minorities in their society. The denial of political voice and influence to socially excluded groups in a society has often been a major driver of violent conflict, as these groups have no other forum to express their voice.

The intersecting dynamics of social exclusion, and their resilience over time, suggest that piecemeal policy efforts in relation to the MDGs are unlikely to have a discernible impact. The report makes a number of general policy recommendations for tackling inequality and social exclusion and then considers examples of more MDG-specific interventions which have worked in different contexts.

At the most general level, the construction of a more inclusive social contract between responsive states and active citizens offers the most enabling governance framework for the holistic approaches needed to tackle social exclusion. Such a contract would incorporate commitment to transparency, accountability, democratic participation and civic values as the basic foundation of the relationship between a state and all its citizens. These commitments would be given operational form in different policy interventions to address social exclusion.

Given their isolation from the mainstream of their society, the organisation of socially excluded groups and their mobilisation around self-identified needs, interests and priorities is a critical precondition for their participation in the construction of a new social contract. Such organisations can be built as a deliberate aspect of policy through the setting up of citizens'

committees, user groups of various kinds and consultative exercises. Or they may be built from below through the self-organisation of excluded groups or through the support of civil society intermediaries.

**A comprehensive policy on information is necessary if social exclusion is to be tackled through the MDGs.** States need to collect appropriately disaggregated data on all their citizens in order to track their progress – or failure to progress – as a result of development efforts. Such data need to be made widely available, to be subject to critical analysis and used to inform future policy directions as well as civil society advocacy efforts. Information policies should also produce information for excluded groups so that they are more knowledgeable about their entitlements and rights, and more confident about claiming them.

Different channels of information should also be used to address discriminatory attitudes and behaviour among the general public and to promote the values of tolerance, respect and solidarity. The media can be a powerful ally in the fight against discrimination and should be mobilised to educate, inform and entertain in ways that help to break down the barriers between excluded groups and the rest of society.

It is evident that recent patterns of economic growth have not always reduced, and have, in fact, exacerbated economic inequality and social exclusion. **Macroeconomic frameworks which promote broad-based growth and a general expansion of opportunities are much more likely to reach marginalised sections of society.** At the same time, growth on its own is unlikely to overcome the barriers that have held them back in the past.

**Inclusive patterns of growth will need to be supplemented by redistributive policies that can serve to directly address the intersecting dynamics of social exclusion.** Fiscal policies are an important instrument for redistribution. In terms of domestic revenue mobilisation, the redistributive potential of fiscal policies will depend on which sectors, groups and activities are taxed and whether taxes are direct or indirect, progressive or regressive. Taxation policies are likely to have greatest relevance to economic MDG objectives, as they have a direct bearing on livelihood activities. On the expenditure side, the allocation of budgets to different sectors and services and the distribution of social transfers and subsidies will have a direct bearing on the financing of social services and social protection measures of greatest relevance to poor and excluded groups.

**Legislation against discrimination is an important signal of state commitment to social**

**justice and it can provide advocate groups with the support they need to take action.** However, where social inequalities are deeply entrenched, more positive action may also be necessary. Many countries have sought to take affirmative action on behalf of excluded groups in order to break with past patterns and to set new precedents for the future. Affirmative action may take the form of reserved places for members of excluded groups in economic, political and educational systems or they may operate through recognition of the explicit rights of minority groups.

**Economic exclusion has been addressed through a variety of means intended to strengthen the resource base of excluded groups.** Land reform and land titling programmes are important routes for transferring assets to excluded groups. Labour regulations provide formal protection against the exploitation of vulnerable workers, but they are most likely to be enforced when workers are sufficiently organised to exert the necessary pressure. Microfinance has helped to overcome some of the limits of formal financial services, but has not proved effective in reaching the most marginalised or promoting graduation out of poverty. Microfinance service provision needs to be supplemented with other supportive services as well as pathways into the mainstream financial sector.

**The spatial concentration of many socially excluded groups lends itself to area-based development.** Economies of scale may allow various aspects of spatial disadvantage to be addressed simultaneously and cost-effectively. These include transport and communication, water and sanitation, social service infrastructure and the provision of services.

**Improving the outreach, quality and relevance of basic social services is a critical precondition for achieving the social MDGs.** The abolition of user fees, and social transfers to offset costs or provide incentives to take up services (children's education, maternal healthcare), are powerful mechanisms to address this. The report points to various examples of how services can be made more relevant and user-friendly to men, women and children from excluded groups, including recruiting and training staff from excluded communities, relying on female staff in gender-segregated societies, ensuring services are provided in languages understood by those who need them, the use of mobile schools and clinics. What these various policy options share in common is that they seek to address some aspect of the underlying dynamics of social exclusion.

**Social protection measures have assumed increasing importance in promoting livelihoods and**



**Niger: The Fulani are nomadic people who have travelled and settled across the African continent. Many Fulani in Niger live as their forefathers did, maintaining their traditional culture.**  
Photographer: Giacomo Pirozzi/Panos Pictures

**hence improving the resilience of poor people in the face of crisis.** Those found to be most beneficial to excluded groups include conditional and unconditional transfers, often targeted to children, the elderly or the poorest sections of society. The conditionality associated with transfers may relate to work obligations, to encouraging women to make use of maternity services or to ensuring children go to school and for health checkups. Social transfers clearly have a redistributive effect, but where they are provided on a transparent, regular and predictable basis, they have also been found to have important developmental impacts. These include the increased capacity to participate in local labour markets, to upgrade skills and knowledge, to invest in productive assets, to access credit, along with multiplier effects in the local economy.

**There is sufficient evidence from across the world that addressing social exclusion through the MDGs can be achieved, but not through a 'business-as-usual' approach.** The experiences of progress reported by different countries and analysis of the policies that have worked suggest a number of key principles that can serve as the basis for broader strategies to address exclusion.

**The importance of a rights-based framework** Social exclusion entails the denial of full personhood and full citizenship to certain groups on the basis of who they are, where they live or what they believe. Efforts to overcome exclusion should be located within the broad structure of rights, including the Universal Declaration of

Human Rights and the international conventions on civil and political rights and on social, economic and cultural rights. These provide an internationally agreed basis on which to tackle the violation of the basic rights of such groups.

### **Building tolerance and solidarity among citizens**

While responsive states and actively engaged citizens are essential to building a more democratic society, relations between citizens are as important as the relationship between states and citizens. Social exclusion is partly perpetuated by the discrimination that citizens practise against each other. Legislating against the practice of discrimination, along with educating, informing and challenging long-held prejudices, is an essential aspect of building democracy.

### **Getting the right balance between equality and difference**

Broad-based or universal policies to promote equality of opportunity, and special provision for those who have been systematically excluded in the past, can work successfully in tandem. Universalist approaches are essential to building a sense of social solidarity and citizenship, particularly critical for excluded groups. At the same time, the fact that it is their 'difference' from the rest of the poor that has led socially excluded groups to be left behind or locked out of processes of growth and development suggests strong grounds for plurality and diversity within universal frameworks of provision.

### **Beyond amelioration to transformation**

It is quite possible to meet the basic needs of poor and marginalised groups without strengthening their capacity to do so themselves, thereby leaving their longer-term vulnerability intact. Addressing the root causes of social exclusion and adopting integrated and transformative approaches are necessary in order to shatter the resilience of social exclusion.

### **Group-based exclusion requires group-based solutions**

Related to this is the inadequacy of policies that target individuals or households in tackling problems that are essentially collective and group-based. Individual solutions may leave

marginalised groups more isolated and impoverished than before. The need for more collective approaches introduces another route through which 'difference' may have to be built into the design of policies.

### **A new social contract for an interconnected world: states, citizens and MDG 8**

The problems of poverty and social exclusion are not purely national in their causes or consequences. They are the product of structural inequalities at the global level. This is not adequately acknowledged in the MDGs. While MDGs 1 to 7 concern objectives to be achieved by developing countries, MDG 8 encompasses the relationships between developed and developing countries. Not only does it fail to address the unequal nature of these relationships – as manifested in aid, trade and debt – but it is also the only MDG with no targets or indicators to monitor any form of progress.

It is extremely unlikely that developing countries will be able to achieve growth, prosperity and social justice without greater attention to building greater solidarity, a genuine partnership of equals, at the global level. This should constitute the central platform for the post-2015 successor to the MDGs. However, in the run-up to 2015, rich countries should prioritise a number of actions to accelerate the pace of progress:

- Honour the commitment to increase Official Development Assistance (ODA) to 0.7 per cent of gross national product (GNP).
- Recognise and support the role of civil society organisations in mobilising excluded groups, holding governments to account, and transforming power relationships.
- Provide support for a universal social protection floor that allows marginalised groups to cope with risk, invest in their future and lobby on their own behalf.
- Promote fairer trade relations, with special attention to the needs of the working poor in the informal economy.
- Hold corporations and the private sector to account for socially responsible investments.
- Strengthen government capacity and commitment to the international human rights framework.