

# THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOAL OF POVERTY ALLEVIATION IN ASIA: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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## Abstract

*Eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) with reduction of extreme poverty and hunger were brought into sharp focus in 2000. Poverty means different things to different people. Its measurement in qualitative or quantitative terms too varies. In addition to those in extreme poverty with their varying poverty gaps, those just above the poverty line too tend to fall back in to poverty, being vulnerable to man-made and natural disasters.*

*Poverty alleviation by 2006 has achieved mixed results in different countries and from 2008 to 2010, there were increasing doubts about reaching most of the MDGs in 2015. Some reasons for this waywardness have been identified. But the specific gaps have been ascertained and categorized by the ESCAP which also has briefly proposed many remedial measures, with knowledge and capacity development emphasized, to attain MDGs. Having assessed those proposed measures, this study outlines a way forward for capacity building of stakeholders to accelerate MDG attainments.*

## 1.1 Introduction

This study based on available archival data is presented in five parts. Part I provides a general introduction setting out Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), their targets and indicators of progress/failure of those targets, followed with a brief reminder of the international pledges made to reduce poverty. It also briefly refers to the scope of the study. The different ways of viewing and perceiving 'poverty' and the magnitude and changes in material poverty levels are discussed in Part II. It is in Part III that the specific targets prioritized for poverty alleviation and the mixed results achieved in the task performances in the path of set MDGs are dealt with. It also deals with the concerns on mixed results achieved setting out in detail the causes for the checkered progress over space and time in the South and Southeast Asian regions in particular. Part IV is devoted to examine the ESCAP's commendable identification of gaps in task performances in different countries, in working towards the achievement of MDGs. ESCAP's

convincing classification of gaps and the areas in which the task performances need improvements (in knowledge and capacity development, proper mobilization of expertise, use of financial resources available, advocacy and regional co-operation) which are set out in detail. It is indeed the centerpiece of this study. Recommendations with priority given to human resource development through capacity building to accelerate the progress in MDG achievements and how it should be approached, form the contents of Part V.

## 1.2 Goals, Targets and Indicators

The United Nations was setting development goals since the early 1990s, which, initially appeared to be less effective. However, those development goals were more precisely articulated at the Food and Agricultural Organization's (FAO) Food Summit held in 1996. In September 2000, when heads of 186 states met at the Millennium Summit in New York, they further fine-tuned the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). In all, 8 goals, 18 targets and 48 indicators of target achievements were identified at this summit (Table 1).

**Table 1: The MDG Goals, Targets and Indicators**

| Goals  | Number of Targets | Number of Target Measuring Indicators Suggested |
|--|-------------------|---|
| 1. Eradication of extreme poverty and hunger           | 3                 | 5   |
| 2. Attainment of universal primary education           | 1                 | 3   |
| 3. Promotion of gender equity and empowerment of women | 1                 | 4   |
| 4. Reduction of child mortality                        | 1                 | 3   |
| 5. Improvement of mental health                        | 1                 | 2   |
| 6. Combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases      | 2                 | 10  |
| 7. Ensuring environmental sustainability               | 3                 | 8   |
| 8. Enhancement of global partnership for development   | 6                 | 13  |
| Total  | 18*               | 48  |

Source :Department of Census and Statistics, Sri Lanka

\* Subsequently in 2008, four new targets were introduced, one each to: Goal 1- Eradication of extreme poverty and hunger; Goal 5- Improvement of mental health; Goal 6- Combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; and Goal 7- Ensuring environmental sustainability making a total of 22 targets

The above 'wish list' of 'world's goals' have been seen by many as 'clearly achievable' and some have even argued that they are not 'millennium' but 'minimum' goals.'

### 1.3 Pledges Made at the UN Summit 2000

At the UN Millennium Summit held in New York in 2000, it was agreed that the set goals are clearly achievable in 10 – 15 years and the participants agreed to, "free our men, women and children from the abject poverty and dehumanizing conditions of extreme poverty to which more than a billion of them are currently subjected' (UN Millennium Summit Report, 2000). The participating heads of developing countries pledged at the summit to improve policies and governance and increase accountability in their respective countries to facilitate the achievement of the MDGs. The representatives of the developed countries pledged to provide financial and other requisite resources.

### 1.4 Scope of the Study

Among the 8 MDGs of the UN, it is the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger in developing countries, which has been given the utmost priority. Nevertheless, the other 7 MDGs are inextricably entwined with poverty in a tangle. In this tangle, poverty causes some of the above stated ills and conversely poverty is also the consequence of some or all of those ills. Hence, this study aims to examine the problems, prospects and the progress in the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger ( i.e. Goal 1) in Asia including Sri Lanka, with reference to other MDGs where necessary. The study confines to Asia because Asia has been leading in global poverty reduction with a fast economic development in place, during the last two decades Asia's early lead in global poverty reduction is given in Table 2.

**Table 2: Poverty Reduction in Asia, 1990 – 2002**

| Region                       | 1990   | 2002   |
|------------------------------|--------|--------|
| South Asia                   | 39.4 % | 31.2 % |
| East Asia                    | 19.6 % | 7.3 %  |
| Southeast Asia & Pacific     | 33.0 % | 14.1 % |
| Total for Developing Regions | 27.9 % | 19.4 % |

Source : UN Millennium Development Goal Report 2006, N.Y

## II

### 2.1 'Poverty' Viewed Differently

The amoebic change of poverty mostly in association with social, economic and political ills in many of the MDGs themselves, makes it rather difficult to assess poverty very accurately over time and space. This difficulty is further compounded by the fact that poverty means different things to different individuals, different communities, different cultures and even to different countries. What poverty means to the simple fisher-folks in a tiny island nation in the Pacific may not be the same as that meant as poverty in a developing ASEAN nation in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, consider the case of Bhutan which prefers Gross Domestic Happiness (GDH) as an indicator of development inclusive of poverty alleviation, an approach that is different from the usage of Gross Domestic Production (GDP) indicator used to measure material prosperity, mirroring poverty reduction to some extent (but not completely). The GDH refers to a particular level of psychological contentment or 'mental happiness'. Then, isn't happiness is 'richness'? Happiness is **qualitative** while production which is valued and measured in terms of GDP is **quantitative**.

Rural contentment and happiness derived in agrarian societies in Asian countries is not always related to quantified products or production alone. That is often well demonstrated in their accustomed ways of performing folkloristic dancing, folk music, rituals and festivals associated with their regular livelihoods in which they consider themselves as culturally '**rich**' but not '**poor**'. So, what kind of a poverty that they are talking about, and what kind of a poverty that we are talking about? Can the figures and targets capture all what is needed to be provided for a person's or a community's well-being with contentment and happiness? A plethora of similar questions arise with regard to the MDGs in respect of education, health, women in development, child and maternal care, environmental sustainability etc., which have links to 'poverty'.

There are such microscopic, local, national and regional variations in perceiving and measuring 'poverty' in different perspectives as highlighted above. None of them can be totally discarded, because based on different perceptions of 'poverty', they have some validity in each of them. Yet, they cannot be applied uniformly on a very large canvas of a global development task with poverty alleviation which requires a universally acceptable indicator of 'poverty' measurement to measure the progress in poverty reduction spatially and temporally. Hence, however defective, an indicator in monetary terms of assets in possession, that is, an income of \$ 1 per person per day (recently revised upwards

to \$ 1.25 person per day), has come to be widely regarded as the line of separation of those in extreme poverty from those not so poor. The former is regarded as those 'below the poverty line', and the latter as those 'above the poverty line'.

## **2.2 Magnitude and Changes in Material Poverty Levels**

The stark truth is that nearly one-third of the world's population of over 6 billion is in extreme poverty and hunger, earning not more than \$ 1.25 per person per day. The existing poverty gaps of (that is the difference between the poverty line and earning levels of individuals below it) people in such a huge population in different developing countries in the world cannot be overlooked. Then, there is a large number of people operating **just above the poverty line**, who often tend to fall below that line due to unforeseeable world events such as global financial crises, food crises, natural calamities like drought, floods, tsunami and even regional political instabilities accentuated by unending terrorist activities that deteriorate their sustenance. The recent global financial crises is said to have added 53 million people to those already in poverty (Abino,2010). According to Ban Ki- Moon, the UN General Secretary, the possible recent additions to the existing number in extreme poverty are even higher. He contends that the new additions to extreme poverty and hunger due to the world food crisis in 2008 and the recent global financial crisis from 2007 to 2009 can be any thing between 55 and 90 million.

Whatever, the increased number of people in extreme poverty and hunger, it is important to note that the bulk of these fallouts is a part from the 1.6 billion people earning between \$ 1 and \$ 2 per person a day (Agricultural Food Security and Nutrition and MDGs, 2008). Thus, the actual sufferers could well be around the 2 billion mark and there is so much of oscillation of the levels of the poor crossing upwards and downwards the poverty line, more so downwards, because human progress – whether in terms of income, health, nutrition or education – tends to decline sharply in 'bad' times while recovery process in 'good' times takes much longer periods of time.

Whichever, is the total number of marginal and extreme poor, whether it is around or below 2 billion, the UN in 2000 has accepted 1.8 billion as the number in extreme poverty and hunger which is targeted to be halved by 2015.

### III

#### **3.1 Specific Targets Prioritized**

In this envisaged effort three targets have been identified. They are: (a) the reduction of the absolute number of persons in extreme poverty and hunger; (b) provision of minimum dietary energy needs of persons; and (c) enhancement of child nutrition. They are also to be indirectly benefited from many of the set targets for the other seven goals (Table 1). These include: in particular, some of the targets of attainment of universal primary education (Goal 2); promotion of gender equity (Goal 3); improvement of mental health (Goal 5); combating infectious pandemic diseases (Goal 6); and ensuring environmental sustainability (Goal 7).

#### **3.2 Mixed Results Achieved**

The prevalence of poverty as well as the poverty reduction efforts being made, are not uniform over space and time in the world spectrum. In the 1960s and 1970s, about two-thirds of those in extreme poverty was in the densely populated Asian continent, with the higher concentration of the poor in Southeast Asia and South Asia. With the booming economy in East Asia during the early part of the second half of the twentieth century and later spreading that development in Southeast Asia, poverty in those parts of Asia began to be visibly reduced steadily as could be seen in Table 2 above. However, there was no such rapid poverty reduction in South Asia. By the end of the twentieth century South Asia as a region had and still having the largest share of those in extreme poverty.

Regionally in the world too, there are wide variations in the existence of poverty. This is due to several reasons. In the less developed regions in Asia, many countries were long under the Western Powers. These Western countries have exploited the natural resources and whatever they produced in the lands that they occupied using the indigenous labour, sucking out the wealth of those subjugated countries unabated. Some countries in Asia were thus long exploited, sometimes by different European countries in rotation, for several centuries in the past. Without going farther deep into the political histories of these Asian countries under foreign domination, it can be plausibly argued that rampant poverty in many of the Asian countries were man-made mostly by those who conquered and ruled them.

Though the wealth of the conquered lands was sucked out by the invaders for the benefits of their own countries, their promotion of certain social welfare measures in the countries that they ruled, health and basic education in particular, to

improve the native labour efficiency and output need to be acknowledged. They contributed to life quality improvements such as increased life expectancy reducing mortality. These have created large population bubbles constraining opportunities for income enhancement of the ordinary masses. Thus by the mid-twentieth century when most of the Asian countries gained political independence they had very high percentages of their populations in extreme poverty and hunger. Even there were large scale famines in thickly populated large countries like India and China during the first half of the twentieth century. Increases in poverty was also due to geographical limitations in relief, climate, resource scarcity, poor use and management of available resources.

Even within a single country, poverty status varies over space and time. The bigger the country the larger the poverty variations due to geographical factor, uneven resource distribution and polarized infrastructure development in favourable areas, neglecting the less endowed remote areas. This phenomenon is there even in a small country like Sri Lanka where its Western Province in which the capital city of Colombo is located, generates about 45 per cent of the nation's wealth and hence income earning opportunities are greater here than in distant provinces such as the Northern, North Central, Eastern and Uva which contributes less than 5 percent each to the national wealth generation (Siriwardana, 2010). These remote provinces, as anywhere in the world, easily fall prey to the human disaster of terrorism and become vulnerable to natural calamities such as drought, flood and tsunami. The vast majorities of the poor people living in such remote and predominantly rural provinces constantly require government hand-outs (*Samurdhi Grants*) as life-supports. Nearly 35 per cent of Sri Lanka's 20 million people continue to receive financial grants regularly. Such overwhelming rural poverty in Asia has tempted many development functionaries to label poverty as a 'rural phenomenon' though poverty is also quite significant in the Asian cities and towns. But paradoxically, Asia which has the largest share of the poor in the world has experienced the fastest economic growth during the past two or three decades. A country-wise paradox is India which is with a very large share of people in extreme poverty, is a dynamic engine of economic growth that has been recently admitted as a member of G- 20.

Though the progress in poverty alleviation had been far from uniform across the developing countries in Asia, numerous progress reports on MDG performances prepared by international agencies and even by some individual countries expressed high hopes of achieving most of the MDGs. Many countries in the region were initially, that is during the tail-end of the twentieth century and during the very early dawn of the twenty-first century were performing poverty alleviation tasks well by being on proper track hoping to reach most of the set MDG targets by 2015 ( Table 2).

It is to be reminded here, that, this success was not taking place instantly with the declaration of the MDG goals alone. Some of these countries, as has been already pointed out, were following social welfare development approaches since they won political independence from the Western dominations during the mid-twentieth century or there about. That background preparation greatly facilitated the working towards the achievement of UN 'wish list' or the MDGs, promulgated towards the tail-end of the twentieth century.

However, by 2006, it was becoming increasingly evident that some Asia-Pacific countries were not 'on-track' but going 'off-track' and some were even in regression in the avowed task of poverty alleviation. Thus, Matt Crook in his study of 'Fragile Nations Speak their Peace' (2010) states that, "millions of dollars in aid money hasn't yielded the expected results". It is also evident in this study that how some of the aid-recipient conflict-affected countries such as Timor-Leste, Nepal and the Solomon Island among others in Asia are unable to do what the donors exactly want them to do to reduce poverty and that, "aid recipients are now telling donors how to make their dollars work better".

### **3.3 Concerns on Mixed Results**

Some countries which were promisingly proceeding in poverty alleviation during the early stage of reducing poverty under the MDG programme, developed hick-ups half way. Around 2000, poverty alleviation was progressing well in Sri Lanka showing that poverty could be halved by 2015 to 13 percent, (a questionable figure). But the Statistical Review of the Millennium Goals in Sri Lanka issued by the Department of Census and Statistics says,

"The proportion of population whose income is less than the national poverty threshold is known as the poverty headcount ratio and this is the indicator presented here. As measured by this indicator, as at 2002, about one-fifth of the household population in Sri Lanka was living in poverty and given the recent trends the 2015 target of 13 per cent is unlikely to be achieved". The UN's Millennium Development Goals Report of 2006 too had expressed similar concerns. The report states,

"We have some achievements and some are being achieved. Yet there are disparities among and within countries, mostly in remote rural areas are being left behind". Much more can and must be done with outside aid and with there own resources".

More recent reviews made from 2008 to the end of the first half of 2010, have cast more doubts than hopes about the earlier anticipated successes in 2015. Both

the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 2009, have agreed, that, the number of people remaining below the poverty line in the world, including those in Asia, would well exceed 1 billion and possibly not remain between 700 and 800 million by 2015, as originally anticipated. Progress in improvement of health, nutrition, education and gender parity, closely entwined with poverty alleviation too have fallen behind. The number of chronically hungry people too increased since the world food crisis in 2008.

The UN itself is concerned with the slowed down overall progress made in poverty alleviation. Its MDG Progress Report of 2008 which is very pessimistic about the potential realization of the MDGs in 2015 and calls the member-countries to make more concerted efforts to move forward more vigorously than ever before to meet the targets set for 2015. The UN's MDG Report 2009, further notes that,

“...despite many successes, the overall progress had been too slow for most of the targets to be met by 2015. And major advances against the fight against poverty and hunger have begun to slow or even reverse as a result of global economic and food crises”.

### **3.4 Reasons for Retardation**

There are many reasons for overall target achievements lagging behind, even in countries which were earlier 'on-track'. Some countries are moving 'off-track' without much success. Reasons for these have to be initially identified at country specific level by the concerned countries. Some of the reasons for these found embedded in numerous annual reports of international organizations, country reports and studies of individuals are itemized and demonstrated for easy exposition of the magnitude of the problem. They are not placed in any logical sequence.

- Most developing countries lack public resources constraining the improvement of economic growth in reducing poverty. These countries do not have sufficient tax revenues to adequately satisfy the development needs of the people as they have low per capita income where low tax-to-GDP seldom exceeding 20 per cent as opposed to about 30-35 per cent tax-to-GDP in the developed countries. Hence there is the problem of financial resources.
- The recent global economic recession causing times of tight economies where most commodity prices soared curtailing purchases, global markets

shrinking for local produce offered for sale and loss of jobs and income, hurting those already poor and disadvantaged.

- Life and death tragedies remain all too common when natural calamities occur and life remains horrendously fragile (e.g. during the last tsunami devastation in the island of Sumatra in Indonesia and in Sri Lanka) in societies that lack the resources and infrastructure to meet even the basic human needs to the disaster victims.
- Asia in particular, has weaker social protections than some areas in the world such as Eastern Europe and Latin America (Heyzer, 2010). Without protection people fall back in to poverty with economic crises, health pandemics and national level disasters and they cannot recover easily, making the MDG achievements more difficult. Socio-cultural environments in many of these countries are intimately related to the extent of poverty and they will have a direct bearing on the speed in the progress attempted in poverty reduction.
- Specific local conditions of different countries and in different geographical environments in a country with varying dimensions in ethnicity, language, religion or any other peculiarity that exists notably in rural areas, have put the MDG achievement into a snail's speed.
- Although the outside official aid provided to a country is enough at times (at least as in 2008) the aid absorption for the intended purposes remains well below that envisioned by donors, making a more constrained fiscal environment causing a serious threat to future aid efforts.
- There is the use of aid money specifically meant for poverty alleviation for other purposes. Though perhaps over-emphasized, it is not totally untrue. In the words of Dombisa Moyo in her book titled, *Dead Aid*, "aid is easy money, it comes without conditions and accountability [and] as much as 85 per cent of aid those were used for purposes other than that for which they are initially intended. Aid is like oil, enabling powerful elite to embezzle public revenues. Yet, this diversion does not have any consequence – the same country who badly misuse funds, end up receiving even more'. Though this pronouncement has been made more specifically in respect of Africa, it is true in respect of some Asian countries as well.

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- Related to the above, there is the lack of transparency and overall bad governance and the effects of them worsening during poor economic times, threatening the efforts of those trying to help and diverting the resources away from those who need them most. In those circumstances, it is the urban middle class public servants (elites) who are more effective than those in the general civil society, in articulating the interests and claims of those in power and themselves, ignoring the genuine priorities of public interest.
  - Though the heads of governments vouch at international/global summits to lay stress on MDG-based development strategies, on their return home, they often get more cocooned in their own national development plans. In general, the governments continue to rely on a loose amalgam of economic and social development proposals within their respective countries, as policies for the promotion of economic growth within a broad development framework.
  - That includes improvement of infrastructure, expansion of public services, enhancement of the poor people's access to credit (even though it is not properly done), increase of employment opportunities mostly in already over-loaded public sector and many other assorted items in demand in a mixed development baskets where even a proper prioritization and sequencing is not in sight. In other words, there is no hierarchy of importance placed in such a development framework clearly focusing on national and local priorities. The priorities, if any, changes with the change of governments in some of the developing countries in Asia. These governments expect 'trickle down' of the effects of all such pickled development efforts and rapidly increase the GDP growth per capita and thereby the living standards of the people. How much has 'trickled down' to the poor remains all too uncertain.
  - Most developing countries in Asia do not have separate budgetary allocations for poverty alleviation efforts under the MDG goals. A case in point is that of Sri Lanka where the UNDP the over viewer of the MDG progress in the country is still trying to persuade the Sri Lankan government to allocate a separate slot for MDG guided poverty alleviation in the national budget (Abeyratne, 2010).
  - There are serious weaknesses in the prevailing institutional structures with which the 'development' is entrusted. There are glaring gaps and as well as over lapses in efforts made to decentralize administration and there are

also all too frequent ministry portfolio changes and re-allocation of subjects to the ministries.

- Particularly in respect of the achievement of the MDGs, the collective action expected of the governments, legislatures and civil societies by the international agencies are often not moving in the desired ways. Governments and legislatures dominate in decision making, leaving a little or no opportunity for the civil society that includes the rural populace which is a huge chunk of a country's population. This is a serious lacuna in any system geared predominantly to alleviate rural poverty. In prioritizing decision making required in respect of the long term needs of the rural poor to sure-footedly escape from the drudgery of poverty without falling back to poverty again, the rural poor need to have room to participate in planning and implementing planned activities with participatory monitoring and in evaluating them with implementing authorities, which is a far cry in many countries with large numbers of poor people.
- There is also the belief that the UN has so far followed a highly limiting 'government-to government' link up, and not trying seriously to ensure a linkage with the civil society through the respective governments. More than the UN, this should be the responsibility of the individual countries who are familiar with their own civil societies. However, the UN has not pressured governments enough for them to be more concerned in bringing the civil societies to the centre stage of poverty focused development.
- The policies and interventions remain not factored in strong linkages prevailing between the social factors (health, child nutrition, education and women's welfare) and environmental factors (water, sanitation, pollution and, climatic change). This deficiency is at its zenith in rural areas where poverty is rampant.

## IV

### 4.1 Gaps Categorized

The above gaps in the attainment of the MDG and many others detectable in the process of reducing extreme poverty and hunger from now till 2015, can be formed in to five groups - growth gaps, policy gaps, strategy gaps and implementation gaps as very fittingly identified by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), in dealing with MDG reaching

efforts made over the past several years. Filling of these gaps with proper and continued research conducted and training (capacity building) designed on the findings of that research to provide due knowledge and training to the relevant stakeholders in poverty alleviation at country and regional levels is urgently required, if the countries 'on-track' to reach the targets and the countries 'off-the-track' to get back on track, at least to get closer to the targets in 2015. The sooner the causes of the gaps and their dimensions are identified, it would be possible to eliminate or negate the impediments that lie before the stakeholders – the policy makers, implementers and vastly the rural beneficiaries – to be 'on-track' and quicken the process of achieving at least a majority of the overall poverty alleviation goals, if not all, in 2015.

There is another valid reason for the argument that these gaps have to be identified through the conduct of proper research, even belatedly, and use that research knowledge to mount necessary corrective measures through requisite knowledge sharing and human resource capacity development through training that is so vital in the current atmosphere of knowledge and skill-based economy.

We need to remember that all these times, we were talking about a 'halving' of the number of poor people in each member country, which we are not quite sure of achieving in many of the countries by 2015. The time-bound goal setting is not inappropriate in any development approach. Expected targets are not reached even belatedly without deadlines fixed. However, when we reach 2015 will our burden of alleviating poverty of the population be over, even if some countries reach the set targets? Poverty in the world will continue any way. The important thing is to keep a close tab on it and continue rigourously to minimize and contain it.

All these times every body concerned with the attainment of the MDGs was talking about halving the numbers of persons in extreme poverty in each country at the time of the initiation of work on the MDGs. What about the other half of the poor that we left out since the formulation and implementation of the MDGs? Is halving poverty in each country is the same as halving the global poverty? How much new knowledge we need to acquire to achieve MDGs in the ESCAP region by 2015 or thereafter and how should we proceed in acquiring that knowledge? It is commendable to note that ESCAP has been giving thoughts for some time not only about the aforementioned gaps but also on the exact tasks required to close up some of those gaps. In an exhaustive report titled 'Achieving the Millennium Development Goals in the ESCAP Region – A Regional Road Map to 2015' issued in 2006 there are five major types of activities or tasks proposed. They are, (a) knowledge and capacity development, (b) sharing of expertise, (c)

resource acquisition, (d) advocacy of MDGs and (e) regional cooperation which are amplified below.

#### **4.1.1 Knowledge and Capacity Development**

Though the ESCAP has not specifically emphasized, first of all we need to remember is, that, the socio-cultural environment of a country is intimately related to the extent of poverty in that country and that will have a direct bearing on the speed at which a progress can be made in achieving MDGs. Therefore, there is a need for gathering relevant information and evaluating some of the socio-cultural components, even though the doing so may not have a direct bearing on the goal achievements. The required aspects of socio-cultural environmental information includes legal regimes, inheritance laws, women's access to assets, status of minorities and resilience to natural disaster which would provide reliable adjuncts to the understanding of the causes of poverty and pointers to what is needed to be done from now until the MDG achievement.

Knowledge derives from research and analysis. Research, according to some, can be mostly prescriptive, which is debatable. However, that would help to charter and fine-tune a road map leading to goal achievement. The knowledge gained through research would be useful to see whether (a) a country is 'on-track', 'off-track' or even regressing (b) assess the progress achieved under each or concerned goals (c) develop executive evidence-based policy options (d) estimate resource requirements (e) identify key areas and sectors where public-private partnerships could be involved in goal achievement and (f) identify by-lateral, sub-regional as well as multi-lateral co-operations that are required.

Several modalities can be pursued to gain requisite knowledge through research conducted individually by the concerned countries using its available expertise or in collaborative research involving two or more countries. The latter would enable the cross pollination of research methods and result analysis. Whether the conduct of research is envisaged individually or collectively by the concerned countries, they have a wide arena of research to be conducted where they have to deal with (a) the identification of obstacles to progress and suggest policies and programmes to eliminate them and reach MDG targets (b) critical examination of the national development goals and strategies adopted by the concerned countries seeing their compatibility with the MDGs (c) analysis of the movement of macro-economic indicators representing fiscal, monetary and external financial sector linkages identifying gaps in each of them (d) identification of resource gaps – human, financial and technological and (e) identification of training areas for different types and levels of stakeholders working towards the achievement of

MDGs. This should be the linking thread through out all activities set out above and inquiring in to the hindrances identified above (in bullet form). Because, without identifying the various facets in those hindrances and eliminating them by capacity enhancement of all stakeholders through proper **training**, reaching the MDG goals in 2015 or soon thereafter will be in jeopardy.

The research results require to be widely disseminated and shared through regional publications, periodicals, progress assessment reports, thematic studies, sector studies, macro-modeling, costing exercises and policy briefs. As the knowledge economy is growing vibrantly, regional knowledge sharing centers (if there are any) have to be more effective as knowledge 'clearing houses'. As the electronic media power of dissemination of knowledge-based information has grown powerfully, networking of research institutions would be essential for MDG achievements. They must shed their age-old habit of working, being cocooned within themselves forming powerful knots in a wide network of information dissemination and sharing.

The ESCAP has very rightly stated that the expected impact of those types of knowledge creation, identification of areas of capacity building and conducting need-based training for capacity enhancement and dissemination of research results will lead to (a) have better informed policy makers, experts and professionals, (b) maintaining of greater transparency and accountability in implementing MDG related policies and programmes, (c) a better prioritization and targeting of public as well as private resources, (d) a better utilization of scarce resources including donor funds, (e) an effective mobilization of different stakeholders around a common set of objectives and (f) a better harnessing of grass-roots and public support towards the MDG achievements.

#### **4.1.2 Expertise**

Every country has some expertise. But many developing countries may lack expertise in some specific areas, say, in sanitation, health issues such as in HIV/AIDS control, child health and nutrition, micro-credit, enterprise development, or in public-private partnership in poverty alleviation tasks. Outside experts may also be required to augment local expertise, creating synergies between locally and externally available expertise to conduct research successfully in complex subject areas ensuring better project and programme implementation, facilitating MDG achievements. The exchange of expertise is often facilitated by ESCAP. Such a well screened facilitation process has to be actively pursued to avoid the in and out 'bat-flying' of worthless experts leaving a little or no impact behind of what they do in developing countries.

### 4.1.3 Resources

Resources could be financial, human or technological. Many countries have savings gaps and fiscal constraints. Most of the developing countries have to depend on global resources for the foreseeable future. That is resource flows have to be ensured to them. The early promises of the donor countries though laudable, the financial aid committed for the achievements of MDGs in developing countries were not readily flowing till about 1997. Aid committed to grant to the developing countries towards the attainment of MDGs increased since then calculated to be \$106 billion at the rate of one-third of 1 per cent of their national income. Donors mostly in the European Union (EU), sixteen countries in number, have pledged to increase support in 2005. If all of the donor countries honour their past pledges, aid is expected to reach \$ 130 billion or more by the end of 2010.

Furthermore, the EU in March 2010, expressing a greater commitment towards the MDG achievements in the expressed **vision** in its action plan, 'Decade for Development, 2010 -2020', has promised to play still a greater role with 12 pledges made. They are (a) getting all donor countries each to contribute 0.7 percent of gross national income (GNI), (b) working altogether coordinated, (c) doing more for the poorest, (d) improving results and targeting the key sectors for gender, education, health and food security, (e) working in partnership, (f) acting in coherence in the use of other EU policies for development from trade to migration to food and climate change, (g) helping better national funding, (h) strengthening regional integration, (i) supporting initiatives on innovative financing with high revenue potential that can benefit the project, (j) using the Euros 2.4 billion a year "fast start" funding commitment for climate change as a test case for aid effectiveness, (k) addressing conflict situations and make development and security work better as there will be no development without security and no security without development and (l) supporting to get the World Bank (WB), International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the United Nations (UN) to put more weight in supporting development in developing countries.

In addition, President Obama in April 2010 has pledged that the United States would come to the next New York Summit equipped "with a global plan to make the MDGs a reality" (Setty, 2010).

All these signal, a greater commitment of developed countries and international agencies. In view of the increased natural calamities that we experienced since 2008 both in the developed and developing countries (hurricanes, floods, oil spills, earth quakes, tsunami, volcanic eruptions and mud flows) and escalating

wars and unrest in many parts of the world, possible destructions from increasing terrorism, religious fanaticism leading to destruction, still prevailing pains of the recent global economic downturn may unexpectedly suck MDG committed funds away from the intended countries for intended purposes. Nevertheless, it is a consolation to see that, at least at present, there is an increased resources committed towards reaching the MDGs.

Assuming that resources will be available, the prospective recipient countries have to fulfill many tasks competently such as (a) carrying out need assessments, costing exercises to estimate the required resource flows, (b) making that information available to sources of financial resources, (c) maintenance of high levels of accountability for funds received having undertaken more realistic costing exercises before the receipt of the financial resources and (d) relentless capability and skill enhancement through training and on-the-job work experience provision. Donors too, on their part, should honour the provision of pledged financial resources in adequate amounts on time.

#### **4.1.4 Advocacy**

It is evident from various summit meeting reports, annual reports of the international organizations, *ad hoc* studies commissioned and even in individual studies carried out by the officials associated with international organizations and interested academicians, that, at the international and regional levels the advocacy carried out in respect of the MDGs is commendable. One only needs to visit the electronic media websites to realize how much has been done in this regard.

However, at sub-regional and country level it appears that advocacy is insufficient. It is, therefore, suggested that ESCAP which is performing a commendable task towards the attainment of MDGs in particular and overall social and economic advancement in the Asia-Pacific region in general, makes an increased effort to further pop up advocacy at individual country levels in the sub-regions so as to keep alive the interest of country level policy makers, stakeholders and even the civil societies through the respective governments and international agency country offices entrusted with the task of inducing various countries to accelerate the progress towards the MDG attainment. Of all the stakeholders, the beneficiaries of the outcomes of the MDGs, should be made aware of the task functions that are being carried out and planned to be carried out so that they can extend their full support in which ever ways they can to accomplish the MDGs by 2015 or soon thereafter.

It would also be very useful to enhance inter- and intra-country institutional dialogues within the individual countries and collaborative dialogues of such institutions among countries so that they can network themselves to share their experiences and learn from each other's best practices. Such a networking would be extremely useful particularly in respect of the generation of project ideas for technical assistance, reviewing progress better by reputed independent expatriates rather than by the locals.

#### **4.1.5 Regional Co-operation**

This will be extremely useful for delivery of a range of public goods – frameworks and arrangements, promotion in trade, transport and communication system expansion and adaptation of sustainable environment-friendly methods of economic and social development. Regional co-operation will also be useful to update monitoring systems, which, in some countries are neither frequent nor comprehensive enough. The monitoring systems should be geared to see whether, (a) the anticipated events are taking place as anticipated, (b) they produce policy related information accumulated, and (c) the poor themselves are induced in the monitoring of poverty and the information of such monitoring are known to them. Their active participation in poverty monitoring is absolutely necessary. It is far better that outsiders are involved with the locals rather than the locals alone in monitoring and evaluation using result-based monitoring indicators.

## **V**

### **5.1 Recommendations**

Though some marginal recommendations have been embedded above in the discussion, the following recommendations are emphatically made to foster the human resource development so required for gap-filling to make the MDGs move faster. First of all, it is for the individual countries to identify the most pressing gap or gaps ( pertaining to growth, policy, strategy, resource or implementation) and prioritize their needs to be 'on-track' or to get back on to the right track if they are 'off-track' to move towards the attainment of the MDGs. There are myriad of evidences in development literature, particularly in the project oriented development literature, generated during the past three decades, where, **the lack of capacity** in identification, formulation, appraisal, monitoring and evaluation of projects are displayed. Hence, there were inordinate delays in implementation of them. In some countries, even the donor-allocated funds have not been fully

utilized for the intended purposes either due to lack of knowledge or capacity or due to both.

Like in Timor-Leste, Nepal, The Solomon Islands and in several African countries referred to earlier as well, there were even donor-recipient disagreements as to how and on what to spend donor financial resources, and “billions of dollars in aid money hasn’t yielded the expected results” (Matt Crook, 2010). These have largely resulted from the lack of capacity leading to the existence of many gaps in the MDG achievement process. Unfortunately due to capacity shortages the identification of gaps (in growth, policy, strategy, resources and implementation) in a continuum while the whole process of the MDG attainment tasks were in motion, has not taken place in many countries. Therefore, timely and necessary remedies have not been made.

The conventional strategy followed in capacity building is training largely based on the understanding of some of the past capacity deficiencies in development reflective in past records and some experience of the trainers themselves. Training is seldom based on proper need assessment of capacities required for specific intended purposes. Training expected to increase knowledge, change attitudes and enhance skills, gives a little or no positive benefits to trainees when the right types of trainees are either not nominated for training nor not enrolled, notably in international or regional training courses conducted.

To make a training program a success, about 35 to 40 per cent of time has to be spent in training need assessment, course designing and preparation of relevant training materials, another 35-to 40 per cent should be set apart for actual conduct of training which of course would vary with the intended duration and the gravity of the intended training. At least 20 per cent of time should be allocated for ‘follow up of training’ some time after the conclusion of training (may be about 2 to 3 months later) to ascertain whether those who received training has got its dividends enabling them to do their jobs better. This important segment of training for capacity building is the most conveniently forgotten part in training. Like the training need assessment, the training result assessment too have to be improved to know whether the training provided has actually contributed towards the much needed capacity building. Most trainers think that their responsibility ends with the last item in training, that is, valediction where they say *adieu* to the trainees.

The above necessities to conduct proper training call for a **strong link between research and training** to work towards the fulfilment of MDGs by 2015 or even thereafter. As at present, by and large, researchers and trainers are separately

cocooned in their own areas of specialization, without a worthwhile merger. They need to be made to act reciprocally. Once the researchers identify the hurdles for development they need to be passed on to the trainers to identify from them the areas amenable for training because all problems cannot be solved through training. In the course of training, new developmental problems will be brought into light by the adult trainees who are already the development functionaries with some hands-on experience in dealing with the MDGs. These need to be referred to the researchers for further investigation. If the researchers and the trainers are a same group of people it would be the most conducive situation for this reciprocal task functions. But that combination still remains a rarity in the real world situation.

A great deal of time, personnel and financial resources may be required to conduct research for initial identification of development hurdles and re-examination of hurdles surface at training for capacity building. But doing them patiently will give dividends in the task of attaining the MDGs by 2015 or at least there after. After all, as stated earlier, poverty will not going to end in 2015 and the efforts to keep it under a reasonable control will continue into the distant future. Hence, the fusing of research and training should continue patiently and sure-footedly.

The main responsibility of initiating collaborative research and training lies with the individual countries. In this regard the available local specialists' collaborative attempts with designated specialists invited from the neighbouring countries would be highly desirable to learn from each others' experience. But the total dependence on 'bat-flying' foreign specialists from elsewhere, coming in and conducting 'fire-fighting' interviews with local institutions and even with a hand-picked few individuals to draw conclusions and make recommendations for capacity building before they soon disappear, has to be carefully guarded and guided by the real local needs. The 'rapid-fire fighting' type of work of the 'whistle-stopping' foreign specialists have sometimes created more problems anew than solving the existing problems.

In the conduct of initial research described above, the researchers need to focus their concentration **horizontally** on the MDG number one, that is, poverty reduction and its other associated goals, because their disparities vary very widely from a locality to locality with a greater gravity of them in remote rural areas. This calls for a greater focus on field investigations. They also have to have a **vertical** focus from the grass-roots level to the highest level of stakeholders in varying facets notably to identify the problems in development that the stakeholders confront at different levels. This will be extremely useful in respect

of capacity building through training. Here too, collaborative efforts made with neighbouring countries will be desirable to learn from each other's experience.

Perhaps the country and country dual collaborations or even tripartite agreements would be very useful to arrange a system of on-the-job capacity building of the relevant stakeholders in the MDG achievement. That will also form a bridge for appropriate technology transfer along with the skill enhancement. Seldom there are such arrangement. Finally, it is to be emphasized that while the capacity building is kept high in the agenda to reach the targets of the MDG, the above mentioned resource mobilization and the proper use of foreign and local resources frugally for the intended purposes, strengthening advocacy and regional co-operation with periodical monitoring of them would greatly facilitate the MDG attainment, if not in 2015 at least soon thereafter.

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