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UN reports progress towards poverty alleviation, urges increased support for the poorest



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Some of the world's poorest countries have made impressive gains in the fight against poverty, but the least developed countries still lag in efforts to improve living standards, the United Nations said today in a [report](#) showing significant overall progress towards achieving the global targets against extreme poverty.

Giving examples of achievements, the Millennium Development Goals ([MDGs](#)) Report – prepared by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) – says that Burundi, Rwanda, Samoa, Sao Tome and Principe, Togo and Tanzania attained or are nearing the goal of universal primary education, one of the targets.

Considerable progress has also been made in Benin, Bhutan, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Guinea, Mali, Mozambique and Niger, where net enrolment ratios in primary school increased by more than 25 percentage points from 1999 to 2009.

Sub-Saharan Africa, with an 18 percentage point gain in school enrolment between 1999 and 2009, is the region with the best record of improvement, according to the report.

Despite significant setbacks caused by the global economic crisis that plunged much of the world into recession in 2008 and 2009, and the high food and energy prices, the world is still on track to achieve the MDGs, according to the report.

“Despite these declines, current trends suggest that the momentum of growth in the developing world remains strong enough to sustain the progress needed to reach the global poverty-reduction target,” the report says. “Based on recently updated projections from the World Bank, the overall poverty rate is still expected to fall below 15 per cent by 2015, indicating that the Millennium Development Goal target can be met.”

The number of deaths of children under the age of five declined from 12.4 million in 1990 to 8.1 million in 2009, which means nearly 12,000 fewer children die each day. Increased funding and intensive control efforts have cut deaths from malaria by 20 per cent worldwide – from nearly 985,000 in 2000 to 781,000 in 2009, the reports notes.

Increased funding from various sources has also expanded key programmes, such as treatment for people living with HIV/AIDS.

The report, however, stressed that efforts need to be intensified especially among the most vulnerable members of the global population who continue to be marginalised as a result of sex, age, ethnicity or disability. Disparities in progress between urban and rural areas also remain significant, according to the report.

The document points out, for example, that wide gaps remain in women’s access to paid work in at least half of all regions and following the job losses in 2008 and 2009, the growth in employment during the economic recovery in 2010, especially in the developing world, was lower for women than for men.

“The poorest of the world are being left behind. We need to reach out and lift them into our lifeboat,” [Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon](#) [said](#) during the launch of the report during the high-level segment of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) in Geneva. “Now is the time for equity, inclusion, sustainability and women’s empowerment,” he added.

“Achieving all the MDGs will require extra effort. Even where we have seen rapid growth, as in East Asia and other parts of the developing world, progress is not universal, nor are the benefits evenly shared,” said Mr. Ban. “Stubbornly high unemployment persists in rich and poor countries alike. And in many cases, the wealth gap is widening between the prosperous and the marginalized and between urban and rural,” he added.

The report also highlights the fact that as a result of concerted efforts to achieve the MDGs, new HIV infections have been on a steady decline. In 2009, some 2.6 million people were newly infected with HIV – a 21 per cent drop since 1997, when new infections peaked. The number of people receiving antiretroviral therapy for HIV or AIDS increased 13-fold from 2004 to 2009, thanks to increased funding and expanded programmes.

An estimated 1.1 billion people in urban areas and 723 million people in rural areas gained access to an improved drinking water source between 1990 and 2008.

Progress has, however, been uneven, the report notes, highlighting the large gaps between and within countries. The poorest children made the slowest progress in terms of improved nutrition and survival, and nearly a quarter of children in the developing world were underweight in 2009, with the poorest children most affected.

Advances in sanitation has also often bypassed the poor and those living in rural areas, with more than 2.6 billion people still lacking access to toilets or other forms of improved sanitation. In Southern Asia, for example, sanitation coverage for the poorest 40 per cent of households hardly increased between 1995 and 2008.

“Everywhere, social inequalities have grown too wide,” Mr. Ban later [told](#) reporters. “We need to change that. We need to do things differently. We need a renewed global partnership for global social progress.”

The MDGs were agreed at the UN Millennium Summit in September 2000, with eight targets for reducing extreme poverty and hunger, improving health and education, empowering women and ensuring environmental sustainability by 2015.

Last year, world leaders attending a summit at UN Headquarters reaffirmed their commitment to the goals and called for intensified collective action and the expansion of successful approaches. A Global Strategy for Women’s and Children’s Health was also launched, attracting over \$40 billion in pledges.

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