In 2000, the world adopted the United Nations Millennium Declaration, setting out a series of time-bound targets — with 2015 as the deadline — that are known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The eight MDGs range from halving extreme poverty to halting the spread of HIV/AIDS and providing universal primary education.

At a special session at the United Nations in the last week of September, leaders agreed to scale up action against extreme poverty, hunger and disease and called for a summit to adopt the next set of post-2015 goals that will balance the three elements of sustainable development: providing economic transformation and opportunity to lift people out of poverty, advancing social justice and protecting the environment.

After 13 years, India has made progress but has not achieved the MDGs: according to the government’s Statistical Handbook of India 2013, the poverty ratio is likely to be 26.7% by 2015 as against the target of 23.9%, while infant mortality rate (IMR) would be 43 per 1,000 live births as against the target of 27. The child mortality rate would be at 52 per 1,000 live births compared to the target of 62. Similarly, the maternal mortality rate (MMR) would come down to 139 per 1 lakh births by 2015 from 437 in 1990.

According to the government’s Statistical Handbook of India 2013, the poverty ratio is likely to be 26.7% by 2015 as against the target of 23.9%, while infant mortality rate (IMR) would be 43 per 1,000 live births as against the target of 27.

is expected to reduce MMR by three quarters between 1990 and 2015 to 109 per 1 lakh births.

While the country seems to have made progress on the MDGs, certain socioeconomic groups continue to lag behind. Among Dalits, Muslims and tribals, poverty rates range between 30% and 33%, and the gap between these groups and the national average is increasing.

The reduction in poverty incidence has been slowest in the growth centres, the cities: annual reduction has been 2.3% in cities against 2.5% in rural areas between 1993 and 2010. This paradox highlights some of the systemic factors that skew the country’s development benefits towards relatively more privileged groups. A plan for reducing inequality was a major omission in the original list of MDGs. Without targeted efforts to reduce gaps between the rich and poor, the next set of global development goals cannot be met. So, ‘inequality’ must be included in a future framework for development.

High levels of inequality are not just morally objectionable, but they are damaging for social stability and to growth itself.

So instead of under-investing in human development, the Indian government needs to provide sufficient resources to make the MDGs a success. To achieve this, it needs to raise additional revenue and introduce innovative financing mechanisms like a financial transactions tax.

nisha@oxfamindia.org

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THE VERDICT IS OUT BUT THE PROBLEM REMAINS!

The verdict in the Delhi gang rape case is out. But violence against women continues to be a growing concern in India as under-reporting of major forms of crimes against women coupled with long periods of trial in the court has resulted in a situation where many “Nirbhayas” are still awaiting justice!

The “Nirbhaya” gang rape incident in December 2012 will probably mark a turning point in the prolonged history of violence against women in India. Suddenly the media has become the big push factor in flashing diurnally several rape cases across the country.

Skim through the National Crime records Bureau (NCRB) data for the year 2012 and you will find there has been a marginal increase in reporting major forms of crime against women which includes rape and atrocities on women but with a high rate of pending trials at the courts. At an all India level, the reporting of cases of rape has increased by 2.9%. However, incidences of crime against women in remote locations and with women and girls belonging to marginalized communities still largely go unreported. There have been several instances where the police have denied registering a case.

Ironically, the NCRB data shows that charge-sheeting by the police is seemingly as high as 95. Charge-sheets1 are filed against the number of cases that gets reported at the police station which evidently is lesser in numbers. Some cases are withdrawn in the period between registering a case and the charge-sheet.

Another matter of concern is the time period of filing a charge-sheet which ranges from six months to a year or more. Some of the critical reasons for delay are: delay in filing First Information Report (FIR)2, delay in investigation, submission of medical reports, tampering of evidences and delay in the forensic reports.

Apparently, the main bottleneck for the speedy resolution of cases is the judiciary. Disposal by courts is as low as 24% and pending trials is as high as 85%.

The NCRB data also found that close relatives or acquaintances of the victims are accused in 98% rape cases, as opposed to the traditional belief that most rape is perpetrated by men unknown to the woman.

Amongst the other forms of crime against women, the percentage of kidnapping and abduction has increased at 7.6%, the increase in the percentage of cases registered under Section 498-A of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) is 7.5%.

The rise in the reporting of crimes against women under some sections of IPC is a welcome step. But we still have a long way to go to improve the law and order system for ending violence against women within India.

Even as the verdict on the Delhi gang-rape case is out, Oxfam India expresses its concerns on the rising incidences of violence against women across the country.

Some of the key recommendations that Oxfam India would like to propose are:

- Immediate counselling and other allied support to survivors
- Fast track courts for speedy disposal of pending cases across the country
- Ensure a reduction in the time period for filing a charge sheet by the police
- Ensure a reporting system that demarcates the actual number of cases coming to police and number of cases getting registered through FIRs to address the issue of under reporting
- Build accountability of police and enforcement agencies in adhering to provisions within existing laws like time period for filing of FIRs, medical examination and so on.
- Proper implementation of the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 20133 to deal with the cases of violence against women across the country.

1 The charge sheet is the final report prepared by police after investigation and submitted to Court having jurisdiction.
2 The FIR regarding the commission of a cognizable offence is recorded by the police to register for further action and investigation.
3 The Criminal Law (Amendment) Bill, 2013 passed by the Lok Sabha on 19 March 2013, and by the Rajya Sabha on 21 March 2013, which provides for the amendment of Indian Penal Code, Indian Evidence Act, and Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973 on laws related to sexual offences.
TRIBAL COMMUNITIES IN CHHATTISGARH GAIN ACCESS TO THEIR OWN COMMON LAND

“We want to conserve the forests so that our next generation can live”

Tribals living in Bule and 33 other villages in the forests of Udaipur block in the Sarguja district of Chhattisgarh now have something to cheer about — for the first time they have been granted legal access to the common land which they have been naturally protecting and conserving for generations.

This right over their own forest land, known as the Community Forest Rights (CFR), has been granted to them under an empowering provision of the Forest Rights Act (FRA). CFR becomes vital for the village communities in order to save their resources from being diverted for development and industrial purposes.

“We want to conserve the forests, so that our next generation can live. It’s not a matter of years but generations,” said Prem Sai, a member of Bule village whose thoughts on saving their forest and natural resources reflected the opinion of the community at large.

The area around Bule, like many villages in Central India’s forest belt is rich in coal and other minerals. Not surprisingly then, the Government initiated steps to survey the land for prospective coal mining. Plans were also drawn up to build a dam on a river that flows alongside. While the areas around it where the villagers grow rice, kodu, kutki and maize will be submerged if the project comes through, the dam itself will be used for a power project nearby. The villagers do not have any legal rights over the land they have lived on for generations and as a result, they are unable to protest.

Bule represents a typical situation in Chhattisgarh. The state’s majority population is the adivasis including particularly vulnerable tribal groups (PVTGs) who have been living in the coal and mineral rich forests for generations. Many of these forests are earmarked for mining by the State government in order to bring in investment, development and so-called ‘growth’. Control by the forest department and high economic interest has hence made claiming of forest rights by the adivasis especially CFRs, a complicated issue. State government officials are not much aware about the rights of the community under FRA.

Since 2012, Chaupal, Oxfam India’s partner in the region, has been working to create awareness on FRA and train the village communities on the process of filing claims for Individual and Community Forest Rights. Chaupal also had the critical responsibility of advocating with the district level government officials to make them aware of the provisions of FRA and the importance of recognizing CFR in the State.

With Oxfam India’s support, a series of meetings were held and a Jan Sunwai (Public Hearing) on FRA was conducted on March 2012 in collaboration with the State Tribal Department, which gave a boost to the FRA process in the State.

By March 2013, Chaupal with support from Oxfam India, Poorest Area Civil Society (PACS) program and Church Auxiliary for Social Action (CASAI), was successful in filing CFR claims for 40 villages in Ambikapur and Sarguja districts over 16963 hectares of forest land and submitting it to the Sub Divisional office for approval. The effort bore fruit as on Sept 7, 2013, in a momentous occasion, the Chief Minister distributed the 34 ‘said’ CFR titles to the villages.

Though a remarkable achievement as a result of continuous advocacy, this success falls short of being complete. All the given titles are conditional and do not entail the full extent of CFR under the Forest Rights Act. Out of the nine types of Community Rights relating to management and conservation of forest resources, the state has recognized only three — rights over fuel wood, rights to collect minor forest produce and grazing rights for cattle. There are also conditions imposed which violates the spirit of the Act and provides an unfair deal to the adivasi communities like those in Bule.

Nonetheless, Chaupal and Oxfam India have been able to build in-roads into a difficult political situation and give us hope that with constant efforts and advocacy, the adivasis can get their due rights. As the next step now, Chaupal and Oxfam India along with the state CFR network and national CFR advocacy platform (CFR-LA) will file an appeal to the district level committee and also write to the Minister, MoTA (Ministry of Tribal Affairs) on behalf of the Gram Sabhas to reverse the claims and grant full and unconditional titles.
UTTARAKHAND RESPONSE: A RACE AGAINST TIME

With winter fast approaching and temperatures expected to go below the freezing point, it is a race against time for Oxfam India and its humanitarian staff as they endeavour to provide immediate humanitarian assistance to decrease the public health risks to 4,000 affected households in Rudraprayag and Uttarkashi districts.

Even as reaching out to some of the remote villages remains a difficult task for the field staff, Oxfam has speeded up the provision of food aid, water and sanitation facilities, public health services and temporary health materials by the end of December 2013.

Recurrent landslides and road damage due to continuous rains have been a dampener to providing relief in both the operational districts. Roads to Guptkashi and project areas in Uttarkashi are unsafe and in bad shape. Continuous rains have made travel to the field extremely risky and reaching the most vulnerable beneficiaries in isolated villages still remains a challenge.

Since June 2013, Oxfam India has been responding to the Uttarakhand crisis and has reached 3000 households with provision of dry food rations, emergency shelter materials and hygiene kits. In addition, cash for work and unconditional cash transfer has been provided to 1400 households to ensure a steady flow of income for food security. Transitional shelter assistance provided to 225 households.

Activities planned till March 2014 include ensuring safe access to good quality drinking water, access to sanitation facilities, rehabilitation of village water systems and public health practice and behaviour change.

Oxfam India will also be providing support to 20 affected Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) centres targeting children in the affected areas.

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