

Op-ed: Millennium Development Goals: Time is running out

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Dayaram expected to hold his baby in his arms. Instead, he was left to mourn his wife and unborn child. They died of complications during labour because Dayaram's wife, Bushba, had to walk fifty kilometers from her remote village in northern India to the nearest hospital. Bushba's fate is not exceptional.

Saving the lives of the many women like Bushba is the aim of one of the eight Millennium Development Goals which the world's leaders endorsed 10 years ago. The leaders will meet again this September to assess progress in reaching these Goals, which were conceived to reduce poverty, hunger and disease and to promote gender equality, health, education, environmental sustainability and global partnerships by 2015. Full implementation of these MDGs is literally vital, as is tackling violations of human rights from which poverty and exclusion almost invariably stem. The lives of the world's poorest and most vulnerable people are at stake.

According to current World Bank estimates, more than 1.4 billion people live in extreme poverty. The recent food, economic and financial crises will push an additional 64 million people into extreme poverty by the end of this year. Over 1 billion people suffer from malnutrition. In sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia, poverty remains stubbornly high; the number of persons

living below US\$1 a day went up by 92 million in sub-Saharan Africa and by 8 million in Western Asia between 1990 and 2005.

In many countries, hundreds of pregnant rural women like Bushba die unnecessarily because of a lack of accessible medical care. Maternal health is a human rights concern. Indeed, implicit in the MDGs is the concern that all people should be able to meet their basic human rights, including the right to food, to shelter, to education, to obtain remedies when their rights are violated, and to fully participate in public life. The interrelation between freedom from want and freedom from fear is made explicit by the UN Charter and by international human rights law. It must also be regarded as a central tenet of the world leaders' discussions on the MDGs.

Such discussions are awaited with a mix of great expectations and even greater apprehension. This is because concrete and positive change still eludes millions. Promises have been made and have been broken, condemning multitudes to a life of poverty, neglect and abuse. We cannot afford to keep disappointing the hopes of those who live at the margins of their own societies—let alone the global community. Their disenfranchisement may carry a higher cost than investing resources and political will in their empowerment.

And empowerment cannot be achieved if development policies are pursued in a human rights vacuum. Yet, for too long, governments have considered human rights and development to be two very separate issues, each to be tackled independently and according to a different order of priority. Economic development has been the overriding concern, exacerbating the

gap between the rich and the poor. But in combination with human rights, economic growth strategies can be a powerful tool to help us realize the UN Charter's vision of a more equal, secure and just world in larger freedom.

Human rights principles such as equality, participation, accountability and the rule of law are instrumental for development to take firm root and be both equitable and sustainable. Freedom and participation, and all other civil and political rights, bolster the common wealth of societies. In turn, social and economic rights are critical to empower an informed polity to count and be counted, as well as to devise effective development policies. And gender equality is the biggest development multiplier, known to work everywhere.

I am convinced that Bushba and many of the estimated 500,000 women who die unnecessarily every year during pregnancy and childbirth would live and even prosper if, in addition to medical care, they were given the chance to educate themselves, to access information and to participate in the decisions about their pregnancies and how to deliver their children.

Development cannot be a project imposed on people but must be a common journey led by the people themselves.

This is why a human rights approach to development is essential: it puts people in control of their own lives, as it puts women in control of their own bodies and fate. When leaders meet in New York this September to decide upon the future of the Bushbas of this world, I will invite them to join me in

an effort to make human rights the basis for development. It's too late for Bushba, but for many people who *can* still be saved, time is running out.