

ICPD Beyond 2014 Issue Brief: The Far-Reaching Effects of Inequalities

The global development model has lifted many out of poverty over the past decades, but its economic and social benefits have been unequally distributed and have come at great cost for the environment. Article 1 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights affirmed that “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights...,” a principle re-affirmed in the ICPD Programme of Action, yet severe inequalities in income and wealth, economic, social and political empowerment and participation, and lack of access to quality education and health, including sexual and reproductive health and rights, preclude equitable development and prevent large sectors of the population, in particular women and young people, from rising out of poverty, exercising their human rights, and contributing fully to society. In this brief we highlight the far-reaching impact of inequalities and the need to eradicate poverty and break the cycles of exclusion and inequality to ensure a sustainable future.

Income and Wealth Inequality

Between 1990 and 2010, the number of people living in extreme poverty fell by half in developing countries, a reduction of 0.7 billion people; yet 1.2 billion people still remain in extreme poverty. Many of the world’s poor live in countries caught in “development traps” of bad governance, wasted natural resource wealth, lack of trading partners, or conflict, and have seen only limited gains in health and well-being since 1994. Some are poised to become poorer as the rest of the global population anticipates better livelihoods.

The current wealth distribution presents a serious threat to inclusive economic growth, poverty reduction, and both social and environmental sustainability. Only 8% of adults hold approximately 83% of the world’s wealth, and 53% of gains in income over past 20 years went to the top 5% of earners, with essentially no gains to the bottom 10%.

Inequality is a threat to social cohesion, empathy and shared responsibility because it generates and exacerbates social segmentation. This is true politically, where economic resources significantly determine political access, influence and outcomes, and socially, because it diminishes the likelihood that people with varying wealth and income will interact and gain the chance for shared understanding and empathy. It also constrains class mobility and therefore people’s ability to emerge out of poverty and achieve more secure livelihoods.

The consumption-based model for development is inherently unequal and proving unsustainable. The majority of the Earth’s finite natural resources have been diverted to a small part of the population, limiting the resource base for poverty reduction. The poor bear the brunt of environmental burdens, despite having little or no impact on greenhouse gas emissions, and lacking the resources or societal supports to adapt effectively to current and future changes.

The Many Faces of Inequality

Growing inequality, exclusion and discrimination due to income, gender, place of residence, ethnicity or race, disability status, migrant status, sexual orientation and gender identity, or other factors, deeply impacts all of society at great cost, limiting people’s dignity, health, productivity and exercise of their human rights.

Women continue to be paid less than men, command less authority, and to be over-represented in informal, temporary and insecure labor. While women’s paid employment has risen since 1995, they are under-represented in positions of power, and their overall work burden remains higher, since they bear the majority of the responsibilities at home.

The largest demographic cohort of young people (10-24 years) is entering their productive and reproductive lives, and their success will define development worldwide. **Yet lack of education and ill-health remain common risk factors and**

manifestations of poverty and unequal access among young people, curtailing economic growth, well-being, and the ability of both individuals and societies to innovate and thrive in a changing world. These cohorts have the potential to jumpstart economic growth and spur innovation needed for a sustainable future, if they have opportunities for employment and participation, and the human and social capital to take advantage of these opportunities.

As the number and proportion of older persons (60+ years) rises in all countries, inequalities experienced in childhood and their impacts are perpetuated into adulthood for a growing population. **Many adults and older persons remain trapped in cycles of illiteracy, limited employment, poverty, and poor health.** A lack of pension systems and other non-contributory schemes in many countries compounds these vulnerabilities, forcing older persons to remain in poverty or in informal, insecure and low-paid employment.

Poverty is both a driver and consequence of disability, though the relationship is understudied. Disability is more prevalent in low-income countries and among women, and increases dramatically with age. Disability hampers educational attainment and interferes with labour participation. Further, persons experiencing disabilities are more likely to experience discrimination, social exclusion and violence.

Indigenous peoples continue to be subject to economic, social and political marginalization that has undercut their access to development. Indigenous peoples often experience structural discrimination that is reflected in lower educational attainment, poor health outcomes, higher poverty levels, as well as threats to their land and cultural heritage.

An alarmingly high proportion of people continue to live without access to quality sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services, particularly the poor. Aggregate improvements

in sexual and reproductive health and rights mask inequalities between and within countries, with flat or marginal progress among poor households. Sub-Saharan Africa, and to a lesser extent South Asia, continue to have some of the least accessible and most fragile health systems alongside some of the worst SRH outcomes. Within select middle and high-income countries, pockets of weak and poor health system coverage or quality abound for select areas or populations.

Globally, the maternal mortality ratio declined 47% between 1990 and 2010, yet 800 women still die from pregnancy or childbirth-related complications each day and differences in MMR between developed and developing regions remain stark.

Gains in skilled attendance at birth mask inequalities in access to care, with skilled attendance at birth showing the greatest inequity of all SRH indicators, across household wealth quintiles. Access among urban and rural women is also strikingly inequitable. Disparities in skilled attendance and emergency obstetric care highlight the limited capacity of many health systems to provide essential SRH care to poor women.

In an increasingly urbanized and interconnected world, **migration can offer opportunities to improve livelihoods and living standards and generate greater equality.** Yet internal and international migrants often face unequal access to social protection, housing and justice, impeding their full integration and exercise of human rights in their places of destination.

Sustained discrimination can lead to intergenerational cycles of poverty and disadvantage. There is growing evidence that the social cost of discrimination is high and negatively affects performance, productivity, and health, including childbearing. And evidence shows where there is a high level of intolerance and discrimination directed towards one population group, intolerance is also often

directed towards multiple population groups.

Key Messages and Areas for Action

A broadly educated, healthy, secure and empowered population is the goal of development, and also necessary for inclusive economic growth. **Active states that promote the capabilities of their people, provide universal public services, govern effectively and efficiently, fight discrimination and are shaped by the political participation of their people are able to generate more equal development.**

Governments should develop, strengthen and implement effective, integrated, coordinated, and coherent national strategies to eradicate poverty and break cycles of exclusion and inequality as a condition for achieving development and for all persons enjoy the protection and exercise of their human rights, also targeting persons belonging to marginalized or disadvantaged groups, and in both urban and rural areas.