

The Millennium Development Goals Report



UNITED NATIONS

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Poverty on the rise in Western Asia, UN report finds, worsened by global crises

DEVELOPMENT GOALS OFF-TRACK, WITH DISMAL LACK OF PROGRESS ON WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

CAIRO, 6 JULY – Poverty in Western Asia has been increasing steadily, with the absolute number of poor almost quadrupling, from 3 to 11 million, between 1990 and 2005, according to a UN progress report released today.

The situation has been exacerbated by the global economic and financial crises, which have pushed tens of millions of people into vulnerable employment, where they are self-employed or working in family businesses for little pay, says the *Millennium Development Goals Report 2009*.

The report, launched today in Geneva by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, finds that, at current growth projections, overall poverty rates in the developing world will still fall in 2009, but at a much slower pace than before the onset of the economic crisis. For many countries, slower economic growth may mean the difference between reaching or not reaching the poverty reduction targets agreed by world leaders in the year 2000, as part of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Only six years remain until the 2015 deadline.

“We cannot allow an unfavourable economic climate to prevent us from realizing the commitments made in 2000,” Secretary-General Ban states in the foreword to the report. “The global community cannot turn its back on the poor and the vulnerable”. He adds: “Now is the time to accelerate progress towards the MDGs. The goals are within reach, and even in the very poor countries, with strong political commitment and sufficient and sustained funding.”

In Western Asia, the negative trends partly reflect the impact of on-going conflicts in the region and displacement of people, now worsened by the economic crisis:

- The percentage of people living in extreme poverty, on less than \$1.25 a day, increased steadily from 2 to 6 per cent, between 1990 and 2005.
- Economic hardship has increased the numbers of the working poor, who cannot earn enough to support their families and rise above the poverty line. In a worst-case scenario, the International Labour Organization (ILO) projects that in 2008, the percentage of working poor rose to 25 per cent, from 10 per cent the year before.
- The report warns that the regional ambition of meeting the target of reducing hunger is now in danger of being derailed by the current crisis. In Western Asia, the proportion of hungry people was already on the rise between 1990-1992 and 2004-2006, and there was no progress between 2006 and 2008.

The regional situation remains particularly dismal on the goals to improve women's empowerment and gender equality, according to the report. Western Asia continues to have among the lowest gender parity indexes for both primary and secondary education. The share of women in non-agricultural wage employment is also among the lowest compared to all regions, indicating that employment opportunities for women in this region remain extremely low.

Women have also struggled to advance in political representation, holding only 9 per cent of parliamentary seats.

On the positive side, the report highlights significant strides made towards access to safe drinking water, although in rural areas, 20 per cent of the population still uses an unimproved source of water. Major advances were also made in progress providing access to safe sanitation, with 84 per cent of the population using some form of improved sanitation – such as toilets or latrines – in 2006.

The Millennium Development Goals Report is the most comprehensive global MDG assessment to date. It is based on a set of data prepared by over 20 organizations both within and outside the United Nations system, including the World Bank and Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The project is overseen by the UN Secretariat's Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

For more information, see www.un.org/millenniumgoals or <http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/>

The Western Asia region is comprised of the following countries: Bahrain, Cyprus, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Occupied Palestinian Territory, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syrian Arab Republic, Turkey, United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

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