

## Human rights are key to the MDGs: Kenya

by Salil Shetty

Amina was almost raped while walking to the closest latrine in a slum in Nairobi. It was 7pm when she was surrounded by a group of four men who hit her, undressed her and were about to rape her when her cries were heard and a group of residents came to save her. Although she knew one of the men involved in the assault, Amina did not go to the police as she feared reprisal attacks.

Sadly, Amina's story is all too familiar in Nairobi, a city which contains over two million slum dwellers. Women and girls in Nairobi's slums live under the constant threat of sexual violence, leaving them too scared to leave their houses to use latrines.

Even by day, latrines are few and far between and invariably involve walking long distances. According to official figures, only 24 per cent of residents in Nairobi's informal settlements have access to toilets and latrines at household level.

Despite some positive features, Kenya's Millennium Development Goal (MDG) policies to meet the target on sanitation do not address the specific needs of women who face the threat of violence because they lack adequate sanitation.

The MDGs represent an unprecedented promise to address global poverty, adopting eight targets addressing a range of issues from extreme poverty and health to education and living standards to be met by 2015.

But, a decade on, the fate of the MDGs is in doubt. The UN has issued a clear warning that many of the MDGs will not be met in time unless efforts are radically ramped up. Even by the most conservative estimates, more than a billion people are being left behind.

Amnesty International's work over the years has shown how discrimination and exclusion can often cause or exacerbate many of the problems the MDGs seek to address. In rich countries as well as developing ones, vulnerable people on the fringes of society are frequently subjected to violations of their right to adequate housing, health, water, sanitation, and education, among others. They are often left out of consultations about things that will affect them, or ignored when they try to make their voices heard. As Amnesty has also shown, equality and inclusion are essential for making things better.

Ten years on, it is worthwhile to reflect upon where we are and where we need to go to meet the MDG goals. The architects of the MDGs established the original targets as a starting point for progress. They always intended that states should set their own individual targets, adapted to their national contexts but within the MDG framework. This was left for states to do so voluntarily. Unfortunately, most countries have chosen not to act.

Some countries have adopted targets above the MDG level. For example, Latin American and the Caribbean countries have expanded their commitments on education to include secondary education. In Africa and South Asia, Kenya, South Africa and Sri Lanka adopted targets stronger than the MDGs for access to water and sanitation. Peru has taken steps towards addressing health barriers for poorer women and Nepal has explored improving maternal health care.

These countries have shown that it is possible to adapt the MDGs to address some of their most pressing needs and to bolster the rights of some of their most vulnerable people. The rest of the world should be working to do the same.

We have an opportunity to ensure that the political momentum around the MDGs can be used as a catalyst to bring about the far deeper and longer-term change that is necessary for people living in poverty.

But this can only be achieved if world leaders make a commitment at this month's MDG Summit to uphold the human rights of those who need the greatest support. Discrimination against women and exclusion of the marginalized must be addressed in all MDG efforts, if they are to be effective.

To achieve this, all governments should make an honest assessment of their progress on the MDGs. They should work to end discrimination and promote equality and participation, ensuring that progress towards the MDGs is inclusive, aimed at ending discrimination, guaranteeing gender equality and prioritizing the most disadvantaged groups.

Finally, they should remember that the Millennium Declaration – from which the MDGs are drawn – promised to strive for the protection and promotion of *all* human rights, civil, cultural, economic, social and political rights, for *all*.

As the members of the United Nations gather this month to reflect upon the progress made on the MDGs, little has changed for Nairobi's slum dwellers. For them life is characterized by exclusion from health, water, sanitation and education services, harassment by the authorities and the constant threat of being forcibly evicted.

For Nairobi's two million slum dwellers - and the women who risk rape each time they walk to the latrine after dark - there is still little help, and little hope that things will improve any time soon. It is up to us to help change that.

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