

Human rights are key to the MDGs: Cambodia

by Salil Shetty

The security forces moved in before dawn. More than 70 officers, some armed with guns and electric batons, forcibly evicted the last remaining families from a lower income area of Phnom Penh known as Group 78, ending a long-simmering dispute between the families and city officials.

Lim Sambo, 54, and his wife and five children, were among the 60 families that had been living under the threat of eviction for more than three years. They had lived at Group 78 for nearly 20 years, earning a living selling coconuts at Phnom Penh's Central Market.

After the July 2009 eviction, they moved to Dangkor District, nearly 20 km from the Central Market, along with other families from Group 78 and those forced from their land in similar circumstances. They now struggle to earn a living and have no access to electricity or drinking water. "In Cambodia, the government takes the land from the poor and gives it to the rich," Lim Sambo told Amnesty International in December 2009. "This is the way the poor are made poorer and the rich are made richer."

Throughout the dispute, the Cambodian authorities followed none of the safeguards required under international law. The compensation given to the families was far below the market value of the land they lived on. All of those displaced face lower incomes, higher living expenses and longer distances to work. Many describe a variety of health problems, including psychological trauma following the eviction.

Like the other members of the United Nations, the Cambodian government committed to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000. 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. Sadly, the MDGs do not require states to provide basic legal rights against forced evictions like those experienced by the families of Group 78.

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 UN gather this month to reflect upon the progress made on the MDGs, forced relocations continue in Phnom Penh and elsewhere in Cambodia. The families of Group 78 have had their lives shattered. They had no power. They had no choice. It is up to all of us to help prevent this in the future, and to ensure the MDGs do not leave anyone behind.

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