

FROM THE UN  
**INEQUALITY AND THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS**

To quote the ancient Greek biographer Plutarch --" An imbalance between rich and poor is the oldest and most fatal ailment of all republics."

This is also true for the world as a whole.

Ten years ago, the world's leaders pledged to achieve universal primary education and reduce poverty, hunger, and child and maternal mortality--all by 2015.

These bold, moral pledges, by the world community, is one of the most inspiring endeavors of current times. Media coverage of such a major ethical project has been minimal .

The goals they set concentrate on global averages, which hide the huge differences between countries. For example, in Nigeria 77 percent of the population lived on less than \$1 a day in 2008, up from 49 per cent in 1990. In Ethiopia, the same figure dropped to 16 per cent from 60 per cent, according to a recent study by the Overseas Development Institute, a British research group.

There are also huge differences **within** countries. A national average can hide the suffering of groups that are discriminated against in anti-poverty programs. Progress depends on narrowing inequality, sending resources into slums and remote rural areas and creating jobs for the poor. Ethiopia focused on its poorest rural population. Inequality is much less in Ethiopia than in Nigeria.

Organizations within the United Nations have acknowledged the importance of inequality. The Geneva-based United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, for example, has argued that the UN is ignoring the critical role of jobs and income inequality in its strategy to fight world poverty and hunger. Many leaders have resisted dealing with the hot potato of inequality and would rather deal with averages. It is often a matter of politics and fair government.

A recent report by UNICEF documents that one million spent on young children in the most remote disadvantaged areas—rather than on people who are easier to reach, the current strategy--would save 60 per cent more lives. UNICEF advocates training more local community health workers in remote villages, urging the poor to seek care, and covering transportation costs to hospitals. One suggestion is to build houses near urban hospitals where rural women can stay before delivery.

The latest United States census tells an important story about inequality here. Most of the wealth created since the 1970's went to the richest Americans. The median income ( adjusted for inflation ) has scarcely improved since 1970. Wages have stagnated and inequality has risen dramatically. In the 1970's the top 1 per cent of earners made 8% of all income. In the late 1990's it was 15%. By 2007 the richest 1% of the population was taking in more than 23%.

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The causes? The decline in unions, technological changes, and the increase in the United States trade deficit .

President Johnson's War on Poverty proved that social policy directed at the poor can work. The poverty rate fell dramatically in ten years. We also know that the inequality in the United States today is no longer sustainable. As Robert Reich, the former Labor secretary in the Clinton Administration, has concluded: consumers can't or won't buy enough to keep turning the economy around. There are limits to how much people can borrow and how many more hours they can work. The recession may be officially over, but as long as unemployment is high—and inequality sky-high—the economic future for most Americans is in danger.

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