



PRESS RELEASE

Alternative poverty estimates say progress is too slow to achieve the Millennium Development Goals by 2015

New York, September 22 -- Contrary to repeated mainstream claims that poverty is diminishing fast in the world, the coverage of the basic needs required to escape poverty is slowing down and even regressing in many places, says the **2008 Basic Capabilities Index** (BCI) released today by **Social Watch**, a network of more than 400 civil society organizations in 70 countries.

The Basic Capabilities Index, made public today by Social Watch states that the majority of the planet's population lives in countries with dormant social indicators or progressing too slow to reach an acceptable standard of life in the next decade, or for which there is no reliable information. Progress in basic social indicators slowed down last year all over the world and at the present rate – the index stresses- the internationally agreed poverty reduction goals will not be met by 2015, unless substantial changes occur. In Sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, progress in social indicators is extremely slow and, at the current rate, would only reach an acceptable BCI score in the 23rd century.

The whole index figures and graphs are available at www.socialwatch.org

Out of 176 countries for which a BCI figure is computed, only 21 register noticeable progress in relation to how they were in 2000. Other 55 countries show progress that is slight and slow, while other 77 countries are stagnant.

Setbacks are registered in Central Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean and even in Europe (Georgia), yet the majority of countries which have regressed the most in social development are to be found in Sub-Saharan Africa where they are extremely alarming, since countries in this region were already among the lowest in the index.

A summary index, the BCI provides a consistent general overview of the health status and basic educational performance of each country and is proven to be closely correlated to the measurement of other capabilities related to countries' social development.

The Basic Capabilities Index is a simple average of three indicators: percentage of children who reach the 5th year of primary education, mortality among children under five, and percentage of child deliveries attended by skilled health personnel. The BCI assigns a score to each country and assesses its evolution over time for those countries for which reliable data are available. Information is insufficient to show trends for 23 countries, of which China is one. As the impact of the food crisis starting in 2006 begins to be registered by incoming statistical data, Social Watch researchers estimate that the situation is likely to worsen in next months.

By not using income as an indicator, the BCI is consistent with a definition of poverty based on capabilities and (the denial of) human rights, thus free from the inaccuracies affecting income-based estimates. Last August 26, the World Bank corrected by almost 50% its estimation of the total number of people living in the world with under one dollar a day, from less than a billion to 1.4 billion.

The BCI has been calculated for 176 countries, which were then grouped into categories. The most alarming realities are to be found in countries with critical BCI scores, followed by those with very low BCI and low BCI. Only 52 countries have BCI value of 98 or 99, which implies almost universal access to basic education and health services. Such a high BCI can only be achieved without malnourishment (of children and their mothers) and when basic housing and sanitation are provided, Social Watch understands a BCI value close to the maximum to be synonymous with the “dignity for all” that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights wants to achieve.

“Such dignity is not the objective of social development”, specified Social Watch’s coordinator Roberto Bissio, “but a necessary starting point to achieve it”.

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