

Religious minorities and the Millennium Development Goals

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Christian and Hindu minority girls in Pakistan mainly come from poor families. They struggle to afford basic provisions. They are forced to make difficult decisions about whether or not school should be a priority. Indeed, the motivation for sending girls to school is low. Girls may be vulnerable to violence or kidnapping *en route* to schools by those determined to intimidate, harm or forcibly convert religious minorities. A parochial or state school may be nearby and accessible, but even these are under threat from militant local leaders seeking to close all schools except *madrassas* (Islamic religious schools). Once in school, non-Muslim girls are likely to face discrimination in the classroom for their religious beliefs. That is, if they are permitted to register at all.

Pakistani girls belonging to religious minorities have little prospects for empowerment in the long term either. Pakistani constitutional provisions prohibit these girls from reaching the highest levels of decision-making in government because they are not Muslims; anti-blasphemy laws dissuade many of the country's non-Muslims from speaking out against government policies. Gender and religious discrimination will compound each other to reduce their access to employment, limiting them to the most menial of jobs with the least labour rights protection. Ultimately, Pakistani girls and women belonging to religious minorities are excluded at a very early age from making a contribution to or benefiting from the overall economic and cultural wealth of their country.

The situation of these minority girls is just one example of the issues faced by religious minorities and women from religious minorities worldwide. These issues should be at the top of the priority list for all those involved in reducing poverty and discrimination on a national and international scale. But for people from these minorities, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs, see Box) are a distant unknown. What is worse is that minorities are not mentioned in any of the 8 goals, 21 targets or 60 indicators intended, among other urgent concerns, to reduce poverty and maternal mortality, and offer universal access to primary education, including for girls. Furthermore, there is no requirement that states collect disaggregated data to measure the progress (or not) of marginalized minority groups when reporting on any of these targets.

But the stakes for countries are high. If these girls do not make it through primary education,

Pakistan will not meet Goal 2 on universal access to primary education. Their lower levels of literacy and higher rates of poverty will also affect Goal 4 on child mortality and Goal 5 on maternal health; and their continued exclusion will undermine Goal 3 on gender equality. The MDGs are meant to be achieved by 2015 – there are only five years to go. With the September 2010 UN MDG Summit in sight – intended, as the UN states, to ‘boost

Key aims of the MDGs

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are a set of commitments made by governments at the 2000 United Nations (UN) Millennium Summit. The collective aim is to use these goals as the framework for national and international development activities to 2015. The MDGs consist of 8 goals, 21 targets and 60 indicators. The key targets include: the reduction by half of the number of people living in extreme poverty (i.e. on less than US \$1 per day); universal access to primary education, including for girls; reduction by three-quarters of maternal mortality and by two-thirds of under-5 child mortality; a reverse in the spread of HIV/AIDS and malaria; a reduction by half of the number of people without access to safe water and sanitation; and integration of sustainable development principles in country programmes.

Overarching these targets is Goal 8, namely to ‘develop a global partnership for development’, that aims to reform the international trade and financial system. Donor countries report on their contribution towards the MDGs through international development cooperation, while countries in receipt of development assistance report on their domestic progress in fulfilling the MDGs in periodic MDG Country Reports. ■

progress' towards the MDGs – this is a crucial time to consider new approaches that will help narrow the gap between current realities and intended outcomes. This chapter outlines some of the issues and recommends how some of these gaps should be addressed.

Advocates often note that in the UN Millennium Declaration, with which the MDGs are associated, states committed, 'To strengthen[ing] the capacity of all our countries to implement the principles and practices of democracy and respect for human rights, *including minority rights.*' Operationally, this call has not filtered through to state practice on the MDGs. A study presented by the UN Independent Expert on Minority Issues (IEMI) in 2007 showed that of the 50 MDG Country Reports reviewed, only 19 discussed minorities and none did so across the MDGs. Only four reports specifically mentioned religious minorities, and of these, only Nepal and Vietnam discussed inequalities experienced by religious minorities.

But many religious minority groups exist in a precarious position on the margins of society. For those who are poor, religious persecution and discrimination limit their access to poverty reduction initiatives, employment, micro-finance, health services and education. For those in a better economic position, social exclusion and targeted violence nevertheless perpetuate their insecurity, can dissuade them from investing locally and threaten to push them further into marginalization. At all levels, religious minorities have less access to political opportunities to influence the MDGs due to religious-based laws (e.g. on holding political office and on blasphemy) that restrict their public participation.

Such persecution and discrimination against religious minorities creates conditions of injustice, inequality, impunity and instability that are unfavourable for achieving the MDGs, both for religious minorities and for society at large. Religious minorities can neither be full participants in, nor generators of economic growth if they are marginalized or insecure. Without better attention being paid to the particular exclusion of religious minorities, some of the MDGs will not be met. In order to improve low achievements in education, health and poverty, there must be engagement with religious minorities who score lowest on these indicators. If neglected in MDG policies, excluded religious minorities will likely face even greater inequality. If ignored, vio-

lence targeted against them could escalate further to undermine MDG achievements.

Many of the challenges faced by religious minorities in achieving the MDGs are similar to those of other marginalized minorities. Such groups tend to be under-represented in access to political participation, which limits their ability to influence decision-making on MDG policies. They face discrimination in access to employment, schooling, health care, financial services, housing and land rights, all of which impact directly on the achieving of individual MDGs. There is a low level of disaggregated data by ethnicity, religion or language, making inequalities difficult to detect and measure.

Religious minorities can also face particular challenges related to the MDGs. This can stem from the religious identity *per se*, from its social or cultural practices and tenets and/or from practices of the wider society. For example, religious minorities may not be territorially concentrated and would therefore have weaker claims to forms of autonomy (like those sought by many ethnic minorities) that would give them greater control over decisions on issues like health, education and other budgetary allocations pertaining to the MDGs.

Minority practices and the MDGs

Religious minorities may rely on support from their wider (transnational) religious communities. For example, a shared religious identity can be a source of social capital, enabling members to access jobs or loans that are unavailable in the formal sector and thus helping to address poverty, unemployment and hunger. While this support can helpfully be directed towards MDG initiatives, it can generate resentment from other poor communities who do not benefit. International support can also attract criticism from governments that are motivated politically to label such actions as external interference. The effect on religious minorities is increased discrimination, despite the immediate benefits such co-religionist support can bring towards meeting the MDGs.

Within the religious minority community, certain practices and beliefs can undermine the MDGs. In some religions, beliefs about the status of women may hinder their ability to own land or seek employment outside the family, thus increasing the incidence of poverty. Because of their religious identity, such women are also likely to face discrimination by the wider community when attempt-

ing to access employment or secure land rights. Discrimination between sub-groups in a religion can also be harmful: among Hindus, the caste system bars many low-caste groups from employment or loans; inter-sect violence among some Muslims threatens the security of religious minorities.

Understanding the relationship between religious identity and achieving MDGs is principally about identifying discrimination, persecution and exclusion, but in some cases may also need to consider the religion(s) and the beliefs that attend it. The barriers are both internal and external to the religious community, linked both to the actions *within* the group and the actions *against* the group by society and the state.

Addressing these issues is not a question of restricting religious freedom or promoting assimilation strategies but rather should be understood within the human rights framework. Members of religious minority groups have human rights, including minority rights, which states are obliged to respect. Protection of these rights can help to achieve the MDGs.

Minority exclusion and the MDGs

Given that religious identity also frequently corresponds to a distinct ethnic or linguistic identity, it can be difficult to isolate religion as the key variable in motivating practices of exclusion. In Iran, for example, communities report that they face discrimination as Sunnis, but also as Kurds, Turkmen and Balochis. Many religious minorities in China are also members of distinct non-Han ethnic groups, such as Hui and Uighur Muslims. Many indigenous groups practise distinct religions but these practices *per se* are not the sole or principal reason for their marginalization. It is also important to note that forms of exclusion on the basis of religion do not always translate into economic or social exclusion, either because the religious minorities are economically dominant or because the restrictions are focused on freedoms to express religious identity and other civil or political rights. There is no question, however, that many religious minorities experience inequalities in development, and that even civil and political rights restrictions can affect prospects for economic and social inclusion. This is particularly evident in regions where religious intolerance has manifested itself as violence against religious minorities, creating conflict situations in which realization of the MDGs is virtually impossible.

Religious minorities and five MDGs

Practices within and towards religious communities are impacting on the realization of the MDGs for many religious minorities. Key targets in five of the MDGs will be discussed here: eradication of extreme poverty; universal primary education; improved maternal health; reduction of child mortality; and combating HIV/AIDS. Each raises interesting questions about religious practice and the MDGs as well as the marginalization of religious minorities.

The examples are drawn from countries that receive development assistance and are therefore mandated to implement the MDGs domestically. While there is evidence of economic and social marginalization of religious minorities in donor countries (e.g. among some Muslim communities in Western Europe), this will not be the primary focus. Where appropriate, the role of donor countries in integrating attention to religious minorities in MDG cooperation activities will be discussed. The emphasis will also be on religious minorities who suffer exclusion from MDG-related sectors, like health care and employment, rather than on religious minorities who experience only restrictions on their freedom to practise their religion without corresponding social and economic exclusion.

Poverty reduction

Goal 1 includes targets to reduce by half the number of people living in extreme poverty and to achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all. For many religious minorities, economic exclusion has resulted in disproportionately high levels of poverty and unemployment. For example, in Nepal, poverty among Muslims is 41 per cent, approximately 10 per cent higher than the average rate, according to the Nepal MDGs Progress Report (2005). China is praised for its success in reducing poverty and helping to reach global MDG targets. In fact, MRG and US-based NGO Human Rights in China (HRiC) have reported that those from ethnic minority regions (populated by several religious minority groups) have seen average incomes increase only from 845 yuan in 1982 to 7,802 yuan in 2000, in comparison with a nationwide increase in average income from 792 yuan to 9,371 yuan; the disparity holds for both urban and rural incomes. Advocates, including HRiC, warn that such inequalities are a source of inter-communal tension. Their concerns

proved valid in Urumqi, Xinjiang province, in July 2009, when riots broke out between Uighurs and Han, resulting in at least 156 deaths. The grievances were rooted at least in part in government policy that is encouraging Han migration to an already poor region, increasing discrimination in access to jobs for local minority Muslim Uighurs.

Discrimination in access to employment is common for many religious minorities and exclusion from the formal labour market is a major cause of higher poverty. State requirements that identity cards denote religion often enable such discrimination. The case of Baha'is in Iran is a testimony to this. In January 2009, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Asma Jahangir, relayed reports from Turkmenistan and Bangladesh that religious minorities faced serious barriers to employment in public institutions.

Religious minorities may have less access to justice, making it more difficult to protect themselves against unfair job dismissals or attacks on their property or businesses. In Bangladesh, human rights NGO Odikhar has documented numerous cases where Hindus have faced indiscriminate (and sometimes violent) seizures of their property with little protection from the police and with the complicity of the government. Land rights can be very insecure for religious minorities; they may easily be displaced from their land or be reluctant to invest in agricultural production on land to which they do not hold formal legal title. Moreover, national laws may not recognize traditional forms of land tenure, further reducing land security.

Religious minorities can also experience weaker access to credit and financial services. Indian Muslims have lower than average access to bank credit, which is particularly worrying given that Muslims rely disproportionately on self-employment for their livelihood, according to the 2006 Sachar Report (named after Justice Rajinder Sachar, who chaired the committee that drafted it).

Another major cause of poverty among religious minorities is the level of government investment in the regions where they live. Such investment is either too low to guarantee basic human development provisions or is of an extractive nature, i.e. intended to take resources out of the region without returning proportionate funding to local development. Chronic under-investment in infrastructure – from market routes to schools and health clinics

Right: Bilingual literacy class for Lacandon children in Chiapas, Mexico. *Julio Etchart*

– is a major contributor to low-MDG attainment in minority regions. This has been a problem in Iran, where the natural resource-rich regions of Balochistan and Khuzestan have seen resources extracted while the local population – Sunni Balochis and Ahwazi Arabs (some of whom are Sunni) – continue to experience disproportionately low levels of human development. In the words of one Baloch activist speaking at the UN Forum on Minority Issues in 2009, such, 'systematic, historic and institutionalized inequity and blatant bias have in effect paralysed the Baloch people in making meaningful public participation, in access to employment, education, health, property ownership, housing, social welfare, media and cultural life'.

Tensions also arise between religious minorities and majorities where national government MDG-related policies on poverty and employment are promoting migration to minority regions. In the Philippines, Christian group migration to the largely Muslim Mindanao region has led to resentment among Muslims, who see this migration not only as an economic threat but also as a threat to their religious and cultural identity. In China, Tibetan Buddhist communities have faced a large influx of Han majority migrants to the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), following major government investment in the region. While overall development rates have improved, the benefits are not distributed fairly. Due to Mandarin language restrictions for public sector employment, lower levels of education of Tibetans and discrimination against them, fewer jobs go to Tibetans than to Han migrants, the latter decreasing the proportionate share of employment for Tibetans. Tibet lags well behind every other region on key health indicators like child inoculation (69.3 per cent in Tibet compared to a national average of 94.6 per cent) and hospitalized deliveries (less than 40 per cent in Tibet versus an 88.4 per cent national average), according to a UN Development Programme (UNDP) report on China, suggesting that investment benefits have been focused on Lhasa where the 6 per cent Han population (2000 figures) is concentrated. Activists argue that the government is creating conditions that principally benefit Han Chinese and those who assimilate, which may reduce poverty in the long-



term but will do so at the cost of the cultural and religious identity of Tibetans.

Also crucial for some religious minorities is the prevalence of violence against them. In Laos, Hmong (predominantly Christian) have experienced long-standing persecution. Many have sought refuge in neighboring Thailand, where the government is now forcibly returning Hmong asylum-seekers to Laos, despite strong evidence that returnees are detained or tortured by security forces. In Iran, Baha'is are the target of arbitrary arrest, imprisonment and confiscation of property, and are frequently denied access to employment and education. Living under threat of insecurity and violence undermines the ability of families to pursue livelihoods and education, to invest in small businesses and to access basic public services, increasing rates of poverty and mortality that the MDGs aim to reduce.

Universal primary education and girls

Two MDG targets relate to education – the first is to achieve universal access to primary education for all girls and boys (Target 2a), and the second is to achieve gender equality in access to primary and secondary education (Target 3a). Religious minorities can face barriers in both cases.

Available figures show that persons belonging to religious minorities can often have lower levels of literacy and education, as well as experience less investment in schools where they predominantly live. In India, Muslim children aged 6–13 years have 74.6 per cent literacy while Hindus in the same age group achieve 90.2 per cent literacy, the Sachar Report says. Likewise, Hindus in Pakistan have a 12 per cent lower probability of attending school than Muslims, the Oxford Policy Management Group has found. In Southern Sudan, which is populated by numerous ethnic groups of predominantly Christian faith (in contrast to the largely Muslim north), the 2004 MDG Country Report reveals that the 'net enrolment ratio (20 per cent) and its ratio of female to male enrolment (35 per cent) are the worst in the world', and 'South Sudan's adult literacy rate is the second lowest rate in the world, after Niger'. Lower levels of education among religious minorities also inhibit access to other rights, such as employment and political participation, and their ability to contribute to general social and economic development.

Education systems can also be used by the state to assimilate religious minority children. Curricula may be imbued with the doctrine of dominant religions and cultures, and may even denigrate religious minorities through the perpetuation of stereotypes

and negative narratives. State curricula can be used as a vehicle for persecution of religious minorities. These have been major concerns for Baha'is in Iran, who report that school curricula are being used to denigrate their faith and to pressurize students to convert to Islam. Furthermore, Baha'i students are regularly expelled from school and denied access to higher education because of their religion, the NGO Baha'i International Community has reported.

Mucha Shim Quiling Arquiza, a Filipino activist from the Muslim minority community, expressed her concern at the 2008 UN Forum on Minority Issues that:

'In the desire to combat terrorism and implement counter-terrorism measures, [states] have been unwittingly using social institutions such as education, the media and institutions of scholarship to promote a certain political agenda especially to influence its citizens to support its current national security campaigns that have been especially discriminatory to religious and ethnic minorities.'

In contrast, faith-based schools of many religious minorities are contributing to the realization of universal primary education within these communities. Such institutions provide a vital alternative to poorly resourced public education systems, especially where religious minority children face discrimination in the 'mainstream' classroom. The right to have faith-based schools is protected for religious minorities under international human rights law, which recognizes the rights of all parents to educate their children in this manner. Article 18(4) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) holds that state parties should, 'undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents ... to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions'. Article 29(2) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) recognizes the right of groups to 'establish and direct educational institutions'. Not all states are doing enough to protect these rights for religious minorities.

Religious preferences for the education of girls, and sometimes boys, can inhibit their access to education. Faith-based schools that give less priority to the education of girls, for example, would be working against Target 3a on gender parity. There is a tendency, however, to make blanket assumptions that only the religion *per se* is to blame. The

Right: Rohingya refugee women in the Kutupalong camp await medical treatment, Cox's Bazaar, Bangladesh, July 2009. *Espen Rasmussen/Panos.*

issue is not solely a matter for the religious community, and the public education system must be engaged. For example, discrimination against girls in schools may decrease the willingness of parents to enrol their children in the formal education system. In Kenya, MRG has reported that the marginalization of Muslim girls from formal education is being addressed in cooperation with the Mombasa Regional Women's Assembly. Amina Zuberi, District Convenor of the Assembly, has said that they are working with key leaders of the Muslim community to show how improving education of girls can decrease poverty rates of entire families.

Faith-based schools should not be relied on as a replacement for state failures to ensure that religious minorities will achieve Goal 2 by 2015 but can be integrated into a wider state strategy to achieve universal primary education. Parents and leaders in faith communities can be invited to participate in decision-making about the provision of education, to ensure that discrimination on the part of teachers or students, or in the curricula, is tackled at the same time that positive messages about religious diversity are integrated into schooling.

It is vital that the curricula taught in faith-based schools and state schools comply with international human rights standards as elaborated, *inter alia*, in the CRC. The CRC requires that the state shall ensure that education of children is directed to, *inter alia*: the child's 'own cultural identity, language and values ... [to] the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and ... [to] civilizations different from his or her own' (Article 29.1 (c)); and to 'preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin' (Article 29.1 (d)). Putting in place such measures can reduce discrimination and help to improve enrolment rates towards Goals 2 and 3.

Maternal health and child mortality levels

The MDGs set targets to reduce by three-quarters maternal mortality and to achieve universal access to



reproductive health. The targets for child mortality aim for a two-thirds reduction in under-5s mortality. The MDGs are closely intertwined, with maternal health contributing significantly to prospects for children's health, and access to reproductive health care services helping to ensure that pregnancies are wanted and healthy for both mother and child.

Many marginalized religious minorities face higher disparities in maternal and child mortality. This is largely due to a lower provision of health care and sanitation services, and less adequate access to food in areas where religious minorities predominantly live. It can also be affected by discrimination and lack of awareness among health officials of cultural practices that may impact on pregnancies and children's health. In China, national child mortality and maternal mortality rates stood in 2000 at 39.7 deaths per 1,000 and 53 per 100,000 respectively; in contrast, in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) of China, child mortality and maternal mortality rates in 2000 were 65.4 per 1,000 and 161.4 per 100,000, MRG has noted. In the border regions of Burma, where Rohingya Muslims live, more than 60 per cent of Rohingya children suffer from chronic malnutrition, despite reports of a national surplus of rice. State actions have rendered these communities effectively stateless,

putting families into precarious positions for survival. Although it is possible that China and Burma, for example, could achieve their MDG targets while ignoring the situation of religious minorities, such an approach is not only a violation of human rights but will entrench gross inequalities more deeply.

The link between religious practices and maternal and child mortality is not well researched. In some religious communities, beliefs about child marriage or reproductive health could undermine MDG programmes aiming to reduce mortality rates. Religious identity alone is difficult to isolate as a variable and factors such as urban or rural location and gender discrimination will also impact. The 2006 Sachar Report on the status of Indian Muslims found that Muslim women and children in many states had lower than average mortality rates, despite poor access to health care. Another 2006 study (presented at Princeton University) of religious minorities and majorities across India and Bangladesh found that contraceptive use among currently married Muslim (religious minority) women in India is 28 per cent compared to 42 per cent among Muslim (religious majority) women in Bangladesh. These figures suggest that access to reproductive health may be less about religious preferences and more about equal access to health services in general, particularly

where they are not culturally adapted on key issues such as reproductive health.

The issue of reproductive health has generated controversies among leaders of some faith communities. Advocates of family planning sought to ensure that the MDGs would focus on the reproductive health rights of women. For some faith communities, the term 'reproductive rights' is interpreted to include access to abortion or contraceptive services, which are against firmly held beliefs. In the adoption of the MDGs in 2000, there was no target on reproductive health, due to objections from some states, observers (e.g. the Holy See) and some segments of civil society. Since then, efforts by the UN Secretary-General, UN agencies including the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) and many civil society advocates have introduced an MDG target for reproductive health. Although the target does not mention abortion or contraception *per se*, it is nevertheless viewed by some faith groups as illegitimate. UN agencies, including UNFPA, are proceeding on the basis that access to contraception and reduction in unsafe abortions are among the strategies needed to achieve the MDGs.

HIV/AIDS

A halt and reversal in the spread of HIV/AIDS and malaria are among the targets of Goal 6. There is evidence that minority groups are often disproportionately affected by rates of HIV/AIDS and have less access to health services to address the disease. The delivery of health services may be under-resourced in regions where religious minorities live. Religious minorities may also face discrimination from health service professionals when they seek out services. Traditional medicinal practices and remedies, common particularly in animistic religious groups, can also impact – positively or negatively – on treatment of HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases. The lack of knowledge of these practices among mainstream health care providers can inhibit the successful use of complementary and conventional medicine.

Research by the Bangkok office of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) into HIV/AIDS public education programmes in the Mekong Delta region found that materials did not impact well on minorities, where the social and cultural practices of dominant groups

were the basis of the campaign message. In other words, in order to reach minority groups, particular attention in HIV/AIDS education must be paid to religious and cultural practices around, *inter alia*, sex and contraception.

This can be challenging for some religious minority groups that may hold dogmatic beliefs regarding sex (especially outside of marriage), contraception, homosexuality or men who have sex with men. MDG programme efforts must take this into account when devising interventions that will contribute to HIV/AIDS reduction among these communities, who, regardless of their religious beliefs, may still be vulnerable. Some faith groups have produced guides for religious leaders on how to discuss these issues. The UN Joint Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) has reported that the Islamic Medical Association of Uganda, for example, has successfully cooperated with imams in reaching out to Muslim communities with education projects on HIV/AIDS prevention and services.

Recommendations for a minority rights response to the MDGs

With the September 2010 UN Summit to review progress towards the MDGs in sight, this is a crucial time to adopt new approaches that will help narrow the gap between current realities and intended outcomes. Indeed, the MDG framework has much to offer marginalized religious minorities. If governments are genuinely committed to universal primary education, the inequalities in access to education experienced by many minorities can be eliminated. Their lower access to health care, housing and employment can be improved. Such gains will not come easily. Addressing the marginalization of minority groups means exposing deeply entrenched discrimination and transforming structures of power built to exclude minorities.

In policy spheres, there has been little in the way of systematic analysis of minority group exclusion from the MDGs and even less attention specifically given to religious minorities. The work of the IEMI and MRG is an exception. Research on religious minorities focuses overwhelmingly on civil and political rights violations linked to restrictions on freedom of religion; the social and economic dimensions of exclusion are insufficiently publicized. In her most recent report, however, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief

dedicated a 2009 section of her UN report to a preliminary review of some economic and social rights issues faced by religious minorities. This research appears to be the start of a wider effort under the mandate to examine MDG-related issues. Indeed, the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) endorsed this effort by adopting a resolution (10/25) in 2009 on 'Discrimination based on religion or belief and its impact on the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights'.

Governments need to create the necessary enabling environment, whereby all citizens can achieve the MDGs. This means eliminating forms of religious persecution, harassment, violence and discrimination that generate instability and conflict. Strengthened rule of law, impartial policing and greater freedom of expression are integral to development and will establish stronger investment confidence and opportunities in the local and national economy. With their personal security protected, and their jobs, businesses, homes and land more secure, religious minorities will be better able to focus on building prosperity for their families and for the wider community without fear.

Another important starting point for better attention to religious minority exclusion is systematic analysis of the economic, social and political status of these communities in key aid modalities. National action plans for poverty reduction and education for all, for example, should include measures for inclusion of religious minorities. Ministries with MDG-related responsibilities, such as on health, education, employment, justice and environment, should be offered capacity-building to combat discrimination against religious minorities and improve operational knowledge of how each sector can increase minority inclusion. Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) and the UN Country Teams' Common Country Assessments and UN Development Assistance Frameworks need to review the situation of religious minorities and integrate programme responses where marginalization is evident.

Three rights of minorities should inform MDG policies aimed at including religious minorities: the right to non-discrimination, the right to participation and the right to protection of (religious) identity. These should be mainstreamed into a broader human rights-based approach to the MDGs. The capacity of both minorities and majority groups

involved in MDG work needs to be strengthened to meet these objectives.

Given that discrimination is a key barrier in achieving the MDGs for religious minorities, efforts by governments and development organizations to prevent such discrimination need to be prioritized. Religion is a prohibited ground of discrimination under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), impacting on several MDG issues such as health (including reproductive health) (Article 10), education (Article 13) and employment (Article 7). State parties have an obligation to revise their domestic legal frameworks to ensure that discrimination on the basis of religion is clearly prohibited and that remedies to redress discrimination are easily accessible to religious minorities. They also have an obligation to ensure substantive realization of non-discrimination, even where legal frameworks are good. Unfortunately, some states have promulgated laws and policies that adversely affect the ability of religious minorities to achieve the MDGs: laws pertaining to blasphemy can inhibit the ability of minorities to challenge government policies on development; requirements for religious education in schools can dissuade minority parents from enrolling their children; and prohibitions on religious dress can deny minorities education and employment opportunities. Such policies may be based on deeply entrenched beliefs and backed by powerful interests. Here the role of international development organizations in calling for national counterparts to pay attention to exclusion and discrimination against religious minorities may help to tip the balance in favour of reforms. Beyond the clear human rights obligations, there is also a compelling economic argument to be made: protection of religious minorities in law and in fact improves stability and creates a better environment for investment and growth.

Discrimination – both direct and indirect – can be monitored through the collection of data disaggregated by religious identity (and gender). The 2010 MDG Summit can recommend that national statistics offices take the lead in developing systems to gather information to supplement the existing 60 indicators for the MDGs. Impact assessments of MDGs programmes should be adopted as mandatory for determining in advance how interventions might help or harm religious minorities. Even where resources are limited, governments can develop

periodic surveys that will review key indicators of religious minorities' status in relation to the MDGs. Some religious minorities may have concerns about data collection and self-identification if they have been targets of violence or discrimination in the past. For this reason, religious minority staff should be involved in all stages of this data collection process, from designing and delivering surveys, to evaluating results.

Tackling inequalities created by discrimination may require targeted MDG programmes for minorities. Policy-makers often express concerns that targeted programmes can create inter-communal tension, particularly where poverty and other forms of inequality also exist among members of dominant groups. This is a legitimate concern, but it must not be used as a veto for targeted interventions where they are justified by data showing disproportionate inequality, are transparent and are supported by consultations with minority groups. There is a strong legal basis for such programmes in international law, which recognizes the possibility of special measures like affirmative action programmes. Such measures will help to tackle the barriers that religious minorities face in equal access to health, education, employment and financial services that are linked directly to MDG achievement. There are also firm commitments made by states in the context of the 2001 World Conference Against Racism Durban Declaration and Programme of Action to adopt National Action Plans in order to address racism and discrimination. The adoption of affirmative action or targeted policies must be accompanied by full implementation. In Greece, for example, the government has approved a 0.5 per cent quota for Muslim minorities in the civil service, but poor implementation means it has had little impact on the unemployment rates of Muslims – estimated to be as high as 60 per cent in Western Thrace, according to a 2009 report from the European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI).

The right of minorities to participate in decision-making that affects them is a cornerstone of minority rights standards. Participation of 'stakeholders' is increasingly mainstreamed into development processes, but it is far less common to find measures that enable minorities, including religious minorities, to be included in such processes. This is essential to ensure that MDG programmes will be

effective for religious minority groups and will not create further inequalities unintentionally that might undermine MDG objectives. Speaking at the UN Forum on Minority Issues in 2009, Wahyu Effendy of the Indonesian Anti-Discrimination Movement (GANDI), said, 'Political participation [of religious minorities] needs as a precondition government protection of their existence and participation.'

There is a wide range of options for realizing the right to participation in practice. At a minimum, public education on the MDGs should be made available to religious minorities, and they should be included among any civil society consultations on the MDGs, particularly in regions where such minorities live. Any existing National Minority Councils should be invited by relevant ministries to engage in MDG-related development planning. In India, for example, the National Commission for Minorities has intervened in several cases to secure protection for religious minorities' educational institutions guaranteed by the Constitution, thus helping to secure Goal 2 and contribute to Goal 1.

Forms of autonomy for religious minority groups can also be helpful for the MDGs. In many countries, minority groups have been granted autonomy over sectors that impact directly on the MDGs. Non-territorial forms of autonomy, such as support for the development of school curricula on issues of religious diversity or management of micro-finance institutions, can be devised in line with MDG programming. Territorial forms of autonomy, where religious minorities are regionally concentrated, can enable even greater empowerment for minorities to deliver on the MDGs. In China, the 1984 Law on Regional Ethnic Autonomy includes, since 2005, stronger provisions enabling poverty reduction, access to education and sustainable development for ethno-religious minorities, such as the Uighur Muslims, MRG has reported. Such support of territorial or non-territorial autonomy can help to achieve the MDGs, provided it is implemented in good faith and its impact is monitored with data disaggregated by (religious) identity and made publicly available, *inter alia*, in MDG Country Reports. Building capacity and opportunities for religious minorities to manage MDG initiatives will also increase participation. Training on budget monitoring is one example.

The protection of identity is a crucial concern in the daily lives of religious minorities. Persecution on

the basis of religious identity can severely threaten the ability of individuals to live their lives in security and freedom. Getting a job, running a small business, going to school and getting basic public services can all be undermined when expression of religious identity becomes a cause of insecurity. Governments should show leadership in: promulgating zero tolerance of religious intolerance in the public and private sectors; redressing impunity for violence against religious minorities; and increasing efforts to protect religious minorities from violent attacks and other forms of injustice.

MDG programmes that do not give due assessment to the influence of religious identity and practices on realizing the goals can be wasting (already limited) resources. Development interventions that appear identity-neutral can either miss religious minorities or harm them. Using mechanisms of participation, religious minorities can inform policy-makers of how identity issues may impede their ability to benefit from MDG projects and can offer recommendations on how to make MDG interventions more compatible with their own daily needs.

While some religious practices and beliefs, such as giving to the poor or enabling literacy, can help realize the MDGs, there are other religious practices and beliefs that can undermine them. MDG policy-makers need to be sensitive to these possibilities and reach out to faith groups in an effort to ensure that human rights obligations are not violated in the name of religious dogma. At the same time, individual negative practices within religious communities must not be used as justification for any outright prohibition of religious expression.

It is important to mention the positive role played by faith groups in supporting the MDGs. There have been several interfaith initiatives to raise awareness of the MDGs and direct action by faith communities to help realize the goals through community cooperation initiatives and advocacy. Religions for Peace, the largest interfaith global alliance, has produced a *Millennium Development Goals Toolkit for Religious Leaders* (2007), in cooperation with the UN Millennium Campaign. The Micah Challenge is an international North-South alliance of Christian churches and agencies in 40 countries advocating greater government compliance with the MDGs. Faith-based development organizations have also been leaders in realizing the MDGs. In Tanzania, for example, the Aga Khan Foundation

has successfully supported community health clinics to improve child and maternal mortality rates, and HIV/AIDS testing and counselling. These positive actions do not eliminate concerns that some development initiatives by faith-based actors can be a tool for co-opting vulnerable communities to new or more extreme religious doctrine. Such practices can be avoided by transparent cooperation with government at all levels to enable religious minorities to participate in decision-making that affects them and equitably access resources for human development. Leaders of all the major world religions have shown a great commitment to the MDGs, and this outreach can be a platform for dialogue on contentious issues.

Conclusions

MDG Country Reports urgently need to be revised to incorporate discussion of the legal framework for protection of religious minorities and national measures to ensure that religious minorities are benefiting equally from progress towards the MDGs. The silence on these points in MDG Country Reports to date is chronic. The collection of disaggregated data for religious (and other) minorities needs to be prioritized by international and national development actors alike. Opportunities for religious minority actors to influence and implement MDG-related initiatives should be implemented.

There is great scope to use the minority rights framework to improve the effectiveness of MDG policy interventions. This is not only good practice and fiscally responsible but is also a fulfilment of state obligations under international human rights and minority rights standards.

If religious minorities are excluded from the MDGs, not only will the purpose of the goals be undermined, but the conditions for their long-term sustainability will seriously be in doubt. Investing in the human capital within religious minority communities and ending persecution and discrimination on the basis of religion will contribute to better development for all. ■