

# Millennium development goals: a vision

By Afshan Subohi

IT was a pleasant March night in Karachi. A sick woman and her sickly daughter were spreading their sheet on the ground to make room for them both to sleep. The woman was not alone. There were several dozen others, some asleep or preparing for another night under an open sky.

This was not some remote village but the OPD compound (outdoor patients department) of the Civil Hospital in the heart of the city. People occupying the compound were not junkies; they were patients and their relatives, mostly from outside Karachi. Many required treatment at intervals and the family could not afford to travel back and forth. Nor could they afford to rent a room in the city, so they camped there.

Shadman, a graduate, 30 years old, mother of four interviewed by *Dawn*, mentioned earlier, said she was forced by her health condition to move to the city from her home in Nawabshah, Sindh. Her kidneys failed two years back and she needed dialysis twice a week for survival till such time when she gets a kidney transplant. Initially she used to go back home each time after treatment but three months back, because of financial problems she decided to stay on.

"The kidney of the available family member did not match mine. The facility of quality dialysis was not available in my home

town so I had to come to Karachi. For me there is no light at the end of the tunnel", said dejected Shadman.

"Before I fell sick, we had a normal lower middle class living as my husband had a small auto spare parts business and I was teaching. My ailment upset the apple cart. We spent all we had on the treatment. I had to quit my job. My husband's business suffered for he had to cater to children in my absence. Now all four kids are out of school and the family is in deep distress" Shadman said with a fading pair of eyes, her little girl clinging to her side.

It was not possible to conduct an extensive survey but there is no reason to expect the situation to be different at other government hospitals. It must be worse in the neglected rural areas.

The situation depicted above reaffirmed the observation made in the 2006 progress report on Millennium Development Goals. In its concluding section the report said that chances of achieving a majority of targets, especially those in the health and education sectors were dim.

That was the last report that appeared. Why has the government stopped reporting on the millennium development goals?

Sardar Asef Ahmed, Deputy Chairman Planning Commission expressed his ignorance over the issue. "I am not in the picture about that. Yes, we are working rigorously on Poverty Reduction Paper II", the Deputy Chairman who reports directly to the prime minister (also the chairman of the Planning Commission) told *Dawn* from Lahore. He agreed that com-

mitments to prestigious international forum like UN should have been honoured.

He said Musharraf's government did not focus on MDGs because it did not care for people or their plight. To question as to why the present government failed to make correction and publish quality progress report on time he promised to inform *Dawn* about the reasons after returning to Islamabad. There was no response from his office till our deadline a day later.

Many ministers contacted were unaware of the MDGs. They requested not to mention them in the article as it would paint them ignorant. Amanullah Niazi, Director Centre for Poverty Reduction and Social Policy Development that was launched in January 2008 in the Planning Commission (after Centre for Research on Poverty Reduction and Income Distribution become defunct on completion of its five year tenure in December 2007) told *Dawn* from Islamabad that the reports could not be developed because the data on which the report was to be based was not provided to the Planning Commission.

"We need data to review the progress. We did not get household income and expenditure survey that the Federal Bureau of Statistics was supposed to complete and circulate. In absence of the relevant data it was not possible to compile the report" Director Niazi responded to *Dawn* query from Islamabad. He also mentioned the department's weak capacity but did not explain why the staff that brought out earlier reports was sent home.

The Director General Federal Bureau of Statistics reached over telephone to find out the reason for the non-availability of annual survey of household income and expenditure declined to comment on the issue.

Salmian Siddique, Federal Secretary Finance was also not aware of the reasons for the long delay in the publication of progress report. He did direct *Dawn* to an officer Mr Amjad Mehmud who sent in a matrix chart via e-mail titled 'Progress of MDG indicators'.

The matrix listed all eight uniform goals and 15 Pakistan-specific targets. There was a column of indicators for the country. Another column showed indicators from PRSP II. Some random data of the years 2007, 2006 and 2005 was given in the next col-

umn. It did not show anything—no percentage change, no trend, no benchmark for the year. A junior officer admitted that the matrix was actually developed for PRSP II for which year 2007 has been taken as a base year.

Farrukh Qayum, Federal Secretary Economic Affairs Division said: "EAD does not keep track of these reports. As far as I know, the relevant people have undertaken some review. By and large, we are up to the benchmark for the year".

The signals emanating from different quarters belie the senior officer's assertion. There were clear signals of slump in trade, manufacturing and several sub-sectors of services. Retrenchments were reported over the last six months in many sectors. Javed Burki was

reported to have expressed fear that the poverty might actually increase because of the economic slowdown was to hit a high point. He did not quote data on unemployment but thought it has increased dramatically.

Had the country been committed to the pledge it made ten years earlier in 2000 when it signed on the dotted line to strive achieve millennium development goals the situation could have been different for vulnerable segments.

As people did not know about them there was no internal pressure on the government to push harder. The last government took its time to indigenise MDGs. It took Musharraf's government years to produce the first progress report that appeared on 2005.



Photo by Anis Ha

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fears was supposed to be compiled every year to evaluate the distance covered in the priority areas and judge it against the bench marks set for the year in each of the eight areas of priority.

The international and regional MDG monitors judged the pace of progress as slow and urged the government to speed up its efforts if it were to achieve what it pledged. The 2006 report again was delayed by several months but it did appear in late 2007.

That was the last progress report. Pakistan did not produce annual MDG progress report for the year 2007 and 2008. There was no hope for any such report appearing this year either.

Our sources in the relevant quarters confirmed that the findings of the initial surveys on which the report was to be based were too embarrassing for the government in 2007 to let the relevant staff to put together. "You have no idea about the pressures we had to cope with in preparation of the report", a source at the cell in the Planning Commission told Dawn privately.

Pakistan made a commitment to halve the poverty rate from the year 2000 level by 2015. It was one of 188 signatory nations to eight millennium development goals adopted in United Nations General Assembly.

People of Pakistan forced the establishment to accept demands of lawyers' movement. Together they have power to make government report the progress on goals. In fact, if made aware and mobilised, people could well take care of not only reports but could kick the ball in the goal.