

**The Manila Times Opinion**  
**Wednesday, September 07 2005**

## **A future within reach? Manila Times Opinion**

By Kim Hak-Su, Hafiz Pasha And Geert Van Der Linden

*(The Asian Development Bank, the United Nations Development Program and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia will be holding a huge conference on the Millennium Development Goals today in Manila. In this regard and on the eve of the UN Millennium Summit in New York, three senior officials from these development organizations have jointly written an Op-Ed piece on the imperatives of the MDG.)*

TWENTY-TWO-YEAR-OLD Rina was 13 when she was forced into marriage. She had her first baby while she was still a child herself. Deprived of proper care and with a body too weak and undeveloped to deal with pregnancy and childbirth, she lost control of her bowel and bladder movement, and is incontinent for life.

There are millions of women like Rina across Asia Pacific whose stories tell us what it means to be poor, and to be a woman with limited or no access to basic services.

As the media glare on Africa's plight begins to wane, it's worth remembering that poverty is certainly not history in the Asia-Pacific region—where 680 million people are poor, representing about two-thirds of the global poor. South Asia, for example, has more undernourished people than Sub-Saharan Africa, more people without access to improved sanitation, and more people living in slums.

It was because of stories like Rina's that the Millennium Development Goals, or MDGs, were established five years ago in 2000. At the Millennium Summit in New York, the world's governments committed themselves to the eight goals and 18 targets to be reached by 2015.

On the eve of the United Nations Millennium's World Summit in New York, the Asia-Pacific region's progress report—"A Future Within Reach"—states a startling fact: Asia and the Pacific may be one of the world's most dynamic regions, yet none of its over 50 developing countries are on track to meet all of the MDGs. That's one of the conclusions of the new report jointly prepared by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

In spite of the sobering prognosis, the report offers hope to Rina and millions of her sisters. By focusing attention to the major tasks ahead for countries in the region, especially on basic services, it attempts to further galvanize efforts both at the national and regional levels to ensure that the MDGs are achieved.

Although the region has taken major strides in removing income poverty, its progress on the many nonincome MDGs has been lackluster. The region's key challenges are those for maternal health, rural water supply, infant and under-five mortality, malnutrition and enrolment in primary education.

Improving the lot of poor women such as Rina would require a major scaling up of efforts. While this would undoubtedly require more resources, it would also need institutional reform for expanded and effective delivery of basic services at the national level. Hence the particular focus of the report is on reshaping institutions. Institutions in this sense refer not just to specific organizations, governmental or nongovernmental, but also to "rules," formal and informal, that govern patterns of behavior—cultural, economic and social.

Institutional barriers are preventing many of the poorest and most marginalized groups from getting the services they need. Some of these barriers are economic: the use of free government services involves costs. Parents who send their children to "free" schools, for example, often have to pay for uniforms, books and transportation. Other barriers may be legal—particularly for squatter families who have no title to their properties, and so cannot get connected to water and electricity supplies.

Sociocultural barriers are another challenge for ethnic minorities, for people with HIV/AIDS, or injecting drug users, or the 200 million or so people across the region who have disabilities.

Finally, there are "political" barriers. Governments typically provide services first to the groups that are easiest to reach, or that are best placed to claim their rights.

The report offers suggestions toward overcoming such barriers. Efforts at the national level need also to be supported by efforts at the regional level through enhanced regional cooperation. Regional institutional arrangements are largely absent or weak at present and would need strengthening to support the massive effort necessary to achieve the MDGs. Regional bodies such as UNESCAP, UNDP and ADB, for example, are well positioned to support governments, civil society and the

private sector in forging MDG-focused partnerships and the report suggests they work closely together and with other regional agencies, complementing their respective strengths towards sustainable and inclusive growth in the region.

An important suggestion is strengthening intergovernmental cooperation on financial resource mobilization and management in support of MDG achievement. Many countries in the region have already built up substantial reserves that could be used to strengthen the economic resilience of the region to preclude a repeat of the 1997 East Asian financial crisis. Mechanisms have to be found also for utilizing the region's vast pool of savings better for infrastructure development.

Other regional measures suggested include regularizing labor migration, promoting food security, tackling HIV/AIDS, promoting more sustainable patterns of growth and fighting corruption.

The MDGs have already helped many countries in galvanizing their development efforts. The report highlights the most important purpose of the MDGs—to focus attention on gaps that remain in MDG achievement, and on the changes needed to enable the fulfillment of rights for all—especially those who are the poorest and the most vulnerable.

The world's leaders will gather for the Summit in New York next week and recommit themselves to the goals of hope for the dispossessed. Let us remember Rina, her sisters, their children and families throughout Asia Pacific. What happens to them will determine the global quest for MDG achievement.

The future is here and now. ♦

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