



Warring against extreme poverty

By K P SHASHIDHARAN

The Millennium Development Goals formulated by the UN have dominated the development discourse in the new millennium. However, the recent study of Oxford University, UK, shows that India has over 340 million poor persons. Forty percent of all poor in 49 countries live in India, making it the second poorest country in South Asia next to Afghanistan. The Global Hunger Index report says the number of hungry people declined in the world to 842 million in 2011-13 but the population growth added hungry mouths since then. India is rated high in "Poverty Vulnerability Rankings" on the basis of critical parameters like the proportion of the undernourished in the population, underweight children, the infant mortality rate and other human development indicators. Life expectancy at birth and adult literacy rates for males and females are comparable with those of the deprived humanity living in abysmal poverty in sub-Saharan Africa.

A World Bank report shows an unprecedented pace in poverty reduction in the last decade through targeted policy interventions and economic management. The "Poverty Profile" of the country prepared by the World Bank indicates that almost 77 percent of the Indian poor live without basic amenities in rural areas. Extreme poverty remains painfully high despite economic reforms and increased GDP growth because of India's rapid population growth rate. A recent McKinsey Global Institute report finds that 680 million Indians cannot meet their essential needs; 50% of public spending on basic services does not reach the people; 115 million additional non-farm jobs are needed over the next decade; and 50% of public social spending is required for securing sustainable livelihood needs: food, energy, housing, drinking water, sanitation, health care, education and social security. The Labour Ministry's report called, 'Youth employment- unemployment scenario, 2012-13' puts the unemployment rate in the 15-29 age group at 13.3 percent. As of now, the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) set for 2015 have become a mirage. The Chronic Poverty Report 2014-2015 has to reset the target year to 2030 for reducing extreme poverty to zero.

It is true that economic reforms commenced in 1991

helped improving the living standards of poor Indians during the last two decades. Reforms need to be pursued to reduce fiscal deficits, overcome infrastructural bottlenecks, improve the financial system and deregulate certain sectors. The anti-poverty strategy needs to be finely targeted with enhanced programme delivery efficiency to outreach the extreme poor with safety nets for rural households to sustain against agricultural income fluctuations.

The biggest challenge before the nation is how to develop a sustainable governance model that can balance conflicting concerns of economic advancement, environmental preservation and social, cultural and human interests. There is need to revisit the extant policy framework and overhaul, plugging its loopholes by systematic planning, an adequate resource allocation and putting in place an effective implementation and delivery mechanism. A robust anti-corruption framework must be an irreducible minimum, considering India being ranked 94th in Transparency International's 2012 Corruption Perceptions Index. Reforms should be invigorated for an inclusive governance model with added emphasis on employment generation, agricultural productivity, access to basic services securing food, drinking water, sanitation, health, energy and education. Engagement of civil society, the private sector and the social sector is critical for nation-building. A conducive business environment is inevitable for enterprises, investors and entrepreneurs, the social sector and NGOs to work in collaboration for the generation of more employment, industrial and agricultural productivity and income.

The Millennium Development Goals viz. eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, achieving universal primary education, promoting gender equality and empowering women, reducing the child mortality rate, improving maternal health; combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, ensuring environmental sustainability and developing a global partnership for development would become elusive if concrete steps are not taken. Warring against extreme poverty and uplifting the poor above the poverty line and empowering them would remain an important development agenda before the nation for years to come. ■

send your feedback to: info@bureaucracytoday.com

(K P Shashidharan is the author of two volumes of poetry: "Painting Symphony" and "Whispering Mind" and a book on business, "BIG: Business India Guru". He is working as Director General in the CAG Office and his views expressed are personal.)