

## Is global poverty reduction a political myth?

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WHEN the United Nations hosts a summit meeting of world leaders next September to assess the current state of its Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), it is expected to single out one of the major success stories of the day: a reduction in global poverty.

But have there been any real, significant successes in the absolute number of people worldwide who have escaped poverty?

The United Nations is convinced the developing world as a whole remains on track to achieve the poverty reduction target (a 50 per cent cut) by 2015. But the numbers may belie that.

At the global level, the number of people living under the international poverty line of less than US\$1.25 a day declined from 1.9 billion to 1.4 billion: a reduction of about 500 million people.

The argument by most critics is that these figures are distorted because the successes are mostly in a few countries, primarily China, Vietnam and Brazil, and to a lesser extent, India.

China and Vietnam account for the largest reductions in the poverty rate, and India accounts for much of the reduction in South Asia, according to the latest international assessment released by the UN Development Programme (UNDP).

And the decline in absolute poverty levels in Latin America and the Caribbean another so-called success story is largely accounted for by Brazil.

According to the Brazilian Institute of Applied Economic Research, Brazil has exceeded the MDG target to cut extreme poverty by half by 2015: between 1990 and 2008, the number of Brazilians in extreme poverty has been reduced by 81 per cent.

If so, is the reduction in global poverty a political myth?

Asked for his comments, Rob Vos, director of the Development Policy and Analysis Division at the UN's Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN-Desa), told IPS: "It is true that most of the poverty reduction comes on account of China when measured in absolute numbers."

According to the data presented in the UN's World Economic and Social Survey, the total number of poor in the world decreased from 1.9 billion in 1981 to 1.4 billion in 2005, when the last international survey was conducted.

In China alone, he said, the number of poor decreased from 835.1 million in 1981 to 207.7 million in 2005, which meant a sharp decrease of China's poverty rate, from 84.0 to 15.9 per cent.

"In Vietnam, the decrease in the poverty rate over the same period was staggering: from 90.4 to 17.1 per cent, and much progress was made in much of East Asia," said Vos.

"India's contribution to global poverty reduction has been less impressive," he added. In South Asia as a whole, he pointed out, the absolute number of poor increased from 548 million to 596 million during 1981-2005.

"As a share of the population, South Asia's poverty rate did fall from 59.4 per cent in 1981 to 40.3 per cent in 2005 but because of population growth it was not enough to stop the increase in the number of poor," Vos argued.


The upcoming MDG summit, scheduled to take place in New York September 20-22, will be attended by 192 member states, mostly represented by heads of state or heads of government.


They are expected to adopt a plan of action to accelerate the progress towards meeting the eight goals by the deadline. Asked about MDG poverty reduction in the context of China, Dean Baker, co-director of the Washington-based Centre for Economic and Policy Research, told IPS: "I don't know that there is any distortion."

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