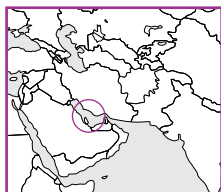


## Much to be done



With the exception of Millennium Development Goal 7, relating to the environment, Bahrain has achieved – or is about to achieve – the Millennium Development Goals. However, remaining challenges include eliminating the wide income gaps that generate relative poverty, developing more technology-based education, passing laws to promote women’s empowerment and making information on sexually transmitted diseases more widely available. In terms of the environment, policies are needed to prevent depletion of groundwater sources and stop the destruction of biodiversity due to the growth of the construction sector and the increase in land reclaimed from the sea.

Social Watch Bahrain  
Abdulnabi Alekry

The Bahrain Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) progress report (2004–2007), prepared by a group of experts from Government, academia and civil social organizations (CSOs), as well as UNDP indicated that Bahrain has successfully achieved and even surpassed the MDG targets.<sup>1</sup> However, critical reading reveals several shortcomings in understanding and implementing the MDGs in official strategies. A parallel CSO assessment – linking targets and financing for development – could contribute to a more objective assessment of progress.

### Vision 2030

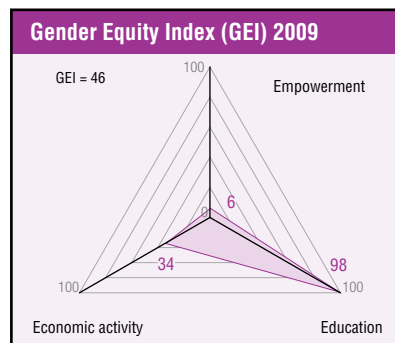
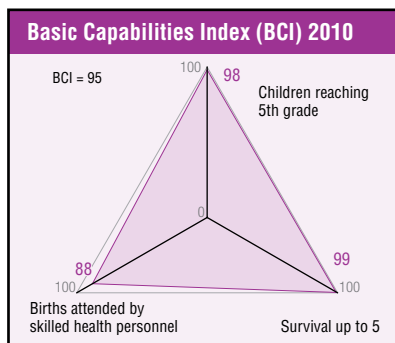
Bahrain’s Economic Vision 2030 strategy, which involves the national economy, the Government and society, highlights the following:<sup>2</sup>

- “Economic growth will be driven by increased private sector productivity and by Bahrainis becoming the employees of choice for high-value-adding companies”;
- The Government will gradually move away from service provision towards generating and enforcing forward-looking policies in areas such as finance and the economy, health care, education, the environment, security and social justice;
- Bahraini society in 2030 will be a meritocracy based on hard work and talent. Basic care will be available irrespective of abilities, and all Bahrainis will enjoy equal opportunities.

Vision 2030 recognizes the challenges to the economy in today’s competitive and globalized world. Bahrain is a highly ranked country in terms of attracting foreign investment – especially in real estate development, banking, finance and services. Several free zones have been opened to encourage manufacturers to establish businesses. Also, through

1 Ministry of Social Development and UNDP, *The Millennium Development Goals: Work in Progress 2004–2007*, 2007. Available from: <[www.undp.org/bh/Files/2008MDGPROREP/BHRMDGPROREP2004-2007.pdf](http://www.undp.org/bh/Files/2008MDGPROREP/BHRMDGPROREP2004-2007.pdf)>.

2 Bahrain Economic Development Board, *From Regional Pioneer to Global Contender: Economic Vision 2030*. Available from: <[www.bahrainedb.com/uploadedFiles/BahrainEDB/Media\\_Center/Economic%20Vision%202030%20\(English\).pdf](http://www.bahrainedb.com/uploadedFiles/BahrainEDB/Media_Center/Economic%20Vision%202030%20(English).pdf)>.



privatization policies, those sectors involved in development – such as ports, transport, electricity production, public housing, health, education and municipal services – have been opened to private sector investors. This is expected to generate new financial and material resources for the MDGs.

### MDGs: achievements and challenges

#### MDG 1 – Eradicating extreme poverty and hunger.

In the Bahraini context, this translates into eradicating relative poverty. The Government has upgraded long-term measures to form a safety net for needy families that includes allowances for those below a certain income level, subsidized housing and reduced fees for public services through the Family Bank. The Royal Charity takes care of orphans while the Ministry of Social Development supports the handicapped.

One of the major goals of Vision 2030 is to develop a sustainable economy based on knowledge and added value, led by the private sector, that will generate highly rewarding work. Many Bahraini job seekers are not qualified or refuse to take certain kinds of work due to the low salaries offered. The Government has therefore put in place a number of initiatives: establishing a Labour Market Authority, which regulates the market and controls employment permits, allowing immigrants to change jobs; taxing the employment of immigrant workers; setting up a fund to finance the training of job seekers and support young entrepreneurs to start their own businesses through the Development Bank; encouraging private banks to finance small and medium enterprises with Government guarantees; and establishing facilities for small enterprises incubators.

The engagement of the private sector and new sources of financing helped to create jobs and reduced unemployment – according to the Labour Minister, Dr. Majeed Al Alawi – from 16% in 2002 to 3.7% in February 2009.<sup>3</sup> This reduction was also due to the establishment of the Unemployment Insurance System, which allows citizens registered as unemployed to receive financial assistance for six months during which the Ministry helps them to find a job or further training. Furthermore, the average salary of the newly employed increased, although there are still many Bahrainis in the public and private sector with low incomes. A mixed public and private fund was also established to provide grants to CSOs for the implementation of development projects.

#### MDG 2 – Achieving universal primary education.

Bahrain achieved this goal a long time ago. The challenge now is providing an education that is more creative, diversified and technology-based. There are pilot plans on information technology that are being – or will be – applied in primary, intermediate and secondary institutions.

#### MDG 3 – Promoting gender equality and empowering women.

Gender equality and the empowerment of women have been addressed more positively since the 2001 National Charter, which stipulates equal political rights for men and women. The Supreme Council

3 Habib Toumi, “Bahrain’s unemployment rate down to 3.7 per cent,” *GulfNews.com*, 16 March 2010. Available from: <[gulfnews.com/news/gulf/bahrain/bahrain-s-unemployment-rate-down-to-3-7-per-cent-1.597366](http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/bahrain/bahrain-s-unemployment-rate-down-to-3-7-per-cent-1.597366)>.

of Women, established in 2002, has been the main facilitator of women's empowerment in all fields and levels. One key indicator of these changes is the increase in the female/male ratio in tertiary education (2.46), with women comprising 70% of students.<sup>4</sup>

Regarding the economic dimension, female participation in the labour force in 2008 was 35% compared with 86% male participation.<sup>5</sup> The number of women with a business license or practicing business is increasing dramatically<sup>6</sup>. Women are as entitled to family allowances as men. But the number of women who occupy leading positions in both the private and public sector is still disproportionately low in view of their qualifications.

Since 2002 women have been more actively engaged in politics. They have become ministers and members of the legislative council, and the new political organizations include women up to leadership levels. A quota system is to be adopted in favour of women in candidates' lists, parliament, consultative councils, municipal councils, leadership of political organizations and CSOs. Women should be well represented at all Government levels – starting with the Council of Ministers. However, the State and the society are dominated by a male chauvinistic culture and practices and Bahrain has yet to adopt a comprehensive strategy to ensure women's equality with men.

#### *MDG 4 – Reducing child mortality.*

Bahrain has been able to meet the requirements of all three indicators: reducing under-five mortality, reducing infant mortality and immunizing one-year old children against measles. In 2008 the under-five mortality ratio was 12 per 1,000 live births and the infant mortality ratio was 9 per 1,000 live births<sup>7</sup> – which is similar to the figures in developed countries. Vaccination against measles covers 100% of the population. Comprehensive health services are provided by both the Ministry of Health and private entities. CSOs of medical professionals also play a role.

The challenges in this area are to further reduce child and infant mortality rates; improve treatment for hereditary diseases, especially sickle cell anaemia;

ensure the quality and affordability of private health services; increase the number of qualified medical personnel; and improve child nutrition.

#### *MDG 5 – Improve maternal health.*

Recorded maternal deaths between 2000 to 2006 did not exceed 2 per 1,000 newborn. Universal access to reproduction health services has been accomplished, for nationals free of charge and for immigrants with nominal fees. All births are attended by skilled health personnel. Contraceptives are available free at state health centres and at an affordable cost in all pharmacies – their limited use is due to either ignorance or religious mandates. While the percentage of births to teenage mothers is very low, it is increasing with modernization and a more liberal attitude towards sex. Progress should emphasize improvements in health care for both the mother and baby during pregnancy, delivery and post pregnancy.

#### *MDG 6 – Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases.*

Epidemic and contagious diseases hardly exist in Bahrain. There is no malaria and only a few cases of tuberculosis among immigrants workers. However, fighting AIDS is a priority and a big challenge for numerous reasons. It is still considered a disgrace to be infected with HIV and many conceal their infection for this reason or due to ignorance. Action is needed to change people's attitudes regarding AIDS and the isolation suffered by those with the disease, develop mechanisms to catch HIV infection at an early stage and ensure a normal life and treatment for people living with HIV and AIDS.

#### *MDG 7 – Integrating principles of sustainable development into country policies.*

Sustainable development has been a national strategy for decades and is highlighted in Vision 2030. Unfortunately the country's rapid development has been reached at the cost of the environment. Biodiversity loss is on the rise. Green palm trees, for instance, have been replaced by concrete complexes. From 1970 to 2009 more than 90 square kilometres were reclaimed from the sea at the expense of bays, lagoons and beaches. This has caused the destruction of natural habitats and the extinction of many marine species.

Widespread access to drinking water and basic sanitation was reached several decades ago. The problem is that the underground water sources are not renewable and the quality of water is deteriorating. Increasing amounts of desalinated water – produced from electricity – are required, which means burning more fossil fuel.

The majority of slum dwellers are unskilled and low-paid Asian workers, and there are currently no Government plans to build decent housing for them. The housing problem is reaching a crisis level due to the shortage of affordable public and private housing units and the takeover of State land by top officials.

#### *MDG 8 – Developing a global partnership for development.*

Bahrain is well established as a country open for trade and a hub for international banking and financial services. It has succeeded through an open door policy to attract international investors. This resulted in a booming economy, with around 6.3% of gross national product (GNP) real growth in 2009 – this means about USD 38,400 per capita.<sup>8</sup> Bahrain is a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO), Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Arab Common Market and has concluded free trade agreements (FTAs) with the United States, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and other countries.

However the Bahraini people have no say in these agreements, in which the Government and the business sector are the real players. There is a general feeling that giving citizens from those countries bound with Bahrain through FTAs or similar arrangements the right to practice their professions or operate businesses generates unfair competition.

#### **Conclusion**

As discussed under the individual goals, major progress has been achieved towards the MDGs but a number of challenges remain. In particular there is a need to develop laws and mechanisms to combat discrimination against women, to find ways of dealing with the shortage of natural water resources, to address the housing crisis, and to improve the quality of primary education to make it compatible with the constantly changing needs of and advances in technology. A national strategy also has to be developed to provide the public with accurate information about AIDS and address the sources of HIV infection. ■

4 Ricardo Hausmann, Laura D. Tyson and Saadia Zahidi, *The Global Gender Gap Report 2009* (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2009). Available from: <[www.weforum.org/pdf/gendergap/report2009.pdf](http://www.weforum.org/pdf/gendergap/report2009.pdf)>. However, it should be noted that one reason for women's higher participation is that a large number of men are educated overseas.

5 *Ibid.*

6 For instance, figures released by the Central Bank of Bahrain (CBB) in 2007 showed an increase in the number of women working in the country's financial sector. They then accounted for 36% of Bahrainis employed in the sector and 25% of the total workforce (including immigrants).

7 UNICEF, "Bahrain statistics." Available from: <[www.unicef.org/infobycountry/bahrain\\_statistics.html](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/bahrain_statistics.html)>.

8 Index Mundi, "Bahrain GDP – per capita." Available from: <[www.indexmundi.com/bahrain/gdp\\_per\\_capita\\_%28ppp%29.html](http://www.indexmundi.com/bahrain/gdp_per_capita_%28ppp%29.html)>.