

Inequality and Social Exclusion

Although inequalities are persistent and widening, they are increasingly absent from poverty debates. Inequality is inherent to social exclusion and is closely related to extreme poverty.

Social exclusion, based on multiple non-material dimensions of deprivation such as identity, structures, cultural norms and expectations, social relations and processes, manifests itself in inequalities in both developing countries and developed countries. Such inequalities exist between the rich and the poor as well as in degrees of inequality among people living in poverty. Relative powerlessness is a common experience of all excluded groups.

Women, especially women living in rural areas, are especially vulnerable to multiple forms of inequality.

In some countries cultural perceptions and traditional practices assign a subordinate role to women throughout their lives, simply because they are women. As citizens, women do not have equal legal, political nor economic rights. In many cases, they have neither legal identity nor any property rights, and they are denied the right to inheritance. They are excluded from participation in decision-making political structures and processes and have limited opportunities to participate in the social and cultural life of the community.

In addition, rural women and those who work in the informal sector often do not benefit from social protection and thus have unequal access to education, health care, public services, employment and income.

For the 2 billion small scale rural farmers, the majority of whom are women, agriculture provides food security and is the main source of livelihood. Yet, property rights are tied to social status, thus severely limiting women's economic independence and security.

It is not enough to have good social policies. Wherever inequality is embedded in the system, new social norms are urgently needed. Wherever practices of social exclusion based on identity, structures or cultural beliefs and norms exist, it is imperative that governments commit to addressing the root causes of inequality that exist within the structures of society. Assuring full and equal citizenship which provides political, social and economic rights for all members of society and addresses the universality of rights and needs is a sure path to poverty eradication.

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