

PRESS RELEASE



United Nations Development Programme

Mixed picture on human development West Bengal releases three District Human Development Reports

Kolkata, 12 July 2010: An in-depth study of three districts in the Indian state of West Bengal reveals that where you live can determine your well-being as there are wide variations in human development between districts and also between rural and urban populations.

According to recent surveys, in the South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal gender gaps in literacy have been narrowing faster than the state average and more than one-third of women own land. In North 24 Parganas, however, the picture is mixed – with a rise in income and purchasing power in the ever-spreading urban areas, acute distress in the rural areas (in nearly 30% of rural households) and severe malnutrition in the slums. In Uttar Dinajpur district, women's political empowerment is noteworthy at 35 percent of seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions even prior to reservation of seats for women but fertility rates of 4.9 are significantly higher than the state average of 2.4.

It is also reported that the Sunderbans in South 24 Parganas is highly vulnerable to climate change and it is estimated that 15 percent of the region will be submerged by 2020. Neglecting the Sunderbans can have global implications.

These are among the findings of the three District Human Development Reports (HDRs), for the districts of North 24 Parganas, South 24 Parganas and Uttar Dinajpur, released by the Government of West Bengal, maintaining its lead as the state far ahead in incorporating the human development approach in planning at district-levels.

Mr. Nirupam Sen, Minister-In-Charge, Development and Planning, Government of West Bengal, releasing the three District Human Development Reports produced with technical support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Planning Commission, Government of India, said: "It is hoped that the DHDR will serve as a primary document for building a district vision and for assessing and redressing disparities within the district, and shall strengthen the capabilities of the District Planning System in meeting people's aspirations and needs."

Acknowledging the significant strides made by the West Bengal Government in integrating human development in state and district planning, Ms. Fadzai Gwaradzimba, Chief South and West Asia Division, Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific, UNDP said: "The strong linkages that these District HDRs have with planning processes in West Bengal is unique and ensures that Human Development Reports do not merely remain books on the shelf but actually inform the planning process at the district and sub-district levels. Action at the local-level is critical if national development and the globally agreed Millennium Development Goals are to be achieved. With its immense experience in human development analysis and action, India can play a lead role in sharing its expertise in a south-south context as well as globally."

Twenty years ago, UNDP promoted the human development paradigm with the launch of the first Human Development Report in 1990. In 2010 UNDP commemorates the 20th Anniversary of the Human Development Reports brought out by Mahbub ul Haq working in collaboration with Amartya Sen, both eminent economists from South Asia, to put people at the centre of development planning. India has taken the lead in adopting this approach and has pioneered in bringing out government-owned state and district HDRs. With support from UNDP and the Planning Commission 21 states have prepared their HDRs and 80 district-level HDRs are at various stages of preparation. The central government has also recommended that the district HDRs should replace the district gazetteers (official notification about the district) in all 600 districts of India.

West Bengal has long been at the forefront of incorporating the human development approach in planning at state and district levels. The West Bengal HDR won the 2004 global Human Development Award for excellence in quality of analysis. The state has already released three district reports (Malda, Bankura and Birbhum) and among them the Bankura district report was shortlisted for the 2009 Human Development Awards for excellence in innovation and measurement. District Administrations are using these district HDRs for identifying causes of backwardness and to identify ways of addressing the challenges highlighted through these reports.

West Bengal also holds the distinction of bringing out 'Bhanga Gara' or To Break, To Create, a film examining human development challenges. The film which was produced by the Film and Television Institute of India and UNDP, highlights two diametrically opposite development challenges in the district of Malda -- lack of water and flooding -- and won the award for the best scientific film at the country's prestigious 55th National Awards, adding yet another feather in West Bengal's cap.

Dr. Surjya Kanta Mishra, Minister-In-Charge, Health and Family Welfare, Government of West Bengal, was the Chief Guest at the event. He released 'Naari-O-Aain', a compendium on the acts and rules for women in the state.

Also read:

Remarks by Ms. Fadzai Gwaradzimba, Chief South and West Asia Division, Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific, UNDP available at <http://www.undp.org.in/sites/default/files/mediarelease/Remarks-by-Ms-Fadzai.pdf>

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Note to Editors

Key highlights from the reports are:

- **Wide variations in performance:** The three reports reveal wide variations in human development achievements. These extend not only between districts but to rural-urban differences within districts. Disparities are also accentuated owing to challenges posed by differences in ecological zones that exist within the same districts.
- **Gender and inclusion:** Gender gaps in literacy in South 24 Parganas have been narrowing faster than the state average and 37 percent of the land holdings are either owned or jointly owned by women. In all three districts women's participation in the work force is lower than the national average. In Uttar Dinajpur, women's political empowerment is noteworthy at 35 percent of PRI seats even prior to reservation of seats but fertility rates of 4.9 are significantly higher than the state average of 2.4.
- **Vulnerability remains a challenge:** 35 percent of households live below the poverty line in South 24 Parganas and surveys have revealed that close to 33 percent of households in North 24 Parganas did not receive two square meals per day in an entire year. 47.6 percent of rural households in Uttar Dinajpur in 2002 were characterised as below poverty line.
- **Ecological importance of the Sunderbans:** The region is highly vulnerable to climate change and it is estimated that 15 percent of Sunderbans will be submerged by 2020. The report states that neglecting the Sunderbans can have global implications. 54 of the 102 islands are inhabited and are characterised by poor infrastructure, which leaves the local poor with few alternate livelihood options. Consequent over-reliance on natural resources can harm an already fragile ecosystem that is critical to maintaining the region's biological balance.