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Social Safety Nets: Not many urban poor getting help

Says World Bank report

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Rejaul Karim Byron and Sohel Parvez

Most of the poor people in urban areas are not getting social safety net protection benefits.

Only 17.84 percent of the poor people living in towns and cities receive support from social safety schemes, whereas 35.77 percent of the poor people in rural areas get the benefits, according to a World Bank report.

The large gap in allocation in social safety net remains although the pace of poverty reduction has slowed and the ratio of extreme poverty edged up in urban areas after 2010, says the assessment report unveiled last week.

The government has allocated Tk 74,367 crore for the safety net programmes for the current fiscal year, up 15 percent from a year ago.

The WB report said that urban poverty rate declined to 19.3 percent in 2016 from 21.3 percent in 2010, marking only 2 percentage points cut. Extreme poverty rate rose to 8 percent in 2016 from 7.7 percent in 2010.

On the other hand, the rate of rural poverty fell 8.5 percentage points to 26.7 percent in 2016 from 2010, according to the report.

“Even though poverty is still highly rural, it is urbanising rapidly and that will require new solutions,” the WB said in the report ahead of the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty being observed today.

The theme of the Day this year is “acting together to empower children, their families and communities to end poverty”.

The report said, “Given the country’s rapid urbanisation there are now more people living in extreme poverty in urban Bangladesh than in 2010.”

According to the WB, 35.01 percent of Bangladesh’s population lives in urban areas.

Even though 8 out of 10 poor live in rural areas, at current trends of urbanisation and poverty reduction, more than half of Bangladesh’s poor households will live in urban areas by 2030, it said.

The report said Bangladesh recorded 3 percent increase in its urban population share between 2010 and 2016, and the urban population grew at an average 3.9 percent a year since 2000.

“Rapid urbanisation in Bangladesh plays a modest role in poverty reduction,” it said, adding that safety nets could contribute more to poverty reduction in the country.

The report mentioned that a third of the poor households have access to social protection programmes, compared to 18 percent of non-poor households.

“This suggests there is room to increase coverage and improve the quality of targeting. Coverage in urban areas is particularly low and safety nets for families with young children and elderly members could have a strong impact on reducing urban poverty.

“There is a natural life cycle to poverty, and well-designed safety nets can target support to households when they need it most: when children are young and when elderly household members must be cared for.”

Talking about the issue, economist Zahid Hussain said the coverage of safety net schemes should be expanded in urban slums.

He said quality education, adequate healthcare and sanitation should be extended in the slums.

“A child born in a slum is not responsible for the poverty of the family. It is the responsibility of the state to provide proper education and nutrition to children so that they can break out of the vicious circle of poverty,” he said.

He added steps were necessary to protect slum dwellers from various types of exploitation.

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