

New Statistics: 25 million in extreme poverty

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This year two major reports came out of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) which, when put together, tell a story about the state of the nation. The first was a preliminary report on the "Household Income & Expenditure Survey (HIES), 2010." The second was the preliminary results of the "Population & Housing Census 2011."

In July, the latest census reported there were 142.3 million people in Bangladesh, making it by most counts the 8th most populous country in the world -- behind China, India and the USA, but ahead of Mexico, Japan and even Russia. In fact, the figure is conservative compared to that of the World Bank's "World Development Indicators," which puts the population at 162.2 million.

Just one month before, the HIES for 2010 had told us that 17.6% of the country currently lives in extreme poverty -- defined as those people whose total expenditure is equal to the food poverty line (the cost of a basket of goods amounting to the consumption of 2,100 Kcal per person day). Combining just these BBS figures equates to approximately 25 million extremely poor people in Bangladesh. To put this figure in context, if all the extreme poor people of Bangladesh were a separate country, they would be the 53rd largest country by population in the world. In fact, there are more extreme poor people in Bangladesh than the entire population of say, Australia.

The message from the BBS and the government of Bangladesh (GoB) is that the rate of poverty reduction in Bangladesh is cause for celebration, and that in general the country is making excellent progress. This cannot be denied -- and certainly, compared with many other countries, the trend of poverty reduction in Bangladesh has indeed been impressive. The most recent numbers suggest that since 2005 (the last HIES) the incidence of extreme poverty in the country has decreased from 25.1% to 17.6%.

However, this narrative from those in power obscures the scale of poverty and extreme poverty in Bangladesh. Let's remind ourselves -- 25 million people living in extreme poverty (using the lower poverty line). If we use the upper poverty line -- defined as those households whose food expenditure is at the food poverty line -- then there are almost 45 million Bangladeshis still living below this threshold.

The size of this country -- updated by this year's census -- conveys a huge moral responsibility on those in power. They are charged to protect and serve the interests of 142.3 million human lives. Too often in domestic and international dialogue about Bangladesh, does the country's strong performance on statistical indicators (like GDP

growth or poverty reduction rates) obscure and the cold, hard facts about absolute numbers of people living in moderate poverty and extreme poverty. These huge numbers (45 and 25 million respectively) tell us that there is a long way still to go. They remind us that we should keep pressure on those in power to make the strongest possible efforts to improve the lives of those who, by any measure, would rank as some of the world's most vulnerable people.

This article does not aim to belittle the achievements of the people in this country in the years since independence. In spite of numerous challenges, including natural disasters, economic crises as well as deficient government service provision, the people of Bangladesh have managed to not only survive, but also to drive their country forwards and upwards. These achievements have been momentous and should be celebrated. However, we should always try to refocus the narrative on the huge challenges ahead for those most vulnerable.

A major concern from the recent survey is that extreme poverty has decreased slower than moderate poverty, suggesting that those most in need are still failing to reap the benefits of the widespread economic growth in the country. Further, the incidence of extreme poverty in rural areas has decreased more slowly than in urban areas, suggesting a widening gap between the economic core of the country and those on the periphery. Indeed government service provision to the extreme poor (including healthcare, schooling, social protection and agricultural extension services) is generally limited and 25 million people rely on service systems riddled with problems and inefficiencies. The government has a moral responsibility to reform these systems, with the needs of the extreme poor taking the highest priority in reform.

The extreme poor in Bangladesh strive every day to improve their situation, but they need help. 25 million Bangladeshis still live in extreme poverty and we have a responsibility to look beyond the statistics and positive trends paraded by those in power, to these real human lives and ask ourselves and our government: what more can we do?

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