

Tackling Social Exclusion: South Asia

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Social exclusion remains a serious development issue in the developing world and in South Asia in particular, hindering the life chances of millions of people. Although authorities often pay lip service to increasing the social participation of excluded groups, talk is rarely backed up by action. A more inclusive, sustainable development pathway is needed to promote the empowerment and well-being of all on an equitable basis to counter the present situation, which accords power and wealth to some and exclusion and vulnerability to the majority.

What Is Social Exclusion?

Social exclusion may be defined as the process through which individuals and groups are wholly or partially excluded from the society in which they live. The exclusion may have economic, social, or political aspects—or a combination of all three.

Economic aspects of exclusion may take the form of a lack of access to land and other physical assets, credit, skills, and labor markets, resulting in the economic impoverishment of those who are excluded and frequently condemning them to undernourishment, ill health, poor housing or homelessness, and unsanitary living conditions. Social aspects of exclusion may involve discrimination on the basis of gender, ethnicity (including belonging to scheduled tribes and castes, particularly in India), social group (specifically, people in “lowly” occupations—as perceived by elite groups—such as street cleaners), mental and physical disabilities, and age. This discrimination effectively reduces the opportunities of the socially excluded to lift themselves from impoverishment. Exclusion may acquire a political aspect when

people-centered democratic institutions are not present and when political rights (such as political participation, the right to organize, personal security, freedom of expression, and equality of opportunity) are restricted or nonexistent. The excluded are often deprived of the chance to legally redress violations of their rights and denial of opportunities to them because they cannot afford the costs or they are prevented from doing so by the more powerful perpetrators of these injustices, who can often bend the rules and laws in their own favor.

Social exclusion may be deliberately imposed by a government or by a powerful social group on other communities or groups. For example, immigrants and expatriate workers in many European and Middle Eastern countries are discriminated against with regard to their political rights, terms and conditions of work, and housing. Also, ethnic minorities in South Asian countries generally suffer from discrimination against their culture and from constrained educational and employment opportunities. Social exclusion also occurs through ongoing social processes in the absence of any deliberate attempt on the part of the government or any group of powerful people to exclude people, partially because there may not be any deliberate public or private interventions to reverse social exclusion of this nature. The two types of social exclusion have respectively been designated by Amartya Sen as *active* and *passive* social exclusion.

Social Exclusion in Today's World

The world is becoming ever more complex and increasingly differentiated in the wake of unprecedented advancements in science and technology, particularly information and communications technology, and vast increases in global wealth and trade. Developed countries and multinational and transnational companies are at the forefront of these changes because of their often exclusive access to ever-advancing knowledge, their management capabilities, and their control over wealth, the factors of production, distribution channels, trading arrangements, news and advertising media, and international institutions. The rich in the developing world, including those associated with large national and multinational companies, are also important stakeholders and beneficiaries in these new global developments.

Though relative deprivation and pockets of absolute deprivation exist in developed countries, the majority of the population in developing countries suffers from a high degree of economic and social deprivation and political marginalization. The deprived segment of society in developing countries is highly differentiated due to different economic circumstances, human capabilities, and varying degrees of access to education, health, employment, information, and financial resources as well as different degrees of political marginalization. All these conditions constrain the ability of the deprived to break the cycle. They are in effect socially excluded, albeit to different

degrees and in different ways, from the economic and technological advancements and the consequent social and political developments from which elites are benefiting. Hence, the key issue underlying the high levels of poverty, inequality, and deprivation in the developing world is, in the main, social exclusion.

South Asia's Experience

Social exclusion encompasses more than just poverty, although poverty is frequently an inevitable characteristic of most of the socially excluded. About one-third of the population of South Asia live on less than a dollar per person per day (the extremely poor) and four-fifths live on less than two dollars per person per day (the poor), according to data from 2000–04. It is unlikely that there has been much improvement since then given the increasing population pressures and growing social inequalities. In addition to increasing poverty, social exclusion prevents people from having adequate access to food, health, education, and, above all, prospects for a better future.

The socially excluded in South Asia include landless and other assetless laborers, whose ranks include large numbers of unemployed and underemployed persons as well as employed persons who earn very low incomes. Other socially excluded groups include small and marginal farmers, small artisans and informal sector operators, disadvantaged women, ethnic minorities, hill people, scheduled tribes and castes, and people with mental and physical disabilities. Disadvantaged people living on marginal lands such as riverbanks, coastal areas, and *chars* (riverside flood-prone areas and low-lying sandy islands) or arid or semi-arid lands, and hence on the frontline of severe types of natural disasters such as cyclones, floods, and river erosions, also belong to excluded groups. Of these groups, some are more excluded than others. For example, in poor families in male-dominated South Asian societies, women are more excluded than men. If those women also belong to ethnic minority groups, they are further deprived. It is also the case that children who are forced by economic and social circumstances to become child laborers are often condemned to severe social exclusion because they are deprived of education and training and, therefore, of the opportunity for a better life.

Because the ability of the deprived to respond to vulnerabilities caused by natural disasters is virtually nonexistent, they suffer the most as a consequence of natural disasters such as floods, cyclones, storm surges, tornadoes, and droughts. Climate change and projected rises in sea levels will cause such disasters to be more frequent and more severe in the future, which will lead to much more economic and social suffering for the most vulnerable.

Three major concerns affect South Asia's economic development and compound social exclusion in the region. One is the present size and growth rate of the South Asian population. The second is continuing environmental degradation

(deforestation, soil quality depletion, air and water pollution, depletion of wetlands, and river erosion) and climate change, both of which threaten human and social development in the region. The third concern is the fact that governance in the region is, in practice, extrademocratic, underpinned by elitism, based on heredity, militarily hegemonistic, or all of these. Even in India, governance remains essentially elitist. This kind of governance, reinforced by adherence to the principles of neoliberalism and globalization, abets and causes social exclusion despite promises by the governing elites to reduce poverty and promote justice. Sometimes powerful groups and politicians respond to local needs and desires simply because they need local people to promote or consolidate their own interests and power.

Toward Social Inclusion and Cohesive Social Transformation

In South Asian countries, palliatives are generally offered to the excluded and deprived majority through various nationally and internationally designed poverty reduction and social development projects and programs, which are implemented by governments and nongovernmental organizations. The stated purposes of many of these programs are good, even laudable. But in most cases the people to be served are treated as target groups or objects and the underlying basic causes of their exclusion are not addressed.

The governing elites often talk (especially during election time) about reorienting the political and economic situation so that people are empowered to take control of their destiny and become equal constituents in an inclusive society. But they do not act on these words, and perhaps they do not mean to. Various motivated citizens' groups are working to empower some of the most deprived segments of the population in South Asia by promoting self-help and highlighting people's abilities within their communities. But these localized efforts remain negligible compared with the size of the population involved and the nature of the problems they need to overcome.

A pathway to the empowerment of all people could be based on the following five key principles, which define the work program of a people-centered South Asian development and cooperation process called Imagine a New South Asia (INSA):

1. freedom from the economic, social, and political deprivation experienced by the socially excluded under the ruling paradigm;
2. empowerment of the socially excluded through quality education, training, basic health services, and access to resources, employment, information, and appropriate technologies;

3. equitably shared economic progress, which requires a reorientation of investment and production patterns toward those sectors in which the excluded can most easily find employment or undertake economic activities;
4. unity in diversity, which means celebrating diversity while promoting unity on the basis of shared goals and aspirations; and
5. participatory democracy at all levels of society, from central to local, so that people can participate in governance and socioeconomic processes.

These principles are essential for an inclusive, equitable, and sustainable social transformation in South Asia.

INSA's goal is to increase awareness among the socially excluded of how their social inclusion can be articulated, organized, and implemented. At the same time, South Asian governments need to realize that the current situation is not sustainable and that new, people-centered action programs based on research and dialogue are key. Once the socially excluded are aware and organized, they can exert their own pressure in support of a shift to an inclusive socioeconomic, political order.

For Further Reading

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