

# Child rights in India

India, home to one fifth of the world's children, ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in December 1992. Since then, rapid economic growth, averaging 4.5 per cent annually between 1990 and 2007, has lifted millions out of poverty and combined with government action to improve trends in child survival and development. According to national sources, the national under-five mortality rate fell sharply from 117 per 1,000 live births in 1990 to 72 in 2007. Use of improved drinking water sources rose from 62 per cent in 1992–1993 to 88 per cent in 2005–2006. Primary school attendance rates for girls 6–10 years old climbed from 61 to 81 per cent over the same period, helping lift the gender parity rate for primary education from 0.82 to 0.96.

## Deprivations and disparities remain large, despite economic progress

Despite this marked progress, many challenges for realizing child rights in India remain. Partly because of its immensity, India experiences child rights deprivations in greater absolute numbers than any other country. Each year, 1 million newborns die during the first month of life; another million die between 29 days and five years. Almost 55 million children under five are underweight for their age. In excess of 20 million children of primary school age are not attending school. More than 40 per cent of the population currently lives on less than \$1.25 per day, 128 million people have no access to improved drinking-water sources, and a staggering 665 million defecate in the open.

Rising incomes have been accompanied by widening disparities in income, education, access to health care and development outcomes. The 2005–2006 National Family Health Survey shows sharp divergences in access to essential services and key development outcomes

across caste, ethnic, gender and wealth strata. These disparities extend to child protection, given the country's moderate rate of birth registration (69 per cent) and high rate of child marriage. Despite legislation prohibiting child marriage, the latest household surveys indicate that an estimated 47 per cent of women aged 20–24, and 16 per cent of men aged 20–49, were married or in union before age 18. In addition, the country's skewed sex ratio at birth and high level of child labour remain significant challenges.

## Concerted efforts are yielding results

The Government of India, its partners and a multitude of non-governmental organizations have made determined efforts to reduce child deaths, expand access to health care and get children into primary school. The country is also making headway towards identifying child protection violations and creating legal means of redress. It is beginning to address material disparities by targeting essential services towards marginalized groups such as scheduled castes, scheduled tribes (the indigenous peoples, or Adivasis) and others who suffer entrenched discrimination. A National Commission for the Protection of Child Rights was established by the Government in March 2007 to monitor proper enforcement of child rights. In addition, a comprehensive plan called the Integrated Child Protection Scheme has been set up to protect vulnerable children.

Women-led and women-focused organizations are thriving in India, which is home to some of the world's most innovative institutions empowering women in the community, the workplace and government. Similarly, non-governmental organizations and voluntary groups have for decades been among India's most energetic advocates for child rights. An example is Balkan-Ji-Bari. Founded in 1923, this organization has become a

recreational and educational institution for impoverished Adivasi children, providing vocational training, vaccinations and other services.

Young people are showing the way to overcoming some of the key obstacles to fulfilling child rights. In 1990, child labourers involved with the Concerned for Working Children organization launched their own association – Bhima Sangha, which has become an international model for children's participation. Beginning in 1997, Bhima Sangha has established *makkala panchayats*, or children's councils, that run parallel to adult councils. In the state of Kerala, the government has institutionalized child participation through Bala Sabhas or children's neighbourhood groups. There are 45,417 clubs in the state, with around 800,000 participants.

## Challenges ahead

Widespread and entrenched exploitation, gender discrimination, caste bias and other social problems in India will not be overcome overnight, and it is uncertain how the 2008–2009 global fuel, food and economic crises will affect the country's social progress. As all three threaten to undermine India's economic growth, there is a grave risk that the share of people living in absolute poverty will increase, possibly slowing or even stalling recent moderate gains in child survival, health and education.

The Government of India and other stakeholders are working towards fulfilling child rights – and young people themselves are voicing their priorities and embracing community involvement. Their continued participation and leadership will be critical to achieving continued human progress in India during the years to come.

*See References, pages 90–92.*