

The real Slumdogs of India

By Percy Barnevik
Chairman of charity Hand in Hand

Slumdog Millionaire has triumphed at the Oscars, winning eight Academy Awards.

Cinemas all over the Western world have been filled with audiences gasping at its hard-hitting portrayal of India's underworld of brutal poverty.

This is an India far removed from the modern call centres and computer companies.

My background is as an industrialist and chief executive, who has been active in India for 40 years.

During the early 1990s I advised the Indian government on its reform policies, and fought to open bridges between the country and the West.

I have supported investments of millions of dollars in plants and research centres across the country.

Although I was working in the growing India, among well-educated and well-fed Indians, I was always aware of the "other" India.

'Empowerment'

Some seven years ago I switched track, and now work with the vast India characterised by extreme poverty, as chairman of the charity Hand in Hand.

" Out of India's population, 76% live below the poverty limit of \$2 a day, compared to 73% in Sub-Saharan Africa "

So far Hand in Hand has enrolled 387,000 extremely poor women.

They are trained in finance and enterprise creation, and supported with micro-loans.

They have started 215,000 enterprises in production, trade and services, and currently establish around 400 new enterprises per day.

The reality is that when the women start businesses, they get empowered at all levels. They eat more, earn more, read better, become more active in local government.

Hand in Hand has also helped some 30,000 children, who were labouring, back into its 100 schools.

'Neglected'

It has surprised me greatly to see Indian poverty so largely neglected by the international aid community. When Gordon Brown, Bob Geldof or Bill Clinton talk world poverty, it is all Africa.

It is true that Africa has desperate and unique problems, and Hand in Hand is also active in South Africa with its job-creation model.

But we must not push for Africa at the expense of India's poor. They are equally in need of help.

One third of all the world's ultra poor are Indians. 40% of all malnourished children are Indian.

Out of India's population, 76% live below the poverty limit of \$2 a day, compared to 73% in Sub-Saharan Africa. That is 800 million people living in abject poverty - in one country.

'Indian inspiration'

The efforts to eradicate poverty must from now on include India, both in rhetoric and resources.

The fight against global poverty can also be greatly inspired by Indian methods.

We have seen that, with tight cost control, it is possible to create a job for some \$50.

This means taking a woman living on less than \$2 (£1.40) per day, and within one to two years turning her into a self-sustaining entrepreneur, with a business generated income supporting an average of five or six people.

This cost is a one-off. It is a fishing rod rather than a fish.

With the reallocation of some 5 to 6% of the world's aid budgets, and using a self-help model, we could see a massive improvement in the living standards of the world's poor in the next 10 to 20 years.

These self-help models, now growing among the entrepreneurial ultra-poor Indians, show that India could lead the way in the fight against poverty.

When I watch the Oscars on Sunday, I will keep my fingers crossed for Slumdog Millionaire. It has given face and voice to the poorest of India, whom I have learnt to love and respect.

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