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New Report Examines “Persistent Problem” of Global Inequality

Washington, DC—Global levels of inequality today are at extremely high levels even as conditions for alleviating deprivation are more favorable than ever before. Inequities in the international system and within developing countries threaten to halt progress toward greater democratization and economic development for the poorest countries in the world.

So concludes a new report, entitled *The Persistent Problem: Inequality, Difference, and the Challenge of Development*, issued today by the Task Force on Difference, Inequality, and Developing Societies of the American Political Science Association (APSA). The report highlights how these problems threaten efforts to alleviate human deprivation such as the U.N.’s Millennium Development Goals and how economic inequality and social difference pose relentless challenges. The report and associated reference materials are available online at <http://www.apsanet.org/~globalinequality/>.

The persistent problem of inequality is that it enables dominant actors to create institutions and policies that favor their interests even when they are not in the best interests of society as a whole. At the international level, this has resulted in a pattern of globalization that limits the potential benefits of international markets to the poorest countries. At the domestic level in poor countries, inequality has enabled elites to perpetuate inefficient institutions at a time when globalization gives a premium for efficient ones.

According to task force chair John Echeverri-Gent (University of Virginia), “The report shows why we should care about economic inequality even in a world where growth has brought unprecedented affluence. Inequality means that international markets provides fewer benefits to poor countries, and within developing countries, it limits the quality of democracy and the number of people who can take advantage of the opportunities offered by economic development.”

The consequences of economic inequality and political marginalization based on social differences will become more urgent as rapidly improving communications and technologies increase people’s awareness of it. Democracy and capitalism do offer the promise of alleviating the problems of inequality, but they flourish best only if the peoples of developing societies can develop economic and political institutions that reflect their own histories and cultures.

In wealthy countries, policymakers and citizens must learn more about the distinctive conditions in each developing country as their ability to help remedy inequalities depends on listening to and engaging with social and political goals formulated by actors within the developing world. Effective change will be interactive, not imposed. The report concludes that there are no universal policy prescriptions to this complex challenge.

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The American Political Science Association (est. 1903) is the leading professional organization for the study of politics and has over 14,000 members in 80 countries. For more news and information about political science research or upcoming task force reports (Political Violence and Terror, 2008) visit the APSA media website, www.politicalsciencenews.org.