

## **Executive Summary**

Empirical studies from India show that certain regions and communities despite geographic, economic and cultural proximity to major towns are left out of important socio-economic achievements in the country. Despite wide-spread economic growth and prosperity in recent times these communities have traditionally been neglected and left out of the process of development. Several reasons can be adduced for this and a large literature dealing with exclusion and welfare has developed on the issue. Some of these studies argue that a major cause of marginalization due to exclusion can be attributed to historical reasons and to caste discrimination, tribal isolation, low levels of technology in farming or animal husbandry and the lack of adequate levels of literacy.

It is in this context that UNICEF, India collaborates with the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta (CSSSC) to set up a knowledge hub about social exclusion in general and with initial emphasis on West Bengal. In addition to accumulating academic and operational resources on aspects of social exclusion and building synergies within institutions dealing with related issues, the CSSSC-UNICEF Social Inclusion Cell also conducts primary surveys in districts of West Bengal. The present report documents the first major survey at the district Level for Cooch Behar, in the north of West Bengal. Since CSSSC is involved with several contemporary studies on the socio-economic conditions of the rural poor in West Bengal and neighboring states, the present report includes some highlights from these studies as well discussing access to critical public goods like education and health for a number of districts in West Bengal.

The report is based on a primary survey of 50 villages in the district of Cooch Behar, one of the six districts that this project intends to cover over the coming years.

Social Exclusion implies that despite apparent availability of several goods and services, certain sections of the population remain outside its coverage for many reasons. The caste and religious divides in a country like India is well known and many of the gaps in intra-community access to services owe their roots to such historical categorizations. Apart from that lack of geographic contiguity/proximity could also be a significant factor that affects access to many public services and facilities. Thus, it is possible that communities that are either distant geographically or according to social classifications may be excluded from the process of development even at a time when the effects of growth are touching the livelihoods of a large number of people in the country. We identify a large number of factors that are potential candidates for explaining the degree of social exclusion facing communities. These include, access to basic amenities such as housing, drinking water, sanitation, health, infrastructure, education on the one hand, and public distribution of food grains, development schemes, credit facilities etc. on the other.

A large number of tables are presented in the main text of this report that display the level and extent of social exclusion facing the SC/STs and the general caste communities in the district. All of these tables offer two subsequent ranking of the villages that are excluded over a continuum of 50 villages. Depending upon the type of issue under consideration in each table, the villages are either most excluded or least excluded at both ends of the distribution. For example, if the residents of a village face little or no access to health facilities/infrastructure/schooling, according to unweighted ranking the village is deemed as most excluded. However, one must notice that several sub-components constitute the main issue and we use the well-known Principal Component Analysis to assign appropriate weights to each of these components. The

weighted ranks may or may not be same as that observed under unweighted ranking. In general we observe quite similar trends in both – the village residents who are most excluded according to the unweighted index also rank among the worst performers (or sufferers) in terms of the weighted index. There are many other categories that to some extent depend on the cultural or religious distribution irrespective villages. It ranges from institutional deliveries to use of in-house bathrooms.

The social exclusion index for every single component should provide a large number of cases where focused and directed interventionist policies may be adopted relatively easily. The index, as we emphasize are glaring examples of development deficits in these villages. The large number of governmental schemes that have been implemented in the country thus far and continue to draw attention from the general population and the policymakers alike seems to have failed to deliver the desired outcomes in most cases. It is possible that the problems are specific to districts or even a particular state in the country. The proposed survey design shall help to accommodate both cross-sectional and dynamic aspects of the extent of exclusion as we define and hypothesize in this report.

Finally, the project offers a huge emphasis on the condition of children. To this extent, we borrowed questions from the NFHS survey components. The direct and indirect questions affecting the well being of children in all villages have received due coverage in our report. We identified places where institutional delivery, vaccination, administering of vitamin doses, schooling, parental occupations, household income levels etc. are reportedly below the average and might be critical factors behind social exclusion. Once again, directed policy interventions should pay more attention to issues

like widespread coverage of vaccination, sensitization of breast milk practices just after birth, exclusive breast milk practices for infants, provision of better institutional delivery for mothers, better pre-natal and ante-natal care etc. Moreover, regular, and hygienic mid-day meals, school supplies including books, school uniforms and maybe additional household level support to retain potential drop-outs in school are critical issues in need of directed interventions.

