

Sustainability of Poverty Reduction Initiatives in Bangladesh

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A roundtable discussion on “Sustainability of Poverty Reduction Initiatives in Bangladesh” was organised by Shiree and The Daily Star on April 9, 2011. The roundtable was attended by Government officials, development partners, NGOs, academicians, extreme poverty experts, civil society members and private sector representatives. What follows are important excerpts of the discussion. *-Editor*

Mahfuz Anam, Editor, The Daily Star

It is indeed a delightful moment to be partnering with Shiree and also on an important topic like the sustainability of poverty reduction initiatives in Bangladesh. We Bangladeshis are very good at starting things but not really at sustaining them. We from the Daily Star try to do our modest bit on this issue of poverty alleviation, as well as in the whole issue of development. We promise not to take today's event as a one off. We will focus in our own way on the issues that emerge from today's discussion.

Geof Wood, Professor Emeritus, Bath University

This meeting is about the sustainability issue - sustainability of poor people's livelihood and sustainability of the supporters who are involved in policy making and implications.

Poverty reduction programmes have been running in Bangladesh since liberation. Many of the programmes working with the poor people in Bangladesh make some assumptions. First of all they expect poor people to have a capacity to work. That assumption is not always correct. We also know that trying to link the poor with fair market access is a major challenge. Another major poverty reduction strategy in Bangladesh has been the use of group mobilisation. Another major activity is microfinance to support the poor. Microfinance is a key component of poverty reduction but the extreme poor are excluded from microfinance and depend on money lenders.

Overall there is a strong need for security. Everyone needs conditions under which they can reasonably plan for the future. This is the key ingredient of sustainability. Unfortunately we have a political economy in Bangladesh which is by and large hostile to the interest of the poor. It has been a class divided society comprising of elites who accumulate most of the resources of Bangladesh with very little distribution to the poor. It is a hostile political economy in which the poor have to navigate and within this hostile political economy, programmes and projects have to navigate as well.

We cannot ignore the crucial condition for improving the life of the poor. We cannot recognise poverty reduction just saying it is a technical issue. It is a political economy issue.

We have the intergenerational problem. Many of the projects in Bangladesh were short lived. We have very little idea that whether short life projects can be translated into long term security for poor people. Either the poor jump from one programme to another or they are left out. We need to combine support for present survival with future provisions for children. We need to look at outcomes over 15 or 20 years, the crucial test of holistic policy in Bangladesh.

We need a holistic policy mix. We need to recognise health as a universal need. Many of the valuable interventions are simply undermined by poor health. So we can never leave primary health care outside of any holistic package for the poor whether they are working in the garments factory in Dhaka or working in the field in Dinajpur.

In the case for social protection the new policy mix still assumes some capacity for household counterpart economic action, supportive local environments and a capacity for organised voice. Where these conditions do not apply, the need for unconditional transfers and full social protection is imperative.

So, what are the main threats to the sustainability of the poor livelihood, to the programmes and to the supporters? First of all we are facing problems in Bangladesh as in India of non inclusive growth, that means growth without employment. So the expansion of the labour market and employment opportunities are vital policy questions for the country. We have huge inequality and unfairness in Bangladesh. The visibility of inequality is becoming greater by the day.

Bangladesh is the most vulnerable large populated country in the context of climate change. There are also mastaans and deep structures of patron-clientism.

Finally, I really want to say that sustainability is not just a moral issue for the elites in Bangladesh. A moral issue under which they should pay more taxes and the government should redistribute the money for the social protection of the poor.

The middle classes and the rising middle classes do not take action through the political process. We should acknowledge expansion of middle classes and their responsibility.

Otherwise the interest of the middle classes in Bangladesh will be threatened by the hostility and the hostile mobilisation of the poor. So there is a pragmatic as well as moral importance to move with the sustainable agenda.

I suggest you we might organise our discussion under four main headings - concepts of sustainability, major threats to poor, responsibilities for activists and innovative ideas of policy and practice.

Md Abdul Hakim, Professor, UODA

I strongly believe that to make poverty alleviation initiative sustainable the alleviation programmes should be integrated into national development programmes. In this context our development objectives need to be redefined in terms of poverty reduction, reduction in inequality and unemployment rather than focusing on growth. Of course growth has to be there but focus should be on poverty reduction. Many of our poverty reduction initiatives have disappeared because they were not mainstreamed.

Poverty reduction is not just a technical issue. It is a very sensitive political issue. There is a programme from government to give the khas land to the poor. Yesterday, Prothom Alo reported on how a solvent man got khas land from the government to build a house. According to this report, many solvent people have managed to get land from the government. At least the government owned khas land which is near about 10% (3.3 million hectares land are available) should be redistributed.

Dr. M. M. Akash, Professor, Department of Economics, Dhaka University

I have some questions to Geof. Your first point was group mobilisation and individual entrepreneurship. Such cases will be always very small scale. And in the market, the bargaining powers of the poor have to be increased. But that cannot be increased on the basis of individual entrepreneurship model. That can only be increased by forming collective of the poor producers and on the other end collective of the consumers. Then the middle man could not take away the profit.

Intergenerational projects are needed. Those are long run projects. Sometimes the character of those projects will be such that it will have to be done by the government -- neither by the private sectors nor by the NGOs. For example, in the Monga areas in Rangpur, the main constraint is the particular structure of rivers and floods. To control them we need large scale infrastructural work and labour mobilisation which cannot be done by the private sector.

To see a real inclusive growth model we need to change ownership structures. We have seen in Bangladesh that the private capitalists have failed. The nationalised SOE has failed. A unique type corporate ownership model is Grameen Bank where the share holders are the poor themselves.

Shaheen F.E. Mahmud, Sr. Programme Manager, AusAid

Extreme poverty is a bigger challenge than poverty at the upper line because the rate of the reduction of extreme poverty has not changed from 2000-2005.

Instrumental for addressing extreme poverty in Bangladesh is social protection. In recent years, the government has increased the allocation for social protection up to 15.5% of the national budget in 2010-2011 and 2.5% of the GDP. Still the coverage is inadequate. The need is huge.

Tarana Halim, Member of Parliament, Bangladesh Government

For sustainability of poverty reduction initiatives in Bangladesh, we need to ensure a human rights based approach. If we ensure the UN approved declaration and good practices all over the country.

of human rights then the extreme poor will have access to income generating activities and basic services.

We need to empower women. The national women development policy that has been passed in the cabinet actually is a model for ensuring the empowerment of women.

One of my friends here has said poverty reduction is a political issue. I would like to say, let's make it a national issue. Because you know in Bangladesh whenever we talk about political issues, it becomes so political that it's impossible to have a national consensus.

We often say our population is our strength. With our growing population, if we cannot create proper employment, proper training, then they will be a drain on resources, not a strength.

The government is feeding the poor with VGD, VGFs, etc. If we feed the poor today there will more hungry mouths tomorrow. This cannot be the solution. We need a holistic solution. We need to create jobs.

Kishore Singh, Extreme Poverty Advisor, UPPR Project, UNDP

The extreme poor are not a homogeneous category. There are different kinds of vulnerabilities which we can target. There are the homeless, the slum dwellers, the people living in areas which will be affected by climate change. There are socially vulnerable people, women headed households, Biharis, Adivasis, Dalits.

To make an inclusive society we need policy reforms. We give too much importance to economic development rather than social issues. Social issues like dowry, early marriage, early pregnancy, illegal divorce, domestic violence should be addressed with proper importance. These issues create barriers to poverty reduction.

Shafiul Islam, President, BGMEA

Let me share what we are contributing regarding poverty alleviation. We are employing 3.6 million workers. We give them jobs so they can climb out of poverty. BGMEA is searching for new markets, Latin America, Japan and South Africa, so that we can expand our market and employ more workers.

We are fortunate that the demography of the population is young and vibrant. So there is a hope. We are running 7 skill development programmes for 12,000 people. Education, training and skill development are sustainable solutions.

Dr. Md. Khairul Islam, Country Representative, WaterAid Bangladesh

We discuss a lot about Monga areas. But now the coastal belt, especially Sakhira and Chittagong Hill Tracts need more attention. They are the worst affected by water crisis.

World Bank's Water and Sanitation Programme conducted studies in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. It points to gastrointestinal diseases, which are directly linked to water and sanitation, are eroding 6.8%, 6.4% and 6.3% of the GDP of Pakistan, India and Bangladesh respectively. This problem needs to be addressed.

Anowarul Haq, Team Leader, SETU Project, CARE Bangladesh

Decentralisation is a must. There is a kind of popular saying that if you decentralise, then corruption will also be decentralised. But the local Chairman is more accountable to the rural people.

Mohammad Mir Kashem, Additional Director General, BARD Comilla

We should not segregate poor from the mainstream. Political commitment is very crucial for poverty reduction. We should replicate successful projects and good practices all over the country.



Professor Sadeka Hailm, DU, and Information Commissioner



There are more than 3 crore people who do not have jobs. This is a violation of article 15-B and 20 of the constitution. In Bangladesh, there is growth, but growth without employment. Why? Because corruption

is high and most of the corrupted are sitting high on the hierarchy of the ladder.

The poor are also deprived of information. Can they walk into the district commissioner's house or UNO's office and ask for information about their entitlements? We want to make a digital Bangladesh, but internet penetration is low. In India it is more than 10%. Our functional literacy is so low.

Depoliticization of poverty is important. But still it is a political issue. People easily accept their lead so the leaders can make change happen. For example, they can make land reform happen. We need a pro-people approach, not a corporate style approach.

Ashkur Rahman, Urban Analyst, UNDP

Rapid urbanisation has become a new reality in Bangladesh. Our major policy perception is dominated by the rural orientation. There is a prejudice that urban poverty is an extension of rural poverty so the urban

poor are excluded from government support programmes.

Shaheen Anam, Executive Director, Manusher Jonno Foundation



If we cannot address the injustices in our society, in some way, all our poverty reduction efforts will fail. When we talk about structural changes, one very concrete step would be the redistribution of

Khas lands. We already have policies, but there is no rule of law.

Special policy has to be enacted to make sure that marginalised people like sex workers, Dalit, Harijan, disabled, people living with HIV and so on who are thousands in number are mainstreamed and not forgotten.

The most important thing is to build people's capacity to raise their voice to demand services, human rights and good governance. There is no alternative to social movement.

On the other hand the regulatory bodies like the Information Commission, the Anti-Corruption Commission and the Human Rights Commission have to be strengthened also. Projects should be done under the national governance but the national programme lacks political will and continuity.

Veena Khaleque, Country Director, Practical Action, Bangladesh



If we think about sustainable development, we have to think about technological justice. Technological gap is creating more income gap, knowledge gap and information gap.

Ultimately the poor are getting more marginalised. Monopolisation of the technology by the few multinationals as well as developed countries is the main cause of this widening gap.

Kazi Zahin Hasan, Director, Kazi Farms

In rural areas, most jobs are centered on producing food. The rural poor would benefit from high food prices, but for the urban poor the situation is reverse. So the government should have specific programmes for each.

Dr. Munir Ahmed, Director, Save the Children, UK



Education is key. There are school stipends, conditional cash transfers, to encourage the poor to go to school. Extreme poor children often cannot attend

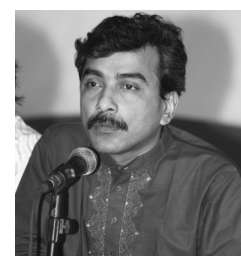
schools, because they are working. We must explore how to make the system support the extreme poor children.

A.H.M. Abdullah, Joint Secretary, RDCD



Poverty reduction is one of the topmost priorities of the government and we are trying hard working with donor agencies. But strong commitment of all and good coordination is crucial to achieve it.

Shishir Shil, Secretary General, People's Empowerment Trust



In order to achieve our goal, accountability is must. It is good the government has promoted the sixth five-year plan. Without vision, poverty cannot be eradicated. Political consensus as well as

political commitment is crucial to address extreme poverty.

Md. Asadul Islam, Joint Secretary and Project Director, EEP, Shiree



I attended an advocacy meeting in Khulna yesterday regarding implementation of Shiree Project. The main issue was that political reforms are necessary for proper khas land distribution. Everybody

feels that some changes are necessary, but nobody comes forward with appropriate efforts. Media can play a catalyst role.

Colin Risner, CEO, Shiree



We have heard several divergent views during the discussion today -- from the view that big business generating employment is the answer, to both praise and criticism of micro enterprise, some

calls for collectivization, for social welfare reform and for public goods provision -- in fact every point on the political economy spectrum. It seems that whichever perspective is adopted there are practical actions of a political, economic and social nature, at both national and local levels that can be taken to address the sustainable needs of the extreme poor.

Shiree, BRAC-CFPR, CLP and other programmes have handed over hundreds of thousands of cows, goats, rickshaws and other assets to extremely poor people and many of those people are very happy. But how to actually protect the gains derived from these and other interventions will be a continuing theme of dialogue.

Thank you for your thoughts and contributions. Next we must consider what steps we can take, together and as individuals. Shiree, as a project, will continue to promote dialogue and collaboration in various forms.

Professor Geof Wood

Every society has a category of poor people, even in the UK, which has a rich economy. We accept two main prompts here in local context, one is social protection and the other is employment. When we talk about the employment problem we have to keep an eye on the real wage issue. We have talked a lot about media, middle classes and mindset. We can only shift toward a more widespread, decent policy if we change the mindsets of middle classes. We emphasize the interests and what the middle class and the poor have in common.