

Bangladesh 2015: Crossing miles...

Coinciding with the Conference Asia 2015: Promoting Growth, Ending Poverty being held from March 6-7, 2006 at Lancaster House, London, we publish in two parts, beginning today, a paper prepared by the author based on a consultation exercise organised by Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC), Dhaka.

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BANGLADESH has lived in the shadow of poor imageries since its emergence as an independent country in 1971. For a long time, the country endured the derisive imagery of an international basket-case coined in the early 1970s when the country experienced a famine. For many observers, the image has seemed all too real as one witnessed in succession the political and economic upheavals of the 70s, autocratic rule of the 80s and the onset of bickering politics in the 90s.

Less well-known has been the resilience of the people and a continuous under-current of national efforts, conscious or otherwise, which sought to take the country out of the shadow of famine. Only in the aftermath of the devastating floods of 1998, when national and international observers predicted a new famine but were astonished at the rapidity and the comprehensiveness of the turnaround of the national economy, did the realization dawn how far ground realities had moved beyond the 70s imagery.

The outcome was not achieved in a day: the freeing of import restrictions on irrigation equipment in late 80s giving an immediate boost to agricultural production, the impetus to rural infrastructure building by LGED from late 80s, far-reaching reforms in the food distribution system in the early 90s, the impetus to non-crop agriculture in the early 90s and the robust growth of these sub-sectors in the late 90s, the consolidation of the micro-credit network over the 80s and 90s, consolidation of safety-net initiatives in late 90s, and above all, the robust engagement of ordinary citizenry on all available opportunities, local and international, have played a part in bringing Bangladesh out of the shadow of famine. The 2000 IFPRI publication of the same name merely put the professional seal on a quiet transformation which had been three decades in the making.

The paradox of poor imagery and impressive achievements has continued into more recent times. While new imageries of corruption, poor governance and confrontational politics bedevil the country, it is instructive to see what else has been achieved. Uniquely for a country facing an extremely vulnerable ecology, Bangladesh has established a credible record of sustained growth within a stable macroeconomic framework. Growth rates have inched upwards from a low of 1-2% in the 1970s to 3-4% in the 1980s to 4-5% in the 1990s to over 5% in the current decade. It is not only macro data which confirm a credible degree of growth dynamism. A recent study on local business in seven towns shows more than doubling of firm capital over the start-up amount. Annual remittance flows are in excess of 4 billion dollars.

Poverty too has declined by an average of a percentage point a year since early 1990s. The burden of seasonal poverty which covered many parts of the country even as late as 1990 had by 2005 become restricted to the ecologically vulnerable parts of northern districts. Achievements on social indicators have been equally noteworthy. At a comparatively low level of development, Bangladesh has earned the distinction of a major decline in population growth rate which currently stands at an annual

rate of 1.7%. Progress on MDG-related health and education targets have been equally astounding: notwithstanding widespread poverty, the country has graduated to the medium human development group of countries by UNDP's ranking. Child mortality was halved during the 1990s, life expectancy has increased to 61 years, net primary enrolment went up significantly as did women's economic participation, gender parity has been achieved in primary and secondary education, and, major strides have been made on sanitation for all. Gender parity is not only at the level of students: the proportion of female primary teachers has risen from 2 percent at the time of independence to nearly 40 percent currently. On environment, depletion of tree cover has been reversed rising from seven to 15 percent through a focus on social forestry.

Infrastructurally, a focus on rural roads has succeeded in substantially banishing the curse of remoteness for the majority of villages. People have been on the move as never before and mobile telephony has revolutionized connectivity among ordinary citizens. Anti-poverty innovations such as micro-credit have gone on to win world renown. Vibrant non-government sectors as well as private sector bodies have worked side by side with the government to achieve the above. Against all odds, the democratic process has found roots though the road ahead is anything but assured.

It is true aggregate poverty rates remain dauntingly high. Pockets of extreme poverty persist. Inequality is a rising concern fuelled in particular by a quality divide in education. Women continue to face entrenched barriers and insecurities in their attempts to consolidate their gains on social and economic fronts. Governance weaknesses stand in the way of an acceleration in the growth process. But the discourse on poverty is no longer a discourse on the statistics of despair. Yesterday's dreams of sheer survival are increasingly giving way to new dreams of graduation, dreams which have already found roots in millions of hearts in the villages and in the towns, in the fields and in the factories, in offices and in homes across the length and breadth of the country.

Limits of economics

Bangladesh is already embarked on a journey of transformation. However, once the reality of economic dynamism is acknowledged, it is easy to see critical social and governance downsides which impinge on the quality and future of the change process. Three such downsides need to be highlighted.

Growth with insecurity: While the growth process is certainly a credible one, it appears to be imbued with various insecurities which ultimately detract from the equitable and unhindered enjoyment of the fruits of growth. The insecurities stem from poorly developing governance norms, a growing concentration of economic power, lack of effective planning oversight over a rapid urbanization process, and, institutional weaknesses of grievance redressal mechanisms.

Insecurity can lead to concrete economic loss but also often translate into higher risks for all categories of economic transactions. Even where opportunity frontiers are expanding, not all the available

opportunities are accessed on account of the insecurities of public spaces. This is particularly true for women. Not surprisingly, quality of the criminal justice system and access to affordable justice have become as important determinants of how well the poor and marginalized groups are accommodated in the growth process as much as trade and investment policies.

Widening choice, limited influence: The poverty literature of the 70's was replete with references to analytical categories such as inter-locked markets and personal dependence. These described a situation where the poor households were enmeshed in inter-locking ties of dependence on land, labour and credit markets. Three decades on, this situation of personal dependence has significantly weakened. The spread of high-yield agriculture and all-weather road infrastructure has largely done away with seasonal dependence. Possibilities of quick migration have greatly expanded the choice horizon

clearly an area for effective policy engagement. A paradoxical barrier to such engagement is the MDG-influenced discourse emphasis on summary indicators such as enrolment rates. Ashortcut mentality has come to prevail amongst politicians and administrators, and indeed even within the electorate, which unwittingly militates against a more holistic engagement on such critical issues as teaching quality, service ethics, class-room environment, performance monitoring and system development.

Key lessons

There are a number of lessons from the Bangladesh experience which are of relevance to the wider struggle against poverty.

Plurality of drivers: A key feature of the Bangladesh experience has been the plurality of drivers in the process of social change and the relative utilisation of the comparative strengths of each type of driver. Less a conscious strategy and more a contextual outcome, this multi-driver

proved systematically inimical to viable growth of co-operatives. By terming them informal and thus rendering them outside the purview of co-operative law, micro-credit groups were able to develop their own rules of operation and eventually become a mainstay of NGO growth, and indeed, of similar initiatives by state agencies themselves. The consolidation of the micro-credit sector subsequently has been marked by one of the more successful examples of government-NGO partnership in the form of PKSF, the apex micro-finance funding organization.

A different set of insights emerge from the case of the private sector. Current discourse, particularly in elite and donor circles, tends to equate private sector with capital-based big business having organized voices in policy and political arenas. While the emergence of such an actor has indeed been a major development of the last fifteen years particularly in

adoption of social mobilization approaches and getting intermediate milestones right in the attainment of the goals of sanitation, child mortality, primary enrolment, gender parity, and tree cover. Social mobilizational approaches which creates effective partnerships of government, NGOs and local governments and which use campaign methods as well as specific incentives have brought major success in immunization, shunning of open space defecation, registering children in school including girl children, and spread of road-side forestry.

The example of sanitation merits a closer look. Key to success here has been the effective formulation of intermediate milestones. For much of the 1990s, the major transformation was a move from open space defecation to a fixed point defecation. Since then, the challenge has been to transform the fixed point hanging latrines into semi-sanitary ring-slab latrines. The coming challenge will be to transform the ring-slab latrines into water-

attendants (TBA) located within the communities. The UNESCO emphasis on SBA rather than TBA bypassed the task of technically upgrading the culturally experienced TBAs and instead brought in inexperienced younger women who found less demand for their services. There are not only technical skill issues but also problems associated with superstitions and lack of knowledge. The contextualization challenge is also innovating on local monitoring systems utilizing existing institutional capacities eg. local health centres, local government bodies, NGOs, for effective pre-natal care. Another failure at contextualization is to project the anaesthetic program as a case of specialists whereas an effective short-term training could enable locally-based health workers to assist on the matter.

Women's agency: 1st round victories, 2nd round challenges: Women in Bangladesh have won important first round victories of visibility and mobility. Female gains in primary and secondary education, access to birth control measures and micro-credit compare favourably with the situation in other developing countries. Social attitudes looking positively on women's economic participation too have become near universal. However, beyond these first-round victories of visibility and mobility lie new constraints and new areas of strategic challenge. Entrenched patriarchal attitudes and insecurities of public spaces serve to inhibit fuller engagement by women with the unfolding opportunities. At issue too are social attitudes which put low priority on maternal health. While women's economic participation has expanded, female labour productivity remains very poor.

A personal revolution: Perhaps the over-riding story of Bangladesh is one not found in the statistics at all. The poor of Bangladesh have undergone something of a personal revolution and become more assertive, pro-active towards opportunities, clearer on life-goals. This has not happened in a day. The egalitarian and democratic aspirations which underpinned the attainment of independence, a resilient outlook born of a continuous struggle with the vagaries of nature, the demonstration effect of mobility and livelihood opportunities, the return of competitive politics, all have played their role. The social reality may not have lost its oppressive features but the poor men and women of rural and urban Bangladesh are new protagonists on the scene and societal outcomes are very much open.

The Bangladesh experience also holds a number of cautionary lessons.

Politics and the perils of weak system development: The onset of parliamentary democracy in 1991 in Bangladesh has introduced new challenges of system development with implications both for the consolidation of a democratic polity and state capacity to address developmental goals. In many ways, the novelty of these challenges is not sufficiently appreciated by many who end up prescribing feel-good governance solutions. The administrative class has far deeper roots in the exercise of state-power than the political class a majority of whom assume offices with little or no training in statecraft or policy-making. A healthy transition on the politician-administrator interface has been anything but assured. Politicians often over-reach to overcome a sense of insecurity while administrators resist system change which could lead to a more productive distribution of administrative power. Such tensions have been compounded by authoritarian tendencies which have deep roots in the exercise of state-

power and which are too readily adopted by democratic power-holders.

Two clear perils have manifested themselves: jurisdictional over-reach by parliamentarians, and, a 'spoils without standards' approach to administrative and other appointments. Unaided by any system development on their 'job description', MPs want to dominate all public institutions within their constituency, be it local government bodies, educational institutions of central government agencies. At the other end, appointments have narrowly come to be viewed as spoils of victory but an increasingly partisan political environment has neglected any system development which could inject a sense of standards within the process. Both of these systemic perils are compounded by a political culture of confrontation which shows little signs of abating.

Reversibility of achievements: A different category of peril is the reversibility of achievements. One of the notable success area has been in birth control. However, since the late 1990s, there has been an emerging concern on the plateauing of the total fertility rate (TFR) particularly among the poorer strata. Increased importance of temporary methods over permanent methods in family planning, health sector reform in the late 1990s which promoted a one-stop service centre in place of domiciliary (door-to-door) services may have contributed to the observed TFR plateauing. The policy lesson here is the importance of appropriate time sequencing of the intervention: clearly, an end to the social mobilizational approach was premature.

Reversibility has also occurred in the area of access to safe water. The near-universal access achieved via the spread of tube-wells has now come under question due to arsenic contamination of ground-water. The strategy is now having to be wholly re-oriented towards arsenic decontamination and a switch to use of surface water.

The case of rural electrification provides another example of the danger of reversibility. Rural Electrification Board (REB), once touted as a role model, has fallen victim to a combination of inconsistent donor support, political interference, and policy failure on power generation. (First part ends)

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Bangladesh is already embarked on a journey of transformation. However, once the reality of economic dynamism is acknowledged, it is easy to see critical social and governance downsides which impinge on the quality and future of the change process. There are a number of lessons from our experience which are of relevance to the wider struggle against poverty.

of the poor. The lives of women have also been touched: female mobility is a conspicuous phenomenon and women's reproductive burden too has gone down.

However, while choice horizons have expanded, the political leverage of the poor over power structures and decision-making processes shows little evidence of any significant change. The electoral process is increasingly biased towards big money. Local governments, where the political scope of the poor is somewhat greater, remain weak bodies. Press is independent but media ownership is narrowly controlled by business and political elites. Poor do retain a political potential in the spontaneous mobilizational politics around specific local demands or grievances. But such mobilizational efforts rarely translate into long-term transformation of the institutional processes of policy-making.

Education and the new inequalities: Historically, education has been the great ladder for social mobility for the rural and poorer classes in Bangladesh. However, while major strides have been made towards universal primary schooling in recent times, an emerging quality divide is rapidly eroding the social mobility potential of education. The quality divide manifests itself firstly, in the increasingly large differences in achievement indicators between urban and rural schools, secondly, in the consolidation of a private sector elite education stream which is largely unconnected to the national system, and thirdly, in the proliferation of a sub-stream of religious schools which offers opportunities for poor children but include no national curriculum on basic education. The quality divides are not only fuelling new economic inequalities but also creating fertile grounds for social conflicts and asocial behaviour. An associated concern is the narrowing of interpretive focus across the three streams of madrasah (religious) education which stands at odds with the generally more tolerant social practice of religion.

While it is unlikely that there will be any slowing down of the private sector elite education stream, the quality divides within the public education system particularly between metropolitan centres and village and rural town schools is



reality has provided the strengths for achievements so far but also pose new challenges in the task of scaling up efforts for accelerated poverty reduction. It is instructive to see how and when such a reality comes into play.

In a fundamental way, the state in Bangladesh has been jurisdictionally aggressive but functionally pragmatic. Jealous on issues of power, the state has nevertheless demonstrated a propensity to co-exist with or even accommodate a progressive series of functional actors, most notably NGOs, private sector, local governments and the media. The sociology of this process has been little examined but some important lessons can be highlighted.

Take the NGO case. A rarely understood aspect of why NGOs came to be able to operate on such a social scale was the political intelligence of Grameen in defining its micro-credit clientele as informal groups. The emphasis on the category 'informal' served to create and nurture as it were a jurisdictionally-protected functional space in an institutional environment where the law on co-operatives had

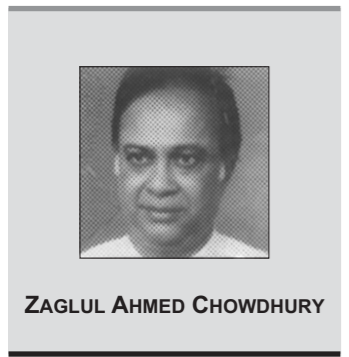
sealed fully sanitary latrines. Interestingly, the ring-slab latrine has also proved to be a low-threshold technology. While the relevant state agency, i.e. Department of Public Health and Engineering supported by UNICEF, dispenses an ideal type costing around 30 dollars, local entrepreneurs have mushroomed who offer somewhat lower quality but usable products for as low as 7-8 dollars. The social mobilization approach too has innovated. The initial pre-occupation with technology gave way to an attack on cultural inhibitions and fostering appropriate behavioral norms such as washing of hands after use of latrines and ensuring that children too used the latrines. The mobilization of local government bodies has been particularly effective in addressing the issues of behavioral norms.

Example of the negative consequence of a failure to contextualize can also be cited. One of the areas where success has lagged is on the maternal mortality indicator. While there are deep-seated attitudinal problems here, one clear policy failure has been to promote skilled birth attendants (SBA) bypassing traditional birth

response to economic liberalization from the early 1990s, equally important has been the larger and longer transition, both through incremental reforms and physical connectivity, to a market economy from the late 1970s and the deepening of entrepreneurship across micro, meso and macro levels of society.

Contextualizing MDG attainment: The Bangladesh experience highlights the utility and significance of effective contextualization of MDG implementation. Two particular success areas have been in the

Sri Lankan scene: Cautious optimism



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

THERE has been a discernible change for the better in the South Asian embattled nation of Sri Lanka. The recent talks between the government and Tamil rebels have impacted positively and consequently violence is on the wane even if temporarily. Of late, few news emanate from Sri Lanka of violent incidents or clashes which were common despite the existence of a ceasefire between the contending sides. The truce for last more than four years was becoming increasingly vulnerable till two sides sat across the table and agreed to honour the cessation of hostilities. Undeniably, there is now a respite in the country, but this welcome development is unlikely to be taken as a firm indication that the civil war is going to be over and a settlement

MATTERS AROUND US

The positive development notwithstanding, one cannot lose sight of the fact that in the past good ambience did not hold for long as bitterness and acrimony that followed marred the progress. This time the strife-torn country may have borrowed time, but this opportunity should be turned into the basis of mechanism that may help find a settlement.

is in the offing. For, bumpy road awaits ahead for a solution of the vexed crisis.

The much-awaited dialogue between the government and the Tamil rebels on the complex crisis of civil war in Sri Lanka appears to have gone well in the given circumstances. The talks in Geneva took place nearly after three years of last round of such dialogue and the Lankan scene worsened considerably during the long interregnum and so much so that recent times saw a series of violent incidents raising fears for resumption of full-blown hostilities. Such a fast deteriorating situation was salvaged, thanks to the difficult and dogged mediatory efforts by Norway, which made a fresh dialogue possible at a time when it looked remote.

The two-day talks from February 22-23 may not have produced anything very remarkable, but the

outcome came as a great relief both nationally and internationally. For, both sides agreed to honour the instable ceasefire and vowed to maintain the atmosphere conducive for next round of dialogue in April. Indeed, this is a very positive development when viewed in the context of a situation where the government and the rebels only a few weeks ago were bracing for resumption of the hostilities.

The dialogue did not cover the nitty gritty complexities of the civil war and a possible settlement since two sides rightly devoted time on maintaining the truce that had appeared on the verge of collapse. Indeed, salvaging this situation was not an easy task. And the government and the rebels deserve kudos for bringing back the positive atmosphere. Such contentious issues like the extent of powers in the autonomy for the rebels and a timeframe for a settlement as earlier

demanding by Tamil militants supremo Prabhakaran did not figure prominently. Discussions on these would have in probability landed them in difficult situation at this stage. This realisation has dawned on both sides and substantive issues would be taken up in the next round of talks.

The Lankan imbroglio nosedived after Mahinda Rajapakse won the presidency on a hardline stance on the Tamil issue compared to his main rival and former prime minister Ranil Wickramasinghe, who preferred dialogue rather than use of force in settling the conflicts with the rebels. It was during Wickramasinghe's tenure as prime minister that the current fragile truce was signed and several rounds of talks between the two sides took place outside the country. The dialogue was vexed, but made remarkable progress given the thorny nature. The militants

agreed to give up the demand of a separate independent Tamil country in preference to greater autonomy. The government side also gave several concessions. This infuriated president Chandrika Kumaratunga, political rival of Wickramasinghe, and finally she sacked his government claimaxing their differences on attitude towards the Tamils. The midterm elections for parliament brought Chandrika's Freedom party and Peoples Alliance to power and hawkish Rajapakse was made the premier and the peace process suffered severe setbacks.

As Rajapakse is in helm as two terms of Chandrika is over, the government-rebels ties appeared to touch the lowest ebb. However, he as the president of the nation is also stressing on the need for peace with the rebels, whose supreme leader Prabhakaran gave the government December 31 for a broad framework of a settlement of the civil war or risk

resumption of hostilities. The government expectedly brushed it aside as "totally impractical". Evidently, the Norwegian government seemed flabbergasted, but did not give up hope and eventually succeeded in bringing two sides to the negotiating table through painstaking efforts. After the talks, Solheim, the Norwegian peace envoy, exuded optimism about the eventual settlement of the problem while he did not play down the complexities.

Oslo's mediatory efforts is not without opposition in Sri Lanka since communist JVP, an ally of president Rajapakse, questions rationale of Norwegian role. However, it is good that the president lately chose to turn a blind eye to such criticisms and preferred seriousness for talks. The opposition parties say that would lend support to resolve the crisis through talks.

The dialogue has generated a sense of cautious optimism about the shape of things to come in the future. Since the government and the rebels hold diametrically opposite positions on certain key issues, a solution to the contentious crisis is unlikely to be on the cards. But what is important is the process to find a settlement, the pitch of which has unfortunately been queered as

discussions were stalemated. Now the Geneva dialogue has provided the much needed ray of hope and this beacon may lead to something tangible even though the future talks are expected to witness intense controversy and debates before a deal can be clinched. One good sign is that there has been a significant slackening in the war of words that contributes to provocations.

The positive development notwithstanding, one cannot lose sight of the fact that in the past good ambience did not hold for long as bitterness and acrimony that followed marred the progress. This time the strife-torn country may have borrowed time, but this opportunity should be turned into the basis of mechanism that may help find a settlement. A top leader of the Tamil Tigers S. P. Thasmesilvan said after the talks that the rebels gave the government two months time to make good on the promises made during the dialogue or risk a return to hostilities. A government spokesman expressed satisfaction about the outcome, but stopped short of making any concrete comment on how the future will unfold. Clearly, the rebels are unwilling to give much time while the government is unlikely to rush with any agenda for any settlement. Two sides need to demonstrate patience and realism since the crisis warrants

time for any breakthrough, which, however, is not an easy task.

The process should continue and at least the ceasefire must be observed by both sides should they want progress. In any case, return to hostilities will lead to nowhere. The government and the militants must be mindful about this for the sake of their country and people. The window of opportunity created following the Geneva talks after a long gap needs to be seized with a spirit of accommodation, shunning stubbornness.

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NOTICE
The Daily Star invites its readers to send in pieces for publication in the upcoming March 26 special supplement. Special request is made for original writings detailing the writer's personal experiences during the war of liberation. Please keep submissions below 1000 words.