

Feature

Development

Aid in Action Moves Ahead

by Rahat Fahmida

For those who are neither rural nor poor to know the priorities of those who are both is not as easy as it sounds. The rural poor are isolated, often neglected, rarely asked their views, selectively perceived, deferential. The silent cannot be heard. Direct approaches distort impressions: replies in interviews notoriously mislead, especially when respondents believe that their replies may bring benefits. An indirect approach may help, drawing on social science research, especially case studies of social anthropologists and social workers, and agricultural economists' understanding of the behaviour of poor farmers. On the basis of such evidence something can be said about what poor people want, inferring their priorities from what they do as much as, or even more than, from what they say.

There are a number of non-government organisations (NGO) in the country, which work intensely in remote areas and deal with the major grass-root problems, but remain behind the curtain of the big ones, which take up rather more space in the media or publicity sector. One such organisation is a British organisation, Action Aid, which came to Bangladesh in late 1983. Its first year was spent in research and policy foundation, for example, survey of its project area — Bhola, an island in the South of the country, study of other organisations, that is, particularly Bangladesh Rural Advancement Centre (BRAC) and Grameen Bank.

This organisation started in 1971 with its head office in London, and now it operates in five countries in Asia, eleven in Africa, and four in Latin America. It made its humble start by supporting other organisations in Africa.

Action Aid was founded by a group of people, many of who were associated with another well-known British agency — Oxfam. It has over 100,000 regular supporters amongst ordinary families mainly in Britain and also in other countries. It also has fund raising affiliates in France, Spain, Italy, Ireland and in India. Besides, it is supported by many national, and government organisations including those of Great Britain, like the Overseas Development Assistance (ODA), and many other international donor agencies along with the European Economic Community (EEC).

Action Aid, U.K.'s total income in 1990 was just over £20 million. Coming back to its Bangladesh project, the first one year was in Tikkapara, which is in Mohammedpur. The Daily Star discussed its projects in details with the organisation's Bhola project director, Mukhlesur Rahman, and Stuart Rutherford, who is now the adviser for Bhola, and previously was the country director here. Initially the NGO supported a local primary

school in Dhaka, which it took over from another non-government organisation. As it went for expansion of its programme, income generation through group formation, popularly known as savings and credit, came along.

In this work Action Aid's inspiration was the Grameen Bank, but we place much more emphasis on self-reliance of the beneficiaries through their savings, to the point where six years later the groups have built up large savings fund, from which they take their own loans and are now economically independent". In this way, Mr. Rutherford said,



Women's group in the island

Action Aid have created a unique example of sustainable urban development programme. There are currently 750 members, who are all women.

Women are developing their own business and are not dependent on their husbands. Talking about these women members' effort and eagerness to work, it was learnt that in the 1988 floods, most of their houses went under water. Notwithstanding their own hardship, they worked as volunteers carrying and distributing food to other poor people who were worse off.

Meanwhile, this British organisation used an innovative method to support the school. It used donors' funds to build up an endowment fund in a local bank. In five years this fund was big enough to support the school out of its interest. This is another example of Action Aid's policy of finding ways of making its project independent and self-reliant. Its Dhaka office is now headed by the organisation's country director, Robert Reitemeyer.

Now its main project area is Charfassion, which is in the southern part of Bhola island, and to where the only means

of communication from Dhaka is about a twelve hours journey by launch. This project started in early 1985. This is an area where no other non-government organisation is working on a long-term development programme. Here Action Aid works in an integrated way, focusing mainly on the landless groups, known as 'Samittis', which are similar to the ones in Dhaka. Now they have, as of September 91, 999 samittis, that is 18,886 members, as each samitti has 18 members each.

The adviser of the Bhola programme said that Action Aid hopes to cover the major-

ity of these loans on the members' lives. Dr. Ruth Alsop of University of East Anglia found that the loans enable families to change the whole pattern of the income sources. They become much less dependent on day labouring and derive an increasing part of their income from trading and from small businesses over which they themselves have control. Many also use the loans to invest in their own farming by leasing land.

On the social side Dr. Alsop found that women members experience a huge boost in their self-esteem and self-confidence.

blind people in becoming active in their own communities. Blind people are trained in various skills and then given a loan to start a small business based on those skills. In the meantime their families are shown how to overcome public prejudices against blind people and they come to recognise their blind family members as people able to contribute to family life and income. So far

82 blind people are running these kinds of small businesses. Similarly Action Aid has been supporting schools through its endowment scheme. By June 1992, 24 primary schools in the area will be running independently on their endowed income. Most of these schools have also received solid durable buildings from Action Aid and their

While discussing tubewell programme, Action Aid's one of the most successful of the programmes in Bhola. Mr. Rutherford pointed out that in Bhola the groundwater is salty down to 900 feet deep. This makes them very expensive costing about Taka 35,000 (taka thirty five thousand) each. It is difficult for the ordinary people to pay for this. Therefore when Action Aid came to southern Bhola the only tubewells were the ones supplied by the government ones. And most of those were sited in the 'baris' of rich elites, areas where most of the poor lived had to do without the tubewells. In a rolling project that started in 1985, Action Aid had installed 960 tubewells so far. In this way nearly two lakh eighty thousand, mostly poor people are enjoying safe clean water for the first time in their life. This makes this organisation one of the leading NGOs in deep tubewell installation in Bangladesh.

Another field that this organisation has penetrated in a remote area like Bhola, is to provide facilities for the disabled or handicapped people. Starting from last year, Action Aid is funding the Bangladesh Dristhithin Foundation to operate its innovative programme for the blind. Instead of placing blind people in institution, BDF's approach is to help the

blind people in becoming active in their own communities. Blind people are trained in various skills and then given a loan to start a small business based on those skills. In the meantime their families are shown how to overcome public prejudices against blind people and they come to recognise their blind family members as people able to contribute to family life and income. So far



Safe drinking water programme

teachers have been trained. Of course Bhola is in the cyclone-prone part of Bangladesh. It was in the eye of the storm in 1970 and was badly hit in the 1985 and again in April 1991. As the only NGO in the area, Action Aid plays a major role in such natural disasters. But it believes spending the money before the cyclone is more cost effective than afterwards. Mr. Rutherford now a more Bhola man than even some of the locals, said, "Installing 960 tubewells before the cyclone is much more useful to the affected people at the time of the cyclone than driving a truck load of jerry cans full of water to Bhola a week after the cyclone." he went on to say that protecting one lakh women and 70,000 children from tuberculosis by immunising them before the cyclone is much better than trying to cure them after the cyclone.

The samittis proved to be a very strong institution after the recent cyclone. Even on the day after the cyclone many samittis held their regular weekly meeting. Through these samittis the organisation was able to respond to the emergency very quickly, by making extra cash non-interest bearing loans immediately available. In this way Action Aid released Taka one crore into the local economy within three months of the cyclone, with no extra administrative costs. People were able to turn this money into roof-sheets, foodstocks or seeds or fertilisers — according to their real needs.

This British NGO also moved swiftly to repair the schools that were damaged in the area and this work is now almost complete. Many other NGOs came to help in the immediate aftermath of the cyclone and Action Aid through its intimate knowledge of the area was able to act as the co-ordinator to ensure that these organisation's help reached the poorest and the worst hit areas.

Action Aid is very proud of its staff whose dedication and hard work have made the progress of the organisation so outstanding.

STRUCTURE PLANNING for DHAKA

by Emdadul Islam

A recent phenomenon, town planning is yet to be popular with people in many Third World Countries. In Dhaka, the idea was first introduced in 1981 by the consultants of Dhaka Metropolitan Area Integrated Urban Development Project (DMAIUDP) study carried out under UNDP and ADB assistance. Although no other recommendations of this study has been considered so far, the authority intends to prepare structure plan, master plan and detailed area plan for Dhaka City incorporating a few new satellite towns. The UNDP/UNCHS agreed to provide a grant for the preparation of this plan. The primary rough planning of this work has already been finalized now subject to the approval of appointment of consultants the field level work of the preparation of the plans is expected to begin soon.

British Experience

The preparation of the plans in the town planning system was first introduced in practice by the Town and Country Planning Act of 1968 in Britain, at the height of the problems in self-containment and the dispersal of new towns development that started alternatives to traditional planning. The plans as defined by the Planning Advisory Group (1965) was a written statement describing the local planning authority's policy and general proposals accompanied by a justification and appropriately illustrated in diagrammatic form which include a key diagram showing the general nature of the policies and proposals in broad terms. After the approval of the plan from the Central Government, the local authorities designate 'action areas' in general conformity with the plan, for which detailed 'local plan' are drawn. The format and procedure of these development plans were later consolidated in the Town and Country Planning Act.

But, this integrated development planning which consists of structure and local plan, in fact, could not streamline the British planning as expected. There arose confusion over country and district responsibilities for planning control. In most cases, the plans have been criticized for being too long, too detailed, too expensive and too conventional. Bristow & Cross (1983) argued that it is a dialectical process, characterized by increasing contradictions within the planning system and the tensions due to changing circumstances in British politics, economy and society associated with changing personnel

developing and administering the new procedures and methods, changing political priorities both in central and in local government, and changing perspective in the planning profession. Kirby & Carrick (1985) said that the local plans prepared have been criticized for taking an inordinate amount of time to prepare, for being inflexible once produced for the uncertainty surrounding the relationship between the two plan levels and the plans have not only been revised drastically but there has been a swing away from 'action area' and 'subject plans' towards 'district plans' — a swing which could be interpreted as a return to conventional land-use planning and away from action-oriented intervention.

Planning for Dhaka

Being aware of those facts about the structure planning, the British-origin consultants of DMAIUDP project advocated in favour of the preparation of a plan in Dhaka. They neither evaluated the suitability of the plans in Dhaka nor elaborated any format and procedure of this planning for Dhaka. In Britain, the plan was initiated in the background of their present level of socio-economic, political and technological advancement, in spite of which their professional wisdom and practice are under criticism. In Dhaka until today there is no any articulated policy for urban planning and development. Moreover there is neither an effective organization for this purpose nor adequate tools or legislation for planning control. On top, the outcome of the plans lies with the participation of inhabitants/consumers, which is totally absent in the planning system of Dhaka. And as such the zonal plans prepared for some city areas, for instance at Senpara Parbata, Badda etc. are frustrated totally.

Apart from that, the idea of simultaneous preparation of a master plan, new town and structure planning is ambiguous. It needs careful consideration before the launching of such a paradoxical planning package. Any unfamiliar concept will produce the same result as happened in the past, thus it needs a proper evaluation in terms of Dhaka's planning framework and control system before the preparation of structure plans.

DIT, which was established in 1956 under the provision of the Town Improvement Act of 1953, has been transformed to RAJUK in 1987 enabling to cope with the probable works. But it is still going on with its

original set-up and skills. To prepare an integrated development plan, there must be structure planners and related skills viz specialized urban planners, landscape architects, infrastructural engineers, financial analysts, urban economists, social scientists, demographer/statisticians etc. Unfortunately RAJUK has only a few physical planners with geography and economic backgrounds. Besides, it needs a sound socio-economic and political structure in the management for the preparations, and implementation of the plans, which is lacking in our country. Thus it is worth reviewing the proposition of structure planning in Dhaka at this level of our development.

Donor recipe

In fact, urban planning in Dhaka is yet under the influence of international aid-trap like many other sectors. The donor agencies select their consultants, plans and strategies in which the government of Bangladesh has virtually nothing to do. The selection of the first master planners (under Colombo plan) and the consultants of DMAIUDP study (under UNDP and ADB) are ready reference. As UNDP/UNCHS agreed to provide a grant for the preparation of upcoming Metropolitan Development Plan another group of such expatriate consultants would undoubtedly join in this series.

Besides, due to the influence of the donor agencies over the institutional framework, a number of aided-projects in the country remain unimplemented or dropped half-done. In many cases, two-thirds of the project allocation has been spent in consultancy fees and on paper work. Commenting about the aid-tragedy in Bangladesh, Scandinavian economist Rene Dumont wrote that "a road is built leading to a river, but there is not enough money to construct a bridge. Is there nothing that can be done?" (The IDRC-Report, 1985).

Dhaka, after all, does not need a utopian plan nor a conspicuous plan, it needs a positive plan where the planning can be put into action. A consolidated expansion programme has to be taken for Dhaka. An expansion programme like this with stress on area improvement strategy may ensure that everyone may not have to fight to get the city centre.

(The Author is an Executive Engineer of RAJUK)

Women's position in India worsens

Aisha Ram writes from New Delhi

THE massive Indra Gandhi Nahar Pariyojana (IGNP) irrigation project in Rajasthan to turn the desert green has created new wealth in the form of cash crops, but it has been bad news for the area's women.

The growth of cash crops, which include groundnut, mustard and cotton, has been at the expense of food crops such as protein-rich moth bean and pearl millet.

"Though we are rich in irrigated areas we have no food in our kitchens," say Inderbal, Dhapudbal and Mohini who live in villages in Bikaner district of Rajasthan. After harvest, cash crops are brought straight to market by the men and the money is used to pay off loans taken to invest in irrigated farming.

The deteriorating position of women in some areas irrigated by the IGNP is reflected nationally. The 1991 census in India shows a drop in the ratio of women in relation to men since 1981: down from 934 women per 1000 men to 929.

Women activists are alarmed by the drop because it means that despite various government initiatives such as The Integrated Child Development Service to improve the nutritional health of women and children, and despite the efforts of the United Nations Decade of Women from 1975 to 1985, the general situation of women in India is going from bad to worse.

Says Dr Veena Muzamder of the Delhi-based Centre for Women's Development Studies: "The declining sex ratio is the final indicator that registers that women are losing out on all fronts — on the job market, in health and nutrition and economic prosperity."

For the last 10 years, women activists and centres for women's development studies have been trying to raise public awareness of the rising tide of social prejudice

against women demonstrated by practices such as "dowry-deaths", the burning of young brides by in-laws for not bringing enough dowry, the reemergence of suttee, the burning of widows on the funeral pyres of their husbands, and induced abortions of female foetuses.

Activists also argue that development projects geared towards cash income production, such as the IGNP, do not take the non-income generating activities of women into consideration, leading to more work for women thus increasing their over-all vulnerability.

In a recent study undertaken by the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) in Jaipur on the impact of the Rajasthan Canal on the health of women, women who were interviewed pointed out that with irrigation, the traditional work of men, such as ploughing and levelling, has become mechanised.

No such mechanisation alleviates the work of women: they continue to weed, turn the soil and harvest by hand. They work at night, too, watering the fields and driving away deer and black buck that come to graze on their crops.

Irrigation also makes it possible to cultivate land all year round, and the extra work load gives women less time and energy to take care of the needs of their children — and of themselves.

Taken together with the demands of traditional routine, the effect on women's well-being is ominous. For example, girls and women traditionally eat last and receive a smaller share of food than boys and men. When the amount of food is reduced, this practice taken in conjunction with the tougher work required, becomes critical in terms of health.

The income of families living in the command area of the IGNP has, for example, increased substantially and this

fact is used to justify this and similar projects.

Mr KS Kang, chief engineer of the IGNP admits that the problems of the people have increased with irrigation facilities, but maintains that "so has their prosperity".

But this prosperity has not benefited women and girls. A study by URMUL, a voluntary organisation working in the Lunkaransar region of Bikaner district of Rajasthan surveyed ten villages in 1987-88, five of which were irrigated by the

IGNP and five of which were not. The study found no significant difference in the nutritional status of boys in irrigated and unirrigated villages.

In the case of girls, however, those in irrigated areas weighed significantly less than their counterparts in unirrigated areas.

Irrigation has also fragmented villages as families move into dhans, single unit outposts, separated from each other by two to three kilometres (1.2-1.8 miles).

Traditional supportive networks existing between women have been disrupted. Says Mohini: "Earlier we met at the village well but now a fortnight may go without contact with another woman."

This not only increases feelings of loneliness among women but makes them more vulnerable to health problems. Their access to medical facilities is generally very limited, and as women get more isolated, they have no neighbours to help care for them in pregnancy and ill health. /Panos.

India's female population declining

