

A Case for the 'Other Half'

In its report on Human Development in Bangladesh, 1994, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has taken up 'empowerment of women' as the core issue. Of the several suggestions the UN body has put forth, two have merits of immensely positive bearing on our nation, the first relates to the provision for 20 per cent reserved Jatiya Sangsad seats for women to be filled through direct voting, and the second advocates for ensuring the involvement of 50 per cent women in planning and decision-making committees and social programmes at the local level.

The point the UNDP has raised deserves dispassionate analysis in the context of the country's existing situation. The agency's credit lies in the fact that it has not only detected a problem of development concern but also suggested a few concrete measures to overcome it. The UNDP has been opposed, for reasons understandable, to the present system of electing women members of parliament by their male counterparts and instead recommended the direct voting for their election. The rationale behind this should not be misread. In a country where women have a disproportionately low representation at all levels of decision-making — this is despite the fact that the country's government and the main opposition party are headed by women — the two suggestions appear to be a recognition of the practical need.

Not that this will call for an undue favour for women who constitute 50 per cent of the total population. Already women have demonstrated their quality, and given the opportunities they will prove their worth in areas men have so far considered their exclusive preserves. Even in certain professions and sectors, women in general have excelled their male partners. So the important thing is to demolish the wall of male chauvinism and make way for more women to remove the gender-biased disparities. After centuries of discrimination therefore the disadvantaged 'other half' need some legal support. Unless the nation opts for such a radical social and legal framework where women find their interests protected, society as a whole has no chance of advancing towards the desired goal where reservation for any particular group will no longer be required.

In a democratic system we are now following, parliament is the repository of power. Therefore the UNDP has suggested what it should have: sharing of power at the top level by women. In the same breath one ought to be as much realistic as to point out to the need for women representation at the local level. Without gender equality in access to resources and opportunities, growth is surely to be stultified. The question of harmonious and sustainable growth simply does not arise. As for the 20 per cent reservation quota for women in the JS, there should not be much of a problem. For already there are 30 seats reserved for them. What the UNDP report is asking for is to give the process more respectability and to make the elected women MPs directly accountable to people. They will be able to exercise their rights more independently and with greater confidence, obviously bolstered by the people's mandate.

On the other hand, women's greater participation in decision-making process at the local level will remove the age-old barrier between sexes and make way for a more democratic society based on equality and equanimity. Now the government must take the lead in this respect. Already the non-government organisations have proved through their various programmes that the women at the grassroots level are capable of realizing their potentials once the right kind of opportunities are created for them. In this regard therefore a political commitment is most necessary. Political parties should not only attach to women programmes the importance they deserve but also see to the point that women are nominated in an ever increasing number for election. Political considerations may outweigh the concern for gender equality, but a right kind of campaign strategy and some ground works to bring the women into lime light will make up for other shortcomings. The emphasis should primarily be given on women's education so that they can overcome the first hurdle with ease.

Hats off to Lara

It was a dream innings that every batsman has wanted to play ever since the great Garfield Sobers etched his name in the cricket's history book with a mammoth individual score of 365 not out against his name in 1958. But before Brian Charles Lara, a 25-year-old Trinidadian, set himself the task of assaulting the magic, monumental personal cricketing peak, no one seemed to be a serious contender for the job. True to his billing, the soft-spoken and childlike West Indian cricketer has accomplished the seemingly impossible task with a flair characteristic of the island nation.

Lara's is a flawless masterly innings that rendered the making of cricketing history even sweeter. It was not just a numerical nor a physical barrier that posed before the cricketers a challenge for long 36 years. It was a mighty mental barrier that awaited no less a cricketing genius than Brian Lara for its demolition. The gifted left hander had his chance earlier in his debut test when he made that blunder of running himself out, on 277 and had his opportunity cut short. This time he has been an epitome of natural ability, courage and patience all rolled in to a cricketing supremo.

In the long line of cricketing greats, the West Indians have a pedigree of their own. When Lara first burst on the international scene, he was given the difficult task of replacing another cricketing phenomenon, Vivian Richards. Lara has been playing the role quite ably. He has already catapulted himself in the cricket's hall of fame with a Promethean heave but the Trinidadian is just in his prime and will have fortune smiled on him often so much so that he may bask in more cricketing glories.

By scoring as many as 375 runs, 10 more than Sobers', Lara has expanded the horizon of cricket that is what the game is all about. Whether this record will be broken soon or not is not the important question. What is important is that he has once again helped renew the faith in human capacity to get over a barrier, to overcome a challenge. It is this tenacity, the indomitable will to scale ever newer height and chart ever newer course that has been the ultimate test of man, the most superior living being. Lara has given us a taste of such a higher plane. Hats off to him.

PARTICIPATORY PLANNING

Understanding the Concept in Bangladesh Perspective

by Kabir U Ahmad

RECENTLY the Government of Bangladesh has introduced an almost evolutionary concept called the "participatory" or "bottom-up" planning in a two-day workshop held in Thakurgaon on April 5, 1994. The report of this seminar under various attractive headlines appeared in all the national dailies on April 6th. The purpose of this short article, however, is to understand more about this new approach to planning rather than to provide a simple critique of it.

By way of explaining this new approach, the Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia made the following points: (1) "...the main basement of a plan would be constructed from the village union, thana and district levels"; (2) "...the objectives, priorities and strategies of the development plan would be determined at the local level while the plan would be formulated in the light of local problems and resources"; (3) "...because the problems, demands and resources of different places were not alike and the production facilities were also different in different places, ...we have given so much importance to this aspect of local level planning process"; and (4) "...the participation of the common people in the implementation process will be ensured.... and people will become the active force for the formulation and implementation of a plan". (The Daily Star, April 6th, page 12). Further, (5) she blamed the "top-down" nature of planning procedures for the failures of all the plans of the previous regimes in the country even since before the country's independence. These are serious issues the implications of which are needed to be analysed and understood carefully.

1

As far as making the "village union, thana and district levels" the basement of the plan "is concerned, it is certainly a laudable idea, but will the people of 69,000 villages, and 4,401 unions be given the

opportunity to directly express their needs and demands to the representatives of the planning commission or will the seminars be held only at the district and thana levels? From the point of view of sheer practicality, it may not be feasible to hold these seminars at the village or even the union levels, the planning commission will rise above partisan politics and will invite people from all sections of the rural people to give it a genuine neutral character so that social welfare is promoted and not the sectional interests of some particular groups of the rural society.

Suppose this is achieved due to the sincere attempts of the Planning Commission. A technical economist can visualize a huge problem of demand aggregation, prioritization, inter-temporal optimization and resource balance. It is important to elaborate these issues associated with people's expression of their wants. If one asks the people what they want, no doubt, they will come up with a long list of goods and services to satisfy their needs for food, clothing, shelter, health, education, transport and entertainment etc. One can call this an aggregated total, which will be a fantastic sum, of the "revealed" wants or "preference" of the people. These are not even demands because these wants are not backed up by purchasing power of the people, which some of them don't even possess.

From this, one can see that it will be a gathering of the rural elite, rich farmers and traders etc. Will this elite group represent faithfully the wishes of the unemployed and the poverty-stricken people, whose involvement the Prime Minister wants in the planning process, or will they just reflect their own wishes? The history of operations of this kind of rural elite as a basis for democracy and economic uplift of the rural areas since the days of Field Marshall Ayub Khan (1958) does not offer a very bright prospect. While the rural elite always want roads, schools, and hospitals etc in their own local areas, the underemployed farm workers and the fully unemployed people want employment all round the year so that they can feed and clothe themselves. The latter group gets neglected in the battle almost always and hence the people below the poverty line remain condemned to where they are. What is more interesting is that the people who get invited to these seminars are usually the local party leaders and the potential party supporters with the sprinkling of a few local opposition leaders which makes the whole exercise a partisan affair. The

institutional structure that comes into existence can easily turn into a party channel or distribution of the largesse. Hopefully, in this "participatory" planning seminars at the thana levels the Planning Commission will rise above partisan politics and will invite people from all sections of the rural people to give it a genuine neutral character so that social welfare is promoted and not the sectional interests of some particular groups of the rural society.

It is the government

which will have to bear the burden of costs of making these goods available to the people. It will be a horrendous burden on the government's Treasury. Here comes the question of balancing the demand for goods and services with the availability of resources in the economy. Usually, the costs of meeting these needs are too high compared to the available resources. Then the question of giving priority to the most urgent needs over the less urgent ones comes which has to be decided in the light of the national priority scale. Unless the local priority needs can be met entirely by the local resources, which is unlikely to happen, the local priority will have to be in line with the national priorities; otherwise with limited resources the country will not be able to meet its prioritized targets.

Then comes the problem of raising domestic and foreign resources for meeting these needs. Here the experts have to sit down to do some hard thinking and serious analysis for raising revenues without distorting prices and thereby misallocating resources in the economy and also without increasing the external payment burden of the country. What role can the people's participation play here?

The next question is how long will the government take to meet these needs of the people? One, five, then, twenty or even fifty years? This is where the problem of preparing a "Perspective Plan" with inter-temporal efficiency rules of resource allocation comes in. Here the static and short-run consistency in resource allocation has to be checked by using an up-to-date input-output table while the dynamic consistency in resource use has to be checked by using a dynamic input-output table. On top of that the general dynamic growth path of the economy has to be worked out by using either calculus of variations or

control theory. The planning seminars at the grass roots level may generate some "revealed preferences" at best but the need for doing the most fundamental, which are rather sophisticated, technical analyses to much the resources with those needs cannot be just wished away. Careful exercises on consistency and dynamic efficiency in the resource use will have to be done by some hard-headed and sophisticated economists. Otherwise, the whole planning will lead to varieties of contradictions, chaos and uncontrollable forces in the economy.

2

Can "the objectives, priorities and strategies of development plans be decided" in the local level meetings or seminars? The participants in these seminars may give some answers to the questions of objectives, priorities and development strategies, but what will happen if they conflict, which is most likely, with those decided by the government at the highest level taking into account the total position of national resources and future direction of developments? Which one of these will the Planning Commission work with?

3

The recognition of "local differences in production techniques and available resources" and their inclusion in the plan is certainly an acknowledgement of reality. But that acknowledgement has to be overridden by the needs for developing, innovating and refining new technologies for producing the same goods with better quality as well as newer goods in that local area and outside. No region should get stuck for a long period with the traditional technology and products. All successful developments have taken place through the introduction of newer methods of using the same resource or improved products by using better inputs, and finding new markets for them. Can the local level meetings or seminars decide

which one of these should be adopted or rejected?

4

How can "the participation of the local people in the implementation process be ensured"? If all the local people could effectively participate in the implementation process, then there would be full employment in the rural areas, which would be the "golden age" for Bangladesh. To think that such a state could be reached immediately or within a period of five or even 10 years with about 30% of the rural work force unemployed would be unrealistic. If they can do it, it will be an extraordinary achievement. Hopefully, the Planning Commission will explain how it can achieve this in such a short period

5

Finally, successful planning needs the cooperation not only of the people at the grass roots level, but also of the politicians, the civil servants, the business community and the sophisticated economists. Technical planning is nothing but a consistent and coordinated set of economic policies geared to developing the economy. What seems to be missing in all these discussions is the deep commitment of all the participating agents to promoting social welfare and not the narrow individual or group interests. It is the task of the government to ensure that the interests of various groups are taken care of through various compromises and yet the ultimate social welfare is promoted. The past plans failed perhaps for three reasons: the technical inadequacy of the plans to incorporate enough flexibility to cope with uncertainties that the economy was facing, bureaucratic red-tapism contributing to the slow implementation of the plan projects and the lack of deep commitment on the part of governments to implement at least the core of the plan. Hopefully, the new approach to planning will address these vital issues.

communism in eastern Europe, the Italian government's interests shifted and it stopped funding the water project. The NGO, it was reported, went ahead and imported foodstuffs for the people of Karamoja, including Christmas cakes.

That is one small example of how the scramble for donor resources in recipient countries and the complex politics of altruism in the donor countries are combining to pose a question mark over the role of NGOs in development.

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NGOs Tainted by 'Pajero Culture'

George W. Lugalambi writes from Kampala

Non-government organisations are of the praised for their independence, innovativeness and ability to work with ordinary people. For these reasons, industrialised country governments are channelling more of their official aid money through NGOs. But, argues a Gemini News Service correspondent, government funding is threatening exactly those qualities that make NGOs attractive.

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The exact number of NGOs is unclear. The NGO Registration Board treats its records as though they were official secrets.

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In response to public criticisms, NGOs formed a Development Network of Voluntary Organisations, which seems to work more like a super-NGO than a supervisory body.

Many NGOs are not genuine and have been used to accumulate wealth for individuals instead of dealing with the social afflictions they were ostensibly set up to tackle.

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As a result, NGOs have much less flexibility than they enjoyed a decade ago: "NGOs' heavy dependence on government funding has thus sacrificed some of the inherent advantages of being an NGO — their independence, their creativity and their objectivity."

The money, says Wabwire, may have strengthened the capacity of grassroots organisations to combat racism, but nonetheless it was "official" money and the NGOs were simply conduits: "Why the European Union decided to channel funds through the opposition NGOs in South Africa must be part of its own broader strategy in the country," he says.

The increasing dependence of NGOs on government funding undermines their neutrality. In the US, the African Development Foundation was funded by, and gets all its money from, Congress. In Canada, the government increased its share of NGO funding from one-third to almost a half in nine years. In The Netherlands, three major development organisations, Novib, Hivos and SNV, get 70-100 per cent of their funds from government.

Wabwire notes that "unrestricted money which an NGO can use for its programme as it determines is becoming increasingly scarce,"

It may be said, however, that in this particular area, and also in many others, the human factor is an important element, in so far as the application of rules are concerned. We conveniently forget that the rules are made for people and not vice versa.

In the present time, there are Ministries and Departments where there are no pending pension cases. But on the other hand, there are also Ministries/Departments where the pension cases are languishing for several years.

We have to ensure accountability at each stage. This is sine qua non of good governance.

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Home for the aged

Sir, Recently I, accompanied by my friend Mr F H Khan, Director of Food Department (life-member of Bangladesh Association for the Aged & the Institute of Geriatric Medicine) paid a visit to the Rehabilitation Centre for the Aged, situated in Azampur, Uttara, Dhaka. Its founder-chairman Mr Khatib Abdul Zahid Mukul started this home for the aged in a rented house in the year 1987. It consists of 12 rooms which can accommodate 30 persons or more at

it may be worthwhile to consider establishment of such Homes for the Aged in other parts of the country.

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OPINION

Pahela Baishakh : Chaos Mustn't be there

Akku Chowdhury

The ritual of celebrating Pahela Baishakh varies from community to community of Bangladesh. Many of the dwellers of the Dhaka metropolis have been waking with the sunrise and gathering at the "Botomol" (under the Banyan tree) at the north end of Ramna Green for many many years. Old faces and new faces are all to be seen. Chhayanaut has been the bastion of our cultural activists' organization had been responsible for the reawakening of the Bangladeshi consciousness to the traditional value of Pahela Baishakh. The first gathering was back in 1967. Chhayanaut was still a new organization created from the need of Bangladeshi nationalism that was running very strong with the middle class and progressive among the intellectuals and politicians. As the re-formation on the Bangladeshi culture simultaneously by the Pakistani military, bureaucrats and intellectuals was getting stronger, Chhayanaut was in the forefront fighting against that and trying to preserve and expand as well as propagate the culture and rich heritage of the Bangladeshi. Chhayanaut played a most important role and will always be remembered for bringing in a cultural awakening and blossoming of innumerable musical talents. In the history of our struggle for national liberation a chapter ought to be dedicated to this organization that fought a hard fight under great repressive situation during the dark days of Pakistani rule.

Anyway, returning to the Pahela Baishakh, the gathering at Botomol has now become like an ocean compared to the handful of audiences that used to sit on shotronji and fit within 3000 square feet. Now the overflow itself would require a few square miles. Comparing the situation to three decades back when a handful of die hard fans and followers used to gather on the green under the Botomol, and what it is now — innumerable mass of people coming to this pilgrimage, one cannot deny

control theory. The planning seminars at the grass roots level may generate some "revealed preferences" at best but the need for doing the most fundamental, which are rather sophisticated, technical analyses to much the resources with those needs cannot be just wished away. Careful exercises on consistency and dynamic efficiency in the resource use will have to be done by some hard-headed and sophisticated economists. Otherwise, the whole planning will lead to varieties of contradictions, chaos and uncontrollable forces in the economy.

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