

Feature Development

The Cairo-Copenhagen-Beijing Connection

by Raana Haider

The daily lives of most women in Western and non-Western countries vary only by degree, still we perceive each other as different, often by as much as 180 degrees.

APPROACHING the 21st century, the keyword in development is paradoxically, poverty alleviation — a sobering thought. The focus of development is now on providing people with the basic needs: the life sustaining needs of food, shelter and health and measures to provide employment and reduce social disintegration.

The overriding concern for people's welfare underlines the inseparable and overlapping domains of population, development and environment. The goal of sustainable development in the 1990s has provided the conceptual framework and set the social themes for the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo, the 1995 World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen and the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing.

At the close of the 20th century, the role of women is now recognized and given priority in the areas of population, development and environment. Women representing half of the world's human resources are critical and essential for any development strategy programme. Development has to be more equitable and pay more attention to the specific need to women. It is the triad of rapid population growth, increasing environmental degradation and pervasive poverty which development in the 1990s has to cope with.

Island countries, contraceptive use is low and women bear an average of 6 or more children. According to Nafis Sadik, Secretary-General of the ICPD held in Cairo in 1994, the interests and rights of the individual must be central in all population and development efforts; that women's needs and freedom of choice must be extended in a population programme; and that the empowerment of women in society must be championed in its own right.

The ICPD World Plan of Action highlights the close lines between population issues, sustainable development and human rights, including women rights. Women rights are a key to population change. In response to the question, 'why is the status of women important in addressing issues related to population and development?' Nafis Sadik says, 'in many countries, relationships with the family are very unequal, and women often do not have control over their own reproductive decisions. In addition, society can dictate that women should have many children, or produce sons. Many governments have laws that ban contraceptives. All of this exists at the expense of women's rights.'

Some 1.1 billion people in the world live in a state of absolute poverty with income and consumption levels below nationally defined poverty levels. According to the 1994 Economic and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific issued by ESCAP, these poor do without many of life's basic necessities on an income of less than \$370 a year and with very little access to resources. The rural poor represent more than 80 per cent of the world's impoverished people in developing countries. (ESCAP, 1994). An Asian Development Bank study traced the problem of rural poverty to inequalities of land distribution. Although most developing countries have gone through one or two rounds of land reform, they experience a number of weaknesses common to most land reform efforts. Thus empirical evidence suggests that many land reform policies have aggravated rather than reduced, the incidence of rural poverty. (Asian Development Bank, 1995).

The urban poor fare no better. During the past decade, Asia experienced the fastest rate of urbanization among the developing regions at 2.7 per cent per annum compared

with annual rates of two per cent in Africa and one per cent in Latin America. The study cited that urban poverty incidence ranges from one fourth to two fifths, with signs of worsening in some instances. With the continuing rapid urbanization in they years to come, urban poverty is likely to be a persistent problem in developing countries and can be expected to diminish more slowly than rural poverty, according to the Asian Development Bank. Life is grim for the rapidly increasing urban poor population working in factories and living in urban slums. They are among the 'wretched of the earth' who, if the world has progressed, have certainly been the victims of that progress. (Asian Development Bank, 1995.)

Women represent 70 per cent of the world's poverty-stricken population. This gender angle to poverty characterizes the situation known as the 'feminization of poverty'.

The World Summit for Social Development meeting in Copenhagen in March 1995 addresses this bleak and deteriorating international scenario. It focuses on the umbrella issues of poverty, unemployment and social disintegration. UN Secretary-General, Boutros-Boutros Ghali finds it 'unacceptable that individuals and societies with the fewest resources — the poor, the unemployed, the weak and the vulnerable should have to bear the greatest burden of the economic and social transformation of our world. The world is suffering from a social and moral crisis which, in many societies, is of immense proportions.'

There is recognition of the 'new orthodoxy of development economics, is the poverty-oriented, basic human needs approach to economic development in the 1990s. Economic growth alone is no longer the sole objective of development. There is universal concern with the distribution of the economic pie. Development begs the question, development for whom? Who is getting what?

Since 1975, when the First World Conference on Women was held in Mexico City and the of the coming Fourth World Conference on Women to be held in Beijing in September 1995, the women's movement has played a substantial role in formulating the 'new orthodoxy' of development thinking. The new paradigm of development stresses the crucial and multiple roles women perform in the economic and social development of their communities.

There is much evidence to show that whether economic

growth occurs or not, women seem to lose status relative to change and are often absent from agents that are planning for change and development. The rapidly changing socioeconomic environment disadvantages particularly women in developing countries, where they have lost their traditional role in the subsistence agricultural economy without having acquired any new functions in the fast growing cash economy. In this process, they have been marginalized invisibly and non-recognition of women's productive labor significantly undermines their contribution to society. Recognition of women's reproductive role but choosing to ignore their productive role cannot be but an obstacle to society's progress as a whole.

Population pressure, landlessness, environmental degradation, rural urban migration, increasing levels of poverty

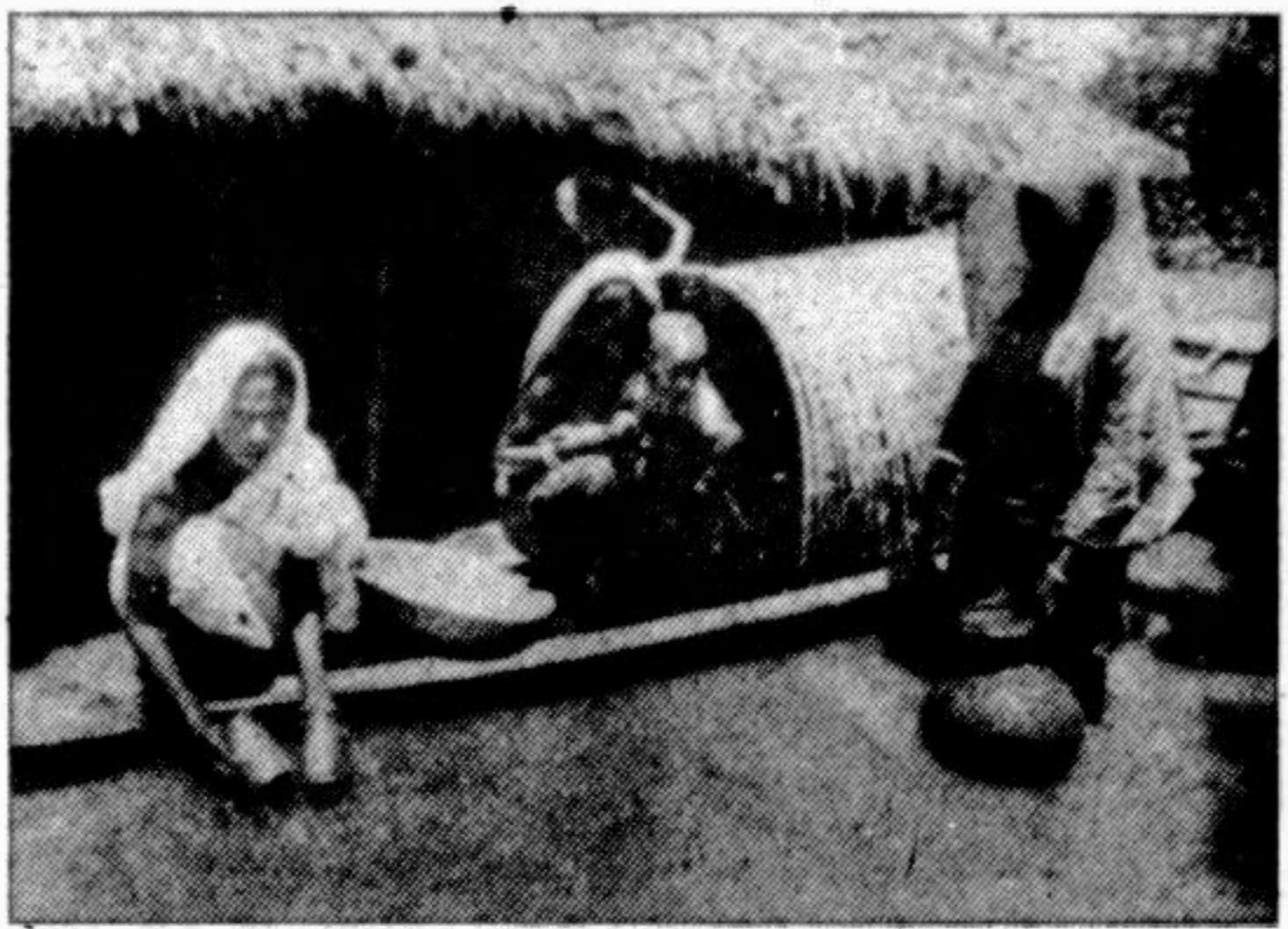
and a host of other factors combine to create a change in the makeup and role of the traditional family. Such a combination of socioeconomic pressures in a last changing global economy have disadvantaged women the most, resulting in a sharp increase in the number of female headed households.

The woman's dilemma is acute. The family's wellbeing is increasingly their responsibility yet there is no commensurate amount of resources to enable her to provide for such survival needs. With limited access to resources, she is paradoxically required to manage. Women are at the bottom of the pay and power scales in agriculture; they are employees not employers, unpaid sowers, reapers and bread-makers, not breadearners on the family farm. (Seager and Olson, 1986).

According to Gertrude Mongella, the Secretary-General of the 1995 Conference on Women, 'The problems of women are not different from country to country or region to region.'

they only differ in intensity.' UNICEF in Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women and Girls: A Policy review, states that 'during the late 1980s and early 1990s, there was a shift towards wider recognition of the gender dimension in development strategies. The gender approach emphasizes that actions need to be directed to the fundamental structural causes that determine the status and role of men and women.'

Gender relations describe the social meaning of male and female and thus what is considered appropriate behavior or activity for men and women. The focus of gender is on social roles and interactions of women and men rather than their biological characteristics which is sex. As stated by (Blumberg, 1981), 'Women's fate owes little to biology, much to socialization and even



Facade of poverty: More acute during flood and also in drought and winter.

NGOs: Partners in Social Development

The scene is El Salvador where a mother is being united with her 12-year-old son who had been wrested away from her as a six-month-old infant by troops during a counter-insurgency war in May 1982. 'I was sure he was alive,' she said. 'I never gave up.' How could this child be found after so many years? In the first case of its kind to arise from the civil war, the reunion took place after a DNA test, performed by the Boston-based Physicians for Human Rights, matched young Juan Carlos with his mother Maria Magdalena Ramos. The boy had been living at a private orphanage run by the Austrian-based Children's Villages, SOS. The search for Juan Carlos was one of many conducted by the Association in Search of Missing Children, a grassroots organization without political or religious ties, according to The New York Times. This NGO was formed in conjunction with the United Nations Mission in El Salvador which also acted as initiator for the DNA testing. The search for Juan Carlos, and countless other war orphans in El Salvador, has been actively supported by efforts of the Salvadoran Government and Salvadoran Red Cross.

This striking story is just one of many, the world over, which epitomize the cooperation between governments, the private sector and non-governmental organizations, all acting together as partners. OVER the last decade, the world has witnessed a growing inability on the part of many Governments alone to cope with the proliferation of social problems, which include armed conflicts, ethnic tensions, the rapid dissolution of many socialist systems and a simultaneous transition to democracy in many developing countries. This trend has been accompanied by a growing community-level awareness of social problems.

NGOs have played an increasingly important role in addressing these problems, both through local citizens' empowerment and through international advocacy. NGOs bring citizens' concerns to the attention of governments; they advocated particular policies and present alternatives for political participation; they perform policy analysis; they serve as early warning mechanisms; and they help to monitor and implement agreements. Increasingly, NGOs not only influence policy, they act as policy-shapers.

Defined as 'any non-profit citizens' voluntary entity organized locally, nationally or internationally, whose activities are determined by the collective will of its members,' the term NGO includes thousands of organizations.

Especially now, with the convergence of two major trends — globalization on the one hand and participation on the other — NGOs are becoming an essential dimension of public life at all levels and in all parts of the world,' according to a recent report of the Secretary-General (E/AC.70/1994/5). For example:

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) estimates that the total contribution of developed country

ring much greater amounts of resources through NGOs than through the entire United Nations system.

Social Summit Involvement of NGOs:

As for the Social Summit, NGOs' interest and participation has burgeoned. Whereas 78 new NGOs were accredited at the first Preparatory Committee meeting in early 1994, and another 285 were accredited to PrepCom II in August 1994, according to figures cited at the opening of the final meeting of the Preparatory Committee in January 1995, a total of over 2,500 NGOs, including NGOs previously accredited to ECOSOC, have now received Social Summit accreditation. This number exceeds even the number of NGOs accredited to the Earth Summit at a similar point in time.

POVERTY ALLEVIATION: Because of their unique composition, location and networks, NGOs often operate beyond the public sector's periphery to reach groups which governments and development agencies find it most difficult to help, providing concrete assistance to about one fifth of those 1.3 billion of the world's people living in absolute poverty, especially those in remote rural and poor urban areas where government services may be scarce or non-existent.

PRODUCTIVE EMPLOYMENT: Examples of projects in support of productive employment include: Access to credit: In Bangladesh, the Grameen Bank, one of the better known Southern NGOs, extends small loans to the landless poor in over 23,000 villages, and boasts a 95 per cent repayments rate.

North-South assistance: Between 1970-1990, grants by Northern NGOs, one third of which came from government sources, to developing countries jumped from just over \$1 billion to \$5 billion a year.

Entrepreneurship: The Paris-based Business Association for the World Social Summit (BUSCO), involving business leaders in 30 countries on four continents, has developed its own Programme of Action of Entrepreneurs to submit to the Summit which includes proposals for conditions that promote, inter alia, productive employment, the dissemination of technologies and vocational training, and intensified investments in developing countries.

US \$1,400,000,000,000. That is how much money the world's rich countries say they have given to poor countries in the past 35 years. And yet, global poverty has spread, and the gap between the haves and the don't haves in the North and South is growing.

What went wrong? Firstly, US \$1.4 trillion may sound like a lot of money, but it is a tiny fraction of what the world spent during the same period on weapons.

Also, the money is peanuts compared to the losses developing nations suffer due to international trade restrictions, depressed commodity prices for their exports, debt repayment and capital flight. Then, a lot of that aid never really reached the poorest in the poor countries. Much of it went to subsidise exports and flowed back to donors, to pay salaries for the aid bureaucracy. The little that was left went into the pockets of developing country elites.

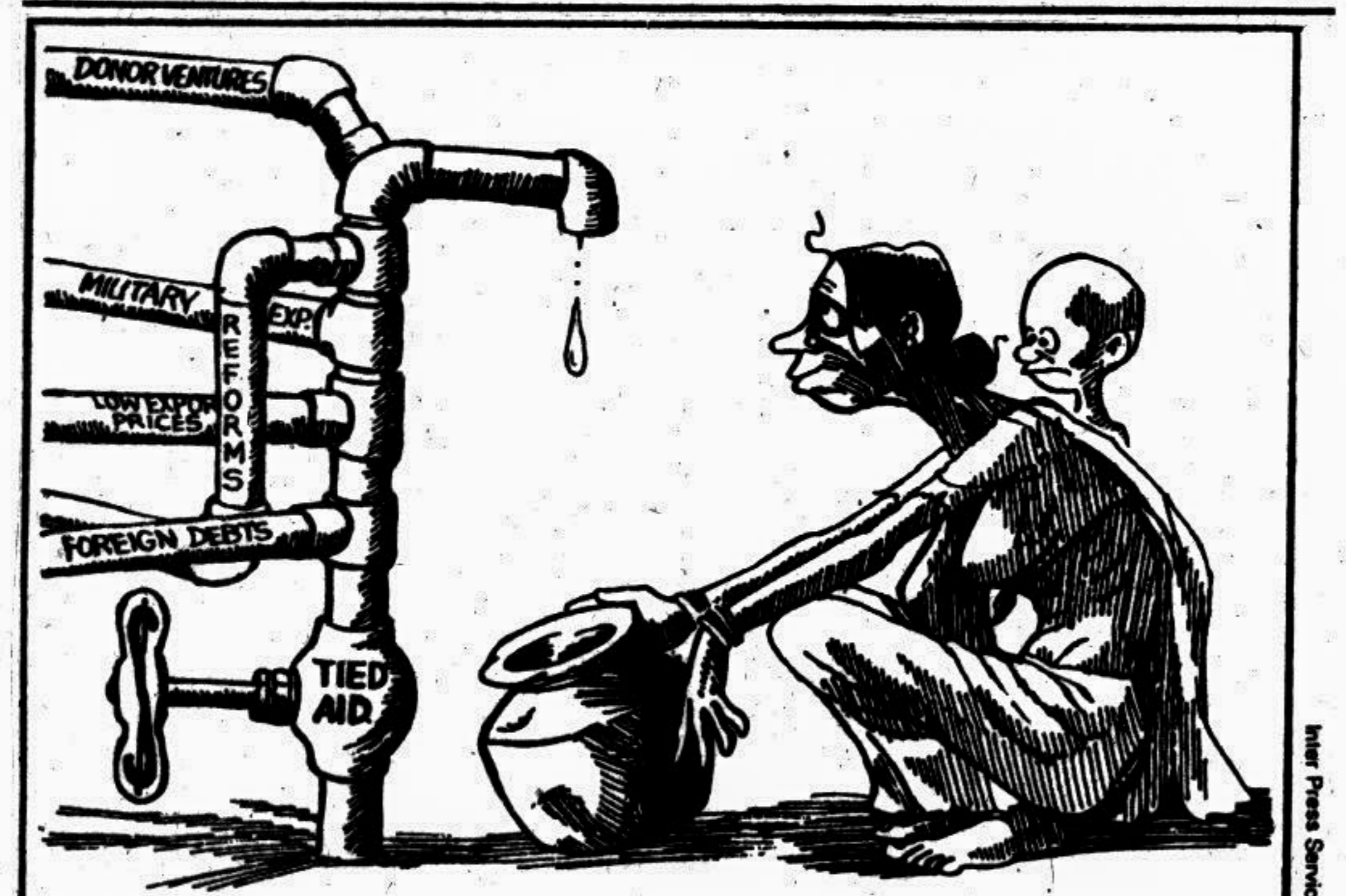
There has been a lot of soul-searching among donors and recipients about aid in the run-up to this month's World Summit on Social Development in Copenhagen from March 6-12.

Dubbed the Poverty Summit, the conference is being attended by 100 world leaders — mainly from poor countries. But although poverty lies at the root of the world's environment and population crisis, the agenda of the Copenhagen meeting has been virtually ignored by the international media.

The Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro and the Population Summit in Cairo last year provided headline-grabbing sound bites on climate change, abortion, Copenhagen, it seems, just isn't sexy enough for the Western media.

Aid: The Poverty Summit

World leaders gather at an international conference to discuss poverty and what to do about it. Kunda Dixit of Inter Press Service reports from Copenhagen.



about aid, and the concerns of some of the world's poorest countries in the run-up to the Copenhagen conference.

Why hasn't foreign aid made a difference, or has it? How can aid be used more efficiently? Is the volume of aid to a country linked to economic growth? A recent study in Bangladesh found that three-fourths of foreign aid the country has received since independence 25 years ago went back to donors to pay for experts, consultants and equipment.

'Large numbers of people are supposed to benefit. But most often, it is the people who prepare and implement the aid projects who benefit,' says Muhammad Yunus of Bangladesh's Grameen Bank, which lends small amounts of money to poor women.

In 1992, 65 per cent of all Canadian development assistance was spent in Canada, and 90 cents out of every dollar the Australian government gave to poor countries went back to Australia.

'Increasingly, it seems that possible commercial benefit to Australia has become the dominant motivation of the Australian aid programme,' says Andrew Hewett of the Australian charity group, Community Aid Abroad. 'It is a sad fact that as Australia has got richer, we also got meaner.'

Most donors aggregate their aid statistics, and although the total annual aid budget may run into millions of dollars the portion allocated to directly meet the basic health and education needs of the poorest is small. Aid has also gone to strate-

gic allies, former colonies and not necessarily to the most needy. The United Nations says 40 per cent of the richest developing countries receive twice as much aid as the poorest 40 per cent.

Aid fatigue, recession, competition for funds from emergency peacekeeping and relief have further shrunk aid levels. Ironically, arguments similar to Yunus' about the misuse of aid is now being put forward by the new rightwing House in the United States as an excuse to terminate US contributions to agencies like the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme.

Conservative economists are also sowing scepticism about charity to assert that there is no economic logic to back the argument that foreign aid is a determinant to economic growth.

Peter Boone of the London School of Economics says in a recent paper that the volume of development aid to poor countries has had no impact on living standards. Taking the cue, some in the West have gone on to blithely assert that aid flows have not made a difference to infant mortality rates in developing countries.

Even vociferous critics of aid would disagree. I fact, one of the most dramatic impacts of foreign aid has been on increased life-expectancies in poor countries because of vaccination campaigns and oral rehydration. The other area of maximum aid impact is in technologies to boost food production like the Green Revolution.

The argument that despite masses of development aid there has been no improvement in living standards among recipients is belied by the performance of East Asian countries,' writes Victor H Frank, former US director at the Asian Development Bank in Manila.

The formula that allowed East Asian countries to gallop ahead was foreign aid plus sound domestic economic management and good governance.

On the other hand, in poorer South Asian countries foreign aid now injects up to 80 per cent of the annual budget allocation for development and has become an addiction. Without it, provision of even the existing meagre health and education services to the poorest would grind to a halt.

One of the proposals being put forward at Copenhagen is the 20/20 concept that would require donors and recipients to set aside 20 per cent of their aid or national budgets to basic social services.

But some countries, including those from the South oppose setting fixed targets. Says Martin Khor of the Malaysia-based Third World Network: 'It is clear that this time aid the wrong tree to be barking up. Northern countries have not kept the aid pledges they made at previous summit, some of them have since cut aid volume quite substantially.'

From Poverty to Better Living

Momtaz Begum (33) of village Kestopur in Mymensingh narrates her story of reaching a self-reliant stage.



I am a small trader now. I deal in cloths. I purchase 'sari' and 'lungi' from Islampur of Dhaka and sell them to the hawkers in Mymensingh market. Sometimes, the local women buy 'sari' directly from me according to their choice. With this business the family is on the way of attaining a stability; poverty and affliction have been, moderated.

Previously, my husband was the only bread earner for the family. His occupation was dealing in pickles. His capital was insufficient and hence, his earning was far below the actual need. Most of the days had to be passed even on starvation. As we had not family property, poverty was acute. To reduce poverty and adversity from the family and to get a sort of solvent life I joined the ASA Landless Women's Group. I attended the development education class for one year. Various issues on women's rights, divorce, dowry, minor marriage, saline preparation, homestead cleanliness, environmental care, etc. were discussed in the class. From the discussion I learnt certain things that help me in my family life. I learnt to sign my name. Also, I learnt about numbers, alphabets, calculation, etc. I can't note down all the equations of account keeping.

50/- on average and I contributed Tk 20/- per day to the family expenses. Including everything my yearly expenditure stood at Taka 14,000. The balance in my hand was Taka 2000 only. In the next year I got Tk 3,000/- as credit. Adding the previous year's balance to the credit amount my capital became Tk 5,000/-. I invested the total amount in my business. As the quantity of cloth increased considerably, I lessened the frequency of my tour and began traveling once a week. Then, I could earn a profit of Tk 500/- per week. I could utilize about 40 weeks in the year and earned a total amount of about Tk 20,000/-. This time I spent Tk 25/- on average per day for their family.

Last year my expenditure was Tk 15,000/- including instalments, savings, conveyance, family expenditure etc. After deducting all the expenses incurred, my total income was Tk 5,000/-. When the total credit was cleared up, the organization provided me with an amount of Tk 4,000/-. On receiving this my capital has become Taka 9,000. At the time of festivals (Eid, Puja) the profit increases considerably. Now, I can manage the family in a smooth way adding my husband's income with that of mine. I think, this is enough for me.

I would start printing sari in near future. I think, that will be more profitable. More capital will also be needed for that. But it would be profitable if I purchase 'Dhuti' from Dhaka and after printing the same sell in Mymensingh. I believe that I shall be able to become economically self-reliant through this process.

At present, I am not indebted to others. I not longer need borrowing from the money lenders. I myself bear all expenditure of my children's education. Also in the house a new room has been constructed with the income from credit operation. Although my husband's earning is considerably low, our joint income ensures better living for the family members. I hope to purchase a piece of land in near future.

— An ASA case study