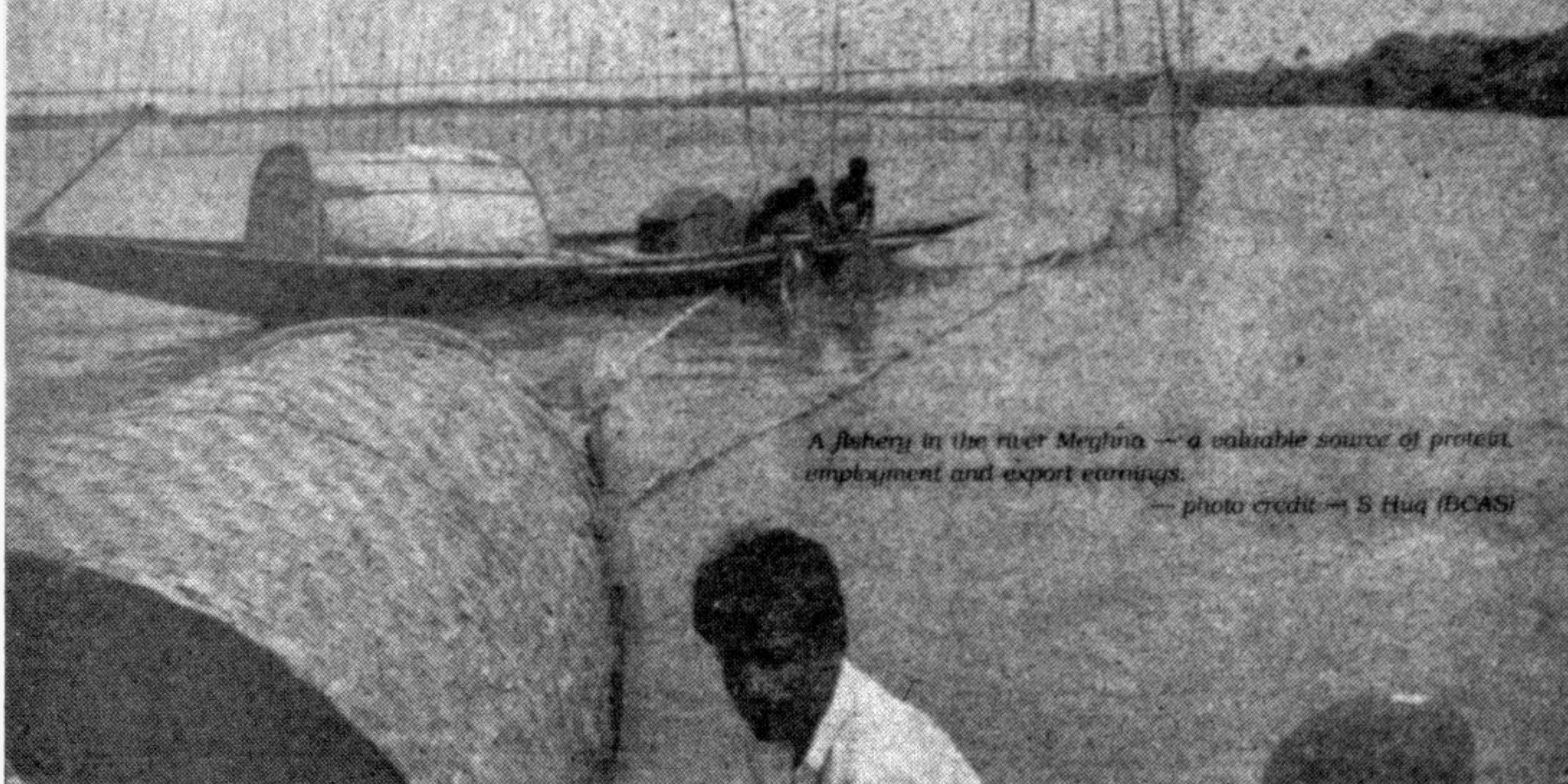


Feature Development

The Fishers of Bangladesh

An Anthropological Overview

by Bob Pokrant and Saifur Rashid



A fishery in the river Meghna — a valuable source of protein, employment and export earnings.

— photo credit — S Huq (BCAS)

FISHERIES and fishing peoples play a central role in the economic and social life of Bangladesh yet, until recently, they have attracted relatively little interest from policy makers, planners and researchers. Most policies, programmes and research work have been directed to technical and scientific matters such as fish resources and stocking, artificial rearing, fish biology, and management issues. Less attention has been given to the fisher and their families who are the backbone of the fisheries sector.

Fisheries Sector

Fisheries provide employment for large numbers of people, export earnings for the government and protein and calories for the general population. For example, there are 1.27 million full-time fishers in the country (1990) and another 11 million part-time fishers whose number increases during the monsoon season from June to October. In fact, most rural Bangladeshis engage in fishing at some time during the year in the many rivers, beels, haors, ponds, canals and ditches which cover the countryside. The production of fish for export, of which 90 per cent is made up of shrimp, is the second largest export earner providing over 3 per cent of total Gross Domestic Product and 11 per cent of total export earnings. Furthermore, these exports are increasing at a rate of 15 per cent per annum. However, ninety five per cent of total fish production is consumed domestically and provides eighty per cent of animal protein and seven per cent of total protein intake of the population. The bulk of fish consumed comes from inland capture fisheries which employ the majority of fishers and account for almost 50 per cent of total catch estimated to be 860,000 metric tons (1990). Inland pond and coastal aquaculture and marine fisheries provide 23 per cent and 28 per cent respectively. These three fisheries sub-sectors employ some 5 per cent of the national labour force.

Fish Production and Consumption

Despite the importance of fish to the national economy, in recent years there has been growing concern about the future of the fisheries sector, particularly open capture fisheries. Although fish production is increasing, it is unable to keep pace with the growth of population and per capita consumption of fish has been declining for over 20 years. Thus, in 1972, per capita consumption was 11.7 kg per annum while in 1990 it was only 7.5 kg. The rate of decline has been 4.66 per cent annum during this period and it is the rural population, particularly the rural poor which includes a majority of the fishing population, who are suffering most from this decline. Much of the increase in production that has occurred is accounted for by pond and coastal aquaculture and marine fisheries while open capture fisheries have declined relatively. According to the Fourth Five Year Plan (1990-1995), the greatest increase in future fish production is targeted for pond culture (some 90 per cent increase) and coastal aquaculture (200 per cent increase). In contrast, open capture fisheries consisting of baors, rivers and estuaries, beels, haors, and floodplains are expected to increase by just under 25 per cent.

The declining importance of open capture fisheries can be accounted for by a number of factors. These include siltation of rivers, beels, and haors caused by domestic flood control, irrigation and drainage projects and the Farakka Barrage; drainage of water bodies, particularly wetland areas, for cultivation; local industrial and agricultural pollution from chemical and other effluents; and inadequately managed restocking programmes. These factors have been exacerbated by an influx of landless labourers into fishing, overfishing of particularly vulnerable species such as juvenile hilsa (jatka), leasing arrangements which encourage short-term maximum exploitation of the fish-

ing stock, and a series of government policies which put agriculture first largely to the detriment of fisheries and fishing peoples.

There are those, including government officials, who emphasise the importance of pond culture, coastal aquaculture and marine fishing as a complement to, or open capture fisheries. While initiatives in these areas are important and will go some way to increasing total production, there are a number of problems with such an approach.

First, inland open capture fisheries cover large areas of the country (the total area of inland open waterbodies is 4.05 million hectares of which 25 per cent is rivers) and provide employment for a majority of the fishing population. Ponds, coastal aquaculture and marine fisheries are unlikely to provide work for more than a small percentage of inland open capture fishers. Second, for a large part of the population, marine fish is not popular, although this is changing. Third, pond fisheries are, for the most part, owned and controlled by non-fishers and there is little guarantee of regular work for full-time fishers. Fourth, many pond owners and leaseholders are only interested in growing the higher priced carp and other species which are out of the reach of the rural poor, including fishers. Finally, coastal aquaculture is totally export-oriented and the bulk of the population cannot afford such an expensive source of food. Nor does such production provide much employment for genuine fishers.

Fisher Communities

Despite the important economic role they play, fishers are one of the most socially stigmatised and politically neglected communities in the country. In the past, fishing was dominated by low caste Hindus and it was they who were accorded low status. Over the past 30 years, however, large numbers of landless Muslims have entered the sector and they now suffer the same sorts of problems faced by

their Hindu counterparts. Both Hindu and Muslim fishers earn very low incomes; have little schooling; have little control over access to water bodies; are often unable to afford the big nets and mechanised boats increasingly required by modern fishers; do not get the best return on what they produce as they are tied through advance and credit arrangements to sell particular traders at below market prices; have no facilities for marketing their own fish; rarely get to eat what they produce; are given low priority by fisheries experts; and are often blamed for the impact of policies they did not formulate. Few such fishers have their own agricultural land and many live in the flood-affected areas of the country which puts them at great risk. Furthermore, they are often harassed by fisheries police, leaseholders' agents and local farmers. Women in fishing communities are particularly neglected as many of their traditional sources of income from ancillary fishing work such as fish drying and net making have disappeared. Even their children receive little, if any, education and they are forced to work as fishers' assistants from a very early age.

Fisheries Management and Policies

During the period of British rule in what was then undivided Bengal (1757-1947), fisheries were in the hands of the so-called Zamindars who were given almost absolute control over water bodies that formed part of their estates. In 1950 the zamindar system was abolished and fisheries came under government control. Until 1986, successive fisheries policies were designed largely to raise government revenue and increase production rather than ensure that fishermen had more equitable access to and control over, fish resources. Most government-owned water bodies were leased out to a small elite of powerful and well-connected neo-zamindars. The New Fisheries Management Policy (NFMP), introduced in 1986 in an attempt to shift the balance

of power in favour of actual fishers by replacing the traditional leasing system with that of a theoretically more affordable licensing system, was never taken seriously by government. Thus, out of over 10,000 registered water estates (jalmahol), only 300 were transferred to fishers' cooperatives under the NFMP. The vast majority of water estates continued to be in the hands of the neo-zamindar class. The few fishers' cooperatives that were established under this scheme were often subverted by these neo-zamindars who wished to ensure their continued control over what became an increasingly valuable commercial asset. Government's inadequate response to the plight of fishers has not been ameliorated by NGO involvement which is directed much more to pond fishing than open water capture fishers.

Future Directions

In the light of these problems, there is a pressing need on the part of policy makers, aid donors, NGOs, and academic researchers to direct more attention to these increasingly marginalised fisher communities. As a first step, we need to know much more about the social, cultural, economic and political characteristics of fishers in different parts of the country, especially the wetland regions, and the many economic, political and environmental pressures that such communities are facing and how they are adapting or reacting to those pressures.

Six areas stand out as of major importance. First, how fishers organise their work and production and the ways in which access to fishing grounds is controlled (Water bodies management and leasing system). Second, the relationship between fishers and the processing, marketing and distribution of fish and fish products. Third, the role played by women and children in fishing and in the wider affairs of the village community. Fourth, changes in the local ecology of fishing and how fishers are adapting to these changes. Of particular importance here is the ways fishers have traditionally managed their fishing grounds and resources, how these management techniques and strategies are changing, and the value of such indigenous knowledge for the future sustainability of the fisheries sector. Fifth, the relation between full-time fishers, part-time fishers, farmers and other occupational groups. Finally, the role of the state, local government, and NGOs in the organisation of fisher communities. In forthcoming articles we shall be taking up some of these themes in more detail.

* We use the non-gendered term 'fishers' to replace 'fishermen' as women play a major, if ancillary, role in fishing communities.

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— BCAS feature

Dances with Woves: When Bingos, Gongos and NGO Meet

"DANCING with woves" is how many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) tend to view their relationships with the state. Some try to have as little as possible to do with it, believing state machinery is at best bureaucratic and inefficient and at worst, corrupt and repressive. Such NGOs will often be pressing for changes in official policies in favour of the disadvantaged, advocating a nationwide programme of agrarian reform, as in Brazil or the Philippines, or concentrating on a narrower issue, such as tree planting in Kenya or cheap medicines in Bangladesh.

At the opposite end of the scale are NGOs which feel quite happy in close proximity to governmental institutions. A tendency is growing in the South for new groups — "opportunistic NGOs," as some of their more established colleagues call them — to mushroom, virtually overnight, with an eye on the increasing funds being made available by donors to voluntary agencies for agricultural servicing and contract work, often in close association with government departments.

In between come a host of groups which, in their work with disadvantaged communities, may or may not cooperate with the state, depending on the issue, circumstances and people involved — and on the overall political context. While they may not see their governments as woves, they may often ask themselves whether cooperation is "a source of life, or the kiss of death," as a Tanzanian critic put it.

Enormous variety

There is an enormous variety in the way NGOs operate and take decisions, in their motivations and the funds at their disposal. Lack of clarity on these points — often due to lack of transparency on the part of the NGOs themselves — leads to much fuzzy thinking about "the third sector," as they are sometimes called.

A problem is that, in UN parlance, the term NGO refers not only to groups concerned with development cooperation, but other, non-profit private organizations, which can include business, commercial or professional associations (BINGOS). This is not just a semantic question of interest to academics, because of the

It is possible for public sector strengths to be joined with the strengths of NGOs to make a genuine impact on the living conditions of the rural populations in the south?



vagueness of definition, it has been possible for certain interest groups to use an NGO cover to mask their activities, which may be far from promoting the interests of the rural poor. Some, quite dishonestly, go so far as to refer to profit-making commercial firms as "NGOs".

Not only are Northern governments channelling increasing amounts of aid through their own NGOs (known as SONGOS), but there is a trend, spearheaded by Canada, to contribute directly to NGOs in the South (known as SONGOS). It is still a relatively small proportion (less than five per cent) of total aid disbursement through NGOs, but it is enough to create problems in relationships between SONGOS and SONGOS, not to mention governments in recipient countries.

It might indeed be time to start questioning the OECD definition of NGOs as organizations "established and governed by a group of private citizens for a stated philanthropic purpose and supported by voluntary individual contributions". Also, though the voluntary spirit is alive and especially active in time of emergency, the pressures toward professionalism and commercialism tend to break down the differences that have traditionally distinguished NGO activities from those of governments, or parastatal agencies.

That all these trends could make it easier for governments and NGOs in the south to cooperate in promoting sustainable agricultural development is one of the main arguments of *Reluctant partners?*



Reluctant partners? Non-governmental organizations, the state and sustainable agricultural development by John Farrington and Anthony Bebbington, with Kate Wellard and David J. Lewis. Overseas Development Institute/Routledge, London and New York, 1993. In four volumes. ISBN 0-415-08843-7 (Hbk) £40.00; ISBN 0-415-08844-5 (Pbk) £12.95

BOOK REVIEW

Seventy case-studies

The series includes an overview volume, presenting the general findings of the case-studies on which the work is based, complemented by regional volumes on Africa, Asia and Latin America. Altogether, some 70 case-studies have been documented, from 18 countries. Most are written from an NGO viewpoint, but some from a governmental perspective and there is a constant effort to view experiences from both sides.

The study does go beyond a functional approach to agricultural technology development, seeing institutions also as groupings of human agents with their own identities, aims and social histories which affect policy decisions and the distribution of power and resources in society. A prime example is the consistent concern of most agriculture ministries in the South with technology and services catering to larger farmers and those who are already relatively well-off. This continues to be the emphasis of most agriculture de-

velopments created a certain confusion and mythical thinking — "NGO infatuation", as some say sourly. Are NGOs really able to reach the poorest of the poor, as they claim? Are their approaches really participatory and supportive of sustainable development? Is it possible to "scale up" their activities so that a much larger portion of the rural population can benefit?

Reluctant partners addresses these issues with a methodology that sets out to be as rigorous as possible.

Limitations spelled out

It is also a natural choice for the study, with its emphasis on agricultural technology, to single out NGOs mainly engaged in development activities.

although examples of NGOs that are more concerned with advocacy and networking (such as CLADES in Latin America and KENGO in Kenya) are also included. While outlining the reasons for unsatisfactory state performance in promoting sustainable agricultural development for the majority of its rural population, Farrington and Bebbington also spell out NGO limitations: they are relatively small and have restricted impact; operate far away from policy decisions; often lack professional and technical competence; are not well coordinated, either with each other or with the state, and there are problems of representativeness and accountability. However, in comparison with public sector, they are more interested in low-input agriculture, more able to adapt technologies to local conditions, more participatory and therefore more able to link local and modern agricultural knowledge, as well as more efficient in using resources.

Is it possible for public sector strengths — more specialized skills in different agricultural disciplines, more laboratories and libraries and, in theory at least, more resources and nationwide coverage — to be joined with the strengths of NGOs to make a genuine impact on the living conditions of the rural populations in the South?

There are no easy answers, but the study tries to identify fields in which interaction could be fruitful and circumstances which might make it possible, basing its conclusions on the empirical data thrown up by the case-studies. Some of the studies are technically in-

A More Business-like Approach to Foreign Policy

by Allan Thompson

Canada's new foreign policy backs away from human rights issues, links aid more closely with trade promotion, and seeks to project the country abroad. The policy, reports Gemini News Service, is in line with continued aid cuts by almost all industrialised countries.



February that the EU was under pressure from some member states to cut aid and impose tougher conditions.

Increasingly, industrialised countries are pleading — like Canada — economic difficulties at home, and also arguing that private capital compensates for some of the aid reductions. But the combination of falling aid and private investment directed at a handful of rapidly developing markets leaves a number of needy countries in the cold.

Tabling Canada's policy blueprint, Ouellet said the aid programme will be focused on fewer countries, but promised no-one will be cut off arbitrarily.

The new package emphasises trade promotion with the booming Asia-Pacific region

and Latin America, a thrust Prime Minister Jean Chretien already underlined with recent trade missions to both regions. It reiterates Chretien's suggestion that Canada promote a free trade zone between the North American Free Trade Area (linking Canada, the United States and Mexico) and the European Union. There was a concern that the "trans-Atlantic trade nexus has been weakened." International Trade Minister Roy MacLaren told reporters.

The government has taken up a parliamentary committee recommendation to earmark a minimum of 25 per cent of the aid budget for alleviating poverty and meeting "basic human needs." But it rejected a recommendation that Canada separate trade promotion from

foreign aid and scale down the practice of linking aid to the purchase of Canadian goods and services.

"These proposals were not conducive to an effective way of promoting jobs and prosperity in Canada," Ouellet said. "Tied aid will continue." Its provisions help build relations of mutual benefit between Canada and developing countries," he argued.

Instead, the Canadian International Development Agency will work more closely with the foreign affairs department on coordinating trade promotion.

On other aid conditions, Canada will use its clout along with fellow donor countries, such as Japan, to pressure aid recipients to cut military spending. But the policy paper

states that it makes little sense for Canada to go it alone and refuse trade with countries that abuse human rights.

Canada would join other countries in multilateral sanctions, but acting alone "may hurt Canada more than it will change the behaviour of offending governments."

"Our ultimate aim is not to punish countries and innocent populations whose governments abuse human rights but rather to change behaviour and to induce governments to respect their people's rights," the report says.

The way to do that, it says, is through trade.

That has brought strong criticism. Human rights activist and former leader of Canada's socialists party, Ed Broadbent, slammed the breaking of the link between trade and human rights.

"It is sad statement on the world we live in that virtually and democratic governments have recently paid more attention to the rights of capital than to the rights of people."

"Will we be among the frontrunners in a race to the bottom, where governments trip over each other in a short-term search for market share?" Broadbent asked.

Said Philippe Paret an MP for the Bloc Quebecois, the group seeking separatism for the province of Quebec which is now Canada's opposition: "There is no concrete commitment in this foreign policy statement from the government, except perhaps a confirmation to make an about turn and completely ignore human rights."

CANADA has become the latest country to offer evidence that international aid is under threat.

A new policy paper, Canada in the World, makes clear that getting Canada's economic house in order is the cornerstone of its new foreign policy. That will mean putting more emphasis on trade and temporarily trimming foreign aid.

Foreign Affairs Minister Andre Ouellet says fiscal restraints mean aid will probably be cut again in the next budget, expected in late February.

Critics say the new policy moves the country away from its traditional position as a leader in aid and promotion of human rights.

The recently-elected Liberal government's policy shift coincides with publication of a report by the Paris-based OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, the grouping of industrialised countries) which shows that in 1993 worldwide aid fell to its lowest level for 20 years (measured by the share of donors' gross national product).

The chairman of the OECD's development assistance committee, James Michel, described the fall as "a rather disturbing phenomenon."

Countries which felt the pinch, said Michel, included Egypt, India, Indonesia, Nicaragua, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe.

The fall looks set to continue, with Joao de Deus Pinheiro, the new European Union (EU) Commissioner for Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific warning in mid-

It is not easy to do justice in a review to a work like *Reluctant partners*, which is a collective effort of people who have worked over several years and continents and puts together an interesting amount of material that should be studied by all those who are involved in development. But the extent to which NGOs can learn to cooperate with governments without losing their identity, and governments learn to work with NGOs without losing face, is anyone's guess. Should we be optimistic and remember that woves have highly developed social and communication skills, with acute senses?

Julia Rossetti

Courtesy — FAO (Ceres)