

An Excellent Project

The World Bank's private sector infrastructure development project, acronymed PSIDP, has features in it to strike a responsive chord with us.

Our financially handicapped private sector can hope to be bank-rolled on a scale it has not known before to take up projects to add capacity to our uninspiringly underdeveloped infrastructure. One only hopes though that the Bank will see reason in the near future to lower the rate of interest at which it has now decided to make the funds available to the private sector entrepreneurs. The effective rate of interest is proposed to be 9.5 per cent — the London Interbank Offer Rate (LIBOR) of 6.5 per cent plus 3 per cent as service charge.

The initial size of the WB fund is expected to be somewhere between 150 and 300 million US dollar; but with the opening of the Project Finance Facility (PFF), as envisaged, replenishments are likely to pour in from various bilateral and multilateral sources.

The channelling of the funds through the government should ensure the creation of the desired enabling environment in the sense that whatever policy backing would be required to implement the projects is expected to be forthcoming as a matter of course. However, the funds will be managed by the lending institutions, as usual. Thus coordination between the government agencies and the private sector on the one hand, and good understanding between the ministries and the lending organisations on the other, would be of crucial importance in making the project work.

There are indeed many legal impediments to private sector investment in infrastructure-building. The piecemeal or truncated approach to the question of commercial or financial sector law reform needs to be forsaken in favour of a holistic one to yield a comprehensive framework of laws.

The World Bank project promises some promotional benefits for us. It has the potential to draw attention to Bangladesh by putting across a message to the outside world that a radical improvement of her infrastructure is underway.

Sanitation Drive

A sanitation week began yesterday throughout the country with the main function, as usual, taking place in the capital. But if the upgradation of the national sanitation status is at issue, the focus should now shift from the cities and towns to the villages.

There is, however, no denying the fact that slums in the urban areas call for special attention and the sanitation problem there must be addressed with a few crash programmes undertaken through coordinated efforts of the government, NGOs, and voluntary organisations such as Lions' clubs and Red Crescent etc.

A much larger part of the country consisting of the villages is particularly disadvantaged in this respect. The problem is that the union parishes do not undertake waste disposal activities like the municipal corporations or bodies do in the cities or townships. Not at least on a comparable scale. The households are individually responsible for taking care of the excreta or other forms of waste. Even there, they are at best perfunctory by and large. Many are simply unaware of hygienic requirements and those who know the rules cannot afford to apply these because of the financial hardship. So, it is out of the question that a whole village would be treated as a sanitation unit.

On that count the use of water-sealed latrines is an improvement on the existing sanitation situation. But the programme under which such latrines were supplied at a nominal price received a setback for some time; but now with the UNICEF helping the Public Health authorities, things have started brightening up in this area.

The price of water-sealed latrines must be kept within the purchasing power of the ordinary village folks, otherwise they would feel discouraged in procuring and using them. The observance of sanitation weeks will bear fruit if some concrete steps are taken to enhance the popularity of such devices among the rural people.

Avoidable Malady

A fierce gun-battle lasting for three hours, from 12 pm on Tuesday to 3 am on Wednesday, rocked the Chankharpu area. The clash involving hotel workers, shop-keepers and local people on the one side, and a group of students allegedly belonging to the Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal on the other, left at least 50 injured, one of them in a critical condition. A dispute over non-payment of bills for a meal some students ate in a restaurant triggered the clash.

The incident is a manifestation of an attitudinal problem that most disputes can be solved by a show of highhandedness which is resorted to without a blink of the eye regardless of time and place. The tendency is greater among those having a feeling that they have a clout.

Worse still is the fact that the police take a delayed role whenever youths are locked in a clash. Perhaps they could have been alerted to the impending trouble after the altercations had taken place in the restaurant to pre-empt its snowballing. We do not like people taking law into their own hands, however provocative they might deem a situation to be.

We have to strengthen the rule of law by ridding ourselves of group mentalities and subjecting ourselves to some basic social norms. Without this we are sure to witness more of such erratic behaviour.

PARTICIPATORY planning has become the latest fashion amongst some government agencies, NGOs and donors. However, its practice often means different things to different groups. Two recent exercises undertaken by the government of Bangladesh have interesting parallels and differences. These are the Participatory Perspective Plan (PPP) initiated and developed by the Ministry of Planning, largely at the personal initiative of the State Minister for Planning and the other was the National Environmental Management Action Plan (NEMAP) initiated by the Ministry of Environment and Forests with the non-government community including NGOs, through the Coalition of Environment NGOs (CEN) and Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh (ADAB), the media, through the Forum of Environment Journalists of Bangladesh (FEJB), lawyers, through the Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA) as well as others.

Both processes were partially supported by UNDP but relied on national consultants only (although the NEMAP did use expatriate consultants in its earlier phase, the participatory phase was done entirely with national consultants). Also in the case of NEMAP the NGO community contributed about a quarter of the costs (in kind) of the consultative phase. Therefore, both plans can be regarded as being nationally owned.

PPP

The Participatory Perspective Plan (PPP) was initiated by the State Minister for Planning with the support and blessing of the Prime Minister who personally kicked off the first local level workshop in Thakurgaon approximately a year ago. Since then thirty district level workshops have been held and the Final Draft of the Plan has been prepared and submitted to the Cabinet along with ten District Plans (in Bangla). It is worth examining both the process as well as the products of the exercise.

Process: The PPP was organized and carried out entirely by the officials of the Planning Ministry with inputs from some consultants for the analysis and writing up. Thus, it was quite a path breaking exercise to make the mandarins of the Planning Commission actually go out to the districts to hear local people talk about their problems. Indeed, one of the enduring impressions of the first workshop in Thakurgaon was the sight of several senior secretaries (the Planning Ministry houses perhaps the largest number of full secretaries including Planning, IMED, Statistics and the Members of the Planning

Commission who are all senior secretaries) sitting for a whole day amidst hundreds of local people complaining about how ill treated their district had been in the past. This process was repeated in district after district. The result has been that senior bureaucrats have taken the trouble to go to the people and listen to them before preparing their national plan.

Whether or not this has had any lasting effect on those bureaucrats only time will tell. Certainly they have become much more familiar with the jargon of participatory planning which at least is a good sign. My own impression of the impact on senior officials within the Planning Ministry is that some of them have certainly become genuine converts to the process and have found it to be both stimulating as well as instructive (although at least one senior bureaucrat of the Ministry confided to me that he thought it was just a fad which would soon blow away).

The effort at instituting a participatory process of planning, whatever their shortcomings, is certainly a most laudable one for which this government may be rightly proud. Indeed, this has been recognized even internationally when the NEMAP was given special commendation at the last Paris Consortium meeting...

Another substantive point which has been raised by some reviewers, is the genuineness and degree of participation that was achieved. Here it must be acknowledged that this is always going to be the easiest way to criticise any participatory planning process since it is quite obviously impossible to consult all 120 million citizens. However, the relevant criteria for evaluation should surely be whether all the critical groups (or their representatives) were given an opportunity to have their say and also whether their input has actually been incorporated in the final product. From my limited experience of attending several of the district workshops, I would say that the representation in the meetings (usually several hundred people) was quite wide including local elected representatives, farmers, labourers, businessmen, journalists, local government officials, teachers, women and ordinary citizens. One of the remarkable achievements was the fact that in almost all the workshops the local Member of Parliament, regardless of party affiliation, was present. Indeed this was during the time when the opposition MPs were boycotting parliament and also after they had handed in their resignations. Thus the claim that all groups had the opportunity to have their say in the process is probably quite credible.

It is undeniable that any

gathering or consultation of this kind is likely to be dominated by the more vocal elites of the locality with the poor and women generally not being given adequate chance to give their views. However, as the main purpose of the exercise was to get inputs about problems and issues regarding a particular district (rather than any particular group within the district) by and large the people had plenty of opportunity to vent their feelings (and many grievances) regarding the needs of their district. In many of the workshops the very fact that the Planning Ministry had bothered to seek their opinions was seen as a very welcome and positive step.

Thus it can be said that the process, although far from perfect, has been a major step forward in making senior officials of the Planning Ministry actively seek out the opinions of people

from different parts of the country and also in allowing people in different parts of the country to have a say in the national planning process. It is to be hoped that this does not remain a one-off exercise but continues in future.

Products: The main product consists of the "Participatory Perspective Plan for Bangladesh 1995 to 2010" (Final Draft) which takes a fifteen year time horizon and looks at the development scenario over this time period. This draft has been presented to the Cabinet and press and has come in for some criticism mainly focusing on its supposedly too rosy growth scenario. My own feeling is that the high growth scenario may indeed be quite optimistic but then what is the point of having a pessimistic growth scenario? Surely over a decade and a half any projections are so uncertain as to make them useless as predictions. However, they may still be useful as an objective or target to aim for. In which case I would argue that it makes perfectly good sense to aim high (with the possibility of not achieving it) rather than aiming low and achieving it. The more crucial question should surely be: What needs to be done now in order to make the high growth scenario become possible?

The other products are a series of District Planning books in Bangla for each dis-

trict showing where that particular district stands with respect to a number of development parameters compared to the national average. These district reports are a major innovation and are likely to be very useful documents for all sorts of people living in the district from elected representatives to teachers, local officials and the general public. They allow for the very first time, a benchmark for each district's development against which successive administrations, MPs or other elected representatives can be measured in future. I personally feel that these documents may be the most lasting and important achievement of the PPP exercise.

Process: As the NEMAP process has been described in detail before, I will only highlight the important points of contrast with the PPP. Whereas the PPP carried out the consultation exercise entirely by the government, the NEMAP was undertaken by a steering committee chaired by the MOEF with representatives from other government agencies, NGOs, journalists, academics, lawyers, consultants and donors (the latter

as observers only). The entire grass-roots consultation was carried out by the NGO community organized through CEN/ADAB who identified individual NGOs in each locality who undertook the responsibility of organizing and hosting the workshop in their locality. Each workshop in turn was organized over two days with not more than 60 to 80 people representing different groups and professions including farmers, fisherfolk, teachers, businessmen, women, local elected representatives, etc. After holding one session in plenary to discuss the objectives of the exercise they were broken up into 6 to 8 homogenous groups (e.g. farmers, fisherfolk, women, etc) with a facilitator familiar with local dialect and a rapporteur in each group. Each individual in every group was thus given an opportunity to have his or her say which was recorded.

Finally, all the groups reported their priorities which

were discussed again back in plenary with everyone present. Thus, each group of people and each individual participating in the workshop had an opportunity to give their inputs. Ofcourse, the total number of workshops and number of participants per workshop being relatively low due to limited time and financial constraints makes the representativeness of the sample questionable. However, the effort made to ensure at least some inputs from each important agro-ecological zone and each important group including those that are normally not heard from e.g. the poor, women, fisherfolk and poor farmers, was probably reasonably credible. One of the other failings of the process which has been pointed out is the lack of involvement of other important line ministries who will need to play an important part in implementing the plan. Although the line ministries were involved in an earlier phase of NEMAP in identifying and prioritizing their own agenda, it was probably at an insufficiently high level within the ministries and this needs to be redressed.

Product: The summary NEMAP Final Report in English and Bangla is being printed and distributed throughout the country, particularly to all the participants in the different workshops to whom this was a promise. The Main Report will also be available for

sharing with all the relevant ministries, agencies, donors, academics, NGOs, media and others. The Action Plan in its current form gives an overall picture of people's views regarding the main environmental problems and their likely solutions. It looks at environmental issues in terms of (i) policy and institutional issues, (ii) sectoral issues, (iii) location specific issues and (iv) long-term issues. However, it does not make any specific or prioritized programmes or projects which are due to be completed in the current phase of activities within the next few months.

Conclusions

It is clear from the above that both the PPP and NEMAP are important new developments in the evolution of governance in Bangladesh where two ministries of the government, namely the Planning and Environment Ministries respectively have taken a pro-active, nationally driven attempt at participatory planning.

Certainly both processes are not perfect and are open to criticism and further improvements. However, in addition to criticism it would be more useful, in my view, for commentators or reviewers to make their own suggestions and recommendations for their improvement as both the plans have declared themselves to be open to revision and inputs. In particular it behoves the non-government sectors of society, such as the NGOs or private sector to improve their own analytical capabilities in order to give a more coherent and comprehensive input into future phases of these two plans.

On the whole the effort at instituting a participatory process of planning, whatever their shortcomings, is certainly a most laudable one for which this government may be rightly proud. Indeed, this has been recognized even internationally when the NEMAP was given special commendation at the last Paris Consortium meeting and the Administrator of UNDP, James Gustave Speth commended both plans and wished to support them further when he met the Prime Minister in New York recently. It is to be hoped that both processes get enshrined within the government and continue the participatory mode in their further planning as well as eventual implementation and monitoring. If that can be achieved it will mean a significant breakthrough in democratic governance in this part of the world.

The writer is Executive Director, Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies, a non-government, non-profit research and policy institute.

PARTICIPATORY PLANNING

The Experience of PPP and NEMAP

by Dr Saleemul Huq

World AIDS Day

Heartbreak Stories from the Blue Folders

Rebecca Dodd writes from Kumasi, Ghana

In a nondescript office that could be anywhere in Africa, a sick man struggles to come to terms with AIDS. The illness is making his already chronic poverty even harder to bear, and he has almost given up hope. A Gemini News Service correspondent looks at the toll exacted by the epidemic

Prescription for a pandemic

• Human immunodeficiency virus attacks blood cells that help protect the body from disease-causing organisms (such as bacteria)
 • As immune system is progressively damaged, the person becomes increasingly vulnerable to a range of infections
 • Average time from infection with HIV to onset of AIDS: 9 years. During this period there are no symptoms. Infection can be detected only by blood test
 • There is no cure, though a few drugs seem to prolong the life of people with AIDS

• 15m adults and 1.5m children are infected with HIV
 • UN estimates 40m people will have contracted HIV by end of century

to stay healthy, but he cannot afford even that.

This man, who has hardly the strength to talk, has

about as much chance of starting a business as of recovering. Exasperated but gentle, the counsellor leans forward to touch the man's knee. "You must try to think positively," he says. "You could live for years if you do." The man looks up, startled — disturbed at the thought.

More than a million people in Africa are thought to have AIDS, and 10 million are believed to be infected with HIV, the virus that causes it. They require a complex balance of medical, financial and emotional support. But many countries cannot afford even basic hospital care.

Developing countries with big AIDS problems are beginning to discover the full implications of having a large proportion of young adults — one in three in the worst-hit communities — struck down with a terminal illness.

These are people often in

their most economically productive years — those usually relied on to take care of elders in their extended families.

In neighbouring Ivory Coast, one in 10 adults is infected with HIV, and AIDS patients occupy 70-80 per cent of hospital beds in the capital, Abidjan.

The high cost of health care reduces many sufferers to poverty. Hospital treatment for pneumonia, common among those with AIDS, can cost a month's salary. "And if a patient needs an operation," says Dr Marc Acqure, who runs one of the city's few free medical centres, "he must pay for gloves, blades, drugs — everything."

Most local health services cannot afford to pay their workers any extra to take on AIDS counselling duties, so few people bother.

Because health-sector pay is low, many workers depend on a "dash" — a small gift or bribe, often as little as a tin of condensed milk — from patients hoping for good-quality care. But counselling work away from the hospital wards offers little opportunity to reap such rewards.

Charles is one of 25 counsellors working in Kumasi, a region with an estimated 25,000 AIDS sufferers. "I am really doing this voluntarily," he says. "It would be better if there was some kind of incentive."

The stress of the work is intense. Charles' boss, psychiatric nurse Michael Boamey, says: "I have trouble

sleeping at night because I feel infected psychologically." Sometimes he spends the whole day seeing only AIDS patients.

The enormity of the AIDS crisis cannot be over-stated. It is likely to result in shortages of labour and perhaps even food. It will sap the last drops of energy out of doctors and nurses, and will have a lasting psychological impact on a generation of young Africans — few of whom will grow old without having had some contact with a sufferer.

While governments are prepared to invest in prevention and education, few will stretch limited health budgets to care for those who cannot be saved.

But money is not the only problem. In eastern Ghana, a counsellor angrily tells of how a young woman infected with HIV married and had a child. "I was furious," says the counsellor. "I tracked her down and threatened to tell her husband unless she did."

The woman consented, but as soon as her husband was told, he abandoned her and the child.

Of course the woman was wrong to marry without informing her husband. In some countries, such behaviour would have earned her a jail sentence. But the counsellor's heavy-handedness is not likely to make people more honest about their condition.

Michael Boamey says: "People here are beginning to recognise the physical symptoms. If they see a family caring for someone with the disease, fingers will be pointed at the house and no-one will want to marry into it. People are afraid of being shunned by their communities — a problem that may persist until there are too many AIDS patients to ignore."

REBECCA DODD is a journalist working for the fortnightly bulletin, "Africa Analysis."

To the Editor

Bangobazar fire

Sir, The area I live in is not very far from Bangobazar.

On the morning of the sad incident (Monday, November 27), as I step into my veranda to breathe some fresh air, I suddenly noticed a column of black smoke which looked more like a formation of tornado! Later, I was informed of the terrible devastating fire.

It is indeed a huge loss! The Bangobazar was the most popular readymade wear

market in the country. The articles available there were not only cheaper or in other words "within the reach of common man" but sold in wonderful varieties and qualities that drew buyers from of all walks of life, including foreigners.

It is even painful to imagine that how all those good stuffs were burnt down to ashes in an inferno that continued for hours before the eyes of ineffective fire fighters!

We express our heartfelt

sympathy to the owners and workers of the Bango market. We hope some more compensation will be considered for the owners besides the Mayor's kind announcement.

We pray that the good old Bangobazar will soon again be set afresh to bring relief to its thousands of customers and livelihood to the owners and workers.

K Vigar Moineddin
Dhaka.

Road divider

Sir, The Dhaka City Corporation spends money in the construction of road dividers in the city every year. It is often damaged by trucks and buses. Therefore, it is suggested that suitable trees be planted along the centre of the roads which will not only act as dividers but help in keeping better environment, save cost, and above all, add beauty to the city.

Serajul Islam
Gulshan, Dhaka-1212