

ENVIRONMENT

Reassessing Globally

by Saleemul Huq back from New York

The United States is still showing reluctance as there is a strong lobbying effort being made by the coal, oil and gas industry in the US against making any firm commitments as they fear it will reduce consumption of their products which are the major source of greenhouse gases.

will reduce consumption of their products which are the major source of greenhouse gases. This issue is of particular importance to Bangladesh since it is one of the countries most vulnerable to both global

this commitment turns out to be and what it means in practice. Given the importance of this issue to Bangladesh it is in Bangladesh's interest to lobby hard for strong commitments at Kyoto in December.

protecting the world's biodiversity. The Global Environment Facility (GEF) which was created at Rio as the main instrument for supporting both the Biodiversity as well as Climate conventions has not been re-



Shrimp farming, real estate development and conversion to farmlands are destroying mangroves, swamps and wetlands across the world. Photo: Sigfred Balatan

warming and sea level rise.

However President Clinton, in his speech before the UN made a strong reference to the danger of climate change, even referring to Bangladesh as one of the most vulnerable countries to global warming and sea-level rise and stated that the US would also promote the use of renewable energy which does not produce greenhouse gases. It remains to be seen how strong

Biodiversity

The second international treaty signed at Rio in 1992 was the Convention on Biodiversity (CBD) which was designed to protect the world's biodiversity which has also had a series of further negotiations and discussions since then. Although much work has been done the main problem has been lack of funds to address the problem of

plished to the required extent and there has also been strong criticism from the developing countries of the difficulty in accessing funds through the GEF. Bangladesh has yet to receive any funds from GEF although a number of proposals have been submitted over the years and one proposal on coastal zone biodiversity has been approved some time ago, although it has still not been operationalised.

Bangladesh's role

Since Rio, Bangladesh has mounted a major environmental effort through the National Environment Management Action Plan (NEMAP) developed through a countrywide participatory process which has been acclaimed internationally. The NEMAP is about to go into operation with support from various donors including CIDA, UNDP and the World Bank. During the UN special session a meeting was organised by UNDP in New York to discuss the implementation phase of NEMAP for which the UNDP is likely to commit around 25 million dollars over the next 5 years. The meeting was chaired by Dr Nay Htun head of the Asia Bureau of UNDP and the special guest was Begum Shajeda Choudhury, Bangladesh's Environment minister who was accompanied by Bangladesh's Permanent Representative at the UN and the Representatives to the boards of UNEP and UNDP. It was also attended by a number of senior officials from the UN and the World Bank. The Minister reiterated the government's commitment to environment and to operationalising the NEMAP in the same participatory manner as was used in its planning while the UNDP senior officials stated their continued support to this initiative which they saw as one of the major environmental support activities of UNDP.

Conclusion

Many people, particularly from the NGO community felt that both the Rio and Rio+5 meetings were failures since the countries of the world have not been able to keep their commitments to improving the global environment. However, although it is true that most of the global environmental problems are still as big or getting bigger and that the promised resources have not been provided, nevertheless it would be wrong to characterise the whole process as a failure as never before in human history has so much attention been given to global environmental issue not only by governments but more importantly by the people of the world. Therefore, in the larger context the legacy of meetings like Rio and Rio+5 are not so much in the official documents signed, important as they may be, but in the ability to engage the attention and actions of millions of people from all over the world, from both the richest and poorest regions, in the common cause of protecting the world's environment. In the long run this may be the most important contribution made by such meetings.

The writer is Executive Director, Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies.

EDUCATION

A Matter of Social Obligation

by Chandra Shekhar Das

The main problem in Bangladesh is that there exists no effective methodology for imparting education to the deaf. Even the traditional methods applied successfully elsewhere cannot be applied here

THE necessity of a new education policy was not felt so acutely before. Quite fittingly so. With democracy making slow but sure-footed progress, key factors in development like education could not wait any longer to come under a sharp focus. Besides, the world wide preparation to enter the new century has also made it absolutely imperative of us to have an education policy that will play a significant role in connecting us with the global trends of progress. But a new education policy will not deliver the goods if it is flawed by myopia in encompassing the total learning population as an organic whole. Categorically speaking, it will never have the optimal impact in equipping the nation the way one would like to, if it cannot accommodate all the students across the country irrespective of their physical, economic and social status.

That lends voice to the argument that quite a lot has to be done to bring about even a semblance of sense and effectuality in our education system. One area that has come to be languishing in this regard and cries to be addressed immediately is that of the education of that part of the population which is hearing impaired.

Education is one of the basic rights of man. It does not wax or wane with the student being normal or retarded one way or the other. But deaf population which, for the absence of any specific census, is estimated to be in the vicinity of five million in the country, is dispensed with awfully inadequate education facilities which borders violation of human rights.

There are only seven government primary schools, one privately run secondary school and one lower secondary and 15 primary schools for the hearing impaired population of the entire country which is almost half of the total retarded population of 13 million, according to a UN statistic.

And Dhaka Deaf School in Dhaka is known to be the only centre for higher education of the deaf students. Figures speak

for themselves to highlight how incredibly inadequate the scope is for the education of those among us who are born with defective hearing faculty.

What has led to this appalling condition? Apparently, it is a problem of attitude. Though it does strip the tinsel off all our egalitarian pretensions, few would deny that we are enormously negligent about those sections of our population who are unable to keep pace with natural process of development for no fault of their own. The prejudice of deeming retarded people as a divine punishment or family curse is so entrenched in our psyche that let alone the ordinary people, even who are enlightened and entrusted with the job of shaping the future of others are affected by the same token. This explains the collective, national amnesia about the needs and problems of the deaf.

Apart from a handful of people engaged in the truly admirable struggle for integrating this handicapped group with the mainstream population, nobody seems to understand that unlike their 'normal' counterparts, deaf students are unable to thrive in a 'normal' educational system. In fact, they have hardly any chance of succeeding in the examinations under the same syllabus and evaluative system.

The main problem in Bangladesh is that there exists no effective methodology for imparting education to the deaf. Even the traditional methods applied successfully elsewhere cannot be applied here. Techniques like sign language and total communication could not be used effectively due to various constraints.

There are not enough teachers with the special training for teaching the deaf. Then there is an acute shortage of implements needed for imparting education. There is a serious dearth of people who can make effective use of visual aids.

It is not that there have not been attempts to bring these problems to the knowledge of the government of the day at various points of time. Evidently those petitions have

fallen on deaf ears. But the small minority of people like Iqbal Ahmed, acting Head Master of the school for the deaf in Dhaka and a teacher in the IBA, is far from being daunted by this tale of unabated apathy. Ahmed for whom not history but hope and a genuine understanding of the plight and potential of the deaf seem to be the only forte, recently arranged a workshop on designing a special curriculum and syllabus at the secondary level for the hearing impaired students. Participated among others by the Chairman of the National Committee for Education Policy Shamsul Huq, the day-long brain storming session gave birth to a dozen recommendations that did not only focus on the topic of the day but also addressed some of the key issues regarding the problem in educating the hearing impaired.

It is true that not all the problems faced by the retarded population, deaf to be precise in this context, will be removed even if these recommendations are implemented. But if realised this will go as a watershed in paving the way for an attitudinal overhauling as regards the hearing impaired people of the society. It seems so difficult to break the barrier of indifference. Laments Ahmed, "Even if the major political parties had included the small doables about these people in their agenda for sheer convenience, the purpose would have been served to an extent".

So far, nothing has happened to give hope a boost. But one thing is for sure, insincerity, callousness and lack of humanism apart authorities cannot heap the blame on anything else for the shameful deaf reality in Bangladesh. That, incorporating the deaf with the majority privileged population is not a major financial challenge is something there to be seen, if only one takes the trouble of taking a stock of the situation in other countries. The fact is it does not cost much in terms of money. What it really requires is love for fellow man. The question is: do have we that?

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