

# International Health: Emerging Global Challenge

by Dr M Zakir Husain

**An isolated and narrow sectoral approach by Health Ministries will fail to achieve the kind of health impact that is clearly required. The Ministry and the Sector must build partnerships with other sectors, with NGOs, with voluntary initiatives by communities and associations of people and the professions.**

THE current globalisation sweep-up of world brings challenges and opportunities for international health. It brings the prospect of widely sharing knowledge and expertise in international cooperation for health. But it is not being adequately recognised and harnessed. Yet, globalisation has also brought new threats and challenges to international public health. Open borders, rapid travel, and open economy adds to vulnerability also. New threats emerge, old threats re-emerge; the barriers are thin and fragile. There is no longer any island of health security; if there is a perception of that it is false. Since challenges are global in dimension so the solutions have to be sought globally. That will demand a new pledge for global cooperation in public health.

Fortunately, a global forum has been in existence for 50 years in the form of the World Health Organisation. The Organisation established in 1948 had been mandated to be the directing and coordinating authority in international health. It is the premier world body which establishes agreed global health policies and sets universally accepted standards of health technologies. It has a rich and wide pool of knowledge, tools, technologies, and experience. The challenge before the international health community is to synthesise and harness that resource. Even in the present climate of diminishing enthusiasm for multilateralism and growing new tensions in international cooperation, the issue is not if we will but how we shall harness the vast global resource.

Even as there are expressions in support of national health actions and greater cooperation in international health work, it would be naive and unrealistic to assume that such cooperation can work outside the political system and democratic decision making. Political compulsions and the new wave of national isolationism are realities. International solidarity is perhaps no longer

even an enchanting moral concept let alone an economic dictum. But solidarity has to rediscover or reposition itself in future international relationships specially in a subject like global health that is eminently non-political and is an universal public good in the world community.

Now to take a brief look at the macro challenges to global health. Poverty is a world wide reality; it has even increased recently in many countries who already had substantial number of people living below what is euphemistically called the poverty line. Poverty is the single most pernicious obstacle to health. Malnutrition, infections, loss of productivity and income, social marginalisation, premature deaths and disabilities are all largely the outcome of poverty. Is it not shocking to know that in many poor countries 90 per cent of the health resources may be consumed by a mere 10 per cent of the well off people? This is totally unacceptable. The gap between the rich and poor between and within countries in health has widened since 1978 when the international community had solemnly declared health for all as a social goal to be attained by the year 2000. That goal remains elusive.

Even a quick look at the situation in many countries will show that health has never been allocated the resources that it needed. This is sadly true even though health was mentioned as an essential underpinning at many UN Conferences - Rio (Earth Summit), Cairo (Population and Development), Beijing (Women) and Copenhagen (Social Development). Had these been taken seriously, health would have found its rightful place in national and international agenda of the 80s and 90s. It did not. Time and again the rhetoric that health is at the core of human development has been loud; it is time for action. And it is clear as crystal that health cannot remain relegated to the technocratic or professional agenda only; health

must be elevated to the national and international political agenda. But the task will not be easy. It will require high level of professional excellence - a kind of excellence that strongly and persuasively articulates health in the political agenda and process, and in national and international decision making. Health is the outcome of combined efforts in creating many essential facilities and public services like clean water, sanitation, adequate and safe food and nutrition, general education, information, in addition to extension of health services to the entire population.

Health cannot remain an isolated sectoral agenda; it has to be secured within and dovetailed into the socio-economic agenda. Economic evaluation of national health expenditures must enter into national health accounting, the best value for money must enter into the equation; greatest good of the largest number and high aggregate health impact of expenditure are notions relatively new to health. These cannot be postponed any longer. Capacity building - in policy analysis, long-term strategy formulation, critical evaluation of health actions - is a high priority. National health systems and health agenda in many countries need reforms - some of them deep and extensive. As new emerging and re-emerging diseases pose formidable threats, specific disease control programmes are relevant. In many countries malaria and tuberculosis take a heavy toll of life and disabilities with very adverse social and economic impact. These far exceed the damage caused by local strife and natural catastrophes combined. Yet without a strong and capable health sector, the Ministries of Health remain weak and inconsequential; their real priorities often misguided.

Fortunately, there are very good public health tools ready and tested - for disease prevention and health promotion. The combined threat of new health challenges and re-emerging public health threats call loudly and urgently for correct

analysis of options and very modern strategic long-term planning projected into future scenarios. Public health actions can and will often be expensive; it is not a short cut or cheap substitute for conventional categorised medical care for acute and chronic illnesses. But fulfilment of essential public health functions with adequate funding and infrastructure will give higher aggregate health returns and value for money. It will need technical wisdom and political courage to make this shift for greater public good.

It should be by now very clear that an isolated and narrow sectoral approach by Health Ministries will fail to achieve the kind of health impact that is clearly required. The Ministry and the Sector must build partnerships - with other sectors, with NGOs, with voluntary initiatives by communities and associations of people and the professions. And internationally too with other country Ministries and Agencies. In this new endeavour, there will be inevitable failures but there will also be rewarding successes and experience to sustain. Within the health system, a new culture must permeate - a culture of team work, cooperation and not competition between professionals and others, of ethics and humility, of client service above personal gains alone.

The twenty-first century is full of challenges and threats but it is also a century of hope and opportunities for those who acquire the courage and skills to adapt and evolve. Health is not just a moral issue or a charitable sentiment. It is a fundamental social, human right, and economic issue as well. The coming century will demand the finest human capital with mind and intellect, creativity and concern, innovation and enterprise. What other than health will be the foundation to build all of this upon.

The writer is a health consultant.

# Hybrid Rice Seed: Prospective Technology

by Md Nazim Uddin Mondal

Hybrid Rice Seed production if undertaken in the country, it will generate employment opportunity and brighten the prospect of greater yield.

HYBRID' is an established technology all over the world to increase yields in plants and animals. In case of rice, crossing between two genetically dissimilar plants yields more. Hybrid rice has ability to yield 25 per cent to 30 per cent more than High Yielding Varieties (HYV), now grown all over the world. In China about 51 per cent of total rice cultivation area is under hybrid rice varieties, with an average yield of 6.67 ton/ha. On the other hand rice yield in Bangladesh with HYV is not more than 2.5 ton/ha. To increase rice yield,

introduction of hybrid rice varieties is one of the modern technologies that can be used. The major problem of hybrid rice production is its seeds because hybrid seed can be used only once for commercial rice production. In Bangladesh total area under rice production is about 10 million hectares of which around 3 million hectares are under Boro rice cultivation. To cultivate only 10 per cent of total Boro area about Tk 100 crore are involved. If we import seeds, a lot of foreign exchange will be spent. It is easy to understand the importance of hybrid seed

search organisations. Department of Agricultural Extension can play the major role in reaching hybrid seed production technology to the doorsteps of the farmers and private seed growers with the help of its well educated agriculturalists and diploma holder field staff. In China farmers grow hybrid rice seed in their field with the help of agricultural extension worker. A hybrid seed production centre at district level may play a vital role in providing hybrid technology and training to farmers and private seed growers. In this connection activities

require higher education, for example if so happened in China, India and Vietnam. Private sector involvement is the most important to flourish hybrid seed industry in this country. Poultry farming industry has proven this concept. Private poultry companies import parents stocks from different countries and grow those birds, after egg laying they hatch them to supply to other commercial poultry farmers. This way a private company can import parents of hybrid rice seeds to supply them to farmers. Some joint venture companies can do their own re-



# Telecentres Give Deprived Areas a High-tech Voice

MAKING a telephone call used to be a costly and time-consuming business for South African student Arnold Yilani.

His village of Ndevana, in the Eastern Cape, had no public telephone, and he had to pay eight rand in taxi fares for the 30-kilometre round trip to King William's Town. There, he could use a public payphone - and hope that the person he wanted to speak to was available.

For Yilani, a student taking correspondence courses with a technical college in Johannesburg, the task of contacting his lecturer about any difficulties he encountered during an assignment often took him a whole day.

Things became much easier recently with the opening of a "telecentre" in Ndevana, which is in one of South Africa's poorest provinces.

"It's cheaper and easier to use the centre," says Yilani, who is eager to improve his qualifications in the hope of securing a good job. "Now I am able to contact my lecturer any time I need to."

The centre is one of six - offering access to telephone, fax and computer services - that have been set up by South Africa's Universal Service Agency in a pilot project to link disadvantaged communities to telecommunications channels.

"A telecentre is about education and development - not just installing a few payphones," explains Peter Benjamin, a lecturer at the School of Public

New divisions between rich and poor have opened up with the onset of the computer age. But, as Gemini News Service reports, a project in South Africa aims to narrow the gap by providing disadvantaged communities with access to vital information channels.

Alan Martin writes from Ndevana, South Africa

## Chattering classes

● Eight industrialised countries have three-quarters of the world's phones; 80% of the world's population have no access to reliable telecommunications

● Average teledensity (number of phone lines per 100 people) in developing countries: 1.5

● In very poor countries, such as Afghanistan, Guinea, Liberia, Niger and Somalia, the average is about one phone for every 500 people

● Cambodia, Chad and Zaire have one for every 1,000

and Development Management at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. The centres will not only make it easier for friends and

relatives to contact each other. They are intended to provide new skills and information that people can use to enrich their lives.

As financial constraints will prevent the installation of a phone line in every home for at least 30 years, the government is hoping that the telecentre project will help it achieve its 10-year goal of providing everyone with a telecom link at least five kilometres from their home.

The Universal Service Agency, a statutory body set up a couple of years ago after privatisation of the former state monopoly, Telkom, expects to have established at least 500 centres by the end of 2002, when its mandate expires. A 20-million-rand fund has been set up to help finance its work.

"Four thousand telecentres are needed to make universal access a reality," says Benjamin. "But if we piggyback the telecentres on existing churches, clinics, schools and community centres, we might get close."

In 1984, Sir Donald Maitland, chairman of an international commission for

telecommunications development, identified the lack of telecom infrastructure as the "missing link" between developing and developed countries. He pointed out that the city of Tokyo has more telephones than all of Africa.

Seemingly, South Africa's "teledensity" of 9.5 lines per 100 people compares closely to that of some Western countries. But the figure is misleading, because, in some rural areas and townships, the density is less than one per hundred.

In some countries, recent technological advances have led to the creation of an information elite and another form of deprivation for the poor, says Benjamin. Through the telecentre project, the South African government is trying to use technology to lessen the inequality.

Bukelwa Gidi has visited the centre at Ndevana almost every day since it opened. Like most, she comes mainly to make telephone calls, but the 21-year-old also uses one of the centre's four computers to type and to search for a job.

"People are much more interested than we thought," says Madoda Buta, a volunteer computer teacher at the centre. "So far, about 25 people come everyday, but we expect to have about 50 by the end of July."

The centre plans to expand its teaching role so that pupils from the local secondary school can be taught how to use a keyboard and the Internet.

The Universal Service Agency gives priority to deprived areas when considering where to locate a centre. Each one costs about 250,000 rand to set up. The aim is to make them financially self-supporting. After an initial two-year period, responsibility is handed over to local community groups, and their progress is closely monitored for signs of strengths and weaknesses.

Jay Naidoo, the Minister for Posts, Telecommunications and Broadcasting, is an enthusiastic supporter of the project. "The information society is not an impossible dream - neither is it a sophisticated nicety," he told a recent telecommunications conference.

"It is fundamental to the... improvement of the quality of life of the disadvantaged people of the world."

production in this country. Chinese experts, working with hybrid rice comment that Bangladesh is capable of producing enough hybrid seeds for her own requirement and can export because of favourable climate and cheap labour. Therefore, hybrid seed production may be a wonderful area to employ unemployed rural youths, if proper plan and steps are taken. Rice production technology and variety development is the main function of Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BRRI) and these technologies are taken to the doorstep of farmer by Department of Agriculture Extension (DAE).

BRRI has its glorious past in developing HYV rice varieties. This organisation own international award for HYV rice varieties. However, no significant success has so far been achieved in developing hybrid rice variety. Along with many constraints it may be their attitude towards hybrid rice, in their consideration high yielding varieties are capable of yielding 5-6 ton/ha but our average rice production is around 2.5 ton/ha so we have enough potentiality to increase rice production with HYV. On the other side of the coin, the attitude of farmers about hybrid rice is different because hybrid rice varieties are being cultivated in bordering districts in Bangladesh for 2-3 years and they are getting higher yield. Farmers want higher yield so they want hybrid rice seeds, whatever may be the source.

It may be mentioned that hybrid varieties of watermelon, cabbage, cauliflower and maize are being cultivated for long time from imported seeds. In the market indigenous watermelons are not found. Now the nation is spending a huge amount of foreign currency to import these seeds. Proper steps in proper time could save us because hybrid watermelon or maize seed production is possible in Bangladesh. If appropriate steps are not taken similar things may happen in case of rice production. A poor nation would not be able to bear the load of hundreds of crores of taka worth of foreign currency to import rice seeds. Moreover hybrid seed production in Bangladesh is easier than in other countries.

A number of organisations can take responsibility of hybrid seed production, these are DAE, Directorate of Youth Development, private seed companies, NGOs, BADC and re-

search to develop their parents (A, B, and R lines) or they can multiply these or can import to supply A and R line to seed growers. This big companies can buy seeds from contact farmers for processing, packaging and marketing. In the end research organisations particularly BRRI need to come forward with full support to produce hybrid seeds. Special attention is needed to develop hybrid variety as well as screening of imported varieties.

Coordination among the partners is very much essential to flourish seed industry in Bangladesh. For example a seed company who has imported a parent from China needs screening from research establishment: A to grow in the field it requires technical assistance from DAE, for marketing it needs Seed Certification. Therefore, a close coordination is essential among the organisations.

It may be concluded that hybrid rice seed production is a vital issue for this nation which may be a potential for income generation or be a burden of foreign currency. Therefore, in my opinion following measure will be helpful.

a) There should be a Government policy for hybrid seeds and plan for hybrid seed production.

b) Import of commercial hybrid rice seed should be discouraged or banned.

c) Import of hybrid rice parents (A, B and R line) should be encouraged for commercial seed production after screening.

d) A training and demonstration centre for hybrid seed production should be established at district level under DAE.

e) Scientists of BRRI and DAE personnel should be properly trained.

f) Research facility as well as screening facility for hybrid varieties should be increased at BRRI.

g) Linkage between research and other sister organisations should be strengthened.

h) Private seed company and seed growers should get full government support to grow seeds in the country.

The writer is Subject Matter Specialist, Department of Agriculture Extension, Naogaon, Bangladesh.

# Getting Closer, the Cultural Way

RECENTLY a considerable section of German audience has come in close contact with Bangladesh culture - its folk songs and dances and the typical instruments, embassy sources said.

A cultural troupe from Bangladesh has been on a visit to Germany since June performing in 22 important cities including Frankfurt, Hamburg, Berlin and Heidelberg.

In course of their long tour the eight-member group of artists, Bangla Shur, a cultural organisation from Bangladesh, having been invited by NETZ, a German NGO, presented songs

and dances at the headquarters of NETZ in Wetzlar, in the middle of Germany, on 3 July.

The cultural function constituted a part of the programme chalked out by the city corporation to celebrate the Summer Festival held from 3-5 July. The Lord Mayor, Mr Wolfram Dette, inaugurated the festival and spoke highly of the efforts of NETZ to introduce Bangladesh culture to Germany.

Mr Mohammad Amjad Hossain, Counsellor of the Bangladesh Embassy, who represented the Embassy, also spoke on the occasion and had a word of praise for NETZ in promoting Bangladesh culture in Germany.

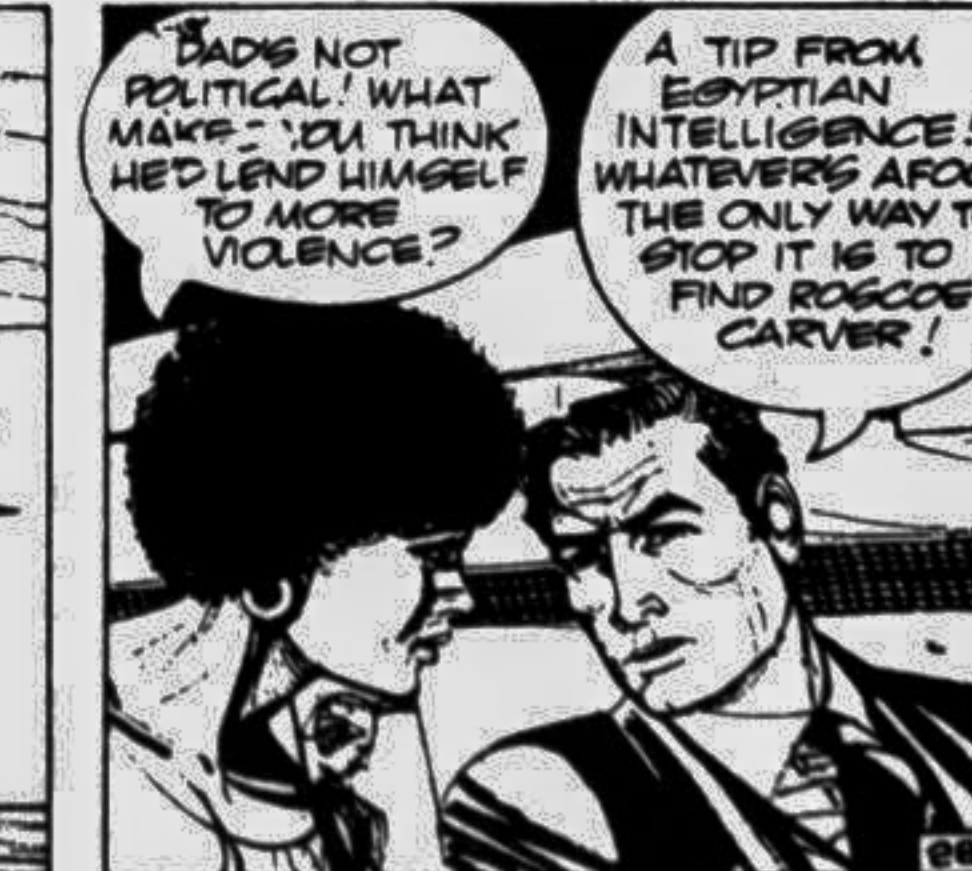
Deepa Khondakar, Abdus Sattar Kalu, Agnes Peris, Baby and Bonny Ahmed enthralled those present with their duet and solo folk dances, while Anima Mukti Gomes charmed the audience by her folk song. Dhipan Barua's tabla was also appreciated by the German audience. Nazrul song, folk song, Tagore song and Hasan Raja's songs were presented to their appreciation.

Mr Dietzel from NETZ explained the themes of the dances and songs and about the musical instruments, such as our harmonium, ektara and tabla, for the benefit of the audience.

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by Jim Davis



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