HDDevelopment Projects: Evaluating People's Participation

by N. Shams Choudhury

Development efforts in Bangladesh till now have benefited her people insignificantly rather burdened them significantly with dysfunctional consequences. Welfare and well-being of the people, and the environment along with its scarcer and valuable resources, as exclusive domain of a few to handle cannot be overlooked as one of the major causes of defeat of development efforts.

BANGLADESH has continued development efforts since her independence and implemented a number of projects to widen opportunities for individuals, social groups, communities, neighborhoods or regions, etc. and supposedly, extend equitable distribution of common benefit in physical, economic, social and cultural terms. However, her efforts have neither increased opportunities nor resulted to even distribution of benefits; on the contrary, imposed numerous dysfunctional consequences.

Her present day scenarios attest depicted or wasted mineral resources; decreased farmlands, forests and grazing grounds; clogged canals and rivers; endangered wild or aqua life or species; blighted or destroyed settlements, communities in villages; reduced productive capacity of farmland; economic and social disparities among regions, between rural and urban areas and between a minority class and the majority groups; lack of basic amenities like pure drinking water in the rural areas and for the urban poor; unexceptional and uncontrolled growth of slums, shanties or squatters in the cities that are overcrowded with people in search of better opportunities; overstrained urban infrastructures, civic amenities and community facilities; polluted surface or underground water; increased congestion, pollution and traffic hazards, etc.

Why her development efforts have gone awry? Is it the concentration of power and authority in the hands of a few — politicians, engineers, planners, experts, professionals — for decision making and planning with respect to development actions or projects that may be one of the source of many of the problems?

Some may frown at and dissent with the allusion above to hold responsible a few at the helm of development activities. They may rationalize the problems, scarcity or dysfunctional consequences as inevitable due to numerous problems, need and wants of the people, and difficulties to set priorities and or satisfy all. But the reasons are not enough to shake the finger off a few as identified earlier. Dysfunctional consequences and discontent of the majority, when delved beneath the surface, are found to be due to the projects pursuing mostly modernity, that at most benefit a few who can afford, creating illusory impression to promote supposedly general interests. The majority of the people are forced to act against their own interests because the development affairs are, most likely, at the hands of a few.

The central objectives of development endeavour are to allocate resources to satisfy the needs, solve problems, and produce goods or services for the majority people of a group, community, region, environment, i.e., society at large. But whenever a few are endowed with power and authority for planing and decision making, however well intentioned they are, chances are high that valuable resources would be employed to improper tasks, wasted and destroyed forfeiting forever the benefits of proper use; infinitely larger societal problems and environmental damages would be imposed upon the society as a whole with no or costly option to reverse; true development would be deferred or jeopardized; and all members of the society will loose out eventually.

To the least development projects should bring changes which harm no one while make some people better off. This can be better achieved only if planning and decision making process of development projects and or/actions involves many beside a few managers, administrators, professionals, etc.

This can be emphatically stated here that a project imposed from top or by a political system will less likely satisfy the majority and make the society well off. A few should not have a free hand to clutter with the welfare and well-being of the people, and the environment and its resources that belong to every one. Development policy should emphasis to induce the majority to consider the situation and make them capable of changing it. Participation of majority members of a society, community, region, environment, etc., in the decision making process of development projects will facilitate successful planning and increase social acceptance.

Decision making and planning process identifies the problem area that requires attention, causes of deficiencies or needs and wants of the people; formulates alternative actions or projects as solutions; and ensures selection and implementation of the best possible action. Goal setting, project preparation, project evaluation and selection, project implementation and effectiveness assessment are the distinct phases of the process. People's participation should be encouraged at individual level and/ or in a group form like advisory committee, planning committee, community or citizen's council, inter community groups or in other form, to tap perceptions, attitudes, reactions, etc., in all the phases.

Potential Problems

There are strong criticisms, from a small quarter, of people's participation in the decision making and planning process of development projects as a cost without any significant perceivable benefit. A potential problems often cited in the implementation of the approach are listed below.

(a) People of varied social and local groups, spheres and walks of life with different habits, privileges, views, interests, etc., are involved. Their propensity is to uphold their own tradition, habits, privileges, institutions, views and interests; and resist with little tolerance and flexibility conflicting views and interests with no concern to resource constraints or other limitations.

(b) People's lack of knowledge and perceptions on concepts, issues and judgmental techniques may fail them to identify causes and effects and variables.

(c) Satisfactory representation of the community, society, region, etc., as a whole or majority members is difficult to assess.

(d) Long range, less visible problems and solutions, perhaps of greater significance, may often be overlooked or pushed into the background as lower priority.

(e) Political influence or other means to favour certain interests or groups, etc., creates excessive delays — or even paralyzes the process.

(f) Survey may also not satisfactorily reflect representations due to statistical complication from the non-experimental nature of the procedure and many of the reasons mentioned above.

(g) All the above complicate to arrive at an ideal, consensus and harmonized plan.

Potential Benefits

The concept of people's participation and social acceptance is largely oriented to the genuine desires and needs of the majority people and attached to the idea of democracy which is ....in the hands not of the few, but of many.' The approach promotes democratic practices by giving influence, in the decision making process, to the people who are going to be affected by the decision(s), and upholds democratic philosophy that as development of the people, for the people and by the people. Some of the benefits of people's participation are listed below.

(a) People become more aware of their role and importance in a society, community, group, environment, etc.

(b) People are in a better position to perceive their interests in related changes, projects, and consequences in terms of social, economic, physical, environmental, etc.

(c) Increases flow of information regarding needs, wants, problems, consequences and environmental impacts various actions or options.

(d) Exhausts alternatives to satisfy needs or solve problems, and select mode and method of production, operation and dispensation.

(e) The right choice is more likely to be made.

(f) Increases people's tolerance and contributes to maintain societal stability.

(g) The organization, professionals and /or bureaucracy become more oriented to the people and the environment, under increased scrutiny of the people for their responsibilities and also become efficient.

(h) People's sacrifice of costs, time and effort contributes to the success of the project and benefits the organization.

Participation Techniques

The success of the people's participation approach depends on the use of an appropriate technique, chosen form among the many available like, not exclusive, drop in centers, meetings, review boards, task forces, judgmental and value analysis, survey, Delphi process, etc. Selection of a technique depends upon the planning purposes, objectives, and phases or characteristics of a particular situation. A few techniques are presented below that most likely will be effective to achieve the objectives under the perspectives identified as : (i) Administrative perspective : (a) information exchange, (b) education, (c) support building, and (ii) People's perspective: (d) decision-making supplement and (e) representational input.

(a) Information exchange results are better accomplished by unstructured techniques which are designed to produce direct contact between the decision makers like engineers, planners, professionals, etc., and the people. The techniques that may be employed are drop-in centers; citizens, neighborhood, community, social or local group meetings; agency information meetings, public hearings.

(b) Education and support building among the people for development actions and plans at various levels of government is accomplished by structured techniques of advisory committees, review boards and task forces with representatives of neighborhood, community, various groups, etc. The techniques allow the decision makers a certain degree of control as they involve a selection of participants.

c) The active process techlsion via nominal group process, judgmental analysis value analysis, etc , are available to get increased input from the people and members of neighborhood, community, various groups, etc., to supplement decision making and planning process. Decision makers have direct contact with the people, but they still have control over the issues being dealt at the meetings.

d) Finally, the passive process techniques such as citizens' survey, Delphi process, etc., may be used to get the views of the entire community on particular issues as representational inputs. They are backed by proper and well developed methodologies and do not promote a direct contact between the decision makers and the people.

The following caveats need attention. People's participation does not wholly determines a development plan. Participation must be thought carefully on when, why and where it is considered. Decision makers should be very aware of the difficulties arising from input analysis, statistical techniques and other situations. The most important task for the decision maker is to balance the people's input, develop value system, synthesize alternatives, apply judgment, compare and make the final decision.

Conclusions

Development efforts in Bangladesh till now have benefited her people insignificantly rather burdened them significantly with dysfunctional consequences. Welfare and well-being of the people, and the environment along with its scarcer and valuable resources, as exclusive domain of a few to handle cannot be overlooked as one of the major causes of defeat of development efforts. People's participation is a very important factor in the judgments to be made in the planning of a development project. The purpose of those who criticize people' participation as a cost without significant perceivable benefit or improvement in the quality of the product is suspected as ulterior. They overlook people's sacrifices of time, effort and money to safeguard their well-being and welfare, and undermine people's concerns for the environment and its resources. A general analysis of pros and cons of people's participation would definitely bring positive results.

The End of Innocence?

by Dr M Zakir Husain

Problem is, historically, kings and emperors in our part of the world have shown a fatal attraction for wars with huge loss of lives of their subjects. Some of our leaders have a pronounced penchant for immortality.

MAY, 1998. India and Pakistan detonated their own nuclear bombs. They have, as it were, proved their coming of age; heralding end of 'innocence.' And yet there is an irony of sorts, both preach high moral intentions, reiterate their determination to end poverty, illiteracy, and ill health of their people. Yet, there is not much to show after fifty years, millions are still deprived of minimum basic needs for survival. The leaders went ahead with costly nuclear military adventure. And things will never be the same again in this subcontinent. What might remain unchanged is that millions will remain consigned to unmitigated human misery. The spectre of poverty, ignorance and ill health is that much more unlikely to lift.

The bottom line is : geo-politics and security equation in the subcontinent has altered irrevocably; the nuclear "have-nots" in the region must now assert and not remain sidelined in geo-political equation. Sleek phrases, however cleverly crafted, cannot rationalise this perversion of nuclear bomb adventure; nor will benign assurances suffice to comfort neighbours. Pathological suspicion and hostility have unfortunately characterised the relations of these two [now "more equal than others"] members of SAARC. Disappointingly for many, the SAARC summit in colombo skirted this issue of major concern to all members. The much hyped meeting of the two Prime Ministers (Vajpayee and Sharif) proved futile ("zero result") not perhaps unexpectedly. Since the Summit closed, there is no sign of any breakthrough towards reconciliation nor anything to give a sense of genuine security to other members of the SAARC alliance. That unfortunately is the sordid and sad truth. It is better to accept than pretend otherwise.

That being said, what is rather intriguing and ill understood is the whimper followed eventually by what seemed to be acquiescence by the five non-nuclear members of the SAARC alliance. Conspicuously absent was an emphatic call for restraint and demand for an overall security assurance from these two States. On the contrary, the Colombo Summit appeared to almost rationalise their belligerent stance and stopped short of its actual endorsement. As if the issue was a small bilateral friction best left alone. Now what the political observers, the ordinary citizens like us are left to deduce? Shall we reason that the Summit was convinced that nuclear bombs in the hands of two jittery members bring security to the rest, or did it believe these two self-proclaimed junior members of the nuclear club will browbeat the five nuclear "big-wigs" to denounce and destroy their arsenal and make the whole world free of nuclear menace?

Something causes the ordinary citizens a great deal of unease. Given their track record of past fifty years, few if any can honestly discount the danger that India and Pakistan leadership might just trip the wire and escalate the present low intensity skirmishes into full scale war. They have already fought three wars that solved nothing. That itself does not give any comfort to their neighbours. They might inevitably end up using their newly acquired symbols of prowess — the nuclear bombs. But there is one big difference in that this time around, they will bring human disaster of unimaginable scale not only to their own countries but to their neighbours too. The human cost and fallout of nuclear bombs are all too recent in human memory. Need there be a repeat of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, or even worse catastrophe? And in this sub-continent where people with ancient civilisation adore and worship saints and sages? To confirm the apprehension, we cannot fail to note a certain sense of fatal determinism in the post-bomb utterances of the leaders of both the countries. There is on the one hand a loud (almost vulgar) delight with the possession of these deadly toys and, on the other hand, a readiness to embrace a kind of national martyrdom in defence of the glory of nation — a glory for which even national suicide is welcome. If committing suicide is the test of valour we can do with less valour but more wisdom. At the national level such sentiments are completely irrelevant and out of mode.

Problem is, historically, kings and emperors in our part of the world have shown a fatal attraction for wars with huge loss of lives of their subjects. Some of our leaders have a pronounced penchant for immortality. The point is, as Arundhati Roy (the renowned Booker Prize winner) so poignantly mused in her recent article 'The End of Imagination' to the effect that if we play with bombs, will there be a future left for the leaders to be remembered in? Our leaders are presumably endowed with extraordinary statesmanship. Does it require extraordinary genius to comprehend how retrogressive and flawed this adventure of nuclear weaponry is in any context, especially in our context? As ordinary citizens, we do not possess grand visions but we are perfectly willing, I think, to be "spineless cowards" in a saved civilisation rather than be "brave but/and terminated" in an annihilated earth.

People deprived of education and income have been conditioned by numerous real or imaginary tales to idolise great heroes who performed miraculous exploits in wars and battles. Very few, if any, songs are sung in praise of ordinary men and women who did great deeds of personal courage and achievement. Our people truly worship past heroes, our political leaders are pleased to perpetuate ancient myths — the more ancient and prodigal the better. The question is : Are the needs of human development and human rights in democratic societies any longer compatible with invocation of mythical heroes to claim hollow national prestige and glory?

India and Pakistan may be in possession of weapons that seem to frighten or stun their neighbours into silence. But do the nuclear have-nots of the Region lack the moral strength and diplomatic resolve to show their deep concern and exercise their geo-political right to be assured of security from external misadventures-accidental or otherwise. The menace is of sufficient gravity, the scenario of nuclear holocaust is plausible though not inevitable. There is enough reason to warrant these States to invite the support and co-operation of those whose nuclear capability and economic clout are far more convincing to secure a modicum of restraint and, ideally, binding guarantee of non-proliferation, non-use, and eventual destruction.

LETTER FROM EUROPE

Bangladesh Revisited: Musings on the Way

by Chaklader Mahboob-ul Alam

By and large, people have always been conscious of the differences in skin colour. Poets and lovers have written poems and sung songs admiring the skin colour of their loved ones. But this ideology of exploitation based on supposedly static and God-given colour lines (meaning white and non-white) is a fairly modern concept and is closely linked to the European colonization of America and the need to identify the Ango-Saxon colonizers on the one hand and the colonized and the slaves on the other.

I had planned to visit Bangladesh this winter but a sudden deterioration in the health of a close member of my family precipitated the trip and I was forced to travel to Dhaka in the last week of July. As far as I remember, this was the first time in about thirty years that I visited my country in summer and that was quite an experience. I was there only ten days. Besides attending my sick brother, I talked to as many people as possible, watched, observed and took some notes. This letter is a travel report and comes as a result of that brief visit. It does not pretend to be a treatise on the social, political and economic conditions of Bangladesh today. It merely narrates some thoughts and reflections of a traveller and tries to convey the general impressions on some aspects of life in Bangladesh of a native, who revisits his home country after a long period and inevitably sees things from a perspective, which is not necessarily critical but simply different.

As soon as I made up my mind to travel to Dhaka at the earliest possible opportunity, I got in touch with the recently opened office of representative for Biman the Bangladesh Airlines in Madrid and a return ticket was made available to me at a competitive price. It was indeed a pleasure to be in a position to contact the national carrier directly and discuss my travel plans without the hassle of going through intermediaries. I was given three options. I could travel through either London, Paris or Frankfurt. I chose London because of obvious reasons. It is always a pleasure to go back to London (even if it is for a short stay) where I studied and worked for so many years, where I got married and where my first son was born. The other factor which weighed heavily in favour of London, and in my opinion was the deciding factor, that London offered me the opportunity (on my way back) to give a hug to my second son, who now lives in London and whom I had not seen for the last six months.

In spite of the fact that during my professional career, I travelled quite frequently and at short notice, I was never given to us. After conflicting rumours about the cancellation of a direct flight from Barcelona to London and the need to lump the two flights into one, we were driven to a larger plane and made to wait for some transit passengers to board the plane. Finally, after more than an hour's delay, the plane left for London.

After the chaos and confusion at the Madrid Airport, the quiet efficiency of the ground staff at Heathrow Airport, which is located in the ancient English county of Middlesex was indeed a pleasant change. While O'Hare in Chicago which handles more than 60 million passengers annually, is considered as the world's busiest airport, Heathrow holds the record of handling the largest flow of international traffic in the world. Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted together handle more than 45 million passengers per year. Although modern industrialization has changed the face of Heathrow and Brentford and they are criss-crossed by congested motorways, they (especially "Caesar's Camp" at Heathrow) were once the seats of ancient civilizations. Later, in the 1st century BC, they were settled by the Belgic tribes and formed part of the Catuvellauni territory. The Romans set up trading posts all along the Thames river. In the 5th century came the Saxons, who colonized the entire area. Since it was situated between the East and West Saxons, the area soon came to be known as Middelseaxan [Middlesex], i.e., the place of the middle Saxons. The name Middlesex is even today used for official and unofficial purposes.

The Biman employee at the transit lounge checked my ticket and gave me a window seat in the no-smoking area. She said that the plane was travelling full. Therefore, I prepared myself for a long sleepless night. The departure lounge was full to the brim. Except a young English couple in shorts and a few other Europeans, almost all the passengers were of Bengali or Indian origin. The overwhelming majority were Bengali and Indian expatriates ,who were going back to Bangladesh for their summer holidays. Since Madrid does not have a large Bangladeshi presence, I very rarely have an opportunity to see so many of my countrymen in one gathering under the same roof. There were men , women and children ,who belonged to different age groups and at different stages of cultural adjustment in the UK.

Besides our distinctive ethnic features, what really attracts the attention of an observer in such a gathering is the variety of clothing worn by the people. There were men in three-piece Western suits (in spite of the temperature running close to 30 degrees Celsius), Indian Muslim traditional clothes with an European jacket or a shawl thrown on top, and in different combinations of these two styles. I did not find anyone wearing a lungi. Older men with long beards and no moustaches (like the Amish in the US) wore different types of Muslim caps and hats. There was greater uniformity in the footwear — most men wore European style shoes. Women looked elegant in silk sarees. Only a few wore shalwar and kamis. There were only two or three who were dressed in European style blouses and skirts. Most of the women wore sandals and no stockings . [That is fine in summer, but I have seen women wearing the same sandals in winter as well]. Then there were little children who unlike their European counterparts(who usually wore casual wear, while travelling) were dressed in suits and rather garish ties.

Another special feature was the language or languages used by the members of the group. Most of the older men and women, in spite of holding British passports spoke hardly any English. There were Bangladeshi born students and businessmen, who spoke good English but with an accent. There were students who had gone to school in the UK. They showed excellent command of the language. There were yet others , who were born in England and who spoke good English with such a cockney accent that I had difficulty in following them. But by and large, the language that was most commonly used among the group was Bengali. What pleased me was to observe that most of the children spoke English among themselves but addressed their parents in Bengali.

The economic boom of the late fifties and early sixties in England created labour shortage (especially in the lower categories) in the major industrial centres of the country. The economy desperately needed people to work at the factories and to keep the huge public service industries such as transportation, sanitation and health care institutions etc. running. The Polish and the Jewish immigrants had moved up in the social ladder. They were not interested in these unskilled positions. By and large, the natives (the British) did not want these "unclean" jobs, because they had better opportunities. So the doors were opened to immigration from the Commonwealth. The first to come were the Caribbeans. This was the first immigration wave of people who had a different skin colour. They were not pink or pale but black or brown. Most of them spoke English. They were shocked to find that while their labour was needed to keep the economy booming, they were socially rejected. They were denied access to public rental housing and private housing in good residential areas. Therefore, they were forced to find refuge in heavily concentrated areas like Brixton and Notting Hill in London. The same pattern continued in other big cities.

The British economy needed more workers. As a result, groups of immigrants came from the Indian sub-continent. They faced similar rejection from the British public. Actually, they suffered more discrimination than the immigrants from the West Indies. Because not only they had a different skin colour but also most of them did not have English as their first language. By and large, the West Indians professed to be Christians, while most of the immigrants from the sub-continent were either Hindus or Muslims and were therefore considered as heathens by these very "Christian" natives. By the end of the sixties, sizeable groups of newly-arrived immigrants had settled in the depressed areas of large cities like London, Birmingham, Manchester etc. Often these concentrations were based on religion and/or language. For example, while the Sikhs outnumbered the others in Southall, Bangladeshis formed the majority group in Whitechapel and Indians in Ilford and Hounslow. There were also small groups of Arabs, Chinese, Vietnamese, Kurds, Iranians, Brazilians and Colombians.

From cultural, religious and ethnic points of view, there were significant differences among these immigrant groups. But to the vast majority of the British people they were all "coloured" people or "people of colour". [Does this mean to say that the others were "people without colour"?]. According to them the world population was divided into "whites" (meaning the British and perhaps some other Europeans) and "non-whites" or "coloureds"(meaning people from America and most of Asia and Africa etc.)

The predominant tendency in the United Kingdom has been to look at human differences in a simplistic oppositional manner. This binary thinking is an important part of the social construction of race and culture there. It tends look at every human being as either black or white, civilized or uncivilized . It is absolutely fixed. What is different or purported to be different is utterly "other". There is no scope to think that human beings can have different shades of grey as their skin colour. Such an approach implicitly indicates hierarchy and carries with it the rationale for unequal distribution of power, privilege, wealth and opportunity. The dominant values, beliefs and the dominant language of a society are completely intertwined and reflect the ordinary truths and realities that the people or the majority of them (not necessarily belonging to the dominant group but also to the "other") accept without question. How does it happen? Well, the answer is quite simple. The language and the belief system like members of dominant group in the United States used to classify the Southern Europeans and the Irish (predominantly Catholic) and the Jews (no matter whether they came from Asia, Africa or Europe) as non-whites. Due to the overwhelming economic and military superiority of the United States in the world and the efficiency of the media to create stereotypes, today "white" has come to be considered as synonymous with power, wealth, civilization and culture. There is an obsession with "whiteness". Everybody wants to be "whiter than white." This principle is applied while defining the power relationship with other groups. For example, in South Africa of the apartheid era, while the Chinese were considered as non- whites, the Japanese (because of their economic power), were given the status of whites. I was once shocked to find that some Saudis, while comparing themselves with the people from the sub-continent of India considered themselves as whites and Indians as non-whites(meaning inferior). The Germans , when they compare themselves with the immigrant workers from Turkey, consider themselves as whites and the Turks as non-whites.

In matters of race relations, Britain, over the last forty years, has made a great leap forward. In the fifties and the sixties, I used to think that Britain would go the American way with racially segregated ghettoes in the inner-cities, seething with anger and frustration and a permanent underclass, eternally condemned to live at the margins of the society without ever having the opportunity to get out of that situation. Today, there is a much greater racial tolerance, understanding and acceptance among the people (of all colours), who inhabit these islands.

I was musing quietly over all this, when the ground staff gave us the signal to board the plane and there was a mad rush for the exit gate. The flight from London to Dhaka via Frankfurt was pleasant. The in-flight service was excellent. The take-offs and landings were perfect. My congratulations to the authorities. While flying over Bangladesh, I observed that most of the country was under cloud. As we approached Dhaka, the steward announced over the microphone that we would land at the Dhaka international airport in a few minutes. More next time.

Racism is the theory or idea that ' there is a causal link between inherited physical traits and certain traits of personality , intellect or culture and combined within the notion that some races are inherently superior to others". According to this theory race is something fixed and immutable — that God has created this chosen people as "whites" to rule the world and the others as "non-whites" in the UK, then Prime Minister Mr Harold Wilson once jokingly remarked that he did not know any normal healthy human being ,whose skin colour was white. He then added, not that he had anything against them, but only the albinos could claim to be real whites, because their skin unfortunately was devoid of any pigmentation whatsoever. !

Actually, by and large, people have always been conscious of the differences in skin colour. Poets and lovers have written poems and sung songs admiring the skin colour of their loved ones. But this ideology of exploitation based on supposedly static and God-given colour lines (meaning white and non-white) is a fairly modern concept and is closely linked to the European colonization of America and the need to identify the Ango-Saxon colonizers on the one hand and the colonized and the slaves on the other. According to Winthrop Jordan ("From the initially common term CHRISTIAN, at mid- century (17th) there was a marked shift toward the terms ENGLISH and FREE. After abot 1680, taking the colonies as a whole, a new term of self-identification appeared—WHITE."

It is interesting to note here that until almost the end of the nineteenth century, many